The role of experiential familiarity in shaping hotel-chain competitiveness

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the role of experiential familiarity in determining the competitiveness of hotel chains. It does so by comparing the attribute-performance perceptions of guests who had and had not previously stayed at a property belonging to a specific hotel chain. It also examines how far such perceptions shape word-of-mouth and future purchase intentions.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from 1,016 Finnish leisure tourists in 2021 using an online questionnaire, providing a representative sample of Finnish domestic leisure tourists.

Findings – The results indicate that the competitiveness of different hotel chains depends on a small number of key attributes. Differentiation between hotel chains can be seen from the results. Previous guests rate hotel chain attributes more highly than non-previous guests. Behavioral intentions do not differ between previous and non-previous guests, but how many times a person has stayed in the hotel chain significantly influences behavioral intentions. The results provide strategic levers that hotel chains can use to enhance their competitiveness.

Originality – This study found that while certain hotel attributes had a significant shaping effect on guests' performance ratings, there were no decisive differences between those with or without experiential familiarity with the hotel chain.

Practical implications – Hotels should invest in attributes that have the biggest positive impact on customer behavior. These will be different for different hotel chains. By understanding these differences, it is possible to communicate relevant attributes to customers through marketing and develop hotel features that will drive revisit intention and word-of-mouth marketing.

Keywords: hotel-chain, competitiveness, selection attributes, attribute performance, behavioral intention

1. Introduction

Like many organizations in the tourism sector, hotels operate under intense competitive pressure (Kim et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2023). This requires them to exploit every available source of competitive advantage to achieve their organizational goals (Kim and Oh, 2004). While there is ample research into the determinants of the competitiveness of individual hotels, there is a lack of studies on this subject in the hotel-chain context (Xia *et al*., 2020). Undoubtedly, the process through which competitiveness is determined is more complex at the hotel chain level. This is because guests' perceptions of the quality of the experience they receive at a particular hotel can be influenced by the quality of the experience they received during stays at other hotels in the chain. This renders analyzing the determinants of hotel-chain competitiveness inherently more challenging.

The task is further complicated by the ambiguity that remains with respect to identifying the most salient determinants of hotel competitiveness (Cheraghalizadeh *et al*., 2021). While the literature has considered the resource structures and attributes that determine hotel competitiveness, no generalized model has yet been agreed (Xia *et al*., 2020). Studies tend to be context-specific, and to conclude that hotel competitiveness is influenced largely by hotel characteristics (e.g., Soifer *et al*., 2021) and guests' socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., Tsai *et al*., 2009; Spoerr, 2021; Kim *et al*., 2019b; Francesco and Roberta, 2019).

Behavioral variables, in contrast, have received much less attention (Ban *et al*., 2022). It is widely reported that repeat guests' preferences can be influenced by familiarity with the hotel's attributes from previous stays. Studies have found that repeat guests give higher performance ratings to hotels for this reason (Hu *et al*., 2019). It is noteworthy, however, that the extent to which such perceptions feed through to behavioral intentions, and thereby competitiveness, has received relatively little attention. Even the most recent studies suggest that more work needs to be done on understanding behavioral intentions, including both positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and future purchase intentions (Ban *et al*., 2022). Where the link between experience perceptions and behavioral intentions has been investigated, the focus has been on individual hotels (Lien *et al*., 2015, Kim *et al.*, 2019b).

There is, therefore, a clear case for more closely examining the relationship between guests' performance perceptions and behavioral intentions at the hotel-chain level. This study contributes toward filling this gap by examining the determinants of competitiveness at the hotel-chain level rather than the individual hotel level. This will be achieved by comparing the determinants of attribute performance among guests who have previously stayed in one of the hotels in a hotel chain and those who have not. The relationship between attribute performance and behavioral intentions will also be examined. This will permit an exploration of the links between experiential familiarity, perceived performance, and competitiveness at the hotel-chain level.

2. Literature review and hypothesis formulation

2.1 Hotel-chain competitiveness

Studies of competitiveness from an organizational perspective can be grouped into three main streams, each representing the application of the concept at a different economic level. Studies at the destination/national level have built upon seminal works such as those of Porter (1985, 1990), Ritchie and Crouch (2000), Dwyer and Kim (2003), and Enright and Newton (2004). Such studies have attempted to identify the salient determinants of competitiveness by focusing on the sources of comparative and competitive advantage (Azzopardi and Nash, 2013), situational factors (Cronjé and du Plessis, 2020), and marketing and management practices at the level of the destination (Pike and Page, 2014). While the focus has often been on price competitiveness, some studies have incorporated additional non-price variables. Such studies are frequently criticized for their failure to fully recognize the regional/sectoral-level and business-level dimensions of competitiveness (Kim *et a*l., 2022).

