

**CREAREA DE EXPERIENȚE MEMORABILE:  
O ANALIZĂ APROFUNDATĂ A EXCELENȚEI ÎN OSPITALITATE  
LA HOTELUL CROWNE PLAZA BUCUREȘTI**

*Crafting memorable experiences: A deep dive into hospitality excellence at Crowne Plaza Bucharest Hotel*

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**Rezumat:** Excelența în ospitalitate reprezintă satisfacerea nevoilor oaspeților prin conectarea cu aceștia și făcându-i să se simtă ca acasă atunci când stau la hotel. Crowne Plaza Bucharest, reprezentant al InterContinental Hotels Group, se bucură de succesul său ca o unitate hotelieră de top în România, în timp ce creează experiențe memorabile pentru oaspeți datorită mai multor factori. Cu scopul de a sublinia ceea ce face acest hotel remarcabil, acest articol se bazează pe un studiu de caz al hotelului Crowne Plaza Bucharest și include perspective adunate dintr-un interviu semi-structurat cu managerul operațional. Constatările arată că excelența în ospitalitate de la Crowne Plaza Bucharest se traduce prin conectarea cu oaspeții și oferirea acestora unei ospitalități autentice, o experiență memorabilă care cuprinde mai mult decât cazarea și favorizează fidelizarea clienților.

**Cuvinte cheie:** excelență în ospitalitate; experiențe memorabile; factori de influență; netnografie; satisfacerea nevoilor consumatorilor

**Abstract:** Excellence in hospitality represents satisfying the needs of the guests by connecting with them and making them feel at home when staying at the hotel. Crowne Plaza Bucharest, an InterContinental Hotels Group representative, enjoys its success as a leading hospitality company in Romania while crafting memorable experiences for the guests due to several factors. Aiming to point out what makes this hotel outstanding, this article is based on a case study of Crowne Plaza Bucharest and includes insights gathered from a semi-structured interview with the operations manager. The findings show that hospitality excellence at Crowne Plaza Bucharest is translated into connecting with the guests and offering them true hospitality, a memorable experience that goes beyond accommodation and fosters customer retention.

**Keywords:** hospitality excellence; memorable experience; influence factors; netnography; satisfying customer needs

**JEL Classification:** L83, M10, M31, Z32

**REL Classification:** 7A, 11D, 14F, 17B

## 1. Introduction

The increasing interest in hospitality excellence has heightened the need for understanding which are the main factors that contribute to the peerless performance reported by hotels. Seeking to preserve the authenticity of the hotels' atmosphere and to foster the guests' intrinsic belief to revisit the hotels (Tung and Ritchie, 2011), hospitality managers fight hard to craft memorable experiences. While pursuing excellence in hospitality seems classically associated with the value proposition, customer relationship management, and empowered employees (Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė, 2015), the modern and digital environment where hotels compete in considers also sustainability practices and certifications that aim to create awareness (Bianco, Bernard and Singal, 2023) and technological innovation through AI service (Wong, et al., 2023).

However, few studies have explored how hospitality excellence is achieved in Romania and which are the key driving forces that make the Romanian hospitality sector outstanding. This paper aims to investigate whether the theoretically researched factors pursuing excellence in hospitality are applicable to the Romanian hotel market, specifically focusing on the Crowne Plaza Bucharest Hotel. Therefore, the present article wishes to make a deep dive into the secrets of the excellent service provided by upper-scale Romanian hotels using the findings from a case study on the 4-star business hotel Crowne Plaza Bucharest. Using the conclusion drawn by several researchers worldwide regarding how hotels should perform to craft memorable experiences, the primary focus of this paper is on the service provided to guests at Crowne Plaza Bucharest, one of the most iconic hospitality properties from the capital city of Romania, functioning as a top hotel since the communist era.

## 2. Literature review

Tourism exists to deliver positive experiences for tourists and that is why hotels, as part of the travel and tourism sector, foster the crafting of memorable experiences as the fundamental reason for their functioning (Tung and Ritchie, 2011), since memorable experiences convince tourists to revisit destinations and to share their positive feelings by word-of-mouth and reviews. Hospitality excellence represents the thriving of hotels that implement successful business models (Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė, 2015), which comprise unique serving features that create memorable experiences for tourists.

Tung and Ritchie (2011) indicate that memorable experiences are described by the authenticity of the visited places and the feelings evoked by tourists getting part of them. By mastering strategy formulation and implementation (Köseoglu, et al., 2020), hotels can prove themselves successful in making guests revisit their location and triggering those positive feelings that would generate customer retention. According to Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015), several factors regarding the market, customers, or service contribute to the thriving of hotels in the hospitality service sector and their joint action crafts unforgettable experiences for the guests.

Since hospitality clients are able to associate positive feelings and emotions with their stay (affect), compare the service they receive with their intentions and planned agenda (expectations), draw some personal conclusions about the service (consequentiality), and reflect back on the tourism experience after their stay (recollection), hotels have all the necessary capabilities to meet the four dimensions of crafting memorable experiences (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Therefore, hospitality excellence can be achieved by properly serving the guests, which leads to the positioning of the hotel in the minds of the customers, who represent the main driving force behind the success of hotels.

Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015) examine to which extent hospitality excellence depends on innovation, empowered employees, customer relationship management,

technology, internal marketing, and the value proposition stated by the hotel. Additionally, Martin-Rios and Ciobanu (2019) consider that innovation represents a key factor contributing to the competitiveness of hotels in the business sector and both technological and non-technological innovation are beneficial for the strategy of hospitality firms. Despite new technologies that can boost productivity considerably, innovation is also translated into reorganizing the work processes or reconsidering the management of employees, according to Martin-Rios and Ciobanu (2019).

