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Tourist complaints on arrival: common triggers

Quejas del turista a la llegada: desencadenantes comunes

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Abstract

Tourist apartments (AT in Spanish), as a type of extra-hotel accommodation, are a very popular option nowadays. In many cases, the owner of the apartment is the person in charge of guaranteeing the reservation process from start to finish. On the other hand, tourists, informed of their obligations as users of the service, frequently do not comply with aspects that later have a domino-effect both on their own state of mind and on that of the hotelier. The aim of this study is to relate direct personal inner feelings after travelling with external complaints against tourist apartment owners.

By means of an interview carried out among 100 AT owners in different Spanish locations as well as a collection of comments published online by travelers, it was revealed how fatigue generated by the journey has a significant influence on tourist complaints during the first hours of their stay. This exploratory study represents a timely contribution to the analysis of variables that affect the change in mood of tourist users, and which provides a forecast of their behavior and its impact on the feelings of AT owners.

Keywords: apartment owners, complaints, tourist, arrival, tourist apartment

Resumen

Los apartamentos turísticos (AT), como tipo de alojamiento extrahotelero, están a la orden del día. En numerosas ocasiones, el propietario del apartamento es la persona encargada de garantizar del proceso de reserva de inicio a fin. Por otra parte, los turistas, informados de sus obligaciones como usuarios de un servicio, frecuentemente no cumplen con aspectos que más tarde tiene un efecto dominó tanto en su propio estado de ánimo como en el del hotelero. El propósito del estudio es relacionar sentimientos personales directos después de un viaje con quejas externas contra los propietarios de apartamentos turísticos.

A través de una entrevista a 100 propietarios de AT en diferentes ubicaciones españolas y recolección de comentarios publicados online por viajeros, se reveló cómo el cansancio generado por el viaje influye notablemente en las quejas del turista durante las primeras horas de su estancia.

Este estudio exploratorio supone una contribución oportuna para el análisis de variables que afectan al cambio de humor del usuario turístico, lo que brinda una previsión de comportamiento del mismo y su impacto en los sentimientos de los propietarios de AT.

Palabras clave: quejas, turista, llegada, apartamento turístico, propietarios de apartamentos turísticos

1. Introduction

The growth and transformation of tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented fact to be considered. Consequently, and in response to high tourist demand, the ATs have become a more economical option that responds to the current tourist demand for accommodation. The increase of tourist apartments has placed owners in the front line to deal with mood swings and complaints from tourists, especially on arrival.

ATs in the autonomous community of Extremadura, as it is the case of study, are regulated by article 61 of Law 2/2011, of January 31, on the Development and Modernization of Tourism in Extremadura providing standards (rights and

obligations) for both parties involved in reservations, that is, service providers and service users.

Given the fact that tourism has become an interactive process between the hotelier and the traveller (McIntos et al., 1995), a higher account of issues and complaints are therefore common occurrences (Jafari, 2005; Urry, 2002).

Besides, information provided by opinions of previous travelers published online are considered a credible reality for those about to start their journey, facilitating online promotion of tourist establishments based on personal experiences (Sheldon et al., 2003; Sturienė, 2019; Štefko et al., 2011).

Taking into account the fact that travellers may be out of the comfort zone, most likely suffering from tiredness and that this fact may have a relevant impact on their behaviour (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) on arrival, the importance of complaints may be considered a valuable source for improvement but also a source of stress for the parties involved in the process of the reservation.

Tourists generally behave in a different way and have a different mindset (Borsboom, 2005) while on holiday (Cohen, 2004; Jafari, 2005; Pearce, 2005), which might originate distress and mood change. For this reason, it is key to understand internal processes in the mind of travellers and how these may affect the tourism industry and influence complaints, from the start, for the consecution of personal purposes that are influenced by those negative feelings (Sánchez González, 2021) and their impact on apartment owners.

2. Literature review

Tourist behaviour is a top research topic with lack of comprehensive information (Reisinger & Turner, 2002) as of yet; however, it is key to understand the insides of the tourism industry in order to generate service excellence. Being aware of the tourist complaint process, its causes and consequences can only bring light and positive outcomes for all parties involved in each booking.

