



# Adaptation Strategies of the Colombian Hotel Industry During the Pandemic

*Diego Alejandro López-Cadavid\**

*Jorge Anibal Restrepo-Morales\*\**

*Juan Gabriel Vanegas-López\*\*\**

*María Alexandra Arango-Mesa\*\*\*\**

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**Abstract:** Different aspects related to business dynamics motivate the design and execution of strategies. In the case of the Colombian hospitality industry, the recent price regulation, the emergence of disruptive technologies, and events affecting public health demonstrate the need to outline appropriate tactics that lead to an adequate contextualized implementation. This study proposes an Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) model to evaluate the set of tactics and strategies most applicable to these current situation alternatives faced by hoteliers in the city of Medellín. The results of the evaluation indicate that intensive, generic business and defensive strategies are the most preferred. In addition, as expected, the results suggest that the pandemic has the greatest weight and should therefore be selected by hotel companies as the priority alternative on which to focus their strategies.


**Keywords:** crisis management; business strategy; COVID-19 pandemic; digital disruption; pricing; adaptation; hotels; Colombia.


**JEL classification:** M10; H12; L10; Z30; Z31; Z32.

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\* Magíster en Ingeniería Administrativa. Profesor de cátedra asociado a la Facultad de Ciencias Administrativas y Económicas del Tecnológico de Antioquia Institución Universitaria, Medellín, Colombia. [joven.investigador3@tdea.edu.co](mailto:joven.investigador3@tdea.edu.co)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2221-2381>

\*\* Ph. D. en Dirección de Empresas. Profesor titular asociado a la Facultad de Ciencias Administrativas y Económicas del Tecnológico de Antioquia Institución Universitaria. [jrestrepo@tdea.edu.co](mailto:jrestrepo@tdea.edu.co)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9764-6622>

\*\*\* Magíster en Economía. Profesor investigador asociado a la Facultad de Ciencias Administrativas y Económicas del Tecnológico de Antioquia Institución Universitaria. [jvanegas1@tdea.edu.co](mailto:jvanegas1@tdea.edu.co)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1955-0195>

\*\*\*\* Magíster en Administración. Profesora asociada a la Facultad de Ciencias Administrativas y Económicas del Tecnológico de Antioquia Institución Universitaria. [maria.arango92@tdea.edu.co](mailto:maria.arango92@tdea.edu.co)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5203-9973>

# *Estrategias de adaptación de la hotelería colombiana ante la pandemia*

**Resumen:** Diferentes aspectos asociados a la dinámica empresarial motivan el diseño y ejecución de estrategias. En el caso de la industria hotelera colombiana, la reciente regulación de precios, el surgimiento de tecnologías disruptivas, así como los eventos que afectan la salud pública demuestran la necesidad de delinear tácticas apropiadas que lleven a una adecuada implementación contextualizada. Este estudio propone un modelo de análisis jerárquico de procesos (AHP) para evaluar el conjunto de tácticas y estrategias más aplicables a estas alternativas de situación actual que deben afrontar los hoteleros de la ciudad de Medellín. Los resultados de la evaluación indican que las estrategias intensivas, genéricas de negocio y defensivas son las preferidas. Adicionalmente, los hallazgos sugieren, como era de esperarse, que la pandemia tuvo el mayor peso y por lo tanto debe ser seleccionada por las empresas hoteleras como la alternativa prioritaria en la cual enfocar sus estrategias.

**Palabras clave:** gestión de crisis; estrategia empresarial; pandemia COVID-19; disrupción digital; precios; adaptación; hoteles; Colombia.