No matter how innovation is pursued, Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015) focus on the economic point of it and suggest that hospitality businesses should innovate with the aim of improving the quality of the service or cutting down costs in order for hotels to better satisfy the needs of the guests and to enjoy a competitive advantage in the market and higher profits. However, Martin-Rios and Ciobanu (2019) observe that hospitality firms have a lower score for innovation compared to other companies from the service sector but highlight the importance for hotels to implement strategies that would improve turnover performance by combining innovation at different levels of the company such as service, organizational, or marketing.

Moreover, Köseoglu, et al. (2020) place strategy along with the value proposition as key factors contributing to excellence in hospitality since hotel managers formulate their business strategy in regards to the assessment of the competition and macro-environmental factors such as the GDP and CPI that impact the inflation. Closely related to strategy, the value proposition is essential for the success of hotels aiming to demonstrate their uniqueness and distinguish from the competition in satisfying customer needs (Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė, 2015). Thus, the value proposition should be emphasized based on the strategy and goals of the hospitality companies whose managers should also take into account the employee involvement from inside the organization in the strategy implementation (Köseoglu, et al., 2020).

Since hotels belong to the service sector and employees represent the core of the service delivery to the guests, hospitality excellence is correspondingly identified in hotels with empowered employees, because the hospitality staff represents the main channel in providing quality service to the accommodated guests and the key element in attracting new customers (Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė, 2015). Despite this, several scholars have researched the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the performance of hotels and some hospitality properties even implemented robots that would replace hotel workers and take over their duties. After all, Wong, et al. (2023) question if employees are still needed for hotels when technology and AI appear as key factors for success in this fast-changing environment but conclude that robots act as a double-edged sword as hotels might enjoy higher performance with less human costs while also hospitality businesses might suffer from their guests reporting communication misunderstandings and the lack of human interaction.

While technology should be implemented by hotels to create enjoyable experiences for their customers by enhancing communication and interaction between the staff and the guests (Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė, 2015), the same target is stated for sustainability. Therefore, Bianco, Bernard, and Singal (2023) speculate that sustainability certifications might help hotels increase their financial performance through the improvement of several key performance indicators such as occupancy rate, average daily rate (ADR), and revenue per available room (RevPAR). Despite their significant costs for achieving these, sustainability certifications might contribute to higher returns on assets or equity, internal cost savings, and improved online ratings for hospitality businesses (Bianco, Bernard, and Singal, 2023). At the same time, implementing sustainability practices for hotels should consolidate their competitive advantage in the market by improving all performance metrics specific to the hospitality sector.

Moreover, customer relationship management and internal marketing exist as key factors that foster hospitality excellence because the customer represents the core of the business and

that is why clients should be understood in terms of their needs and attitudes (Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė, 2015). By doing this, hospitality workers must pay special attention to each and every guest and assure them that they are provided exceptional service and are taken care of. Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015) assume that getting to know the character of the guests through internal marketing and managing to fulfill every client's special desire through mastering customer relationship management are essential for providing hospitality excellence.

### **3. Methodology**

To emphasize how excellence in hospitality is carried out in the Romanian hotel market and which are the key factors contributing to the successful performance of hotels, qualitative research based on a semi-structured interview was conducted with the help of the operations manager from Crowne Plaza Bucharest. Representing an international hotel chain, InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), and preserving traditions from its 25 years of existence, Crowne Plaza Bucharest is the winner of multiple hotel awards and was chosen as the primary focus of the case study because of its reputation and market presence. Considered an upper-scale hotel because of its classification as a 4-star hotel and its international brand, Crowne Plaza Bucharest offers much more than accommodation and has experienced managers who possess all the necessary capabilities to unravel the meaning of hospitality excellence.

The semi-structured interview with the operations manager was used as the primary data source for this qualitative research. The face-to-face interview was conducted by the researchers based on the pre-established interview guide, was located in the lobby café of the hotel, and lasted for 49 minutes. The discussion with the operations manager of Crowne Plaza Bucharest was the fundamental point of data collection and was recorded using a smartphone and was then manually transcribed into written words and translated into English. The role of the operations manager is to control and assess the functioning of the accommodation-related services, dealing with the collaboration among the front office staff, reservations agents, salespeople, and revenue managers. Thus, the operations manager watches how the guest experience conveys from the check-in to the check-out of customers and that is why he is valuable for exploring the excellence blueprint at Crowne Plaza Bucharest.

The data analysis was performed by each author separately reviewing each question and answer manually from the interview because of their working background in the hospitality industry. The keywords highlighting the factors that describe how service excellence is achieved at Crowne Plaza Bucharest were marked with bold and separate notes were taken to match the answers from the interview with the theoretical foundation. Moreover, quotes from the interview with the operations manager were extracted to confirm and consolidate the results obtained. However, due to ethical considerations, ensuring confidentiality about business strategies and internal reports was necessary so a few insights about fostering service excellence from the employee perspective remain open to those willing to embrace a hospitality career. Also, the limited time for the interview and the busy schedule of the operations manager who felt time pressured might be considered minor limitations of this study.

Last but not least, another objective of this study is to emphasize a comparative analysis between customer reviews and managers' opinions regarding the factors contributing to hospitality excellence and how Crowne Plaza Bucharest masters the actions that make the service outstanding. Thus, through manual observation, data collection is performed by directly observing the Crowne Plaza Bucharest's customer reviews from online forums and identifying patterns that describe the customer satisfaction experienced during their stay at the hotel. Matching the highlighted keywords and phrases with the operations manager's answers to the interview is essential to deeply understand consumer behaviour and the strengths and weaknesses of Crowne Plaza Bucharest in achieving excellence in hospitality.

