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**“FACTORES CLAVE EN LA CO-CREACIÓN DE VALOR ENTRE LOS
CLIENTES CON DISCAPACIDAD Y SERVICIOS DEL HOTEL. UN
ESTUDIO EXPLORATORIO A DIRECTORES DE HOTEL”**

**“KEY FACTORS IN VALUE CO-CREATION FOR DISABLED
CUSTOMERS AND HOTEL SERVICES. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY
OF HOTEL MANAGERS”**

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KEY FACTORS IN VALUE CO-CREATION FOR DISABLED CUSTOMERS AND HOTEL SERVICES. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF HOTEL MANAGERS

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abstract

The service dominant logic provides an adequate conceptual framework for understanding the way in which the consumer, through co-creation with the service provider, facilitates the development and marketing of tourism products. In particular, the aim of this study is to identify the key factors for value co-creation in hotel services for people with disabilities. There are few academic studies related to accessible tourism for people with disabilities, evidencing the need to deepen the experiences of disabled people and to study their interactions in the field of tourism. Several in-depth interviews were conducted to analyze the point of view of hotel managers. The results indicate that the factors for the co-creation are related to the sequential steps of the interactions between hotels and disabled customers. This analysis highlights interesting academic as well as managerial implications for value co-creation, allowing hotels build a solid base of common knowledge in the field of value management.

Key words: *Value co-creation, customers with disabilities, hotel industry*

resumen

La lógica dominante del servicio ofrece un marco conceptual adecuado para entender la manera en la que el consumidor, mediante la co-creación con el proveedor del servicio, facilita el desarrollo y el marketing de productos turísticos. En particular, el objetivo de este estudio es identificar los principales factores para la co-creación de valor en los servicios hoteleros para personas con discapacidad. Son escasos los estudios académicos relacionados con el turismo accesible para personas con discapacidad, poniéndose de manifiesto la necesidad de profundizar en sus experiencias e interacciones en el ámbito del turismo. Diversas entrevistas en profundidad han sido realizadas con el fin de analizar desde el punto de vista de los hoteleros los factores para la co-creación. Los resultados señalan que los factores para la co-creación están relacionados con las etapas secuenciales de la relación entre los hoteles y los clientes con discapacidad. Los resultados de este análisis muestran las estrategias más interesantes de la co-creación de valor, lo que puede permitir a los hoteles construir una base sólida de conocimiento común en el ámbito de la gestión de valor.

Palabras clave: *co-creación de valor, turistas con discapacidad, establecimientos hoteleros*

1. introduction

The active role of tourists has become an increasingly important part of many aspects of tourism (Shaw et al., 2011). The tourism sector is becoming increasingly based around the customer experience and as such suppliers and consumers interact more closely together at all stages of their relationship. Hospitality organizations have realized that their future survival and growth depend upon creating and offering unique and memorable positive experiences for their customers (Prebensen et al., 2013; Walls et al., 2011). The hotel industry is described as a dynamic environment in which consumers demand excellent service from skilled personnel, functional facilities (e.g., computer systems), and aesthetic facilities (e.g., the ambience of the hotel) (Ottenbacher and Harrington, 2010).

The application of the concepts from the Service-Dominant logic (S-D logic) provides a framework with which to examine supplier and customer processes involved in co-creating the visitor experience (Vargo, 2009; Edvardsson, Tronvoll & Gruber (2011). S-D logic views 'the customer as an operant resource' capable of acting on other resources and as a collaborative partner who co-creates value with the firm (Lusch et al., 2007:6). Hospitality organizations should use their customer-contact employees as "operant resources" (Shaw et al., 2011) and develop their competencies which will enable them to achieve "a level of engagement with role and guests that goes significantly beyond that encapsulated within traditional skills model of the sector" (Baum, 2006, p. 126).

