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## **COVID-19 and the accommodation sector: first measures, and online communications strategies. A multiple case study in a Spanish province**

### **COVID-19 y el sector del alojamiento: primeras medidas y estrategias de comunicación en línea. Un estudio de casos múltiples en una provincia española**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper is to analyse the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the accommodation sector by looking at the measures in place, prospects and future strategies. Using a multiple-case-study methodology, an electronically self-administered questionnaire was sent to the managers of 10 establishments located in the province of Huelva (Spain), between March and June 2020. Additionally, a thematic analysis was performed to compare the messages posted on social media over the same four-month period in both 2019 and 2020. The results showed that those establishments belonging to large chains diversified their strategies to obtain better chances of success. Also, reactions to the COVID-19 crisis appeared to differ by type of accommodation. An important change in the online communication strategy during the lockdown in relation to the same period in 2019 was observed. It was not just the different themes of the messages that were in different proportions, but so too were the levels of engagement expressed in each one. This study provides a snapshot of the effect that the economic shutdown had on Spain's tourist accommodation and contributes to the thematic social media strategies deployed by the accommodation sector in situations of natural disasters and global pandemics.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Spanish tourism; Facebook; Twitter; thematic analysis.

#### **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar los efectos de la crisis de COVID-19 en el sector del alojamiento, las medidas adoptadas, las perspectivas y las estrategias futuras. Se utilizó una metodología de estudio de casos múltiples para examinar 10 establecimientos de la provincia de Huelva (España), de marzo a junio de 2020. Para ello se envió un cuestionario auto administrado electrónicamente a los directivos de los alojamientos seleccionados. Además, se realizó un análisis temático para comparar los mensajes publicados en las redes sociales en el

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mismo periodo de 2019 y 2020. Los resultados mostraron que los establecimientos pertenecientes a grandes cadenas diversificaron sus estrategias para obtener mejores posibilidades de éxito. Asimismo, las reacciones a la crisis del COVID-19 parecen ser diferentes según el tipo de alojamiento. Se observó un cambio importante en la estrategia de comunicación online durante el periodo confinamiento, en relación con el mismo periodo de 2019. Los diferentes temas de los mensajes no sólo estaban en diferentes proporciones, sino también los niveles de interacción alcanzados en cada uno de ellos. Este trabajo proporciona una instantánea del efecto que el parón económico tuvo en los alojamientos turísticos españoles y contribuye a la investigación sobre las estrategias temáticas en medios sociales desplegadas por el sector del alojamiento en situaciones de catástrofes naturales o pandemias.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19; turismo español; Facebook; Twitter; análisis temático.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020), COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) forced the adoption of measures that are unprecedented in most countries, such as stay-at-home orders, border closures, the introduction of social distancing, quarantine measures, and the prohibition of specific activities. These measures have severely restrained global travel, tourism, and leisure activities, meaning that international tourism is among the economic sectors most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the critical importance of this sector and according to the July 2020 analysis from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020b), 40% of all destinations worldwide eased the restrictions that they had placed on international tourism in response to COVID-19. Spain was one of those destinations that eased restrictions after the first wave, since tourism is a strategic sector for its economy, contributing 12.3% of Spanish GDP, and 12.7% of employment in the sector (INE, 2020).

Considering the pandemic-wide impact on the Spanish Tourism Sector, different initiatives were launched with the aim of enabling the recovery of the tourism sector, mitigating, as far as possible, the adverse effects of the pandemic on tourist activity, and ensuring the continuity and competitiveness of the sector (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Spanish Government, 2020; Arbulú et al., 2021; González-Torres, et al., 2021).

Tourism has experienced previous crises in the form of terrorism, natural disasters, and disease with different impacts. However, the nature, the unprecedented circumstances and impacts of COVID-19 are signs of a crisis that is not only different, but one that will leave profound and long-term structural changes, transforming both the socio-economic and the industrial activity of tourism (Sigala, 2020). As Zenker and Kock (2020) indicated in their work, tourism studies on SARS (Zeng, et al., 2005), bird-flu (Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty, 2009), Ebola (Cahyanto et al., 2016; Novelli et al., 2018), and influenza pandemics (Page et al., 2006) showed patterns that were comparable with the present crisis, although on smaller scales. As for the economic crisis caused by COVID-19, certain similarities can also be found with the economic crisis of 2008 studied by Papatheodorou et al. (2010), with the behaviour of travellers, and rationalization in response to the economizing strategies of tourists during other economic crises (Campos-Soria et al., 2015).

The various types of catastrophes bring with them varied consequences for the sector and hoteliers feel obliged to take different measures, in order to confront the different challenges that the crisis has provoked (Jiang & Wen, 2020). In particular, the COVID-19 crisis has influenced tourism demand, not only in view of the reservations that have been cancelled, but also because of the reluctance to travel to a destination or to stay at a hotel in the near future (Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Perić et al., 2021), which is habitual in the tourism crisis (Scott et al., 2007). But it has also affected the reactions within the tourism industry, the investigation of on-line channels and their promotion, the creation of emotive links, making trust and brand values very necessary (Sigala, 2020), for which reason the management of online communication and specifically social networks is especially important.

The effective use of social networks can be of vital importance in times of crisis (Sigala, 2011; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014), as it is with COVID-19, in which the tourism sector has once again to demonstrate its resilience (Zeng et al., 2005; Novelli et al., 2018; Jiang & Wen, 2020). Thus, technology can be one of the best ways to confront this situation (Hall et al., 2017; Sigala, 2020), supported by e-Tourism (Gretzel et al., 2020). In this sense, despite the importance of social networks as communication platforms within which tourism firms can have a presence, little attention has been paid to it in the literature on crisis communication (Ketter, 2016).

Recent studies on the tourism sector, in which social media messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic has been analyzed, have been centered on the opinions, feelings and reactions of the users or potential clients (Hang, et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2020; Flores-Ruiz et al., 2021; Nilashi et al., 2021; Rather, 2021). However, there are few studies that have analyzed the social network communications of tourism firms and their content during the pandemic. No studies have been found on how the accommodation sector changed the content of its messages and to what extent those changes were effective.

