

# What do urban and rural hotel managers say about the future of hotels after COVID-19? The new meaning of safety experiences

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## ABSTRACT

The pandemic crisis has caused a change in tourism trends that affect the way hotels are managed. In accordance with the United Nations (2020), hotels must guarantee safe experiences for customers by incorporating sustainability measures. Collaboration between health and tourism authorities and the tourism industry is key. To test this proposal among hotels in Spain, 3 online focus groups and 25 personal interviews with 36 urban and 28 rural hotels were held in order to define the indicators. The questionnaire was applied to a sample of 475 urban hotels out of 443 rural hotels. The conclusions were: 1.) While in urban areas the testing protocols, especially for workers, are followed by most hotels, in rural areas hotel managers do not consider it as a priority in daily activity due to the reduced contact they have. 2.) A change in trends in the sustainable management of both rural and urban hotels is justified. 3.) Urban and rural hotels are more likely to incorporate collaborative strategies with tourism and health authorities to reduce the negative impact of COVID-19. According to the estimates of the hotels, the implementation of these measures would help to start the recovery process of the hotel industry.

## 1. Introduction

The last decades have seen significant changes in urban tourism planning and development assessing the role of the leisure and tourism industries (Wise, 2016). Cities compete in reproducing themselves as spaces for tourism consumption and tourism-led strategies to capture the tourist interest (Li, 2020).

The recent pandemic has resurrected interest on this topic and its response and adaptation measures on cities (Connolly et al., 2020). Although urban research related to previous pandemic era was mainly focused on issues such as; inequalities that make poor and marginalized groups more vulnerable to pandemics, currently the urban design has turned to provide safe and healthy spaces for tourists (Wade, 2020).

Cities are physical places where the needs of tourists and inhabitants intersect. Urbanization and tourism in the current pandemic era are being deeply connected. The Covid-19 pandemic request an afterthought about the relation between the demand of use by tourist flows, host community and their spatial adaptation (Corbisiero & La Rocca, 2020). Until now, forecasting model of growth used for tourism has paid less attention to unexpected risk such as Covid-19 pandemic. According to Novelli, Burgess, et al. (2018) much research needs to be done to

address the health-related crisis in developing countries and the threat of epidemics on the tourism industries.

Adequate structures and facilities should be balanced with the organizational measures to provide health and safety conditions to tourists. Tourism is a double-edged phenomenon having indisputable positive economic effect and a generator of negative social, environmental, and healthy impact on cities and the tourism sector (Sheng et al., 2017).

To measure that impact in rural and urban hotels organizational model should be proposed based on defining safe and healthy spaces and innovative management to provide confidence and trust to tourists.

In that new scenario, the pandemic crisis has caused a change in tourism trends that affect the way hotels are managed. In accordance with the United Nations (2020), hotels must guarantee safe experiences for customers by incorporating sustainability measures. Collaboration between health and tourism authorities and the tourism industry is key.

The current crisis requires an adjustment to overcome the restrictions imposed by the new reality (Breier et al., 2021; Robina-Ramírez et al., 2020), based on improving the health and safety conditions (Shin & Kang, 2020) in the tourism industry, and specifically, hotel activity (Jiang & Wen, 2020; Moreno-Luna et al., 2021). In Spain,

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according to data from the National Statistics Institute (INE), hotel overnight stays decreased in December 2020 by 81.2%, and by 65.9% in economic collection compared to the previous year (INE, 2020a, 2020b).

It implies substantial changes in the ways of serving customers, evolving from traditional models of creating tourist experiences to a new approach to health care and safety in hotels (Gössling et al., 2020).

In this new situation, hotel managers wonder what tourism product to offer, under what conditions, and how to give value to the tourism service in the midst of a pandemic that generates benefits and trust for regular customers (Breier et al., 2021).

Trust is not only generated by compliance with the protocols established by the health authority; it is necessary to create a safe, healthy and quality work environment both for the employee (Stergiou & Farnaki, 2021) and for the tourist (Yu et al., 2021). According to the document “COVID-19 and Transforming Tourism”, United Nations (2020) has referred to the security conditions of tourism companies that need to be put in operation in the new pandemic crisis framework. Among others, three factors that have to be evaluated by the hotel industry stand out: 1) generate trust in all tourism operations; 2) strengthen public-private partnerships and development of inclusive policies by tourism authorities; 3) introduce sustainability in the manners of managing tourism businesses. The implementation of these factors implies a shift in the transformation of the management and perception of tourism, where the search for non-crowded and “safe” areas prevails, in harmony with nature and with less contact with other visitors.

To analyse hotel managers' perception of the “safety experience” of hotel managers, the research team initially contacted urban and rural hotel managers between October 2020 and January 2021. Through a participatory methodology, three online focus groups were designed to adapt the three items established by United Nations (2020) to the current reality of hotels in Spain (Sánchez-Oro Sánchez & Robina-Ramírez, 2020). In the first session the scientific nature of the study was explained. During the second session, the key indicators were set to define the future of hotels in terms of how they deal with the pandemic crisis. In the third session, the general results obtained were introduced to the participants in the research.

The paper has been divided as follows: Section 2 shows the literature review. The methodology is conveyed in Section 3. Discussions are shown in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 offers the conclusions obtained throughout of the research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The safety experiences (SE)

Quality tourism experiences are at the center of the hotel product and service. Experience economics (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) and entertainment economics (Wolf, 1999) revolve around the meaning and value of consumer experiences. As the largest producer of experiences, tourism must meet the expectations of each consumer (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009). These expectations are related to a set of values and meanings about the tourist services and experiences rendered (Diller et al., 2008).

The term “safety” has traditionally been applied to adventure tourism and to the safety measures adopted to avoid any type of risk (Bentley et al., 2004). With the emergence of the pandemic, the concept of “safety” has moved from adventure tourism to the health connotations of tourism.

In the case of hotels, a design model of empathetic experiences (Leonard & Rayport, 1997) that are unique (Fynes & Lally, 2008) and have added value (Heide et al., 2007) has been transferred to contagion-free tourist experiences.