## INTRODUCTION

The hotel and tourism world has long been known for its high competitiveness. However, the challenges posed by the health situation caused by COVID-19 have posed significant challenges to the viability of hotel companies, prompting a reassessment of the effectiveness of different strategies (Hafsa, 2020; Indrianto et al., 2020; Jain, 2020; Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021). In the context of the Colombian hotel industry, the pandemic caused the tourism sector to experience the most severe crisis ever recorded. In 2020, average occupancy rates plummeted to 6,4% and 50% of hotels were forced to close temporarily or permanently (Asociación Hotelera y Turística de Colombia [Cotelco], 2020). In addition to this complex context, other latent problems have emerged in recent years, such as the unregulated room prices between hotels or the constant competition from digital platforms such as Airbnb, which have caused both large hotel chains and small independent hotels to suffer severe effects on their occupancy levels (El Blog Universidad Externado de Colombia,

2015; Facultad de Administración de Empresas Turísticas y Hoteleras [FAETH], 2019; Harvard Real Estate Review, 2019). Hence, such circumstances lead to the fact that the tactics and strategies that hotels can adopt become highly relevant for their economic and financial sustainability (Radut, 2015; Sarwari et al., 2020).

Although there is a wide range of strategies applicable to the hotel industry, their implementation is subject to different factors and barriers that entrepreneurs should consider. In this sense, López-Gamero et al. (2011) warn that the consolidation of a strategy in the hotel sector faces constraints such as environmental legislation, regulatory context, competition, stakeholder pressure, industrial barriers, and uncertainty. This creates a hostile environment, especially for firms that are not properly prepared. Hotels, when operating in highly competitive environments, generally enhance their levels of differentiation and competitiveness compared to those that do not experience constant pressure to improve (Imrie & Fyall, 2001; Leonidou

et al., 2013). Similarly, according to González-Rodríguez et al. (2018), despite large fluctuations and seasonality in hotel demand, factors such as differentiation through service innovation stand out as a competitive advantage in competitive hotel conglomerates.

Conversely, while being located in highly competitive clusters can enhance differentiation and innovation, the effectiveness of strategies may vary depending on the classification of the hotel. For instance, if a cluster is dominated by low- to midscale hotels, those with higher standards may be constrained in their pricing strategies. On the other hand, if a lower midscale hotel is located in an area with predominantly upper-midscale hotels, it may benefit from the overall rate increase, even if it does not offer the same level of service (Enz et al., 2008). This uneven and changing context leads to strategies within hotels to differentiate according to their classification level and developed capabilities, with other tactics based on criteria such as demand, secondary services, consumer perception, discounts or upgrades that can represent improvements in performance and revenue management (Jönsson & Devonish, 2009; Jabela et al., 2016; Bernal et al., 2021).

In the face of these challenges, hotel operators must adapt their processes to meet the current quality standards, to provide an agile and proactive response to market needs (Sánchez-Ollero et al.,

2011; Franco, 2017). Therefore, these firms are tasked with formulating policies and strategic positions, taking into account the competitive environment in which they operate and the advantages they may have over their competitors (Meidan & Lee, 1982; Basar, 2021). Moreover, before proposing a strategy in the hotel industry, it is essential to analyze its sustainability in the medium and long term, given the diverse number of stakeholders and the potential impact of the environment on business success (Brackett & Carr II, 2015). In this context, the different functional areas and managers play a pivotal role. Once the strategy aligning with the hotel's objectives is identified, they should coordinate their activities following the same common purpose and anticipating potential changes that could affect them (Soriano, 2005; Forgacs & Dimanche, 2016). Even if there is no single strategic position at the global level due to the multiple factors involved in the hotel context, the success of the strategy adopted must be based on the correct selection of the segment, the implementation of innovation in services, and the maintenance of high quality in all activities (Sila & Ebrahimpour, 2004; Guo et al., 2013; Goryushkina et al., 2016).

The Colombian hotel industry faces ongoing challenges, such as the health crisis, digital disruption, and limited price regulation. Given the diversity of strategic responses, this paper aims to identify and evaluate the most favorable competitive strategies for Colombian

hotels post-2020. Specifically, it seeks to determine the optimal approaches to address the COVID-19 pandemic, informal competition from sharing platforms, and unconstrained pricing dynamics. To achieve this objective for the Colombian hotel sector, the study proposes an Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) model to assess strategic preferences and performance among a defined set of options.