This study will focus on precisely how the accommodation industry has been affected and how it has reacted and will include communications via social media.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social networks are turning into strong marketing-communication tools that offer opportunities to win over, satisfy, and hold onto customers in the most effective manner (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014; Mellinas et al., 2016; Cascales et al., 2017; Rasul, et al., 2020). Most studies on the use of social media in the field of research into the tourism industry have been presented from the point of view of the consumer, with less attention given to the gradual incorporation of social media within communication strategies (Leung et al., 2015; Moro & Rita 2018). From this point of view, it must be highlighted that social networks have revolutionized the communication strategies of firms and tourism destinations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014; Moro & Rita, 2018; Law et al, 2020), thereby creating and consolidating the relations of actual and potential clients with the aim of strengthening trust and brand loyalty in a more effective manner (Laroche et al., 2013; Rasul, et al., 2020).

In this sense, Spanish hotels connect their websites to social networks and pursue network diversification, covering a large number of different potential customer profiles (Mellinas et al., 2014; Moral et al., 2014).

Drawing on use and gratification theory, marketers tend to communicate to customers about the things they care about, designing social media content with entertainment,

informational, relational and transactional values (De Vries et al., 2012). In this regard, firm-generated online posts have been classified into product (informational and remuneration posts) and non-product categories (entertainment and social posts) (De Vries et al., 2012; Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013; Shen and Bissell, 2013; Tafesse, 2015). Some researchers have concluded that more efficient use of social media involves posting non-product content that provides emotional benefits to users, rather than commercial benefits through direct promotion of products (Luarn et al., 2015; Tafesse, 2015; Coelho et al., 2016; Lee et al. 2018; Ferrer-Rosell et al., 2020).

In the context of social media, the aim is to boost customer engagement, an important concept in determining the effectiveness of social media marketing efforts (So et al., 2014). As pointed out by Peters et al. (2013), there are numerous social media metrics, but a common ground for the research is to use data from social media to understand the variation of non-economic variables, such as likes, comments, replies, and shares and retweets (De Vries et al., 2012; Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013; Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013; Oviedo-García et al., 2014; Luarn et al., 2015; Bonsón et al., 2016; Coelho et al., 2016; Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Mariani et al., 2018).

In this regard, managers need to pay attention to the characteristics and the impacts, which is to say the effectiveness of not only traditional media, but also non-traditional media outlets after a crisis, in order to minimize negative and to maximize positive news (Ai et al., 2020). There are few studies on the content of the social network communication strategies of tourism firms during the COVID-19 global crisis and their effectiveness is not clear. Among them, according to Rather (2021), social media had a significant and positive effect on customer brand engagement during the COVID-19 outbreak. Likewise, Villacé-Molinero et al. (2021) concluded that the communications on social networks negatively influenced the decision to go ahead with travel plans. Centring on content analysis, the study of Yang & Han (2020) showed that tweets on the “hospitality industry” during the pandemic covered three large blocks of related topics: (a) COVID-19; (b) employment and food services; (c) event planning and hosting. Likewise, Camarinha et al. (2020) completed an analysis of web and social network content among Portuguese tourist firms during the pandemic, arriving at the conclusion that the most frequently discussed topics were reservations (32.8%), services offered (31.3%) and health (18.4%). Moreover, Ketter & Avraham (2021), studying the content on the official YouTube pages of National Tourism Boards, found changes to the marketing strategies used during lockdown (spread hope and inspiration, the Brotherhood of Man and longing and nostalgia) and the post COVID-19 lockdown period (welcome back, COVID-19-safe destinations and restorative experience).

While previous studies have investigated the engagement effects of content strategies on social media in tourism regarding non-crisis situations (Minazzi and Lagrosen, 2013; Barbe, and Pennington-Gray, 2018; Moro and Rita, 2018; Aydin, 2019; Ferrer-Rosell, et al., 2019; Ferrer-Rosell, et al., 2020; Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2020), to the best of our knowledge, no studies have been focused on how hospitality brands have adapted their online communications strategies towards natural disasters and global pandemics.

### III. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given that COVID-19 has inflicted significant damage on economies around the world, including the Spanish economy, we sought to understand how companies have reacted to this

unprecedented crisis. Our global objective was to determine the impact of COVID-19 in Huelva (Spain) and how tourist accommodation companies have reacted during the lockdown, from the perspective of their internal measures and their external communications. In this sense our first objective was to determine the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on tourist accommodation establishments. Our second objective was to describe the measures that these companies have taken, while the third objective was to analyse the online communications of those companies through their official websites and social networks.

Our approach to this study began with the premise that large hotel groups and chains have more resources and therefore greater capacity for reaction when establishing contingency plans to respond to COVID-19. We also considered that the management of the crisis within hotels will differ from the management of the crisis in hotels-apartments and apartment complexes, due to the different characteristics of each type of establishment. Finally, given the deep concern of the population provoked by the spread of the virus, we believe that the topics of most posts may have changed from those of the preceding year. In this sense, it would be logical to think that the majority of the messages transmitted by the establishments through their social networks and official websites were centred on safety-and-health measures.

Accordingly, our research questions (RQ) for the case study were as follows:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on local businesses within the accommodation industry in Huelva, (Spain)?

RQ2. What measures have been taken by local businesses within the accommodation industry in Huelva (Spain) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3. What are the plans that managers have advanced to counter the situation?

RQ4. How have the themes of online messages changed between 2019 and 2020?

RQ5. According to their content, have the messages posted on social networks been effective in terms of engagement?

#### **IV. MULTI-METHOD APPROACH**

Using a multi-method approach in a way similar to the one performed in Ai et al. (2020), this study firstly employs a case study methodology to describe the measures taken by tourist accommodation establishments to respond to COVID-19. Secondly, the thematic analysis method is used to analyse social media posts of the establishments analysed in the case study.

##### **4.1. Study site**

The province of Huelva, located in the Spanish region of Andalusia, was visited in 2019 by 2,578,143 tourists, representing 7.9% of the total number of tourists visiting Andalusia (IECA, 2020a). Of the 1,078,946 who stayed in hotel establishments, 252,511 came from abroad, the majority of whom were Portuguese, while the rest were domestic tourists (IECA, 2020b). Its main tourist segments are sun and beach, nature, sports, health, and wellness cultural and gastronomic tourism.

In terms of the number of accommodation establishments, the province of Huelva has 49 apartment complexes, 12 campsites, 179 rural houses, 4 shelters, 39 hostels, 86 hotels, 16

hotel-apartments and 50 guesthouses, totalling 51,492 accommodation places (Council of Tourism and Sport of the Junta of Andalucía, 2020).

#### 4.2. Study 1: Responses to COVID-19: a case study

The focus of this study was on first measures, and strategies taken by hotels, hotel-apartments, and apartment complexes, located in the province of Huelva, in response to COVID-19 during lockdown as well as their perceptions of future prospects.