In the current context of the pandemic, health authorities have proposed that hotels have to guarantee the safety of the service provider and their clients (Health Ministry, 2020; WHO, 2020). This new approach to experiences is based on two dimensions; “Ad intra”,

adapting the new meaning of “safety” to those who provide the experience, and “ad extra”, generating sufficient trust in the clients. Thus, the service must comply with the characteristics of being hygienic, with social distancing, and with all of the security protocols set by the country's health authority. This is what those characteristic defines in the paper as “safe experience”. In this context, hotels must develop a supplementary planning and awareness effort to develop safe experiences (Galvani et al., 2020).

Part of this planning consists of taking care of social distancing, limiting contact between people to reduce viral transmission (WHO, 2019). Compared to other sectors, the tourism industry is more vulnerable to crisis or disaster than other industries due to its high risk of infection among workers and tourists (Biggs et al., 2012). This greater vulnerability means making decisions such as canceling group meetings; holding meetings virtually; keeping children away from group settings; and promoting online connections between people or social networks to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Hacker et al., 2020).

In relation to the social distancing, the introduction of sanitation and hygiene measures is essential for hotels (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2021b). The WHO has offered practical guidance on the provision of drinking water, sanitation and hygienic conditions since the origin of the spread of the COVID-19 virus (WHO, 2020). Governments have to ensure the universal access to diagnostics and treatment during such situations is crucial (Bassi & Hwenda, 2020). The current pandemic demonstrates the scale of the possible increase of need for intensive care units (ICU) if national case counts are translated into health-care demand. It is especially crucial in rural areas where aging population is higher than cities. Rural areas also have more underlying health conditions and fewer economic resources. Rural health care is more limited, as is access to technology and online connectivity. Altogether, this puts rural older adults at risk of not only the virus, but of not being able to meet their health care, social, and basic needs. Rural/urban inequities, combined with within-rural inequities in health, health care, and financial resources cause particular challenges to health and well-being from COVID-19 for some older adults (Henning-Smith, 2020).

In the case of Spain, these guidelines have been complemented by a series of measures to avoid infections and contagions in hotels (Spanish Government, 2020). Along with social distancing measures and health and hygiene measures, the health authority in some regions of Spain has promoted the distribution of COVID-19 tests throughout the country to stop contagious diseases (Hosteltur, 2020).

Recently, the Government of Spain, through its “vaccination strategy”, has reported on the 4 stages that must be followed in the vaccination process: 1) stage 0, known as “development, authorization and evaluation”, which ended in December 2020; 2) stage 1, “first available doses”, aimed at residents and staff in senior centers, and at health and social health personnel who are on the front line of service; this period extends until March 2021; 3) stage 2, “more available doses”, aimed at people over 80 years of age, will be delivered from March to June 2021; 4) stage 3, “widely available vaccine”, aimed at the rest of the priority groups, which will be distributed starting in June 2021 (Gobierno de España, 2020).

Despite attempts by the health authorities to regulate health conditions, the generation of safe experiences that provide confidence to customers exceeds the organizational capacity of the hotel and the vaccination systems.

What is argued in this section leads us to propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** Safe hotel experiences (SE) will shape the idea of the hotel of the future (FAC19).

### 2.2. Public-private partnerships (PPA)

The management of the pandemic requires the development of alliances and collaborations with the policies of the health authorities to

implement strategies that reduce the impact of the crisis on the company (Hampton et al., 2018). Several techniques have been identified by researchers and professionals to help in the proactive planning and development of cooperative strategies at different levels of tourist destinations for the prevention or reduction of a crisis (Beritelli, 2011; Errichiello & Marasco, 2017).

Authors such as Kash and Darling (1998) have conveyed six elements based on alliances between socio-economic actors to resolve a crisis situation: 1) a strategic forecast, based on opinions, trends, simulation and cause and effect methods; 2) contingency planning; 3) analysis of changing trends in the external environment; 4) analysis of scenarios that describe the situation of the organization before making relevant decisions; 5) risk analysis and hazard mapping; 6) planning of early warning systems, creation of a disaster management center and tourism authorities. These alliances also make it possible to contribute to the transformation of a tourist destination to move away from the current model, which is largely based on mass tourism (Crick & Crick, 2020).

Along with strategic alliances, the safety and technology play a special role (Barbieri & Darnis, 2020; Palos-Sanchez et al., 2017). The objective is to measure the impacts, behaviours and experiences in tourism demand, supply and destination management organizations (Sigala, 2020). Thus, Kash and Darling (1998) suggest the collection of data to plan and predict the level of safety of tourist destinations. Gallego and Font (2020) propose to develop alliances with public institutions to use technology through big data that allows obtaining information in real time to analyse the load capacities of tourist destinations. Some initiatives in this line have been used to project tourist scenarios based on atmospheric parameters (Lobo, 2015).

In Spain, the alliance between Air Institute and the International Institute for Research in Artificial Intelligence and Computer Science, based in Valladolid, has made it possible to carry out studies to measure load capacity on the island of Formentera using blockchain technologies (Hosteltur, 2021a, 2021b). At the international level, public-private partnerships have enabled the UNWTO's first tourist recovery tracker to be launched to report on the stage of the pandemic and the tourism recovery process in each country (UNWTO, 2021). The public-private collaboration allows for obtaining data on: international tourist arrivals, hotel searches and reservations, occupancy rates and demand for short-term rentals, satisfaction with the chosen destination, etc.

Not only is the design of alliances important, the implementation of those measures and indicators requires close collaboration between regional, national and international tourism and health authorities to adequately plan the levels of tourist saturation and seasonal adjustment (Cisneros-Martínez et al., 2018; Zielinski & Botero, 2020). A collective and coordinated response from all stakeholders can stimulate the transformation of tourism, together with economic recovery packages and investments in the green economy (AECIT, 2020).

Part of the implementation of these measures involves the digitisation of hotel services and tourism resources based on the intelligent management of information available to all tourism agents. These resources allow better access to the cultural heritage of historic areas (Álvarez-Sousa & Paniza Prados, 2020), or better interaction between hotels and shops to guarantee safe accessibility to customers (Akhtar et al., 2020).

What is stated in this section allows us to introduce the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** developing private partnerships with other sectors (PPA) will help develop the idea of the hotel of the future (FAC19).

### 2.3. Sustainable management of tourism businesses (SM)

Together with the information offered by public-private alliances to control the volume of tourists in destinations, some hotels are already specialising in offering safe and sustainable experiences in the face of mass tourism (INSEE, 2020).

