

Collaborative Synergies for Elevated Destination Experiences: A Model of Cooperation between Hotel Companies, DMOs, and Local Stakeholders

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Background and Purpose: As outlined in the National Tourism Development Strategy until 2030, Croatia aims to provide higher value, innovative, sustainable, and authentic tourist experiences. There is a need to examine how the main tourism stakeholders can contribute to the transformation of traditional and commodified tourism products into premium-class offerings that add value throughout the entire value chain. It is important for premium-class hotels to take additional steps in improving their offerings to positively impact the entire destination and enhance service quality. This paper aims to: explore initiatives for promoting innovation in premium-class experiences within destinations focusing the cooperation between on hotel companies and DMOs; identify anticipated trends influencing the future of the tourism industry, and assess the future prospects of premium-class hotels in Croatia.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The methodology incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches, driven by the structured nature of the questions in the online survey that target sales and/or marketing directors of hotel companies that have premium-class hotels in their portfolio. Suitable statistical methods were employed to conduct the analysis for the quantitative portion of the data. Content analysis was utilized to analyze the open-ended questions. For this purpose, the MAXQDA software for coding, categorizing, and exploring patterns within the data.

Originality/value: This study represents one of the pioneering investigations into the essential initiatives that hotel companies need to undertake in order to orchestrate the development of a destination that relies on its premium-class experiences. Furthermore, the study examines the role of supporting institutions such as destination management organizations (DMOs) in facilitating this process. A conceptual model to improve the development of the premium hotel segment and destination at the same time, pursued by the responsible practices and initiatives of the hotel companies and strong partnerships with DMO and the local community, is proposed.

Keywords: Premium-class hospitality, Destination management organizations, Elevated experiences, Cooperation model, Tourism

1 Introduction

The responsibilities of Destination Management Organizations (hereafter DMOs) are well-established and often regulated by law in many destinations, including

developing destination products. However, the nature of the tourism product necessitates ongoing decision-making processes, making the strategic management of destination management organizations a constant endeavour (Fairley, 2019). The literature analysis highlights that the

effectiveness of destination management relies heavily on the capability of various stakeholders to fulfil their roles and is closely associated with the pivotal role of a DMO (Korossy et al., 2022). However, managing a destination involves navigating these various stakeholders' differing needs, making it a challenging task. Tourism is inherently characterized by its emphasis on innovation and creative endeavours (Hjalager, 2010). It is evident in practice that hotel companies in destinations are often quick to adopt innovations and influence the emergence of new tourism trends through their service offerings. It is so partially because of knowledge spillovers that play a vital role in enhancing the innovation performance of hotel companies by fostering the development of fresh insights and innovation capabilities (Veiga et al., 2022). As a result, it is crucial to explore what additional steps hotel companies can take to ensure that improvements in their product and service provision process positively impact the entire destination, thereby enhancing the quality of services across the value chain. This is particularly important for premium hotel products that target a market seeking high-quality experiences for which they are willing to pay a premium. Furthermore, it is important to analyze how DMOs can enhance their role in facilitating the rapid absorption of positive effects generated by establishing a premium hotel offering within the destination's value creation chains. These initiatives aim to cultivate high-quality, leisurely, and sustainable tourism experiences that align with current tourism trends and the preferences of travelers.

The objective of this paper encompasses three main aspects. Firstly, it aims to investigate the key initiatives that hotel companies providing premium-class accommodations and DMOs can undertake to promote optimal innovations and practices in developing premium-class experiences within a given destination. Secondly, it seeks to uncover the trends that directors anticipate will have an impact on the tourism industry in the coming years. Lastly, it aims to shed light on the prospects of premium-class hotels in Croatia.

The authors acknowledge the importance of addressing these fundamental inquiries for multiple reasons. Firstly, although extensive research has been conducted on destination management and the role of DMOs in enhancing the appeal and competitiveness of tourist destinations (Coban and Yildiz, 2019), there is a limited focus on investigating their specific association with premium hotels regarding comprehending these innovations and implementing similar practices within the destination context. Secondly, the existing body of research examining the ways and possibilities by which premium hotels can influence a destination's overall quality and offerings needs to be more extensive and adequate. Therefore, it is necessary to bridge this gap and delve deeper into understanding the potential impact of premium hotels on elevating the destination's quality standards through close collaboration with key stakehold-

ers. Thirdly, addressing the aforementioned questions will contribute to formulating a comprehensive model proposal that facilitates such collaboration within the tourist destination, fostering the development of high-quality destination products, with hotel companies taking the lead in creating premium hotel offerings and promoting such practices within the destination ecosystem. Fourthly, the authors chose Croatia as the research location, despite it not being widely recognized as a luxury or premium-class tourism destination. Nevertheless, there is a strong desire to shift away from the conventional sea and sun tourism, which is predominantly seasonal. Croatia faces significant seasonality in tourist traffic compared to other Mediterranean countries, with 92.5% of total beds located in Adriatic Croatia, leading to peak months with the highest average space load. To address these challenges, Croatia aims to offer higher value, innovative, and sustainable tourism products. This strategic focus on authentic and sustainable tourism is outlined in the National Tourism Development Strategy until 2030 (Croatian Parliament, 2022). The goal is to reposition Croatia as a destination that delivers unique, authentic and sustainable experiences to its visitors. The emphasis on authenticity, curated offerings, sustainability, and a profound connection with local culture and heritage reflects the preferences of modern luxury travellers. Indeed, there is a need to examine how the main tourism stakeholders can contribute to the transformation of traditional and commodified tourism products into premium-class offerings that add value throughout the entire value chain. This process will enhance the overall quality of tourism products in the destination, aligning with the growing trends of authentic and curated experiences.

Based on the information provided, the following research questions have emerged:

1. What role do premium-class hotels play in significantly enhancing the quality of services throughout the entire value chain within the destination?
2. What is the role of DMOs in enhancing the success of developing premium-class offerings within the destination?
3. What trends will impact the future of the tourism industry?
4. What lies ahead for premium-class hotels in Croatia, and what are the underlying factors driving this direction?

Valuable insights will be provided to support the design and implementation of an effective model that fosters collaboration between DMOs and hotel companies, ultimately leading to the development of high-quality destination products.

The methodology utilized in this study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to accommodate the structured format of the questions presented in the online survey. The survey questionnaire consisted

of close-ended, open-ended, and Likert scale-based questions. The specific target participants for this research were sales and/or marketing directors and directors of operations¹ representing hotel companies in Adriatic Croatia as they are responsible for designing and pricing specific hotel products in their portfolio.

The paper is organized coherently, following a logical structure. The subsequent section presents a comprehensive literature review, delving into relevant existing research. Chapter 3 elaborates extensively on the methodology employed in this study, providing a detailed explanation of the approach adopted. Chapter 4 is dedicated to presenting research findings, highlighting the outcomes of the investigation. Moving on to Chapter 5, an in-depth analysis and discussion of the results ensue, accompanied by the introduction of an additional value proposition: a conceptual model of cooperation within the tourism destination. The final chapter encompasses concluding remarks and an assessment of the study's limitations.