This paper is divided into five sections. It begins with the introduction of the difficulties of the Colombian hotel sector. The second section explores the literature review concerning the contexts of hotel strategies. Then, the third section provides a detailed description of the methodology employed in the study. Subsequently, the fourth section presents the main findings of the proposed model, comparing them with other references in the field. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the main contributions of the study, recommendations, and future lines of action on the subject.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The hospitality industry struggles with constant change to remain competitive. This review examines studies on hotel strategies. First, we explore theoretical frameworks on strategic archetypes for tourism firms and find that combinations of innovation, cost control, differentiation, and focus represent dominant strategic postures. As infor-

mation technology transforms guest expectations, hotels increasingly adopt omnichannel digital tactics critical to contemporary success factors such as brand interaction and loyalty. Likewise, external shocks also force adaptation, as seen during the severe demand declines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, emerging policy responses to sector informalities, such as price regulation, shape hotel strategic priorities in unique regional contexts.

### **The Use of Strategic Postures in the Context of the Hotel and Tourism Industry**

Looking at the theoretical context surrounding the strategic postures adopted by firms, two archetypes stand out that allow us to identify the profile and priorities of these companies. The first archetype proposed by Miles and Snow (1978), suggests that firms can be divided into four categories: Prospective (focused on pursuing new opportunities), Defenders (focused on improving internal processes and not leaving their market niche), Analyzers (a hybrid posture between Prospective and Defenders) and Reactive (lacking a clearly defined strategy and ineffective for change). Meanwhile, the second archetype is established by Porter (1985), who warns that companies can be classified into four competitive postures: Cost Leadership (generalized cost cutting and aggressive pricing), Differentiation (focus on innovation, brand loyalty and marketing), Focus

(takes advantage of cost leadership and differentiation to target very specific and demanding market niches) and, finally, Stuck in the Middle (lack of priorities and strategic postures).

When contrasting the archetypes proposed by Miles and Snow (1978) with hotel practice, Garrigós-Simón et al. (2005) state that organizations resorting to prospective postures show better performance than others, except in profitability levels. In this aspect, analyzing firms (hybrids) have an advantage, but this advantage does not necessarily translate into a significant improvement in the hotel's overall performance without a joint effort in the strategies. Meanwhile, defending companies are characterized by greater efficiency in production processes and cost control but operate within a smaller market niche (Xu, 2017). Regarding Porter's (1985) archetypes, empirical studies highlight that cost leadership and differentiation have a positive relationship with hotel performance. For the focus (hybrid) strategy, the impact is also positive, but significantly lower (Kaliappen & Hilman, 2017). In agreement with the above, Ngandu (2014) reaffirms that the differentiation strategy proves to be the most effective among the four proposed by Porter. However, he also emphasizes that it must be accompanied by other important dimensions such as a high level of human resources, variety of services, and quality to significantly improve business performance, making it a

relatively hybrid category of factors that most benefit hotels.

These changing conditions on the theoretical positions about tourism companies added to the high levels of competitiveness in the sector, lead managers to choose to implement mixed strategies to maintain a differentiated service and balance in rates, through self-evaluation processes to the tactics applied and the organizational structure (Tavitiyaman et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2020). In this sense, Kaliappen et al. (2019) highlight how the implementation of hybrid strategies in hotels exhibits a positive effect on strategic capability and influences an improvement in business performance. However, strategies, whether hybrid or not, are required to be implemented considering the performance key factors for the hotel operations, such as human resources, innovation, services, and costs (Wong & Kwan, 2001; Ioncica et al., 2008; Mihalic & Buhalis, 2013).

As an illustration, Mutheu (2014) argues that by adopting of hybrid strategies in the processes of hiring highly skilled workers, implementing rigorous training processes, adopting information technology tools, and developing comprehensive virtual marketing strategies a hotel can achieve higher levels of competitive capacity. Similarly, another example highlights that factors such as quality management and competitive intelligence at the operational level play a key role in hotel industry strategy,

as the former manages to drive competitive advantages and reduce costs through activities such as training and service improvement, while the latter

improves the effectiveness of strategy implementation by employees across the enterprise (Köseoglu et al., 2013; Pereira-Moliner et al., 2016).