With the appearance of COVID-19, it is necessary to rethink the concept of sustainable tourism (Pardo & Ladeiras, 2020). In the current crisis, destinations have gone from "over-tourism" to "sub-tourism" or, rather, to the unplanned absence of tourism. The sharp tourism' decreasing connect with another debate that began a few years earlier, about the need to reduce the fast growth of the international of international tourists (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). As Fletcher et al. (2020) note, we cannot afford to return to the levels of travel experienced prior to COVID-19, due to the negative effects on climate change, pollution and resource depletion.

In the midst of the pandemic crisis, new initiatives for social, economic and environmental sustainability have appeared in hotel management, implementing tourism innovation experiences based on: circular economy processes (Sørensen & Bærenholdt, 2020; Vargas-Sánchez, 2018), distribution of benefits in the community (Johnson, 2010), education and training actions for the design of safe experiences (Hu et al., 2020), measures to combat temporary employment and the absence of contracts (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020) and introduction of economic recovery measures (Elgin et al., 2020).

The strengthening of proximity tourism is gaining strength again (Navarro Jurado et al., 2020). The design of tourist destinations close to the place of residence would be a direct consequence of a greater social and environmental awareness of post-crisis tourists (Lew, 2020). These nearby destinations are considered to be of lower economic, health and environmental risk since they help to reduce CO2 emissions. They are peaceful, comfortable and safe destinations currently favoured by tourists since crowded urban destinations tend to rapidly spread the virus (Novelli, Gussing Burgess, et al., 2018). In the context of COVID-19, rural tourist destinations have benefited by channeling the urban tourist flow towards rural areas (Stankov et al., 2020). In fact, according to Hosteltur (2020), in Spain, half of the rural accommodations increased their demand compared to the pre-pandemic figures once the alarm state was lifted. 45.9% say they had more demand than before the health crisis and 27.5% maintained the pre-pandemic level.

The pandemic crisis allows the configuration of a new type of tourism, constituted by the collective good and not by hyper-consumerism. In other words, the sense of well-being must replace profitability (Everingham & Chassagne, 2020). This will be achieved if we respect the new rules of prudence in the management of destinations in accordance with the new health requirements.

What is expressed in the previous paragraphs leads us to propose the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** The incorporation of a sustainable management (SM) will help to develop the idea of the hotel of the future (FAC19).

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** The incorporation of sustainable management (SM) will help to implement safe experiences in hotels (SE).

**Hypothesis 5 (H5).** The incorporation of a sustainable management (SM) will help to develop private alliances with other sectors (PPA).

**Hypothesis 6 (H6).** The incorporation of sustainable management (SM) will help to develop the idea of the hotel of the future (FAC19).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Reasons for using partial least squares structural equation modeling in knowledge management

PLS-SEM is an exploratory methodology that is based on primary or secondary data, which makes it ideal for approaches where the objective is oriented to the researcher's prediction, since it does not require a normal distribution of data and adapts to sample small sizes (Chin & Newsted, 1999). PLS-SEM also provides  $R^2$  values and indicates the importance of relationships between constructs and can handle numerous independent variables at the same time, even when they show multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2011). Bootstrapped-based method is used

to evaluate the general fit of the model in PLS, which seems to work quite well, as indicated by [Dijkstra and Henseler \(2015\)](#). On the other side, CB-SEM also provides path modeling (coefficient and CR). It is more focused on model fit and needs a larger sample size.

With the development of consistent PLS, it has been possible to combine the flexibility offered by PLS-SEM and the adjustment of the model provided by CB-SEM since it now reflects or uses correction factors to give results equal or similar to CB SEM.

**3.2. Purposes of partial least squares structural equation modeling analysis**

This statistical technique is observed when dependency relationships are established between latent variables and indicators ([Sarstedt et al., 2016](#)). For the generation of the statistical model, the PLS (Partial Least Squares) SmartPLS 3 Version 26 technique was applied. This version is especially recommended for composite site models ([Rigdon et al., 2017](#)).

SEM-PLS modeling was defined based on two approaches: the measurement model and the structural model. To proceed with the analysis of the structural model, the reliability that exists between the indicators and the constructs was analysed, as well as the validity of the measurement model ([Hair et al., 2011](#)). In this case, we use reflective elements because they are interchangeable ([Haenlein & Kaplan, 2004](#)).

**3.3. Types of latent variables and measurement model specification**

In October 2020, a Royal Decree was approved in Spain to declare a state of alarm for 15 days, extendable to 6 months. The Government responded to the situation of special risk caused by the COVID-19 virus. Circulation among people through Spanish regions was limited ([Royal Decree 926/2020](#)).

In order to measure the perceptions of hoteliers about the current health and safety system, the research team contacted by email with the 17 Spanish tourism regions. A list of 7670 urban hotels and 12,778 rural hotels were provided. The total number of hotels was contrasted with the National Institute of Statistics of Spain ([INE, 2020a, 2020b](#)). The result was very similar. So, there were no changes in the original list. Two weeks later, the lists distributed by regions were obtained, consisting of which include any type of accommodation in rural areas.

To analyse the perceptions of both city and rural hotel managers, the research team initially contacted 42 urban hotel managers and 36 rural hotel managers. The information on the hotels was randomly collected from the databases provided by the tourism managers of each tourist region in Spain.

Through a participatory methodology, three joint online sessions were proposed to hotel managers. The sessions were different for urban and rural hotels. Eventually, 36 urban hotel managers and 29 rural hotel managers finally participated in the three sessions. The sessions were



Fig. 1. List of urban hotels involved in the preliminary study.

developed in the same week in both sections. Figs. 1 and 2 shows the list of urban hotels and rural hotel that have been involved in the preliminary to ascertain the indicator of the model.

The first session took place in the second week of October 2020. In it, the scientific nature of the study was explained and each hotel manager was provided with a summary of the latest research work related to the incidence of COVID-19 in the transformation of tourism, published in international magazines. A total of 18 articles were sent to the hotel managers.

During the second session, held in the third week of October, the “brainstorming” methodology was applied to determine, based on the document prepared by the United Nations (2020), which indicators would help define the future of hotels for the coming years. A scenario of coexistence with the COVID-19 virus for a few years was contemplated. According to the results of the debate, four latent variables were proposed: FAC19: Future of hotels after COVID-19; SE: Safe experiences; PPA: Public-private alliance; SM: Sustainable management (see Table 1).