2 Literature Review

The subjectivity and contextual nature of luxury make it challenging to establish a universally accepted definition. Scholars and experts recognize this challenge and acknowledge that luxury hospitality's definition varies depending on individual perspectives, cultural influences, and shifting consumer expectations. Heyes (2021) emphasizes the investigation of luxury hospitality, encompassing tangible components such as material characteristics, amenities, and services, along with intangible facets encompassing emotions, experiences, and exclusivity. This accentuates the multidimensional character of luxury hospitality and underscores the importance of accounting for diverse variables in its definition and comprehension. Similarly, Luna-Cortes et al. (2022) acknowledge the need for more consensus in defining luxury hospitality and the associated factors. They highlight the diversity of luxury experiences and the varying expectations of consumers, which further complicates the development of a unified definition. These insights underline luxury hospitality's complexity and subjective nature, requiring a holistic and flexible approach to understanding its intricacies. Prominent trends in luxury tourism include the pursuit of authenticity, slow tourism (Krešić and Gjurašić, 2022), health and wellness, and sustainable tourism (Amatulli et al., 2021). Given the significant contribution of tourism services to the global economy, it is crucial for the hotel industry to adopt proactive environmental strategies that not only generate widespread social acceptance but also enhance market legitimacy (Jacobs et al., 2010). An adequately designed and effectively implemented environmental management program holds the potential to enhance levels of

job satisfaction and organizational commitment among luxury hotel staff members (Sourvinou and Filimonau, 2017). By embracing environmental management practices luxury hotels can establish new trends and standards for other sectors within the hospitality industry to follow (Bohdanowicz ET AL., 2011). Lopes et al. (2022) have acknowledged the influence of digital transformation on the evolutionary trajectory of the luxury tourism industry. These trends reflect the evolving preferences of luxury travellers seeking meaningful experiences, well-being, and environmentally conscious practices. According to Novotna and Kunc (2019), a significant determinant shaping the future of luxury tourism is the shift in consumer values from a focus on material possessions to a preference for experiential purchases. This change in consumer behavior has profound implications for the luxury tourism industry as it necessitates a revaluation of product offerings and the delivery of immersive and memorable experiences to meet the evolving needs and desires of luxury travellers. The 2018 report by Global Data titled "Tapping into the Luxury Travel Market" highlights key trends in luxury travel. These include market growth and diversification, a shift from opulence to exclusivity, a focus on authenticity, wellness, responsible travel, and the importance of customization and technology. Defining luxury hospitality comprehensively remains challenging, necessitating adaptability in diverse contexts and markets. As a result, a definitive and all-encompassing definition still needs to be discovered. Instead, a comprehensive and flexible approach is imperative for comprehending and delineating luxury hospitality within diverse contexts and markets. Thomsen et al. (2020) highlight the necessity for further research that specifically delves into the realm of unconventional luxury. They emphasize the importance of exploring and understanding luxury experiences that deviate from traditional notions, urging scholars to investigate and shed light on this emerging area of study. The luxury travel industry has experienced significant growth and has become a key contributor to global economic development. Several factors have contributed to the growth of the luxury hotel market (Zion Market Research, 2019):

1. Growth in Travel and Tourism: The expansion of the travel and tourism industry has played a significant role in the growth of luxury hotels. As more people travel for leisure and business purposes, the demand for luxury accommodation has increased.

2. Profitability and Asset Value: Luxury hotels are known for their high profitability and asset value. Investors and hotel companies recognize the potential for generating substantial returns from luxury properties, which has driven the development of new luxury hotels.

3. Changing Lifestyles: The emergence of new lifestyles, characterized by a desire for unique and extraordi-

¹ Considering the variation in job systematization among hotel companies.

nary experiences, has fueled the demand for luxury travel. Consumers are seeking exclusive and personalized experiences, and luxury hotels are well-positioned to cater to these preferences.

4. Strong Advertising and Branding Strategies: Hotel companies have implemented robust advertising and branding strategies to promote luxury properties. Effective marketing campaigns have helped create brand awareness and attract affluent travelers.

According to market research (Soeg, 2022) the global luxury hotel market was projected to approach the \$200 billion mark by 2021. Additionally, the global luxury travel market is expected to reach \$1.3 trillion by 2027 (ReportLinker, 2021), with a projected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.1% during the period 2021-2027 (Allied Market Research, 2021). The rise in luxury travel can be attributed to the desire for unique experiences, increasing disposable income of middle- and upper-class individuals, and the growing need for quality family time. The luxury travel market is expected to be driven by the baby boomer generation, who will dominate the growth with a projected CAGR of 10.7%. The Generation X segment is also anticipated to contribute to the market growth, with an estimated CAGR of 11.5% during the forecast period (Allied Market Research, 2021). Overall, the growth of the luxury travel industry and luxury hotels is influenced by various factors, including changing consumer preferences, rising disposable income, effective marketing strategies, and the overall expansion of the travel and tourism sector.

In light of the aforementioned, it is crucial to acknowledge the patterns observed in the expansion of the luxury segment and commence the creation of destinations while considering the prospective trends within the luxury travel market. By crafting distinct experiences that cater to the demands of the luxury travel market, destinations can simultaneously enhance their competitive edge. Nonetheless, in order to attract the luxury travel market, the focal point must be on providing premium-class offerings. Cultivating a premium hotel offering within the destination plays a pivotal role in the overall development of the destination. In order to enhance their productive integration, hotels can establish relationships with support organizations like DMOs. Taking a destination management perspective, the results of the study conducted by Vieira et al. (2022) indicate that support organizations play a crucial role in facilitating interfirm relationships and promoting productive integration within a destination. By effectively coordinating various stakeholders and resources, a well-functioning DMO can drive sustainable practices and effectively address existing and potential challenges. Therefore, destination management plays a pivotal role as a fundamental tool in the endeavour to construct a future that is more inclusive, sustainable, and competitive (Guerreiro, 2022). The establishment of a robust DMO offers

significant potential for enhancing the competitiveness of a destination. DMOs also play a crucial role in fostering, not only cooperation, but also promotion across industries. DMOs are taking on the role of influencers for the destination (Nicole, 2022).

Hotels and DMOs can leverage their strengths and resources by working together to create enhanced visitor experiences and drive destination growth. This collaborative approach facilitates the alignment of marketing efforts, strategic planning, and the development of unique and compelling offerings that showcase the destination's attractions and meet the evolving needs and preferences of luxury and future travellers. Cooperative behavior plays a vital role in achieving sustainable planning and development within tourism destinations. However, there is a scarcity of evidence regarding the factors influencing actors' choices to cooperate. Cooperation in tourism development is topical because no tourism product would exist without engagement of various parties. Tourism destinations can be conceptualized as intricate networks involving numerous co-producing actors who deliver a wide range of products and services. As stated by Bititchi et al., (2004, 253), the concept of cooperation practices should be viewed within the framework of a mutually beneficial scenario, commonly referred to as a win-win situation. The complexity highlighted distinguishes destination development and management from organizational development and management (Haugland et al., 2011). The study conducted in a European Alpine tourism destination, for instance, demonstrates that only relationship-based factors, when combined with communication variables, exhibit a strong positive influence on cooperative behaviour (Beritelli, 2011). The framework proposed by Bramwell and Sharman (1999) examines whether specific collaborations effectively address power imbalances among stakeholders and introduces the concept of partial consensus. Through its collaborative efforts, a DMO can contribute to the long-term viability and success of the destination, while also maximizing its appeal to visitors and maintaining a positive relationship with the local community. DMO serves as a valuable platform for leaders in its destination, as underlined in the research of Beritelli et al. (2015). According to the aforementioned, premium-class hotels must establish targeted partnerships with DMOs, the local community, and other crucial stakeholders to coordinate premium-class offerings within a destination effectively. This collaborative approach is essential to promote the destination's growth by providing high-quality tourism experiences. It is important to underline that Gonzales-Torres et al. (2022) emphasize the importance for hotel companies to meticulously design their partner configuration based on the specific type of innovation they seek to introduce, particularly in the context of premium experiences targeting the luxury travel market. They highlight that careful attention should be given to areas such as service and marketing

when establishing partnerships. By strategically aligning their collaborations within these domains, hotels can effectively harness external expertise and resources, propelling innovation in their services and bolstering their marketing endeavour. This strategic approach underscores the significance of collaboration and strategic alliances in cultivating innovation within the hotel industry. It enables companies to enhance their competitiveness and effectively address the evolving needs of their customers. Organizations in tourism are increasingly involved in collaborative partnerships, such as service bundling for tourism packages. The drivers of service bundling are analysed in the paper of maggioni et al. (2014). This study identifies four clusters of hoteliers based on their networking orientation: Relational/Socials, Opportunists, Innovators, and Marketers. Each cluster demonstrates unique collaboration approaches and motivations for partnership engagement. The study of Tsou et al. (2019) underscores the importance of strategic decision-making regarding partner selection and the utilization of IT resources to foster successful co-development in the hotel sector. The research conducted by Dogan et al. (2019) suggests that residents' perceptions of hotel social responsibility practices have a direct and indirect impact on their support for additional tourism development. Residents' satisfaction with their community mediates this impact. Facilitating active participation of individuals in destination-level tourism development poses considerable challenges. But, living environment, job position, and education are important factors influencing individual's attitudes towards tourism development as concluded in the study of Uran and Juvan (2010). The "bottom-up" approach is widely considered as the ideal approach in this context (Žibert et al., 2017).