Studies at the regional/sectoral level focus on macroeconomic measures of competitiveness (Lopes *et al*., 2018), including closely linked constructs such as regional/sectoral productivity (Kim *et al*., 2021) and endogenous factors that contribute to competitiveness at the regional level (Bernini *et al*., 2020). Porter's (1990) diamond model has frequently been adopted at this level of analysis. Nunes *et al.*'s (2018) study, meanwhile, found that the most salient factors contributing to the competitiveness of the hotel industry at the regional level comprised government policies, factor conditions, and linkages to supporting industries, including co-operation and innovation.

Competitiveness at the business level has often been conceptualized as being determined by the sum of five forces: the bargaining power of suppliers, the bargaining power of buyers, the threat of new entrants, the threat of substitute products, and competition with other businesses (Porter, 1980). This model has been applied to assessing business-level competitiveness in the hotel context. Other studies have highlighted the internal management and customer-oriented factors in determining competitiveness at the business level (Tsai *et al*., 2009).

Research on the competitiveness specifically of hotel chains remains, however, relatively limited. This may be because the phenomenon of the hotel chain challenges the traditional trichotomy of 'economic levels' for several reasons. First, competitiveness at the hotel chain level is influenced by factors at both the micro- and macro-environmental levels, across many markets (Ivanova and Ivanov, 2015). Second, hotel chains are essentially groups of individual hotels that can differ greatly with respect to their business characteristics and levels of performance (Xia *et al*., 2020). Third, it remains unclear how hotel-specific and hotel-chain competitiveness are related to one another (Bravo *et al*., 2018).

2.2 How tourists choose their hotel: Influence of previous stays and selection attributes

The present study is based on two theories of competitiveness: (1) multi-attribute utility theory (MAUT), and (2) expectancy-value theory (EVT). Both are based on the various 'selection attributes' that customers use to decide on their purchase. MAUT suggests that customers view products or services not as single, homogenous entities, but as the embodiment of collections of attributes (Qu *et al*., 2000). Marketers therefore need to consider which mix of attributes will ensure the most beneficial outcomes for each party in the market exchange (Njite and Schaffer, 2017). EVT, meanwhile, is based around the notion that customers make purchase decisions based their consumption goals and the values they attach to them (Wigfield *et al*., 2009). As such, EVT focuses on customers' perceptions of differences in the expected and actual performance of various product or service attributes (Eccles and Durand, 1997). Customers are likely to base their behavioral intentions on such perceptions, including not only the purchase decision but also future purchase intentions and the intention to give positive WOM. Knowledge of the incidence and magnitude of such differences can then be harnessed

by the organizations concerned as a source of competitive advantage (Lai and Hitchcock, 2015a, b).

Destination-level studies have identified significant differences between previous and non-previous visitors with respect to both perceptions of attribute performance and behavioral intentions. One possible explanation for this is that the former will tend to be more familiar with the destination's attributes. Baloglu (2001) conceptualized familiarity with a destination as consisting of two closely related concepts: direct experience with the destination, which is termed 'experiential familiarity', and exposure to wider information sources, which is termed 'informational familiarity'. Empirical studies have found experiential familiarity to be the stronger antecedent of behavioral intentions, including both WOM (Li *et al.*, 2008) and future purchase intentions (Hahm and Severt, 2018). The implication is that those who have previously visited a destination, and have a degree of experiential familiarity with it, will tend to ascribe higher performance ratings to their stay than those who have not (Hu *et al*., 2019).

In the hotel context, the literature on the role of familiarity is more limited. Lai and Hitchcock (2017) note that the focus of many studies has been on future purchase intentions, but relatively few have addressed differences in familiarity among guests. Hu *et al*. (2019) suggest that findings based on destination-level studies are likely to be valid for research into hotel competitiveness. This proposition is at least partly corroborated by the observed tendency for performance evaluations to vary between these two groups depending on attribute-specific characteristics (e.g., tangibility versus intangibility, see Kim *et al*., 2019a), which has also been found in hospitality contexts, e.g., ecolodges (Ban *et al*., 2022), luxury hotel brands (Hu *et al*., 2019).

Tangible attributes relevant to hotel choice have tended to be grouped into three main constructs: room facilities (Chiang and Huang, 2022); ancillary service facilities (e.g., lounge areas, gym facilities, swimming pools), including general physical features (e.g., technology) (Mishra and Gupta, 2019); and tangible elements related to service-delivery (Spoerr, 2021). One particular tangible element, *breakfast*, has often been overlooked in selection-attribute research. It could play a pivotal role in service evaluations, however, as it is typically the only meal included in the tariff (Leite-Pereira *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding those selection attributes that are intangible, greatest emphasis is often placed on *service quality* (Wang *et al*., 2020). This is identified in the literature as one of the most influential factors that determine behavioral intentions (Zeithaml *et al*., 1996). Another intangible selection attribute, *value for money*, is linked to relationship between economic value and price (Spoerr, 2021). Other intangible selection attributes include *uniqueness* (Konu *et al*., 2020) and *brand assets* (Njite and Schaffer, 2017). Uniqueness can influence customers' choice behavior by adding distinctiveness to an offer, while brand assets can deliver symbolic value and psychological comfort for customers (Njite and Schaffer, 2017). In addition, *responsibility* is linked to various actions taken by a hotel and/or hotel chain with respect to sustainability. These translate into environmentally friendly and green hotel-selection attributes (Quan *et al*., 2022).