Once the second session of the focus groups was over, a total of 25 interviews were conducted with the 36 urban hotel managers and 28 rural hotel managers. They were previously sent a communication by email inviting them to respond openly to each of the questions set in the first two sessions. With the permission of all of them, the interviews were recorded in order to later reproduce the contents.

In accordance with the four constructs designed by the hotel managers, the hypotheses ascertained the relation hotel managers’ main drivers to determine the future of hotels and the exogenous variables focused on four items: FAC19: Future of hotels after COVID-19; SE: Develop a safe experiences; PPA: Public-private alliance; SM: Sustainable management.

The proposed theoretical model is shown in Fig. 3.

Each indicator was formulated to adapt to the questions in the questionnaire. The questionnaire has been previously validated with 15 hotel managers.

Throughout the months of November and December 2020, two questionnaires in Google-Doc format were distributed to hotel managers in urban and rural areas. Of the total number of questionnaires sent, 17 were discarded for having some answers left unanswered.

For the selection of the sample, a stratified sampling was carried out according to the tourist categories of the hotel and rural accommodation. Each day, 80 questionnaires were sent randomly to each autonomous community. As the response rate was very low, it was decided to reinforce the shipments with telephone calls. Eight weeks later, the minimum target of 5% responses was reached in both types of hotels set by the research team. There were 475 responses from urban hotels and 443 responses from rural hotels. Table 2 shows the population and the sample of hotels in the study in each region.

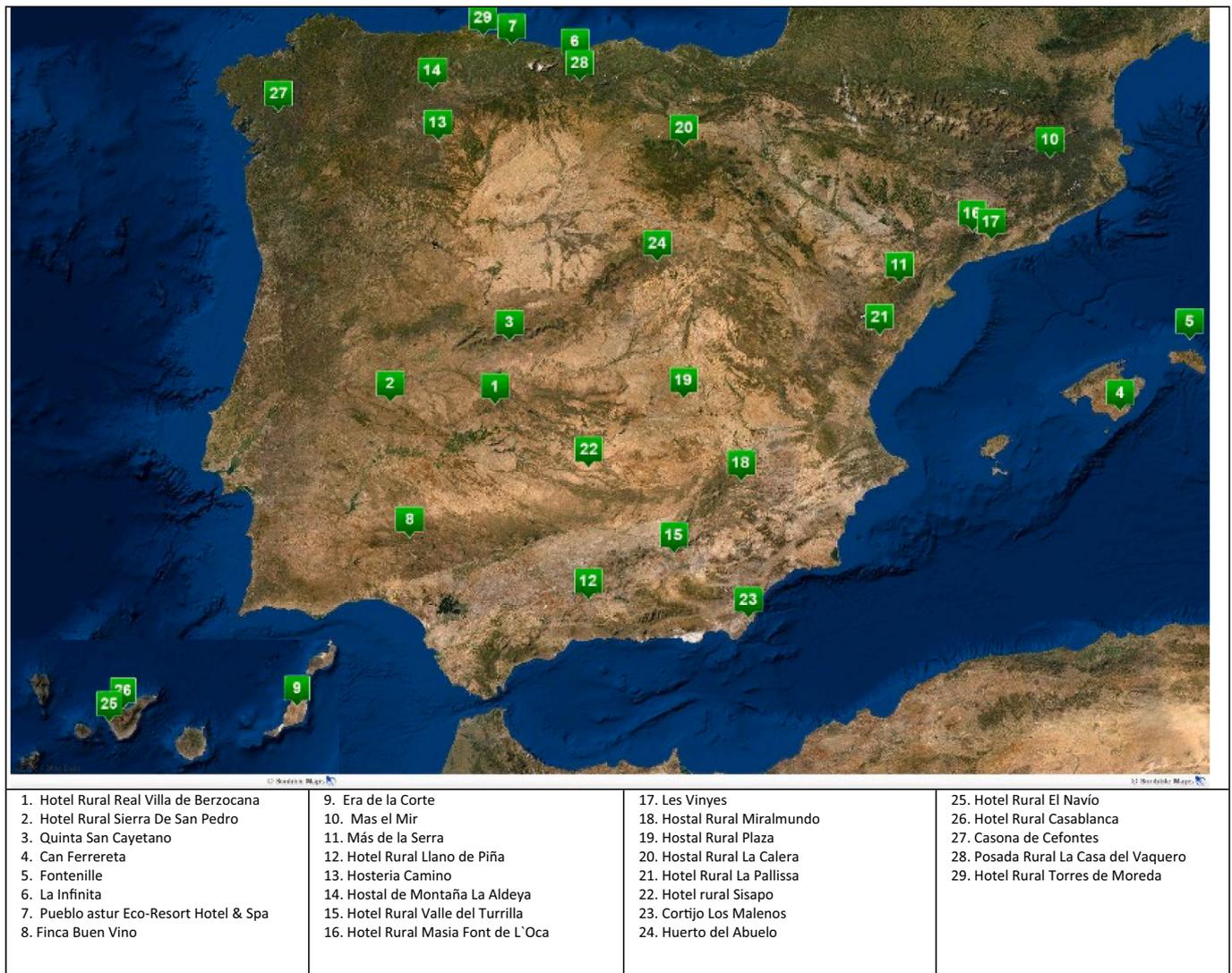


Fig. 2. List of rural hotels involved in the preliminary study.