##### 4.2.1. Methodology

A case-study methodology was used for this study, as it facilitates an understanding of the processes behind certain trends, by focusing the investigation on the facts. This methodology is especially useful to research “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (Yin, 2002).

Specifically, a multiple, exploratory, and descriptive case study was performed.

Stake (1995) and Yin (2002) both defended the concept of triangulation as the most appropriate system for data validation. In our study, methodological triangulation was applied, in other words the use of many qualitative and/or quantitative methods to study the case.

The documents under analysis in our study were of a diverse nature: reports from institutions such as WHO (2020), UNWTO (2020a,b,c), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2020), the Government of Spain (Spanish Government, 2020), economic publications (Deloitte, 2020; KPMG, 2020a,b,c), as well as any available websites of the establishments under study.

Finally, with regard to reliability, Yin (2002) affirmed that this criterion is for demonstrating that data-collection procedures can be repeated with the same results. The protocol followed during the present investigation is highlighted in the Results section, containing all the information that has been collected.

##### 4.2.2. Sample

Merriam (2009) discussed the process for selecting a sample and determining sample size in case studies, concluding that "there is no answer" and noting that it depends on the research questions, the data collected, the data analysis, and the availability of resources.

In all, 10 cases were selected from among a total of 41 apartment complexes (5,077 bed places), 58 hotels (16,943 bed places), and 9 hotel-apartments (4,566 bed places), located less than 15 kilometres from the coast of the province of Huelva (Spain). Together, the 10 cases amounted for 5,062 bed-places (19% of the study population). Non-probabilistic sampling was used, specifically judgmental or purposive sampling, as the researchers themselves, assisted by a manager of the Huelva Tourism Business Circle representing 91.5% of the 46,672 beds in the province of Huelva, chose the accommodation establishments that were to form part of the sample. This procedure was justified by the fact that the sector-related knowledge of the researchers ensured the inclusion of the most representative elements that might otherwise have been omitted in a random selection process.

#### 4.2.3. Research instruments

Furthermore, a combination of techniques to obtain the information, such as questionnaires, documented reviews, and the collaboration of experts within the sector under study must be used in most case studies, in order to avoid informational gaps in the research (Snow and Thomas, 1994; Fox-Wolfgramm, 1997).

The information regarding the responses to COVID-19 was collected through a structured self-administered questionnaire, sent by e-mail to the managers of the selected establishments, over the period between 25 and 29 May, 2020. The questionnaire was divided into five blocks: a) characteristics or profile of the establishment; b) perceptions of COVID-19 and its impact; c) measures adopted to deal with the pandemic; d) future prospects and strategies; e) communication and information strategies.

The items from the barometers prepared by the accountancy consultants Deloitte (2020) and KPMG (2020a,b,c) were taken as a reference to prepare blocks b), c) and d), while blocks a) and e) were the work of the authors of this paper with the help of the manager of the Tourism and Hoteliers Association of Huelva.

#### 4.2.4. Profile of the establishments

The sample profile of the 10 tourist accommodations establishments is shown in Table 1, with which the survey responses could be contextualized. Specifically, we worked with 1 apartment complex and 2 hotel-apartments in the beach modality, as well as with 7 hotels with different modalities and star ratings.

Table 1. Profiles of the 10 tourist accommodations

Case	Type	Modality	Star	Chain	Capacity	Main origin of customers	Markets
A	Apartment complex	Beach	3-star	Yes (small chain)	Large	Regional	Sun and beach, Sports, Health and Wellness
B	Hotel	City	4-star	Yes (large chain)	Medium	Regional and national	Sun and beach, Urban, Nature, IMSERSO*
C	Hotel	City	2-star	No	Medium	Regional	Nature
D	Hotel	Beach	4-star	Yes (large chain)	Large	National and European	Sun and beach, Health and Wellness, Cultural
E	Hotel	Beach	2-star	No	Small	Regional and national	Sun and beach, Sports, Nature
F	Hotel	Beach	4-star	Yes (large chain)	Very large	Regional and national	Sun and beach, Sports, Health and Wellness, IMSERSO*, MICE
G	Hotel	Beach	4-star	Yes (small chain)	Medium	National and European	Sun and beach, Sports
H	Hotel	Rural	3-star	No	Small	Regional	Sun and beach, Health and Wellness, Nature, IMSERSO*
I	Hotel-apartment	Beach	3-star	No	Large	Regional and national	Sun and beach
J	Hotel-apartment	Beach	4-star	Yes (large chain)	Medium	Regional and national	Sun and beach, IMSERSO*

\*Social Tourism Program for the Elderly (Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality).

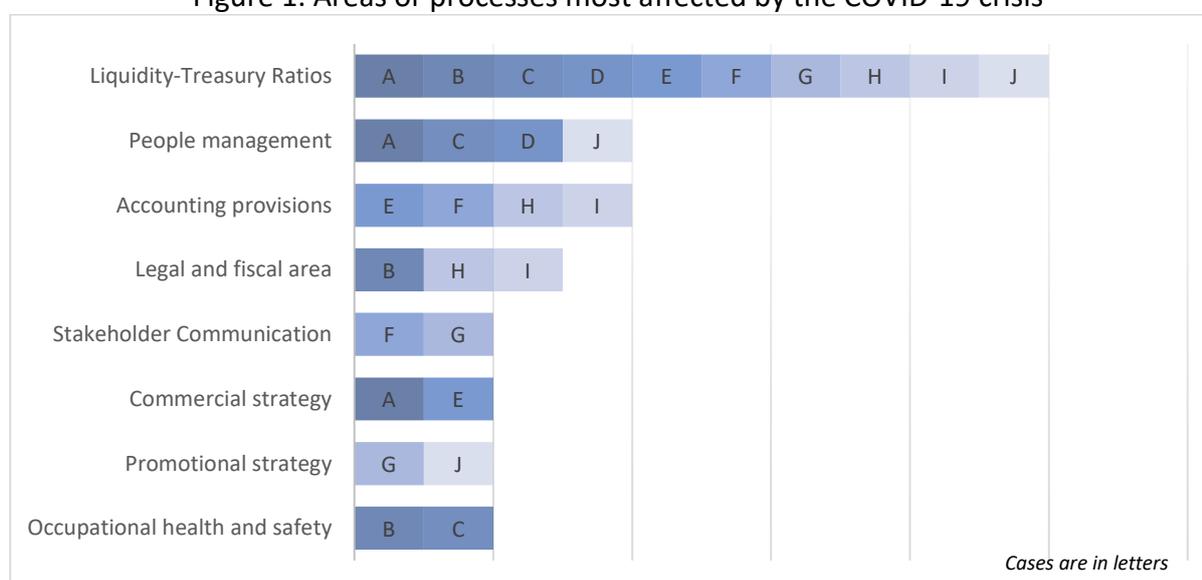
#### 4.2.5. Perceptions about the impact of COVID-19

The hotels and hotel-apartments under analysis saw a 75% reduction in turnover from March to May, regardless of their type or star ratings. The apartment complex was the only category that showed a reduction of between 50 and 75%.