The fact that tourists have limited time for their programmed leisure activities may affect their behaviour and result in complaints (Kotler et al., 2002) directly aimed at the owner of the establishment. Besides, being unfamiliar with the surroundings increases the probability of stress and discontent (Cohen-Hattab & Kerber, 2004). If added to travelling tiredness, the tourist experience may be badly affected, generating feelings of discomfort.

This literature review attempts to link the mind-body connection experienced by a tourist on arrival with subsequent complaints. As MacCormack and Lindquist (2019) state: “Our bodies play a powerful role in shaping our moment-to-moment experiences, perceptions and behaviors — whether we are hungry versus full, tired

versus rested or sick versus healthy,” and this can clearly have an impact on psychological experiences and the way they are perceived.

Table 1. Example of comments published online by AT guests

Examples of comments by guests	
About Personnel	“We struggle to understand how if we arrive late, we can’t stay in the apartment for longer the next day” “The staff did not understand that we did not want stairs in the apartment and refused to give us another apartment”.
About Cleaning	“We saw a hair by the window” “The owners did not provide clothes softener” “Although the apartment was very clean, the street entrance was not quite up to standard”
About Location	“Parking was hard, I can’t believe owners do not keep a street space for you” “Stairs are an obstacle when travelling with babies. Owners should always be there to help with the lifting of luggage”
About Comfort	“Not all rooms have a TV set and the coffee machine is far from modern”
ABout Quality/Price	“The price paid should include a car park space and breakfast” “The owners refused to return some of the money when I decided to leave earlier”
About Facilities/Services	“I knew I had booked an apartment in the town centre, but due to noise issues, I demanded a change of room and they owners refused to do so” “Apartment next to the historical centre, however I had to take a taxi to go to the university campus”

Source: Own

Four main constructs of our research will be analysed to try to clarify and highlight internal processes that affect negative behaviour from travellers.

2.1 Travelling Burnout (TB)

Burnout is frequently linked to tiredness and fatigue. As Pageaux’s definition states: “Tiredness is self-recognizable state in which a person feels to be inadequate to fulfil the given task, which reflects on feeling body comfort, weakness, slowness, and in cognitive plan as a feeling of futility” (Pageaux et al., 2015). Burnout can be classified as a reversible psychophysical condition that appears after expanded activities causing behavioural change and creating negative feelings (Copeland, 2021).

Travelling burnout, in this study, is referred to emotional exhaustion after a long time travelling and which leads to feelings of energy depletion and bad mood. Among common behavioural, symptoms coming from tiredness, acting on impulse (Patton et al., 1995) and loss of value can be mentioned.

When travellers arrive, the perspective of time they have is limited and the surroundings unfamiliar, which inevitably leads to cultural differences. A negative personal experience influenced by burnout then affects other individuals and experiences (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), progressing into distorted thoughts. The negativity created can then lead to counterargue messages (Clayton et al., 2019) and distorted thoughts.

Having taken into consideration the statements above, the first hypothesis can be drawn:

Hypothesis 1: Travel Burnout (TB) strongly influences Distorted Thoughts (DT)

2.2 Distorted Thoughts (DT)

Distorted thoughts provoked by exhaustion, hunger or any other aspect related to travelling is a matter of consideration in any type of research, as it frequently results in unpleasant situations, evoking negative emotional patterns that are repeated.

These initial emotions may have a direct impact on the surroundings and other individuals (Bastiaansen et al., 2019). The surrounding situational context can have a strong impact on the resulting emotional experience, since individuals, when under pressure, become afraid and angry (Buss & Perry, 1992), which leads to anxiety.

On is part, Tight (2018) indicates that “emotional ambivalence, conflict, restlessness, and even restlessness are experiences that we cannot eliminate from our condition without it being affected” (p. 313). Distorted thoughts inevitably lead to comparing and most likely judging without basic solid grounds at the time.

Considering the information above, the second hypothesis can be drawn:

Hypothesis 2: Distorted Thoughts (DT) strongly influence Unfair Comparisons (UC)

2.3 Unfair Comparisons (UC)

Although only temporal, comparisons frequently take place when individuals arrive at a place they are unfamiliar with (McCarthy & Morina, 2020). The recollection of thoughts of how the situation was back at home and how they envision the future suddenly takes place. Criteria-based comparisons, due to the mental state of the individual, occur against norms, requirements or rules (Morina, 2021).

