Athens Journal of Tourism

Front Pages

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ATINER is an Athens-based World Association of Academics and Researchers based in Athens. ATINER is an independent and non-profit Association with a Mission to become a forum where Academics and Researchers from all over the world can meet in Athens, exchange ideas on their research and discuss future developments in their disciplines, as well as engage with professionals from other fields. Athens was chosen because of its long history of academic gatherings, which go back thousands of years to Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum. Both these historic places are within walking distance from ATINER's downtown offices. Since antiquity, Athens was an open city. In the words of Pericles, Athens"…is open to the world, we never expel a foreigner from learning or seeing". ("Pericles' Funeral Oration", in Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War). It is ATINER's mission to revive the glory of Ancient Athens by inviting the World Academic Community to the city, to learn from each other in an environment of freedom and respect for other people's opinions and beliefs. After all, the free expression of one's opinion formed the basis for the development of democracy, and Athens was its cradle. As it turned out, the Golden Age of Athens was in fact, the Golden Age of the Western Civilization. Education and (Re)searching for the 'truth' are the pillars of any free (democratic) society. This is the reason why Education and Research are the two core words in ATINER's name.

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The ***Athens Journal of Tourism (AJT)*** is an Open Access quarterly double-blind peer reviewed journal and considers papers from all areas of tourism and related disciplines such as culture, leisure, recreation, geography, urban planning, heritage, sports, historical cities, landscape, architecture etc. The AJT considers theoretical and empirical papers as well as case studies and policy papers. The journal's aim is to be useful to both academics of tourism research and the practitioners of the tourism industry. Many of the papers published in this journal have been presented at the various conferences sponsored by the Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit of the Athens Institute for Education and Research (ATINER). All papers are subject to ATINER's Publication Ethical Policy and Statement. A journal publication might take from a minimum of six months up to one year to appear. All papers are subject to ATINER's Publication Ethical Policy and Statement.

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President's Message

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The current issue is the first of the eleventh volume of the *Athens Journal of Tourism*, published by the Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit of ATINER.

Gregory T. Papanikos
President
ATINER

Athens Institute for Education and Research
A World Association of Academics and Researchers

17th Annual International Conference on Mediterranean Studies
25-28 March 2024, Athens, Greece

The **Center for European & Mediterranean Affairs** organizes the **17th Annual International Conference on Mediterranean Studies, 25-28 March 2024, Athens, Greece** sponsored by the Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies. The aim of the conference is to bring together academics and researchers from all areas of Mediterranean Studies, such as history, arts, archaeology, philosophy, culture, sociology, politics, international relations, economics, business, sports, environment and ecology, etc.You may participate as stream leader, presenter of one paper, chair a session or observer. Please submit a proposal using the form available (https://www.atiner.gr/2024/FORM-MDT.doc).

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- **Dr. Steven Oberhelman,** Professor of Classics, Holder of the George Sumey Jr Endowed Professorship of Liberal Arts, and Associate Dean, Texas A&M University, USA, Vice President of International Programs, ATINER and Editor of the Athens Journal of History.
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- **Dr. Yannis Stivachtis**, Director, Center for European & Mediterranean Affairs and Associate Professor, Jean Monnet Chair & Director of International Studies Program, Virginia Tech – Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, USA.

Important Dates

- Abstract Submission: **DEADLINE CLOSED**
- Submission of Paper: **26 February 2024**

Conference Fees

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- Greek Night Entertainment (This is the official dinner of the conference)
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- Delphi Visit
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Athens Institute for Education and Research
A World Association of Academics and Researchers

20th Annual International Conference on Tourism
10-13 June 2024, Athens, Greece

The Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit of ATINER organizes its **20th Annual International Conference on Tourism, 10-13 June 2024, Athens, Greece** sponsored by the Athens Journal of Tourism. The aim of the conference is to bring together academics and researchers from all areas of Tourism. You may participate as stream leader, presenter of one paper, chair a session or observer. Please submit a proposal using the form available (https://www.atiner.gr/2024/FORM-TOU.doc).

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- Abstract Submission: **30 April 2024**
- Acceptance of Abstract: 4 Weeks after Submission
- Submission of Paper: **13 May 2024**

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- **Dr. Valia Kasimati,** Head, Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit, ATINER & Researcher, Department of Economic Analysis & Research, Central Bank of Greece, Greece.
- **Dr. Peter Jones**, Co-Editor, Athens Journal of Tourism & Professor of Management, University of Gloucestershire, UK.

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An Analytical Reading of the Omani Tourism and Hospitality Industry Figures (2019-2022)

By Masooma Al-Balushi[*] & Tamer Atef[±]

Studies on the effect of COVID-19 pandemic worldwide indicate significant decreases in revenues and job losses in the tourism and hospitality industry. To what extent is this the case in the Sultanate of Oman? The current study tries to answer this question and much more; therefore, this study aims to assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Omani tourism and hospitality industry. The study analyzed and interpreted the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the Omani National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reports, statistics, and figures. The acquired secondary data were classified, summarized, tabulated. Frequencies and percentages were used in rankings, evaluations, comparisons, and analysis. This study provides scholars, policy makers, and industry affiliates with a scientific overview of the Omani tourism and hospitality industry performance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, employment, hospitality, Oman, tourism, UNWTO*

Introduction

The Sultanate of Oman is located on the south-eastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered by the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea and has borders with the United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Yemen. It is the third largest country in the peninsula, with an area of 309,500 km^2, and a population of almost 2.804 million Omanis of which 50.4% are males and 49.6% are females and 1.723 million non-Omanis of which 78.3% are males and 21.7% are females (Al Balushi 2018, National Center for Statistics and Information 2022a, Omanuna 2022).

Oman's economy is highly dependent on oil, which represented 73.6% of the total actual revenues by the end of 2021 (Kutty 2022). Because of economic and demographic factors, the government has adopted a plan that focuses on economic diversification, with the objective of reducing dependence on the oil sector and creating more jobs to employ the increasing numbers of Omanis entering the labour market. Tourism is one of the major pillars upon which the government depends to achieve its developmental strategies (Ali et al. 2017) being a major worldwide employer as one out of every ten jobs is directly related to tourism and hospitality (UNWTO 2020).

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Tourism in Oman has a long history, dating back to the ancient trading routes and seafaring activities. However, the modern tourism industry in Oman started in the 1980s when the country opened up to foreign tourists. Since then, Oman has been investing heavily in promoting its tourism industry and developing the necessary infrastructure to attract more tourists (Al Balushi and Atef 2019, Ministry of Heritage and Tourism 2021). Oman has a diverse landscape, which provides tourists with a variety of activities such as hiking, camping, beach sports, and wildlife observation. In addition to plenty of cultural attractions, including historic forts, museums, and traditional markets (Ministry of Heritage and Tourism 2021). Unfortunately, the tourism and hospitality sector contribution to employment is still very low at 6% and with a workforce that is highly dominated by expatriates (Al Nahdi 2016). In 2019, the tourism sector accounted for about 2.5% of the gross domestic product (GDP), the Omani government aspires for a higher contribution, the target is to reach 6% to 10% by 2040 (THR Innovative Tourism Consultants 2016).

The tourism and hospitality industry provides total interactive memorable experiences to its patrons, the COVID-19 pandemic has paralyzed the industry due to the unprecedented restrictions on mobility, and since tourism as an industry is known to be labour intensive, the pandemic has had a negative impact on tourism and hospitality employment (Rastegar et al. 2021, Seyfi et al. 2020, Sobaih et al. 2021), it has affected several employment categories and levels, especially those with low education credentials and skills (UNWTO 2022a). Furthermore, the minute-by-minute media coverage of countries' different responses and countermeasures taken during the pandemic has negatively affected many destinations' image and future travel plans (Gössling et al. 2020, Neuburger and Egger 2020).

The situation was not different in the Sultanate of Oman, the tourism and hospitality sector was shaken, severe economic drawbacks were recorded, for example: significant decreases in tourists arrival figures and in occupancy rates have been registered. There is a need for academics, analysts, and specialists to analyze and interpret the exact ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Omani tourism and hospitality industry (Al Hasni 2021).
The current study poses some critical questions and tries to answer them:

1. How was the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the Omani tourism and hospitality industry?
2. What are the statistics on industry related registered activities?
3. What are the industry related registered activities?
4. What is the industry employment structure/figures?

Therefore, the study aims to assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Omani tourism and hospitality industry through the following study objectives:

1. To analyze the Omani tourism and hospitality industry figures (2019-2022).
2. To analyze the statistics on industry related registered activities (2019-2022).

3. To analyze industry related registered activities nature and types (2019-2022).
4. To analyze industry employment structure/figures (2019-2022).

This study provides scientific knowledge to scholars, policy makers, and industry affiliates of the Omani tourism and hospitality industry and the unprecedented situation it faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Labour Market and the Localization Plans in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

While unemployment of citizens is one of the biggest challenges in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC: Kingdom of Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Sultanate of Oman, and United Arab Emirates) region, the Gulf states have the largest share of migrant workers in the world. This is a dilemma, on one hand unemployment between citizens is a pressing issue while on the other hand the workforce is dependent on expats to a large extent (Atef and Al Balushi 2015, Metwally 2003, Zerovec and Bontenbal 2011).

Oman's population is growing, resulting in a society with 60% of its population below the age of twenty-five (Ali et al. 2017). To face the unemployment pressing situation among citizens (See Table 1) and to lessen the dependence on non-Omani workforce, the Omani government is supporting entrepreneurship and putting in action the localization (Omanization) policy/plan (Atef and Al Balushi 2017).

Table 1. *Unemployment Rate in Oman (2017-2021)*

Year	Unemployment Rate	Change (+/-)
2017	2.57%	0.70% decline
2018	1.80%	0.77% decline
2019	1.85%	0.05% increase
2020	2.94%	1.09% increase
2021	3.12%	0.18% increase

Adapted from: The World Bank (2022).

Localizing (Omanizing) the workforce is the process of training and developing Omanis skills and competences, aiming to decrease dependence on non-Omani workforce and eventually replacement with Omani personnel. The Omanization plan has its roots back to 1988. Similar labour nationalization plans are being executed in the Gulf region, including the Emiratization in the United Arab Emirates and the Saudization in Saudi Arabia (Atef and Al Balushi 2017, Law et al. 2004, Wong and Law 1999).

The Economic and Strategic Importance of Tourism

The tourism industry can accommodate different categories of job seeker with varying skills and educational levels, it can even employ persons with no previous work experiences (Liu and Wall 2006, Pan 2015). Taking the hospitality industry as an example, for every created hotel room one job opportunity becomes available, another three indirectly related job opportunities are created in activities pertaining to travel agencies, transportation, retail stores, and activities and entertainment (MacFeely and O'Brien 2009).

The Omani government has taken remarkable steps to develop and promote tourism to help achieve economic diversification and accomplish the aspired Omanization plans (Pujol and Forster 2007). The total number of classified hotels reached 630 in 2022 (Ministry of Heritage and Tourism 2022a). A total of seventy-four registered tourism activities were recorded by the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism during the period from 2019 till end of March 2022. Tourism registered activities are the operations/businesses registered at the Omani Ministry of Labour and fall under the umbrella of tourism and hospitality (Ministry of Heritage and Tourism 2022b). The more the tourism products/ activities offered by destinations/countries the more the ability of the industry to supply the labour market with various job categories and levels (Dorta-González and González-Betancor 2021).

The Omani Tourism Strategy 2040, developed by THR Innovative Tourism Consultants together with the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism focuses on fourteen areas as potential tourism complexes. The Strategy Implementation Plan is divided into three phases: The first phase (2016-2020) includes developing more than 5,620 new hotel rooms and creating more than 76,384 new direct jobs. The second phase (till 2030) includes adding more than 15,419 new hotel rooms and creating more than 126,900 direct jobs. The third phase (2031-2040) includes adding more than 29,596 new hotel rooms and creating more than 242,990 new direct jobs. The Omani Tourism Strategy 2040 aims to achieve several benefits by the end of 2040 (THR Innovative Tourism Consultants 2016):

- Providing more than 500,000 jobs.
- Increase hotel rooms, as well as tourism units with hospitality services, camping sites and villas, to a total number of 80,000 tourism units.
- In 2019, the tourism sector accounted for about 2.5% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in the Sultanate of Oman, and the target is to reach 6% to 10% by 2040.
- The number of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) is planned to be 1200.

Tourism was the third largest major export category in the world after fuels and chemicals before the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the fact that tourism creates jobs and elevates economies, the sector's recovery is anticipated to drive growth all over the world. After a global setback of 3.4% in 2020 and a recovery of 5.5% in 2021, the world economy is estimated to grow by 4% in 2022 followed by another improvement of 3.5% in 2023 (UNWTO 2022a).

The COVID-19 Pandemic Effect on Tourism and the Recovery Plans

Global tourism suffered significantly in 2020, with international arrivals dropping by 74% according to the data from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Destinations worldwide suffered a decrease of one billion in international tourists' arrivals in 2020 than in the previous year. The downfall in international travel represents a loss of nearly USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues. The crisis has put at risk between 100 and 120 million direct tourism jobs, many of them in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), 2020; United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2021). Despite the fact that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have a high degree of resilience and flexibility that could help them survive the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond (Branicki et al. 2018, Eggers 2020, Kuckertz et al. 2020, Pal et al. 2014) the ramifications of the pandemic on social life, mobility, as well as consumption patterns, left no space for maneuverability leading to a radical decrease of business and consequently, loss of revenues (Bae and Chang 2020, Baum and Hai 2020, Clark et al. 2021, Romagosa 2020, Wen et al. 2021).

Oman's tourism sector suffered the COVID-19 pandemic repercussions which included the loss of revenues, the reduction in hotel occupancy rates, and the unfortunate job losses (Al Hasni 2021). Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism sector had to cut employee pays. High employee turnover resulted due to the inability to secure staff salaries/payments (Al Hanai and Matriano 2021).

The ultimate goal of all tourism dependent governments and destinations is to put the industry back on the right track and achieve the pre-pandemic tourists' figures and revenues. This endeavor requires the collective efforts of governments, international organizations, policy and decision makers, marketeers, and media to mitigate the travel risk perceptions created as a result of the pandemic (Kim et al. 2021, Matiza 2020). Encouraging and motivating tourists and travelers to start planning for tourism and seek hotels and restaurants services is a challenge, an equally important challenge is to help those organizations that suffered financially because of the pandemic to resume their operations and to encourage investors to invest in the sector once more, not only immediate governmental financial remunerations are needed but also the creation of a crisis recovery fund scheme to face any future incidents (Frye et al. 2020, Kumar 2020, Rivera et al. 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it evident that the role of governments and policy makers is crucial to the survival of tourism and hospitality related businesses (Kuscer et al. 2022). The closures and movements restrictions have severely affected these businesses (Sharma et al. 2022, Sigala 2020), during such periods, many governments offered financial support and assistance but were not enough for the survival nor for the recovery from the pandemic effects (Khalid et al., 2021). More needs to be systematically offered to support tourism and hospitality stakeholders and heal the sector (OECD 2020).

As the tourism and hospitality industry continues to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative for all stakeholders to take proactive

measures that will help revive the sector to full recovery (Frye et al. 2020, Jones 2022, Kim et al. 2021, Kuscer et al. 2022, Matiza 2020, OECD 2020, Rivera et al. 2021, Sigala 2020): Firstly, it is essential to create comprehensive health and safety protocols that will ensure the safety of tourists and hospitality workers. This can be achieved through training employees in proper hygiene practices in hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions. Secondly, it is crucial to encourage domestic tourism by promoting and highlighting local tourist attractions and experiences. This strategy will help businesses to generate revenues while also allowing residents to experience the beauty of their own country. Thirdly, stakeholders in the industry should consider developing creative marketing campaigns that will attract tourists to their destinations. This could include providing discounts, offers, and packages to lure travelers. Finally, it is essential to remain flexible and adaptable. This implies being open to adjusting strategies and protocols to accommodate future incidents.

The government of the Sultanate of Oman approved a recovery plan that included six pillars to help overcome the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic for a period of three years. It included (UNWTO CME 2022, p. 11):

1. Maintaining safety and precautionary measures to protect tourists and workers, as well as human capital sustainability.
2. Supporting local communities to control the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Developing tourism programs to accommodate the aspirations of tourists and the changes that occurred after the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Focusing efforts on marketing the Sultanate of Oman as a tourist destination in the target markets.
5. Supporting investment in the tourism sector through approving a set of investment incentives for Omani SMEs, or even foreign investors wishing to invest in the Sultanate of Oman in the tourism sector.
6. Exempting the nationals of 103 countries from visa requirements before visiting the Sultanate of Oman, which is expected to have a positive role in the return of tourism momentum and movement to the country.

Tourism Activities and Statistical Analysis

Data and statistical analysis help to create knowledge, which is fundamental to providing and expanding perceptions. The performance of the tourism industry is measured and monitored through statistical figures such as: tourists' flow and revenues generated. In some cases, tourism statistics suffer fallacies because of ambiguity of the used tourism terminology and/or the use of unverified date collection schemes, among others. Official tourism statistics are the most reliable source upon which economists, officials and many tourism industry affiliates depend in their businesses management and strategic planning (Kotlinski 2003, Perera 2017, Van Truong et al. 2022, Volo and Giambalvo 2008, Wöber 2000).

To standardize economic reporting and statistical analysis of productive activities, the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic

Activities (ISIC) was created by the United Nations Economic and Social Council. It is the international reference classification of productive activities. Since the adoption of the original version of ISIC in 1948, the majority of countries around the world have utilized it in developing national activity classifications and has become an important tool for economic statistical data comparisons at the international level (UN 2008). At its twenty-seventh session, in 1993, the Statistical Commission following recommendations in the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) report on tourism statistics; adopted the Standard International Classification of Tourism Activities (SICTA) as a referential classification for use by countries (United Nations (UN) & United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 1994). SICTA details both the characteristic activities that comprise the tourism industries and other tourism related activities. In addition to providing a framework for tourism services data collection practices (UNWTO 2000). The Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) is the second international standard on tourism statistics aiming to promote the consistency and comparability of national and international tourism statistics and analysis (United Nations (UN), & United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2008). TSA defines tourism industries as all establishments whose principal productive activity is a tourism characteristic activity (TCA). Tourism Characteristic Activities can be identified as those productive activities which principal output is characteristic of tourism, in other words, they are the activities that typically produce tourism characteristic products (TCP) (See Table 2) (UN 2008).

Table 2. *Characteristic Products and Characteristic Activities for the TSA*

Tourism Characteristic Products (TSA/TCP)	Tourism Characteristics Activities (TSA/TCA)
1 Accommodation services *1.1 Hotels and other lodging services* *1.2 Second homes services on own account or for free*	1 Hotels and similar
2 Food and beverage serving services	2 Second home ownership
3 Passenger transport services *3.1 Interurban railway transport services* *3.2 Road transport services* *3.3 Water transport services* *3.4 Air transport services* *3.5 Supporting passengers transport services* *3.6 Passenger transport equipment rental* *3.7 Maintenance and repair services of passenger transport equipment*	3 Restaurants and similar
4 Travel agency, tour operator and tourist guide services *4.1 Travel agency services* *4.2 Tour operator services* *4.3 Tourist information and tourist guide services*	4 Railway passenger transport services
5 Cultural services *5.1 Performing arts* *5.2 Museum and other cultural services*	5 Road passenger transport services
6 Recreation and other entertainment services *6.1 Sports and recreational sport services* *6.2 Other amusement and recreational services*	6 Water passenger transport services

7 Miscellaneous tourism services *7.1 Financial and insurance services* *7.2 Other good rental services* *7.3 Other tourism services*	7 Air passenger transport services
	8 Transport supporting services
	9 Transport equipment rental
	10 Travel agencies and similar
	11 Cultural services
	12 Sporting and other recreational services

Adapted from: UNWTO (2000).

Methodology

In tourism research, the aim of searching for figures and data followed by statistical analysis is to create interpretive information to understand nature, society, relations, inform the decision-making process and generate predictive models for future events (Latham and Edwards 2003, Smith 1988, Volo 2018). Secondary data analysis is the processing of data that were collected to be used for other primary purposes (Johnston 2014). It is the reanalysis of previously collected data, which is widely used in social science research (Punch 2005). How the researcher collects, analyses, and interprets the data constitutes the study research method (Creswell 2009). With regard to the current study, it started in June 2022 to investigate the situation before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2019 till 2022 available data). This study is based on secondary data analysis which were acquired/collected from the reports, statistics, and figures of the following national and international entities/organizations:

1. **The Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism**
   - Number of hotels 2011 - until March 2022 (Ministry of Heritage and Tourism 2022a).
   - Data of the national and expatriate workforce in the tourism sector in various activities and professions under the sector (2019-2022) (Ministry of Heritage and Tourism 2022b).

The Ministry reports, statistics, and figures were used based on the fact that this entity is the main official authority responsible for the sector strategies, plans, and development within the context of the Omani Tourism Law and the country's legislations and Laws. Article 1 of Oman's tourism law, decree No. 33/2002, states: "This law aims to encourage, promote and develop tourism in Oman and develop its resources and investments to increase its contribution to the national economy by regulating the establishment and utilization of the country's tourism resources and creating the administrative regulations and manpower necessary to encourage and promote tourism activity in order to support cultural and intellectual communication between the citizens of Oman and other peoples of other countries" (Royal Decrees 2002).

2. The Omani National Center for Statistics and Information

- Electronic census of population, housing, and establishments (End of December 2021) (NCSI 2022a).
- Monthly tourism index report (March 2022) (NCSI 2022b).
- Monthly tourism index report (April 2022) (NCSI 2022c).
- Monthly tourism index report (May 2022) (NCSI 2022d).
- Monthly tourism index report (June 2022) (NCSI 2022e).

The National Center for Statistics and Information was established by the Royal Decree No. 31/2012, 2012. The center follows the Supreme Council for Planning. The center has a legal personality and financial and administrative independence (Royal Decrees 2012). Its mission is: "To satisfy the government's need of official statistics and reliable information to be used in setting policies and programs on local, regional, and international levels; taking into consideration the accelerating economic and social variables. We also seek to satisfy the needs of all authorities in acquiring data in all areas of development" (NCSI 2019). The National Center for Statistics and Information data were used as it is the authority assigned with the mission of providing official statistics and reliable information to be used by the Omani officials in setting policies and programs on local, regional, and international levels, as indicated in its mission statement and as intended by its establishment decree.

3. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

- 145 key tourism statistics (Bulk Data) (UNWTO 2022b).

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN). The UNWTO data were used for their reliability and validity as the organization's published data are directly collected from countries through a series of yearly questionnaires that are in line with the standard led by UNWTO and approved by the UN (UN 2010).

The used reports, statistics, and figures were classified, summarized, tabulated. Frequencies and percentages were used in rankings, evaluations, comparisons, and analysis, all of which were interpreted allowing the current study to offer clear implications and precise courses of actions. These utilized reports, statistics, and figures answered the study questions and achieved its objectives as follows:

- **Question:** How was the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the Omani tourism and hospitality industry?
- **Objective:** To analyze the Omani tourism and hospitality industry figures (2019-2022)
- **Reports, Statistics, and Figures**
    - Number of hotels 2011 - until March 2022.
    - Electronic census of population, housing, and establishments (End of December 2021).

- Monthly tourism index reports (March 2022 - April 2022 - May 2022 - June 2022).
- 145 key tourism statistics (Bulk Data).

- **Question:** What are the statistics on industry related registered activities?
- **Objective:** To analyze the statistics on industry related registered activities (2019-2022)
- **Reports, Statistics, and Figures**
  - Data of the national and expatriate workforce in the tourism sector in various activities and professions under the sector (2019-2022).

- **Question:** What are the industry related registered activities?
- **Objective:** To analyze industry related registered activities nature and types (2019-2022)
- **Reports, Statistics, and Figures**
  - Data of the national and expatriate workforce in the tourism sector in various activities and professions under the sector (2019-2022).

- **Question:** What is the industry employment structure/figures?
- **Objective:** To analyze industry employment structure/figures (2019-2022)
- **Reports, Statistics, and Figures**
  - Data of the national and expatriate workforce in the tourism sector in various activities and professions under the sector (2019-2022).
  - Electronic census of population, housing, and establishments (End of December 2021).