The aim of this study is to identify the factors that influence co-creation between disabled customers and hotels under hotels' managers point of view. The relationship between people with disabilities and tourism has started to receive increasing academic and government attention over the last decade in Europe, the Americas and Asia-Pacific' (Bizjak et al, 2011). More developed economies have been increasingly enhancing legislation at national and supranational level (such as the European Union) to monitor compliance for the needs of people with disabilities (Eichhorn et al, 2008; Richards et al, 2010). This has inspired a new relationship between tourism and disability, including a very attractive new tourist segment for the market. A key contribution of this paper is the consideration of co-creation as a strategic perspective for the hotel industry, which has not been the case for previous research in the hospitality or co-creation literatures. One prominent strategy for companies to capture customers' needs is to actively engage them in the service delivery process (Payne et al. 2008).

The paper's structure is as follows. First, a discussion of the rationale behind value co-creation and the relation with disabled customers is presented. Second, the paper sets out to explain the processes used to get the principal criterion to develop factor's of

co-creation. The final section discusses the main findings and conclusions, looking for innovative ways to face value co-creation and closing by addressing the research and managerial implications of this study.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1 The co-creation of value in hospitality organizations

Tourism providers should improve results not only with better value propositions, but also with a good relational quality environment. If visitors fail to have an enjoyable experience, it is unlikely that they will revisit the destination or recommend it to their friends and family. The understanding of tourist experiences should therefore be based on identifying the perceptions and emotions experienced by tourists during their stay (Blazquez-Resino et al, 2013).

Pine and Gilmore (1998) highlighted the significance to both consumers and producers of creating memorable experiences associated with the consumption of services and products. Memorable experiences are particularly associated with excellent design, marketing and service delivery and have two dimensions: consumer participation -which ranges from passive to active- and, secondly, the connection which links the customer to the experience event. Tourism providers need to create 'experience environments' in which to compete, integrate resources and develop superior competences in order to co-create high value experiences and improve the way in which these processes are managed (Navarro, Andreu and Cervera, 2014).

Customers will be satisfied with a co-created service only if their commitment yields a benefit (i.e., high level of customization) that outweighs the effort invested and the uncomfortable state to use, store, and distribute personal information (Xie et al. 2008). Customers investing considerable time and effort in co-creation might feel an augmented disappointment when the co-created service delivery fails. More precisely, with their comprehensive engagement in co-created services, customers are likely to formulate higher-quality expectations of service provision (Childers et al. 2001). As such, if higher expectations are only met with poor performance, disappointment with the co-created service may be inflated. The research from Heidenreich, et al., (2014) enriches this

perspective by investigating the effectiveness of co-creation in service recovery depending on the level of co-creation in the initial service delivery. In particular, customers may be increasingly motivated to take an active role in overcoming a co-created failure, assuming a perceived responsibility for the flawed service.

Service firms should evaluate their knowledge, skills, and resources to determine their potential for co-creation. Three constitutive dimensions of co-

creation have emerged in the literature: (1) customization, as its key benefit (e.g., Etgar 2008); (2) effort (e.g., Hoyer et al. 2010), and (3) information sharing (e.g., Chan et al. 2010). Successful co-creation requires organizations to build long-term and interactive relationships with their customers, to adapt communication activities and value propositions according to these relationships, to encourage customer participation in each stage of the value creation process, to focus on operant resources as the unit of exchange, to support customer learning, and to foster organizational learning (Payne et al. 2008). In the co-creation process, customers usually interact with one another and with company employees to produce value. During the process of collaboration and its contribution to the social and cultural capital of the community, innovation may occur. Advanced technology, the Internet, and better customer education are some of the requirements for enhancing the co-creative role of customers (Cabiddu et al. 2013; Egger and Buhalis, 2008).