## 4. Findings and discussion

This section of the paper presents the history and amenities of Crowne Plaza Bucharest, exploring the facilities of the hotel and the factors that generate memorable experiences for the guests. Aiming to provide excellent customer service, the staff of the hotel works very hard for continuous improvement and all their joint efforts are exposed by the operations manager as factors that provide hospitality excellence for visitors. The findings from the interview are matched with the results of the netnography to emphasize what guests appreciate the most when staying at Crowne Plaza Bucharest and which are the strengths and weaknesses of the business, helping the administrators' future strategies and positioning the hotel in the mind of the clients.

### 4.1 The services that nurture hospitality excellence at Crowne Plaza Bucharest

Crowne Plaza Bucharest, part of IHG Hotels and Resorts, is a 4-star business hotel located in the northern part of the capital city of Romania, which makes it a great choice for travellers arriving in Bucharest by plane. Its proximity to the airport is not the only strength of Crowne Plaza Bucharest but the excellent customer service provided for the guests (Crowne Plaza Bucharest, 2023). Moreover, its uniqueness is represented by the huge area of about 40,000 square meters that is covered by the hotel and its spacious surrounding garden, the perfect place for weddings and baptism celebrations. Gathering 165 recently renovated rooms available for accommodating guests, Crowne Plaza Bucharest has just celebrated 25 years of existence, in which travellers have always enjoyed a good night's sleep, relaxing at the spa area where guests have free access to the indoor pool, sauna, and fitness room, and fine dining experiences with flavours from the international cuisine (Crowne Plaza Bucharest, 2023).

The professional experience of the authors in hospitality allows them to perform a deep dive into the functional organization of the hotel and to reveal some insights that would consolidate with arguments the idea of hospitality excellence. Therefore, Crowne Plaza Bucharest has been operating under this brand since 1998 as a consequence of the fact that the hotel was opened for the first time in 1990 under the name of "Hotel Flora" and in 1996 was acquired by Ana Hotels and completely renovated. On the Poligrafiei Boulevard no.1 guests come to find a full-service hotel that goes beyond accommodation and hosts an oasis of calm with the green colours of the garden. Tourists can choose from 3 food and beverage units (restaurants, bars, and a café) and 11 conference rooms when scheduling their business meetings. Out of the 165 rooms, Crowne Plaza Bucharest gathers 103 standard rooms (44 Twin and 59 Queen), 2 accessible rooms, 33 King rooms, 8 Queen Premium rooms with a stationary bike, 11 Junior Suites, 7 Executive Suites (apartments with a bedroom and a living room), and one Presidential Suite.

On average, on a weekday (from Monday to Thursday night) Crowne Plaza Bucharest sells a room with the single rate of 199 euro plus 11% taxes (9% VAT and 2% city tax), including breakfast. At this price, guests have complimentary coffee and tea-making facilities in the room, Wi-Fi Internet in the room, and free access to Ana Spa (indoor swimming pool, sauna, and fitness). Since Crowne Plaza Bucharest is a full-service upper-scale hotel, several paid services are available to the accommodated guests such as transfers from/to the airport, parking, minibar and room service, laundry services, and massages or therapies at the spa. Additionally, focusing on the business segment of travellers, Crowne Plaza Bucharest rents conference rooms, ballrooms, and its garden for private events that raise the popularity of the service excellence provided by this IHG hotel to its guests.

### 4.2 The key factors that contribute to excellence in hospitality at Crowne Plaza Bucharest

Crowne Plaza Bucharest relies heavily on the standards promoted by IHG through its brand and that is why the hotel targets mostly the business segment of travellers, concentrating on

bringing humanity to business travel by understanding the individual needs of the guests, “*Small details like what coffee he/she drinks in the morning, whether he/she prefers to do sports or not, or if he/she always needs a second wake up call because he/she doesn’t wake up on time, all of them make a difference and, once known, make that guest understand that we care about him/her*”. Therefore, the operation manager from Crowne Plaza Bucharest defines excellence in hospitality by the human touch offered in serving the guests and all the efforts of the hotel staff in creating a unique connection with each guest that aims to make him/her feel like home while staying at the hotel, “*we need to focus on how we connect with our guests and how we find out what are the things that make them feel at home*”.

Winner of the prize “Hotel of the Year – International Hotel Chain, 4 stars” at the conference TopHotel Awards in 2023, Crowne Plaza Bucharest cultivates hospitality excellence based on its value proposition, as one the factors identified in the literature by Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015), through understanding the customers’ needs and differentiating from the competition, “*we aspire to go to the next level of knowing our guests’ needs, the level where they are willing to share their experiences and their expectations with us and we are willing to meet them*”. At the same time, the mission of Crowne Plaza Bucharest is “*to deliver what is called <<true hospitality>>, meaning hospitality is taken to the level of an art*”, taking special care of all the details that strengthen a memorable experience for the guests. By pursuing the analysis of factors that influence the excellence in hospitality identified in the literature, *Figure 1* shows how those factors lead indeed to the excellence in Crowne Plaza’s daily activity. Compared to the competition, Crowne Plaza Bucharest as part of IHG praises itself with the best relaxation and the best sleep from all the hotel chains because of the implemented standard called Sleep Advantage, “*this means 100% cotton linens, the assurance that the guest receives a wake-up call no matter what happens (no receptionist will forget to wake him/her up in the morning) so that he/she does not miss his/her plane or business meeting*”.