Specifically, the average daily losses per vacant bed were around USD 35.53. In more detail, they ranged from USD 3.55 per day per bed, for a hotel with more than 2,000 beds, to USD 71 per day per bed for a large hotel, although with high rental costs.

This crisis had an impact on liquidity and cash-flow ratios in all the cases under analysis (Figure 1), but the following were also affected: personnel management processes, due to the closure of the facilities; accounting provisions; and the legal and tax area, mainly necessary for the processing of redundancies.

Figure 1. Areas or processes most affected by the COVID-19 crisis



#### 4.2.6. Measures in response to the COVID-19 crisis

The contingency plan for hotel establishments to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis involved different actions: (a) financial and fiscal actions, in order to reduce or to postpone expenses during the period in which there was no income, as well as to seek sources of financing to meet new health and communication expenses; (b) labour actions, to manage worker redundancies; (c) health and safety actions, to create a safe environment and to adapt the facilities before reopening; and, (d) investment in dissemination campaigns and media used to keep the stakeholders informed.

In most cases under analysis, the combination of financial and fiscal measures had as a common factor, the search for financing and Social Security subsidies (Table 2). With regard to other measures of this type, it was observed that the deferral of tax payments or to suppliers was only used by hotel-type accommodations. Regarding the discounts and non-refundable aid, very few establishments reported that they had applied for them, and in all cases, the subsidies amounted to less than USD 6,000.

On the one hand, from the labour point of view, the measures used in all cases were either temporary collective layoffs and redundancies or a reduction of the working day due to

*force majeure*, although redundancies among permanent seasonal workers in hotel-type establishments were less common. On the other hand, only the tourist apartment (case A) and a city hotel (case B) rearranged staff vacations as a measure of capacity adjustment.

In addition to the loss of income, linked to the reduction in economic activity, there was an increase in health and safety investments, which in some cases exceeded USD 67,000 per establishment (cases B and F). In that regard, all the facilities incurred expenditure on sanitary measures, specifically on personal protective equipment, and sanitization and disinfection of the workplace.

With regard to investment in promotional campaigns, only case C indicated that it had not undertaken any campaign. Many of the companies under analysis had even invested in COVID-19 certifications, which were not well defined at that time.

Table 2. Measures taken in response to the COVID-19 crisis

		Cases									
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
FINANCIAL-TAXATION	Low-interest loan financing	•	n/a	•	•	•	•	-	•	n/a	•
	Financing guaranteed by public bodies	•	n/a	•	•	•	•	-	-	n/a	•
	Social Security subsidies	•	n/a	-	•	•	•	•	-	n/a	•
	Mortgage/rent payment facilities	-	n/a	•	•	-	-	-	-	n/a	•
	Tax deferment	-	n/a	•	-	•	-	-	•	n/a	-
	Deferral of supplier payments	-	n/a	•	-	-	•	•	•	n/a	-
	Discounts or exemptions from fees, charges, etc.	-	n/a	-	-	-	•	-	•	n/a	•
	Non-refundable aid	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	•
WORKPLACE	Temporary collective layoffs or reduction of working hours due to <i>force majeure</i>	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Termination of activity of permanent seasonal workers	•	•	-	-	-	-	-	•	•	-
	Early staff vacations	•	•	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Temporary collective layoffs or reduction of working hours due to productive causes	-	•	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
SANITARY	Sanitization and disinfection	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Personal protection equipment	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Training in health and safety processes	•	•	-	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Creation/adaptation of spaces	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	-	•	•
	Specialized cleaning staff	•	•	•	•	•	•	-	•	•	•

n/a: no answer.

According to the responses received, all establishments used social networks to report on their actions during this crisis. The use of e-mails (individual or through newsletters) and the official website was also encouraged. The last-mentioned channel was mainly used as a repository for information on safety-and-health measures implemented by the establishment, focusing on hygiene measures, digitalization of services, adaptation of spaces and catering services. The website was also used to report on the policy of reservation cancellations throughout that period. All this information was offered, in most cases, through a link on the home page.

#### *4.2.7. Future prospects and strategies*

There is no consensus over the estimated time it will take the companies under analysis to recover the pace of their activities prior to the COVID-19 crisis, as the expectations gathered from the questionnaire ranged from the first half of 2021, in case F, a very large hotel 75% of whose guests were national clients, to a period after the first half of 2023, in case G, which is a medium-size hotel, with between 50% and 75% of international clients and sports tourism as one of its markets.

The impossibility of predicting the behaviour of this pandemic, as well as the awareness of the sector's vulnerability to these health alerts, has led hotel-type accommodation to rethink some processes or strategies in the medium and long-term. Specifically, the current situation will lead to changes in both commercial and promotional strategy as well as risk management. Together with those two aspects, establishment E, a small 2-star hotel, considered that the four remaining aspects were going to transform its business actively substantially over the long term.

In this analysis, a different forecast can be seen, depending on the type of establishment, because the owners of the apartment complex (case A) and the hotel-apartments (cases I and J) assessed the long-term transformations arising from this crisis situation less seriously, considering that most future consequences of the current pandemic might have little or no influence on their establishment. Only one hotel shared a similar opinion, case G, which focuses on international sports and sun-and-beach tourism.

According to the results of this study, the revitalization of the hotel business will go hand-in-hand with the adoption of strategies that instil confidence in potential customers. In the opinion of those surveyed, the most appropriate measures were health and safety, the adoption of COVID-19 hygiene certificates, and promotional campaigns. In most cases, lowering tariffs was ruled out, in favour of promoting the personalization and differentiation of the service as a competitive strategy.

The individual analysis of each case revealed that establishment A, belonging to the complex of tourist apartments typology, was the only one that did not opt for any specific measure, while cases B, C, F and H, all of them hotels, opted for a larger number of actions, in order to increase the probability of success.

### **4.3. Study 2: Content analysis of the social media posts**

Inquiring into the online communication strategies, a thematic analysis was conducted of the information published on the official websites of the hotel establishments and posted on their Facebook and Twitter accounts.