**Table 1**  
Preliminary study and list of items corrected by the managers.

Indicators	Items	Authors
Future of hotels after COVID-19		
(FAC191)	The hotel should offer a management model that guarantees the safety and hygiene of customers	Robina-Ramírez et al., 2021a; Gössling et al., 2020.
(FAC192)	Hotels should offer innovative experiences in quality and technology that exceed tourist expectations during the pandemic	Shin & Kang, 2020; Stergiou & Farmaki, 2021; Yu et al., 2021.
(FAC193)	Hotels should collaborate with public institutions and other companies from other sectors involved in the tourist destination	Crick & Crick, 2020; Kash & Darling, 1998
To develop safety experiences (SE)		
(SE1)	Hotels must guarantee distance, health and hygiene safety protocols in the design of experiences with customers	Hacker et al., 2020; OMS, 2020 WHO, 2019; WHO, 2020
(SE2)	Government should guarantee hospital capacity and security measures to stop propagation of the virus	Bassi & Hwenda, 2020; Henning-Smith, 2020.
(SE3)	Hotels must establish necessary testing protocols on the hotel staff and on the clients who request it	Barbieri & Darnis, 2020; Hosteltur, 2020
To build public-private alliance (PPA)		
(PPA1)	There must be a public-private collaboration to measure cargo capacity at destinations	Gallego & Font, 2020; Lobo, 2015; Zielinski & Botero, 2020
(PPA2)	The implementation of technology in all hotel services and the digitisation of tourist resources has become a priority	Akhtar et al., 2020; Gallego & Font, 2020.
(PPA3)	Implement measures in collaboration with the tourism authorities to contribute to the seasonal adjustment of tourism	Cisneros-Martínez et al., 2018; UNWTO, 2021
(SM) To implement sustainable management in the tourism industry		
(SM1)	Hotels must update the concept of sustainability to accord with the COVID-19 crisis	Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Pardo & Ladeiras, 2020
(SM2)	Introduce environmental sustainability measures in the management of tourist destinations and companies	Sørensen & Bærenholdt, 2020; Vargas-Sánchez, 2018
(SM3)	Tourism authorities should introduce aid packages to protect employees in order to help make hotels sustainable	Assaf & Scuderi, 2020; Elgin et al., 2020.
(SM4)	Tourism authorities must introduce social sustainability measures in the management of tourist destinations and companies.	Johnson, 2010; Hu et al., 2020
(SM5)	Strengthen proximity tourism by revaluing the most authentic resources, our history, culture and gastronomy, helping local communities to feel that they are a part of the proximity destinations	Sánchez et al., 2021; Navarro Jurado et al., 2020.

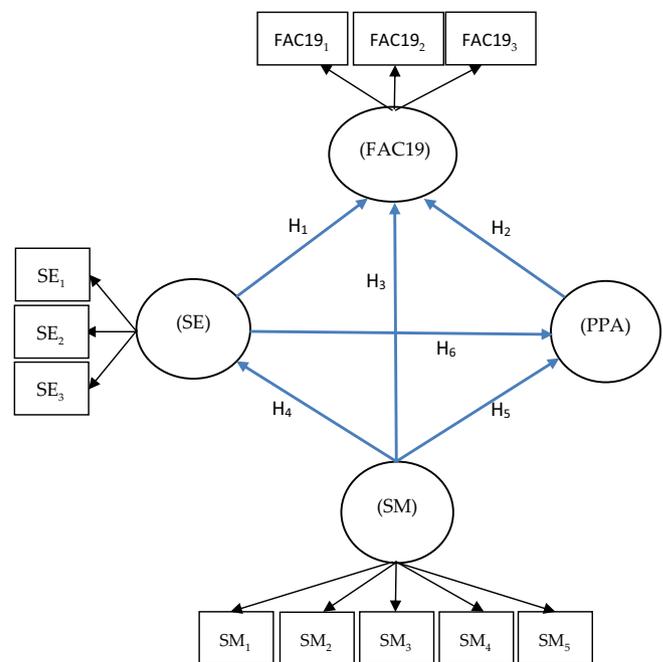
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### 3.4. Assessment of global model fit

Although the proposed criteria for fitting the model in PLS-SEM are in an initial stage of research, they should be taken with some caution (Hair et al., 2017).

However, when applying a consistent PLS approach (PLSc-SEM), focused on reflexively measured constructs, one may be interested in model fit. Therefore, it is possible to mimic CB-SEM more completely through the PLSc-SEM approach (Henseler et al., 2016; Sarstedt et al., 2016).

SmartPLS offers the following fit measures, first is Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) which is defined as the difference between the observed correlation and the model implied correlation matrix whereby values less than 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1998) and Henseler et al. (2016) suggest that SRMR < 95% bootstrap quantile (HI95 of



**Fig. 3.** Research model designed.

**Table 2**  
Population and sample.

Spanish regions	Urban hotels	Sample	Rural hotels	Sample
Andalucía	1147	70	2037	77
Aragón	429	29	822	24
Asturias, Principado de	134	14	227	11
Balears, Islas	63	13	122	10
Canarias	286	15	514	18
Cantabria	93	10	267	12
Castilla - La Mancha	543	18	1452	61
Castilla y León	707	42	2717	81
Cataluña	988	55	1576	32
Comunidad Valenciana	676	42	675	16
Extremadura	272	19	573	21
Galicia	891	54	296	20
Madrid, Comunidad de	727	41	222	10
Murcia, Region de	98	12	139	13
Navarra, Comunidad Foral de	173	14	725	15
País Vasco	354	21	323	13
Rioja, La	89	6	91	9
Total	7670	475	12,778	443

Own source.

SRMR) are considered a good fit, second is the Normed Fit Index (NFI) which measure is represent acceptable fit above 0.9 (Henseler et al., 2016).

The third exact model fit is the tests statistical bootstrap-based inference, these can be evaluated by the squared Euclidean distance (d<sub>LS</sub>) and the geodesic distance (d<sub>G</sub>) as the two different ways to compute the discrepancy between the empirical covariance matrix and the covariance matrix implied by the composite factor model (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). Besides, Henseler et al. (2016) suggest that d<sub>ULS</sub> and d<sub>G</sub> < than the 95% bootstrapped quantile d<sub>ULS</sub><95% bootstrap quantile (HI95 of d<sub>ULS</sub>) and d<sub>G</sub> < 95% bootstrap quantile (HI95 of d<sub>G</sub>). Therefore, a model fits well if the difference between the correlation matrix implied by the model being tested and the empirical correlation matrix is so small that it can be purely attributed to sampling error thus the difference between the correlation matrix implied by your model and the empirical correlation matrix should be non-significant (p > 0.05) (Ramayah et al., 2017).