Additionally, the literature reviewed allowed to check the tourism registered activities against the Standard International Classification of Tourism Activities (SICTA) and the Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) created by the UNWTO to verify the structure of the industry and to validate the related statistics.

Results and Discussion

The Omani Tourism Industry Performance Indicators

By reviewing tourists arrival figures to Oman from 2016 till 2020 (See Table 3) it is clear that the figures (arrivals and revenues) reached a peak in 2019 then drastically decreased in 2020 this is clearly attributed to the precautionary measures taken all over the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic and what followed of borders closing and the emergency halt of all movements between countries which consequently affected all tourism related activities and decreased tourism receipts. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Omani tourism and hospitality industry revenues and employment was disastrous as suggested by the literature reviewed (Al Hasni 2021).

Table 3. *Total Tourists Arrival Figures to Oman (2016-2020)*

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total arrivals	3.21 m	3.18 m	3.24 m	3.51 m	869,000
Tourism Expenditure in the Country	2.32 bn $	2.63 bn $	2.87 bn $	3.08 bn $	669.00 m $

Adapted from: United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2022b); m=Million, bn=Billion, $=Dollars.

The monthly tourists arrival figures to Oman during 2022 started to gradually increase reaching a total of 1,026,865 by the end of June. A huge difference when compared to the same period of year 2021 which was only 122,835 (National Center for Statistics and Information 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e), indicating that the six-pillar recovery plan adopted by the Omani government to overcome the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic is effective (See Table 4).

Table 4. *Tourists Arrival Figures to Oman for the First Six Months of Year 2021 vs. Year 2022 Figures*

Month/Year	2021	2022
January	39,398	106,614
February	23,001	125,070
March	31,115	183,048
April	13,363	162,688
May	6,036	216,348
June	9,922	233,097
Total	**122,835**	**1,026,865**

Adapted from: National Center for Statistics and Information 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e).

Remarkably the number of classified hotels increased in 2022 to reach a total of 630 property/unit (See Table 5) with an increase of 18 property/unit of the previous year 2021 (612 property/unit). In 2022 all accommodation categories increased or remained the same, except for the four-star category, which decreased by one, the highest increase number-wise was the "Guest Houses" and the "Green Lodge" categories which increased by 6 units each. The highest increase percentage-wise was the "Heritage Lodge" category, by a 40% increase of the previous year 2021 (5 property/unit). A closer look at the total number of the classified hotels figures would indicate that the total number in 2022 is higher than the total number in 2019 which is just before the COVID-19 pandemic, by138 property/unit, translated to an increase of 28%.

Table 5. *Number of Classified Hotels 2019-2022 (End of March)*

Classification	2019	2020	2021	2022
5 Star	26	28	27	28
4 Star	23	26	28	27
3 Star	38	44	55	56
2 Star	55	62	62	64
1 Star	80	81	88	88
Chalet and Rest houses	33	35	37	37
Guest Houses	41	53	77	83
Green Lodge	25	37	53	59
Heritage Lodge	4	5	5	7
Hotel Apartments	145	153	158	159
Tourism Camp	22	23	22	22
Total	**492**	**547**	**612**	**630**

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022a).

The increase in the number of hotels and types is based on and follows the Omani Tourism Strategy 2040 preset expansion plans. The development pace and figures follow the strategy phases and depend on the assessed tourism demand and industry needs. The Oman Tourism Strategy 2040 first phase (2016-2020) aims to develop more than 5,620 new hotel rooms. Table 6 proves that the planned figures were exceeded, the number in 2015 totaled to 16,691 rooms which has risen in 2020 to reach 26,733 rooms, which is more than 10,000 added rooms during the first phase of the strategy. These increases during a global crisis indicate that the plans were followed despite the pandemic, which is commendable, it is worth mentioning that the construction of a hotel property takes years requiring investments/costs be already allocated and secured by means of binding national and international agreements. What if the pandemic lasted longer? Would these investments be in vain? Should all tourism plans be put on hold till the circumstances change? Or should all plans be followed in order to be ready for the post-pandemic era? The answer to these questions depends on: The decision maker experience/discretion, funds availability, and nature of the crisis at hand.

Table 6. *Total Number of Hotel Rooms in Oman (2016-2021)*

Year	Number of Hotel Rooms
2015	16,691
2016	18,420
2017	19,520
2018	22,182
2019	25,408
2020	26,733
2021	29,056

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022a).

Tourism Registered Activities and Employment Figures

Tourism Registered Activities

Tourism registered activities are the operations/businesses registered at the Omani Ministry of Labour and fall under the umbrella of tourism and hospitality, each activity has two identifiers: "Name" and "Code".

Tourism entails services and industries such as: Accommodation, food and beverage, transportation, retail stores, activities, and entertainment that together form memorable experiences for persons traveling away from their regular place of residence (Goeldner and Ritchie 2012, Kasavana 2013, Leiper 1990). In Table 7, the Omani tourism registered activities were classified under the previously mentioned tourism related services/industries then tabulated and ordered. The majority of the registered activities fall under the "Activities & Entertainment" category, which comprises 29 registered activities.

The study included the analysis of years 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 (till end of March) registered tourism activities. A total of 74 activities were seen over the study years. Table 8 demonstrates by years the licenced activities number, and names the activities not included out of the total 74 activities available throughout the study years. A slight variation is seen over the study years, year 2021 shows the highest number of registered activities with 73 activities.

Tourism industries and its activities have to conform to the definitions and criteria indicated in the Standard International Classification of Tourism Activities (SICTA) and the Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) created by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) which define tourism industries as all establishments whose principal productive activity is a tourism characteristic activity (TCA). Tourism Characteristic Activities are the activities that typically produce tourism characteristic products (TCP). Tourism characteristic products are those that fulfil the following: The product share of the total tourism expenditure is significant, and/or the product would fail to exist without tourists (UN and UNWTO 1994, UNWTO 2000, UN 2008, UN and UNWTO 2008).

In its current status the "Food and Beverage" category components of the "Registered Tourism Activities" are questionable, implying that the list needs to be reviewed and filtered. According to Oman's tourism law implementing regulations issued by the Ministry of Tourism in 2016 by the Ministerial Decision No. 39/ 2016, (In 2016 The Ministry was still called "Ministry of Tourism" without the Heritage responsibilities) in Article 1: "Classified Restaurants are: Restaurants licensed by the concerned authority and classified according to the requirements of the Ministry's classification system". And in Article 50: "A restaurant is considered classified if it obtains the classification level plate from the Ministry, and the classification is valid for 1 (one) year". Furthermore, according to Annex 1 of the same regulatory act there is a classification fee of 200 Omani Riyals required for the application processing besides the fulfilment of some requirements and the submission of the needed documentations which are mentioned in Article 49: "A restaurant licensed by the assigned municipality may apply for a classification from the Ministry in accordance with the following requirements: 1. The restaurant must have been in existence for a period of no less than a year. 2. Passing the requirements and standards of the approved restaurant classification system in terms of facilities, service, and quality".

Table 7. *Registered Activities Categorization Based on 2019 (End of December) till 2022 (End of March) Registerer*

s/n	Accommodation	Food and Beverage	Transportation	Retail Stores	Activities & Entertainment
1	chalets and rest houses	bars	airport passenger land transport services	botanical gardens and flowers operation	acting activities
2	green lodges	cafés that mainly serve drinks	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	operating and marketing duty free shops	activities of independent journalists
3	guest houses	cafés that serve meals mainly	in-city rail transport of passengers	retail in specialized pottery and handicraft stores	beach buggy rental
4	heritage lodges	catering companies	land transport of passengers (busses - non-scheduled)	retail in specialized souvenir, antique and painting stores	bicycle rental
5	hotel apartments	fast food stores	marine transport of passengers (sea and coastal water transport)	retail in specialty silverware and gift stores	diving tool rental
6	hotels, motels, and resorts	fish and seafood grill shops	marine transport of passengers (internal water transport)	retail in specialty stores for Omani daggers	entertainment and gaming city activities
7	other activities for camp areas and theme parks that offer a place for cars and parks that offer a place for trailers	grilled meat shops	other activities for other types of land transport of passengers		entertainment games activities and electronic simulation systems
8	other activities for other accommodation facilities	ice cream shops	passenger air transport		hosting artistic bands
9	other activities for short-term accommodation activities	juice shops	rental of land means of transport of goods (without driver)		medical coordination offices
10	tourist camps	other activities for beverage activities	rental of land means of transport of passengers (with driver)		mobile entertainment games activities
11		other activities for other food service activities	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)		motorcycle rental
12		other activities for restaurant activities and mobile food services	rental of mobile caravans		museums operation of all kinds
13		restaurants	transport of pilgrims		operation and preservation of historic sites and buildings
14		restaurants and canteens of public facilities			operation of ski lifts
15		selling corn			organizing parties
16		shisha café			organizing sports events
17					other activities for creative, arts and entertainment activities
18					other activities for other entertainment activities that are not classified elsewhere
19					other activities for other sports activities
20					rental of boats
21					rental of leisure and sports tools and equipment

22				stable activities
23				theme park and beach activities
24				ticket sales activities for entertainment events
25				ticket sales activities for theatrical events
26				tour operator activities
27				tourism promotion activities (marketing of domestic tourism)
28				tourist adventures
29				travel agency activities

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Table 8. *Registered Activities Availability/Continuity 2019 (End of December) till 2022 (End of March)*

S/N	Registered Activities (End of December 2019)		Registered Activities (End of December 2020)		Registered Activities (End of December 2021)		Registered Activities (End of March 2022)	
	Available	Missing	Available	Missing	Available	Missing	Available	Missing
1		hosting artistic bands						
2		in-city rail transport of passengers						in-city rail transport of passengers
3	70		71	marine transport of passengers (internal water transport)	73	marine transport of passengers (internal water transport)	70	marine transport of passengers (internal water transport)
4		operation of ski lifts						operation of ski lifts
5		other activities for other accommodation facilities		other activities for other accommodation facilities				other activities for other accommodation facilities
6				rental of mobile caravans				

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Referring to SICTA and the TSA in addition to Oman's tourism law implementing regulations, the ice cream, corn, and juice selling shops besides the rest of the "Food and Beverage" category list do not fulfil the conditions nor adhere to the standards, they should be removed from the "Registered Tourism Activities", their inclusion affects the validity of the tourism statistics with regard to revenues, employment figures, and consequently, the Omanization percentages. This issue was stressed in research, some countries who receive a significant number of tourists have statistical reporting systems that needs to be scientifically updated to better reflect the actual status, size, and market share (Volo 2020).

Employment Figures

Oman's tourism sector suffered severely of the COVID-19 pandemic outcomes. Many SMEs in the sector were unable to secure staff salaries/payments which resulted in high employee turnover and the unfortunate loss of jobs (Al Hanai and Matriano 2021, Al Hasni 2021). Analysis of the tourism workforce figures in Oman shows a gradual decrease from year 2019, throughout years 2020 and 2021, then ends up with a slight increase in year 2022 (end of March) but still far from year 2019 (See Table 9). The decrease in the Omani workforce reached its maximum in year 2021, the industry lost 2,365 Omani employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is nearly 14% of the Omani workforce. The same decrease and gradual increase happened with the non-Omani workforce. The decrease in the non-Omani workforce reached its maximum in year 2021, the industry lost 23,964 non-Omani employees, which is nearly 17% of the non-Omani workforce. The overall decrease in the tourism workforce, which reached its maximum in 2021, was 26,329 employees (Omani and Non-Omani), which is nearly 16.7% of the total workforce. The economic and social benefits generated by the tourism and hospitality sector is undeniable, as an employer it can provide several opportunities to a wide spectrum of job seekers, people of different ages, educational background and physical capabilities (Baum and Szivas 2008), but

the fact that tourism is highly affected by the slightest of incidents that happen worldwide makes its contributions somehow precarious (Blake and Sinclair 2003, Lee et al. 2015, McDowell et al. 2009, Robinson et al. 2019). In fact, the tourism and hospitality industry is a vulnerable economic sector that can support countries' economic growth and social development till a crisis happens anywhere in the world even though not related to tourism and hospitality (De Bruyn et al. 2018).

As a role of thumb, all statistics that deal with employment and manpower In the Sultanate of Oman have an additional column (Omanization %), Omanization (Localization) of the workforce is the process of training and developing Omanis skills and competences, aiming to decrease dependence on non-Omani workforce and eventually replacement with Omani personnel (Atef and Al Balushi 2017, Law et al. 2004, Wong and Law 1999). Noticeably, year 2021 registered an Omanization percentage of 10.8 which is higher than the percentage registered in 2019 (the year with the highest Omani workforce figure of the study years), and so close to year 2020 (10.9%) (the year with the second highest Omani workforce figure of the study years), although year 2022 (end of March) showed an increase in the Omani workforce, it still registered a lower Omanization percentage (10.5%) than year 2021.

Table 9. *Tourism Workforce 2019 (End of December) till 2022 (End of March)*

Year	Omani Workforce			Non-Omani Workforce			Overall Total	Omanization
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total		
2019 (End of December)	11781	4669	16450	134572	6205	140777	157227	10.5%
2020 (End of December)	11272	4251	15523	121410	5314	126724	142247	10.9%
2021 (End of December)	10160	3925	14085	111941	4872	116813	130898	10.8%
2022 (End of March)	10280	4098	14378	116812	5109	121921	136299	10.5%

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Overall, the Omanization figures are nearly frozen and have not significantly changed/increased over a period of four years. There is a pressing need to accelerate the Omanization process and increase the number of citizens joining the industry sectors. There are several factors that hinder Omanis from joining the industry, some of them are related to the image of the industry as perceived by the society and some are related to the industry nature and work environment. Although the industry provides several employment opportunities, the citizens are not motivated to make use of such opportunities. A dilemma that needs further study and analysis to reach the proper course of action.

Throughout the study years the top 10 licenced activities by Omanization percentage revolved around 15 activities (See Table 10).

But, when these 15 registered activities are classified under the tourism related services/industries involved in the tourism experience creation (Accommodation - Food and Beverage - Transportation - Retail Stores - Activities and Entertainment) the "Food and Beverage" category has no presence in the top 10 licenced activities by Omanization percentage:

- **Accommodation**
    1. Other activities for camp areas and theme parks that offer a place for cars and parks that offer a place for trailers
    2. Other activities for other accommodation facilities
- **Food and Beverage**
    o NONE
- **Transportation**
    3. Airport passenger land transport services
    4. In-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)
    5. In-city rail transport of passengers
    6. Land transport of passengers (busses - non-scheduled)
    7. Passenger air transport
    8. Rental of land means of transport of goods (without driver)
    9. Rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)
- **Retail Stores**
    10. Operating and marketing duty free shops
- **Activities and Entertainment**
    11. Activities of independent journalists
    12. Mobile entertainment games activities
    13. Museums operation of all kinds
    14. Operation and preservation of historic sites and buildings
    15. Theme Park and beach activities

The registered activity with the highest number of Omanis throughout the study years was "Catering Companies" (See Table 11), but when the Omanization percentage is considered, surprisingly this registered activity does not exceed 16.4% at most, which was reached in year 2020. There is no relationship between how large the number of employed Omanis is and the Omanization percentage, the activity workforce size differs from one activity to the other, affecting the Omanization percentage. Percentages are tricky when considered without the actual figures.

It could be noticed that some activities can accommodate more Omani employees than the others, offering a window for the unemployed to find job opportunities. The "Accommodation" and the "Food and Beverage" categories which in other words is the Hospitality industry, offered more employment opportunities to Omanis than any of the other industry categories, followed by the "Transportation" category.

Taking a look at the Omani male employment in the sector, figures indicate that the "Hospitality Industry", "Transportation", and "Travel Agencies" are the top employers (See Table 12). Which is also the case with the Omani female employment in the sector (See Table 13).

Table 10. *The Top 10 Registered Activities by Omanization Percentages 2019 (End of December) till 2022 (End of March)*

S/N	Registered Activities (End of December 2019)	Omanization %	Registered Activities (End of December 2020)	Omanization %	Registered Activities (End of December 2021)	Omanization %	Registered Activities (End of March 2022)	Omanization %
1	other activities for camp areas and theme parks that offer a place for cars and parks that offer a place for trailers	100.0%	in-city rail transport of passengers	100.0%	in-city rail transport of passengers	100.0%	other activities for camp areas and theme parks that offer a place for cars and parks that offer a place for trailers	100.0%
2	land transport of passengers (busses - non-scheduled)	90.0%	other activities for camp areas and theme parks that offer a place for cars and parks that offer a place for trailers	100.0%	other activities for camp areas and theme parks that offer a place for cars and parks that offer a place for trailers	100.0%	land transport of passengers (busses - non-scheduled)	97.0%
3	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	89.3%	land transport of passengers (busses - non-scheduled)	95.8%	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	91.2%	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	91.9%
4	theme park and beach activities	76.3%	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	91.3%	land transport of passengers (busses - non-scheduled)	85.7%	rental of land means of transport of goods (without driver)	86.0%
5	museums operation of all kinds	75.0%	museums operation of all kinds	79.4%	museums operation of all kinds	80.6%	theme park and beach activities	82.5%
6	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	70.5%	theme park and beach activities	76.8%	theme park and beach activities	79.5%	museums operation of all kinds	80.6%
7	operating and marketing duty free shops	58.1%	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	72.1%	operation and preservation of historic sites and buildings	77.8%	airport passenger land transport services	80.0%
8	passenger air transport	57.4%	passenger air transport	66.7%	other activities for other accommodation facilities	77.8%	passenger air transport	74.1%
9	activities of independent journalists	50.0%	operating and marketing duty free shops	60.0%	passenger air transport	73.3%	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	70.0%
10	mobile entertainment games activities	50.0%	activities of independent journalists	50.0%	rental of land means of transport of goods (without driver)	71.7%	operation and preservation of historic sites and buildings	68.2%

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Table 11. *The Top 10 Registered Activities by Omanis Employment Figures 2019 (End of December) till 2022 (End of March)*

S/N	Registered Activities (End of December 2019)	Employees Number	Omanization %	Registered Activities (End of December 2020)	Employees Number	Omanization %	Registered Activities (End of December 2021)	Employees Number	Omanization %	Registered Activities (End of March 2022)	Employees Number	Omanization %
1	catering companies	3537	15.4%	catering companies	3358	16.4%	catering companies	2952	15.0%	catering companies	3064	15.1%
2	hotels, motels, and resorts	3297	29.5%	passenger air transport	3214	66.7%	hotels, motels, and resorts	2868	33.1%	hotels, motels, and resorts	2920	32.3%
3	passenger air transport	3201	57.4%	hotels, motels, and resorts	3110	31.8%	passenger air transport	2758	73.3%	passenger air transport	2739	74.1%
4	restaurants	1644	3.2%	restaurants	1484	3.3%	restaurants	1342	3.4%	restaurants	1376	3.4%
5	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	1405	89.3%	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	1357	91.3%	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	1212	91.2%	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	1195	91.9%
6	travel agency activities	1002	26.5%	travel agency activities	839	25.1%	travel agency activities	672	22.9%	travel agency activities	670	23.6%
7	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	394	70.5%	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	379	72.1%	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	353	69.2%	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	367	70.0%
8	cafés that serve meals mainly	282	1.4%	cafés that serve meals mainly	247	1.1%	cafés that serve meals mainly	303	1.2%	cafés that serve meals mainly	315	1.1%
9	cafés that mainly serve drinks	243	0.9%	theme park and beach activities	222	76.8%	cafés that mainly serve drinks	264	1.4%	cafés that mainly serve drinks	275	1.5%
10	hotel apartments	236	17.7%	cafés that mainly serve drinks	220	1.0%	theme park and beach activities	209	79.5%	theme park and beach activities	208	82.5%

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Table 12. *The Top 10 Registered Activities by Omani Male Employment Figures 2019 (End of December) till 2022 (End of March)*

S/N	Registered Activities (End of December 2019)	Employees Number	Registered Activities (End of December 2020)	Employees Number	Registered Activities (End of December 2021)	Employees Number	Registered Activities (End of March 2022)	Employees Number
1	hotels, motels, and resorts	2685	passenger air transport	2605	hotels, motels, and resorts	2304	hotels, motels, and resorts	2346
2	passenger air transport	2579	hotels, motels, and resorts	2528	passenger air transport	2271	passenger air transport	2249
3	catering companies	2423	catering companies	2331	catering companies	2054	catering companies	2109
4	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	1334	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	1286	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	1146	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	1127
5	restaurants	766	restaurants	717	restaurants	620	restaurants	609
6	travel agency activities	485	travel agency activities	420	travel agency activities	334	travel agency activities	338
7	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	322	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	310	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	289	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	308
8	theme park and beach activities	170	theme park and beach activities	165	theme park and beach activities	156	theme park and beach activities	155
9	hotel apartments	162	hotel apartments	133	cafés that mainly serve drinks	138	cafés that mainly serve drinks	145
10	tour operator activities	122	cafés that mainly serve drinks	105	cafés that serve meals mainly	120	cafés that serve meals mainly	122

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Table 13. *The Top 10 Registered Activities by Omani Female Employment Figures 2019 (End of December) till 2022 (End of March)*

S/N	Registered Activities (End of December 2019)	Employees Number	Registered Activities (End of December 2020)	Employees Number	Registered Activities (End of December 2021)	Employees Number	Registered Activities (End of March 2022)	Employees Number
1	catering companies	1114	catering companies	1027	catering companies	898	catering companies	955
2	restaurants	878	restaurants	767	restaurants	722	restaurants	767
3	passenger air transport	622	passenger air transport	609	hotels, motels, and resorts	564	hotels, motels, and resorts	574
4	hotels, motels, and resorts	612	hotels, motels, and resorts	582	passenger air transport	487	passenger air transport	490
5	travel agency activities	517	travel agency activities	419	travel agency activities	338	travel agency activities	332
6	cafés that serve meals mainly	162	cafés that serve meals mainly	145	cafés that serve meals mainly	183	cafés that serve meals mainly	193
7	cafés that mainly serve drinks	124	cafés that mainly serve drinks	115	cafés that mainly serve drinks	126	cafés that mainly serve drinks	130
8	hotel apartments	74	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	71	hotel apartments	67	hotel apartments	72
9	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	72	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	69	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	66	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	68
10	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	71	hotel apartments	63	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	64	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	59

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Table 14 represents the top 25 posts according to Omanization percentages (End of March 2022). It is worth noting that 207 posts are available to Omanis only (non-Omani are not allowed to be employed in these jobs) under Article 1 of the new Labour Law (Ministry of Labour 2022). The posts mentioned in Table 14 are among the 207 exclusive posts, for this reason there is no representation of the non-Omani workforce within the top 25 posts by Omanization percentage, and an Omanization percentage of 100 is the result shown for these mentioned posts.

The following Table (15) is a representation of the Top 25 posts by Omanis employment figures (End of March 2022). The top post is working as "Air Host/Hostess", aviation is a huge sector, so it comes as no surprise that it employs that much of Omanis among other nationalities. Gender-wise, The same result was reached in Table 16 that shows the top 25 Posts by Omani male employment figures (End of March 2022), travelling seems to attract Omani males, while Table 17 that shows the top 25 Posts by Omani female employment figures for the same time period surprisingly indicate that "Food Waiter" was the post with the highest female employment figure despite the hard and demanding nature of the waitering duties, followed by "Cleaning Worker", it is noticeable that the majority of the hospitality industry housekeeping and cleaning posts are occupied by females who excel in doing the required tasks, a trend that is also assured by industry figures in Oman.