#### *4.3.1. Methodology*

Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

The data-collection period covered three months from March 14 of 2020, the day on which the so-called "State of Alarm" began in Spain, which preceded the confinement of the population at home, up until June 14 of 2020, when the data collection period for this study ended. In addition, all the posts and tweets published in the same period of 2019 were collected, in order to find out whether the predominant themes of the online communication

strategy had changed. We looked at the individual profile of each establishment on Facebook and Twitter. In the absence of an individual profile, the group profile of the establishments forming part of a chain was analysed. We focused on studying the publications made by the company, ignoring those that referred to responses or interactions with customers, which is more common on Twitter.

In our case, we applied semantic coding conducted independently by two researchers following the six-phase approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1. Familiarization with the data; 2. Generation of initial codes; 3. Searching for themes; 4. Reviewing the themes; 5. Defining and naming the themes; and, 6. Drafting the report. A precoding session was conducted using one Facebook and one Twitter account to train the coders. Discrepancies in codification were examined by a third member of the research team. Coding of all responses was finally conducted after reaching a 0.86 internal consistency reliability score. Once the themes had been defined, the engagement of the establishments was estimated against the backdrop of this pandemic situation. Specifically, given the information published on the profiles of the establishments, an average measurement of the interest of the user in relation to the number of post or tweets, was used as an estimator of engagement (Oviedo-García *et al.*, 2014; Muñoz-Expósito *et al.*, 2017) and of message effectiveness.

#### 4.3.2. Data sample

Of the 10 cases under analysis from the first study, only 7 Facebook and 3 Twitter profiles offered valid data for analysis. In total, 524 Facebook posts and 981 tweets were published by the establishments in the two periods of study, and all of them were manually analysed. Once those related to customer interactions were removed (mostly in response to cancellations or changes to reservation dates in 2020 tweets), the sample was reduced to 561 tweets.

The first step was to analyse the 187 posts and the 392 tweets published between March 14, 2020 and June 14, and the second step was to analyse the 337 Facebook posts and the 384 tweets from 14 March to 14 June 2019.

#### 4.3.3. Thematic Analysis

In terms of the results of the Thematic Analysis, different themes were differentiated in the messages (Table 3).

Regarding the online communication strategy of the hotels during the Spanish lockdown in this case study, comparing the same time-frame of the previous year, a first approach to the analysis of the themes of the posts and tweets revealed important differences (Table 4). In general terms, although the posts that promoted the establishment or the environment where it was located were given priority during the lockdown, these topics were replaced by non-product related content, such as social actions or sense of community. In addition, posts and tweets on awards and investments were replaced by new themes on opening/closing information and safety/health measures (Figure 2). However, this last theme was not shown on all the profiles analysed and where they were, the percentage of such messages never reached 19% on either Facebook or Twitter.

Table 3. Coding analysis of post and tweets

Themes	Criterion	Example posts
Promotion of establishment/ environment	Promoting both the establishment and destination	<i>In summer, most enjoyment is found at the swimming pool; Keep the taste of our land within you.</i>
Social actions	Focused on society, thank health-care heroes of the pandemic, actions aimed at entertainment	<i>We will donate the food of the hotels we are forced to close to different charities reaching out to the people in need; #BeActive: train anytime and anywhere (at home)</i>
Sense of community	Sought to create a sense of community, promoting a message of optimism based on unity	<i>We have to be positive, one day more is one day less and if everybody followed the instructions; #Regain strength #Daily motivation is important</i>
Promotion of tourism	Promoting tourism in general	<i>#TimeToImagine Our travel dreams are always on; #Wishing to travel with your favourite friends.</i>
Opening / Closing information	Informing clients of the closure or opening of an establishment	<i>We hope to return to normality soon and welcome you to our hotel; We will open our doors on 26 June</i>
Health/ Safety measures	Sought to create a sense of health safety	<i>Be safe and surprised with this service at our hotels if you need them; We understand that technology is key to minimize direct contact at our hotels</i>
Investment	Publicity for investments in new hotels or refurbished hotels.	<i>Today on 31 May one of highest quality and best situated hotels opens its doors.</i>
Awards	Awards or prizes received	<i>We are delighted to share with you that we have been chosen as Spain's Leading All-Inclusive Resort in the best hotel category of the World Travel Awards</i>

The analysis revealed that both social networks were used in similar ways when the type of profile was the same (case B had a group profile on both networks and case I showed an individual profile on both Facebook and Twitter), which may be due to the fact that they were managed by the same community manager. However, for hotels D and F, with individual profiles on Facebook and a chain profile on Twitter, the percentages changed, with the particular profile of the establishment focusing on promotion, leaving the announcement of health and safety measures for the Twitter chain profile and for the website.

In overall terms, many differences are highlighted, when comparing the global result of the thematic analysis of themes between March 14 and June 14, 2020, with the same period in 2019 (Figure 3). While the themes of most messages on Facebook and Twitter in 2019 were on promoting the establishment or the environment, the percentages both on Facebook and on Twitter in 2020 were respectively reduced by around 50% and 25%.

Table 4. Themes of the posts on Facebook and Twitter from 14 March to 14 June, 2019 and 2020 (\*)

Case	Profile	Promotion of establish./environ.	Social actions	Sense of community	Promotion of tourism	Opening / Closing information	Health/ Safety measures	Others (Investment awards, etc.)
<b>Facebook</b>								
A	Group	85.7% (64.7%)	4.76% (23.5%)	9.52% (5.8%)	- -	- -	- -	- (5.8%)
B	Group	85.7% (22.2%)	- (29.6%)	- (7.4%)	12.2% (18.5%)	- -	- (18.5%)	2.1% (3.7%)
D	Indiv.	90.9% (33.3%)	4.55% (26.6%)	4.55% (3.3%)	- (33.3%)	- (3.3%)	- -	11.67 -
F	Indiv.	96.3% (29.6%)	- (25.9%)	3.33% (7.4%)	1.7% (25.9%)	- (3.7%)	- (3.7%)	3.3% (3.7%)
G	Group	8% (50%)	- -	3.7% (43.7%)	- -	- -	- (6.2%)	- -
I	Indiv.	71.43% (48.2%)	28.5% (7.5%)	- (22.5%)	- (2.5%)	- (5%)	- -	- -
J	Group	87.67% (48.2%)	1.37% (10.3%)	1.37% (24.1%)	1.37% (3.4%)	- (5%)	- -	4.1 % (3.4%)
<b>Twitter</b>								
B	Group	83.9% (19.2%)	- (34.6%)	- -	15.5% (19.2%)	- (3.8%)	- (15.3%)	0.6% (7.6%)
D and F	Group	90.3% (5.9%)	0.9% (32.8%)	0.5% (1.4%)	0.5% (26.8%)	- (13.4%)	- (14.9%)	7.9% (4.4%)
I	Indiv.	88.1% (57.8%)	4.8% (7.8%)	7.1% (26.3%)	- (5.2%)	- (2.6%)	- -	- -
(*) Numbers for 2020 are in parenthesis.								