The urban model shows the next parameters: SRMR value was 0.014

it is  $<0.8$  and  $<95\%$  bootstrap quantile (HI95 of SRMR) and the NFI was  $0.989 > 0.90$ . dULS is  $0.008 <$  bootstrapped HI 95% of dULS (0.011) and dG  $0.013 <$  bootstrapped HI 95% of dG (0.019) indicating the data that the model have a good fit. The parameters in the rural model are: SRMR value was 0.013 it is  $<0.8$  and  $<95\%$  bootstrap quantile (HI95 of SRMR) and the NFI was  $0.990 > 0.90$ . dULS is  $0.008 <$  bootstrapped HI 95% of dULS (0.009) and dG  $0.014 <$  bootstrapped HI 95% of dG (0.020) indicating the data that the model have a good fit (Table 3).

### 3.5. Assessment of measurement model

Reliability was studied by analysing individual loads or simple correlations of the measurements with their respective latent variables;  $\geq 0.7$  was accepted (Henseler et al., 2009). In the rural model, in accordance with to Carmines and Zeller (1979), indicators such as; FAC2; PPA2; SE2, SM1 and SM4 in the urban model and FAC2; PPA1; SE3, SM1 and SM4 have been eliminated because they did not reach the minimum value of 0.7.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability were also used as the reliability index of the latent variables. The convergent validity of the latent variables was analysed using the mean variance extracted (AVE) (accepted  $>0.5$ ). To study the discriminant validity of latent variables, the Henseler-Larcker criterion was used (Fornell & Bookstein, 1982). This criterion examines whether the square root of the mean value extracted (AVE) of each item is greater than the correlations with the rest of the latent variables, as shown in Tables 4 and 5.

### 3.6. Assessment of the structural model

According to Henseler et al. (2015), it is necessary to implement techniques that better detect the absence of discriminant validity. In this case, the test that was applied is called the hetero-monotrait relationship (HTMT). If the relationship for each pair of factors is  $<0.90$ , the condition is accepted (Henseler, 2017). Table 6 shows the valid values for the HTMT test.

The variance inflation factor (VIF) is often used to evaluate collinearity of the formative indicators. VIF values of 5 or above indicate critical collinearity issues among the indicators of formatively measured constructs. However, collinearity issues can also occur at lower VIF values of 3 (Becker et al., 2015). Ideally, the VIF values should be close to 3 and lower. In the Urban model VIF values are lower than 3 with the exception of PPA1 = 3.118, PPA3 = 3.128 and SM2 = 3.060. In the Rural Modelling VIF values are lower than 3 with the exception of SE2 = 3.172 and SM5 = 3.125.

The explained variance ( $R^2$ ) of the endogenous latent variables and the p-value of the regression coefficients (*t*-test) were used as indicators of the explanatory power of the model (Ringle et al., 2014). The  $R^2$  values maximise the amount of explained variance obtained for the

investigation and led to the following conclusions: 0.67 “Substantial”, 0.33 “Moderate” and 0.19 “Weak” (Chin, 1998). The result obtained explains the positive relationship between the measures that hotel managers must take to protect the health and safety of their customers. The amount of variation explained by the drivers for the COVID-19 (FAC19) transition period in the Urban model is  $R^2 = 64.3\%$  and  $R^2 = 74.2\%$  in the Rural model. The evidence, therefore, shows that both models have a moderate predictive capacity, the first one highly “moderate” and “substantial” the second one. This explains the reason why the variables of develop public-private alliances (PPA), safety experiences (SE) and sustainable management (SM) become key factors to define the future of hotels during the transition period (FAC19).

Table 7 shows the results obtained that allowed us to accept all the hypotheses, since there were no statistically significant differences in the relationships between the variables of our model (p values  $< 0.001$ ) (Wong, 2013).

### 3.7. Use of predictive analysis

Geisser (1974) and Stone (1974) recommended evaluating the Stone-Geisser test as a criterion for evaluating the predictive capacity of the model ( $Q^2$ ). To determine this in SmartPLS, it is necessary to generate the blindfold procedure. After the Stone-Geisser test ( $Q^2$ ), the values were: 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35, indicating a small, medium and high predictive relevance, respectively. As a result, Table 8 shows that endogenous constructions meet ( $Q^2$ )  $> 0$ .

## 4. Discussion

The depopulation of large rural areas has gradually increased, causing a process of saturation in large cities. The rural begins to replace the urban in decision-making for periods of rest and entertainment. Tourism gradually leaves the big cities and begins to focus on rural areas in search of peaceful, comfortable and above all, safe destinations. This trend began to reverse starting from the beginning of the pandemic crisis. According to “Ecotourism observatory in Spain (OEE)” in 2021 tourism in rural destinations in Spain has increased 42,6% in relation to the tourism in cities. The main reasons to selection rural hotels instead of urban ones have been “safety reasons”, “enjoy of nature”, “visiting small villages”, etc. (Hosteltur, 2021a, 2021b).

According to Morales et al. (2020) the isolation of rural areas in Spain has turned into safe place to stay during the pandemic crisis. In central regions such as Extremadura, Castilla-León and Castilla-La Mancha rural areas has increased around 30% since March 2020. The Internet and digital transformation has become an important factor to provide online solutions to remote work from rural areas without having to move to cities (Ullah et al., 2021). According to Rodríguez (2020) internet has allowed rural population to access to remote work. Before

**Table 3**  
Loads.

Urban	FAC	PPA	SE	SM	RURAL	FAC	PPA	SE	SM
FAC191	0.806					0.861			
FAC192	–					–			
FAC193	0.882					0.894			
PPA1		0.978					–		
PPA2		–					0.932		
PPA3		0.842					0.850		
SE1			0.819					0.838	
SE2			–					0.878	
SE3			0.911					–	
SM1				–					–
SM2				0.902					0.877
SM3				0.793					0.834
SM4				–					–
SM5				0.867					0.913

Own source.

**Table 4**  
Reliability, validity.

	Urban				Rural			
	Cronbach alfa	Rho_A	CR	Ave	Cronbach Alfa	Rho_A	CR	ave
FAC	0.829	0.833	0.831	0.711	0.870	0.871	0.870	0.770
PPA	0.914	0.933	0.920	0.853	0.884	0.889	0.886	0.795
SE	0.854	0.861	0.857	0.750	0.848	0.849	0.848	0.736
SM	0.889	0.894	0.891	0.731	0.907	0.909	0.908	0.766

Own source.