**Table 1.** Strategies and Factors Identified in the Literature

Strategies	Factors analyzed	Source
Cost leadership	Low costs, capacity utilization, co-location, outsourcing and economy of scale.	Enz et al. (2008); Espino-Rodríguez and Lai (2014); Kaliappen and Hilman (2017)
Mobilization of customers and suppliers	Location, development and physical space.	Wong and Kwan (2001)
Development of service systems	Technological information, technological capacity, innovation and development of service systems.	Wong and Kwan (2001); Jönsson and Devonish (2009); Tavitiyaman et al. (2012).
Differentiation	Image and brand management, unique features, complementary service, creative marketing management, relationship management and high prices.	Enz et al. (2008); Jones et al. (2013); Kaliappen and Hilman (2017).
Strategy based on human resources management and training	Employee management, operational training and high service training.	Tavitiyaman et al. (2012); Ngandu (2014)
Hybrid competitive strategy	Combination of finance, customers, internal processes, learning and strategic capability; combination of marketing innovation, technology, customer repeatability and cost reduction.	Bordean et al. (2010); Chen et al. (2011); Kaliappen et al. (2019).
Strategy based on environment (reactive)	Labor intensity, price competition, changes in services, economic, legal and technological environment, change in competitors and the market.	Auzair (2011); López-Gamero et al. (2011); Sitawati et al. (2015).
High segmentation	Unique service and personalized design, clearly defined segment, special offers and products according to the specific needs of the segment.	Enz et al. (2008); Guo et al. (2013); Köseoglu et al. (2013)
Intensive competition	Physical characteristics, service characteristics, promotional strategies, access to distribution channels and geographic position.	Leonidou et al. (2013); González-Rodríguez et al. (2018).

**Source:** own elaboration.

Despite the many positive aspects that the use of mixed/hybrid strategies can bring, Espino-Rodríguez and Gil-Padilla (2017) note that the effectiveness and selection of these strategies

also vary depending on the priorities and size of the hotels. On the one hand, hotels primarily focusing on cost strategies tend to achieve better financial results than those aiming for excellence,

using a greater amount of resources to meet different strategic priorities. On the other hand, smaller hotels exhibit greater ease in implementing strategies focused on improving quality and personalized service compared to larger hotels, which often emphasize cost reduction and flexibility. The foregoing illustrates that while hybrid tactics are strategically convenient for hotel entrepreneurs, no specific combination or position guarantees success in this industry. Conversely, the strategic diversity highlighted by various authors necessitates continuous study to understand their evolution and effectiveness in addressing the challenges faced by the world of tourism. As an example of the diversity of strategic positions identified in the literature, Table 1 shows the different strategies and factors analyzed in several studies.

### **The Role of Digital Tools in Hotel Tactics**

Technology is undoubtedly a crucial aspect to highlight in the adoption of a strategic posture, as it is imperative for hotels to acknowledge the demands of today's digital world. Consequently, contemporary online customers have clear expectations regarding the type of service and the immediacy with which they expect a response. Hotels that lack the technology to respond in real-time risk being surpassed by competitors with access to the new market niche just a click away (Sigala, 2002). In this regard, Kim et al. (2004)

warn that whatever a hotel's strategy, it must be executed in synchronization with the various digital tools available. Therefore, it is no longer enough to have a website; it is imperative to develop strategies for presence in different virtual channels and to consider a global scope as a new concept within the organizational objectives (Schegg et al., 2002; Phelan et al., 2013).

In the same direction, Minazzi and Lagrosen (2013) highlight that social networks are an important channel to improve brand position and that hotels should adopt it to design strategies that make it possible to increase their interaction with users by sharing promotions, opinions, and experiences, to position the brand in the minds of consumers, increase loyalty and be able to get feedback from them. Likewise, after identifying the social network with the largest number of potential customers, Zavala and Estrada (2017) warn that communication and promotion must be homogeneous in all networks, avoiding confusion in customers and, above all, ensuring the effectiveness of such offers so as not to affect upcoming purchase decisions. Thus, a comprehensive digital marketing strategy should contain personalized service, trend analysis, quick and timely responses, monitoring and tracking of networks views, competitively priced information and booking availability (De Pelsmacker et al., 2018). However, it is recommended that the selection of social networks be made considering the presence of the market's



top competitors to match or exceed their level of scope and presence in the target segment (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Denteh et al., 2018).

