



Artificial intelligence in hotel management at destination Manta: Adoption and future trends

La inteligencia artificial en la gestión hotelera del destino Manta: Adopción y tendencias futuras

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming the tourism industry through the personalization of products and services, digitalization and telecommunications. The purpose of this research was to analyze the adoption of AI in hotel management in Manta canton, Manabí province, Ecuador, providing new perspectives on its management, through the evaluation of the use of AI from the vision of hotel managers. To determine the subject of the study, a non-probabilistic qualitative methodology was used, using a technical observation in the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis program. For this, 30 open interviews were collected with hotel managers willing to collaborate. And as a result, the scarce technological culture, lack of time, lack of knowledge and fear of change are reported as the main obstacles for an efficient implementation of AI in the sector, reflecting a stagnation in the service methods based on traditional resources and some of these already obsolete in the current dynamics of the industry. Trends indicate that hotels adopting AI will optimize internal processes and increase operational efficiency, especially through virtual assistants.

Keywords: digitization; hotel management; operational efficiency; tourism; virtual assistants

RESUMEN

La Inteligencia Artificial (IA) está transformando la industria turística mediante la personalización de productos y servicios, la digitalización y las telecomunicaciones. Esta investigación tuvo como propósito analizar la adopción de la IA en la gestión hotelera del cantón Manta, provincia de Manabí, Ecuador, brindando nuevas perspectivas sobre su manejo, a través de la evaluación del uso de la IA desde la visión de los gestores hoteleros. Para determinar el tema de estudio, se utiliza una metodología cualitativa no probabilística que aborda una observación técnica en el programa de análisis de datos cualitativos ATLAS.ti. Para esto, se recopilieron 30 entrevistas abiertas con gestores hoteleros dispuestos a colaborar. Y como resultado, se reporta la escasa cultura tecnológica, la falta de tiempo, el desconocimiento y el temor al cambio como principales obstáculos para una implementación eficiente de la IA en el sector, reflejando un estancamiento en los métodos de servicio sobre la base de recursos tradicionales y algunos de estos ya obsoletos en la dinámica actual de la industria. Las tendencias indican que los hoteles que adopten IA optimizarán procesos internos y aumentarán la eficiencia operativa, especialmente mediante asistentes virtuales.

Palabras clave: digitalización; administración hotelera; eficiencia operativa; turismo; asistentes virtuales



1. INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is the latest technological development and is becoming increasingly intertwined with our daily lives (Abd El Gaber et al., 2024), with a significant impact on the hospitality and tourism sectors (Huang et al., 2024). It enables both large and small hotels to compete through unique offerings, providing one of many strategies for establishing a well-positioned visual identity (Ortega Acosta et al., 2024). Although AI can enhance tourism experiences, research, and operations within the sector, its large language models (LLMs) still have substantial limitations (Hsu et al., 2024). Nevertheless, AI is contributing to a range of innovations in tourism, including product and service personalization, demand forecasting, and value chain efficiency, thereby improving the industry's overall efficiency (Moreno-Izquierdo et al., 2023).

The advent of the internet and technological advances marked the beginning of a period of continuous transformation in the tourism sector, improving its value chain and service quality (Wang, 2022). Through digital information and telecommunications, these technologies are used to improve the operational efficiency of tourism activities and routes (Alberto & Calderón, 2017).

The ability to forecast demand using algorithms and predictive analytics enables tourism stakeholders to anticipate market trends, adjust strategies, and optimize resource management. These advances not only help businesses address situations of oversupply or shortage but also improve planning across the industry. They also stimulate innovation by accelerating the development of new technologies (Citak et al., 2021).

Another innovative aspect is highlighted by Cruz Estrada and Miranda-Zavala (2022), who note that using technologies for the smart management of tourism destination resources not only supports visitors during their stay but also helps tourism businesses improve customer response times and reach a broader audience and a more diverse range of guests. This, in turn, can increase bookings and hotel occupancy rates. These technologies also enable more dynamic room pricing, increasing revenue by ensuring that rooms are sold at the right price at the appropriate time (Onilov Gradjean, 2024). Although few studies have examined AI use in this industry (Citak et al., 2021), its rapid implementation calls for critical research to guide its applications.