The foregoing discussion outlines the selection attributes to be employed in the present study: (1) value for money (VFM); (2) uniqueness (UNQ); (3) service quality (SQ); (4) room facilities (RF); (5) breakfast experience (BE); and (6) responsibility (RES). These will be used to test the first hypothesis, which proposes that the mean values of the perceptions of attribute performance by previous guests are higher than those of non-previous guests. Guests who have previously stayed at a hotel in a certain chain will be able to make actual evaluations of the performance of specific attributes upon which to base their opinions, while those who have not previously stayed in a hotel in the chain can only base their opinions on information sources and image perceptions (Baloglu, 2001; Zhang and Mao, 2012).

Studies indicate that previous visitation has a moderating effect on performance evaluations (Lai and Hitchcock, 2017; Hu *et al*., 2019; Ban *et al*., 2022). Previous guests tend to give higher performance ratings (Hu *et al*., 2019). It is quite possible, however, that perceptions may vary between populations when the analysis is conducted at the attribute-level (Lai and Hitchcock, 2017; Ban *et al*., 2022). The present study aims to establish the validity of such findings. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Previous guests' mean values of attribute performance are greater than non-previous guests' mean values of attribute performance.

2.3 Behavioral intention and how perceptions of hotel chains affect behavioral intentions

The term 'behavioral intentions' refers to the strength of purpose an individual has to undertake a particular action (Kim *et al*., 2019a). Favorable behavioral intentions include intending to recommend a product or service to others, intending to repurchase the same product or service, and being more willing to pay a premium price (Ho *et al*., 2022). The concept has its origins as a theoretical construct in stimulus-organism-response theory, which posits that customers form opinions based on their reactions to various stimuli they receive, and that these opinions then shape their behavioral intentions (Chi *et al*., 2022). Behavioral intentions are typically divided into WOM and future purchase intentions. WOM refers to a communication made between a communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, product, or service, which the latter perceives to be non-commercial in nature. Future intention to purchase, meanwhile, refers to the willingness or likelihood of the customers purchasing a given product or service a further time. Studies suggest that previous guests, who have at least experiential familiarity and can therefore draw upon actual evaluations of the choice attributes they have encountered, are more likely to intend to visit again and to engage in WOM behavior (Hahm and Severt, 2018; Ban et al., 2022)

The second hypothesis thus proposes that attribute performance and behavioral intentions are positively related. The better a customer perceives the attribute performance to be, the greater the impact it will have on their behavioral intention. In this study, behavioral intention is operationalized as a dual construct, consisting of both WOM and revisit intentions. The performance of selection attributes is thus viewed as a potential direct antecedent to (a) WOM and (b) future purchase intentions (Kim *et al*., 2017, 2019a). Although previous guests are expected to have higher performance ratings than non-previous guests, the impact of these performance rating differences on behavioral intention is not known. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: There is a positive relationship between guests' attribute performance ratings and their (a) WOM intentions and (b) future purchase intentions.

It is further postulated that the strength of this relationship varies between previous guests of a hotel in the chain and non-previous guests. The theoretical framework for this study is presented in Figure 1.

*** Figure 1 near here ***

3. Methods and data

3.1 Data collection

A self-administered questionnaire was employed to collect data from Finnish leisure tourists during the summer of 2021. The questionnaire was distributed online using a panel supplied by Bilendi. The sampling frame comprised Finnish nationals who planned to take at least one

overnight domestic leisure trip by the end of the year. The survey was distributed until the goal of 1,000 respondents had been reached. This proved to be a cost-effective and efficient data-collection process that was relatively simple to implement (Sthapit *et al*., 2019).

The questionnaire comprised four sections. In the first, respondents were asked to provide an estimate of the number of domestic leisure trips and overnight stays they expected to take (a) during the rest of the summer, and (b) until the end of 2021. Respondents then rated the importance and performance of various hotel attributes when choosing hotel accommodation. A four-point Likert-type scale was used to measure each of these ratings in turn. The second section posed a set of closed-ended questions, e.g., respondents' previous history of visiting one or more hotels in the chain in question, to help interpret respondents' evaluations of the hotels. All respondents answered all the hotel-chain perception questions, even if they had not previously stayed in the specific hotel chain. In the third section, respondents' intended WOM behavior and future purchase intentions for each hotel chain were measured. The fourth section asked questions about respondents' socio-demographic characteristics.

A total of 1,683 responses were obtained and screened. Data collection was designed to avoid non-response bias (Duda and Nobile, 2010) by utilizing quota sampling. The survey platform made it possible to target certain kinds of respondents using their socio-demographic profile. This enabled the collection of a data set that closely resembles the profile of the Finnish domestic tourists. A two-fold data screening procedure was applied. The first step was to filter out all sets of responses where the same ratings were given for all the importance and performance items. The second step was to use a control question to filter out respondents who had not stayed at a hotel in one of the seven chains. Both positive and negative responses to previous visitation questions were considered usable. In total, 1,016 valid responses remained for further data analysis after data screening had taken place.