This tendency to compare can lead to the generation of feelings of inferiority, sadness and even guilt, creating anger. Anger would be one of the main affective responses that would provide feedback to the person on the situations that arouse these emotions (Bastiaansen et al., 2019). Any comparison made would, no doubt, be biased and generate complaints.

At this stage, the third hypothesis can be drawn:

Hypothesis 3: Unfair Comparisons strongly influence Tourist Complaints on Arrival (TCA)

2.4 Tourist complaints on arrival (TCA)

Needless to say, trip duration affects mood and emotions in a significant way. Fatigue appears creating an overall mood that becomes stronger during longer trips.

Customer complaint behavior is heavily influenced by their own culture. It is known that culture influences the formation of preferences and customer satisfaction with products and services (Lee & Sparks, 2007; Li & Liu, 2022) argued that the difference in customers' culture has a direct correlation with the values they assign to the services they experience. However, when there are overwhelmed situations, the person's ability to control is affected, causing negative feelings and generating stress.

When service problems occur, the customer's confidence depends on the response and actions of the employees to make things better or worse (Lee & Sparks, 2007; Nguyen, 2021). The knowledge and perception of the feelings and emotions of travelers is vital (Sánchez & Fernández, 2018) to be able to design and offer the best product that suits their needs and encourage tourist loyalty and the promotion of accommodation, therefore avoiding failure (Chen & Tussyadiah, 2021).

Once the key constructs for the literature review have been provided, the research question that guides this study is: Can tiredness be the main cause of tourist complaints?

Table 2. Justification of variables

Constructs	Main indicators
Travel Burnout (TB)	TB1: Travelling burnout as a psychophysical condition causing negativity and behaviour change (Patton et al.,1995; Pageaux et al., 2013; Clayton et al., 2020; Copeland, 2021)
Distorted Thoughts (DT)	DT1: Emotional ambivalence affects human nature (Buss & Perry, 1992; Tight, 2018).
Unfair Comparisons (UC)	UC1: Criteria-based comparisons leading to generation of negative feelings (Bastiaansen et al.,2019; McCarthy & Morina, 2020; Morina, 2021).
Tourist Complaints on Arrival (TCA)	TCA1: Overwhelmed situations affecting customer experiences (Lee & Sparks, 2007; Liu et al., 2000; Nguyen, 2021; Chen & Tussyadiah, 2021).

Source: Own

Considering the information above, three main hypotheses can be drawn, whose direction is detailed in the model (see figure 1).

Hypothesis 1: Travel Burnout (TB) strongly influences Distorted Thoughts (DT)

Hypothesis 2: Distorted Thoughts (DT) strongly influence Unfair Comparisons (UC)

Hypothesis 3: Unfair Comparisons strongly influence Tourist Complaints on Arrival (TCA)

The narrow in Figure 1 represents the variable paths as well as the strong connection among them.

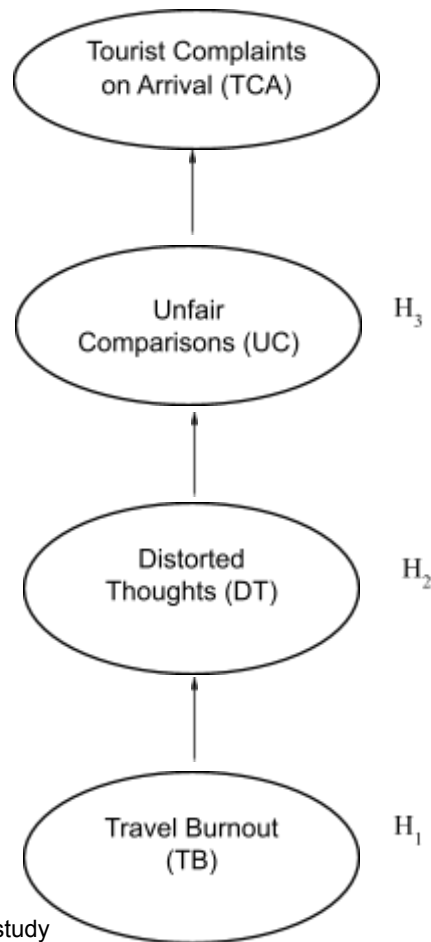


Figure 1. Hypotheses of the study

3. Method

Encouraged by the research question: Can tiredness be the main cause of tourist complaints? The approach of the study was fundamentally psychological in the sense that the aim was to relate direct personal inner feelings of tourists after travelling with external complaints against tourist apartment owners.