Table 14. *Top 25 Posts by Omanization Percentages (End of March 2022)*

s/n	Activity	Post	Omani Workforce			Non-Omani Workforce			Overall Total			Omanization %
			Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
1	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	bus driver	508	0	508	0	0	0	508	0	508	**100.0%**
2	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	driver of all vehicles	320	0	320	0	0	0	320	0	320	**100.0%**
3	hotels, motels, and resorts	reception clerk (hotel)	190	101	291	0	0	0	190	101	291	**100.0%**
4	hotels, motels, and resorts	guard	260	12	272	0	0	0	260	12	272	**100.0%**
5	catering companies	driver of all vehicles	266	0	266	0	0	0	266	0	266	**100.0%**
6	hotels, motels, and resorts	security guard	234	13	247	0	0	0	234	13	247	**100.0%**
7	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	driver of all vehicles	170	0	170	0	0	0	170	0	170	**100.0%**
8	restaurants	public relations clerk	63	107	170	0	0	0	63	107	170	**100.0%**
9	passenger air transport	tickets clerk	81	66	147	0	0	0	81	66	147	**100.0%**
10	passenger air transport	passenger services clerk	92	48	140	0	0	0	92	48	140	**100.0%**
11	hotels, motels, and resorts	driver of all vehicles	126	0	126	0	0	0	126	0	126	**100.0%**
12	restaurants	cashier	55	70	125	0	0	0	55	70	125	**100.0%**
13	passenger air transport	administrative clerk (general)	68	28	96	0	0	0	68	28	96	**100.0%**
14	catering companies	administrative clerk (general)	15	67	82	0	0	0	15	67	82	**100.0%**
15	catering companies	guard	77	0	77	0	0	0	77	0	77	**100.0%**
16	hotels, motels, and resorts	reception clerk (general)	55	22	77	0	0	0	55	22	77	**100.0%**
17	catering companies	reception clerk (general)	36	41	77	0	0	0	36	41	77	**100.0%**
18	cafés that serve meals mainly	public relations clerk	29	47	76	0	0	0	29	47	76	**100.0%**
19	restaurants	administrative clerk (general)	13	55	68	0	0	0	13	55	68	**100.0%**
20	passenger air transport	training pilot	58	0	58	0	0	0	58	0	58	**100.0%**

21	hotels, motels, and resorts	public relations clerk	52	6	58	0	0	0	52	6	58	**100.0%**
22	land transport of passengers (busses - non-scheduled)	driver of all vehicles	57	0	57	0	0	0	57	0	57	**100.0%**
23	catering companies	public relations clerk	35	22	57	0	0	0	35	22	57	**100.0%**
24	passenger air transport	administrative coordinator	27	29	56	0	0	0	27	29	56	**100.0%**
25	passenger air transport	telephone communications clerk	34	19	53	0	0	0	34	19	53	**100.0%**

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Table 15. *Top 25 Posts by Omanis Employment Figures (End of March 2022)*

s/n	Activity	Post	Omani Workforce			Non-Omani Workforce			Overall Total			Omanization %
			Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
1	passenger air transport	air host/hostess	657	121	**778**	4	706	710	661	827	1488	52.3%
2	catering companies	cleaning worker/ public buildings	460	150	**610**	1588	13	1601	2048	163	2211	27.6%
3	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	bus driver	508	0	**508**	0	0	0	508	0	508	100.0%
4	catering companies	food waiter	183	231	**414**	2768	310	3078	2951	541	3492	11.9%
5	passenger air transport	commercial pilot	400	10	**410**	71	3	74	471	13	484	84.7%
6	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	driver of all vehicles	320	0	**320**	0	0	0	320	0	320	100.0%
7	hotels, motels, and resorts	reception clerk (hotel)	190	101	**291**	0	0	0	190	101	291	100.0%
8	hotels, motels, and resorts	guard	260	12	**272**	0	0	0	260	12	272	100.0%
9	catering companies	driver of all vehicles	266	0	**266**	0	0	0	266	0	266	100.0%
10	passenger air transport	jet maintenance technician	260	6	**266**	32	0	32	292	6	298	89.3%
11	hotels, motels, and resorts	security guard	234	13	**247**	0	0	0	234	13	247	100.0%
12	catering companies	cleaning worker/hotel rooms	240	4	**244**	42	2	44	282	6	288	84.7%
13	restaurants	food waiter	121	70	**191**	10099	510	10609	10220	580	10800	1.8%
14	hotels, motels, and resorts	chef (general)	108	80	**188**	641	52	693	749	132	881	21.3%

15	hotels, motels, and resorts	food waiter	159	15	**174**	835	325	1160	994	340	1334	13.0%
16	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	driver of all vehicles	170	0	**170**	0	0	0	170	0	170	100.0%
17	restaurants	public relations clerk	63	107	**170**	0	0	0	63	107	170	100.0%
18	catering companies	utensils cleaner	144	11	**155**	2332	2	2334	2476	13	2489	6.2%
19	passenger air transport	tickets clerk	81	66	**147**	0	0	0	81	66	147	100.0%
20	hotels, motels, and resorts	cleaning worker/hotel rooms	128	13	**141**	868	93	961	996	106	1102	12.8%
21	travel agency activities	tickets clerk	39	102	**141**	2	1	3	41	103	144	97.9%
22	passenger air transport	passenger services clerk	92	48	**140**	0	0	0	92	48	140	100.0%
23	hotels, motels, and resorts	driver of all vehicles	126	0	**126**	0	0	0	126	0	126	100.0%
24	restaurants	cashier	55	70	**125**	0	0	0	55	70	125	100.0%
25	catering companies	chef (general)	83	20	**103**	3230	4	3234	3313	24	3337	3.1%

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Table 16. *Top 25 Posts by Omani Male Employment Figures (End of March 2022)*

s/n	Activity	Post	Omani Workforce			Non-Omani Workforce			Overall Total			Omanization %
			Male	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	
1	passenger air transport	air host/hostess	**657**	121	778	4	706	710	661	827	1488	52.3%
2	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	bus driver	**508**	0	508	0	0	0	508	0	508	100.0%
3	catering companies	cleaning worker/ public buildings	**460**	150	610	1588	13	1601	2048	163	2211	27.6%
4	passenger air transport	commercial pilot	**400**	10	410	71	3	74	471	13	484	84.7%
5	in-city land transport of passengers (busses - scheduled)	driver of all vehicles	**320**	0	320	0	0	0	320	0	320	100.0%
6	catering companies	driver of all vehicles	**266**	0	266	0	0	0	266	0	266	100.0%
7	hotels, motels, and resorts	guard	**260**	12	272	0	0	0	260	12	272	100.0%
8	passenger air transport	jet maintenance technician	**260**	6	266	32	0	32	292	6	298	89.3%

9	catering companies	cleaning worker/hotel rooms	**240**	4	244	42	2	44	282	6	288	84.7%
10	hotels, motels, and resorts	security guard	**234**	13	247	0	0	0	234	13	247	100.0%
11	hotels, motels, and resorts	reception clerk (hotel)	**190**	101	291	0	0	0	190	101	291	100.0%
12	catering companies	food waiter	**183**	231	414	2768	310	3078	2951	541	3492	11.9%
13	rental of land means of transport of passengers (without driver)	driver of all vehicles	**170**	0	170	0	0	0	170	0	170	100.0%
14	hotels, motels, and resorts	food waiter	**159**	15	174	835	325	1160	994	340	1334	13.0%
15	catering companies	utensils cleaner	**144**	11	155	2332	2	2334	2476	13	2489	6.2%
16	hotels, motels, and resorts	cleaning worker/hotel rooms	**128**	13	141	868	93	961	996	106	1102	12.8%
17	hotels, motels, and resorts	driver of all vehicles	**126**	0	126	0	0	0	126	0	126	100.0%
18	restaurants	food waiter	**121**	70	191	10099	510	10609	10220	580	10800	1.8%
19	hotels, motels, and resorts	chef (general)	**108**	80	188	641	52	693	749	132	881	21.3%
20	passenger air transport	passenger services clerk	**92**	48	140	0	0	0	92	48	140	100.0%
21	catering companies	chef (general)	**83**	20	103	3230	4	3234	3313	24	3337	3.1%
22	hotels, motels, and resorts	utensils cleaner	**82**	4	86	159	3	162	241	7	248	34.7%
23	passenger air transport	tickets clerk	**81**	66	147	0	0	0	81	66	147	100.0%
24	cafés that mainly serve drinks	coffee shop waiter	**81**	15	96	4001	137	4138	4082	152	4234	2.3%
25	catering companies	guard	**77**	0	77	0	0	0	77	0	77	100.0%

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Table 17. *Top 25 Posts by Omani Female Employment Figures (End of March 2022)*

s/n	Activity	Post	Omani Workforce			Non-Omani Workforce			Overall Total			Omanization %
			Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
1	catering companies	food waiter	183	**231**	414	2768	310	3078	2951	541	3492	11.9%
2	catering companies	cleaning worker/ public buildings	460	**150**	610	1588	13	1601	2048	163	2211	27.6%
3	passenger air transport	air host/hostess	657	**121**	778	4	706	710	661	827	1488	52.3%
4	restaurants	public relations clerk	63	**107**	170	0	0	0	63	107	170	100.0%
5	travel agency activities	tickets clerk	39	**102**	141	2	1	3	41	103	144	97.9%
6	hotels, motels, and resorts	reception clerk (hotel)	190	**101**	291	0	0	0	190	101	291	100.0%
7	catering companies	hospital cleaning worker	15	**82**	97	50	1	51	65	83	148	65.5%
8	hotels, motels, and resorts	chef (general)	108	**80**	188	641	52	693	749	132	881	21.3%
9	restaurants	cashier	55	**70**	125	0	0	0	55	70	125	100.0%
10	restaurants	food waiter	121	**70**	191	10099	510	10609	10220	580	10800	1.8%
11	catering companies	administrative clerk/general	15	**67**	82	0	0	0	15	67	82	100.0%
12	passenger air transport	tickets clerk	81	**66**	147	0	0	0	81	66	147	100.0%
13	restaurants	administrative clerk/general	13	**55**	68	0	0	0	13	55	68	100.0%
14	passenger air transport	passenger services clerk	92	**48**	140	0	0	0	92	48	140	100.0%
15	cafés that serve meals mainly	public relations clerk	29	**47**	76	0	0	0	29	47	76	100.0%
16	restaurants	coordinator	3	**42**	45	0	0	0	3	42	45	100.0%
17	catering companies	food services supervisor	50	**42**	92	1296	29	1325	1346	71	1417	6.5%
18	catering companies	reception clerk (general)	36	**41**	77	0	0	0	36	41	77	100.0%
19	restaurants	public accountant	12	**37**	49	18	0	18	30	37	67	73.1%
20	travel agency activities	travel agent	8	**37**	45	964	98	1062	972	135	1107	4.1%

21	restaurants	food services supervisor	20	**34**	54	2303	164	2467	2323	198	2521	2.1%
22	restaurants	reception clerk (general)	4	**31**	35	0	0	0	4	31	35	100.0%
23	passenger air transport	administrative coordinator	27	**29**	56	0	0	0	27	29	56	100.0%
24	passenger air transport	administrative clerk/general	68	**28**	96	0	0	0	68	28	96	100.0%
25	cafés that mainly serve drinks	public relations clerk	13	**26**	39	0	0	0	13	26	39	100.0%

Adapted from: Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

The population figures and the Omani tourism workforce figures were tabulated and cross compared to indicate the contribution of Omanis to the industry and the industry attractiveness as an employment option. In general, according to year 2021 population and tourism workforce figures, the tourism workforce represent 2.9% of the total population of Oman (Omani and Non-Omani). The Total Omanis working in the field out of the total Omani population (Omanis only) does not exceed 0.5%. Out of the total Omani males population 0.72% work in tourism, and only 0.28% of the total Omani females work in the sector (See Table 18).

Table 18. *End of December 2021 Tourism Workforce Vs Country's Population*

End of December 2021 Statistics	Omani Workforce			Non-Omani Workforce			Overall Total
	Male	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	**Total**
Population	1,412,508	1,391,609	2,804,117	1,348,646	374,683	1,723,329	4,527,446
Tourism Workforce	10160	3925	14085	111941	4872	116813	130898
Percentage of Tourism Workforce/Gender/ Population	0.72%	0.28%	0.50%	8.3%	1.3%	6.8%	2.9%

Adapted from: National Center for Statistics and Information (2022a); Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (2022b).

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

Conclusions

The study revealed some important facts based on the analysis of the official figures about the Omani tourism and hospitality industry just before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Omani tourism and hospitality industry revenues and employment was enormous. Massive decrease in tourists arrivals, loss of revenues, and sever job losses. The Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism sector were unable to cope and had to cut employee pays. The ramifications of the pandemic left no space for maneuverability leading to a radical decrease of business and consequently, loss of revenues.

There needs to be a systematic offer of support to tourism and hospitality stakeholders to heal the sector. The creation of a government/industry crisis recovery fund scheme to face any future incidents should be considered.

Tracking and analyzing the industry employment figures (End of December 2019 till end of March 2022) led us to understand the COVID-19 pandemic negative effect on the industry workforce size. The overall number of employees who migrated the tourism workforce, which reached its maximum in 2021, was 26,329 employees (Omani and Non-Omani), which is nearly 16.7% of the total workforce. The industry lost 2,365 Omani employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is nearly 14% of the Omani workforce and lost 23,964 non-Omani employees, which is nearly 17% of the non-Omani workforce. The decrease in the industry employment figures in general and that of the Omanis was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic but other factors could have a significant effect as well: Employment law (some jobs are only available to Omanis and non-

Omanis are not allowed to join them), retirement schemes, movement of personnel towards other industries, and the attractiveness of government and military employments to Omanis leading to industry abandonment.

Some industry activities/positions have more Omani employments than the others. Gender comparisons revealed discrepancies between Omani male and female employment figures in favor of males. Analysis of the statistics also allowed to realize which activities/positions have the highest Omani male and female employments. Nationality (Omani - Non-Omani) comparisons were conducted that revealed the dominance of expats employment in the different industry sectors/activities. The Omanization figures for the studied time period (End of December 2019 till end of March 2022) are between 10.5-10.9 % of the total industry workforce size. Figures of Omanis employed in the tourism and hospitality industry (End of December 2021) out of the whole Omani population for the same period is small (0.5%). There is a pressing need to accelerate the Omanization process and increase the number of citizens joining the industry sectors. The factors that hinder Omanis from joining the industry need to be studied and resolved.

The tourism and hospitality registered activities reached 74 in total (End of December 2019 till end of March 2022). Some tourism and hospitality registered activities were present in some years and missing in others. Some of the tourism and hospitality registered activities do not belong to the tourism and hospitality sector nor those relating to it. Not all operations/businesses registered at the Omani Ministry of Labour and related to food and beverage should be registered as "Tourism Activities". In view of the Standard International Classification of Tourism Activities (SICTA) the list of tourism and hospitality registered activities should be reviewed and filtered to better reflect the actual industry performance.

The Omani Tourism Strategy 2040 needs to be revised to assure the validity of the planned goals and figures, after the pandemic, there might be a need for updates and amendments to assure that the strategy is still on the right track.

Theoretical Implications

This study provides an informed scientific overview to scholars, policy makers, and industry affiliates of the turbulent situation faced by the Omani tourism and hospitality industry because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also demonstrates the pandemic recovery strategies adopted by the Government of the Sultanate of Oman to revive the industry.

The study demonstrates the concept of "Omanization" within the context of tourism and hospitality, gives a general perspective of the Omani Tourism Strategy 2040 and the related expansion plans in the tourism and hospitality sector to increase its contribution to citizens employment plans.

The study contributes to the efforts made to study crises. It demonstrates a study model with methods adopted, analysis techniques applied, interpretations, and implications that might serve as guidelines for other research projects.

Furthermore, the paper contributes to the literature on the Omani tourism and hospitality sector, explains its resources, structure, and employment patterns. It

provides some basic knowledge of the Omani tourism law and the law implementing regulations.

Managerial Implications

The current study sheds light on the Omani tourism and hospitality industry performance and stature before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy makers, scholars, and stakeholder would find a thorough analysis of the figures pertaining to different aspects of the industry that would inform decision making for current/future plans and developmental actions.

The results of the study contributes to understanding the industry related issues that should be targeted and solved by Oman as a tourism destination to overcome any future crises. Policy and decision makers would benefit from the analysis and facts reached on the nature and composition of the industry employment structure.

According to the study, the Omanization policies should be reviewed and accelerated. Although the industry provides several employment opportunities, the citizens are not motivated to make use of such opportunities. A dilemma that needs further study and analysis to reach the proper course of action.

The methodology adopted to generate industry statistics should be corrected and improved, industry related registered activities and employment figures should be filtered, the actual filtered figures might decrease Omanization percentages or revenues generated and consequently the industry contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) but would allow for better planning and management of the sector. The current status leads only to a vulnerable industry structure that cannot overcome any hurdles or unfavorable circumstances.

Limitations and Future Research Agenda

This study is based on secondary data analysis which were acquired/collected from the reports, statistics, and figures of the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the NCSI, and the UNWTO.

Study figures show the number of industry affiliates who migrated their jobs because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the significant decrease in tourists' arrivals, and consequently revenues, but no study has yet attempted to assess the costs needed to revive back the Omani tourism industry sectors to the full capacity.

It is not within the scope of the current study to assess the reasons that hinder Omanis from joining the tourism and hospitality industry workforce; but based on the current study analysis and reached facts a thorough study of the push and pull factors that affect Omanis participation in the industry is needed.

A study is proposed to be conducted on the Omani tourism and hospitality academic and professional training institutions in order to discover whether their intake/graduates' figures are in alignment with the planned Omani Tourism Strategy 2040 expansions, and whether they would be able to supply the current and future industry manpower demand or not. The inability to fulfill the industry

required manpower demand would increase the dependence on the non-Omani workforce, a consequence that would negatively affect the aspired Omanization plans of the sector.

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Graduates' Employability:
Hospitality Industry 4.0 and Skill Gaps in Egypt

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The study aims to examine the alignment between the skills required by the hospitality industry and the skills possessed by hospitality higher education graduates in response to Industry 4.0, which affects graduates' employability. In addition, the study aims to explore skill gaps in the hotel management curriculum that negatively affect graduates' employability and to highlight the essential skills that are crucial for hotel operators while recruiting fresh graduates for entry-level hotel jobs. The research instrument comprises 38 skills based on four studies to constitute a broad framework of employability skills. The research targeted a total sample of 145 professional managers, representing five operational managers in 29 5-star hotels in Cairo. The results revealed unalignment between hospitality industry requirements and higher education deliverables, and unfortunately, gaps were identified in all skills. Moreover, the result emphasized the great concern that the hospitality industry gives to soft skills and personal attitudes as a basis for its employability, which demands a careful revision of hotel management curricula to treat any shortages in skills and ensure the fulfillment of hospitality industry requirements to enhance graduates' employability.

Keywords: *industry 4.0, employability skills, curriculum, soft skills, skill gaps*

Introduction

The hospitality market has no longer been stable, and the competition has become fierce (Espellita and Maravilla Jr 2019), which requires hotel operators to find new ways to satisfy their guests by providing the expected and unexpected services that can create the wow experience needed to maintain guests' satisfaction and retention (Ruel and Njoku 2021). No doubt, this aim will not happen without having the right employees who are qualified to perform service tasks properly. Therefore, having the right employees is crucial for attaining success.

Unfortunately, finding the right employees is not easy. According to many scholars, the hospitality industry is facing a significant challenge concerning employment because fresh graduates lack the necessary skills needed by the industry that make them ready for the workplace (Abas-Mastura et al. 2013, Fajaryati et al. 2020, Mourshed et al. 2012). Several surveys declared that it's difficult for hotel operators to find entry-level employees with suitable skills, despite the high level of unemployment (Matsouka and Mihail 2016). According

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to Fajaryati et al. (2020), about 75 million young people in developing countries are suffering from unemployment, and their unemployment rates have reached 2 to 4 times higher than those of adults. In 2023, the Manpower Group conducted a global survey to distinguish the lack of skills and talent among 41,000 employers in 42 countries. The result was that 77% of global employers reported difficulty in finding skilled and talented employees needed to fill available work occupations, which led 55% of global employers to hire employees from outside their countries to fill employment gaps (Manpower Group 2023).

Nevertheless, in the last few years, the employment problem has gotten bigger due to the emergence of a new industrial revolution called Industry 4.0, which is characterized by its technological developments such as CPS, IoT, AR, VR, AI and robotics, big data, blockchain, and 3D printing (Ben Youssef and Zeqiri 2022, Schwab 2017, Verevka 2019) that depend on digital technology, automated processes, and robotics (Drexler and Lapré 2019). This new technology is expected to change everything we are used to doing and reshape our way of living, dealing with one another, managing relationships with others, and doing business (Osei et al. 2020). In addition, Industry 4.0 will affect individuals, organizations, and societies' behavior and standards (Liyanage 2012) and lead to changes in the operators' requirements for skills and the number of manpower used (OECD 2018).

In the same context, the World Economic Forum (2020) has reported that technology adoption will continue to rise, and by 2025, companies will start to transform their jobs, tasks, and skills to match the prevailing technologies. This transformation, as indicated by 43% of business surveys, will lead to a decrease in jobs and workforce numbers as a result of technology integration between humans and machines, as well as an accelerated level of destruction for traditional jobs. The report expected that by 2025, about 15% of a company's workforce will be at risk of disruption, about 6% of employees are estimated to be fully displaced, and about 44% of the effectively used skills will be changed.

Concerning Egypt, the unemployment rate has been on the rise. According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), there were 2.263 million unemployed individuals out of a total workforce of approximately 31.956 million, representing 7.1% in the third quarter (Q3) of 2023, which is expected to increase in the first quarter of 2024, to reach 7.5% (IMF 2024).

Concerning the hospitality industry, hotel management graduates experience a shortage of the necessary skills, which makes them less relevant to the industry, and thus less attractive for hotel recruitment (Hossny 2018), which affects the graduates' employability and leads to an increase in unemployment and underemployment among higher education graduates (Brewer 2013, Ejiwale 2014, Ramisetty and Desai 2017, Crespin et al. 2019).

Unfortunately, this shortage is not only for the time being; it has lasted for a long time. According to Raybould and Wilkins (2005), hotel operators complained of the extremely low supply of skilled employees who have hospitality academic qualifications, particularly in the hotel management department. The reason is that graduates' skills are not aligned with industry requirements, resulting in a gap between hospitality higher education and the requirements of the hospitality

industry because what the hospitality educators teach to students does not represent the actual needs of the industry (Adeyinka-Ojo 2018, Bathla et al. 2019, Hossny 2018, Kanter 2013, Singh and Singh 2008).

For that, hospitality operators are becoming more suspicious of hospitality graduates' skills as a result of the inadequate skill preparation that the hospitality higher institutes offer for students (Abbasi et al. 2018, Bathla et al. 2018, El Mansour and Dean 2016), which leads to graduates' failure to get suitable job opportunities (World Bank 2015). Therefore, an increasing gap between what graduates are taught in higher education and what the hotel industry needs exists, which led to a problem facing graduates in their transition from their educational institutes to the industry (Hossny 2018). Consequently, to be able to produce qualified and employable graduates from an industry perspective, hospitality higher education must study and analyze the current and future requirements of the hospitality industry and develop hotel management curricula to reflect these requirements. This will help to ensure that graduates are outfitted with suitable, sufficient, and industry-relevant competencies (Hossny 2018) that can effectively lead to enhanced graduate employability.

However, hospitality is a fast-moving industry that needs to be fully updated with services and qualified employees to act well with unexpected market challenges. Therefore, research that investigates the alignment between the requirements of skills for the hospitality industry and the deliverables of hospitality higher education is continually required to ensure the sustainability of enhancing graduates' employability.

For that, the researchers have formulated the following questions to be tested during the study:

1. Are the Egyptian hospitality higher education deliverables aligned with the current requirements of the hotel industry?
2. What are the gaps that the hotel operators detected in newly hired graduates' skills?
3. What are the skills that the hotel operators consider most when recruiting entry-level employees?

The research results will be beneficial for all hospitality stakeholders because the results are expected to fill the shortage of knowledge and data on the relationship between the hospitality industry and higher education deliverables in Egypt. The benefits will be as follows:

- Concerning higher education, the research results are expected to enable academics to discover the gaps in the curricula from an industry perspective to bridge them. In addition, identifying the most important skill for hotel operators to put the proper weight on those skills when designing the curriculum.
- Concerning the hospitality industry, the research results are expected to help the industry by providing a sufficient qualified number of fresh graduates equipped with the required skills at a competence level, which

will lead to improved service delivery and support expansion policies for the industry.

- Concerning students, the research results are expected to make them fully aware of the important skills needed for their recruitment acceptance, besides being ready to proceed in the hospitality career successfully.
- Concerning the government, the research results are expected to enhance graduates' employability inside and outside the country, reduce the rate of unemployment, enhance individual lifestyles, and create a state of satisfaction.

Literature Review

Potential of Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Egypt

Egypt occupies a distinct location, climate, history, and societal diversity, making it a focus of attention for tourists worldwide. According to the Travel and Tourism Development Index 2021, Egypt has ranked 51st in the list of world-attractive destinations in 2021, achieving the second-greatest improvement percentage (+4.3%) in the Middle East and North Africa region after the United Arab Emirates for 2019 to 2021, which enabled Egypt to change its rank from 57th to 51st in the 2021 index (World Economic Forum 2022).