Coban and Yildiz (2019) have devised a destination management model for Cappadocia to foster sustainability and enhance competitiveness within its tourism industry. The model emphasizes the pivotal roles of cooperation and coordination. The framework developed in the study of Foris et al. (2020) establishes an interconnected relationship between the analysis of the internal environment through the utilization of the value chain concept and the identification of appropriate Lean Six Sigma methods applicable to the management of tourist destinations. By integrating these approaches, the framework aims to optimize the management practices within the tourist destination, ultimately leading to enhanced performance outcomes. The significance of governance is also highlighted in the research conducted by Ivars-Baidal et al. (2019). While information and communication technology (ICT) undoubtedly influences destination management models, the effectiveness of the smart tourism development approach will not solely rely on technology. It equally hinges on an appropriate governance framework that systematically incorporates three key levels: strategic-relational, instrumental, and applied.

3 Research Methodology

The employed methodology encompassed both quantitative and qualitative approaches due to the structured format of the questions in the online survey. The survey questionnaire included close-ended, open-ended, and Likert scale-based questions. The target participants were sales and/or marketing directors and directors of operations of hotel companies in Adriatic Croatia. The researchers directly contacted the directors, explained the purpose of the research, and invited them to participate in the survey. The questionnaire was distributed via email, and the researchers ensured that the directors were already aware of the upcoming survey. The research was conducted during March and April in the year 2023.

The analysis encompassed the utilization of appropriate statistical methods for the quantitative portion of the data, while the open-ended questions were formulated with four primary objectives in mind:

1. Gaining Managerial Insights on Driving Service Excellence across the Destination's Value Chain: This involved identifying managers' observations regarding specific actions that hotel companies, featuring premium-class hotels in their portfolio, could undertake to make a significant impact on enhancing the quality of services throughout the entire value chain within the destination.

2. Identifying Initiatives for Advancing Premium-Class Offerings by DMOs: The aim was to determine managers' expectations concerning the actions that DMOs can undertake to enhance the success of developing premium-class offerings within the destination.

3. Exploring the Future Outlook and Trends for the Development of Premium-Class Hotels: This sought to gather insights on managers' perspectives regarding the future development and trends related to premium-class hotels.

4. Examining the Model of Cooperation between Premium-Class Hotels and Other Key Stakeholders in the Destination: The objective was to understand how premium-class hotels can collaborate with other significant stakeholders within the destination for mutual benefit.

The research aimed to analyze directors' perspectives on strategies for enhancing service quality in premium-class hotels and the success of premium-class offerings within a destination. Using a content analysis methodology, both qualitative and quantitative aspects were explored. Categories were identified for each open-ended question, resulting in a structured quantitative representation. A qualitative coding process revealed distinct themes, subthemes, and concepts from directors' responses. A keyword-driven approach refined the quantitative analysis by connecting responses to specific themes. This methodology provided a nuanced exploration, combining qualitative richness with a structured quantitative framework, ensuring a thorough examination of the data and contributing to robust findings.

The criteria for selecting the sample:

1. Hotel companies that have 5-star and 4-star hotels in their portfolio based on the Croatian rating system of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport as of January 2023.

2. Hotel companies located in the Adriatic Croatia

Only hotel companies that comply with both criteria were considered. Hotel companies that have their 5-star hotels in more than one Croatian administrative region were counted once. Still, the online survey was distributed to sales and/or marketing directors responsible for the portfolio in the specific region. This was applied in one case only.

In accordance with the provisions outlined in the Croatian Accounting Law, the sample of hotel companies in Croatia includes 10 large companies with over 250 employees and 2 medium-sized companies with 50 to 250 employees. Out of the total of 12 hotel companies contacted for the survey, 11 sales and/or marketing directors and directors of operations actively participated and completed the online questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 84.6%.

The gender distribution of directors, categorized by male and female representation, can be graphically depicted to visually represent the gender composition.

Based on the data provided, the breakdown of directors by educational background, and age group is as follows:

- Educational Background:

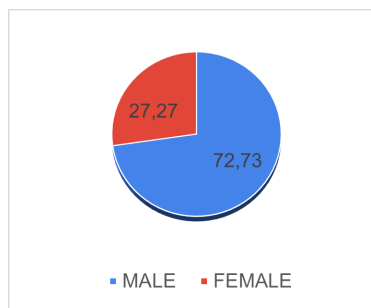
Directors with Master of Arts (M.A.) degree: 72.8%

Directors with Master of Science (M. Sc.) degree: 27.2%

Please note that the table represents the percentage distribution of directors within each age group.

The majority of the sample consists of directors with 15-19 years of working experience and 10-14 years of working experience, comprising 72.8% of the total.

Croatia boasts a total of 62 5-star hotels, including those with special standards such as Radisson, Sheraton, West In, Hilton, and Lone. This constitutes 8.20% of the overall hotel landscape in the country. When examining the number of beds in all Croatian hotels and contrasting them with those in the highest category, the latter accounts for 14.41%. Specifically, hotels of the highest category contribute 17,660 beds. However, when comparing this figure with the total bed count in categorized tourist facilities (excluding beds in households), the share of beds in top-tier hotels diminishes to 4.29%. Incorporating beds in households and other accommodation facilities, which exceed 700,000, into the total bed count in categorized tourist facilities results in hotels claiming 11.26% of the share. Yet, the share of beds in the highest-category hotels in this scenario is only 1.58%. The hotel companies included in the sample collectively manage a total of 22 5-star hotels. When considering the overall number of 5-star hotels in the Adriatic Croatia region, this indicates that the hotel



Source: authors' analyses

Figure 1: Distribution of male and female sales and/or marketing directors

Table 1: Age groups of sales and/or marketing directors

AGE GROUP	FREQUENCY	%
30-39	6	54,55
40-49	4	36,36
50-59	1	9,09
	11	100

Source: authors' analyses

companies from the sample oversee approximately 45.8% of the total 5-star hotels in the area.