3.2 Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted primarily with SPSS 27. First, an overview was undertaken using the socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics of respondents. Secondly, to test H1, the perceptions of the performance of hotel chains by previous and non-previous guests were compared using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA, see Field, 2005). Third, a generalized linear model was used to test H2, the purpose being to examine why respondents intended to revisit a hotel in a particular chain or to share WOM communication.

Comparison of the attribute performance perception means was performed using ANCOVA, and four covariates were incorporated into the analysis. The number of planned leisure trips for 2021 was used as a continuous covariate and gender, personal annual income (earning more or less than 60,000€/year), and whether a person had children were used as binary covariates.

To address H2, several generalized linear models were run and compared. Controls were used for gender, income, whether a respondent has children, travel frequency in 2021, whether the respondent had stayed in the hotel chain, and how many times they had stayed in the hotel chain since the beginning of March 2020. (This data was chosen to avoid the COVID-19 pandemic period, when all travel was severely disrupted.) After testing and comparing different models in association with link functions and goodness-of-fit statistics, those being Pearson's chi-square, deviance, Bayesian information criterion (BIC) and Akaike's information criterion (AIC), it was found that the fitted models outperformed their baseline counterparts (i.e., null and/or intercept-only models). Statistically significant outcomes ($p < .05$) for the model-specific omnibus tests also supported this outcome. For H2, the analysis included the importance of various attributes and hotel chain performance with respect to these attributes. The study only analyzed the main effects, as measured using a Type III analysis model.

4. Results

4.1 Respondents' socio-demographic characteristics

Just over half of the respondents were female (53%). Ages ranged from 18 to 85 years old. The largest origin of respondents was Western Finland (36.0%). The most frequent occupation was 'other employees' (30.8%). Most respondents (77.9%) had an annual gross income of 59,999€ or less.

4.2 Travel-related characteristics

Almost half the respondents (49.5%) estimated they would take two or three domestic leisure trips during the remainder of 2021. Data on the number of domestic overnight stays respondents expected to make over the summer of 2021 (i.e., June 15 to August 31), indicated a positive skew, with most responses (81.9%) skewed towards groups with lower estimates, i.e., 0 overnights, 1-5 overnights, and 6-10 overnights. Only 7.3% of the sample estimated they would travel domestically for a further 11-15 overnights. The question about travel-related characteristics measured respondents' previous history of stays at hotels in each of the seven chains. This question was asked in binary 'yes/no' format. Sokos Hotels (87.1%) and Scandic Hotels (71.4%) showed the highest previous visitation frequencies. In terms of ratios between those who had made previous stays in one of the chain's hotels and those who had not, balanced distributions were presented by Holiday Inn and Radisson Blu Hotels. In other cases, the distributions were polarized towards either end of the binary scale.

4.3 Effects of visitation on perceptions of hotel chain attributes

A series of ANCOVA tests was employed to identify statistically significant differences between the perceptions of the performance of each attribute (Norris *et al*., 2012). The results presented in Table 1 show that guests who had visited a hotel chain considered its performance better than those who had not visited the chain. Covariates are not reported in the table as they were not statistically significant except for gender. (As is typically the case, women gave higher performance ratings than men.) Of the total of 42 performance items, 29 were statistically significant ($p < .05$). In the case of *value for money*, all tests resulted in statistically significant outcomes. The positive F-values in all the cases indicated that the mean values of attribute performance of Group 1 (previous guests) were higher than those of Group 2 (non-previous guests). Statistically significant differences ($p < .025$) between groups were found, meanwhile, in 54.8% of cases. H1 thus received partial support. Regarding individual attributes, H1 was fully supported in the case of *value for money*, as previous guests had greater attribute performance means in all cases. Two other selection attributes, *service quality* and *responsibility*, exhibited statistically significant ($p<.025$) differences between groups in 71.4% and 57.1% of cases, respectively.

*** Table 1 near here ***

4.4 Results of generalized linear modelling

H2 was tested by using generalized linear modelling (Table 2). This examined the effects of hotel attribute importance and performance on the intention to revisit and WOM intention across the seven hotel chains. The sample sizes varied for each chain, ranging from 125 to 455 valid respondents, depending on missing values. The BIC and AIC values, which both measure the goodness of fit of a model, showed variations across the hotel chains for both revisit intention and WOM intention. Lower BIC and AIC values typically indicate a better fitting model. The study investigated the influence of various hotel attributes, both in terms of

their importance and performance, on the intention to visit and share positive WOM across different hotel chains. These attributes included VFM, UNQ, SQ, BE, RF, and RES.

It was found that VFM had a significant impact on the intention to visit Clarion Hotels and Kämp Collection ($p<0.05$). The performance of VFM showed a strong correlation with WOM intention for Holiday Inn, Lapland Hotels, Sokos Hotels, and Scandic Hotels ($p<0.001$), but not for Clarion, Radisson Blu, or Kämp Hotels.