**Table 5**  
Fornell-Larcker criterion.

	Urban				Rural			
	FAC19	PPA	SE	SM	FAC19	PPA	SE	SM
FAC	0.843				0.878			
PPA	0.637	0.924			0.768	0.892		
SE	0.721	0.694	0.866		0.792	0.789	0.858	
SM	0.739	0.604	0.691	0.855	0.813	0.745	0.787	0.875

Own source.

**Table 6**  
Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT).

	Urban				Rural			
	FAC19	PPA	SE	SM	FAC19	PPA	SE	SM
FAC								
PPA	0.641				0.770			
SE	0.722	0.696			0.793	0.789		
SM	0.740	0.609	0.693		0.813	0.747	0.788	

Own source.

the pandemic 27% of the rural workers used internet to attend their professional activities. After March 2020 that percentage has been growing till 61% on average, comparing the so called “depopulated regions” such as; Extremadura, Castilla-León and Castilla-La Mancha, Galicia and Aragón.

That impulse of innovation and digitalisation in Spain since the pandemic outbreak in Spain has motivated the need to rethink the business model and the sustainability and sustainable-oriented segments (rural, nature, health). In this regards, rural areas have become a suitable place to start new sustainable small business as a way of living (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020).

Tourist safety has become a fundamental part of tourists' choice of where to seek rest and leisure. This usually occurs when the disruptive event takes place in the crowded destinations typical of the urban landscape. Under these conditions, outdoor activities are preferred to urban tours, which are still prohibited in many parts of the world (Stankov et al., 2020). Currently, rural tourism and adventure tourism are two segments that benefit from the restrictions imposed in the context of COVID-19 (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

**Table 7**  
Path coefficients.

Statistics	Urban			t statistic	p-Value	Rural			t statistic	p-Value
	β	Lower CI	Higher CI			β	Lower CI	Higher CI		
H1: SE → FAC	0.316	0.202	0.441	4.362	0.000***	0.272	0.092	0.382	3.124	0.001***
H2: PPA → FAC	0.164	0.031	0.286	2.181	0.015**	0.242	0.092	0.382	2.650	0.004**
H3: SM → FAC	0.421	0.292	0.545	5.330	0.000***	0.419	0.271	0.577	4.372	0.000***
H4: SM → SE	0.691	0.638	0.745	21.450	0.000***	0.787	0.734	0.844	23.052	0.000***
H5: SM → PPA	0.238	0.117	0.360	3.219	0.001**	0.327	0.156	0.474	3.302	0.000***
H6: SE → PPA	0.529	0.411	0.641	7.4962	0.000***	0.531	0.386	0.700	5.462	0.000***

Note: Statistical significance: \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001; n.s.: not significant.

Own source.

In the case of hotels, this change in trends has been analysed to establish the possible differences between urban and rural areas. According to different interviews made to rural hotel managers they conveyed that “it is the perfect time to listen to customer demands, further digitize the sector and try to retain this new traveller”. A second rural manager said that “the future of rural tourism, this new panorama that opens up to the touristic sector in the pandemic era, is a great opportunity for emptied Spain”. Some managers in rural areas highlight the role that municipalities provide to improve the necessary infrastructures, services and technologies. “The situation created by the pandemic favored rural tourism in the second half of 2020 and 2021 will also evolve depending on the health situation. If mobility restrictions between autonomous communities are relaxed, but border control elements continue, trips abroad will not grow and that demand will be redirected to rural tourism”.

These interviews combine different approach to data obtained in the research work. The perspective of health authorities and hotel managers are not the same in urban and rural areas. The change in tourist preferences affects the management of urban and rural hotels differently. The first difference that we notice between urban and rural hotels refers

**Table 8**  
Coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>) and Stone-Geisser test (Q<sup>2</sup>).

	Urban		Rural	
	Q <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>	Q <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>
FAC19	0.442	0.643	0.537	0.742
PPA	0.302	0.511	0.481	0.663
SE	0.270	0.478	0.413	0.620

Own source.

to the way to guarantee safe experiences. While in urban areas the testing protocols, especially for workers, are followed by most hotels (SE3;  $\lambda = 0.911$ ), in rural areas hotel managers do not consider it as a priority in daily activity due to the reduced contact they have in rural destinations. In this way, the proposals of the health authorities to the hotels to guarantee the safety of both the service provider and the recipient of said service are having a greater impact among urban hotels than among rural ones (Health Ministry, 2020; WHO, 2020). As an example, it can be added that in addition to the testing of hotel staff members, some urban hotels have signed agreements with clinics to perform antigen tests on clients, although this measure is still underdeveloped in most Spanish territories. However, in rural hotels it is more difficult to implement these measures due to the distances between hospitals and health clinics.

The second difference is related to the hospital capacity and security measures to stop propagation of the virus (Bassi & Hwenda, 2020; Henning-Smith, 2020). Hotel managers in rural areas have highlighted that not only the long distance between hospitals, health clinics and the populations but also the lack of beds available in hospital in rural areas is causing problems due to the aging population (SE2;  $\lambda = 0.878$ ). In urban areas hospitals are well distributed among the populations, providing new spaces to attend the COVID-19 patients when it has been needed.

As the third difference, whereas urban hotel managers have conveyed the need of public-private collaboration to measure cargo capacity at destinations (PPA1;  $\lambda = 0.978$ ) rural hotel managers do not consider this factor as a priority due to well distributed rural tourism along the territory. The mass tourism in urban destinations need to implement measures in collaboration with the tourism authorities to contribute to the seasonal adjustment of tourism (PPA3;  $\lambda = 0.911$ ), aspects that are less important among rural hotel managers. However, due to worse access to technology and online connectivity (Henning-Smith, 2020) rural hotel managers consider the implementation of technology in all hotel services as well as the digitisation of tourist resources as a priority.

Considering the value obtained from the t-Student value that measures the significance of the starting hypotheses, the one related to the sustainable management of hotels has been the most supported by hotels. Specifically, sustainable management contributes very decisively to the generation of safe experiences in both urban (H4: SM $\rightarrow$ SE;  $\beta = 0.691$ ; T = 21.450) and rural hotel (H4: SM $\rightarrow$ SE;  $\beta = 0.787$ ; T = 23,052). This hypothesis corroborates a change in the trend already initiated among tourists moving from urban to rural areas.