According to Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities report, the country received 3.5 million tourists during the first half of 2021, averaging about 400,000 arrivals per month. This number of visitors has garnered revenues estimated at $3.5 to $4 billion, which is about 40% of COVID-19 pre-pandemic revenue levels, but it is a sign of the start of tourism recovery (Ahramonline 2022, AmCham Egypt 2022). Concerning the contribution of travel and tourism to Egyptian GDP, Galal (2024) has reported in Statista that Egyptian travel and tourism have contributed 7.7 percent of Egypt's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The report confirms that this percentage is developed in comparison to 2020, after a decline in 2019 due to the pandemic's impact on the travel and tourism sector. However, statistics expect an increase in the contribution of travel and tourism to the Egyptian GDP to reach 8.3 percent by the end of 2023 and continue to increase to reach 11 percent by 2028.

On the other hand, as travel and tourism increase, the hospitality industry is increasing too. The hospitality market experienced a state of remarkable growth as a result of tourism recovery in 2021 after the COVID-19 pandemic period, and many other growth factors include:

1. Developing the Egyptian infrastructure and increasing governmental support for the hospitality industry (AmCham Egypt 2022).
2. Expanding in the tourist attractions by opening many tourist destinations during 2021 and 2022, such as the Royal Carriages Museum in Cairo, the Sharm El Sheikh Museum, the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, and the Kebash Road linking the Karnak and Luxor temples, in addition to

the opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum, which is expected to open in 2024 (AmCham Egypt 2022, RateGain 2023).

3. Lifting of travel restrictions worldwide, as well as lifting of flight restrictions to many Egyptian cities by several countries, such as the United Kingdom and Russia as a result of confidence and fading of concerns about Egypt's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a significant increase of tourist arrivals to Egypt (AmCham Egypt 2022, RateGain 2023).

4. The interdependence among the Egyptian tourism types, such as health and wellness, medical, cultural, and recreational has led to catering to the multifaceted customer demands (Bathla et al. 2018, RateGain 2023).

5. The provision of new hotel products such as a homelike environment, spacious rooms, a fully equipped kitchen, free wireless connection, complimentary breakfast, on-site laundry service, etc., in addition to the expansion use of a better-communication, dot-com culture, e-marketing, social media networking, and low-priced airlines, that have led to satisfying customer new requirements and encouraging extended stays (Bathla et al. 2018, RateGain 2023).

For that reason, Egypt's hospitality market has seen considerable revenue growth. According to (Ghantous 2023) report in Hospitality News Middle East, in FY 2022, the Egyptian hospitality market achieved 116 USD per available room (RevPAR), versus 55 USD per available room (RevPAR) in the COVID-19 pandemic era in 2019. This growth in revenues has enabled the Egyptian hotel industry in 2021, according to Mordor Intelligence (2023) and RateGain (2023), to experience a robust growth rate of 45.5%, which allowed for a contribution rate of 5.1% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Besides, the hotel industry is projected to increase at an estimated CAGR of 6% to 6.2% for the next five years as a result of increasing tourist visits to Egypt.

This robust growth rate, along with Egypt's government investment target that is projected to reach 7.4 billion US dollars in Egypt's tourism sector by 2027, has encouraged several investment groups and companies that seek great opportunities and look to hold a growing competitive key to invest in the Egyptian hospitality market (Mordor Intelligence 2023).

For that, the demand for trained workers who are well-educated, more knowledgeable, and multi-skilled has increased, which is expected to increase the number of employees required at an annual rate of 3 percent by 2026 to sustain the industry's growth (Bathla et al. 2018). Therefore, the availability of qualified employees is aggressively required in the hospitality industry.

Employability; Skills and Importance

Employability is defined by Yorke (2006) as "a set of achievements—skills, understandings, and personal attributes—that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy" (p. 8). Yorke uses

the word achievement to point to a level of performance or competence needed for each component to create the potential needed to gain a job and ensure success in career lives. Matsouka and Mihail (2016) and Fajaryati et al. (2020) saw that employability skills comprise three components: knowledge gained as a result of academic qualifications, skills related to specification (whether hard or soft), and attitudes and personal characteristics.

Skills are of two types: hard and soft. The hard skills are those technical skills as professional knowledge, tools, or techniques that are needed to perform work tasks (Matsouka and Mihail 2016), while the soft skills are those "skills, abilities, and traits that are connected with personality, attitude, and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge" (Moss and Tilly 1996, p. 257) and can form individual behaviors and ways of responding to different challenges in work and life (Al-Mamun 2012). Soft skills comprise communication, collaboration, problem-solving, critical thinking ability, integrity, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, a positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethics (Fajaryati et al. 2020).

Pieces of literature have provided several skills commonly used in employability studies that can express the operators' perspective when recruiting entry-level employees. The skills are effective communication, self-management, problem-solving, leadership, teamwork, information technology (IT), creativity, interpersonal adaptability, critical thinking, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, negotiating, analytical thinking, decision-making, knowledge, research, hands-on experience, and work ethics (Espellita and Maravilla Jr, 2019, Osmani et al. 2015, Ramisetty and Desai 2017, Robles 2012).

On the other hand, Rowley et al. (2000) have divided the skills required for the hospitality industry into three categories: the industry-particular or vocational skills, which are primarily specialized abilities such as food service and preparation, inventory management, and cost control; the generic skills, which include managerial skills, communication, problem-solving, and sales skills; and the attitude-based competencies that are obtained from the workplace, such as enthusiasm, responsibility, and a willingness to learn. Possessing these skills is what can make hotel management graduates employable, ready to enter the world of work, capable of improving their abilities to attain suitable jobs, able to succeed in their occupation, and able to extend success at all stages of career levels (Adeyinka-Ojo 2018, Espellita and Maravilla Jr, 2019).

However, employability skills can be seen as those skills needed to make an individual flexible, adaptable, and mobile in the labor market (Kelly 2007). The importance of employability skills doesn't stop at just having the skills needed to be eligible for jobs; it is also used as a determinant of graduates' readiness for work and as an indicator of what they can do (Ramisetty and Desai 2017).

Employers' Preferences and Skill Gaps

The development of the hotel business and increased competition in the hotel market have led hotel operators to search for skilled graduates who can meet industry requirements. Hotel operators need innovative, effective, and resourceful

graduates with technical and generic competencies (Tyagi and Shah 2022). At the same time, they give great attention to soft skills and personal attributes over academic qualifications and technical skills (Finch et al. 2013, Saeed 2015, McMurray et al. 2016, Tyagi and Shah 2022), because soft skills provide graduates with the potential needed to make critical decisions, solve problems, and develop their competency and performance (Ramisetty and Desai 2017). For that reason, although possessing technical skills is important to do job tasks properly, these skills alone are not enough today to define graduates as employable and efficient in performing workplace tasks (Fajaryati et al. 2020, El Mansour and Dean 2016, James and James 2004, Menon et al. 2018, Robles 2012). The evidence was provided by Klaus (2010), who reported that about 75% of employees' success in the job is built on soft skills possessed, while about 25% of employees' success is dependent on their technical skills, which reflects the importance of soft skills for the workplace.

Unfortunately, hotel operators see that graduates do not have the necessary level of skills for the workplace environment (Abas-Mastura et al. 2013), which points to a significant gap between what skills academics teach students and what is needed by the industry (Bathla et al. 2019). These mismatches of skills may be a result of graduates' concentration on technical skills (El Mansour and Dean 2016) without realizing the importance of soft skills and what hotel operators need. Moreover, many scholars have seen that hotel management curricula are not preparing the students to be employable due to classroom teaching that does not meet the current industry requirements (Asirifi et al. 2014), which makes higher education be criticized for its inadequate preparation of students (Bathla et al. 2018).

Generally speaking, graduates will be less relevant to the industry when there are gaps between what they possess in terms of skills and what the industry requires, which makes them less attractive to the industry and vice versa (Tyagi and Shah 2022). Therefore, it is the responsibility of hospitality higher education to produce the most relevant graduates for the industry to achieve its purpose of preparing qualified people for the workplace.

Employability Skills Needed for Industry 4.0

Generally, technology is used to give an advantage and a "high touch" to hospitality establishments (Law et al. 2013), which need continuous updates to meet the guests' never-ending expectations and to maintain the establishment niche. As a response to Industry 4.0 technology, the hotel industry has started to change its skill requirements to meet the needs of new technology (World Economic Forum 2016). Industry 4.0 can be described as the adoption of advanced technology and intelligent systems in all aspects of hospitality services to produce the highest forms of digitalization and automation in a business environment, such as cyber-physical systems (CPS), the Internet of Things (IoT), big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and robotics (Osei et al. 2020).

Although the hospitality industry always uses the most developed technologies, such as self-service technology, social media, and online booking websites, many

scholars have seen that these technologies are not enough and predict an era of "hospitality industry 4.0" (Osei et al. 2020). According to Bradley et al. (2015), looking forward to Industry 4.0 and its advanced technology is no longer a choice for the hospitality industry; it has become a commitment to being updated and leading the trends. In that, Beebe (1996, p. 46) had a long-distance vision to emphasize the readiness for the new digital era and stress that: "The digital world is here and now, and... employers... who [want] to stay prosperous must ride this information wave into the future on the skills of employees who can work the secrets of microchips, of computer software, of the Internet... and bring their creations into the marketplace."

Therefore, just possessing technical skills alone will not be enough for graduates to attain a job (Fajaryati et al. 2020), and there is a need to identify those new skills that can fulfill Industry 4.0 requirements (World Economic Forum 2016). For that, Rasul et al. (2013) introduced the BRICS recommendations (BRICS is a group of five great industrial countries comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) to meet Industry 4.0 requirements. The BRICS had declared its concern about four skills that are described as critical for Industry 4.0: knowledge about ICT, the ability to work with data, technical know-how, and personal skills. In addition, a study was made by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2018) to determine the future of education and skills for 2030. It found three groups of skills are needed for 2030: cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (critical thinking, creative thinking, learning-to-learn, and self-regulation); social and emotional skills (empathy, self-efficacy, responsibility, and collaboration); and practical and physical skills (skills required to use and manipulate materials, tools, equipment, and artifacts, and ability to use and manage new information and communication technology devices).

However, according to many pieces of literature, the future skills needed from new-entry employees as basic employability skills will involve numeracy, solid literacy, information and communication technologies (ICT), autonomy, collaboration, coordination, creativity, teamwork, problem-solving, lifelong learning, managing complexity, complex information processing, abstraction, decision-making, critical thinking, independent problem solving, managerial, communication, and organizational skills (Bughin et al. 2018, Deming 2017, Grundke et al. 2017, SpA et al. 2020). In the same context, the World Economic Forum (2020) has discussed its vision of skills needed for Industry 4.0 based on expected changes in job tasks. The forum concluded that as jobs are changed, skills will also need to change to match the new jobs and tasks; otherwise, skill gaps will continue increasing. The forum suggested that the most important skills that are expected to prevail in the future labor market are critical thinking, analytical skills, problem-solving, and self-management skills (that comprise active learning, resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility).

For that, and depending on the previously mentioned, it is expected that soft skills and technological skills will dominate hotel operators' choices of employability skills in Industry 4.0 (World Economic Forum 2018, Farjaryati et al. 2020).

Studies on the Gap between Higher Education and Hospitality Industry

In India, Bathla et al. (2019) conducted a study to explore gaps between hotel management education and hospitality industry expectations. The study has ended with the following results: Concerning hotel industry expectations, the study found that hotel operators expect graduates to have an adequate level of practical skills, technical skills, knowledge of hospitality products, software knowledge, customer service skills, marketing & sales skills, financial management knowledge, professional grooming standards, operational skills, and customer relationship management. On the other hand, concerning graduates' level of skills, the study found gaps in the following areas of skills to meet hotel operators' expectations: limited knowledge about the industry, less exposure to practical work, outdated equipment for conducting practical, inadequate software training, poor communication skills, lack of personal management skills, lack of hands-on practice workshops, an outdated curriculum, lack of customer relationship management, and a short period of internship skills.

In Egypt, Hossny (2018) conducted a study to explore the essential competencies expected and perceived by the Egyptian hotel industry among hospitality graduates. The study showed that there is a gap between hospitality managers' expectations and perceptions of graduates' employability in the hospitality industry. The study indicated that there are gaps that can be described as most negative, such as technical competency (in terms of knowledge and skills needed to perform the product or service), cultural awareness, communication skills, teamwork, strategic thinking, interpersonal skills, organizing, language skills, flexibility, and commitment. However, the lowest gaps they found were in work ethics, administrative skills, computer know-how, and enthusiasm. On the other hand, the results indicate that hotel operators require graduates who have more transferable competencies, generic competencies, professional competencies, analytical skills, and conceptual skills. Finally, the study indicated that hospitality graduates' competencies do not match the industry requirements, and technical competency represents the most critical gap in the hotel management curriculum.

Curriculum and Graduate's Employability

The hospitality industry is a labor-intensive industry that depends on people to deliver its services, which makes the educational curriculum a critical tool for the success of the industry (Kay and Russette 2000). Curriculum can be defined as "the course of study that a student undertakes to achieve a qualification" (Sellar et al. 2018, p. 36). The curriculum is about a set of subjects that constitute one program, which can be distributed over teaching time by giving each subject a specific number of hours (Mulenga 2018). The importance of curriculum comes from the fact that it involves all beliefs, values, skills, and knowledge that represent the outcome of the program (Mulenga 2018).

Nowadays, hospitality education has become essential for an individual who needs to get a job opportunity in the hotel industry (Bathla et al. 2019), because education plays a big role in equipping graduates with the employability skills and

competencies required by the industry to be qualified for hotel jobs and enhance their job opportunities (Tyagi and Shah 2022).

Therefore, insufficient skills from the perspective of industry or gaps in skills can be considered a matter of curriculum quality (Fajaryati et al. 2020), because unfulfillment of the industry requirement of skills will lead to employment problems.

Unfortunately, it was noticed that over 30% of the total hospitality workforce does not possess the basic capabilities and skills needed for the industry (Hossny 2018). Scholars have shown that hotel operators are suffering from a lack of graduates' soft skills (Dhaliwal and Misra 2020) because many hospitality institutions don't implant the required skills in the curriculum, which results in an unskilled and unemployable workforce (Dhaliwal and Misra 2020). Moreover, hotel operators believe that hotel management programs train students on basic skills only, while operators need them to be trained on critical thinking, analytical, interpersonal, marketing, and emotional intelligence skills (Bathla et al. 2019). For that, academics have to involve these skills in the program as an essential part of the curricula (Hind et al. 2007) to build graduates' employability. For example, in planning a curriculum to meet industry requirements of 20 subjects, the hard skills are preferred to not exceed 3 subjects, while the soft skills are 17 subjects (Rainsbury et al. 2002). The same was provided by Hodges and Burchell (2003), who stressed the importance of increasing the weight of soft skills in the curriculum to ensure the availability of competence needed for today's workplace.

Unfortunately, as a result of increasing competition and technology, the gap between curriculum and hospitality industry requirements is increasing gradually, which demands corrective actions to bridge this gap (Hossny 2018). The graduates' employability is no longer a choice for higher education; it has become a commitment (Fajaryati et al. 2020) and a serious matter that they can't run from. For that, the academic curriculum must equip graduates with employability skills to enhance their employability in the hospitality market (Bathla et al. 2018).

Research Methodology

The research aims to discover hotel operators' preferences for skills while recruiting entry-level employees, in addition to their perspectives on the skill gaps of higher education fresh graduates who are newly hired in the hotel within two years of their graduation.

The research will adopt the descriptive and quantitative methods using survey as a tool for research technique.

Research Instrument

The research instrument is a structured questionnaire was built on four studies: Matsouka and Mihail (2016), Abbasi et al. (2018), Kenayathulla et al. (2019), and Dhaliwal and Misra (2020), which are integrally used and removing repeated skills they produced a broad framework of employability skills comprise

38 skills. The skills, they are; oral and written communication, numeracy, leadership, communication skills, problem-solving, team-working, learning orientation, adaptability, creativity and innovation, ethics and integrity, initiative and enterprise, interpersonal skills, professionalism, technical skills, decision-making, time management, personnel management, customer service, planning and organizing, self-management, entrepreneurship, analytical skills, critical thinking, technology, extra effort, goal-setting, emotional intelligence, intrinsic motivation, self-awareness, influence and sales skills, change management, knowledge breadth, academic qualifications, global mindset, personal development, personal attitude, positive attitude, and information technology.

As the framework of skills is broad, therefore, it's important to divide it under a classification of skills to make it easy for respondents to distinguish the differences. For that, the researcher arranged the skills under Ramisetty and Desai's (2017) division of skills as categories, which comprise: (a) basic academic skills; (b) higher-order thinking skills; (c) interpersonal and teamwork skills; and (d) personal characteristics and attitudes, with a description for each skill to make it easy for respondents to provide accurate answers. However, the questionnaire is consisted of 38 skills within four categories of skill. Each skill is presented in the questionnaire with a description to make it easy for respondent to realize the meaning and to get accurate results. Respondents will be asked two questions: the first is to identify the minimum level needed for each skill as a criterion for their level of acceptance for recruitment to be evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), and the second is to evaluate from their perspective the level of skills the newly hired graduates possessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high).

Research Population

The study targeted hotels of the international chain, and focused on the entire population of 5-star hotels in Cairo. This population was determined to consist of 29 hotels according to the Egyptian Hotel Guide (2016), which was the only available source of documented data when the researchers commenced their field research in 2022. The research will include conducting a self-administrative questionnaire among five operational managers in each of the 29 hotels: front office, food and beverage, sales and marketing, housekeeping, and human resources, to generate a total sampling size of 145 managers.

Reliability and Validity

Before conducting the questionnaire, it's important to test the questionnaire's reality and validity. The researchers used a Cronbach's alpha test to ensure the respondents' consistency (when re-replying to the same question) and quality results. For that, the researcher conducted the questionnaire among ten operation managers in two different 5-star hotels, which were conducted with the same number of people after three weeks to check the questionnaire's reliability and validity. The Cronbach's alpha test yielded a reliability score 0.969, indicating high

questionnaire reliability. This allowed the researchers to conduct the questionnaire with the study population.

Table 1. *Cronbach's Alpha Test for Reliability and Validity*

Scale: ALL VARIABLES

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	20	100.0
	Excluded[a]	0	.0
	Total	20	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.969	80

Data Collection

The questionnaires were delivered personally to the directors of human resources at each of the targeted hotels. The director of human resources was responsible for ensuring that the questionnaires were administered to the rest of the managers in the hotel. 145 questionnaires were distributed, and collected back personally from each director of human resources and 135 (93%) completed questionnaire were returned in a valid condition for research purposes.

Data Analysis

SPSS version 25.0 was used to analyze the collected data. Responses for each skill and category were calculated using statistics and added to a table. The statistics analysis was used to show the sum, mean, and standard deviation for the two questions of the minimum required level of skills for hotel operators and their perspective of graduates' level of skills, in addition to analyzing the differences between them for each skill to verify the gaps and identify the biggest gaps, while using the ranking to verify the most preferred skills.

Results and Discussion

The results are as follows:

A. The basic academic skills category

Concerning the basic academic skills as shown in Table 2, the results showed significant differences between fresh graduates' abilities and hotel operators' requirements of skills that led to a skill gap of 8.74% to gain the job, where t = 10.940*, and p <0.001*, which means that the curriculum used in the higher education is not aligned with the industry requirements, especially in essential skills such as technical skills (16.01%), and numeracy (15.76%).

In addition, results showed that the most important basic academic skills by means for hotel operators are oral and written communication (3.64), followed by academic qualifications (3.35), and technical skills (3.31), which means that the hotel operators are interested in concentrating firstly in oral and written communications and technical skills, while their interest for the academic qualification because it is eligible to the job.

On the other hand, results showed that the lowest skills in hotel operators' assessments of graduates' abilities by mean are information technology (2.67), followed by both numeracy and technical skills (2.79), which means that there is a problem in the curriculum and students' preparation concerning the basic skills needed to fulfill the hotel industry requirements, which lead to a direct negative effect their employability.

B. The higher order thinking skills

Concerning the higher order thinking skills as shown in Table 2, the results showed significant differences between fresh graduates' abilities and hotel operators' requirements of skills that led to a skill gap of 11.44%, to gain the job where t = 12.071*, and p <0.001*, which means that the curriculum used in the higher education is not aligned with the industry requirements, especially in knowledge breadth (15.14%), technology (14.06%), planning and organizing skills (14.01%), and critical thinking (13.33%).

In addition, results showed that the most important higher-order thinking skills for hotel operators by mean are time management (3.35), followed by global mindset (3.19), planning and organizing skills (3.14), and technology (3.13), which means that the hotel operators are interested in those candidates who possess skills that enable well-planned and executed of tasks in a defined timetable besides, those skills that enable them to understand and respect people's differences while having the ability to use the latest technology.

On the other hand, results showed the lowest skills in hotel operators' assessment of graduates' abilities by mean are leadership (2.27), followed by entrepreneurial skills (2.30), change management (2.38), and analytical skills (2.39), which means the attention given to higher-order thinking skills in the curriculum and students' preparation for such skills is not enough to meet hotel operators' expectations that may negatively affect their employability.