In the hospitality industry, managers must recognize that strategies are implemented in a highly competitive context, both physically and digitally, so the coordination of real-time activities to monitor, inform, respond, and interact with the target audience will be the ones that truly influencing purchase decision making, reach propagation, and customer loyalty (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017; Lam & Law, 2019).

### **The Effect of the Pandemic on the Hotel Industry**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented and severe impact on the global hotel industry, requiring adaptive crisis management responses at various stages (Wai & Chou, 2020). As the crisis drags on and liquidity needs intensify, strategies have shifted from marketing tactics to layoffs and health protocols (Breier et al., 2021). Public assistance has proven critical, but not sufficient, as hotels must innovate their operations, sometimes requiring changes to business models, to facilitate recovery (Kim & Han, 2022). The pandemic has increased guest expectations for safety to rebuild trust and loyalty through new service features such as contactless options, strict disinfection regimes, and social distancing capacity limits (Gursoy & Chi, 2020), which has

undoubtedly had a direct impact on high costs and low returns (Wai & Wong, 2020). At the same time, declining travel is erasing previous performance baselines, requiring long-term adjustments to address guest psychology and hotel financial sustainability (Jones & Comfort, 2020). Researchers have also examined the resilience management practices of the global hospitality industry during the health crisis. El-Said et al. (2023) found that local hotels were limited to short-term coping strategies during COVID-19, whereas international chains demonstrated more robust crisis anticipation, coping mechanisms, and adaptive innovations.

Numerically, focusing on Colombian's hotel industry, 50% of hotels have been forced to cease operations temporarily or permanently due to a sharp decline in occupancy rates, averaging only 6.4% in 2020 (Cotelco, 2020). Similarly, in other latitudes, some papers have reported severe negative impacts on Bangladesh's hotel and tourism industry, with losses estimated at more than \$470 million as of June 2020 (Hafsa, 2020). The crisis halted international travel and domestic tourism and led to widespread business closures and job losses, particularly in the accommodation, catering, travel agency, and transport sectors (Indrianto et al., 2020). Hotel occupancy dropped to 10-30%, more than 100,000 jobs were threatened, and the airline industry suffered losses of \$163 million (Jain, 2020; Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021).

Recovery recommendations focus on tax incentives, comprehensive policies, local tourism incentives, technology adoption, and strategic communications to reduce risk perceptions and restore traveler confidence (Kim & Han, 2022).

### **Informality and Price Regulation in the Hotel Industry**

Prices in the hotel industry may vary based on hotel characteristics, customer demand composition, and competition. Abrate et al. (2012) note that prices tend to decrease when demand is dominated by business travelers but increase for leisure travelers. Moro et al. (2018) highlight the impact of online review scores and visibility on pricing power. The emergence of informal accommodation platforms, such as Airbnb, has disrupted established regulatory frameworks and pricing norms in the hotel industry. Forgacs and Dimanche (2016) discuss strategic responses that hotels can adopt to address pricing competition from informal sharing economy platforms, such as Airbnb, that disrupt established business models. Additionally, Enz et al. (2008) state that proximity to higher-quality hotels can raise prices for lower-tier hotels, while being near lower-quality hotels can lower prices for higher-tier hotels. Likewise, El Blog Universidad Externado de Colombia (2015) suggests recognizing the productivity potential of the informal sector rather than outright opposing it. However, as the sector evolves, Tirole (2023) notes that rigid

price regulation may become potentially problematic due to the emergence of more complex and variable pricing factors. Empirical evidence on the impact of pricing remains mixed. While Aznar et al. (2018) find that a higher online reputation allows hotels to maintain pricing power, Ennis et al. (2023) show that restricting platform price parity clauses can lower direct hotel prices.

### **METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURE**

To achieve the objective set for this research, a descriptive quantitative methodology was used to determine in a precise and comparable manner the proportion of importance of the strategies to be analyzed as well as their effectiveness in the face of certain problems identified in the Colombian hotel industry. Therefore, the methodology is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the definition of the strategies to be measured. Then, the second section explains in detail the sampling process carried out, the characteristics of the participating hotels and the measurement scales used. Finally, the third section explains the steps involved in the methodological application of the multi-criteria method chosen for the study.