The importance of UNQ was significantly related to WOM intention only for Clarion Hotels ($p<0.05$). UNQ's performance significantly influenced revisit intention, meanwhile, for Lapland Hotels and WOM intention for Holiday Inn, Sokos Hotels, Scandic Hotels, and Kämp Collection ($p<0.05$).

A vital role was also played by SQ, the importance of which significantly impacted the intention to revisit Radisson Blu and Kämp Collection ($p<0.05$). The performance dimension of SQ, meanwhile, had a strong influence on the intention to revisit Lapland Hotels and Radisson Blu and WOM intentions for Clarion Hotels, Scandic Hotels, and Kämp Collection ($p<0.05$).

Another key factor was BE. Its importance significantly influenced WOM intention for Kämp Collection ($p<0.05$), and its performance had a strong effect on WOM intention for Holiday Inn, Radisson Blu, Sokos Hotels, and Scandic Hotels ($p<0.001$).

The study also found RF to play a substantial role in determining behavioral intentions. The importance of RF significantly influenced the intention to visit Kämp Collection ($p<0.05$). Its performance significantly impacted WOM intention for Scandic Hotels ($p<0.05$).

Finally, RES was found to significantly affect revisit intention for Sokos Hotels ($p<0.05$), while its performance had a strong influence on WOM intention for Sokos Hotels and Scandic Hotels ($p<0.05$). Especially for Sokos Hotels, responsibility performance seems to be the most important driver of word-of-mouth marketing.

In summary, the results show that both the perceived importance and actual performance of various hotel attributes play a significant role in shaping customer intentions to revisit and promote the hotel to others. It is important to note that the strength of influence of these factors varied considerably across the hotel chains, suggesting the need for a tailored approach to hotel management and marketing strategies. It is also worth noting that guests differed from non-previous guests in these models only for WOM intention for Holiday Inn, Sokos Hotels and Scandic Hotels, and revisit intention for Kämp Collection.

*** Table 2 near here ***

5 Conclusions

This section of the paper reviews the findings of the analysis presented above in terms of hypotheses utilized in this study. H1 proposed that previous guests would have greater mean values of attribute performance than non-guests. The positive F-values in 54.8% of the ANCOVA tests suggest that previous guests held statistically higher perceptions of attribute performance than non-guests.

The second hypothesis, H2, proposed a positive relationship between selection attributes and (a) their WOM intentions and (b) future purchase intentions. Consistent with evidence in the extant literature (Lien *et al*., 2015; Kim *et al*., 2017, 2019a), various selection attributes were found to be strong predictors of WOM and future purchase intention. Regarding the intangible selection attributes, two were identified as being statistically significant: *value for money* and *service quality*. With regard to *value for mone*y, similar findings have been found in relation to Hong Kong's leisure travel markets (Qu *et al*., 2000), Germany (Spoerr, 2021), and the United Kingdom (Ramanathan and Ramanathan, 2011). The significance of *service quality* validates the findings of recent studies (Wang *et al*., 2020; Chiang and Huang, 2022),

and reinforces the common view that it is a significant determinant of behavioral intentions. This finding of the present research supports the findings of Hu et al. (2020), which identified that staff competence and service quality were among the most significant determinants of hotel competitiveness.

The most important finding is, however, that significant differences exist between the hotel chains. Different chains have distinctly different customer bases, and those customer bases consider different hotel attributes to be important. Although VFM is widely considered to be the most important attribute guests look for, only Sokos Hotels performed in this attribute in a way that increased revisit intention. Another unique example is how performance in responsibility drives WM intentions for Sokos Hotels much more than for any other hotel chain. Interestingly, RES was found not to contribute significantly to revisit intention in any of the hotel chains.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the understanding of behavioral intention and what affects it. The results are in accordance with MAUT (Qu et al., 2000). However, the results deepen the theory by demonstrating that each hotel chain is assessed differently by the customers. The perceptions of performance attributes and the needs of tourists affect behavioral intention, but the effects differ from one hotel chain to another.

Concerning EVT, the contribution lies in comparing perceptions of the importance of hotel attributes to performance perceptions. The results show that perceptions of performance are much better predictors of behavioral intention than the importance of hotel attributes at a general level. What attributes are important for tourists demonstrated much less effect on behavioral intention than perceptions of performance. Indeed, tourists tend to expect hotels to perform well in certain hotel-chain specific ways. When determining the choice of what to measure and attempt to influence with the aim of enhancing competitiveness, expected performance perception becomes crucial in the hotel-chain context (Eccles & Durand, 1997).

This is a significant finding for hospitality researchers. The importance of various factors and attributes is often measured when studying guest behavior. When examined through the lens of EVT (Wigfield et al., 2009), the findings suggest that guests do not generally place much value on the importance of hotel attributes. Performance expectations are much more likely to drive behavioral intention.