Table 2. *Skill Gaps between Hotel Operators' Minimum Required Level of Skills, and Graduates' Level of Skills by Points in Total Sample (n = 135)*

No	Skills	Hotel minimum required level of skills					Graduates' level of skills					Gap (difference)	% Gap (difference)	t	p
		Sum	Mean	SD.	Rank	T. Rank	Sum	Mean	SD.	Rank	T. Rank				
	Basic academic skills	**2225**	**16.48**	**4.57**		**3**	**2030**	**15.04**	**4.58**		**3**	**1.44**	**8.74**	**10.940**[*]	**<0.001**[*]
1	Oral and written communication	491	3.64	1.23	1	8	476	3.53	1.28	1	7	0.11	3.02	4.093[*]	<0.001[*]
2	Numeracy	446	3.30	1.20	4	18	376	2.79	1.16	3	20	0.52	15.76	10.799[*]	<0.001[*]
3	Technical skills	447	3.31	0.99	3	16	376	2.79	0.93	3	20	0.53	16.01	9.657[*]	<0.001[*]
4	Information technology	389	2.88	1.37	5	30	361	2.67	1.26	5	26	0.21	7.29	5.451[*]	<0.001[*]
5	Academic qualifications	452	3.35	0.96	2	13	441	3.27	0.98	2	10	0.08	2.39	3.448[*]	0.001[*]
	Higher order thinking skills	**4708**	**34.87**	**9.51**		**4**	**4169**	**30.88**	**8.69**		**4**	**3.99**	**11.44**	**12.071**[*]	**<0.001**[*]
6	Knowledge breadth	383	2.84	1.05	7	33	325	2.41	0.93	8	34	0.43	15.14	9.243[*]	<0.001[*]
7	Planning and organizing skills	424	3.14	1.10	3	22	364	2.70	0.96	3	23	0.44	14.01	9.298[*]	<0.001[*]
8	Analytical skills	370	2.74	1.10	8	34	323	2.39	0.94	9	35	0.35	12.77	7.736[*]	<0.001[*]
9	Entrepreneurial skills	352	2.61	1.09	11	37	311	2.30	0.94	11	37	0.30	11.49	7.391[*]	<0.001[*]
10	Leadership	343	2.54	1.15	12	38	306	2.27	0.93	12	38	0.27	10.63	6.431[*]	<0.001[*]
11	Creativity and innovation	364	2.70	1.07	10	36	330	2.44	0.97	7	33	0.25	9.26	6.716[*]	<0.001[*]
12	Critical thinking	385	2.85	1.05	6	32	334	2.47	0.91	6	32	0.38	13.33	8.500[*]	<0.001[*]
13	Global mindset	430	3.19	1.15	2	20	402	2.98	1.17	2	15	0.21	6.58	5.672[*]	<0.001[*]
14	Time management	452	3.35	1.01	1	13	426	3.16	1.11	1	11	0.19	5.67	5.654[*]	<0.001[*]
15	Technology	423	3.13	1.21	4	23	363	2.69	0.97	5	25	0.44	14.06	8.511[*]	<0.001[*]
16	Change management	369	2.73	0.96	9	35	321	2.38	0.77	10	36	0.36	13.19	8.091[*]	<0.001[*]
17	Goal setting	413	3.06	1.21	5	26	364	2.70	1.13	3	23	0.36	11.76	7.105[*]	<0.001[*]
	Interpersonal and Teamwork Skills	**3688**	**27.32**	**6.42**		**2**	**3386**	**25.08**	**6.04**		**2**	**2.24**	**8.20**	**11.620**[*]	**<0.001**[*]
18	Communication skills	537	3.98	0.91	1	4	521	3.86	0.96	1	4	0.12	3.02	4.245[*]	<0.001[*]
19	Interpersonal skills	493	3.65	1.03	3	7	427	3.16	0.92	4	11	0.49	13.42	9.324[*]	<0.001[*]
20	Problem-solving	487	3.61	1.04	4	10	473	3.50	1.04	3	8	0.10	2.77	3.938[*]	<0.001[*]
21	Decision-making	388	2.87	0.99	8	31	342	2.53	0.91	8	31	0.34	11.85	8.061[*]	<0.001[*]
22	Team-working	502	3.72	0.89	2	6	483	3.58	0.99	2	6	0.14	3.76	4.685[*]	<0.001[*]
23	Emotional intelligence	426	3.16	1.01	6	21	380	2.81	1.02	6	19	0.34	10.76	7.217[*]	<0.001[*]
24	Influence and sales skills	447	3.31	1.21	5	16	410	3.04	1.21	5	14	0.27	8.16	5.913[*]	<0.001[*]
25	Personnel management	408	3.02	1.16	7	27	350	2.59	0.92	7	28	0.43	14.24	7.275[*]	<0.001[*]
	Personal Characteristics and Attitudes	**6174**	**45.73**	**6.97**		**1**	**5666**	**41.97**	**6.82**		**1**	**3.76**	**8.22**	**13.190**[*]	**<0.001**[*]
26	Personality development	454	3.36	0.97	7	12	426	3.16	0.95	6	11	0.21	6.25	5.922[*]	<0.001[*]
27	Extra effort	438	3.24	0.90	9	19	386	2.86	0.82	8	17	0.39	12.04	8.638[*]	<0.001[*]
28	Customer service	512	3.79	0.91	4	5	501	3.71	0.91	4	5	0.08	2.11	3.448[*]	0.001[*]
29	Intrinsic motivation	416	3.08	0.66	11	25	347	2.57	0.73	12	29	0.51	16.56	10.906[*]	<0.001[*]
30	Self-awareness	402	2.98	0.81	13	29	346	2.56	0.71	13	30	0.41	13.76	8.531[*]	<0.001[*]
31	Self-management	451	3.34	0.91	8	15	383	2.84	0.74	9	18	0.50	14.97	9.418[*]	<0.001[*]
32	Adaptability	489	3.62	0.93	5	9	444	3.29	0.90	5	9	0.33	9.12	6.918[*]	<0.001[*]
33	Positive attitude	565	4.19	0.88	3	3	555	4.11	0.85	3	3	0.07	1.67	3.274[*]	0.001[*]
34	Professionalism	457	3.39	0.75	6	11	394	2.92	0.87	7	16	0.47	13.86	8.738[*]	<0.001[*]
35	Ethics and integrity	581	4.30	0.78	2	2	570	4.22	0.76	2	2	0.08	1.86	3.448[*]	0.001
36	Initiative, and enterprise	405	3.0	0.93	12	28	360	2.67	0.80	11	26	0.33	11.00	6.759[*]	<0.001[*]

37	Learning orientation	418	3.10	0.65	10	24	373	2.76	0.74	10	22	0.33	10.65	7.689*	<0.001*
38	Personal attitude	586	4.34	0.79	1	1	581	4.30	0.83	1	1	0.04	0.92	2.270*	0.025*
	Overall	16795	124.4	24.05			15251	113.0	23.34			11.44	9.20	**14.666***	**<0.001***

SD: **Standard deviation**   **t: Paired t-test**   *: Statistically significant at p ≤ 0.05
p: p value for comparison between the studied skills categories

C. The interpersonal and teamworking skills

Concerning the interpersonal and teamworking skills, as shown in Table (2), the results show significant differences between fresh graduates' abilities and hotel operators' requirements of skills that led to a skill gap of 8.20%, to gain the job, where t = 11.620*, and p <0.001*, which means that the curriculum used in the higher education is not aligned with the industry requirements, especially in personnel management (14.24%), interpersonal skills (13.42%), and decision making (11.85%).

In addition, results showed that the most important interpersonal and teamworking skills for hotel operators by mean are communication skills (3.98), followed by teamworking skills (3.72), interpersonal skills (3.65), and problem-solving skills (3.61), which means that the hotel operators are interested in candidates who possess skills that have a relation of dealing with people, as well as the capability to solve problems.

On the other hand, results showed that the lowest skills in hotel operators' assessment of graduates' abilities by mean are decision-making (2.53), followed by personnel management (2.59), emotional intelligence (2.81), and influence and sales skills (3.04), which means that there is a problem in the curriculum and students' preparation concerning the soft skills needed to do tasks efficiently, which obviously mismatched with hotel operators' requirements and affect negatively their employability.

D. The personal characteristics and attitudes

Concerning the personal characteristics and attitudes skills as shown in Table 2, the results show significant differences between fresh graduates' abilities and hotel operators' requirements of skills that led to a skill gap of 8.22%, to gain the job, where t = 13.190*, and p <0.001*, which means that the curriculum used in the higher education is not aligned with the industry requirements, which showed gaps, especially in intrinsic motivation (16.56%), self-management (14.97%), professionalism (13.86%), and self-awareness (13.76%).

In addition, the results showed that the most important personal characteristics and attitudes skills for hotel operators by mean are personal attitudes (4.34), followed by ethics and integrity (4.30), positive attitude (4.19), and customer service skills (3.79), which means that the hotel operators are interested in candidates who possess the proper attitudes that needed to be compatible with hospitality concept and hotel image, as well as the ability to provide an excellent customer service needed to generate good guests' experience.

On the other hand, results showed that the lowest skills in the hotel operators' assessment of graduates' abilities by mean are self-awareness

(2.56), followed by intrinsic motivation (2.57), initiative and enterprise (2.67), and learning orientation (2.76), which means that soft skills are dominating hotel operators' expectations of the skills needed. The results showed that there is a problem in the curriculum and students' preparation that obviously mismatched with hotel operators' requirements and affects negatively their employability.

Unfortunately, results revealed a significant difference in perspective between the hotel operators' requirements of skills, especially in response to Industry 4.0 (as seen in information technology, technology, and learning orientation), and the perspective of the academics of higher education concerning the minimum level of skills needed to make graduates ready for the workplace (as illustrated in Figure 1). Therefore, a lack of consistency in the curriculum used with industry requirements is noticeable, *which is the answer of research question (1)*, and confirm that Egyptian hospitality higher education deliverables are not aligned with the current requirements of the hotel industry, and much attention must be given to redesigning curricula in a way that can adjust the weight of skills to eliminate gaps and create alignment needed with hotel industry requirements.

It's obvious that according to Table 2 the skill gap percentage is from 1 to 16%, which may be considered not critical, but if we consider that the study aimed to evaluate the newly hired hotel employees the seen will be different. That's because if the accepted employees, who have to be the most qualified, have gaps in skills that reach 16%, the evaluation of the unaccepted may be a disaster. Therefore, gaps in fresh graduates' skills exist, and action should be taken.

In the same context, Table 2 illustrates the gaps that the hotel operators detected in newly hired graduates' skills, *which is the answer of research question (2).* The results revealed gaps in all skills, which is compatible with Ramisetty and Desai (2017) and Abbasi et al. (2018), who pointed out that according to several studies, significant gaps exist in fresh graduates' overall employability skills with hotel operators skill requirements, especially in leadership skills, communication skills (listening), interpersonal skills, negotiation skills (influence and sales skills), ability to supervise (personnel management), analytical skills, critical thinking, being creative or innovative, coordinating (planning and organizing skills), adaptability to change, problem-solving and conflict resolution, self-management, numeracy, and decision-making skills. In addition, the results revealed the importance of soft skills for graduates' employability, which affects their chances of getting proper jobs.

Figure 1. *Skill Gaps between Hotel Operators' Minimum Required Level of Skills, and Graduates' Level of Skills by Points in Total Sample (n = 135)*
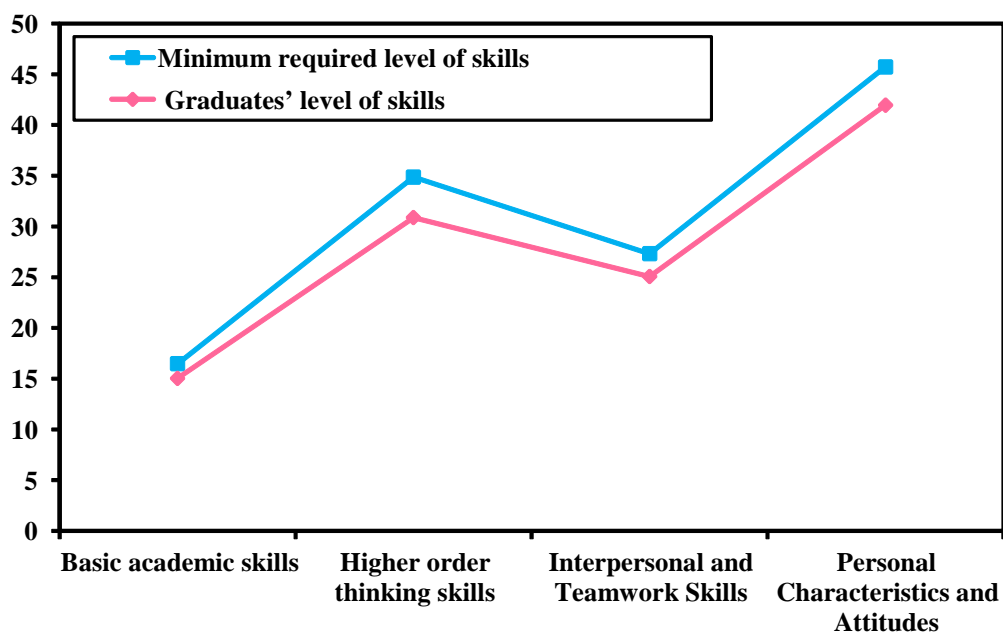
However, it's noticeable that hotel operators are increasingly looking for skills such as communication skills (mean = 3.98), and interpersonal skills (mean = 3.65), as provided by Finch et al. (2013), McMurray et al. (2016), and Abbasi et al. (2018), because they are necessary for interacting with guests, colleagues, and the public effectively.

Moreover, the study agreed with what was approved by Abbasi et al. (2018), who pointed to critical thinking (mean of 2.85), analytical skills (mean of 2.74), and creative thinking (mean = 2.70), as representing the least necessary skills for hotel operators when recruiting entry-level employees. The study is also compatible with Matsouka and Mihail (2016) in that there are many significant gaps in fresh graduates' skills such as professionalism (13.86%), goal setting (11.76%), emotional intelligence (10.76%), learning orientation (10.65%), and influence and sales skills (8.16%), but the study differs in graduates' ethics/ integrity (1.86%), which seems to have a small gap.

On the other hand, the skills analysis has enabled us to identify the most important ten skills that consider most for hotel operators, in addition to, the ten biggest gaps revealed in fresh graduates' abilities by mean (as shown in Table 3). These results have to be taken into account by academics to serve as a base and a guide when designing hotel management curricula. These results also have to be announced to light the way for fresh graduates when they decide to apply for hotel jobs.

Table 3. *The Most 10 Important Skills for Hotel Operators and the Most 10 Graduates' Skill Gaps in Total Sample (n = 135)*

Rank	No.	Skills	Mean	Rank	No.	Skills	% Gap (difference)
1	38	Personal attitude	4.34	1	29	Intrinsic motivation	16.56
2	35	Ethics and integrity	4.30	2	3	Technical skills	16.01
3	33	Positive attitude	4.19	3	2	Numeracy	15.76
4	18	Communication skills	3.98	4	6	Knowledge breadth	15.14
5	28	Customer service	3.79	5	31	Self-management	14.97
6	22	Team-working	3.72	6	25	Personnel management	14.24
7	19	Interpersonal skills	3.65	7	15	Technology	14.06
8	1	Oral and written communication	3.64	8	7	Planning and organizing skills	14.01
9	32	Adaptability	3.62	9	34	Professionalism	13.86
10	20	Problem-solving	3.61	10	30	Self-awareness	13.76

According to Table 3, hotel operators are considering most such skills as personal attitude, ethics and integrity, positive attitude, communication skills, and customer service, which are considered the basic requirements of skills for hotel operators when selecting entry-level employees, which is *an answer of research question (3)*. As seen in Table 3, it has been noticed that hotel operators are more concerned with attitude, contact skills, and soft skills than technical skills and academic qualifications. This result is compatible with a lot of literature (Dhaliwal and Misra 2020, Finch 2013, James and James 2004, MacMurray et al. 2016, Ramisetty and Desai 2017, Robles 2012, Saeed 2015), due to the nature of hotel work, which involves direct contact and interaction with hotel guests of various nationalities and cultures (Teng 2013), who are coming for leisure or on different occasions and under different circumstances. Unfortunately, academic qualification is recognized as of low importance in contrast with soft skills because it just makes graduates eligible for a job application (McMurray et al. 2016, Rehman and Mehmood 2014).

However, graduates of higher education are expected to be front-line employees. So, they have to be ready to deal with different sorts of communications, as well as have good teamwork skills to ensure effective cooperation and be able to transfer information effectively with all hotel staff. For that, Table 3 reveals the graduates' skill gaps that need to be revised in the curricula, such as intrinsic motivation, technical skills, numeracy, knowledge breadth, and self-management.

These results converge with the findings of Saepudin et al.'s (2022) study. They conducted a study at ITB University in Indonesia on 518 undergraduate students from 12 faculties to map the soft skills they required for recruitment based on job requirements, in addition to guaranteeing their development and success in their careers. The results showed that 74% of respondents emphasized that soft skills are very important for both personal and career development. At the same time, they ranked the skill priorities as follows: communication skills, self-management, and others, innovation and creativity, cooperation with others, judgment and decision making, emotional intelligence, knowledge and application of the field of science, smart acting, negotiation skills, and transdisciplinary thinking.

However, as the lack of skills in the curriculum leads to unemployment (Dhaliwal and Misra 2020), the good treatment of these skill gaps in the curriculum will lead to improving graduates' ability to do work tasks and consequently, enhance their employability, which is evidence of the curriculum's significant influence on graduates' employability.

On the other hand, the Spearman coefficient test was used to identify and interpret the strength level of the correlation among skills. The test is adopted on the highest four skills in rank for each category as a sample to understand whether there is a correlation among them or not and to allow academics to bring together all skills that have a strong correlation with each other in the same curriculum to benefit from their high correlation (as seen in Table 4). In addition, correlation tests will help academics realize and give the appropriate weight to skills when redesigning hospitality curricula to make sure that skill gaps disappear and never be seen again.

According to Table 4, Spearman coefficient tests have shown that there is a strong correlation between the following skills: oral and written communication and numeracy; planning and organizing skills and technology; time management and technology; communication skills and interpersonal skills; communication skills and problem-solving; interpersonal skills and problem-solving; customer service and positive attitude; and positive attitude and personal attitude. These results are significant for the quality of hotel education deliverables by guaranteeing the achievement of the requirements for Industry 4.0 and enhancing graduates' employability.

Table 4. *Correlation between the Different Skills in Total Sample (n = 135)*

No.	Correlations	r_s	p	Interpretation
	Basic academic skills			
1 vs. 2	Oral and written communication vs. Numeracy	0.679*	<0.001*	Strong Correlation
1 vs. 3	Oral and written communication vs. Technical skills	0.416*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
1 vs. 5	Oral and written communication vs. Academic qualifications	0.516*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
2 vs. 3	Numeracy vs. Technical skills	0.387*	<0.001*	Weak Correlation
2 vs. 5	Numeracy vs. Academic qualifications	0.584*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
3 vs. 5	Technical skills vs. Academic qualifications	0.311*	<0.001*	Weak Correlation
	Higher order thinking skills			
7 vs. 13	Planning and organizing skills vs. Global mindset	0.406*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
7 vs. 14	Planning and organizing skills vs. Time management	0.502*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
7 vs. 15	Planning and organizing skills vs. Technology	0.643*	<0.001*	Strong Correlation
13 vs. 14	Global mindset vs. Time management	0.432*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
13 vs. 15	Global mindset vs. Technology	0.435*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
14 vs. 15	Time management vs. Technology	0.680*	<0.001*	Strong Correlation
	Interpersonal and Teamwork Skills			
18 Vs. 19	Communication skills vs. Interpersonal skills	0.754*	<0.001*	Strong Correlation
18 Vs. 20	Communication skills vs. Problem-solving	0.648*	<0.001*	Strong Correlation
18 Vs. 22	Communication skills vs. Team-working	0.567*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
19 vs. 20	Interpersonal skills vs. Problem-solving	0.660*	<0.001*	Strong Correlation
19 vs. 22	Interpersonal skills vs. Team-working	0.576*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
20 vs. 22	Problem-solving vs. Team-working	0.578*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
	Personal Characteristics and Attitudes			
28 vs. 33	Customer service vs. Positive attitude	0.641*	<0.001*	Strong Correlation
28 vs. 35	Customer service vs. Ethics and integrity	0.444*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
28 vs. 38	Customer service vs. Personal attitude	0.599*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation
33 vs. 35	Positive attitude vs. Ethics and integrity	0.370*	<0.001*	Weak Correlation
33 vs. 38	Positive attitude vs. Personal attitude	0.789*	<0.001*	Strong Correlation
35 vs. 38	Ethics and integrity vs. Personal attitude	0.508*	<0.001*	Moderate Correlation

r_s**: Spearman coefficient**   *: Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

Finally, we can summarize the skill categories' ranking by their importance for hotel operators, as shown in Table 5. The hospitality concept as a nature of hotel work is playing an essential role in the hotel operators' priorities as it depends on human interaction, which is dominating their priorities of skill categories required and proves the importance of soft skills for hotel business (Hodges and Burchell 2003, Klaus 2010, Robles 2012, El Mansour and Dean 2016, Matsouka and Mihail 2016, Ramisetty and Desai 2017, Menon et al. 2018, World Economic Forum 2018, Fajaryati et al. 2020).

Table 5. *Ranking Skills Categories based on the mean Percentage of Hotel Operators' Minimum Requirements (the Mean to Maximum Score) in Total Sample (n = 135)*

SKILLS CATEGORY	Skills categories minimum requirements		
	Mean	**%**	**Rank**
Basic academic skills	16.48	65.92	**3**
High order thinking skills	34.87	58.12	**4**
Interpersonal and teamwork	27.32	68.30	**2**
Personal attributes	45.73	70.35	**1**
Overall	**124.4**	**65.47**	

The results showed that employee behavior is a major concern for hotel operators. For that reason, personal characteristics and attitudes are placed in the first-ranking from the hotel operators' perspective when selecting fresh graduates for recruiting, followed by interpersonal and teamwork skills in the second-ranking as important for human interaction and work performance. In the third-ranking, the basic academic skills are placed to set the criteria and define the minimum potential abilities and understanding expected from candidates. Finally, in the fourth-ranking, the higher-order thinking skills category is coming to enable operators to differentiate among the candidates by expecting their behavior and potential to achieve hotel policies and targets. Although higher-order thinking skills are very important for the hotel business, they placed fourth due to the research aim of targeting fresh graduates who will occupy entry-level jobs, and the researcher believed that this ranking would change upward in the higher levels of job occupations.

On the other hand, when testing the correlation among the skill categories themselves, the results showed that there are significant correlations among all skill categories (as shown in Table 6). These results mean that these four categories of skills represent the pillars on which hotel service processes stand. Therefore, they are all important for the hospitality industry, and any absence of one or more of these categories may reflect badly on the industry.

Unfortunately, regarding research results, fresh graduates do not have the necessary level of employability skills to be employed up to the hotel industry requirements (Singh and Singh 2008, Mourshed et al. 2012, Abas-Mastura et al. 2013, Kanter 2013, Jackson 2015, Matsouka and Mihail 2016, McDermott and Ortiz 2017, Dhaliwal and Misra 2020, Fajaryati et al. 2020, Manpower 2023).

Table 6. *Correlation between the Different Skill Categories, based on the Minimum Level of Skills Required by the Mean in the Total Sample (n = 135)*

		Basic academic skills	Higher order thinking skills	Interpersonal and Teamwork Skills	Personal Characteristics and Attitudes	Overall
Basic academic skills	r	1.000	0.779[*]	0.582[*]	0.411[*]	0.773[*]
	p		<0.001[*]	<0.001[*]	<0.001[*]	<0.001[*]
Higher order thinking skills	r		1.000	0.788[*]	0.645[*]	0.941[*]
	p			<0.001[*]	<0.001[*]	<0.001[*]
Interpersonal and Teamwork Skills	r			1.000	0.753[*]	0.907[*]
	p				<0.001[*]	<0.001[*]
Personal Characteristics and Attitudes	r				1.000	0.824[*]
	p					<0.001[*]
Overall	r					1.000
	p					

r: Pearson coefficient   *: Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

This state indicates that hotel management graduates' skills are mismatched with industry requirements (Tyagi and Shah 2022), which may lead to a serious problem in their employment and reflect on the hotel industry's business within the next few years.

The reason is that the higher education curricula are inadequate in equipping students with the desired skills needed to fulfill the industry requirements (El Mansour and Dean 2016, Ramisetty and Desai 2017, Abbasi et al. 2018).

In the same context, stakeholders have pointed out their concerns about management education in terms of teaching and learning outcomes (Jackson, 2015), which need to be revised and reconstructed in hotel management curricula according to hotel operators' perspectives and requirements (Baum 2006, Espellita and Maravilla Jr 2019, Hind et al. 2007, Hodges and Burchell 2003, Rainsbury et al. 2002).

Concerning students, they have to understand that the economic challenges will make it hard for fresh graduates to get the opportunity for a suitable job without possessing the adequate soft skills needed because hotel operators are looking for success, which requires hiring graduates who have the potential to add value to the hotel business (Ejiwale 2014). Therefore, students have to improve their skills to attain goals by exerting more effort in learning skills that are valuable for their potential job and realizing that in today's world, to be successful, they have to be flexible and creative. In the same context, Freeman (2013) described the new world's requirement of skills as rewarding diversity achieved by the difference in abilities through possessing soft skills and personality traits that are not taught in higher education without neglecting the value of hard skills.

However, to bridge the gap between higher education and the hospitality industry, students have to be aware of the industry's needs, and academics need to be precisely aware of the skills the industry needs to modify the curricula that can prepare qualified students for the workplace, cater to industry requirements, and present the graduates' competency (Sharma and Sharma 2019, Spowart 2011).

For that, the essential aim of hospitality higher education is to provide the industry with high-caliber graduates who are outfitted with relevant capabilities (Tyagi and Shah 2022). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the higher educational institute to revise its curricula and develop them in a way that fulfills the requirements of the hospitality industry. Consequently, the understanding of study results is vital to achieving the best design of hotel curricula that can meet hotel and Industry 4.0 requirements, develop hotel industry services, and enhance graduates' employability.

Recommendations

According to the World Bank (2015), the unalignment between industry and education has become a universal phenomenon that may create critical issues. For example, surveys have shown that within 24 countries in Europe, from 25% to 45% of the employees are either overqualified or underqualified for jobs, which points to the inadequacy of qualified employees to fill occupations, which will lead to bringing employees from outside the border. On the other hand, the surveys also showed that in developing countries that have service-based economies, such as Egypt, many highly educated people are unemployed, due to employers finding them lacking a variety of skills and competencies needed more than technical skills, so they are unemployed as a result of not having what the labor market needs.