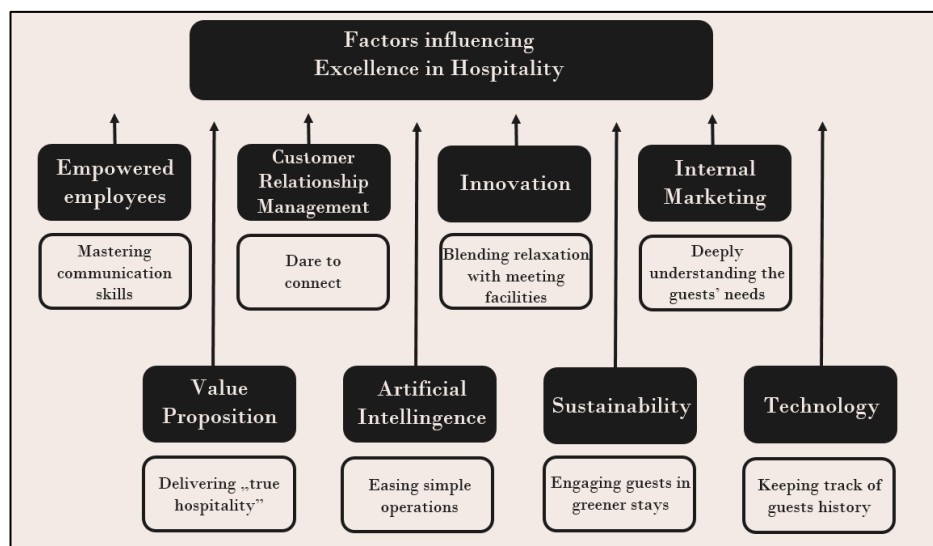


Fig. 1. Factors influencing Excellence in Hospitality at Crowne Plaza Bucharest

Source: Authors' research

Moreover, based on the assumption of Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015) regarding customer relationship management as an important factor that contributes to hospitality excellence, Crowne Plaza Bucharest puts a lot of effort into raising the service up to a level where customers’ expectations are exceeded and that is why the hotel staff should understand who their clients are and what are their needs for becoming familiar in the eyes of the guests,

*“we try to eliminate these communication barriers, to become familiar to our guests, to convince them that they can consider us as part of their family”*. Positioned mainly as a business hotel, Crowne Plaza Bucharest is located in the core business area of Bucharest and that is why the hotel immerses its guests into an atmosphere of a business venue with conference rooms and facilities. Segmenting the market based on the source of the business, the hotel engages in creating memorable experiences for guests regardless of their booking channel, *“we have some customers with contractual agreements, guests who come here to attend a conference, guests who come here because they are part of an airline crew that runs regular flights on the Bucharest route, and guests who book through a tour operator travel agency which made a package for that guest”*.

Despite the fact that Crowne Plaza Bucharest reports a lower occupancy rate from Friday to Sunday night, the hotel does not neglect leisure tourists and attracts them with discounted room rates or packages that combine accommodation with culinary experiences or massages, *“in those three days a week we must reinvent ourselves, we must target another category of guests, those who come to Bucharest to spend their free time”*. As a result, the operations manager of Crowne Plaza Bucharest considers that excellence in hospitality might be proved by the smiling back of the guests who appreciate all the efforts of the hotel staff in providing excellent customer service through deeply understanding the needs and preferences of the guests, *“a smile for us means perhaps more than a kind word, it is actually the recognition of our efforts in identifying those guest needs that make the difference”*.

Furthermore, according to Tung and Ritchie (2011), excellence in hospitality is promoted through memorable experiences that are built on a sense of authenticity and the will of customers to revisit the place, such that Crowne Plaza Bucharest preserves its business authenticity by blending tradition with innovation. The operations manager of the hotel immerses himself in the position of a storyteller and emphasizes the unique historical feature of Crowne Plaza Bucharest as the first hotel worldwide operating under this IHG brand, *“the Crowne Plaza concept started from raising some of the Holiday Inn hotels to the next level, creating the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza concept so, in April 1998 in Bucharest, the first hotel under the Crowne Plaza brand without a Holiday Inn attached was opened”*. Since the early years of the construction, before even functioning as a hotel, there was a tradition for treatment and relaxation, which has been carefully preserved to the present times through the spa facilities, highlighting the authenticity of Crowne Plaza Bucharest, *“the former Flora Hotel, together with Ana Aslan before, had this tradition of offering guests an oasis of relaxation and rejuvenation”*.

However, innovation has always been a priority for the management of the hotel, also pointed out by Martin-Rios and Ciobanu (2019) as a key factor fostering hospitality excellence, and that is why Crowne Plaza Bucharest has blended relaxation with meeting facilities, *“in 1988 when Crowne Plaza appeared, it tried to promote the idea of dynamic relaxation but connected to the needs of the time, the need of people to meet among themselves and that is why Crowne Plaza has developed an extensive area of conference facilities around the hotel so that it can attract as much as possible from the need of people from the northern area of Bucharest to meet, an area that includes many corporations and consortia which gradually developed as a new city here”*. Alternatively, the authenticity of the business is emphasized by signature dishes and Crowne Plaza Bucharest serves food under the concept Fast & Fresh, implemented by the brand in the bar and room service menu, which aims to combine quickly prepared meals with good nutritional choices, *“we understand that our guests often do not have time or eat while being in a hurry and that is why we try to offer them fresh products, which are subjected to thermal processes as little as possible, so that we combine their need to eat quickly with their need to have a certain decency towards the products they consume”*.