Another major debate in tourism concerns the effectiveness of AI-generated content. This technological development raises questions about whether human mediation remains indispensable in interactions between tourists and interpreters (Zhang et al., 2024). Meanwhile, other sectors related to this industry are undergoing profound changes in data collection, processing, and access.

Within the hotel sector, Huang et al. (2024) highlight the importance of shaping expectations regarding AI adoption. However, Muñoz Osos et al. (2023) indicate that a lack of information or technical understanding of AI applications can lead to reluctance to invest in this technology within the sector. This knowledge gap may also limit stakeholders' ability to fully benefit from AI in terms of operational efficiency, service personalization, and improvements to the customer experience (García-Méndez et al., 2022).

Against this background, the city of Manta, located in Manabí Province, is one of the most important destinations on the Ecuadorian coast and has substantial hotel infrastructure (Arias Arias et al., 2017). However, there are no data on AI use to support decision-making in the sector and strengthen its competitiveness, which, according to Arroyo Cobeña (2018), is affected by service shortcomings. Therefore, this article aims to analyze AI adoption in hotel management in Manta and provide new perspectives and specific insights into future trends in its application.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Location

The study was conducted in the tourist destination of Manta, in Manabí Province, Ecuador. Located on Ecuador's central coast at coordinates 0.9629° S latitude and 80.7082° W longitude, Manta has a dynamic and diverse population of approximately 271,145 inhabitants. It is bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the north and west, Montecristi Canton to the south, and Jaramijó Canton to the east (Alcaldía de Manta, 2021), as shown in Figure 1. Manta Canton comprises seven parishes: the rural parishes of San Lorenzo and Santa Marianita, and the urban parishes of Los Esteros, Tarqui, Manta, San Mateo, and Eloy Alfaro. The population is predominantly concentrated in the urban area (Alcaldía de Manta, 2021).

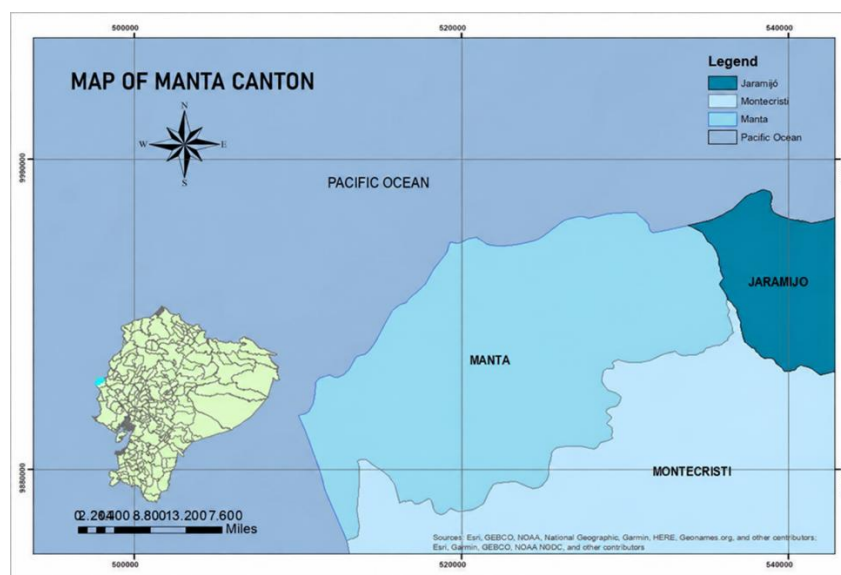


Figure 1. Geographic map of Manta

2.2. Research design

The exponential growth of AI tools has made many tasks that previously required substantial investments of time and money simpler and faster. AI is thus a powerful driver of technological transformation that also involves ethical and moral considerations (Inglada Galiana et al., 2024). However, a limited understanding of these tools has led businesses to implement them through practical experimentation, monitoring the efficiency of the results to assess their usefulness. From this perspective, this exploratory study aimed to examine AI adoption and future trends in its use within the hotel sector of the tourist destination of Manta. Given the nature of the research, a qualitative approach was adopted to explore hotel managers' subjective understanding of the usefulness of AI in hotel management and its potential future applications. Open-ended interviews were used to collect data, an appropriate method for social research seeking to understand interviewees' perspectives on the topic under study. The quality of the findings depends largely on the rigor applied to the qualitative analysis of the collected data, as demonstrated by previous studies (Bolaños & Sarría-Santamera, 2003; Félix et al., 2020).