#### **Definition of Strategies as a Measurement Criterion**

Given the wide range of existing approaches, a combination of general and specific strategies is defined to

effectively address the tactics employed by hotel entrepreneurs in response to the aforementioned challenges. In this way, five general strategic dimensions were stipulated through different theoretical references, divided into intensive (Fleisman, 2005; Tirado, 2013), integration (Gómez, 2008; Tirado, 2013),

defensive (Lora, 2004), diversification (Fleisman, 2005; Gómez, 2008) and generic strategies (Bordean et al., 2010; Porter, 1985). In addition, within these five general dimensions, a set of 17 specific strategies was structured to better characterize the activities developed by the hotels studied, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Structure of Competitive Strategies to Be Measured

General strategies	Specific strategies	Acronym	Source
Intensive: seeks to improve the company's competitive position with existing products.	Market penetration	MKP	Fleisman (2005); Tirado (2013)
	Market development	MKD	
	Service development	SVD	
	International strategies	ITS	
Integration: allow the company to control distributors, suppliers and competitors.	Backward integration	BCI	Gómez (2008); Tirado (2013)
	Forward integration	FRI	
	Horizontal integration	HRI	
Defensive: applied when there is a need to preserve the company's assets, regular consumers, partners and suppliers.	Share risk	SHR	Lora (2004)
	Retrenchment	RTR	
	Divestiture	DVS	
	Liquidation	LQD	
Diversification: this occurs when the organization diversifies the portfolio of products and/or services it is able to offer.	Concentric diversification	CCD	Fleisman (2005); Gómez (2008)
	Conglomerate diversification	CGD	
	Horizontal diversification	HRD	
Generic: these are basic strategies with which a company seeks to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage.	Cost leadership	CSL	Bordean et al. (2010); Porter (1985)
	Differentiation	DFF	
	Focus	FCS	

**Source:** own elaboration.

### Sampling Selection and Measure Scales

To test the applicability of the methodology proposed in the study, the focus was on measuring the perspectives of

entrepreneurs in the sector. For this purpose, various platforms such as Trivago, Booking, Tripadvisor and Kayak were utilized, identifying 98 hotels located in the city of Medellín.

They were classified by factors such as reputation level (range of 1 to 5 stars), style or market segment (economic, mid-range and luxury), size (large, medium, and small) and type of structure (independent or hotel chain), as shown in Table 3. However, due to the crisis caused by the pandemic, most of these hotels were temporarily closed, restricted or without services, which is why the number of hotels to be studied was drastically reduced. Thus, 10 hotels were selected through a non-random, purposive sample using electronic questionnaires as a research tool. The aim was to understand their experiences in the sector, their views on the proposed strategies and their effectiveness in addressing the current crisis in the hotel industry. It's important to note that the data collection took place between April and June 2020, using telephone questionnaires as the only data collection tool. Moreover, the questionnaire consisted of two phases: the first identified the most implemented strategies by the studied hotels, and the second evaluated their effectiveness in different crisis scenarios. Once the sample of hotels had been selected, the purpose of the electronic questionnaires was to capture the perception of the directors, managers, or supervisors with a high degree of experience belonging to these hotels. For this purpose, the 9-point scale proposed by Saaty (2008) was used, whose values had the following

meaning: 1 if the compared strategies have the same level of importance; 3 if one strategy is barely more important than the other; 5 if one strategy is considerably more important than the other; 7 if one strategy is much more important than the other; 9 if one strategy is absolutely more important than the other; while 2, 4, 6 and 8 are used as intermediate values that are used when a middle ground between the previous values is required.