Payne et al. (2008) provide three main components that are at the crux of the process based value creation framework that differentiates co-production from co-creation: (1) customer value-creating processes, (2) supplier value-creating processes (3) encounter processes. Customer and supplier value-creation and processes include the "processes, resources and practices" which customers and suppliers use to manage their activities, whereas "encounter processes" include "the processes and practices of interaction and exchange that take place within customer and supplier relationships" (Payne et al., 2008, p. 85). Payne et al. (2008) referred to the encounter process as "touchpoints" and "contacts". For hotel firms, the key contact points are likely to be those that are commonly referred to as 'moments of truth' in hospitality settings. Three forms of encounters exist during value creation – communication encounters, usage encounters, and service encounters – which may be initiated by the customer, the company, or both. Not all encounters are equally important for value co-creation. Some encounters are necessary for building customer experiences, while others may be more pivotal for value co-creation. The latter are sometimes called critical encounters (e.g., Gremler 2004).

2.2 customers with disabilities and their potential value co-creation within tourism contexts

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities held in 2013 defines people with disabilities as people 'who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.' It also states: Disability is an evolving

concept and results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Therefore a person is rendered disabled due to the physical and social environment not catering for people with access needs.

According to the European Commission (2013), over 2011 – 2020, the tourism demand will jump from about 744.3 million trips to 861.9 million trips by all people with access needs within the EU27 area, which is equivalent to an annual growth rate of 1.64%.. Persons with disabilities would add more than one holiday period per year, travelling with more family members or friends if they could find more and better information on accessible tourism sites. The potential market for accessibility thus has been estimated at 127.5 million beneficiaries in Europe, which includes seven population segments: people with mobility, visual, hearing, speech, mental, intellectual or hidden disabilities (Buhalis et al, 2005).

Other surveys reveal that many of those requesting accessibility do not travel because there exist too many obstacles along the tourist service chain. Therefore, the redesign of tourism establishments and services for this growing group of tourists will create opportunities and competition advantages as well as employment (Leidner and Bender, 2007). Dominguez et al., (2013) applied a scenario method to calculate the profitability available to tourism providers, using the spending behaviour of tourists with disabilities as input to understand their demands and consumption habits and determine their main behavioral characteristics. The authors demonstrate the representation and importance of such segments of the population for the tourism industry, as well as the need for the tourism industry to recognize the importance of designing products, services, and destination points that are accessible to everyone.

The research paper by Navarro, Andreu & Cervera (2014) shows the applicability of the value co-creation framework to the hotel industry integrating the following factors: the process view of customers and hotels –service providers- and the interactions between them; the participants' view (value facilitator and value co-creator) and the role of customers' knowledge in the hotel industry. Their findings suggest that the model can effectively explain value co-creation processes in the hotel industry. Following that study, Navarro, Garzón and Ribeiro, (2014) identify the main factors or attributes that affect co-creation between disabled clients and hotels, and establish their weight of importance from the customers' point of view. Results show that 78% of the factors that affect value co-creation have to do with customer relationships with staff (23.5%), staff training (20.6%), the environment (20.3%), and collaboration. (14.4%). The key phase of the customer–hotel value co-creation occurs during the customer's stay and the

booking process (i.e., before the customer arrives at the hotel). Results clearly indicate the existence of key factors for co-creation that emerge before the client arrives and during his or her stay. In this context, customers become active participants in the performance of an organisation. More specifically, Auh, et al., (2007,p,361) define such co-creation 'as a constructive customer participation in the service creation and delivery process' requiring meaningful and co-operative contributions".

3. method

As several scholars note (Yin 1994; Gummesson 2002; Levy 2005), qualitative methods are very useful for shedding new light on existing phenomena. Furthermore, some authors specifically advocate a qualitative research approach when studying people with disabilities (Poria et al. 2011). Consequently, in-depth interviews help analyze the hotels managers' view.