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Structured sampling was used, as interviewees were required to be hotel managers within the study area to ensure sample homogeneity in terms of participant profiles. Data were collected between April and July 2024, yielding a total of 30 interviews with managers of accommodation establishments in Manta (17 guesthouses and 13 hotels), representing 23.25% of the destination's accommodation establishments (129 establishments). The total number of interviewees depended on hotel managers' willingness to participate

in the research within the scheduled period. Initially, the research proposal was presented to hotel managers at the destination to invite their participation in the study. Subsequently, a list of interviewees and an interview schedule were prepared. The guesthouses and hotels included in the sample are located along the beachfront, where the largest number of visitors converge. This ensures the quality of the data obtained, as the interviewees operate in a tourism environment characterized by its dynamism and continuous evolution.

The interviews had two specific aims: first, to explore current AI use in hotel management, considering its application to the processes carried out by accommodation businesses at the destination; and second, to examine managers' subjective views on future AI applications for optimizing processes throughout the hotel management value chain. This methodology was selected following March Cerdà et al. (1999), who argue that qualitative methods are more effective for developing an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those involved. Accordingly, the open-ended questionnaire was developed around two guiding questions: (1) How do you use AI in your various management processes? (2) What AI functions will be needed to optimize hotel management in the future?

The interviews lasted an average of 15 minutes and were recorded for subsequent transcription with the interviewees' prior consent. The managers' interview transcripts were read repeatedly and analyzed using ATLAS.ti. The information was grouped and coded using inductive and deductive methods, drawing on the study by March Cerdà et al. (1999) as a reference for identifying co-coincidences relationships.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Alfonso et al. (2019), Manta's hotel sector is important because it has the largest accommodation capacity in Ecuador's coastal tourism region, accounting for 12.1% of the country's total accommodation capacity. The Tourism Establishment Registry (2024) lists 129 establishments, an accommodation supply that positions Manta as a destination within the country's coastal region. Hotels have adopted technologies to improve their processes and services, including social media, guests' preferred primary communication channel, intermediary booking platforms, and online services focused on personalizing offers and experiences. These are complemented by advanced technologies for generating and capturing big data (Alcivar & Garcia, 2021).

3.1. AI adoption in hotel management in Manta: Identified problems

A considerable proportion of managers reported having limited time to learn about AI and its application to their management processes. Consequently, this resistance to implementation results in a lack of modern solutions to longstanding problems, such as ineffective communication and difficulties in centralizing operations, which cause confusion and delays in customer service. A small group reported using AI tools to improve customer communication through automated responses available 24 hours a day, providing basic and promotional information about their services. This practice was observed more frequently in establishments classified as guesthouses.

Limited involvement by the relevant authorities in providing training on the implementation of these technologies was also identified. This has left customer service reliant on a traditional model, placing the destination at a disadvantage relative to more competitive destinations. Furthermore, a lack of awareness of AI's benefits not only leads to a lack of interest in incorporating it into management processes but also makes traditional customer communication channels seem more reliable. These include direct telephone calls, brochures or flyers for sharing information, and social media videos without paid advertising or the use of Meta Business Manager.

Interviewees reported having received online training on AI use and indicated that they were aware of its benefits for operational effectiveness. They highlighted virtual assistance for managing or organizing pending tasks and maintaining continuous customer communication 24 hours a day, improving the customer experience while allowing businesses to save resources. Only one two-star hotel and one three-star hotel were found to use AI to create promotional and marketing visual content for their establishments and provide virtual assistance for customer service. The five-star hotels reported that they did not use AI.

Five of the thirteen hotels in the sample belong to the luxury category and have online booking systems to automate the service. Interviewees also reported using AI to implement loyalty strategies within their customer relationship management (CRM) systems. However, these strategies primarily focus on rewarding returning guests.

Virtual assistants are the most common application, although their use remains limited and is more frequently observed in one- and two-star establishments. These findings suggest that an underdeveloped technological culture and fear of change are the main barriers to AI use in Manta's hotel sector. Consequently, service across the sector remains largely traditional and out of step with recent technological advances and the demands of modern tourists. Figure 2 illustrates AI use in Manta's hotel sector.