4 Results

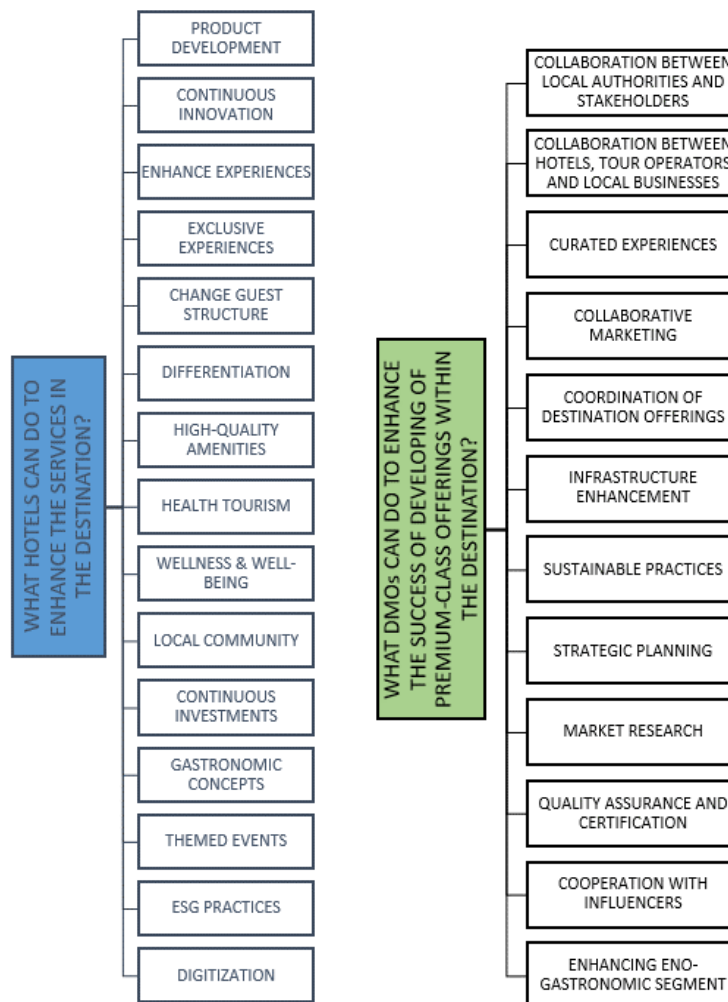
In order to gather directors' perspectives on specific actions that hotel companies with premium-class hotels in their portfolio could undertake to significantly enhance the quality of services throughout the entire value chain within the destination, directors were provided with the opportunity to share their opinions in the online questionnaire. They were encouraged to write about their thoughts and comments as extensively as they desired. The same approach was adopted when gathering opinions on the actions that destination management organizations (DMOs) can take to enhance the success of developing premi-

um-class offerings within the destination.

Based on the received comments and opinions, the authors analyzed and synthesized the common viewpoints derived from all the comments and the views expressed by the directors in the survey questionnaire. The data was quantitatively expressed by identifying number of categories and linking specific views to each category (for each open-ended question). This approach allowed for a systematic categorization and analysis of the data, providing a structured framework to understand the quantitative aspects of the information. 15 categories were identified for the first question and 12 for the second.

The abovementioned is presented graphically in Figure 2.

In the following table the main themes, subthemes and concepts that emerged are presented.



Source: authors' analyses

Figure 2: The common categories for actions hotels and DMOs can take to support the development of premium-class offerings within the destination

RQ1: What role do premium-class hotels play in significantly enhancing the quality of services throughout the entire value chain within the destination?	RQ2: What is the role of DMOs in enhancing the success of developing premium-class offerings within the destination?
MAIN THEME 1 Customer-Centric Excellence SUBTHEMES 1. Local Community Engagement Concept 1: <i>Involvement of the local community in service development</i> 2. Differentiation Strategies Concept 2: <i>Strategies to distinguish premium-class hotels from competitors</i> 3. Exclusive Experiences Concept 3: <i>Creation of unique and exclusive guest experiences</i>	MAIN THEME 1 Collaborative Destination Development SUBTHEMES 1. Collaboration Among Tourism Entities Concept 1: <i>Collaborative initiatives among hotels, tour operators, and local businesses</i> 2. Collaboration with Local Authorities Concept 2: <i>Collaboration with local authorities for destination development</i>
MAIN THEME 2 Upscale Offerings SUBTHEMES 1. High-Quality Amenities Concept 1: <i>Provision of amenities emphasizing quality and luxury</i> 2. Luxurious Spa and Wellness Centers Concept 2: <i>Development of spa and wellness centers for premium guests</i>	MAIN THEME 2 Curated and Experiential Tourism SUBTHEMES 1. Development of Curated Experiences Concept 1: <i>Creation of carefully curated and customized guest experiences</i> 2. Enogastronomic Segments Concept 2: <i>Emphasis on gastronomic experiences within the destination</i>
MAIN THEME 3 Innovation and Sustainability SUBTHEMES 1. Digitization Strategies Concept 1: <i>Integration of digital technologies for enhanced guest experiences</i> 2. ESG Practices Concept 2: <i>Adoption of Environmental, Social, and Governance practices</i>	MAIN THEME 3 Infrastructure and Planning SUBTHEMES 1. Infrastructure Enhancement Concept 1: <i>Development and improvement of destination infrastructure</i> 2. Well-Defined Planning Concept 2: <i>Strategic and well-defined planning for destination growth</i>
MAIN THEME 4 Collaborative Strategies SUBTHEME 1. Cooperation with Main Stakeholders Concept 1: <i>Collaborative efforts with stakeholders for mutual success</i>	MAIN THEME 4 Sustainability and Quality Assurance SUBTHEME 4 1. Sustainable Practices Concept 1: <i>Implementation of sustainable tourism practices</i> 2. Quality Assurance and Certification Concept 2: <i>Ensuring and certifying high-quality standards</i>

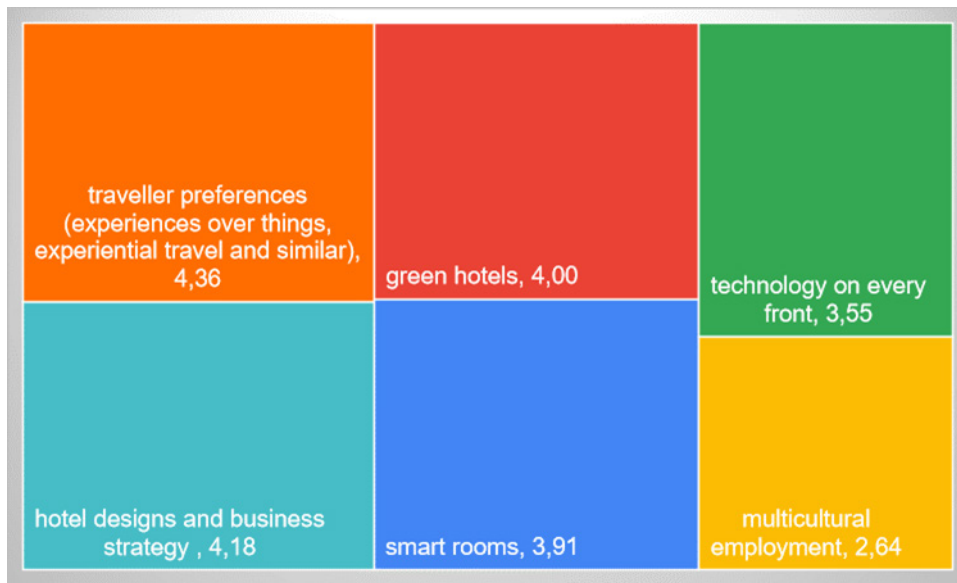
Figure 3: The main themes, subthemes and concepts for actions hotels and DMOs can take to support the development of premium-class offerings within the destination

The authors compared the directors' opinions with the new trends in luxury tourism and hospitality as pointed in the literature review section. The findings emerged are presented visually in the figure 4.