#### 4.3.4. Engagement

According to Figure 4, the levels of engagement generated by the different themes were very different depending on the social network in use. In addition, the interaction rate by message was greater in 2020 for all the themes that were found over the two-year study, with the exception of “promotion of the establishment/environment”.

In Facebook, the high rate of interactions with information on themes relating to opening/closing and the importance of the "likes" over the total number of interactions both stood out. In 2019, Facebook posts promoting the establishment and the attractions of the environment stimulated high rates of interaction, while in 2020 their levels of engagement were equal to those promoting a sense of community, and informing on health and safety measures.

However, the 2020 analysis of the Twitter messages showed a high level of engagement in the messages on health/safety measures, with the average interaction rate of the messages on promotion of the establishment and its environment greatly reduced compared to the previous year.

It is interesting to note that, in general terms, although the proportion of messages on health/safety measures and opening/closing information was low, it reached high engagement values.

Figure 2. Evolution of themes of publications on Facebook and Twitter (March 14 – June 14, 2020)

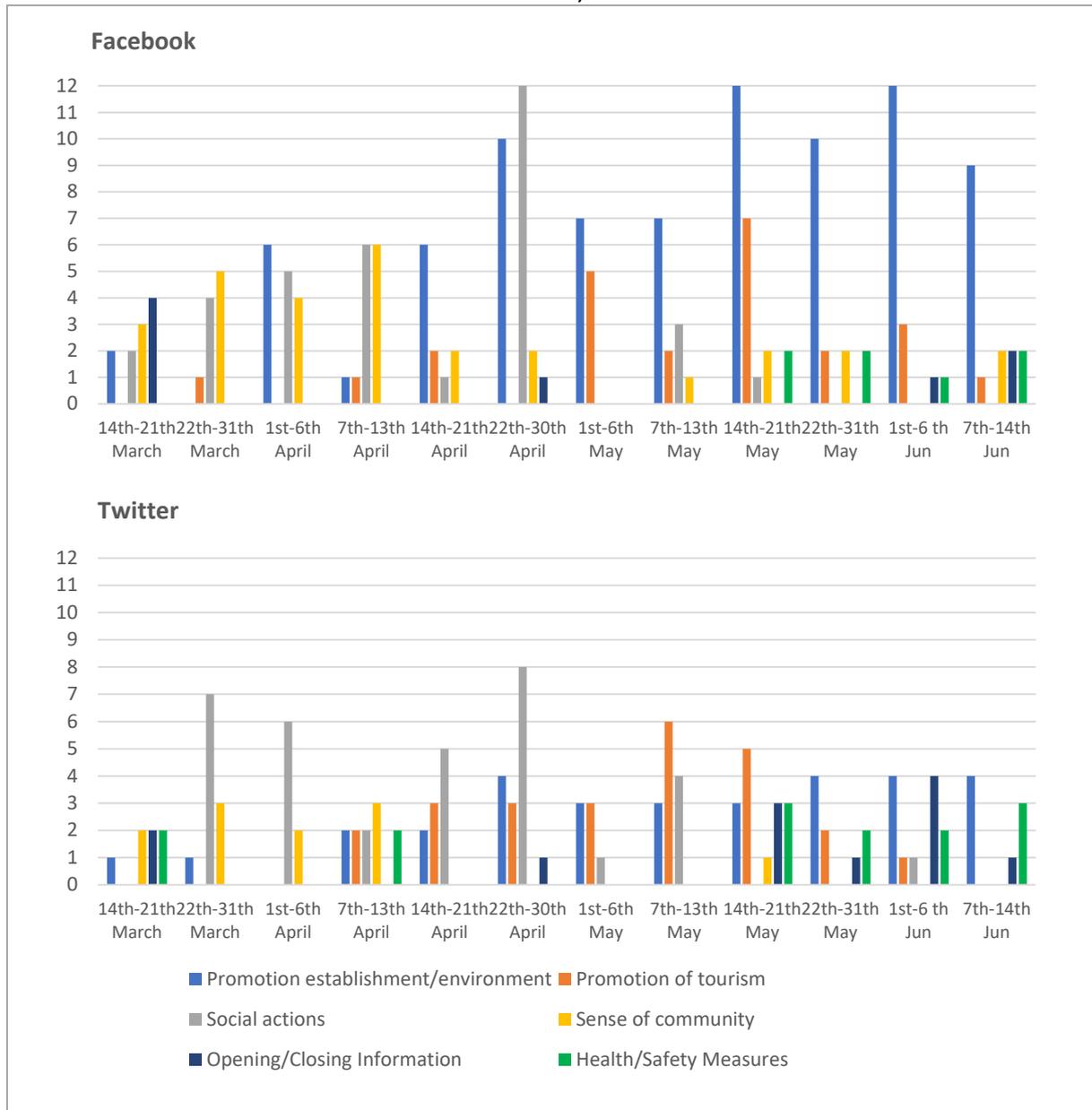
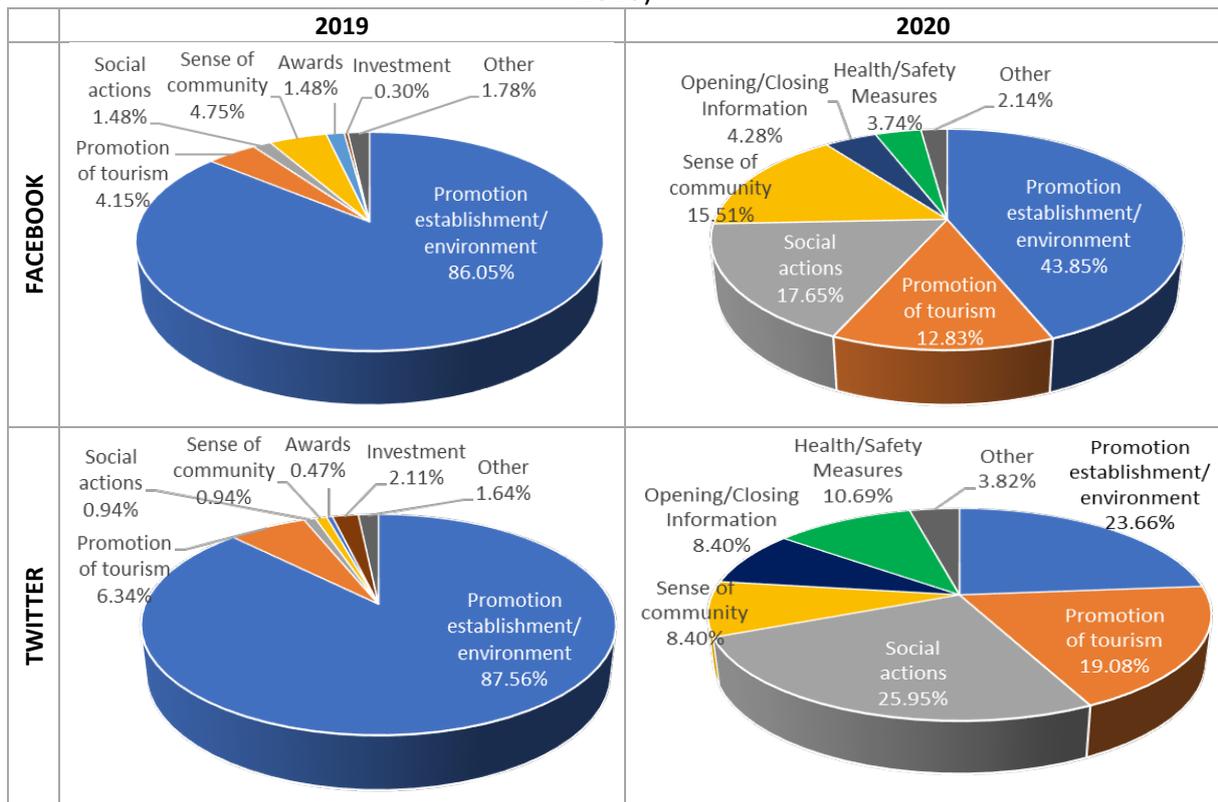