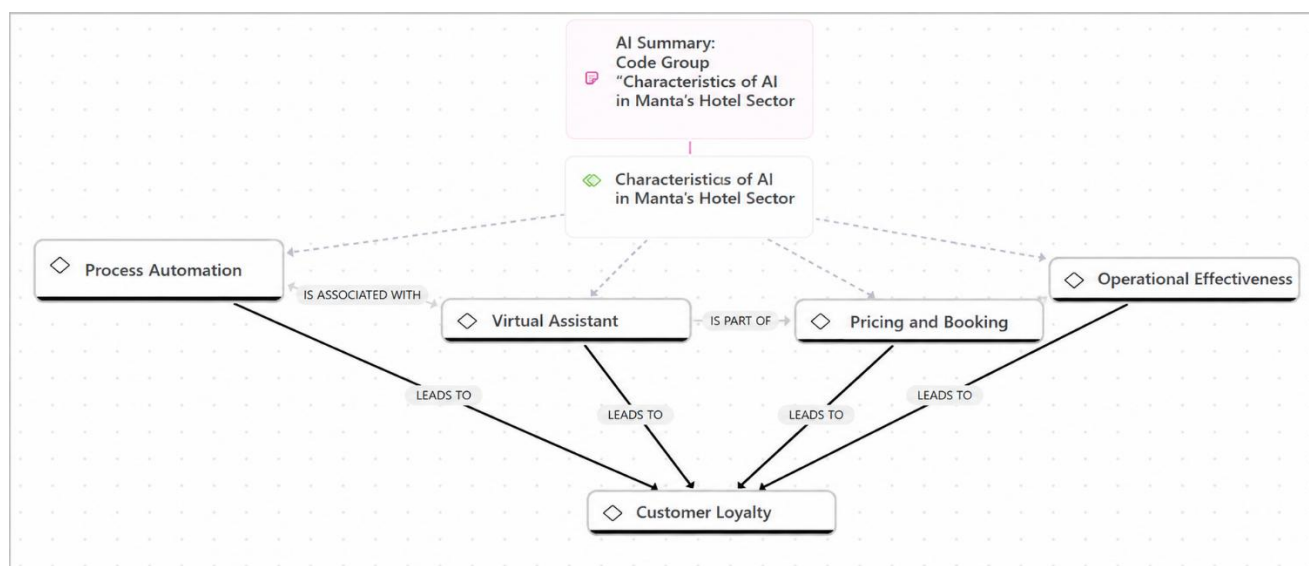


Figure 2. AI adoption in Manta's hotel sector

Note: The analyzed data correspond to the first interview question. Codes were assigned inductively in ATLAS.ti based on associations among interviewees' responses. The connecting lines and their labels indicate the relationships between codes.

3.2. Future trends in AI use in Manta's hotel sector

The rapid growth of AI calls for changes in hotel management processes at any destination. It offers the fastest path to efficiency at the tactical and operational levels. As technology advances, establishments that effectively adopt AI will be able to provide more responsive and personalized services, benefiting both customers and the sustainability of the accommodation industry.

AI plays a vital role in streamlining internal hotel operations, offering many of the benefits already discussed, which continue to increase as knowledge of the technology grows. Despite this, the results of the qualitative analysis conducted using ATLAS.ti reveal a lack of knowledge about AI, leaving interest in its implementation largely unrealized (Figure 3).