Overall, the opinions of the sales and/or marketing directors are consistent with the identified trends, indicating a recognition of travellers' evolving preferences and demands, the significance of unique and visually appealing hotel designs, and the growing importance of sustainability in the industry. Authors further compared the female and male director opinions. The comparison is presented

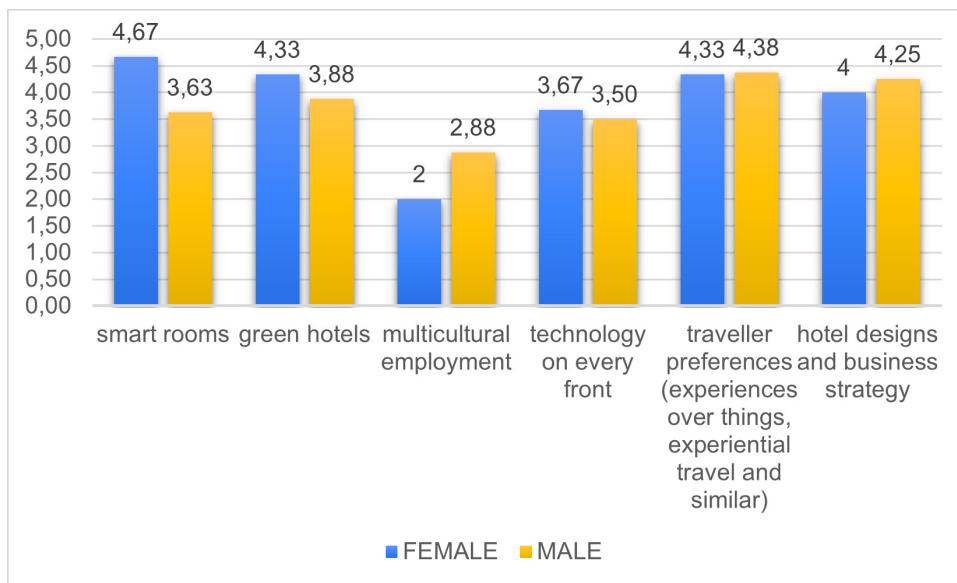
graphically in Figure 5.

Both female and male directors acknowledge the importance of traveller preferences as a key trend that will shape the future of the tourism industry. While females prioritize smart rooms and the green hotel concept, males emphasize hotel design and business strategy. These insights highlight the diverse perspectives within the industry and the multifaceted nature of future trends in hospitality.



Source: authors' analyses

Figure 4: The strength of different trends that will impact the future of the tourism industry in the eyes of Croatian sales and/or marketing directors



Source: authors' analyses

Figure 5: The comparison of opinion between female and male opinion

Based on the responses from the directors in the sample, the key success factors and positive perspectives regarding premium-class hotels in Croatia are as follows:

1. Growing Trend of Luxury Segment
2. Greater Resilience of Premium-Class Hotels to Crises
3. Market Saturation with Mass Tourism
4. Market Shift towards Slow Tourism
5. Growth in Personalization of Experiences
6. Authenticity of Destinations in Croatia
7. Attractive Destination for Luxury Segment
8. Strategic Location

These key success factors and positive perspectives collectively highlight the directors' optimism and belief in the potential growth and success of premium-class hotels in Croatia.

5 Discussion

Through content analysis, a comprehensive examination of directors' perspectives regarding the role of premium hotels and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in the advancement of premium-class offerings and quality tourism within a specific location resulted in the identification of several principal categories. Among the key concerns emphasized by directors within the realm of premium hotels are centred on aspects such as product development, ongoing innovation, the provision of enhanced and exclusive experiences, as well as the composition of the guest structure. Conversely, in the context of DMOs, noteworthy focal points encompass collaboration between local authorities and various stakeholders, cooperative endeavours among hotels, tour operators, and local businesses, the curation of experiences, joint marketing initiatives, and improvements in infrastructure. Prominently highlighted in the majority of comments and viewpoints expressed by directors within the sample, these keywords were extrapolated using content analysis methodology. Through qualitative analysis, four overarching themes emerged from the directors' responses. The first theme, Customer-Centric Excellence, underscores the directors' emphasis on tailoring services to meet the unique needs and preferences of guests, incorporating elements such as local community engagement and differentiation. The second theme, Upscale Offerings, highlights the commitment to providing premium amenities and services, particularly in the realms of high-quality amenities and luxurious spa and wellness centers. The third theme, Innovation and Sustainability, indicates a strategic focus on technological innovation and sustainable practices, reflected in categories like digitization and ESG practices. Lastly, the fourth theme, Collaborative Strategies, reveals the directors' recognition of the importance of collaboration with various stakeholders for overall success, as exemplified by the cooperation with main stakeholders.

The main findings that arise out of the qualitative analyses of the common viewpoints derived from all the comments and the views expressed by the directors on the specific actions hotels can undertake to enhance the quality of services in the destination are:

1. Continuous innovation in product development, innovations, particularly in the wellness segment and exclusive gourmet programs, is important for maintaining and enhancing a destination's appeal.

2. Differentiation between premium hotels and other accommodations relies on offering superior experiences and amenities, and investing in upscale dining, exclusive experiences, and luxurious spa, health and wellness centers.

3. Continuous improvement of services and curating exceptional guest experiences through unique gastronomic concepts, wellness programs, themed events, and immersive activities can elevate a destination's reputation as a premium locale.

4. Placing focus on health and wellness tourism and well-being can attract clientele with higher purchasing power who seek specialized experiences.

5. Hotels can support local artists and cultural events to provide guests with an enriching and authentic experience through collaborations with galleries, cultural programs, and themed evenings.

6. Collaboration and partnerships with local stakeholders are crucial for the success of exclusive packages that combine sports, wellness, gastronomy, nature, well-being, and local experiences.

7. Investing in premium segments can yield positive impacts on hotels and the local community. By attracting guests with greater purchasing power, it leads to a shift in guest structure, favoring high-end clientele. This, in turn, fosters the growth of local establishments and services, further enhancing the destination's overall appeal and economic development.

8. Communication and cooperation with the local community is essential.

9. Highlighting the venues of the destination and catering to guests engaging in different activities can enhance the overall visitor experience.

10. Active participation in tourist events and manifestations provides an opportunity to showcase premium services, engage with visitors, and elevate the destination's profile.

11. To stay competitive, it is essential for premium hotels to prioritize digitization, incorporate environmental, social and governance issues into business strategies, and diversify offerings.

Through qualitative analysis, four distinct themes emerged from the directors' responses. The first theme, Collaborative Destination Development, signifies a shared emphasis on collaborative efforts among hotels, tour operators, local businesses, and authorities for the holistic devel-

opment of the destination. The second theme, Curated and Experiential Tourism, underscores the importance placed on offering curated and experiential tourism, with specific attention to curated experiences and enogastronomic segments. The third theme, Infrastructure and Planning, highlights a strategic focus on infrastructure development, planning, and obtaining necessary permits for the enhancement of the destination. The fourth theme, Sustainability and Quality Assurance, reflects a collective commitment to sustainability practices and maintaining high quality in offerings, as evidenced by categories like sustainable practices and quality assurance and certification.

The main findings that arise out of the qualitative analyses of the common viewpoints derived from all the comments and the views expressed by the directors on the specific actions DMOs can undertake to enhance the success of developing of premium-class offerings within the destination:

1. Collaboration between local authorities and businesses is key in implementing changes and engaging the local community in decision-making processes. These findings align with the research outcomes presented by Fairley (2019). DMOs should foster open communication and collaboration with local authorities and regulatory bodies, build strong relationships based on mutual understanding and shared goals, engage in regular meetings and consultations to address challenges, seek feedback, and advocate for the needs of hotels and other service providers and investors, actively participate in relevant industry associations or chambers of commerce to amplify the collective voice and influence decision-making processes.

2. Fostering collaboration among hotels, tour operators, and local businesses can create exclusive packages and curated experiences, including partnerships for guided tours, VIP access to attractions, personalized services, and opportunities to explore hidden gems.

3. DMOs play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration between hotels and other tourism stakeholders, promoting local products and culture, and investing in overall infrastructure, facilities and aesthetics of the destination to raise their value in the premium tourism segment. One mean could be through constant education and communication with stakeholders, local community included.

4. DMO can enhance networking and collaboration among stakeholders through stakeholder engagement, coordination of destination offerings, and collaborative marketing.

5. Providing help and support for beach concessions, parking concessions, and permit acquisition facilitates new products and investments, attracting business ventures and enhancing the visitor experience. DMOs should facilitate the process of securing beach concessions by streamlining administrative procedures and providing information on best practices. DMOs should collaborate with local transportation authorities to develop comprehensive park-

ing plans that prioritize convenience and accessibility for visitors.