After obtaining the ratings from the hotel experts, the next section of the questionnaire focused on measuring the extent to which the entrepreneurs believed that general-level strategies would help alleviate or address the main problems affecting the sector in the midst of the global emergency (COVID-19), the ongoing competition from unregulated platforms (Airbnb and other technological platforms) and informality (uncertainty in price regulation). For this purpose, instead of employing a 9-point scale again, we decided to complement it with the approach proposed by Liberatore et al. (1992). This approach consists of three rating alternatives: HA (highly adequate), MA (moderately adequate) and NA (not applicable), with the advantage of obtaining a direct criterion on the set of strategies and the non-repetition of a paired matrix.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of the Sample of Hotels

Hotels analyzed	Number of stars	Size	Ownership	Market segment
Participant 1	4 stars	Large	Chains	Luxury
Participant 2	4 stars	Large	Independent hotel	Luxury
Participant 3	4 stars	Large	Independent hotel	Luxury
Participant 4	3 stars	Medium	Independent hotel	Mid-range
Participant 5	3 stars	Medium	Independent hotel	Mid-range
Participant 6	3 stars	Medium	Independent hotel	Mid-range
Participant 7	3 stars	Medium	Independent hotel	Mid-range
Participant 8	3 stars	Medium	Independent hotel	Mid-range
Participant 9	3 stars	Medium	Independent hotel	Mid-range
Participant 10	3 stars	Medium	Independent hotel	Mid-range

**Source:** own elaboration.

### Analytic Hierarchy Process

The AHP technique was the main tool for data analysis since it is an appropriate mathematical model widely used in the literature to evaluate problems with multiple alternatives by decomposing them into successive levels according to their degree of importance. In this sense, the model created by Saaty (2008) focuses on establishing a hierarchical order, both at a general and specific level, for the factors and sub-factors constituting a given complex context based on the relative importance that experts assign to them. Thus, the ratings given by the hotels allow the structuring of a paired matrix for each of the general and specific categories where the final proportions are obtained by solving the eigenvalues and eigenvectors proposed by Saaty and

Kearns (1985). Once these proportions are obtained, the level of consistency of the judgments over the strategies is measured, using a consistency scale between 0 and 1, as proposed by Saaty (2008) according to the size of each matrix. Finally, as suggested by Forman and Peniwati (1998), the results of the hotels selected for the study are grouped using the geometric mean to succinctly gather the criteria considering the wide heterogeneity of the judgments. More specifically, the steps in the application of the AHP model are described below:

The judgments given on the 9-point scale are used to create a paired matrix, whose resolution of eigenvalues and eigenvectors allows to obtain the general and specific proportions of strategies, as shown in Equations [1] and [2].

$$A = \begin{bmatrix} a_{11} & a_{12} & \cdots & a_{1n} \\ a_{21} & a_{22} & \cdots & a_{2n} \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ a_{n1} & a_{n2} & \cdots & a_{nn} \end{bmatrix} = A_I = \begin{bmatrix} a'_{11} & a'_{12} & \cdots & a'_{1n} \\ a'_{21} & a'_{22} & \cdots & a'_{2n} \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ a'_{n1} & a'_{n2} & \cdots & a'_{nn} \end{bmatrix} \text{ where } a'_{ij} = \frac{a_{ij}}{\sum_{i=1}^n a_{ij}}, i, j = 1, 2, 3, \dots, n \quad [1]$$

$$W = \begin{bmatrix} W_1 \\ W_2 \\ \vdots \\ W_n \end{bmatrix}, \text{ where } W_i = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n a'_{ij}}{n}, W' = AW = \begin{bmatrix} W'_1 \\ W'_2 \\ \vdots \\ W'_n \end{bmatrix} \text{ and where } \lambda_{max} = \frac{1}{n} \left( \frac{W'_1}{W_1} + \frac{W'_2}{W_2} + \cdots + \frac{W'_n}{W_n} \right) \quad [2]$$

Once these proportions are obtained, the level of consistency of the judgments that each expert gave to the strategies is measure, using the Consistency Index over  $\lambda_{max}$  value obtained from matrix and eigenvector solution, Randomness Index according to the size of the matrix being [0.00, 0.00, 0.52, 0.89, 1.11, 1.25, 1.35, 1.40, 1.45] and, finally, Consistency Ratio (CR) to establish a 0 to 1 scale over matrix of judgments.