The results also shed light on how attribute performance and behavioral intentions are related to one another (Ban et al., 2022). Whereas earlier research has found out that previous visitation increases perceptions of attribute performance and leads to behavioral intentions, this study argues that this is not invariably the case. Previous visitation often does lead to higher performance perceptions but only then to increased behavioral intention in a limited number of cases. For only one hotel chain, Kämp Collection, previous guests were more likely than non-previous guests to intend to revisit the hotel chain. However, for all the hotels chains except for Clarion Hotels, the more often guests had stayed in the hotel chain in the recent past, the more likely they were to stay with the hotel chain again.

The results also show that word-of-mouth intention differs significantly from revisit intention. Even though both concepts measure behavioral intention, they are clearly separate concepts. Different attributes increase word-of-mouth recommendation intention than revisit intention. These variables are nonetheless often categorized together in research studies (e.g., Ban *et al*., 2022). This study also contributes to the competitiveness evaluation of hotel brands and provides additional insights compared to online-review evaluation methods (Xia *et al*., 2020).

This study also confirms the widespread view that that two of the most important determinants of competitiveness are *service quality* are *value for money* (e.g., Hu *et al*., 2020;

Spoerr, 2021). In addition, other attributes, such as breakfast *experience*, can also be significant. Given the under-representation of *breakfast experience* in research (Leite-Pereira et al., 2019), these findings challenge existing research and provide further insights through the lens of MAUT.

5.2 Practical implications

The results demonstrate the importance of customer loyalty (Pesonen et al., 2019). There are few significant differences between previous and non-previous guests regarding behavioral intention, but there are significant differences between those who visit a hotel chain hotel just a few times and those who frequently visit the hotels in the chain. People who travel a lot seem to be able to find their favorite hotel chains and stay in hotels that are part of them. The reason might be differentiation strategies of the hotel chains or loyalty programmes (Pesonen et al., 2019), but those were not examined in this study.

The hotel chains cater for different audiences. Lapland Hotels is suitable for those looking for good service and unique hotels. Clarion Hotels stands out regarding good service and breakfast. Sokos Hotels provides value for money and sustainability, and Kämp Collection is the most preferred option for guests for whom value-for-money, service quality, and room features are important. Kämp Collection has the only observed significant difference between guests and non-previous guests. This means that for Kämp Collection, the guests' first visit is likely to be much more important in determining behavioral intentions compared to other hotel chains.

Another managerial implication relates to what makes people recommend hotel chains to their friends and relatives. This study suggest that the reasons differ from chain to chain. For Holiday Inn, Scandic Hotels, Kämp Collection, and Lapland Hotels, *value for money* seems to be the main driver of WOM. For Sokos Hotels, *responsibility* is the main driver. Only Sokos Hotels manages, however, to gain competitiveness through their responsibility activities. Responsibility does not result in increased revisit intention for any of the hotel chains. This provides mixed evidence for hotel chains when it comes to thinking about how much they should invest in responsible tourism initiatives.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study can be summarized as follows. First, only six selection attributes were included. These measures were mostly tangible: for example, neither the brand value nor emotional connection was measured. Secondly, single-item measures were used to operationalize the attributes in the dataset. Further studies should consider using multi-item scales. Third, the dataset was limited to major hotel chains, in Finland, in the period immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research should replicate the present study in different places in an updated context. The study scope should be extended to other prominent hotel chains, even in other countries. Longitudinal research would also help to enhance the cross-sectional findings. Furthermore, including other potential selection attributes (such as subsidiary facilities or brand-related factors) could help to better understand the phenomenon, as well as to increase the reliability and validity of the analysis.

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Acknowledgement

This study is derived from Jere Jokelainen's graduate study. Data collection was funded by Matkailukoulutuksen ja -tutkimuksen kannatusyhdistys ry.