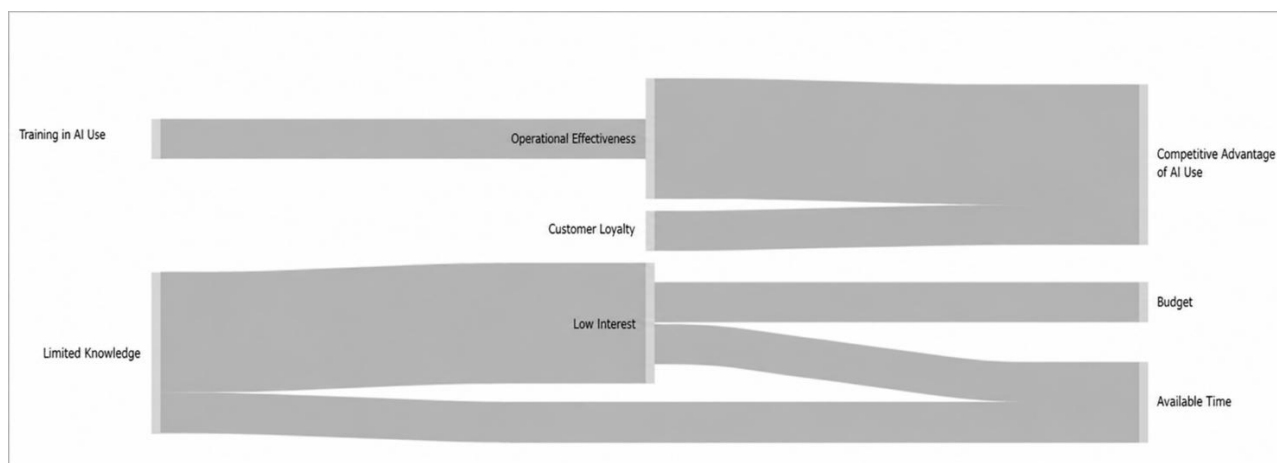


Figure 3. Sankey diagram of future trends in AI use in Manta's hotel sector

Hotel managers reported a lack of funding for investment. Limited knowledge creates uncertainty, which prevents them from allocating even a modest budget to investments that could increase revenue in the short term, such as automating administrative tasks and reducing human error. They also felt that they lacked sufficient time to implement these tools, which could free staff from various tasks and allow them to focus on other priorities, such as customer service quality.

These uncertainties are linked to views such as those described by Citak et al. (2021), who note that some establishments prefer direct contact with guests, including a welcoming smile and a professional approach, which they regard as essential to hotel success. However, this perspective overlooks the views of Camacho-Ruiz et al. (2023), who emphasize the development of innovative processes to meet tourists' needs, and Arroyo Cobeña (2018), who describes this as a process of adaptation or readaptation to societal demands that may involve implementing new development strategies.

Personalizing the guest experience is also one of AI's greatest benefits. As Alcivar and Garcia (2021) note, hotel management is fundamentally concerned with continuously improving the effectiveness of its processes. Such experiences can strengthen customer loyalty, as AI could be used to analyze guests' preferences, improve offers, and provide unique experiences, such as recommendations for activities within the hotel and throughout the city. The aim is to make services more personalized and relevant to tourists in relation to their social and telephone-related circumstances (Grundner & Neuhofer, 2021).

One advantage of AI is that its algorithms continuously analyze and learn, enabling businesses to make informed predictions about future demand and dynamically adjust costs to maximize profitability (Traversa, 2024).

As Montilla et al. (2021) note, Manta is one of Ecuador's most visited coastal cities, but it requires government initiatives that promote AI adoption. Grundner and Neuhofer (2021) argue that AI has the potential to revolutionize how businesses and end consumers interact with information. One example is Oli, an AI assistant designed for hotel management. According to Carchi Lazo (2021), it was created by Ecuadorian Dustin Gallegos to assist guests with the mandatory collection of health forms before their arrival at the hotel. In the near future, such tools could enable high-quality assistance and service improvements, allowing Manta's hotels and guesthouses to become recognized examples of innovation in the tourism sector.

Operational effectiveness would not only improve individual hotels but also create a competitive advantage over other cities in terms of service quality and effective hotel management. This is particularly relevant given that, according to Alfonso et al. (2019), knowledge about applying innovation in this tourist city's accommodation establishments remains limited. In line with Menemenci et al. (2024), it is essential to

emphasize the need for ongoing training in the use of AI applications within the sector. To this end, Arroyo Cobeña (2018) highlights the importance of implementing strategies that involve local government and the community. This would enable managers to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills needed to implement AI correctly and effectively.

Technological trends and AI's ability to simultaneously and accurately analyze large volumes of data on guests' preferences, behavior, and feedback remain underappreciated (Miró & Bustelo García, 2024). Figure 4 presents an example of the AI implementation process in hotel management, developed from the findings and comments provided by interviewees. As AI capabilities develop and improve, its future importance will become increasingly evident (Kazak et al., 2020).