Figure 3. Themes of posts on Facebook and tweets on Twitter (March 14 – June 14, 2019 and 2020)



## V. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Conclusions

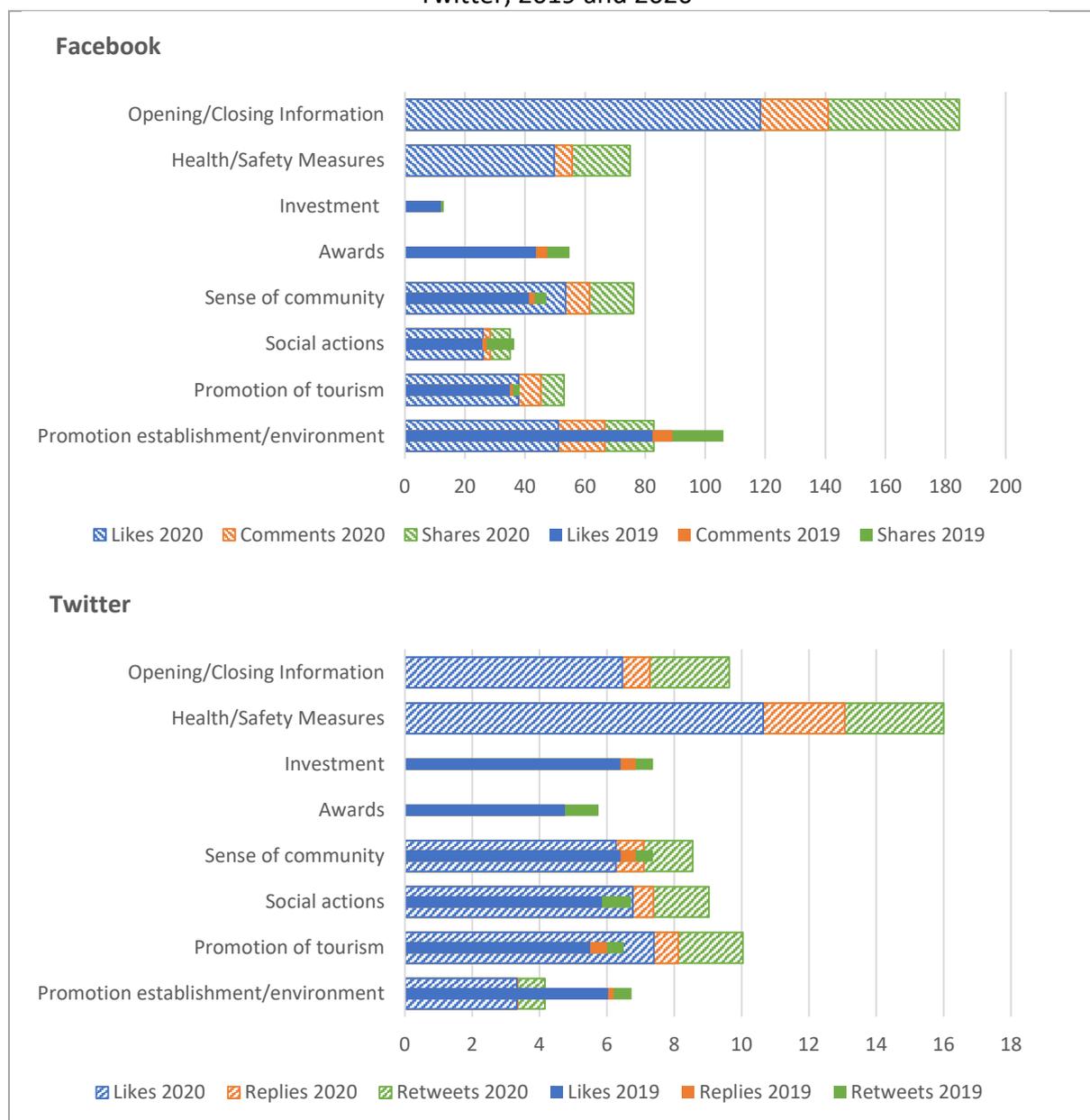
A case study focused on tourist accommodation in Huelva (Spain) has been conducted, in order to offer a snapshot of the impact, the first measures that accommodation establishments have adopted, and how they have reacted and planned to react to the new challenges of COVID-19. The results showed differences in the strategies and reactions to the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, an important change in the central themes of the messages on social media during confinement, in relation with the same period of 2019, increased the non-product content message to the detriment of the promotional ones.