6. Considering sustainable practices and environmentally friendly solutions during waterfront development can contribute to the long-term success and appeal of the area, such as integrating green spaces, promoting sustainable transportation options, and implementing waste management systems.

7. DMOs should provide valuable information on tourist preferences, market research, and industry trends that guide the destination's policies and strategies for sustainable growth.

8. DMOs play a crucial role in advocating for the development of premium products/experiences and facilities by ensuring that funds prioritize such establishments.

9. To revitalize airline operations and restore them to pre-Covid levels, a collaborative approach involving subsidies, lobbying efforts, and engagement with the local community can be pursued.

10. To effectively target the premium segment, strategies such as special marketing campaigns, cooperation with influencers, and organizing tailored events and activities can be employed.

11. Prioritizing the development and promotion of premium health programs and services in areas with a rich tradition of health tourism can be achieved through cooperation, quality assurance and certification, and collaboration with travel agents and tour operators specializing in wellness tourism.

12. The local cuisine of a destination significantly contributes to the overall experience of tourists during their visit. It serves as a vital cultural aspect, allowing travellers to immerse themselves in the unique flavours, traditions, and culinary heritage of the place they are exploring. The culinary exploration becomes a memorable part of the travel experience, leaving a lasting impression on tourists. Moreover, a destination's reputation for exceptional local cuisine can become a significant draw for tourists, encouraging them to visit specifically for gastronomic adventures. Constantly enhancing the eno-gastronomic offerings of a destination is crucial for DMOs. By doing so, DMOs can capitalize on the significant impact that food and beverage experiences have on attracting and satisfying tourists.

The authors compared the directors' opinions with trends that shape the luxury tourism. The following findings emerged:

1. Traveller Preferences: Sales and/or marketing directors assigned the greatest importance to traveller preferences, particularly the shift towards prioritizing experiences over material possessions. This aligns with the trend identified in the literature (Global Data, 2018; Novotna and Kunc, 2019; Krešić and Gjurašić, 2022; Amatulli et al., 2021) which emphasizes experiential travel and the desire for unique, immersive, and memorable experiences.

2. Hotel Designs and Business Strategy: The directors also recognized the significance of hotel designs and business strategies that cater to evolving consumer preferences. This includes the emergence of “cool” and luxury brands that are visually appealing and shareable on platforms like Instagram. The focus on local design and flavor suggests a growing demand for authentic and culturally relevant experiences. Experiential social spaces were also mentioned, indicating the importance of creating engaging and social environments within hotels.

3. Green Hotels: The directors acknowledge the importance of sustainable practices in the hospitality industry. The emphasis on green hotels aligns with the growing awareness and concern for environmental issues among travellers and the wider community. This suggests that the integration of eco-friendly initiatives and sustainable practices is increasingly seen as a crucial aspect of future hotel development and operations. Directors have acknowledged the significance of the “green hotel” trend. The study conducted by Sunhaji and Wihuda (2023) emphasizes that spiritual leaders, who possess spiritual values, altruistic love, and vision, have a positive impact on encouraging voluntary green actions from their subordinates. Additionally, it has been found that spiritual leadership fosters service innovative behavior among employees (Alfarajat and Emeagwali, 2021). As a result, hotel companies are encouraged to promote such an atmosphere within their organizations. As they prioritize environmentally friendly approaches, it is likely that we will see significant progress in fostering more eco-conscious and responsible operations among hotels and related businesses. The collective effort towards a greener approach can have a substantial and positive impact on the industry’s overall sustainability and contribute to a more responsible and environmentally conscious future.

Directors from the sample emphasized these as the top three trends.

When comparing the female and male director opinions the results show that female directors associate the greatest importance with the concept of smart rooms. This suggests that they recognize the growing significance of technology and automation in enhancing guest experiences and convenience within hotel rooms. The second most important trend for females is the green hotel concept, aligning with their emphasis on sustainability. This indicates their recognition of the increasing importance of eco-friendly practices and environmental responsibility in the hospitality industry. Females, like their male counterparts, highlight traveller preferences as a crucial trend that will shape the future of the industry. This underscores the importance of understanding and catering to the evolving needs and desires of modern travellers. Male directors assign the highest importance to traveller preferences. This emphasizes their recognition of the significant impact that changing traveller preferences and behaviors have on the hospitality industry. The second most important trend for

males is hotel design and business strategy. This indicates their focus on creating visually appealing and distinctive hotel experiences, aligning with the emerging trend of “cool” and visually Instagrammable brands. Similar to females, males also highlight traveller preferences as an important trend in the future. This suggests a shared understanding of the evolving demands and expectations of travellers.

The key success factors and positive perspectives regarding premium-class hotels in Croatia are as follows:

- **Growing Trend of Luxury Segment:** Directors recognize the increasing demand and popularity of the luxury segment in the hospitality industry. This trend suggests a favorable market environment for premium-class hotels in Croatia.

- **Greater Resilience of Premium-Class Hotels to Crises:** The directors perceive premium-class hotels as having a higher level of resilience compared to other hotel segments during times of crisis. This resilience could be attributed to factors such as their target market, pricing strategies, and ability to provide unique experiences.

- **Market Saturation with Mass Tourism:** The directors believe that the market in Croatia is saturated with mass tourism. This implies that there is a need for alternative offerings and experiences, which premium-class hotels can provide.

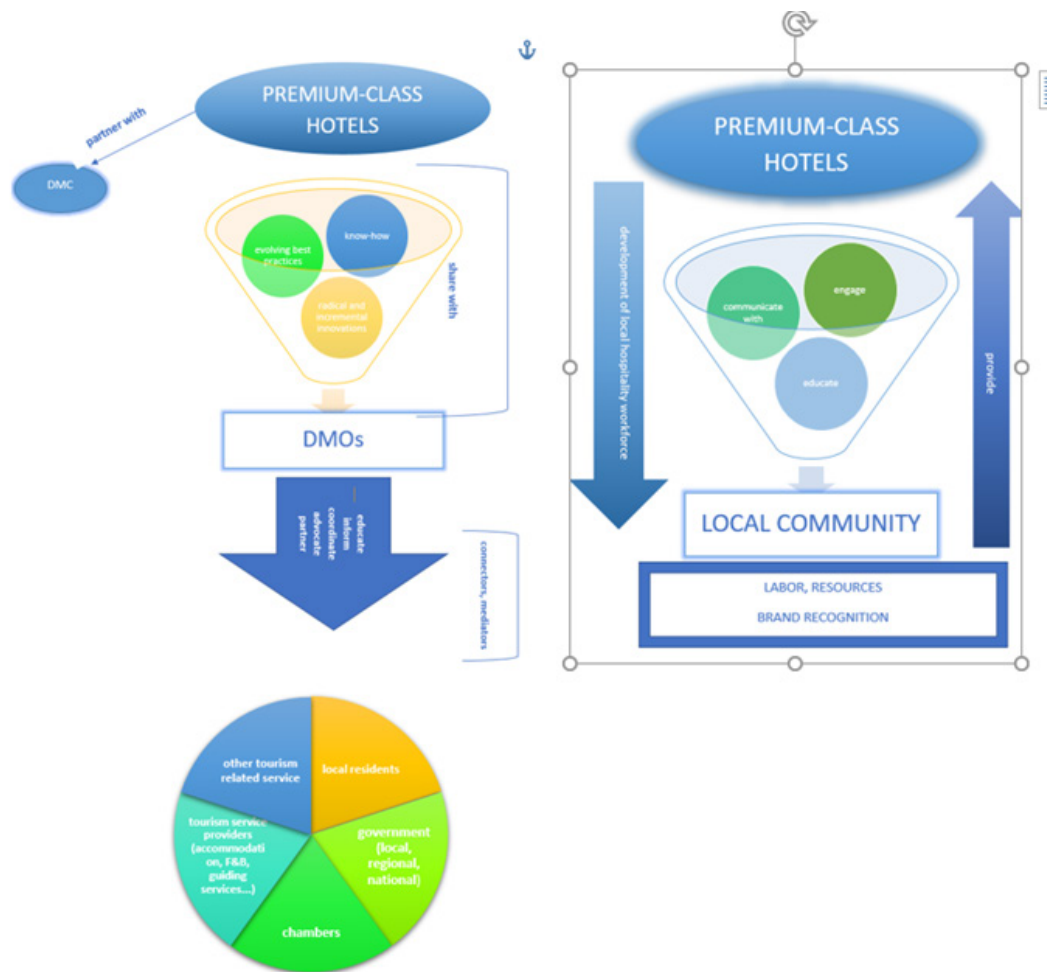
- **Market Shift towards Slow Tourism:** The directors indicate that the market is shifting towards slow tourism, which aligns with Croatia’s potential to offer leisurely and immersive experiences. Premium-class hotels are well-positioned to cater to this growing demand for slower-paced and experiential travel.