For that, the researcher has provided a group of recommendations that can serve as solutions to the research problem:

1. Collaboration between the hotel industry and higher education is a necessity in curriculum design to close existing gaps in the perspective between employers and educators, equip students with current skills needed to improve their competencies that can fulfill industry requirements, and ensure better job opportunities for graduates (Adeyinka-Ojo 2018, Espellita and Maravilla Jr 2019, Matsouka and Mihail 2016, Ramisetty and Desai 2017).
2. Establish a close partnership between academics and industry players so that educators can stay updated with industry transformation, and students can understand industry expectations (Bathla et al. 2019).
3. The weighting of technology and information technology skills in the curriculum has to increase to match the new market requirements level of skills for Industry 4.0.
4. Soft skills and personal attitudes have to be focal points in curricula as they are considered a basis for hotel employability skills when graduates apply for new-entry jobs (Abbasi et al. 2018, Dhaliwal and Misra 2020, El Mansour and Dean 2016, Fajaryati et al. 2020, Kenayathulla et al. 2019, Matsouka and Mihail 2016, McMurray et al. 2016, Menon et al. 2018, Robles 2012).
5. Establishing a quality unit to be concerned with evaluating graduates' competence based on the hotel's minimum level of requirements for skills

that are needed to ensure graduates' recruitment, which is compatible with Kanter's (2013), and World Bank Group's (2015).
6. Concentrate on curriculum design on teaching thinking and analytical skills, rather than teaching specific skills, because learning how to learn is better than applying common solutions (Doncaster 2000, Ramisetty and Desai 2017).
7. Attention should be given to the methods of learning used that can build personality, which, if inadequate, will result in unready graduates for the workplace nowadays, as pointed out by El Mansour and Dean (2016) and Abbasi et al. (2018).
8. Built students' awareness of the range of skills that are needed to remain competitive in the labor market (Espellita and Maravilla Jr 2019)

In the end, a hospitality career is not easy, and students have to realize that without soft skills, it will be hard to be accepted for a good job in the hospitality labor market.

Practical Implications

The study is expected to lead for the following implications:

1. Identifying the gaps in skills that hotel operators are complaining about when recruiting entry-level employees, will help academics develop hotel management curricula.
2. Helping academics recognize the skills that matter most to hotel operators when recruiting new entry-level employees.
3. Orienting the education strategy to re-set the curriculum outcomes to align with the criteria of the industry inputs.
4. Assisting hotel management graduates in becoming aware of the industry requirements for skills that will positively reflect on their employment rate.
5. Helping the collaboration between higher education and the hospitality industry because the output of education is the input of the industry.

Conclusion

The research attempted to discover the recent employability skills needed by hotel operators that form the current and future requirements of the hospitality industry as a response to the new digital era of Industry 4.0. The research asked the hotel operators about the level of skills that represent their minimum skill requirements for recruiting and also their assessment of the level of skills possessed by newly hired graduates to make a comparison and discover graduates' skill gaps. The results were:

1. There are gaps revealed in all skills between what hotel operators want and need as minimum requirements for recruiting, and the real level of skills that the newly hired graduates are possessed.
2. The research revealed that higher education curricula are inadequate to equip students with the skills needed to fulfill hotel requirements, so, they need to be revised and developed up to industry expectations.
3. The research revealed that hotel operators are concerned most with soft skills and personal attitudes which are considered as a basis for their choice of employability skills, without neglecting the importance of technical skills.
4. The research identified the top 10 skill gaps in fresh graduates' abilities and the top 10 significant skills that hotel operators' value most, which may help academics when redesigning hotel curricula.
5. The researcher provided some recommendations that may help to improve graduates' employability and hotel industry services.

Limitations of the Research

The research is tied to the following limitations:

1. The research targets 5-star hotels, neglecting 4-star and other lower levels of hotels because they represent the graduates' level of studies at the hotel higher education institutions.
2. The research targeted 5-star hotels in Cairo only, because it has the greatest number of 5-star hotels and the biggest hotels in terms of room capacity in comparison to other cities. Moreover, Cairo represents the first choice for hotel higher education graduates who require attaining the proper and sufficient experience needed before transient with career promotion in destination areas.
3. The research targeted only five department managers, i.e., front office, food and beverage, sales and marketing, housekeeping, and human resources, because they represent the graduates' study subjects and their desired departments for employment.
4. The research is oriented toward fresh graduates—who were newly hired at the hotels within the past two years in entry-level hotel jobs.
5. The research studied one hotel for each hotel chain unless if they are different in hotel type (downtown and resort).

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Unraveling Value Co-destruction in Tourism: A Deep Dive into the Portuguese Hotel Industry

By Maria Nascimento Cunha[*]

The state of the art presented here aims to bring theoretical contemplations about the co-destruction of value. The term "co-destruction" is now used in the hospitality service environment to describe the phenomenon in which multiple actors interact and integrate their resources to realize valuable benefits, yet their collaborations result in a decline of the well being of at least one of the participating actors. In the recent past, scholars have begun to dedicate their attention towards destructive relationships as a critical component of organizational life, facing it from various points of view, such as trust and partnering, project management, and relational coordination. The investigation was quantitative and adopted the survey method. To measure the proposed hypotheses, a unique conceptual model was developed with leadership support, supportive organizational climate, value co-destruction, and commitment to value co-creation as constructs. Data was collected from the hospitality Continental Portugal and islands, where 1,200 responses were obtained for analysis. The respondents were all hospitality employees. Key findings revealed that leadership support was commanding in comparison to the other constructs based on how high it loaded as a factor. In addition, a high perception of a supportive organizational climate among service employees will result in a low occurrence of value co-destruction in their organization. Further research direction on the subject is suggested.

Keywords: *co-destruction, co-creation, hospitality sector, employees*

Introduction

Most of service organizations and in particular in hospitality sector is understood the value creation capabilities of their guests and seek to involve them in the value creation processes in order to achieve optimal performance. While value co-creation is a goal and perhaps the intended objectives of many hospitality settings, interaction between frontline employees and their customers during service encounters may trigger misbehavior incidents which mostly results in co-destruction of value (Zikmund et al. 2013, Meyer and Schwager 2015, Rajnish et al. 2017, Mxunyelwa and Henama 2019, Cunha et al. 2021).

The composition of service-systems which include both the customers and employees at their core suggests that the interactions between employees and customers are integral in the value creation process of service firms. According to Franke et al. (2016), the effective management of a firm's resources is precursory to the quality of value created and delivered by the organization. Thus, firms must effectively manage the interactions between their employees and customers to

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deliver cutting edge values that beat the competition (Cunha 2019a, b, Cunha et al. 2021). Although service literature seems to be thorough in their investigation of value co-creation, its antecedents and consequences (Cunha et al. 2021) have the same level of research deficit in the area of value co-destruction. The detriment impact of value co-destruction if unchecked is similar if quantified to the beneficial impact of value co-creation and must thus be given adequate attention in order to forestall its influence the overall service delivery and company's value propositions.

The findings of this research are that high perception of commitment to value co-creation will result in low occurrence of value co-destruction. Empirical results also showed that high perception of supportive organizational climate among service employees will result in low occurrence of value co-destruction in their organization. Finally, high level of leadership support of value co-creation in hotels will result in low occurrences of value co-destruction in the same establishment.

Portuguese Hotel Industry

The Portuguese hotel industry has been a vital component of the country's economy and tourism sector. Portugal is known for its rich history, stunning landscapes, and vibrant culture, making it a popular destination for both leisure and business travelers (Cunha 2019a, b, Cunha et al. 2021). In the portuguese hotel industry, as in any hospitality sector, co-destruction of value can occur through a variety of channels as it´s possible to see on Table 1.

Table 1. *Co Destruction Variety of Channels*

Service Quality: If the quality of services provided by the hotel, such as cleanliness, staff behavior, or responsiveness, falls below the customer's expectations, it can result in a negative experience and diminished value.
Communication: Poor communication, misinformation, or lack of transparency can lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and dissatisfaction among guests.
Employee Behavior: Unfriendly or unhelpful staff, rude behavior, or inadequate training can contribute to customers feeling undervalued and dissatisfied.
Facility Conditions: If the hotel's facilities are not well-maintained, outdated, or not as advertised, customers may feel that they are not getting the value they expected.
Booking and Reservation Issues: Problems related to overbooking, incorrect reservations, or room allocation can lead to customer dissatisfaction and a sense of value destruction.
Hidden Costs: If customers encounter unexpected or hidden costs during their stay, it can lead to negative perceptions of value, as they may feel they are paying more than initially anticipated.
Noise and Disturbances: Factors such as noise from nearby construction, other guests, or inadequate soundproofing can negatively impact a guest's experience and perception of value.
Unmet Expectations: If a hotel's marketing and promotional materials create unrealistic expectations, customers may feel let down when these expectations are not met.

Inflexible Policies: Strict and inflexible policies related to check-in/check-out times, cancellations, or other matters can contribute to a negative experience and diminished value.
Lack of Personalization: Guests often appreciate personalized experiences. If a hotel fails to recognize individual preferences or needs, it can result in a sense of value destruction.

Source: Cunha (2019a, b), Cunha et al. (2021).

To mitigate co-destruction of value, hotels in the portuguese industry (or any other) should focus on (Table 2):

Table 2. *Mitigation of Co Destruction Value*

Service Excellence: Prioritize consistent and high-quality service delivery across all touchpoints.
Effective Communication: Maintain clear and transparent communication with guests, addressing their concerns promptly.
Training and Empowerment: Properly train staff to handle guest interactions and empower them to resolve issues effectively.
Facility Maintenance: Ensure that facilities are well-maintained, modern, and aligned with the guests' expectations.
Customer-Centric Approach: Tailor services to individual preferences and needs, providing a personalized experience.
Transparency in Pricing: Clearly communicate all costs associated with the stay to avoid surprises.
Flexibility: Whenever possible, offer flexibility in policies to accommodate guest needs.

Source: Cunha (2019a, b), Cunha et al. (2021).

Addressing these factors can help portuguese hotels and the wider hospitality industry reduce co-destruction of value, enhance guest satisfaction, and build stronger customer relationships (Payne and Frow 2016, Cunha 2019a, b, Cunha et al. 2021). According to the author Franke et al. (2016) there are some key points about the industry that can make the diference between co-creation and co-destruction depending on the way it is used (Table 3).

Table 3. *Key Points*

Tourism Growth: Portugal has experienced significant growth in tourism over the years, with increasing numbers of international tourists visiting the country. Major cities like Lisbon and Porto, as well as coastal regions like the Algarve, have been popular tourist destinations.
Diverse Accommodation: The industry offers a wide range of accommodations, from luxury hotels and boutique lodgings to budget-friendly hostels and guesthouses. This diversity caters to different types of travelers with varying preferences and budgets.
Cultural and Natural Attractions: Portugal's historic sites, picturesque landscapes, wine regions, and beaches attract tourists interested in exploring its cultural and natural offerings.
Investment and Modernization: The industry has witnessed investments in new hotel developments and renovations of existing properties. This has contributed to improved infrastructure, services, and overall guest experiences.

Online Booking Platforms: The use of online travel agencies (OTAs) and booking platforms has become prevalent, making it easier for tourists to find and reserve accommodations.
Challenges: The industry faced challenges related to seasonality, with peak tourist seasons leading to overcrowding in some popular destinations. This has prompted discussions about sustainable tourism practices.
Regulations and Sustainability: Portuguese authorities have taken steps to address overtourism and promote sustainable tourism, focusing on maintaining the cultural and environmental integrity of the country's attractions.
COVID-19 Impact: Like many other countries, the portuguese hotel industry was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions, lockdowns, and reduced travel demand resulted in decreased bookings and revenue. The industry has been working on recovery strategies as travel gradually resumes.
Local Experiences: Many hotels have been focusing on providing authentic and immersive local experiences to enhance guests' stays, including cultural activities, culinary experiences, and connections with local communities.

Source: Franke et al. (2016)

It is very importante to keep in mind that circumstances and developments in the hotel industry can change rapidly, especially in light of global events like the COVID-19 pandemic (Watjatrakul 2018).

The Importance of the Hotel Industry for Economy

The hotel industry holds significant importance in both local economies and the global tourism sector (Richards and Jones 2016, Watjatrakul 2018). In Portugal tourism is a key economic activity for the generation of wealth and employment in Portugal and the tourism data for 2022 are encouraging. In 2022, the tourism sector approached the record values of 2019 in the main indicators of overnight stays (-0.9%) and guests (-2.3%), having surpassed the values in tourism revenues (+15.4%). In Table 4 it is possible to see some key reasons why the hotel industry is considered importante.

Table 4. *Why is Tourism so Important*

Economic Contribution: The hotel industry is a major driver of economic growth and employment in many regions. It creates jobs across various sectors, including hospitality, tourism, catering, housekeeping, maintenance, and management.
Tourism Promotion: Hotels play a crucial role in attracting tourists to destinations. They provide accommodations for travelers, making it possible for people to explore new places, experience different cultures, and contribute to the local economy.
Revenue Generation: Hotels generate substantial revenue for local economies through room rates, dining services, event hosting, and other facilities. This revenue circulates through the economy, benefiting businesses in various sectors.
Infrastructure Development: The need for hotels often drives infrastructure development, including transportation, roads, utilities, and communication systems. These improvements benefit both tourists and residents.

Cultural and Social Exchange: Hotels provide a space for cultural exchange and interaction between travelers from diverse backgrounds. This fosters understanding, tolerance, and appreciation for different cultures.
Business and Conferences: Hotels serve as venues for business meetings, conferences, and events. This promotes business networking, knowledge exchange, and collaboration among professionals.
Revitalization of Areas: Hotel developments can revitalize neighborhoods or areas that were previously underutilized. They bring increased foot traffic, stimulate locais businesses, and contribute to urban renewal.
Employment Opportunities: The hotel industry offers a wide range of employment opportunities, from entry-level positions to specialized roles, providing job options for people with varying skill sets and education levels.
Tourism Industry Support: Hotels support other sectors within the tourism industry, including transportation, attractions, restaurants, and entertainment. These interdependencies contribute to a vibrant tourism ecosystem.
Promotion of Local Culture and Heritage: Many hotels strive to incorporate local culture, traditions, and architecture into their design and services. This promotes the preservation of heritage and showcases local craftsmanship.
Sustainability and Innovation: As environmental concerns grow, hotels are increasingly adopting sustainable practices and technologies, driving innovation in energy efficiency, waste reduction, and eco-friendly operations.
Revenue for Local Government: Taxes generated by hotels contribute to local and regional government revenues, which can be reinvested into public services, infrastructure, and community development.

Source: Watjatrakul (2018).

Overall, the hotel industry plays a multifaceted role in supporting economic growth, fostering cultural exchange, and providing essential services for travelers. It has a significant impact on local economies, job creation, and the broader tourism sector, making it a vital component of many regions' development strategies (Richards and Jones 2016, Watjatrakul 2018).

Co-destruction of Value

In the recent past, scholars have begun to dedicate their time and attention towards destructive relationships as a critical component of organizational life, approaching it from various points of view, such as trust and partnering (Watjatrakul 2018) project management (Payne and Frow 2016), and relational coordination (Cunaha et al. 2021). Co-destruction of value, also known as "value co-destruction," refers to a phenomenon in which the value that a customer or stakeholder expects to gain from a product, service, or interaction is diminished or even destroyed due to various factors or interactions (Cunha et al. 2021).

Interactive efforts between service providers and their consumers often result in value creation or at the very least value proposition with the objective of value creation. However, it is seldom that these interactions result in negative outcomes (Payne and Frow 2016, Cunha 2019a, b, Cunha et al. 2021). According to the

authors Gagnon and Roh (2016) in essence, value co-destruction is the negative outcome of a failed system interaction process (Leigh and Tanner 2014). It can be related to areas such as organizational incompetency (Rahimi and Kozak 2017), lack of adequate resource- human and material (Payne and Frow 2016, Cunha 2019a, b, Cunha et al. 2021), inadequate communication or lack of information (Gagnon and Roh 2016) between others.

The consequences of value co-destruction range from manageable decline in well-being to more severe loss of reputation and assets such as revenue (Rahimi and Kozak 2017). A failed process may also result in lack of trust in future dealings and engagements thereby quenching the potentials for future value co-creation initiatives (Lin and Wu 2011, Payne and Frow 2016, Cunha 2019a, b).

Dominant Service Logic

Dominant Service Logic (DSL) is a concept in marketing and service management that represents a shift in perspective from a goods-centered approach to a service-centered approach. It emphasizes the primacy of services in the economy and the way value is co-created through interactions between service providers and customers (Leigh and Tanner 2014, Richards and Jones 2016, Gagnon and Roh 2016, Cunha et al. 2021). This concept contrasts with the traditional goods-dominant logic (GDL), which focused on the exchange of tangible products (Rahimi and Kozak 2017). There are some key principles at this point as we can see on Table 5.

Table 5. *Key Principles of the Dominant Service Logic*

Value Co-Creation: DSL recognizes that value is not inherent in products or services themselves, but rather it is co-created through interactions between customers and service providers. Customers actively participate in shaping their experiences and the value they receive.
Intangibility: Services are inherently intangible compared to physical goods. DSL acknowledges the importance of intangibility and emphasizes creating and delivering intangible experiences that meet customer needs and preferences.
Customer-Centric Approach: DSL places the customer at the center of value creation. Businesses need to understand customer needs, preferences, and behaviors to tailor their offerings and interactions accordingly.
Relationship Building: DSL emphasizes building long-term relationships with customers. Value is created not just in individual transactions but in ongoing interactions and collaborations.
Dynamic and contextual: Value is dynamic and contextual, meaning that it can change based on the specific situation, customer, and circumstances. DSL encourages flexibility in adapting services to match the unique needs of each customer.
Innovation and Co-Innovation: Since value is co-created, DSL encourages both service providers and customers to engage in innovation together. This can lead to the development of new services, features, and experiences.

Networks and Collaboration: DSL acknowledges that value creation often involves various stakeholders, including suppliers, partners, and even customers. It emphasizes the importance of collaboration and networks in delivering value.
Resource Integration: DSL focuses on the integration of resources from both the provider and the customer. This includes not only physical resources but also knowledge, skills, and capabilities.

Source: Cunha et al. 2021.

The concept of Dominant Service Logic has gained prominence as the economy has shifted toward service-based industries and os businesses recognize the increasing role of customer experience and interaction in creating value. It encourages businesses to rethink their strategies, marketing approaches, and customer engagement methods to align with the principles of value co-creation and customer-centricity (Meyer and Schwager 2015, Richards and Jones 2016, Watjatrakul 2018).

Support for Leadership and Co-destruction of Values

Support for leadership and co-destruction of values would involve understanding how effective leadership can help mitigate or address the negative consequences of value co-destruction in various contexts, such as business, organizations, and customer relationships (Schmitt 2014, Richards and Jones 2016, Watjatrakul 2018). Effective leadership plays a crucial role in identifying and addressing factors that contribute to co-destruction of value, there by fostering positive outcomes and maintaining trust and satisfaction. According to Zhao et al. (2019) leadership can support these efforts as we can see on Table 6.

Table 6. *Leadership Support*

Communication and Transparency: Leaders can promote open and transparent communication within their teams and with customers. Clear communication helps manage expectations, prevent misunderstandings, and address issues proactively.
Empowerment and Decision-Making: Empowering employees with decision-making authority can facilitate quicker issue resolution and improved customer experiences. When employees have the autonomy to address problems, customers are more likely to receive timely and satisfactory solutions.
Training and Development: Effective leadership involves providing ongoing training and development opportunities for employees. Well-trained staff are better equipped to handle challenging situations, reduce errors, and enhance customer satisfaction.
Customer-Centric Culture: Leaders can establish a customer-centric culture within the organization. This encourages employees to prioritize customer needs and focus on delivering value
Problem-Solving and Innovation: Strong leadership encourages a culture of problem-solving and innovation. Leaders can motivate teams to identify root causes of value co-destruction and develop creative solutions.

Conflict Resolution: Leaders should be skilled in resolving conflicts, both within the organization and with customers. Addressing conflicts promptly and effectively can prevent value co-destruction from escalating.
Continuous Improvement: Leaders should emphasize a culture of continuous improvement. This involves consistently seeking feedback, evaluating processes, and making necessary changes to enhance value creation and prevent co-destruction.
Ethical Contemplations: Ethical leadership is essential in maintaining trust and avoiding value co-destruction caused by unethical practices. Leaders should set ethical standards and ensure they are upheld throughout the organization.
Empathy and Understanding: Leaders who demonstrate empathy and understanding toward customers and employees can contribute to more positive interactions. This can reduce the likelihood of value co-destruction due to negative emotions or misunderstandings.
Adaptability and Resilience: Effective leaders are adaptable and resilient. They are capable of responding to changing circumstances and unforeseen challenges, helping to prevent or mitigate value co-destruction.

Source: Zhao et al. (2019).

In summary, effective leadership plays a crucial role in addressing and preventing the co-destruction of value. By fostering a customer-centric, innovative, and proactive organizational culture, leaders, can reduce negative experiences, enhance value creation, and build stronger relationships with stakeholders (Schmitt 2014, Richards and Jones 2016, Watjatrakul 2018).

Favorable Organizational Climate and Co-destruction of Values

A favorable organizational climate refers to the overall atmosphere, attitudes, and working conditions within an organization that contribute to a positive and productive work environment (Table 7). It encompasses various factors that shape employees' experiences, interactions, and perceptions of their workplace (Robert-Lombard and Du Plessis 2012, Tanner et al. 2015, Richards and Jones 2016). A positive organizational climate is essential for promoting employee well-being, job satisfaction, and overall organizational success.

Service experience is a total package of the service ambience, service product and service delivery. Service-dominant Logic (S-D logic), as a paradigm and reaction against Goods-dominant logic, highlights the role of intangible resources (e.g., skills and knowledge) and interactions to create value (Cunha 2019a, b). This logic emphasises on the fact that the customer can become a co-creator of value (Cunha et al. 2021). Value co-creation is the process during which consumers take an active role and co-create value together with the company (Cunha et al. 2021). It is concluded value co-creation helps to achieve competitive advantages (Payne and Frow 2013) and fulfil personalised demands (Cunha 2019a, b). Companys and customers receive mutual benefits of value co-creation.

Company related benefits are lower prices, faster speed; brand awareness, idea generation marketing insight, cost savings; effectiveness, efficiency and increased complexity. Customer-related advantages are enhanced operating efficiencies, greater service value; the ability to fulfil personal needs and interests;

fit with consumer needs, relationship building, engagement and satisfaction (Zikmund et al. 2013, Meyer and Schwager 2015, Rajnish et al. 2017, Gagnon and Roh 2016, Mxunyelwa and Henama 2019). Cunha (2019a, b) indicates customer participation in co-creation activities results in increased interest in the company and reduced communication and new product development costs. In servisse-dominant logic, the inherent tendency of value co-creation is assumed as a result of the interactions between the parts.

Ganesan-Lim et al. (2015) and Meyer and Schwager (2015) mention that both the upside and the downside of interactive value formation should be considered. They go on to convey that value co-destruction, like value co-creation, can occur when providers and customers have interactions indicate that customer engagement in value creation may be positive or negative.

Table 7. *Favorable Organizational Climate Key Points*

Open Communication: Effective communication channels that encourage the free flow of information and ideas between employees and management. This includes active listening, feedback mechanisms, and transparent sharing of information.
Respect and Inclusion: A culture that values diversity and treats all employees with respect and fairness, regardless of their background, identity, or position within the organization.
Collaboration and Teamwork: A focus on collaboration and teamwork, where employees are encouraged to work together, share knowledge, and collectively achieve goals.
Empowerment and Autonomy: Empowering employees to take ownership of their work, make decisions, and contribute their unique skills and expertise to the organization's success.
Employee Development: Providing opportunities for skill development, training, and career growth to enhance employees' capabilities and job satisfaction.
Recognition and Rewards: Acknowledging and rewarding employees' contributions and achievements to boost motivation and job engagement.
Flexibility and Work-Life Balance: Offering flexible work arrangements and promoting a healthy work-life balance to support employees' well-being and reduce burnout.
Positive Leadership: Leadership that serves as a positive role model, sets clear expectations, provides guidance, and fosters an environment of trust and support.
Emphasis on Well-Being: Prioritizing employee well-being through wellness programs, mental health support, and initiatives that promote a healthy work environment.
Adaptability: Being open to change and adapting to new challenges and opportunities to ensure the organization remains competitive and relevant.
Clarity of Goals and Expectations: Clearly defining organizational goals and individual roles and responsibilities to align employees' efforts with the company's objectives.
Conflict Resolution: Providing effective mechanisms for resolving conflicts and addressing grievances in a fair and timely manner.
Safe and Inclusive Environment: Creating a physically and emotionally safe environment where employees can express their ideas, concerns, and feedback without fear of retribution.
Ethical Standards: Promoting ethical behavior and integrity throughout the organization, from leadership to employees at all levels.
Positive Relationships: Fostering positive relationships among colleagues, supervisors, and team members to create a supportive and harmonious atmosphere.

