

ACADEMIA DE STUDII ECONOMICE DIN BUCUREȘTI

Școala doctorală Administrarea Afacerilor



TEZĂ DE DOCTORAT

Prezentată și susținută public de către autor:

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Titlul tezei de doctorat:

**NEW STRATEGIES AND BUSINESS MODELS IN HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM
INDUSTRY. RESEARCH ON BOUTIQUE HOTELS COMPETITIVITY**

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București, 2024

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Key words:

Hospitality industry; tourism industry; luxury hospitality; hospitality trends; boutique hotels

Summary

Over the past few decades, changes in global tourism patterns, evolving customer preferences, and technological improvements have significantly transformed the hospitality industry. This study examines these shifts by conducting a thorough theoretical and practical examination of the sector with an emphasis on local, European, and global contexts. The emergence and growth of boutique hotels are examined in particular, along with business plans, marketing approaches, and the effects of new and developing trends like technology (Virtual Reality – VR and Augmented Reality – AR), sustainability, and the shifting preferences towards lifestyle and experiential travel.

“The use of 360° virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) has become a major trend in boutique hotels, enabling prospective guests to explore hotel environments in an immersive way before booking”. (Alfaro et al., 2024) The authors show that this technological approach enhances cognitive and emotional engagement, leading to increased consumer interest and higher booking rates. As a result, boutique hotels that invest in such technologies can create deeper connections with their guests, setting themselves apart from competitors who rely on traditional marketing techniques.

Through the integration of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, this study seeks to shed light on the competitiveness of boutique hotels and offer recommendations for improving managerial performance and service quality in the larger hospitality industry. Particular attention is given to the rise and development of boutique hotels, examining their business models, market strategies, and the impact of emerging trends such as sustainability and new technologies.

The hospitality industry, a cornerstone of global tourism, has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades due to the interplay of various factors such as globalization, technological advancements, changing consumer preferences, and socio-economic shifts. This paper delves into these changes by offering a comprehensive analysis of both the theoretical and practical dimensions of the industry, focusing on its evolution at global, European, and local levels, with an emphasis on the Romanian market.

The hospitality industry is a dynamic and ever-evolving sector that plays a pivotal role in global tourism and economic development. Among the most noteworthy developments in this

sector is the emergence of boutique hotels — a niche segment that has redefined the concept of luxury and personalized service in the industry. Boutique hotels stand out due to their unique characteristics, which cater to the growing demand for authentic and personalized travel experiences. This paper explores the emergence and growth of boutique hotels, examining how they have evolved in response to market demands and how they compare with traditional hotel models.

The hospitality industry serves as a critical component of the global tourism sector, driving economic growth, job creation, and cultural exchange. Its evolution over the past century has been shaped by multiple waves of change, from the rise of mass tourism in the post-war era to the recent shift towards niche markets and personalized travel experiences. Within this dynamic environment, boutique hotels have emerged as a prominent trend, offering an alternative to the standardized services of large hotel chains. Characterized by their intimate size, distinctive design, and personalized service, boutique hotels cater to travelers seeking unique and immersive experiences.

This paper explores the development of boutique hotels within the broader context of the hospitality industry, examining how they have carved out a niche in a highly competitive market. The analysis is grounded in a thorough examination of the industry's history, tracing the evolution of tourism from its early roots to its current status as a global economic powerhouse. By focusing on the global, European, and local (Romanian) levels, the paper provides a multi-faceted perspective on the industry's growth and the role of boutique hotels within it.

“Boutique hotels, by leveraging technology such as 360° VR tours, have found innovative ways to create a deep emotional and cognitive connection with their customers”. (Alfaro et al., 2024) Research highlights that these technologies lead to heightened emotional engagement, which plays a crucial role in influencing guest decisions and building long-term loyalty. This emotional connection is becoming a key driver of competitiveness in the boutique hotel market.

In addition to the historical and theoretical analysis, the paper conducts an in-depth market analysis of the hospitality industry. This includes an exploration of key trends such as the increasing importance of sustainability and the adoption of new technologies. For example, the integration of VR and AR in the hospitality sector is transforming guest experiences, offering new ways to engage with customers and differentiate services. The paper also addresses lifestyle and cultural trends that are driving changes in consumer behavior, influencing everything from accommodation preferences to the types of experiences travelers seek.

To complement the theoretical and market analysis, the paper incorporates both qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative component involves interviews with tourists and industry professionals, providing insights into the business models and strategies employed by boutique hotels. The DEMATEL Methodology is used to identify and analyze the factors that contribute to the competitiveness of these establishments, with a particular focus on the Romanian market.

The quantitative research component includes a survey of hotel managers and staff, aiming to assess the quality of services and managerial performance in boutique hotels. This dual approach—combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys—provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by boutique hotels in today's market.

Ultimately, the paper seeks to offer practical insights for improving the competitiveness and service quality of boutique hotels, while also contributing to the broader academic discourse on the hospitality industry. The findings are relevant not only for hotel managers and industry stakeholders but also for policymakers and academics interested in the future of tourism and hospitality. By exploring the intersection of tradition and innovation, this paper sheds light on the evolving landscape of the hospitality industry and the emerging trends that will shape its future.