Also, as exemplified by Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015), empowered employees are essential to hospitality excellence and that is why Crowne Plaza Bucharest counts on staff, not necessarily with previous work experience, who is willing to learn how to master communication skills and to join them in their journey, *“we rely heavily on communication so we try to make this selection, in terms of staff who have direct contact with the guest, based on the candidate’s abilities to connect with guests, be a jovial person and ready to understand our customers’ wishes and make them true”*. The hotel business offers several benefits to employees and flexibility, *“we do not shy away from finding various means of collaboration with young people, means that must be much more flexible than they were before, such as shorter working hours (instead of the 8-hour norm, 6-hour or 4-hour – part time), working schedule only on weekends (if there are other activities or school schedule during the week)”*, relying heavily on the IHG training programs for both new and experienced employees, *“we have some introductory training, which lays the foundations for both product knowledge and how to act and relate from the point of view of colleagues who interact directly with the customers”*.

While understanding customer needs is crucial for providing excellence in hospitality and can be done even before the arrival of the guests through internal marketing as documented by Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015), technological innovation, explored by Martin-Rios and Ciobanu (2019) in the literature, might simplify this process and contribute to improving the service using reservations, databases, and keeping track of customers history. Therefore, Crowne Plaza Bucharest as part of IHG benefits from a loyalty program and the oldest reservation system in the world, originally called Holidex and later absorbed by the new system which is called Concerto. This system is connected with all the online reservation systems that exist at the moment, *“we are connected with Booking.com and all 4 GDS (Galileo, Sabre, Amadeus, and Worldspan)”*, so that the reservations department of the hotel receives the reservations in their system in real-time from any terminal, *“whether it’s a guest booking through the app, a travel agency booking from a terminal that’s connected to one of the GDS, or another agency that’s connected to one of the tour operators that connects directly with us like Booking.com, Hrs, Hotelbeds, Thomas Cook, ITS, they can book in real-time and the bookings reach us”*. The main point of this worldwide interconnectivity is that Crowne Plaza Bucharest can offer personalized experiences to its customers using the details provided in the traces of the reservations, which aid in achieving hospitality excellence through better service, *“for reservations made in real time it is very easy to add from the primary data of the guests to their particular needs, such as extra bed, room far from the elevator, upper floor, late check-out or early check-in, all appearing in our system without the need for an offline user intervention to produce effects”*.

Moreover, the operations manager from Crowne Plaza Bucharest strongly believes that a personalized experience at his hotel goes beyond guests acknowledging the implementation of IHG international standards and focuses on meeting the preferences of the guests and satisfying all their needs, offering them *“a joy of recognition, specifically to address them by name, to know that when a guest comes to the hotel he/she does not have to wait long because he/she has the key already prepared and that the hotel staff already knows his/her particular needs, in terms of his/her business meetings or leisure time, and to be happy when he/she comes to us because we have his/her favorite wine or coffee”*. Crowne Plaza Bucharest monitors attentively the satisfaction of its customers and uses an internal system called Problem Tracker to record all the difficulties guests have in different areas of the service and generate reports, using the feedback offered by clients constructively to improve the service, *“we want to be able to help our guests get what they wanted and also to understand our mistakes, to accept them, and not to repeat them”*. Therefore, the hotel workers aspire to provide hospitality excellence and make significant efforts to overcome imperfections, *“we recently had a guest who really wanted a room with a balcony but he only told us at check-out this aspect. We apologised that we didn’t*



*know his preference and we put a comment in his profile about it so that for a future booking he would automatically be allocated a balcony room. He enjoyed it and has since come back, and we know to assign him a room with a balcony because of that feature in his profile preferences”.*

Alternatively, the customer relationship management and internal marketing emphasized by Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015) as essential factors contributing to hospitality excellence get along very well with the positioning of the hotel in the mind of the clients as a key marketing strategy. Crowne Plaza Bucharest as an upper-scale business hotel focuses on creating memorable experiences for the guests and the operations manager unravels how the first contact of a guest with the hotel could become memorable for the client, *“it is very important that when he/she enters the hotel for the first time and comes into contact with the atmosphere/ambiance to be greeted by someone who says <<Welcome!>>, explains to him/her what the amenities and hotel facilities are, where he/she can go to serve breakfast, which is the easiest way to the spa, and asks him/her whether he/she needs transportation when leaving the hotel”.* Whereas the arrival impression is crucial for the guest experience, also the first moment when entering the hotel room contributes highly to the overall experience of the guest because of the cleaning level and all the other details expected by clients due to the previously known international standards, *“the way he/she finds the cleaned room is very important: the smell, the temperature, the ambient light”.* Similarly, Crowne Plaza Bucharest insists on shortening the waiting time for the guests at check-in and making sure that everyone is taken care of regardless of the queue’s length, *“the employees can give guests the feeling that they have been treated well and fairly so that they can get to the room as quickly as possible”.*

Despite the fact that hospitality excellence could be analysed based on the factors that build memorable experiences for the guests, it is vital to observe how the hotel staff creates a complete experience for clients during their stay. Therefore, Crowne Plaza Bucharest goes much beyond offering a bed for its guests and aspires to market itself as a hotel where people want to stay and meet other people. The hotel staff tries to transform Crowne Plaza Bucharest into the most chosen destination when customers think of their future business trips and the perfect place where they could arrange dining with a business partner, *“it is very important for us to try to keep our guests in the house for services other than accommodation, such as a great atmosphere at the bar, good food and a properly prepared menu at the restaurant, a way to continue their fitness training started at home, or relaxing at the spa”.* Accordingly, the operations manager of Crowne Plaza Bucharest stresses the importance for all staff members to pay attention to all the details that contribute to the creation of memorable experiences and define excellence in hospitality for the hotel that should appear as a top priority destination for business travellers in Bucharest, *“the idea we are trying to promote is <<your business home away from home>>”.*