3.1. Stages of data recollection

The research started by identifying the four main constructs through literature review: travelling burnout, distorted thoughts, unfair comparison and tourist complaints on arrival.

The first stage involved searching for related past literature on tourist behaviour, complaint processes and internal mechanisms that may have led to bad mood and impact on commentary afterwards. Then, a brief introduction, previously recorded, was sent out by email to apartment owners about the factors to evaluate in a study regarding ATs. During three weeks in September 2022, phone calls to apartment owners were made asking for collaboration to take part in an interview with the aim to confirm key timeframes for tourists to complain.

The second phase of the research involved drafting the interview questions. After a period of validation of the items (by means of interviews asking 7 random participants), these were finally approved as they were considered easy to understand and suitable to obtain straight answers.

3.2. Instrument

Due to the typology of the study, the methods used were both the qualitative (short phone interviews) and quantitative (an 8-item questionnaire with dichotomous questions) as these proved to be easy, fast and cost-effective (Creswell & Clark, 2017), considering the number of participants. The online application employed to draft the items of the questionnaire was Google forms. A link was generated to then be sent via email/WhatsApp; it was available for answers for a period of a month.

3.3. Population

A total of 100 (n=100) participants that were apartment owners (30 males and 70 females) took part in the study, given the direct relationship with the subject matter being researched. Most of them had been in the tourism industry for over 7 years, which revealed awareness of the problem and knowledge this could have on their daily routines, not only at the present moment but also in the long run. The participants were encouraged to take part in the survey by providing research credit.

As the atmosphere was confidential and, at the same time, it provided a relieving environment for apartment owners to project their views as they felt free to respond and were grateful to be asked about their emotions and views, being on the other side of the reservation.

4. Results

As the previous model (figure 1) shows, the variables directly influence other variables, aiming to predict tourism complaints if these variables gather and take place.

For data processing, excel spreadsheets were used along with Google forms percentage system in order to predict the relationship among the variables of the study.

Table 3 shows items used and result percentages from the questionnaire.

Table 3. Questionnaire items responded by 100 AT owners

Questionnaire Items	Yes	No
1.Complaints usually happen on arrival	85%	15%
2. When guests arrive late, parking becomes an issue	100%	0%
3. Arrival times always dictates tourist behaviour	78%	12%
4.Complaints cause stress for apartment owners	99%	1%
Late arrivals don't allow me to relax due to online comments afterwards	69%	31%
5.The relationship between the tourist and the apartment owner hardly has limits	60%	40%
6.Comparing the tourist apartment and their own home is the first thing guests do	97%	3%
7.The apartment owner is the <i>punching bag</i> of the guests	81%	19%
8.Complaints and bad comments are always a threat for apartment owners	99%	1%

Source: Own

In order to complement the research, telephone interviews were carried out (table 3). Percentages revealed a high percentage of tourist complaints taken place on arrival.

Table 3.Percentages of complaints made by guests provided by 100 AT owners

Percentages from telephone interview
85% of complaints takes place within the first few hours after arrival
5% of complaints takes place half way through the stay
10% of complaints takes place on the last day of the stay

Source: Own

The final question asked to end the interview and find out how the apartment owners felt was: Do complaints affect you? Table 5 shows a very high percentage of responses stating negative feelings on a personal level.