The research context is the hotel industry in a Spanish city on the Mediterranean coast. Ten hotel managers form the basis of this study. These hotels have more than 50 rooms because Spanish hotel policy requires hotels with 50 or more rooms to provide accommodation specially adapted for disabled customers. The data collection method consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the hotel managers (see Table 1). The interviews last between one and two hours, with transcriptions and recordings of these sessions subsequently performed. The decision makers form a group of ten experts in the field of hotel management with several accessible rooms and services. The managers involved in the research were senior level executive. The executives who participated in the research showed intellectually interested in co-creation, wanted to improve their company's offering to customers and were keen to obtain commercial benefits from co-creation. The group of experts is deliberately heterogeneous. The reason for seeking a mixture of backgrounds is to generate a range of views and judgments from the experts (Wedley, Schoner & Tang, 1993).

All interviews take their lead from Payne et al. (2008), referred to the encounter process as "touchpoints" and "contacts". Three forms of encounters – communication encounters, usage encounters, and service encounters- during value creation were adapted to those between disabled clients and hotel staff. These touchpoints and contacts identify the criteria that exert an influence in the co-creation process. This process draws on the main factors appearing in the existing literature.

The first encounter, *Communication*, relates to encounter process between the customer–hotel. By communication encounters we mean activities which are primarily carried out in order to connect with customers, and promote and enact dialog (e.g., through advertisements, brochures, internet home-pages and manuals, social media). The customer is

able to inform the hotel of his or her needs and also the customer can co create value with other customers through the social media getting knowledge about the establishment.

The second encounter, *Usage* refers to customer practices in using a product or service and include the services which support such usage. This criterion covers all the features as regards the following areas: rooms, common areas and services. The environment should meet the customer's needs and should be conducive to interaction between the client and the hotel (e.g., accessibility).

The third encounter is the *Service*, which relates to customer interactions with customer service personnel or service applications (e.g., via front office, room service,). Key features include the following aspects: the client offers suggestions, gives opinions, and shares his or her experience with the hotel. Collaboration between the customer and the hotel staff should flow so that the customer can suggest improvements for the service (e.g., improving the layout of the rooms, etc.). The client should behave responsibly and should be cooperative. He or she must accept the hotel's rules as well as any indications from the hotel staff. Finally, staff members should have received suitable customer service training for clients with disabilities.

4. findings

Results obtained are consistent with those exerting participation in the co-creation process between suppliers (hotels) and customers (disabled customers).

4.1 communication encounters:

Communication encounters relates to all actions that promote dialog and interactions between customers with disabilities and staff. Hotel managers refer that is necessary to be in touch with potential or actually clients through the social media or web page (Cases #H2,#H3,#H4,#H5,#H6,#H10). Only a few think that attending a special fair or congress, and other marketing events are also important (#H1,#H7,#H8,#H9).

Case #H2. "We take care everyday about all clients comments through trip advisor or booking web page and we give answer to all of them, we need to keep in contact with the client and we really appreciate all comments even if they are not good".

Case #H4. "We have all accessible information at the web page, in this case client knows exactly what we have, but also we give them the opportunity to give suggestions to improve our services, it is the ideal platform for soliciting user's participation in to maintain connections and develop relationships".

Case #H3. "We always ask to clients how their stay is, therefore we know for sure that they are going to co-create value with other potential clients".

Case #H2. "In our weekly meetings we take care of several issues as communication between client and staff and furthermore how to reach this information to the hotel decision makers. Our staff knows how to interact with the clients and give an answer to any query they could have.

4.2 usage encounters

All interviewed hotel managers support the view that rooms must be accessible, must allow access, use and enjoyment even more than hotel general services. Also, the public areas are important to be accessible.

Case #H1. " Accessible rooms are necessary but also hotel public areas, client needs to use the swimming pool, gym, restaurant, etc...).

Case #H4, If we have rooms specially adapted for disable guests then we think that clients will be willing to collaborate in co creation process

Case #H7, In our establishment we don't have common services well adapted to disabled guest but we have well adapted the room. Therefore we always take care that client can use the rest of the hotel services.