In this way, hotels begin to develop sustainable strategies aligned with a safe offer to customers, aspects that until now occupied a second place in management strategies. Among them would be the approach to circular economy processes (Sørensen & Bærenholdt, 2020; Vargas-Sánchez, 2018), education and training actions for the design of safe experiences (Hu et al., 2020) and introduction of economic measures of recovery (Elgin et al., 2020). These three aspects have been debated in the interviews carried out with the urban hotel managers (interviews 2, 7, 9, 14, 16, 19, 23) and rural hotel managers (interviews, 3, 5, 10, 11, 12, 18, 21).

Environmental and economic sustainable is also in the mind of the managers according to the new tourist's search for nature destinations (Sánchez-Oro et al., 2021). As a result, hotels has motivated the introduction of environmental sustainability measures in the management of tourist destinations and companies in urban areas (SM2;  $\lambda = 0.902$ ) as well as rural ones (SM2;  $\lambda = 0.877$ ). Similarly hotel managers have proposed the strengthen proximity tourism through the revaluation of the most authentic resources, our history, culture and gastronomy in urban (SM5;  $\lambda = 0.899$ ) and rural areas (SM1;  $\lambda = 0.870$ ) (Navarro Jurado et al., 2020). Hotel managers also demand for aid packages to make job management sustainable through measures that help combat temporary employment (SM3;  $\lambda = 0.793$ ) and rural hotels (SM3;  $\lambda = 0.834$ ) (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020).

Either in cities and rural areas, the development of alliances and collaborations with the policies of the health and tourism authorities are very necessary to implement strategies that reduce the negative impact that the crisis has caused in the hotel industry in urban areas (H5: SM  $\rightarrow$  PPA;  $\beta = 0.238$ ; T = 3219) as well as rural ones (H5: SM  $\rightarrow$  PPA;  $\beta = 0.327$ ; T = 3302) (Beritelli, 2011; Errichiello & Marasco, 2017). As a result, a large part of the hotels have incorporated these alliances in the design of sustainable hotels' mission and vision in urban areas (H3: SM  $\rightarrow$  FAC;  $\beta = 0.421$ ; T = 5.330) and rural ones (H3: SM  $\rightarrow$  FAC;  $\beta = 0.419$ ; T = 4.372), offering a new perspective of collaborative management and safe experiences in hotels. Among these measures, the result of cooperation would be the collection of data to plan and predict the level of safety of tourist destinations (Gallego & Font, 2020) and the implementation of tourism recovery models (UNWTO, 2021). In the interviews carried out with the urban hotel managers, hotel managers wish to rationalise the entrance of tourists into Spain to avoid the possibility of new waves of contagion (interviews 1, 2, 4, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 24, 25). Rural hotel managers have expressed this concern as well, but in significantly lower numbers (interviews, 3, 10, 11).

As a result, the two modeling has been used not only for explanatory or predictive research but also for confirmatory ones (Henseler, 2018) following the PLSc methods (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). It confirms that role that safety experiences play in defining the future of the urban and rural hotel managers after COVID-19 could be replicated in other urban and rural areas.

## 5. Conclusions

Even though world's population is currently facing unprecedented restrictions recommended by WHO, individuals have the desire for social interaction. Urban design in the pandemic era should take into account how tourism interact with public and private spaces where social distancing and safety need to be guaranteed for residents and tourists (Eltarabily & Elghezanwy, 2020).

In spite of that restrictions, the damages caused by the pandemic crisis in tourism is being gigantic. It entails designing strategies for tourist cities to protect workers and clients from new infections. These strategies are based on the design of safe experiences that give tourists confidence to gradually regain normality in the tourism industry. Several variables could be considered as excellent candidates to estimate tourism's performance in cities. In this regard it should be proposed key performance indicators the hotel industry to control the spread of the virus through tourism such as; the number of international tourists, the number of visitors to museums, the number of flights or the quantity of tourism-related Google searches for each urban destination represent some clear examples (Anguera-Torrell et al., 2021). That is the example of the city of Barcelona. Since the beginning of the pandemic it has been collected information about the tourist hotel bookings and scheduled flight (Observatorio de Turismo de Calidad, Turismo Sostenible, Turismo Responsable, 2020).

Combining measures related to urban tourism and indicators designed to provide a health and safety in public and private space the urban and rural hotel's management play also a key role. In the first case, the maturity and responsibility of Spanish hotels has been noted for incorporating all the social distancing and hygiene measures recommended by the health authorities. To this must be added the change of consciousness of the hotels regarding the incorporation of measures Aimed at increasing sustainability in the management and strategies of the hotels.

In the search for this normality, the managers of urban and rural hotels have decided to incorporate not only environmental but also economic and social sustainability measures to the management of the hotel. This sustainability entails not only avoiding the negative effects that tourism has on climate change, pollution and the depletion of resources, but also developing new measures that protect tourists from crowded destinations such as the development of proximity tourism

(Navarro Jurado et al., 2020), improving education and training actions for the design of safe experiences (Hu et al., 2020) and combatting temporary employment measures (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020), involving a more extensive provision in the policies of safe experiences offered by hotels.

Whereas urban hotels desire to collaborate with health authorities as well as the tourist ones to rationalise tourist arrivals, avoiding overcrowded destinations that may contribute to the spread of new infections, rural hotels need to find solutions to protect their aging population by demanding hospital capacity and security measures.

This study becomes a starting point for developing a collaborative work with the health and tourism authorities and the tourism industry in Spain. The formulation of strategies should be introduced in the promotion of destinations and in public infrastructures for receiving tourists; airports, train stations, roadside parking places to final destinations. The objective is to provide clarity and security to tourists when defining and deciding which destination to choose as a resting place in the post-COVID-19 phase. The future of both urban and rural hotels depends on the design and implementation of these measures.

The limitations of the study are basically two: 1) the low percentage of hotel managers who have decided to participate, mainly rural hotels. 2) the lack of joint attendance of the focus groups by the managers; this has required the same session to be repeated several times between different participants, thus preventing them from knowing directly the opinions of all of them.

Among the future lines of work, two should be highlighted: 1.) Extend of the study to tourists to define the impact of the measures proposed by the United Nations (2020) to offer safe experiences. 2.) Process the contents of the interviews carried out through the Atlas.Ti tool to establish the most recurrent themes exposed by hotel managers.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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