Furthermore, sustainability certifications are important for the management team of Crowne Plaza Bucharest as pointed out by Bianco, Bernard, and Singal (2023) because the hotel aims to become more and more eco-friendly using also its location strength. Surrounded by a 7,000 square meters garden, Crowne Plaza Bucharest argues that a transition towards a greener stay is crucial for the future of hospitality and that is why the hotel follows very strictly the IHG sustainability standards, *“since 2019, we have implemented the standard for the disposal of plastic straws and make paper straws available”.* Thus, Crowne Plaza Bucharest is part of the IHG Green Engage system and has already implemented bulk amenities to eliminate single-use plastics and replace them with premium cosmetics, *“there was an initiative some 20 years ago to give up single-use plastics for reusable bottles, but then it was based on the idea of saving money, now it is based on the idea of sustainability”.* Also, IHG engages guests in their sustainability journey and offers loyalty points through the Greener Stay program. Dedicated to guests staying more than two nights, the program lets the customer decide whether or not

they need a maid each day of their stay to clean their room. Crowne Plaza Bucharest offers 500 loyalty points to the guests who choose each day not to have their room cleaned by putting a specific sign on the door of the room so that several benefits are experienced by all parties involved, *“we save manpower, we can focus more on the guests who are about to arrive, and it gives us the freedom to make our guests even more loyal by offering these points”*.

Regarding keeping pace with the trends, Crowne Plaza Bucharest is interested in the technological progress using AI devices that might ease the workload of the hotel staff as highlighted in the literature by Wong, et al. (2023), testing some robots that could help the housekeeping workers, *“we recently had a pilot project with some robot vacuums to be up and running in hotel corridors”*. However, the operations manager of the hotel does not think that AI is able to replace employees in hospitality because feelings that cannot be replicated by robots are essential for connecting with guests and crafting excellence in hospitality, *“AI can’t produce feelings and that’s what we rely on so that every experience of staying with us, in our accommodation area, in our conference venues, fosters a feeling to be remembered”*. Even though in the near future AI might be used at Crowne Plaza Bucharest for simple operations like automatic check-in where guests will be able to choose the room in which they will stay, similarly to picking the seats on the plane, it is an absolute necessity to use AI in conjunction with the human factor for a personalised experience expected by guests in an upper scale hotel, *“when they come to the hotel, especially a 4 or 5-star hotel, they will have to be greeted by someone who asks the guests how are they in general, how are they feeling today, what are their needs and what we can do for them”*.

Correspondingly, on the restaurant side, AI is far from replacing the human workforce at Crowne Plaza Bucharest since the introduction of tablets for guests to order from was never debated at the hotel or chain level. In the context of more and more restaurants focusing on including pictures in the menu to make their dishes more appealing for the customers, the operations manager stresses the importance of a well-trained waiter to tell clients in detail how their dish is prepared and the story of that food for creating a memorable experience as emphasized by Tung and Ritchie (2011), *“we want to preserve this connection through which to explain, for example of a very delicious American beef steak that we serve, the culture of raising cattle from the original place of the dish and the tradition of the producers dating back hundreds of years”*. Therefore, the kitchen workers and waiters from Crowne Plaza Bucharest rely on crafting a unique culinary experience for their guests who are encouraged to remember more the taste of the dish than its value for money, *“if you think about how much you paid for that product, something is already wrong but if you eat and you enjoy the dish, it does not even matter how much you paid for it”*.

Resulting from the assumption of Köseoglu, et al. (2020) that strategy is indispensable for achieving hospitality excellence and preserving it for the future, Crowne Plaza Bucharest has already drawn its future plans and goals. Regarding the hotel infrastructure, the staff concentrates on maintenance because of the considerable time that elapsed from the date the hotel was built, and the complexity of replacing pipes challenged significantly the technical and administrative team for the last two years. After two complete renovations with the last one ending in 2017, Crowne Plaza Bucharest does not take into consideration expanding its accommodation capacity but its events capacity through the garden space, *“a tent or an area in the garden so that we can include the events after 10 PM in the summer, or a swimming pool in the neighborhood, in the garden area, all of these could be some ideas”*. Regarding the business development, Crowne Plaza Bucharest aims to preserve its good value for money for the services offered that contributes to the value proposition as an essential factor for hospitality excellence, according to Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015), keeping constant the occupancy rate of 70-80% during the week and somewhere around 30-40% at the weekend, *“we generally do not aim for an annual occupancy of 80%, considering that a smaller number*

*of guests gives us the chance to connect with them faster and gives us the chance to personalize the service more”.*

As a result of the fact that a higher occupancy rate produces more wear on the rooms and the available equipment and a higher price also produces a natural selection in terms of the social class from which the guests originate, the management team of Crowne Plaza Bucharest is satisfied with the occupancy rates and room revenues and focuses more efforts on the conference area as part of the business, *“this hotel is atypical, producing 55-60% income from events, and the difference on accommodation”*. Despite the fact that profitability margins are higher for accommodation compared to events, Crowne Plaza Bucharest’s administrative staff does not take into consideration expanding the accommodation capacity because of the annual occupancy rate not exceeding more than 70% and not so many sold out days, which does not generate enough reasons to start building an additional floor at the top of the hotel, *“we prefer to stay at the proposed level of exclusivity and function like this”*.