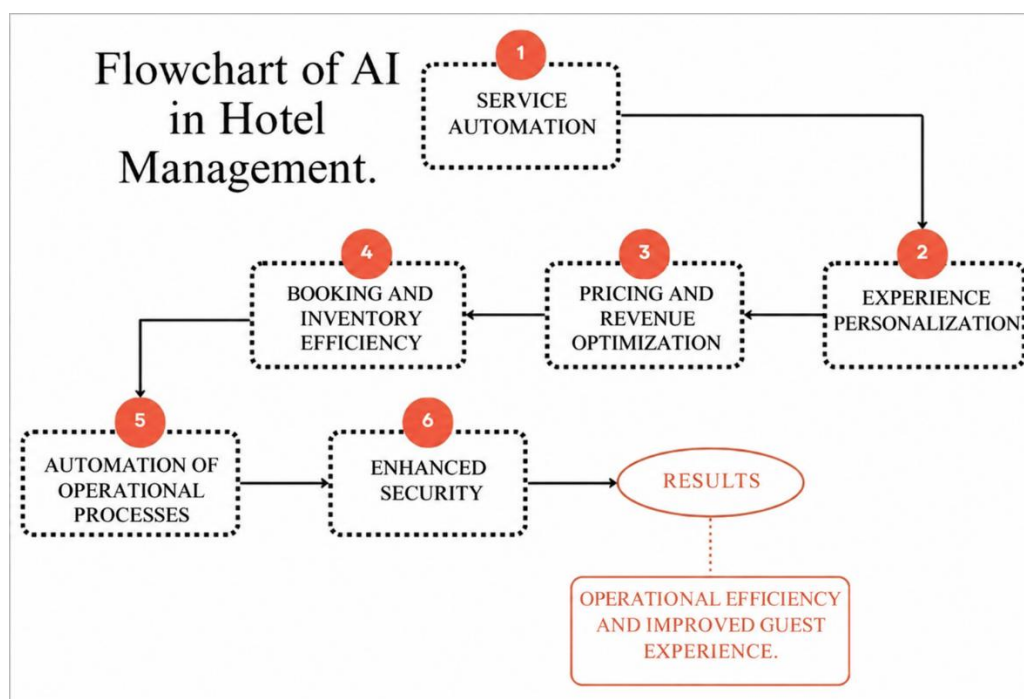


Figure 4. Flowchart of AI adoption in hotel management

As Miró and Bustelo García (2024) note, traditional hotel management does not commonly consider travelers' individual preferences and needs. However, managers who already use AI begin by automating basic service tasks, such as room allocation. Once managers achieve positive results from their initial use, a succession of effective outcomes encourages continued AI use in management. This aligns with Kazak et al. (2020) and Riquelme Brevis et al. (2024), who consider modern consumers to be constantly evolving and emphasize the tourism sector's responsibility to engage visitors through experiences that maintain ongoing contact. In this regard, Diecknow (2020) argues that familiarity with and proficiency in tools and techniques such as big data, intelligent neural networks, and various technological applications are becoming increasingly necessary.

CONCLUSIONS

AI adoption in hotel management in Manta is progressing slowly, despite the city's high tourist influx, supported by public holidays and vacation periods that encourage local tourism, as well as municipal government initiatives to promote tourism development. Effective AI implementation in local hotels is constrained by factors such as an underdeveloped technological culture, a lack of awareness of its benefits, and fear of change. These challenges constitute the main barriers to successful AI integration within the sector. Nevertheless, establishments are beginning to adopt AI through modest investments in tools such

as virtual assistants and booking systems available 24 hours a day, helping to prevent potential service failures.

Higher-category hotels continue to resist change, adhering to traditional customer service methods that prioritize human contact. This limits their modernization and efficiency, as well as the expansion of AI use in hotel management at the destination. Meanwhile, hotels and guesthouses that already use these smart services have optimized their internal processes and improved operational efficiency in areas such as booking and online payment management, inventory control, and the automation of multiple tasks. This suggests that AI has the potential to optimize resource use and save time, enabling hotels to offer more personalized services.

Given Manta's tourist influx and the events held in the city, AI implementation offers a competitive advantage by improving the visitor experience and aligning services with growing expectations regarding technology in the hotel sector. AI adoption would also help position Manta as a destination that actively promotes its use.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this work.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology: Alcivar-Chiluiza, D. J. and Guerra-Herrera, A. D. Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing: Alcivar-Chiluiza, D. J., Guerra-Herrera, A. D. and Vera-Vera, J. R.

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