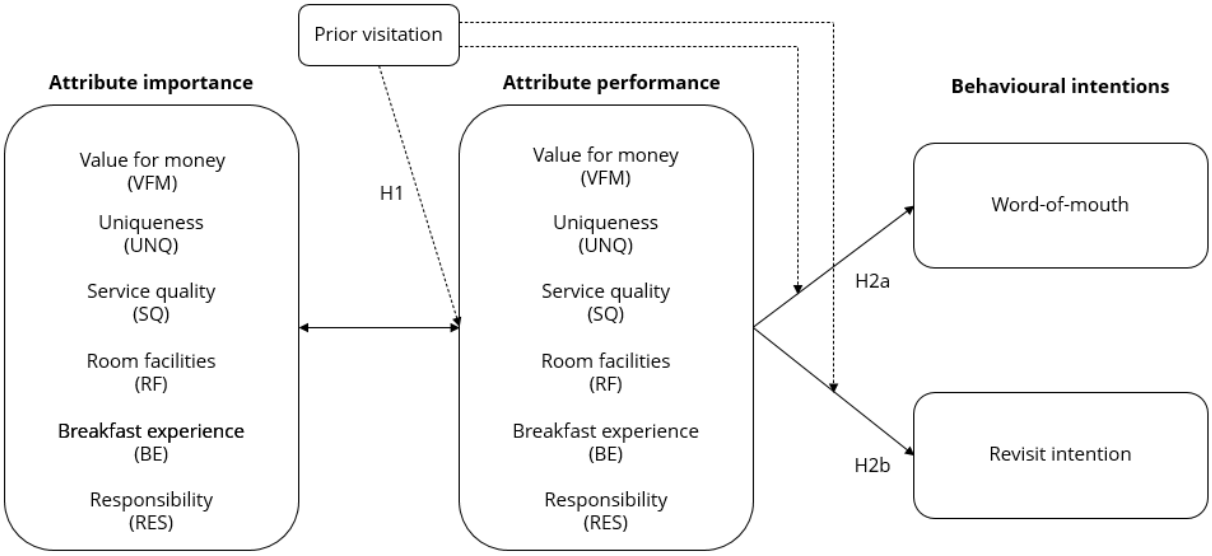

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

Table 1. Comparing attribute perceptions of hotel chains between guests and non- previous guests with ANCOVA tests

		Group 1	**Group 2**	**Levene's test**		**ANCOVA**		
Hotel chain	**Measurement item (n=group 1, group 2)**	**Previous guest (Mean)**	**Non-previous guest (Mean)**	**F-value**	**p-value**	**F-value**	**Partial Eta Squared**	**p-value** (one-tailed)
Holiday Inn	VFM (n=447, 120)	3.219	3.083	24.278	<.001	5.153	**.024**	**.009**
	UNQ (n= 433, 132)	2.684	2.530	1.282	.258	3.384	**.066**	**.006**
	SQ (n=437, 110)	3.188	3.100	4.183	.041	1.581	**.003**	.209
	RF (n=447, 112)	3.076	3.018	2.939	.087	.992	**.002**	.320
	BE (n=435, 105)	3.170	3.057	1.236	.267	3.211	**.006**	.074
	RES (n=323, 91)	3.158	3.110	6.772	.010	.586	**.001**	.445
Lapland Hotels	VFM (n=199, 136)	3.457	3.007	7.368	.007	41.431	**.113**	**<.001**
	UNQ (n=193, 182)	3.306	3.319	1.667	.197	0.078	**.000**	.780
	SQ (n=195, 130)	3.482	3.154	14.233	<.001	24.340	**.072**	**<.001**
	RF (n=199, 147)	3.342	3.245	8.735	.003	33.324	**.010**	.066
	BE (n=192, 128)	3.406	3.258	5.472	.020	4.340	**.014**	**.038**
	RES (n=150, 134)	3.387	3.022	11.792	<.001	21.072	**.071**	**<.001**
Clarion Hotels	VFM (n=131, 125)	3.366	3.064	9.330	.002	16.579	**.135**	**<.001**
	UNQ (n=129, 136)	3.178	2.985	1.438	.232	33.969	**.015**	**.047**
	SQ (n=129, 105)	3.357	3.162	15.800	<.001	5.373	**.023**	**.021**
	RF (n=130, 119)	3.246	3.101	8.272	.004	3.341	**.014**	.069
	BE (n=127, 108)	3.252	3.074	6.792	.010	4.715	**.021**	**.031**
	RES (n=98, 107)	3.286	2.981	7.603	.006	13.944	**.066**	**<.001**
Radisson Blu Hotels	VFM (n=448, 78)	3.259	2.974	6.330	.012	17.666	**.033**	**<.001**
	UNQ (n=443, 82)	2.801	2.805	.340	.560	.039	**.000**	.843
	SQ (n=447, 68)	3.239	3.088	19.948	<.001	4.538	**.009**	**.034**
	RF (n=449, 72)	3.116	2.958	5.995	.015	3.254	**.006**	.072
	BE (n=444, 68)	3.311	3.118	40.569	<.001	6.773	**.013**	**.010**
	RES (n=316, 62)	3.142	3.065	4.869	.028	.783	**.002**	.377
Sokos Hotels	VFM (n=810, 29)	3.331	2.724	12.405	<.001	29.289	**.034**	**<.001**
	UNQ (n=796, 33)	2.751	2.333	3.008	.083	9.747	**.012**	**.002**
	SQ (n=806, 24)	3.259	2.708	6.430	.011	18.906	**.023**	**<.001**
	RF (n=810, 28)	3.058	2.750	4.972	.026	6.979	**.008**	**.008**
	BE (n=804, 25)	3.292	2.760	6.743	.010	16.086	**.019**	**<.001**
	RES (n=595, 22)	3.292	2.955	.051	.821	6.686	**.011**	**.010**