Source: Cunha et al. (2021).

A favorable organizational climate contributes to higher employee moral, increased productivity, lower turnover rates, and improved overall organizational performance. It plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining top talent and creating a workplace culture that aligns with the organization's values and goals (Read 2011, Robert-Lombard and Du Plessis 2012, Tanner et al. 2015, Richards and Jones 2016).

Commitment to Co-creation

Commitment to co-creation refers to an organization's dedication and active engagement in the process of collaboratively creating value with its customers, partners, and stakeholders (Ganesan-Lim et al. 2015, Tanner et al. 2015, Payne and Frow 2016, Stein and Ramaseshan 2016). Co-creation involves involving various stakeholders in the development, design, and improvement of products, services, and experiences. Organizations that are committed to co-creation recognize the importance of involving external perspectives and insights to enhance the value they deliver. Table 8 shows how commitment to co-creation can be demonstrated.

Table 8. *Demonstration of Co-creation Commitment*

Openness to Input: Organizations that are committed to co-creation actively seek input, ideas, and feedback from customers, employees, partners, and other stakeholders. They encourage these stakeholders to share their insights to drive innovation and improvement.
Inclusive Decision-Making: They involve stakeholders in decision-making processes, valuing their input and insights when shaping strategies, products, and services.
Collaborative Platforms: Organizations committed to co-creation provide platforms or channels for stakeholders to contribute their ideas, opinions, and suggestions. These platforms can be digital (such as online forums or social media) or physical (such as workshops or focus groups).
Interative Development: They embrace an iterative approach, continuously refining and adapting products and services based on ongoing collaboration and feedback from stakeholders.
Customization and Personalization: Co-creation-committed organizations prioritize customization and personalization to meet individual customer needs and preferences, allowing customers to play an active role in tailoring their experiences.
Empowerment of Employees: These organizations empower their employees to engage in co-creation efforts. Employees are encouraged to generate ideas, propose improvements, and engage with customers to create value.
Feedback Loops: They establish feedback loops to ensure that insights from stakeholders are integrated into the organization's processes, fostering a continuous cycle of improvement.
Diverse Stakeholder Engagement: Organizations committed to co-creation engage a diverse range of stakeholders, recognizing that multiple perspectives lead to richer, more innovative solutions.
Transparency and Trust: They build trust with stakeholders by being transparent about intentions, involving them in the co-creation process, and honoring their contributions.

Learning Orientation: A commitment to co-creation reflects a learning-oriented mindset. Organizations are willing to learn from stakeholders, adapt to changing needs, and leverage external expertise.
Value Alignment: They ensure that co-creation efforts align with the organization's values, mission, and long-term goals, maintaining a consistent brand identity and customer experience.
Celebrating Contributions: Organizations committed to co-creation celebrate and acknowledge the contributions of stakeholders, reinforcing the idea that value creation is a collaborative effort.

Source: Stein and Ramaseshan (2016).

By actively involving stakeholders in co-creation, organizations can create more relevant and meaningful offerings, build stronger relationships, enhance customer loyalty, and foster innovation. Commitment to co-creation reflects a dedication to embracing change, valuing external perspectives, and remaining agile in a rapidly evolving business landscape (Zikmund et al. 2013, Meyer and Schwager 2015, Rajnish et al. 2017, Mxunyelwa and Henama 2019).

Moderating Role of Employee Assignment Style

The moderating role of employee assignment style refers to how the manner in which employees are assigned tasks or responsibilities can influence the relationship between two variables. In the context of organizational dynamics, employee assignment style can impact how certain factors interact and affect outcomes (Lin and Wu 2011, Payne and Frow 2016, Cunha e Santos, 2019).

The set of theoretical frameworks that underpins attribution theory were built on the assumption that everyone is a "naïve psychologist" who has been wired to always make sense of their encounters (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, Cunha 2019a, b). Particularly when they are faced with disappointing situations or experiences (Lin and Wu 2011, Payne and Frow 2016).

Attribution styles are justly established propensities of ascribing cause across a variation of circumstances (Viet and Nguyen 2019). Therefore, attribution styles can be considered as an individual's trait-like tendencies to make specific forms of attributions (Park and Kim 2013). It can also be viewed as degree of an individual's bias in attributing cause to events (Gagnon and Roh 2016).

Table 9. *Moderating Role of Employee Assignment Style*

Employee Engagement (Main Variable): Employee engagement refers to the emotional commitment and level of involvement employees have toward their work and the organization.
Task Assignment Style (Moderating Variable): Task assignment style refers to how tasks, projects, or responsibilities are assigned to employees. It can range from a highly structured approach where tasks are assigned rigidly, to a more autonomous approach where employees have more freedom to choose their tasks.

Source: Viet and Nguyen (2019).

The moderating role of employee assignment style comes into play when examining how different styles of task assignment affect the relationship between employee engagement and other factors, such a job satisfaction or performance:

1. **Structured Assignment Style:** In an organization with a highly structured assignment style, where tasks are assigned by managers based on specific roles and responsibilities, the impact of employee engagement on job satisfaction might be less pronounced. This is because employees have less autonomy in choosing tasks, and their satisfaction might be more influenced by factors other than engagement.
2. **Autonomous Assignment Style:** In contrast, in an organization with an autonomous assignment style, where employees have more control over the tasks they work on, high levels of employee engagement might lead to significantly increased job satisfaction. The sense of autonomy and ownership over tasks could contribute to higher satisfaction levels.

Essentially, the employee assignment style moderates how employee engagement affects other outcomes, depending on the level of autonomy employees have in choosing or being assigned tasks. Organizations can consider the following when understanding and leveraging the moderating role of employee assignment style (Park and Kim 2013, Gagnon and Roh 2016).

Customization: Organizations should consider tailoring task assignment styles based on the desired outcomes. For instance, more autonomous assignment might be suitable for tasks that require creativity and innovation.
Flexibility: Offering a mix of structured and autonomous task assignment can provide a balance that meets the needs and preferences of different employees and types of tasks.
Employee Voice: Providing employees with some choice in their task assignments can enhance their sense of ownership and engagement (Viet and Nguyen 2019).
Communication: Clear communication of task assignment styles, expectations, and goals is crucial to avoid misunderstandings and misalignment.

Remember that the moderating role of employee assignment style is context-specific and can vary based on the organization's culture, the nature of tasks, and the preferences of employees. Organizations should be flexible and open to adjusting assignment styles to achieve desired outcomes and maintain a positive organizational climate (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, Cunha 2019a, b).

Methodology

A model was developed based on the insights gathered from the literature review, as depicted in Figure 1. This model is designed to serve the research objective, which is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors

contributing to value co-destruction. The conceptual framework for this study suggests that leadership support, a supportive organizational climate, and the occurrence of value co-destruction are predictive factors influencing commitment to value co-creation, which serves as the ultimate outcome variable. The synthesis of relevant literature related to these research variables led to the formulation of the conceptual model, as presented in Figure 1, to serve as a guiding framework for the empirical investigation.empirical investigation.

Figure 1. *Research Model*
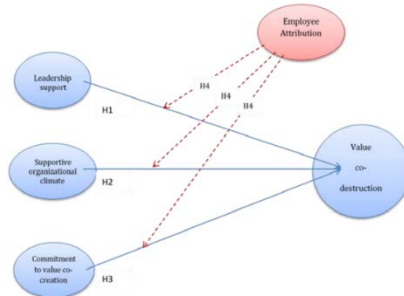
Hypotheses Statements

Based on the preceding discussion, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

H1: There is a relationship between leadership support and commitment to value co-creation.
H2: A relationship exists between a supportive organizational climate and commitment to value co-creation.
H3: There is a relationship between value co-destruction and commitment to value co-creation.

Empirical Analysis

This research aligns with the positivist paradigm, as it seeks to empirically test predefined hypotheses to establish relationships between independent and dependent variables. The researchers opted for a quantitative research approach to enhance precision through robust statistical analysis. This approach not only facilitated the collection of crucial data related to leadership support, a supportive organizational climate, value co-destruction, and commitment to value co-creation but also allowed for the investigation of causal relationships among these constructs.

The research employed a quantitative methodology and utilized a survey-based data collection method. Given the absence of an easily accessible sampling frame, a convenience sampling technique was applied. The selection of hotels deliberately avoided specific star ratings to prevent any undue limitations on the sample size. Data was gathered through an online questionnaire, with participants identified as individuals employed in hotels within Portugal, resulting in a total of 1200 responses.

Measurement variables for leadership support, a supportive organizational climate, value co-destruction, and commitment to value co-creation were adapted from well-established variables used in previous research. Necessary adjustments were made to ensure their suitability for the current research context. The scale for assessing a supportive organizational climate consisted of eight items and was adapted from Hayat and Afshari (2020). Leadership support was sourced from Iqbal et al. (2014), and the concept of commitment to value co-creation was based on Järvi et al. (2018). Value co-destruction was adapted from Järvi et al. (2018). All measurement items employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

The collected data were meticulously recorded in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet following the screening of returned questionnaires. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha values, correlations, and was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 27.0). The psychometric properties of the measurement scales and hypotheses were tested using the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS version 27.0) statistical software.

Ethical considerations were a top priority in this research investigation. Participation was entirely voluntary and was conducted in an anonymous manner. No personally identifiable information was gathered, and participants were fully informed about the research before providing their consent to complete the questionnaire. No incentives were offered to participants, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any point.

Results and Discussion

The sample's demographics have been analyzed, taking into account various characteristics. The results indicate that 56% (678) of the participants are male, while 44% (522) are female.

Table 10 illustrates the distribution of workers within the sample. It reveals that 54% of the workers are in full-time positions, while 46% hold part-time jobs.

Table 10. *Demografic Results*

Monthly	Income	Frequency	Percent
Full time		636	54%
Part time		564	46%
Total		1200	100%
Gender	**Frequency**		**Percent**
Male	678		56%
Female	522		44%
Total	1200		100%
Monthly Income	Frequency		Percent
500-1500 euro	408		33%
1501-4000 euro	626		52.5%
4001 euro and above	168		13.5%
Total	1200		100%

Own source

Regarding participants' monthly income, 33.0% (408 individuals) earn between 500-1,500 euros, 52.5% (626 individuals) fall within the income range of 1,501-4,000 euros, and 13.5% (168 individuals) earn 4,001 euros or more.

Research Findings

The results section centers on three key components: confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), hypothesis testing conducted via structural equation modeling (SEM), and subsequent discussions. CFA is a specialized form of factor analysis employed to assess the congruence between a construct's measurements and the inherent nature of that construct. Meanwhile, SEM is utilized to scrutinize the relationships between latent (unobservable) variables, encompassing both dependent and independent constructs (Bagozzi and Yi 2012).

To ascertain the psychometric properties of the measurement scales, a CFA was conducted, which involved evaluating the constructs' reliability, validity, and model fit. The findings from this CFA evaluation are presented in Table 11.

Table 11. *Measurement Scales for Psychometric Properties*

Research constructs		Mean Value	SD	Cronbach's test		CR	AVE	Factor loadings
				Item total	alpha			
LS	LS1	4.728	1.314	0.665	0.930	0.945	0.775	0.810
	LS2	4.630	1.224	0.712				0.900
	LS3	4.454	1.375	0.743				0.899
	LS4	4.719	1.460	0.787				0.914
	LS5	4.702	1.547	0.717				0.874
SOC	SOC1	4.476	1.576	0.549	0.850	0.860	0.430	0.603
	SOC2	4.456	1.654	0.675				0.610
	SOC3	4.613	1.794	0.688				0.700
	SOC4	4564	1.876	0.754				0.736
	SOC5	5.547	1.880	0.746				0.633
	SOC6	5.249	1.870	0.751				0.590
	SOC7	5.542	1.893	0.753				0.728
	SOC8	5.705	1.970	0.783				0.649
VC	VC1	3.928	1.477	0.672	0.890	0.830	0.500	0.874
	VC2	3.713	1.593	0.688				0.838
	VC3	4.195	1.425	0.697				0.543
	VC4	4.978	1.563	0.701				0.679
	VC5	5.083	1.305	0.725				0.514
CVC	CVC1	5.582	1.163	0.716	0.960	0.740	0.420	0.619
	CVC2	5.748	1.075	0.755				0.790
	CVC3	5.630	1.328	0.752				0.562
	CVC4	5.456	1.143	0.799				0.605

Note: LS = Leadership support, SOC=supportive organizational climate, VC=value co-destruction, CVC=commitment value co-creation, SD=Standard Deviation, AVE=Average variance extracted, CR=Composite reliability.

As per Cunha et al. (2021), Cronbach's alpha coefficient serves as a measure of internal consistency or reliability for a set of survey items. This statistic assists in evaluating whether a group of items consistently measures the same underlying characteristic. Cronbach's alpha quantifies the level of agreement on a standardized scale ranging from 0 to 1. Higher values signify greater agreement among the items.

A score of 0 implies no correlation between the items; they are entirely independent. Knowing the response to one question provides no information about the responses to other questions. On the other hand, a score of 1 signifies perfect correlation, where knowing the value of one response offers complete information about all other items. Typically, analysts consider a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.7 as a benchmark. Values around 0.7 are considered minimally acceptable, though not ideal.

The results presented in Table 13 reveal Cronbach's Alpha values for each research variable: LS (Leadership Support) = 0.930, SOC (Supportive Organizational Climate) = 0.850, VC (Value Co-destruction) = 0.890, and CVC (Commitment to Value Co-creation) = 0.960. These Cronbach's Alpha scores indicate that each construct demonstrates robust internal reliability (Lee 2009). Table 13 shows the loading of each item on their construct. The results indicate that all the measurement instruments are acceptable and reliable, since all the individual items converged well and with more than 50% of each item's variance shared with its respective construct (Fraering and Minor 2006). Composite reliabilities (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct were also computed using the formulae proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981, p. 22), that is:

$$CR\eta = [(\Sigma\lambda yi)2/[(\Sigma\lambda yi)2+(\Sigma\epsilon i)]$$

Where CRη = Composite reliability, ($\Sigma\lambda yi$) 2= Square of the summation of the factor loadings; ($\Sigma\epsilon i$) = Summation of error variances:

$$V\eta = \Sigma\lambda yi2/ (\Sigma\lambda yi2+\Sigma\epsilon i)$$

Where Vη= Average Variance Extracted (AVE); $\Sigma\lambda yi2$= Summation of the squared of factor loadings; $\Sigma\epsilon i$= Summation of error variances.

CR and AVE for each construct were also computed and assessed to determine if they met the required thresholds for reliability and validity. As per the results shown in Table 5, the lowest CR value (0.720) is well above the recommended 0.6 (Hulland 1999), while the lowest obtained AVE value (0.420) is above the recommended 0.4 (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). This indicates that convergent validity was achieved, further confirming excellent internal consistency and reliability of the measurement instruments used. By and large, these results provided evidence for acceptable levels of research scale reliability (Chinomona and Chinomona 2013). According to Field (2013) discriminant validity refers to items measuring different concept. Table 4 presents the results of the discriminant validity analysis. As depicted in Table 12 all the correlation coefficients of this investigation fell below 0.70, thereby confirming the theoretical uniqueness of each variable in this research (Field 2013).

Table 12. *Correlation Matrix*

Variables	LS	SOC	VC	CVC
LS	1	--	--	--
SOC	0.518**	1	--	--
VC	0.233**	0.358**	1	--
CVC	0.594**	0.656**	0.498**	1

Note: LS = Leadership support, SOC=supportive organizational climate, VC=value co-destruction, CVC=commitment value co-creation

According to the authors Anderson and Gerbing (1988), model fit analysis is a process that assesses how well the model represents the data. In this investigation, model fit was tested by using the following indices: Chi-square/degrees of freedom, comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), normative fit index (NFI), goodness of fit (GFI) and random measure of standard error approximation (RMSEA). The acceptable thresholds should be equal to or higher than 0.90 for CFI, IFI, RFI, NFI, GFI and AGFI. For Chi-square/degrees of freedom a ratio of 3:1 or less is recommended and RMSEA value should be equal to or less than 0.08 (Lysons and Farrington 2012). The general model fit indices for both the CFA and SEM models are presented in Table 13.

Table 13. *Model Fit Indices for Both the CFA and SEM Models*

Fit indices	Acceptable fit índices	CFA (measurement model)	SEM (structural model)
Chi-square/degree of freedom (df)	<3.0	1.659	1.956
Incremental fit index (IFI	>0.90	0.967	0.951
Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)	>0.90	0.961	0.957
Comparative fit index (CFI)	>0.90	0.963	0.967
Normative fit index (NFI)	>0.90	0.921	0.945
Goodness of fit (GFI)	>0.90	0.914	0.955
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	<0.08	0.045.	0.053

Note: CFA=confirmatory factor analysis; SEM=structural equation modelling

Figure 2. *Structural Model*
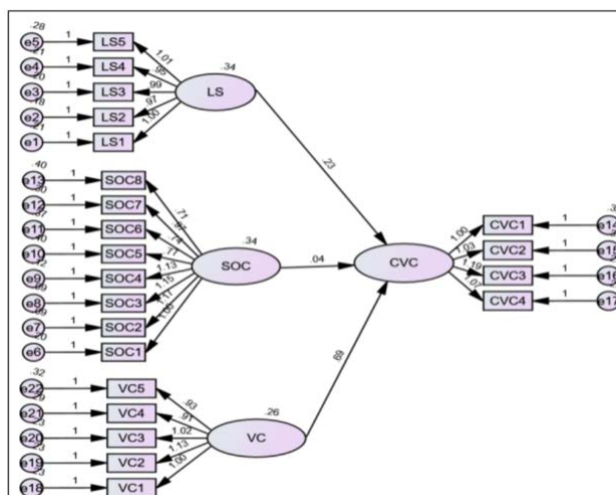
Note: Key: Leadership support, supportive organizational climate, commitment value co-creation, value co-destruction.

Table 14 shows the findings of the hypotheses. It is observed that all three hypotheses tested were supported. However, of the three hypotheses only one was not significant.

Table 14. *Hypotheses Results*

Relationship	Hypotheses	P-value		Estimate	Outcome
LS to CVC	H1	***	0.23		Supported and significant
SOC to CVC	H2	0.07	0.04		Supported but not significant
VC to CVC	H3	***	0.69		Supported and significant

Note: Key: LS: Leadership support, SOC: supportive organizational climate, CVC: commitment value co-creation, VC: value codestruction, Level of significance p<0

Hypothesis 1 (H1), which explores the relationship between leadership support and commitment to value co-creation, was both substantiated and demonstrated significance at the p<0.05 level, as indicated by *** and an estimate of 0.23. This finding signifies a meaningful connection between leadership support and the commitment to value co-creation. Essentially, the influence of leadership support on commitment to value co-creation is as substantial as the extent to which employees attribute these qualities to their leaders. When an employee attributes organizational failures to leadership, it's likely that they perceive value co-destruction in the organization as primarily a leadership issue, especially in comparison to those with low attribution styles (Cunha et al. 2021).

Hypothesis 2 (H2), concerning the link between a supportive organizational climate and commitment to value co-creation, received support with an estimate of 0.04. However, this relationship did not achieve statistical significance at p<0.05, as the p-value was 0.07, surpassing the requisite 0.05 threshold for significance. Notably, this was the weakest of all hypotheses tested, aligning with findings by Akroush et al. (2011). A supportive organizational climate and commitment to value co-creation are believed to foster desirable psychological qualities in employees, such as resilience, hope, and optimism, enabling them to rebound swiftly from setbacks, like encountering an unsatisfactory idea or providing ineffective assistance to other team members, as elucidated by Gagnon and Roh (2016).

Hypothesis 3 (H3), addressing the relationship between value co-destruction and commitment to value co-creation, was supported and exhibited significance at the p<0.05 level, denoted by *** and an estimate of 0.69. This denotes a robust and meaningful association between value co-destruction and commitment to value co-creation, making it the most potent among all hypotheses tested. High levels of commitment to value co-creation are linked to a reduced incidence of value co-destruction. The authors recognize that for consumers, a key element in creating a memorable service experience lies in the service provider's dedication of resources toward crafting an exceptional experience (McLauchlin 2011). Gagnon and Roh (2016) argue that the value co-creation process often hinges on the allocation of resources by the organization. Pimonratanakan (2019) posits that resource commitment nurtures a strategic relationship perspective, signifying a willingness to invest resources in the business strategy (Frawley 2014).

Consequently, specialized knowledge and process activities are cultivated (Faed and Forbes 2011).

Conclusion

This study makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of leadership support, supportive organizational climate, commitment to value co-creation, and value co-destruction within the hospitality sector. The findings highlight that value co-destruction significantly impacts commitment to value co-creation in the hospitality sector, while the role of a supportive organizational climate appears to be less influential.

Our investigation delved into the factors at the organizational level that influence value co-destruction in the hospitality sector of Continental Portugal and its islands. We empirically examined the impact of leadership support, supportive organizational climate, and value co-destruction on commitment to value co-creation. Notably, the study revealed that value co-destruction wields a substantial influence on commitment to value co-creation within the hospitality sector, with value co-destruction being the most potent factor. In contrast, the impact of a supportive organizational climate on commitment to value co-creation was found to be relatively weaker.

Nonetheless, there are certain limitations to this research. Firstly, from a practical perspective, the study adopted a quantitative approach, constraining participants' ability to provide nuanced feedback due to their confinement to a Likert scale. Consequently, valuable information might have been left unexplored. To address this, future research could consider employing a qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews to gather more detailed insights from hotel employees regarding their perceptions and experiences in the hospitality sector. Additionally, it is advisable to expand the sample's geographic diversity, encompassing a broader spectrum of locations, to mitigate potential participant bias introduced by the study's narrow focus on a single city.

On a conceptual note, there is room for enhancement in the conceptual model. Unexplored hypotheses could be tested to further enrich the discussion. This entails investigating the relationships between value co-destruction and a supportive organizational climate, as well as between a supportive organizational climate and leadership support. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to consider introducing additional constructs into the existing model or applying the same model and constructs to a different sector to assess whether the results can be replicated.

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Nature Positive Tourism

By Peter Jones[*]

The concept of nature positive, simply defined as a means of describing a world where nature is being restored and is regenerating, rather than declining, is attracting increasing attention in the tourism industry. With this in mind, this review paper outlines the current global nature crisis, presents the results of an Internet search of academic research and consultancy company reports on nature positive, summarises the World Travel and Tourism Council's recent report on nature positive travel and tourism, and offers some critical reflections on nature positive tourism. The reflections focus on the concept of nature positive itself, the industry's commitment to nature positive tourism and concerns about greenwashing, and the relationship between tourism and sustainable development, which might all be seen to call the nature positive tourism into question.

Introduction

The concept of nature positive, simply defined as a means of describing a world where nature is being restored and is regenerating, rather than declining, is attracting increasing attention in a number of industries. In 2023 the World Economic Forum, for example, produced three major reports on sector specific actions that companies should take to transform their businesses and contribute to reversing nature loss by 2030, in the chemical sector, the cement and concrete sector, and household and personal care products sector. That the concept of nature positive is gaining increasing traction reflects growing concerns about the global nature crisis, which has seen the planet 'experiencing a dangerous decline in nature', in which 'one million species are threatened with extinction, soils are turning infertile, and water sources are drying up' (United Nations Environment Programme 2023).

There is certainly growing interest in nature positive tourism within the tourism industry, In her 'Foreword' to 'Nature Positive Travel and Tourism', subtitled 'Travelling in Harmony with Nature', Julia Simpson, President and Chief Executive Officer of the World Travel and Tourism Council, for example, claimed that 'travel & tourism are intrinsically linked to biodiversity and nature', and that 'over half of travel & tourism demand is driven by the desire to explore nature, whether it is an international safari of a lifetime or a day trip exploring the countryside' (World Travel and Tourism Council 2022a). However, nature positive tourism has, to date, attracted no attention from academic researchers, and this represents a gap in the academic tourism literature.