Table 5. Most common feelings of AT owners after a complaint from guests

Examples of comments	
91% Very affected and upset; anxiety caused on a personal level	<p>"I was very affected and upset by comments and complaints by guests; I could not sleep that night"</p> <p>"I have the impression this only happens to my business and I struggle to find a solution"</p> <p>"The anxiety is building up with the passing of years. One day I'll have to give up as it is causing me health problems"</p>
7% Concerned on a commercial level	<p>"Bad comments and complains do affect my business and I can't control that"</p> <p>"It is unbelievable how guests' comments are inspirational for other travellers and, as owners, there is nothing we can do"</p> <p>"I worry a lot about complaints and possible fines from the Tourism Board; after all it is my family business and it is being affected by a traveller"</p>
2% Indifferent	<p>"Complaints are part of the business, not worth worrying that much"</p> <p>"Complaints do not affect me, personally speaking, as long as business goes on"</p>

All in all, Results showed the relevance of the constructs used. In this study, the external variables (TB Travelling burnout; DT Distorted thoughts; UC Unfair comparisons) converge with the internal variable (TCA Tourist complaints on arrival).

5. Discussion

This study explored basic factors and examined the effect of customer expectations on a family tourist business (AT).

In the tourism sector, not much attention has been paid to tourist behaviour in different accommodations facilities. Tourist apartments are a popular new alternative and the lack of literature makes this study stand out. The study has tried to highlight how simple common factor can shape complaint on arrival.

The aim of this study was to correlated direct personal inner feelings after travelling with external complaints against tourist apartment owners, considering and being aware of processes related to tourist behavior and mood. The study offered a general overview of a highly common issue for travelers and apartment owners, that is, complaints.

The analysis of the data collected using both interviews and questionnaires indicated that all variables were valid and reliable and therefore, findings were consistent with those of Li and Liu (2022) and Lee and Sparks (2007) regarding cultural differences as a trigger for comparison on arrival resulting in complaints

hindered by consumer decision, as specified by Maslach and Jackson (1981), after being exposed to internal experiences such as travelling burnout,

Exhaustion, being of the factors affecting emotions of the travelers can activate further negative experiences, coinciding with the studies of Sánchez and Fernández (2018). Besides, initial emotions (Basti) leading to criteria-based comparison, as corroborated by Morina (2021) result in defiance against rules or requirements.

Taking into consideration that tourists are not familiar with the surroundings they are planning to visit affects their ability to judge different situations within a time limit as stated by Kotler et al. (2002), therefore complaints form, as documented by studies carried out by Jafari (2005) and Urry (2002).

Like any research work, this study offers a series of theoretical and practical implications. As a methodological utility, this research can be considered an instrument that corroborates previous work carried out as well as future research to be performed using similar variables, especially within the tourism field of study. As practical implications, the information and prediction offered by this research is key to understand behavioural changes at a specific time and which seems to create a repetitive pattern to be studied.

Future lines of research

Given the increase in complaining and the importance thereof, further research is needed in order to bring light to factors affecting tourists who then raise complaints as soon as they arrive at their destination, affecting family companies, as it is the case of tourist apartments.

Being aware of processes affecting bad mood and modification of behaviour in tourists is a very useful tool for companies to adapt existing strategies to try to palliate negative effects on the parties involved in reservations.

6. Conclusions

Through the analysis of the most common factors following the comparison of data from different sources of information, and after the examination of direct connection among the variables, the hypotheses posed were confirmed and a model was created to understand and predict similar patterns of behaviour in tourists/travelers.

Once the research question was answered and the objective of the study was accomplished, the following four conclusions are to be drawn:

First: It is appropriate to affirm that the impact of basic external factors, at a personal level, has a straight relationship with the change in mood of the tourist/traveler and a negative impact on the owner of the tourist establishment.

Second: The change in behaviour of the service user due to tiredness triggers negative feelings towards others, resulting confused thinking that ends up in distorted thoughts and unfair comparisons generating complaints.

Third: The study proves the strong connection between the variables employed, evidencing the impact of tourist behaviour on the feelings of the apartment owners (upset, concerned, worried). The results obtained evidenced the importance of fully considering the connection among the main variables taking place, on a regular basis regarding a tourist reservation process.

Limitations

Updated literature focusing on tourist apartments and personal experiences of apartment owners after a complaint was scarce due to the fact that tourist apartments are actually a new topic of research.

The fact that responses were self-reported and noted down by the researcher might lack proper classification thereof. Despite these issues, the objective of the study was supported by different phases of the methodology used in the study, providing a predictive model and the importance of inner feelings triggering decisions on the spot.

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