Scandic Hotels	VFM (n=650, 45)	3.280	2.889	.150	.699	15.551	**.022**	**<.001**
	UNQ (n=643, 46)	2.770	2.630	2.167	.141	.769	**.001**	.381
	SQ (n= 648, 41)	3.230	2.927	.104	.747	9.400	**.014**	**.002**
	RF (n=647, 45)	3.026	2.778	8.457	.004	7.160	**.010**	**.008**
	BE (n=647, 43)	3.230	2.861	1.520	.218	5.954	**.022**	**<.001**
	RES (n=449, 40)	3.221	2.825	.598	.440	15.772	**.032**	**<.001**
Kämp Collection Hotels	VFM (n=99, 136)	3.444	2.853	3.072	.081	23.855	**.095**	**<.001**
	UNQ (n=99, 171)	3.616	3.444	8.051	.005	4.867	**.018**	**.028**
	SQ (n=100, 134)	3.580	3.321	3.836	.051	9.845	**.042**	**.002**
	RF (n=98, 140)	3.541	3.443	1.993	.159	2.095	**.009**	.149
	BE (n=100, 124)	3.560	3.363	.065	.800	4.674	**.021**	**.032**
	RES (n=68, 115)	3.353	3.174	.017	.895	3.400	**.019**	.067

Table 2. Effects of hotel attribute importance and performance on visit and word-of-mouth intention
*p<0,05

		Holiday Inn (n=342)		Lapland Hotels (n=229)		Clarion Hotels (n=159)		Radisson Blu (n=321)		Sokos Hotels (n=455)		Scandic Hotels (n=369)		Kämp Collection (n=125)	
		Revisit intention	Word-of-mouth Intention	Revisit intention	Word-of-mouth Intention	Revisit intention	Word-of-mouth Intention	Revisit intention	Word-of-mouth Intention	Revisit intention	Word-of-mouth Intention	Revisit intention	Word-of-mouth Intention	Revisit intention	Word-of-mouth Intention
Goodness of Fit	AIC	13386.254	1245.990	999.720	763.455	690.344	580.368	1372.644	957.220	2060.958	1461.480	1619.844	1165.260	440.208	460.468
	BIC	1528.142	13387.878	1126.768	890.503	797.756	687.780	1508.416	1084.061	2213.409	1613.931	1764.544	1309.960	539.199	559.459
Omnibus test	Chi-square	57.616	151.136	70.675	189.967	43.757	126.038	61.712	158.278	136.347	263.191	128.556	283.233	64.103	111.771
	Sig.	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p=.012	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001
	Gender	0.045	2.555	.613	.431	.006	3.848*	.101	1.305	6.006*	3.611	7.486*	5.320*	5.043*	.007
	Income	5.558	2.094	2.226	5.177	.976	8.283*	1.042	.744	3.661	.011	2.030	.903	2.183	.384
	Children	.769	.251	.010	.196	.081	.000	.050	.167	.539	.830	2.716	3.419	.015	6.857*
	Leisure travel frequency in 2021	14.558*	1.227	7.220	6.828	6.534	2.597	4.555	5.404	9.618*	1.080	16.083*	1.236	8.495	9.439*
	Has stayed in the hotel chain	.107	4.951*	.250	2.518	.036	1.998	.121	1.996	.139	4.997*	.143	6.750*	4.139*	.468
	Number of times stayed at the hotel chain	13.326*	10.175	23.819**	6.564	6.078	6.629	24.839**	12.592*	44.216**	14.540*	47.501**	6.461	10.682*	13.973*
	VFMimportance	1.134	.593	.349	.001	4.153*	1.576	1.146	1.239	.082	.299	.228	.185	7.260*	3.436
	UNQimportance	.005	.2330	.058	.365	1.255	7.873*	1.069	.592	2.017	.853	.394	.615	1.807	1.851
	SQimportance	.000	.059	.887	.009	.931	.015	5.679*	.304	.000	2.436	.427	.061	7.862*	.096
	BEimportance	.154	1.424	.004	1.190	.877	.673	.166	1.479	.522	.450	.447	4.333	.082	4.566*
	RFimportance	.181	.282	.472	.035	.113	2.698	.497	.356	.869	.025	.034	.856	9.636*	.346
	RESimportance	1.938	.011	.010	.065	.009	2.839	.256	.749	4.525*	.736	1.441	2.130	1.181	.218
	VFMperformance	.076	19.592**	.012	11.457**	.359	4.629*	.371	3.534	6.509*	4.906*	3.008	12.992**	.027	9.206*
	UNQperformance	3.133	.448	4.342*	2.425	2.920	13.460**	1.061	8.129*	1.789	10.796**	.077	11.733**	4.142*	2.312
	SQperformance	.364	1.231	4.533*	9.835*	9.015*	.027	1.215	4.907*	.035	2.492	.533	4.614*	4.562*	.000
	RFperformance	.291	1.042	.014	.001	.370	2.669	2.011	.006	.303	.569	.000	5.236*	3.217	.007
	BEperformance	.352	10.706**	1.146	2.559	3.839*	.602	.013	8.944*	1.086	11.787**	.475	2.614	.194	1.698
	RESperformance	.973	4.279*	.846	2.426	.449	.396	.916	5.976*	.598	25.095**	.484	7.544*	1.607	2.526

**p<0,001