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With this in mind, this paper offers an exploratory review of the concept of nature positive tourism. The paper includes, a summary of the scale and severity of the nature crisis, a description of the simple methodology, a review of the definition and meanings of nature positive, an examination of the academic and professional business perspectives on the concept of nature positive, a review of developing thinking around to nature positive tourism, some wider reflections which can be seen to call into question the future of nature positive tourism, and a short conclusion.

The Nature Crisis

The warnings about the scale of the nature crisis are clear, and set the context for the growing interest in the concept of nature positive. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2019), for example, reported that 'nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history, and the rate of species extinctions is accelerating with grave impacts on people around the world now likely.' The World Wildlife Fund's (2022) 'Living Planet Report' noted that 'nature loss is now rarely perceived as a purely moral or ecological issue, with a broadened sense of its vital importance to our economy, social stability, individual well-being and health, and as a matter of justice', and that 'we are leaving a terrible legacy to our children and future generations to come.'

At the same time, there seems to be a broad consensus on the principal causes of the global nature crisis. Typically, the United Nations Environment Programme (2023), identified 'the top five drivers of nature loss', as being 'changes in land and sea use', 'climate change', 'pollution', 'direct exploitation of natural resources', and 'invasive species.' More specifically, the major driver of biodiversity loss is how people use the land and the sea, including the conversion of forests, wetlands and other natural habitats for agricultural and urban use, and harvesting minerals from the ocean floor. Pollution has a particularly devastating effect on freshwater and marine habitats. Marine plastic pollution was seen to have increased dramatically since 1980, and to have affected a range of animal species, including marine turtles, seabirds, whales, dolphins, and porpoises. At the same time plant and insect populations continue to decline because of the commercial use of insecticides.

Methodology

Nature positive tourism is a new, and largely unexplored, theme within the tourism industry, and in an attempt to obtain a preliminary picture of, the concepts of nature positive, and of nature positive tourism, a simple qualitative approach was adopted. This approach drew on a series of searches conducted on the Internet using either Google, or Google Scholar, search engines in September 2023 and January 2024. Using only the two Google search engines seemed appropriate in an

exploratory paper. In part and perhaps as might be expected in an exploratory study, the search process took what might be termed an iterative approach in that the findings from some of the originally planned searches led to further searches.

The first search, which used the term nature positive, was designed to explore the origins, and meanings, of the concept of nature positive. The second search, firstly used the key terms nature positive, and nature positive tourism, both with the key term consultancy reports, in an attempt to discover if the concepts of nature positive, and nature positive tourism, had attracted attention from tourism industry bodies or consultancy companies. The nature positive tourism search suggested close links between nature positive tourism and sustainable tourism, green tourism and ecotourism and a third search was conducted using these two terms. In a similar vein, the search for reports from tourism industry bodies and consultancy companies suggested that Deloitte, one of the major consultancy companies had published a report on the role of nature in the travel and tourism industry, and the names of the other major consultancy companies, namely, McKinsey and Company, EY, KPMG, the Boston Consulting Group, and Accenture were used in a fourth search process along with the terms nature positive and nature positive tourism. Finally, Google Scholar, was employed using the terms nature and nature positive tourism, to explore the extent of academic interest in the two concepts.

This information from these five sets of searches provided the source material for this paper. This information is drawn from a variety of sources including, academic journals, consultancy companies, industry reports, and conservation organisations, and they are all named in the paper and/or in the list of references at the end of the paper. The paper draws on a number of direct quotations taken from corporate websites, and the aim here is to add authenticity to the narrative by exploring how consultancy companies, conservation organisations and industry bodies publicly expressed, and looked to evidence, their understanding of, and their approaches to, nature and nature positive tourism, in their own words.

Definitions and Meanings of Nature Positive

Quantis (2023), an international sustainability consultancy, recognised that the concept of nature positive was gaining traction, but argued 'a lack of definition, guidance, and ways to measure nature impacts', meant that government and corporate claims to be moving towards a nature positive future, might, at best, be difficult to validate, and at worst be misleading. In a similar vein, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (2022) suggested that 'a nature-positive future is an essential goal, but as yet an undefined one', though Greenen and Butterworth (2023) argued that there are three types of current definitions of nature positive, namely target-based, process-based, and conceptual. Target-based definitions have specific quantifiable outcomes, process-based definitions look to specify the operational steps required to achieve nature positive, while conceptual definitions are aspirational but look to put nature at the forefront of everyday actions and decisions.

More specifically, a number of organisational definitions of nature positive can be identified. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (2022) proposed the following definition, namely, that, 'a nature-positive future means that we, as a global society, halt and reverse the loss of nature measured from its current status, reducing future negative impacts alongside restoring and renewing nature, to put both living and non-living nature measurably on the path to recovery.' For the UK's Joint Nature Conservation Committee (2022) 'becoming nature positive means reversing the current declines in biodiversity, so that species, and ecosystems can begin to recover', which was seen as 'an essential first step on the path to full nature recovery.' The World Wildlife Fund (n.d.) simply defines nature positive as 'having more nature in the world than we have now.'

Greenen and Butterworth (2023) suggested that the concept of nature positive has its origins in the idea of 'no net loss' introduced in public pollution and wetland trading in the US in the 1970s. Here, the focus was on compensating for environmental goods and services that were previously removed from the environment, which, in turn, paved the way for not just compensating, but adding value, to the environment that was lost. Within the last 50 years the thinking behind the concept of nature positive has gathered momentum, initially amongst conservation organisations and much more recently in the world of business, and it is now very much part of the lexicon of sustainability transition.

In December 2022, a commitment to halting, and reversing, biodiversity loss was formally agreed by almost 200 countries in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and though nature positive does not receive explicit mention within that framework, it effectively underpins it. Here, the aim is to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030, and to achieve full recovery by 2050. The following year the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2023) produced 'Roadmaps to Nature Positive', subtitled 'Guidelines to Accelerate Business Accountability, Ambition and Action for a Nature Positive Future', which were designed to complement and help to deliver on the Global Biodiversity Framework.

In September 2023, 27 of the world's largest nature conservation organizations, institutes, and business and finance coalitions, including the African Natural Capital Alliance, Business for Nature, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the World Wildlife Fund, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, came together to launch the Nature Positive Initiative. The aim was to drive alignment around the definition, integrity, and use of the term, nature positive, and to support broader, longer-term efforts to deliver nature positive outcomes.

Perspectives on Nature Positive

The concept of nature positive has received some attention from academics and consultancy companies. On the academic side, Booth et al. (2023), for example, recognised that nature positive was emerging as a rallying call for

businesses, but argued that tinkering with businesses will not bring about transformative change in business's relationship with the environment, and that there was a lack of clarity in how to operate such transformative change. That said, Booth et al. (2023) proposed a framework, to support companies to understand and develop transformative actions in the context of contributing towards a nature positive future, with case studies from food retailing and mining, which were grounded in robust social science theory and empirical evidence, and they offered some suggestions to promote integrity and innovation, whilst guarding against greenwashing.

zu Ergmassen et al. (2022) suggested the low levels of adoption of nature positive practices is not surprising given that the concept is new, that it has been subject to numerous definitions, and that little operational guidance has yet been provided. Although it is inevitable there will be on-going debate about the meaning of nature positive. The authors made the case that firms that do not address biodiversity impacts along their supply chain, set robust and measurable biodiversity targets, aligned with global goals, meaningfully engage with biodiversity at board level, and address single environmental issues in isolation, cannot credibly be considered nature positive, and call for more specific and careful use of the term in order not to dilute its transformative potential.

de Jaramillo et al. (2023) looked to provide an overview of the evidence in favour of nature-positive food systems. The authors concluded that current global food systems were driving habitat and diversity loss, and undermining the productivity, sustainability and resilience of such systems, and that this vicious circle could only be broken if fundamental steps are taken to realign food, feed, and fibre production to achieve positive agricultural production at scale. More specifically, de Jaramillo et al. (2023) make a number of calls for action, including, increasing policy coherence and strengthening natural governance; improving sustainable soil management; adapting and intensifying the knowledge-sharing of farmers, farm advisors and farm teachers; and empowering rural areas by cross-farm cooperation and through high local value creation.

Taylor et al. (2023) argued that while organisations are committing to biodiversity protection targets, with a focus on nature positive outcomes, there are few examples of how to feasibly achieve such targets. In a case study of Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford University, UK, Taylor et al. (2023) put forward an approach to achieve nature positive targets with respect to the biodiversity impact of food consumption. This approach involved using a comprehensive database of lifecycle environmental impacts and mapped strategies to meet targets structured according to a mitigation and conservation hierarchy. Taylor et al. (2023) concluded that delivering ambitious nature positive targets within the existing constraints would be challenging, and perhaps, more tellingly, that however committed an organisation is to being nature positive in its food provision, this is unachievable in the absence of systems change.

On the consultancy side, four of the selected consultancy companies, posted material on nature positive. For McKinsey and Company (2023), for example, being nature positive means 'that the world interacts with nature in a way that restorative and regenerative rather than just extractive' and the consultancy

claimed that 'becoming nature positive is the world's next big challenge.' More specifically, it is argued that while climate change is generally discussed in terms of the carbon emissions and the carbon budget, scientists are beginning to come to a consensus about the planetary boundaries that regulate the stability and resilience of the environment, there are a number of ways of looking at nature risk. Using water as an example, there was a recognition that people rely on freshwater supplies, but that if such supplies are diminished in some locations, this will have a damaging impact on various ecosystems, which will lose their ability to provide a number of essential ecosystem services for human populations.

EY (2023) argued that 'the environment is being destroyed at an alarming rate, threatening the global economy and the future of mankind', and that 'although some companies are taking steps towards nature-positive strategies, corporate action must accelerate to meet the challenge', and the company claimed to have 'the latest thinking and experience with implementation strategies for nature positive value creation.' More specifically EY (2023) identified 'six steps corporates should take toward achieving nature positivity', namely becoming familiar with forthcoming regulations and reporting frameworks; understanding the company's impact boundaries and its operational control for dealing with nature; mapping the company's value chain footprint and assessing its impacts and dependencies; evaluating potential risks and opportunities in relation to stakeholders; developing key performance indicators; and acting to address impacts and to report on progress.

Fredeau et al. (2023), writing under the Boston Consulting Group banner, suggested that the economic value produced by biodiversity was nearly twice the world's Gross Domestic Product, and that the drive to nature positive was especially pressing for a variety of industries, including agriculture, energy, forestry, food, fisheries, mining, manufacturing, retailing, and pharmaceuticals, that have a significant impact on nature and are heavily dependent on nature. Further, Fredeau et al. (2023) claimed that the business case for nature positive was compelling for four reasons, namely that nature positive was central to business resilience; that it can add substance to Economic, Social and Governance Reports; that it can generate demand side opportunities; and that it can enhance employer brands.

Accenture (2023) recognised the 'everything depends on nature', and argued that 'we must work together to shift the current economic system to be more nature positive, and organisations must embed nature positivity, alongside their other sustainability priorities, into the heart of their strategy, operations, and culture.'

Towards Nature Positive Tourism

There is widespread agreement that tourism relies heavily on nature, and while tourism can be seen have an exploitative and destructive relationship with the natural world, there is increasing interest in the development of harmonious relationships between tourism and nature. A variety of terms, including sustainable

tourism, green tourism and eco-tourism have been employed to define such harmonious relationships. In some ways, sustainable tourism is an umbrella term for other terms, some of whose meanings seems to have changed over time. For the Sustainable Tourism Development Council (2022) 'sustainable tourism refers to sustainable practices in, and by, the tourism industry. It is an aspiration to acknowledge all impacts of tourism, both positive and negative. It aims to minimize the negative impacts and maximize the positive ones. Here, negative impacts to a destination are seen to include damage to the natural environment and overcrowding, while positive impacts include job creation, the preservation of cultural heritage, and landscape restoration. The term green tourism was originally used to refer to small scale tourism that was focused on visits to natural areas while minimising environmental impacts but it is now taken to refer to tourism activity that is environmentally friendly. Ecotourism is defined by the International Ecotourism Society (2019) as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education.'

More recently, the concept nature positive tourism, has attracted growing attention, but there is, as yet, no widely agreed definition of the term. The World Travel and Tourism Council (2022a), for example, claimed that nature positive tourism is concerned to 'protect nature while preventing further damage to nature and promoting a regenerative approach to tourism.' For Responsible Travel, an activist travel and tourism company founded in 2001, 'nature positive holidays are those which directly contribute to, and advance, the protection of habitats and wildlife, and support the re-wilding of the planet's natural spaces.' Skutka (2023), writing under the banner of the Rewilding Society, nature positive tourism is 'a path towards sustainable travel.' Looking to the future, it seems likely that interest in the concept of nature positive tourism will gather increasing momentum, but to date it has received no attention in the academic tourism literature. That said, one of the business consultancy companies and a leading organisation within the travel and tourism industry, have focused on the concept.

Angelidis and Roxburgh (2023), writing under the Deloitte banner, suggested that as the nature crisis continued to escalate, many travel and tourism companies were increasingly looking to adopt activities to become more nature positive, and that such activities included setting nature related objectives and in identifying strategies and investments to realise these objectives. Further, Angelidis and Roxburgh (2023) argued, 'with ambition and action', the travel and tourism industry could play a leading role in a more nature positive future, and they highlighted the role of the framework launched by the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures. This framework, a global market led initiative, is designed to help organisation better understand their relationships with nature, and to maximise the opportunities created by the drive for a nature positive future.

More substantively, the World Travel and Tourism Council's (2022a) report, 'Nature Positive Travel and Tourism', looked to explore 'how our sector can protect nature.' The report was created 'to serve as a resource for travel and tourism businesses and as a springboard to ensure nature positive strategies are employed throughout the travel and tourism value chain and in every region', and

'to facilitate a more co-ordinated global effort to living in harmony with nature while enabling global travel and tourism.' In the course of compiling the report, the World Travel and Tourism Council surveyed over 180 global travel and tourism companies, including tour operators, travel agents, destination managers, cruise lines and hotel owners, and the two main audiences were seen to be governments and campaigners, and businesses. In addressing the first set, the report focussed on the evidence and ideas needed for policymaking at the local, national, and international levels, while the second set focused on ways in which business leaders could spark change within their companies, and the provision of a roadmap to guide nature positive tourism journeys.

In addressing 'the importance of nature', the report recognised that 'nature is the very fabric on which all life on Earth is based and is essential to human existence. It includes both non-living natural materials such as soil, water and stone, and all living things from bacteria to blue whales' (World Travel and Tourism Council 2022a). More specifically, the report argued that nature 'provides destinations with unique identities and is a core part of their appeal to travellers', and that 'the business benefits of a nature positive agenda include improved reputation and consumer trust; brand enhancement and competitor differentiation: appeal to socially conscious and environmentally aware employees and customers; an inspired, experiential product portfolio; strategic positioning in a growing marketplace of responsible travellers; and progress towards to United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.'

The report sets out a nature positive road map for travel and tourism. This framework, which is designed to guide the travel and tourism sector, from small and medium sized companies to multinational organisations, in adopting a nature positive approach, has four phases, namely, assessment and definition; reducing impacts on biodiversity and restoring nature; monitoring and reporting; and collaboration and communication. In addressing monitoring and reporting, for example, the importance of defining the baseline and monitoring is seen to be essential in seeking to operationalise the impact on nature, not least because investors and other external stakeholders need to understand how a company measures, and monitors, its nature related risks and opportunities. Here the accent is on setting objectives and key performance indicators, on implementing these objectives and key performance indicators, and on effective reporting.

Specific examples are used to illustrate the monitoring and reporting process within the tourism industry. All Marriott's International hotels complete their own reporting on local ecosystem restoration activities. This is seen to reflect the global diversity in biodiversity in the company's estate, as well as the differences between urban and rural hotel locations. The Carnival Corporation's reporting process employs an Economic, Social and Governance framework to separate individual biodiversity goals. The company's environmental and biodiversity commitments are clearly specified, with measurable actions, under 2030 goals, and 2050 aspirations, under the Environment banner, while the company's community-based projects are reported under the Social umbrella.

More practically, the report has a hyperlink to a toolbox of tools and resources to support the roadmaps, which demonstrates how theory can be applied, and

provides some appropriate resources, support services, and business case studies (World Travel and Tourism Council 2022b). The toolkit focuses in turn on each of the phases of the roadmap. In the assessment and definition phase, for example, one of the sets of guidance highlights the problems of animal exploitation. Here, the report claims that the illegal trade in wild animals and plants, for commercial use, is a significant driver of biodiversity loss, and has the potential to threaten the survival of species, and could result in the spread of invasive species, and businesses are encouraged to consider how they can eliminate animal exploitation in the supply chain. The use of captive animals in tourism is also seen as highly controversial, not least in that few captive facilities provide an environment that meets an animal's welfare needs. In contrast, genuine animal sanctuaries, which take in rescued animals and return them to the wild wherever possible, which protect animal welfare, and which can help to educate tourists about animal exploitation, are seen to be a positive way forward. The toolkit also has a hyperlink to guidance on how to distinguish a genuine animal sanctuary from a bogus one.

The World Travel and Tourism Council reported a high level of support for its nature positive tourism agenda across the sector, but that there was a limited understanding of how to put this support into practice. By way of a conclusion, the report emphasised that a nature positive approach to tourism does not need to be complicated, and included six corporate recommendations. These recommendations are:

- Assessing current business operations and activities against the five drivers of biodiversity loss,
- Working with destination partners and suppliers to halt any exploitation or degradation of the natural world,
- Committing to mainstreaming and integrating biodiversity safeguards throughout the business.
- Creating a nature positive strategy
- Taking a proactive role in nature protection and restoration, and
- Delivering simple, yet effective, communications to shareholders, employees, destination partners and suppliers, affected communities and customers.

However, arguably the most telling argument from the World Travel and Tourism Council is that a nature positive future for tourism requires a shift of focus and significant investment.

Reflections

There is growing interest in nature positive tourism and the World Travel and Tourism Council (2022a) has argued that the increased international attention on commercial impacts on nature will present the travel and tourism industry with an opportunity to demonstrate its potential in making an important contribution in

building a nature positive future. However, three sets of issues, namely, the concept of nature positive itself, the industry's commitment to nature positive and concerns about greenwashing, and the relationship between tourism and sustainable development, might be seen to call nature positive tourism into question.

Firstly, while the concept of nature positive seems to have widespread support amongst conservation organisations, it is not without its critics. Marien and Fernandez (2023) writing under the banner of Friends of the Earth International for example, posed the question 'how positive will nature positive be?' Here, Marien and Fernandez (2023) argued that nature positive may sound good, but that its meaning is unclear, that its proposed measurement is extremely vague, and that its meaning becomes even less clear when broken down into its constituent parts. More specifically while biodiversity is seen to be clearly defined, nature is not, in that nature can be many things that are not biodiverse, but have natural elements. The term positive is described as ambiguous, and while it is seen to signal an optimistic approach, in reality it accepts the destruction and loss of biodiversity and ecosystems, expecting them to be offset by larger conservation or restoration projects.

In a similar vein, Silva (2022) writing under the Greenpeace banner, argued that no one really knows what nature positive means. Arguably more critically, Silva (2022) claimed that 'the nature positive agenda promotes the financialisation of nature, that there is a monetary value to nature', and allocating financial values to nature, and to elements of the natural world, 'could define all that nature means to us, and that we can start trading plots of nature like tokens and feeding into an ecosystem service, that only benefits some people in particular economies.' Ultimately, Silva's (2022) arguments are that 'nature positive is more focused on saving a failed economic model than on protecting biodiversity', and that nature positive could be 'a bag of tricks', enabling corporate decision makers, and potentially governments, to 'distract, defer and obscure their harm for nature.'

Secondly, there are a set of issues about the industry's genuine commitment to nature positive tourism. In reporting on its 2023 'Nature Positive Travel and Tourism Survey', the World Travel and Tourism Council (2023) identified 'critical barriers to progress, including funding gaps, skills shortages and a lack of time and capacity.' Further, respondents to the survey, highlighted the need for help in measuring and reporting impacts on nature, training, and in building political support. In addressing reporting, for example, almost half of the respondents to the survey expressed their willingness to undertake reporting on a voluntary basis, while 10% welcomed reporting requirements in principle, they would only undertake such exercises if, and when, reporting became a mandatory obligation. Looking more optimistically towards the future, although Do and Schlapfaer (2023), writing under the banner of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, questioned if tourism could be nature positive, and they called on tourists to put pressure on airlines to reinvest profits back into habitat conservation.

There is also the danger that the concept of nature positive tourism is subject to greenwashing, which deceptively, and falsely, uses marketing to portray a

tourism company's products and services as restoring and regenerating nature, for business gains. While nature positive tourism can be seen to present many potential opportunities for greenwashing, the wide range of ways in which tourism depends on, and interacts, with, nature, can allow tourism companies to highlight specific features of their positive approach to nature, as part of wider clams to be nature positive. While the examples below, taken from Carnival Corporation's 2022 Sustainability Report are not presented as greenwashing, it does illustrate how biodiversity achievements can be used selectively to portray nature positive tourism.

The Carnival Corporation's (2022) Sustainability Report outlined the development the new cruise port destination on Grand Bahama Island which is scheduled for completion in 2025. The company reported that they are 'committed to developing this new cruise port in a sustainable and responsible manner, meeting or exceeding all applicable environmental standards, while preserving a 100-acre wetland area and creating a beautiful nature path where visitors will be able to enjoy the unspoiled island wilderness and seek information on the island and its local flora and fauna.' The sustainability report does not mention that once completed the new facilities will be capable of welcoming two million guests annually and that it will include extensive hospitality facilities, or any environmental deterioration or damage associated with these developments.

Thirdly, there is a thorny set of issues revolving around tourism and sustainable development. On the one hand, tourism can offer major benefits, and so seen, sustainable tourism development enables the industry to become a force for good. Benefits are seen to include, attracting the sustainable traveller, creating added value, generating competitive advantage, creating a dialogue with, and support for, local communities, helping to provide sustainable employment opportunities in host communities, improving the infrastructure of the destination, and providing new opportunities for innovative businesses. In theory, nature positive tourism might be seen to offer embrace many, if not all, of these benefits. Indeed, Animondial (2022), a specialist consultancy working with travel and tourism businesses to improve animal welfare, halt biodiversity loss and ensure nature's recovery, claimed 'beyond sustainable tourism, the future is nature positive.'

On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the demands that all tourism, including nature positive tourism, is making on the environment and on natural resources, and the industry's focus on what its critics see as unsustainable consumption. While 'mainstreaming sustainable consumption and production in tourism', was seen as part of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation's (2023) 'One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme', the programme does not define sustainable consumption and production or outline how it is to be achieved. Here, although the World Travel and Tourism Council's argument that a nature positive future for tourism requires a shift of focus, and Taylor's suggestion that however committed an organisation is to being nature positive, this is unachievable in the absence of systems change, certainly resonate, it remains to be seen if the tourism industry is willing to countenance radical change. Such a change could involve abandoning economic growth, and prioritising the welfare of

the planet, and more specifically, a dominant focus on local, rather than international tourism, a halt to new tourist development, the closure of many tourism facilities, and corporate and government investment directed to restoring and regenerating biodiversity in areas where tourism had been the dominant economic activity. Such radical changes might be the ultimate price of nature positive tourism.

Conclusion

This paper, offers an exploratory review of nature positive tourism, and includes a summary of the scale of the global nature crisis, a description of the methodology, a review of the definition and meanings of nature positive, an examination of the academic, business consultancy and industry perspectives on the concept of nature positive, a review of developing thinking around nature positive tourism, some wider reflections, and a short conclusion. The review of developing thinking around nature positive tourism revealed some measure of consensus about nature positive tourism, including, the need for the tourism industry to move towards nature positive, the need for strategic and operational guidance in making such a move, and on the challenges that need to be addressed, but the personal reflections might be seen to call nature positive tourism into question.

That said, the paper has a number of limitations, not least that its empirical material is based on Internet sources, but it makes a modest contribution to helping to fill the gap in academic literature identified earlier, and it may provide a platform for future research enquiries. Such enquiries, might include, empirical work on how both large and small tourism businesses are approaching nature positive tourism in various locations, on how they are looking to address the barriers to adopting such an approach, on consumers' attitudes to nature positive tourism and on the factors influencing their patronage of nature positive destinations, theoretical approaches to nature positive tourism, and stepping sideways, on nature positive initiatives in the hospitality industry.

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