4.3 service encounters

In relation with the three forms of encounters - communication, service and use-, hotels managers refer to service encounter as the most important factor that influence the co-creation process (Cases #H1, #H2, #H3, #H4, #H5, #H6, #H7, #H8, #H9). The co-creation emerges when there is a contact between the staff and client. Moreover, the client must be collaborative and should behave responsibly and the staff should know how to treat customers with disabilities.

Case #H9. "Co-creation is only achieved through full commitment of the client and we know that this implies a collaborative effort among the client and the staff, so we reward clients' participation", i.e. we bring some presents to his or her room. For example, we invite them to some fruits and beverage at the room.

Case #H8, " All staff in the front and back office must be trained in how to treat disabled clients, although our environment is not accessible at all but we try to offer the best service inside the hotel.

5. conclusions and future research opportunities

The interest for disabled customers in the tourist sector appears as a topic of relevance, not only from an academic point of view, but also in terms of its economic impact.

If we analyse these results and those obtained in the former study by Navarro, Garzón & Ribeiro (2014) (where the co-creation factors were analyzed from

the users' point of view), we can conclude that the most influential criteria for co-creation emerge during the stay and the booking phase. Factors affecting value co-creation derive from disabled customers' relationships with staff. These factors involve staff-disabled customers' relations at the booking phase because customers and hotel employees exchange information on customers' needs and hotel's capability to support these needs in terms of their potential access, use and enjoyment of the hotel. Guests establish relationships with hotel staff through direct contact with the establishment. In these relationships, employees provide useful information and answer customers' questions. Customers can inform the hotel of their needs. In this phase "communication" exists, there is an interaction and dialogue. Hoteliers believe that communication is a crucial aspect in these phases as long as the client is collaborative and willing to engage.

At the usage encounters, physical accessibility appears as a critical aspect to facilitate customers' commitment and eagerness to collaborate. Hotel managers should therefore improve accessibility to and within their establishments, thereby offering more favorable conditions for their disabled clients. The environment should meet the customer's needs and should be conducive to interaction between the client and the hotel (e.g., accessibility).

Both hoteliers and customers also consider that good staff training in customer with special needs is essential to provoke interaction and dialogue, a key source for value co-creation. Hotel managers should therefore seek to increase the level of their employees' communication -verbal and non verbal- training in order to enhance co-creation between customers and employees.

Customers also expect hoteliers to take into account their opinions and suggestions, not listening to them can turn them against the hotel. The results are in connection with studies as Payne et al (2008), referred to the encounter process as "touch points" and "contacts". Furthermore, previous work (Payne et al. 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) already identified the two main elements involved in the development of the co-creation process: interaction and dialogue. Results confirm that contacts, interaction and dialogue are needed for co-creation to emerge with particular emphasis for disabled customers.

Further research should deepen value co-creation in this specific tourist segment by creating a valid and reliable instrument scale for measuring it. Few measurement instruments for value co-creation exist (Yi & Gong, 2012), and not particularly in this context. Information provided by the qualitative studies performed provides the basis for this instrument development employing quantitative data.

6. figures and tables

Table 1. Sample description : Hoteliers

Case	Category	Type of hotel	Starting year	Number of rooms	Number of disable access rooms
H1	Chain Hotel 5* GL	Vacational	2006	120	1
H2	Chain Hotel 5* GL	Urban	2006	253	1
H3	Chain Hotel 4*	Urban	2000	63	3
H4	Independent hotel 3*	Urban	2009	87	9
H5	Chain Hotel 5* GL	Urban	2006	253	1
H6	Independent hotel 4*	Vacational	2005	50	3
H7	Independent hotel 1*	Urban	2009	14	1
H8	Independent hotel 4*	Urban	2005	50	3
H9	Independent hotel 3*	Vacational	1995	110	4
H10	Independent hotel 4*	Urban	2000	262	5

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