- **Designing Personalized and Unique Experiences:** Croatian hotel companies are seen as having the resources and knowledge to design personalized and unique experiences specifically tailored to the luxury segment. This capability enhances the value proposition of premium-class hotels.

- **Attractive Destination for Luxury Segment:** Croatia is perceived as an attractive destination for the luxury segment. Its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and diverse offerings contribute to its appeal among luxury travellers..

- **Strategic Location:** Directors recognize Croatia’s favorable location, close to key markets actively seeking premium-class services and experiences. This proximity can provide a competitive advantage for premium-class hotels in terms of accessibility and market reach.

Based on the research results, views and comments of the respondents and grounded in the literature on the topic of luxury hospitality and premium-class hotel services, the authors propose a model of cooperation between different stakeholders in the tourism ecosystem that fosters high-quality and responsible tourism driven by the development of premium-class hotel product. The model is presented hereafter (Scheme 1).



Source: author's contribution

Scheme 1: Model of cooperation between premium-class hotels and other key stakeholders in the destination

Undeniably, the concept of luxury in hospitality has evolved beyond material possessions and physical amenities. Today, the 'new luxury' is more focused on providing personalized experiences and emotional connections with guests. Guests seek a sense of familiarity, comfort, and a home-like atmosphere during their stay. This shift in expectations challenges the traditional notion of luxury travel and necessitates a deeper understanding of guest preferences and desires. Creating the 'home-from-home' feeling involves going beyond the physical aspects of the hotel and focusing on creating a warm and welcoming environment. It requires attention to detail, personalized service, and an understanding of the guests' individual needs and preferences. Peace and tranquillity are highly valued by luxury travellers, as they seek respite from their busy lives and seek moments of relaxation and serenity.

Furthermore, luxury experiences today go beyond the tangible aspects of a hotel stay (Kiessling et al., 2009; Williady et al., 2022). Guests are looking for meaningful and authentic connections with the service and the brand. They value experiences that evoke emotions, create memories, and provide a sense of exclusivity. Hotel companies play a crucial role in shaping the perception of prestige and symbolic value through innovative service offerings. To meet these evolving expectations, hotel companies need to continuously innovate and adapt their services. This includes both radical innovations that bring about significant changes and incremental innovations that improve existing services. By staying at the forefront of innovation, luxury hotels can differentiate themselves and provide unique and memorable experiences that meet the desires of their discerning guests. Overall, the 'new luxury' in hospitality is

characterized by a focus on personalized experiences, emotional connections, and creating a sense of home and tranquillity. Hotel companies that embrace these shifts in guest expectations and continuously innovate in their services are well-positioned to succeed in the evolving landscape of luxury travel. However, the success of hotel companies alone is insufficient, particularly in enhancing destination competitiveness by improving the overall quality of other services and products within the destination. While hotels are important stakeholders that significantly influence destination competitiveness (Mendieta-Peñalver et al., 2016), there are other stakeholders whose products, services, and contributions also contribute to the destination's attractiveness and competitiveness. Thirumaran and Raghav (2016) emphasize the need to highlight the distinctions among the primary resources of the destination, such as attractions, accommodations, infrastructure, and service personnel. It is crucial that complementary services expected by guests in the destination are provided at a comparable or closely similar level of high-quality comfort.

In this context, hotel companies that offer premium-class services should prioritize the creation of personalized and memorable experiences for guests, while also actively collaborating with other key stakeholders in the tourism industry, including residents, to collectively enhance the overall value proposition of the destination. The primary partner for hotel companies is the destination management organization (DMO) or the entity responsible for coordinating various stakeholders within the destination (Presenza, 2023). The collaboration between hotel companies and DMOs should be considered fundamental in establishing a well-organized destination that aims to provide premium-class offerings and embrace the principles of slow tourism. DMOs play a vital role in curating destination narratives, co-developing and co-designing the destination product, and ultimately promoting it. Hotel companies should share their knowledge and continuously evolving best practices in creating premium hotel experiences and other complementary services that meet market expectations.

The exchange of knowledge, best practices, and innovations between hotel companies and DMOs will facilitate the tasks of DMOs, particularly in the aspect of fostering the collaborative development of high-quality products and services within the destination. These products and services can complement the offerings of premium hotels and create a cohesive and comprehensive destination experience. The role of DMOs extends to providing guidance and training to various stakeholders in the destination, with the aim of creating responsible and innovative tourism experiences that contribute to the overall quality and desirability of the tourism destination. It is important to note that the success of a destination should not be solely measured by an increase in tourist arrivals. DMOs also play a crucial role in fostering collaboration and promotion

across industries, as well as taking on the role of influencers for the destination (Nicole, 2022). Therefore, a strong partnership, cooperation, and co-development of experiences between hotels and DMOs are highly recommended.

The central aspect of socially responsible business practices involves showing respect for, engaging with, and effectively communicating with the local community. It also includes investing in the local community and supporting its sustainable growth. Establishing a partnership with the local community is mutually beneficial for both hotels and residents, as it fosters a healthy and sustainable development. There are numerous examples of how hotels can contribute to the local economy while also ensuring that the local culture is deeply integrated into every aspect of a guest's experience. This expectation is particularly relevant for premium-class hotels, as they have the opportunity to introduce local sourcing practices, such as using local produce, bedding, and entertainment, among other initiatives. Supporting local artisans and crafts can greatly enhance the value of the experiences provided by premium-class hotels. There are various approaches to achieving this. One example is organizing and promoting specific workshops that highlight local crafts, which also fosters the co-creation of authentic experiences. Guests are often eager to discover hidden gems and engage in the most authentic activities. They have a genuine interest in exploring new cultures and traditions (Skift, 2018). Premium-class hotels can contribute to the local community by hosting important and interesting social events, which positively impacts their reputation. Ultimately, the human capital and individuals within a destination ecosystem play a crucial role as integrators of knowledge and skills (Boes et al., 2016). Maintaining constant communication with the local community can raise awareness and provide new perspectives on attractive job opportunities within the premium-class hotel sector. This approach serves as an excellent means to foster the development of the local hospitality workforce. Hotel companies can implement paid volunteering programs, allowing their employees to dedicate time to educate the local community on topics related to luxury hospitality, premium-class services, and employment opportunities. Collaboration with educational institutions can be established to develop specific training programs. Additionally, hotel companies can drive positive change through targeted donation programs that focus on charitable themes aligned with local challenges. These initiatives can include youth programs, animal welfare, environmental conservation, healthcare, and more. By educating both guests and community members, hotel companies not only raise awareness but also actively contribute to the sustainable development of the local community. The key to achieving enduring positive outcomes lies in the community's active participation, transcending the role of a mere observer to become an integral contributor to the process. Local community play a vital role in identi-