On the sustainability side in the future, Crowne Plaza Bucharest explores several paths to become more sustainable by using renewable energy and reducing waste. Therefore, the hotel staff has already implemented strategies to separate the waste and has installed solar panels to reduce pollution and cut down costs, *“we produce in the summer months, between May and September, somewhere around 10% of the consumption, which is significant”*. Moreover, Crowne Plaza Bucharest targets to procure locally sourced products through as many as possible local suppliers. By using traditional Romanian products, the hotel organizes several culinary festivals that are attractive for guests, profitable for the business, and beneficial for the suppliers, *“with these festivals we help local producers to sell their goods, and we put a local product on the plate, which no longer involves transport costs”*. However, partnering with well-known suppliers is an important need for an upper-scale hotel and imported products should consolidate the sustainability strategy of Crowne Plaza Bucharest, *“we also try to attract very well-known suppliers, Coca-Cola for soft drinks, Illy for coffee, so that through their sustainability policy they support us in delivering the right product at the right price”*.

#### **4.2 Netnography: a comparative analysis between customer reviews and managers’ opinions**

Examining the Crowne Plaza Bucharest’s customer behaviour in online forums demonstrates that the hotel is highly appreciated for its cleanliness and comfortable rooms. The hotel is present with opinions of its customers on several online forums such as booking.com, tripadvisor.com, and google.com, where Crowne Plaza Bucharest proves its popularity among top Bucharest hotels because of the numerous expressed opinions on each of the previously mentioned sites. Therefore, gathering 762 reviews on booking.com, 572 reviews on tripadvisor.com, and 2945 reviews on google.com, Crowne Plaza Bucharest praises itself with very high scores based on the average of the grades given on each of the sites on which marks are awarded by clients.

Rated with the mark 9.0 out of 10 on booking.com, 4.5 out of 5 stars on tripadvisor.com, and 4.5 out of 5 stars on google.com, Crowne Plaza Bucharest is most appreciated for its cleanliness and staff and least valued for its prices and location. Most positive reviews about the hotel rooms point out the generous accommodation space, the comfortable beds, their cleanliness, and their equipment, *“rooms were clean and good size”, “bedroom was large and comfortable with everything you need”, “the room is spacious and well furnished”, “the room was super clean, spacious, and felt luxurious”, “comfortable beds and clean rooms”*. However, some guests question the modern-looking aspect of the rooms, *“old furniture in the rooms and bad smell”*, and the comfort given by the quality of the mattress, *“the mattress is quite hard and uncomfortable”*. Additionally, clients notified some issues about the malfunctioning of the

room climate control system, “*room climate control system does not work properly*”, and hoped to have found balcony furniture in all hotel rooms, “*odd though to have a balcony with no chairs*”. Thus, positioning the hotel in the mind of the clients contributes to the overall guest experience mentioned by the operations manager, also described in *Figure 2*, who emphasized that the first impression of a guest when entering the hotel room is crucial for crafting memorable experiences

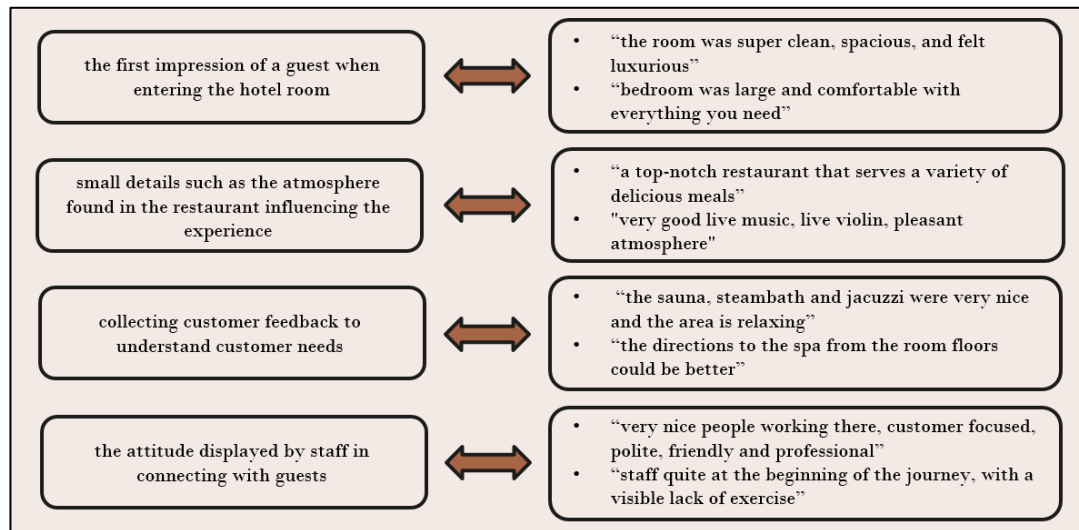


Fig. 2. Netnography: a comparative analysis between customer reviews and managers' opinions

Source: Authors' research

Regarding the food and beverage department, visitors of Crowne Plaza Bucharest enjoy the quality of the food, the breakfast, and the atmosphere at the restaurant, “*great breakfast and the food in the bar was great*”, “*a top-notch restaurant that serves a variety of delicious meals*”, “*restaurant has a good menu with quality food*”, “*nice room-service*”, “*New Year's brunch in the hotel restaurant with very good live music, live violin, pleasant atmosphere*”. Despite these strengths, customer reviews explore the weaknesses of the banqueting department and suggest some improvements in the breakfast food options, the serving speed, and the coffee served in the morning, “*breakfast is overpriced for what is offered*”, “*breakfast correct but coffee could be better*”, “*the Pine restaurant is nice although the service there might be a bit faster*”, “*it could be more bio and vegan options for breakfast*”, “*poor coffee quality on breakfast, better at the bar*”. As a result, hospitality excellence is influenced by details such as the quality of the coffee and by the atmosphere found in the restaurant that shapes the taste of the served dishes and that is why Crowne Plaza Bucharest is attentive to the preferences of all guests as mentioned by the interviewee when defining the main concept of the discussion.