### 5.2. Findings and discussion

Firstly, it has been shown in this study that the perceptions of COVID-19 (RQ1) and its impact have entailed a reduction of over 75% in turnover, in the great majority of cases under analysis. These values are in line with the result presented by the report on the economic impact of COVID-19 by Deloitte (2020), in which 75% of companies in the hotel and tourism sector confirmed a drop in turnover.

As occurred in global terms in the Spanish economy (KPMG 2020a,b,c), the processes most affected by the crisis, in the cases under analysis, were liquidity and cash flow ratios, as well as people management, a direct result of the majority closure of tourist accommodation.

Figure 4. Engagement (rate of interactions) by theme of publications on Facebook and Twitter, 2019 and 2020



In answer to RQ2, it has been shown that financial and fiscal measures were taken in response to COVID-19, to meet the fixed costs and to finance the new health costs required to launch the activity as soon as possible. In most of the cases under analysis, the combination of measures had, as common factors, the search for financing, social security bonuses, and temporary collective layoffs. All the establishments used this temporary redundancy legislation (*Expediente de Regulación de Empleo Temporal*) (ERTE) for regulating the employment of their staff, while throughout Spain, although the most frequently employed redundancy measure was the ERTE due to *force majeure*, it was only used by 59% of companies (Deloitte, 2020).

With regard to health and safety actions and investments, 100% of the cases under study reported that they had invested in safety and health measures, mainly in personal

protective equipment, and less so in sanitization and disinfection of spaces. In contrast, only 56% of the companies in other sectors of economic activity had, in global terms, made similar investments (Deloitte, 2020).

Based on the case analysis from this study, the earliest expected dates of recovery were those offered by hotels belonging to large chains, which considered that they will not return to their prior levels of activity before 2022, much longer than the average date in global sectors surveyed at the same period, in which the foreseen end-date for COVID-19 related disruptions was October 2020 (Bartik et al. 2020). It could be understood by taking into account the deep dependence of the hospitality industry on social distancing and domestic and international travel. Moreover, in answering RQ3, awareness of the hospitality sector's vulnerability to these health alerts has prompted a rethinking of hotel-type accommodation, mainly in terms of risk management, as well as commercial and promotional strategy. According to our results, less importance is given to long-term transformations under the heading of apartment in tourist accommodation (apartment complex or hotel-apartment). Similarly, differences have been detected between this type of establishment and hotels in relation to the importance of the most valued strategies for revitalizing the business.

The establishments under study combined emotional content (sense of community and social actions) with promotional content in their social media communication strategy. As with previous results (Leung et al. 2015; Bonsón et al., 2016), on the one hand, hotels with similar profiles used similar social-media marketing tactics on different social media platforms. However, differences can be clearly seen in the communication strategies, as the smaller hotels with fewer stars posted little or nothing on their social networks during the months of the lockdown. Moreover, an important change in the online communication strategy in relation to the same period in 2019 was observed (RQ4). The profiles that were analysed showed a significant reduction in promotional posts on the establishment or destination, accounting for over 85% of the total in 2019, and an increase in messages with non-product content. The effectiveness of this strategy may be positive as the engagement rate of promotional messages decreased during confinement, while rates of messages with emotional content increased.

Specifically, companies increased their use of social media during the lockdown period (Kantar, 2020), nevertheless the theme of their messages changed over the weeks, as their management practices changed (Lai and Wong, 2020; Ketter and Avraham, 2021). In line with the results of Ketter and Avraham (2021), messages aimed at improving the company's social image and fostering a sense of community or the Brotherhood of Man were mainly expressed during lockdown weeks. Subsequently, social media was to a greater extent used to promote the establishment, the environment (welcome back), and to stimulate tourism. This change in the themes of the messages could be due to: (1) the recommencement of activity due to the end of lockdown; and (2) the awareness of companies that demand for tourism was set to decrease.

On the other hand, publicity on safety and health measures was scarce in social networks, with establishments leaving it to official websites to post such information, although this message theme achieved very high response rates. In this sense, if we value the effectiveness or engagement of the messages in social networks by the rate of interaction (RQ5), we can say that the decision to reduce the messages targeting promotion of the establishment was a sound one, because their rates of interaction were reduced, unlike the

other themes. However, it might have been advisable to increase the number of messages targeting health and hygiene measures, as they incited high levels of engagement.

### 5.3. Implications

This case-study of a province of Spain can, in countries less affected by COVID-19, also serve as an example of health-crisis management and its impact that has led to the closure of tourist accommodation. This work has also led us to observe the extra support needed by independent establishments or those belonging to small chains in relation to their online marketing and communications strategies, which both the establishments themselves and government agencies should take into account.

This work has offered some initial findings on the effects of content strategies on communication in social networks in times of external crisis. Accordingly, it is recommended that the messages should not be used as a means of information, but rather the messages that reflect both social and community commitments among the accommodation companies should be emphasized, in order to achieve higher levels of engagement.

Moreover, this study has contributed to the social media literature on hospitality studies. To the best of our knowledge, the thematic strategies that the accommodation sector uses on Facebook or Twitter (Minazzi and Lagrosen 2014; Huertas and Marine-Roig 2016; Ferrer-Rosell et al., 2020) have only been examined in very few studies, but no studies have been found on social media strategies in situations of natural disasters or pandemics.

### 5.4. Limitations and future research

It should be taken into consideration that this paper has only focused on one Spanish province and, although the cases under analysis include representative establishments of the tourist accommodation sector, the results cannot be extrapolated to the rest of Spain.

The inherent limitations of exploratory studies must also be taken into account, such as the case study, to which an intentional non-probabilistic study was applied and in which the sample was never subject to any requirement to generalize the results, but instead appropriate characteristics were sought to respond to the research questions (Kazez, 2009). In this sense, the search for a representative sample of the different types of hotel establishments of the province led us to a reduction in the number of social network accounts, because the smallest establishments or those of lower category never had or never used social networks during the period of study.

However, this study is presented as a starting point, to examine the transformations in this sector and the communication strategies that are used, due to the impact of the COVID-19. A line of research remains open that would involve a longitudinal analysis, to assess the evolution of these establishments in relation to the variables under analysis.

An additional line of research might focus on combining thematic analysis with qualitative or quantitative studies of Facebook comments and Twitter responses. It could include both the study of engagement and sentiment analysis and whether online reactions differ during pandemics.

The results of the Spanish case could be compared with those of other countries and within other Spanish provinces with a preponderance of sun-and-beach tourism to establish whether similar behaviour may be evident.

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