lying and promoting tourist resources and attractions that serve as the foundation for tourism development. The engagement of the community in decision-making enhances the trust of individuals in the tourism sector. First of all, the key to fostering the active involvement of the local community in the development of high-quality tourism products lies predominantly in the attitude, motivation, aspirations, vision, and engagement of both the local government and the destination management system. Their shared commitment to achieving a superior level of quality in tourism products within the destination sets the stage for creating the necessary conditions for a comprehensive and top-notch offering by all stakeholders involved. Without the local community acknowledging the concerted efforts of the local government and destination management, their participation is likely to be limited to mere information exchange and generic consultations. Hence, it becomes imperative for the local government and the destination management system, equipped with the tools and enhanced powers provided by the 2024 Law on Tourism in Croatia, to clearly define priorities and projects. These entities should strategically invest and encourage participation through various means, including co-financing. The local government should revitalize and repurpose all of its primarily abandoned buildings and land holdings to align with the new and envisioned image of the destination. This entails either selling or leasing these properties under specifically defined criteria, offering preferential pricing, or providing other forms of support. Conversely, activities and projects that do not align with the envisioned goals can be deterred through decision-making and regulatory measures. This approach allows them to spotlight endeavors that benefit the local population, contributing significantly to the advancement of high-quality tourism through offerings such as gourmet establishments with refined cuisine, sophisticated dining outlets, premium-themed bars, glamour galleries, chic boutiques, accommodations, green spaces and gardens, eco-tourism and nature trails, and more. Subsequently, much like the transformative influence of a snowflake, the local population begins to adapt their offerings. This adaptive approach is the sole method through which the local community can actively and indirectly foster the advancement of high-quality tourism within the destination.

Collaborating with destination management companies (DMCs) is crucial for allowing guests to create unique and personalized travel experiences. While premium hotels excel at crafting exclusive services, DMCs possess the expertise in packaging the cultural and natural resources of a destination into value-added products and experiences for guests. Customization, considered as the fifth “C” in the new definition of luxury, emphasizes the importance of tailoring experiences to individual preferences (Skift, 2018). By partnering with DMCs, hotels can ensure that they meet the evolving demands of the industry and pro-

vide guests with exceptional and personalized experiences.

6 Conclusion

The directors emphasize the importance of investing in premium offerings, collaborating with local stakeholders, and providing unique and exceptional experiences to attract discerning travellers and foster the overall growth and development of the destination. On the other side, they strongly believe that DMOs should highlight the importance of collaboration, strategic planning, infrastructure development, sustainable practices, and targeted marketing to attract the premium segment, enhance the visitor experience, and drive sustainable growth in the tourism industry.

DMOs can play an important role in ensuring the seamless integration of premium hotel offerings and their associated benefits into the destination’s overall tourism ecosystem. This can be achieved through various means but collaboration is essential. DMOs can foster strong partnerships and open channels of communication with premium hotel companies in the destination. By actively engaging with these stakeholders, DMOs can stay informed about the latest innovations, market trends, and customer preferences, enabling them to provide valuable guidance and support. DMOs can actively promote the premium hotel offerings and the destination as a whole, leveraging their marketing expertise to attract target audiences seeking high-quality experiences. This can include highlighting the unique features, cultural authenticity, and sustainability initiatives associated with the premium hotel products and other premium experiences developed in the destination. DMOs can advocate for policies and regulations that support the growth and sustainability of premium offerings in the destination.

Directors highlighted Croatia’s appeal as a desirable market for luxury travellers and expressed optimism regarding the future development of premium-class hotels in the country.

In summary, fostering high-quality tourism products in Croatia requires robust state support. This includes implementing a favorable tax policy, streamlining legislative regulations for the hotel industry, and expediting procedures for the sustainable valorization of valuable state property. The current development trajectory, marked by a surge in coastal capacity and a predominance of seasonal, low-quality accommodations with limited economic impact, is deemed detrimental to Croatia’s economy and society. Reorienting towards a more sustainable model is imperative for positive development.

Contributions of the study

This article makes multiple significant contributions:

1. **Extensive Literature Review:** The article presents an extensive literature review on the concepts of luxury tourism, destination cooperation, and collaborative partnerships within the destination ecosystem. This review provides a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and serves as a valuable resource for further research and analysis.

2. **Practical Insights for Managers:** The study offers actionable insights for hotel managers, destination management organizations, and policymakers. It highlights the need for nuanced approaches to meet evolving guest expectations, foster sustainable tourism practices, and enhance the overall quality of the tourism experience. This comprehensive understanding will guide stakeholders in navigating the dynamic landscape of premium tourism and contribute to the long-term success of both premium-class hotels and destination development.

3. **Focus on Corporate Social Responsibility:** The article emphasizes the importance of sustainable tourism development and corporate social responsibility (for hotel companies in particular).

4. **Premium Destination Offer:** The article emphasizes the significance of a premium destination offer. It highlights the benefits of developing a unique and high-quality tourism experience that can attract luxury travelers and enhance the destination's reputation and competitiveness.

5. **Model of cooperation between premium-class hotels and other key stakeholders in the destination:** The article provides a clear and structured approach to initiating a prudent and long-lasting cooperation between different stakeholders. The model that focuses on collaboration within a destination, specifically involving premium-class hotels, DMOs, and the local community is presented. The model highlights the joint efforts of these stakeholders in promoting sustainability and enhancing the overall visitor experience. The model presented in this paper showcases a comprehensive approach to nurturing collaboration and synergies among crucial stakeholders in destination development, emphasizing the significance of involving diverse stakeholders to elevate the overall destination experience. This model offers a practical framework for fostering effective cooperation and aligning collective efforts towards the shared objective of promoting premium-class experiences and fostering sustainable growth in the destination.

In conclusion, these contributions make the article a valuable resource for researchers, destination managers, and hotel managers seeking to understand and implement effective strategies for the "new luxury" tourism, destination cooperation, and collaborative partnerships.

Study limitations

Authors acknowledge the limitations of the current study. Firstly, subjectivity in responses: The data collection method involves directors providing their opinions in an online questionnaire. The subjective nature of opinions may introduce bias, as individual perceptions and attitudes can vary. Additionally, the encouragement for extensive comments may result in qualitative data that could be challenging to quantify and analyze objectively.

Secondly, lack of diverse perspectives: The study focuses primarily on the perspectives of directors, potentially overlooking the views of other key stakeholders such as customers, employees, or local communities. A more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within the tourism ecosystem may require incorporating diverse perspectives.

Thirdly, reliance on self-reported data: The findings are based on self-reported data provided by directors in the survey. This introduces the possibility of response bias, where participants might provide answers they perceive as favorable or socially desirable, potentially affecting the accuracy of the results.

Qualitative Analysis Challenges are also worth mentioning. The qualitative analysis of open-ended questions involves categorizing and synthesizing responses. The subjective nature of this process may introduce interpretation bias, and different analysts might categorize responses differently, impacting the reliability and consistency of the analysis.

Assumption of homogeneity could be considered as another limitation. The study seems to assume homogeneity among directors and their perspectives. It may be valuable to explore potential variations within the director group, such as differences based on hotel size, ownership structure, or individual background and experiences.

Suggestions for future research

Authors propose further research directions. Specifically, it is suggested to conduct a study focusing on the local community, particularly in destinations with a high concentration of premium-class hotels. This research would aim to explore the community's perspectives on the development of premium-class offerings in the destination and their opinions on the impact of premium hotels on the local community. Furthermore, conducting interviews with directors of local and regional DMOs in Croatia would provide valuable insights into their views on the development of high-quality and slow tourism, as well as their collaborations with premium hotels in their respective destinations. Additionally, involving the national tourism board in the research would help to provide a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the topic.

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