Moreover, the customer opinions comment on the quality of the equipment and facilities found in the hotel and most of the positive reviews mention the spa facilities, “*the gym and spa are very nice, new machines in the gym*”, “*nice pool, nice sauna and Hamam room*”, “*great SPA with therapeutic massages*”, “*the sauna, steambath and jacuzzi were very nice and the area is relaxing*”. Additionally, clients appreciate the facilities found at the conference rooms designed for business travellers, “*equipment worked flawlessly for the conference sessions attended, i.e. microphones, projectors and such*”, and other details about the infrastructure of the hotel, “*the shower in the room was great, good power and steady flow of warm water*”. Yet, Crowne Plaza Bucharest's clients observed that parking facilities might suffer from a lack of administrative coordination because of the pricing policy, crowdedness, and payment procedure, “*parking was a little strange but that seems to be something in Bucharest in general*”, “*the parking is charged separately*”, “*paying for parking outside is not the best way*”.

*to cope*". Despite these, some other minor inconveniences occurred to some guests regarding the facilities of the hotel, *"the directions to the spa from the room floors could be better"*, *"the fridge of mini bar wasn't cooling at all"*, *"problematic Wi-Fi, slow speed"*, *"restaurant area too small"*. Hence, the operations manager's focus on collecting customer feedback to understand customer needs matches the clients' intention for guest experience improvement so that hospitality excellence is achieved through a personalized experience expected by each hotel guest.

Similarly, Crowne Plaza Bucharest often surpasses guest expectations in service and that is why positive reviews about its staff are abundant. Highly rated for their professionalism, friendliness, and hospitable character, the Crowne Plaza Bucharest workers are appreciated according to hundreds of customer opinions, *"very nice people working there, customer focused, polite, friendly and professional"*, *"great customer service from all the staff with a friendly welcoming approach"*, *"Dragos and Dana from the bar were friendly and attentive"*, *"housekeeping kept the room spotless"*, *"very courteous and professional staff"*, *"very good service at reception and breakfast"*, *"the staff was kind, courteous, helpful, and accommodating"*, *"the genuine smile and empathy shown by the staff"*. Nevertheless, a few clients spotted a distant attitude of some employees, *"some of the female reception staff were rather aloof as in <<don't ask me>>"*, but it is possible that this impression was displayed by a newcomer employee still not adapted to the workplace, *"staff quite at the beginning of the journey, with a visible lack of exercise"*. Therefore, hospitality excellence is highly dependent on the attitude displayed by staff who need to possess strong communication skills and be able to connect with guests as mentioned by the operations manager who stresses the importance for the hotel staff to offer guests the joy of recognition by understanding their needs and fulfilling them through mastering internal marketing and customer relationship management.

## 5. Conclusions and limitations

To sum up, hospitality excellence is represented by the joint effects of multiple factors such as innovation, empowered employees, customer relationship management, technology, internal marketing, and the value proposition stated by the hotel along with sustainability initiatives and certifications and artificial intelligence systems. However, excellence in hospitality differs from one hotel to another since it depends on the atmosphere and the connection created between the staff members and the guests. At Crowne Plaza Bucharest, hospitality excellence is perceived as the deep understanding of customer needs such as his/her favourite coffee or wine and as the willingness of the staff team to satisfy those needs by daring to overcome communication barriers and truly connect with guests.

The operations manager emphasizes that genuinely caring about guests is the key to success in hospitality since making them feel at home when travelling far from home is essential for customer satisfaction and customer retention. Therefore, hotel guests always expect the joy of recognition, such as the employees addressing them by their name, and are willing to offer a smile back when they experience "true hospitality" as in the case when the service exceeds their expectations and becomes close to art. As the first hotel operating under the Crowne Plaza brand, Crowne Plaza Bucharest follows rigorously the IHG standards and assures that all guests benefit from the expected levels of cleanliness and comfort. Thus, the Sleep Advantage and Fast & Fresh concepts prove the genuine care about the needs of the hotel clients such as a good night's sleep, balanced nutrition, and a healthy meal choice cooked in a short period of time.

Moreover, hospitality excellence is fostered by innovation both at the level of processes and technology. Crowne Plaza Bucharest seeks to innovate permanently and has already tested robots for the vacuum cleaning of corridors and installed solar panels to pursue carbon neutrality. Despite the fact that sustainability represents a long and difficult journey, the hotel

managed to reduce carbon emissions by 10% and implement initiatives for separate waste collection. Also, excellence in hospitality is described through personalised experiences that make guests feel at home and that is why Crowne Plaza Bucharest takes advantage of the oldest existing reservation system that allows adding preferences and traces to the profile of each guest.

According to customer reviews, most hotel visitors appreciate the cleanliness of the rooms, the quality of the food at the restaurant and the breakfast, the friendliness of the staff, and the professionalism of the service. Whether travelling for business purposes, for attending a conference, or for leisure, guests are all treated with the same special care at Crowne Plaza Bucharest, greeted when arriving at the hotel, asked how are they and what are their desires for the stay, and made them feel like home. Yet, the manual observation of the guest opinions is a limitation of the study because the presented results are subjectively filtered through the authors' perspective and the qualitative analysis of them is highly interpretable.

Also, this paper focuses on the case study of Crowne Plaza Bucharest where hospitality excellence is perceived solely through the vision of the operations manager. Future studies might use multiple interviewees to highlight which are the factors contributing to excellence in hospitality or extend the observation to multiple hotels in order to compare how service is delivered. Similarly, extended research on this subject might consider exploring whether hospitality excellence delivered in business hotels is different from excellent customer service displayed in leisure hotels.

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