Finally, the results of each expert are grouped using the geometric mean to gather the criteria in a concise manner in the face of the wide heterogeneity of the ratings, as shown in Equation [3].

$$a_{ij}^{Global} = \prod_{k=1}^m (a_{ij}^k)^{a_k} \quad [3]$$

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the AHP model show both the effectiveness and the proportion of the use of competitive strategies to address the weaknesses within the studied sector. In general, intensive (0.3069), generic (0.2244) and defensive

(0.2170) strategies show the highest preference in both importance and frequency of use. On the contrary, integration (0.1485) and diversification strategies (0.1033) are reported as the least useful and effective, as depicted in Table 4. In this regard, it could be argued that such a preference stems from the fact that increasing the frequency of regular customers results in reduced costs and increased positive perception of services received by the current market niche (Alshourah et al., 2018). Another revealing finding is how generic strategies provide an advantage for tourism firms with low financial capacity and highly competitive pressure. These firms could offer a distinctive service using differentiation strategies (Bordean et al., 2010; Becerra et al., 2013; Agyapong & Boamah, 2013). Similarly, in the case of defensive strategies, they can be very useful in managing crises when there are few alternatives and the hotel is under significant external pressure, as is the case with the current pandemic emergency (Bernal et al., 2021; Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021).

**Table 4.** Importance and Effectiveness of General Strategies

Strategies	Intensive	Integration	Defensive	Diversification	Generic	Weights
Intensive	1	2.93	0.98	4.32	1.06	0.3069
Integration	0.34	1	0.93	2.15	0.45	0.1485
Defensive	1.02	1.08	1	2.07	1.03	0.2170
Diversification	0.23	0.47	0.48	1	0.81	0.1033
Generic	0.95	2.20	0.98	1.23	1	0.2244

Consistency Ratio = 0.097

**Source:** own elaboration.

It is noteworthy to mention that after identifying the general strategies, the AHP analysis emphasizes the specific strategies of each dimension, revealing marked preferences for strategies such as service development-SVD (0.3633), backward integration-BCI (0.5054), liquidation-LQD (0.4199), concentric-CCD (0.4954) and differentiation-DFF (0.6859), as shown in Table 4. These results show how, within the generic strategies, differentiation scores with a superlative level of importance, while other dimensions, such as intensive and defensive, do not present major differences among the set of specific strategies that comprise them. Another notable fact is that the integration strategy BCI was the most relevant in its respective dimension, as it is directly associated with control over suppliers, and could have an impact on the quality of services and the reduction of costs in areas such as food, beverages, external tourist services, transport, and other factors inherent to tourism (Sila & Ebrahimpour, 2004; Auzair, 2011). Similarly, in defensive strategies,

the preferred tactic to face the current situation is liquidation, evidencing the serious situation derived from the pandemic, the low expectations of recovery in the short term and the absence of proposals to mitigate the dire financial impact on the sector.

Following the quantification of the general and specific proportions of the strategies highlighted, it is also possible to highlight from Table 5 the global weightings of the 17 specific strategies proposed for this study. Thus, at the global level, differentiation (0.1539) is consolidated as the preferred strategy to mitigate current challenges, followed by service development (0.1115) and liquidation (0.0911). Conversely, the least valued strategies include divestment (0.0191), conglomerate tactics (0.0240) and cost leadership (0.0262).

These overall results confirm the favoring of differentiation-focused strategies. This can be attributed to the inherent benefits of differentiation in terms of price stability, brand building,

authenticity, and improved market position (Abrate et al., 2012; Moro et al., 2018). Notably, several entrepreneurs, when responding to the questionnaire, claimed to obtain adequate rates of return and retention when offering differentiated services, directly mitigating the effects of poor price regulation and the presence of informal digital platforms, as supported by previous studies by Jabela et al. (2016) as well as Franco (2017) who recommended

that if the hotel industry wants to deal with such informal platforms, it should concentrate efforts on staff training to ensure that the level of service in hotels generates new experiences for customers, optimizes costs in all tasks, and implements technological tools in the conduct of operations. However, despite these recommendations, none of the respondents reported its implementation in the face of the constraints caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

**Table 5.** Importance of Specific and Global Strategies

General strategies	Specific strategies	Local weightage	Local ranking	Global weightage	Global ranking
Intensive	MKP	0,2967	2	0,0910	4
	MKD	0,0862	4	0,0264	14
	SVD	0,3633	1	0,1115	2
	ITS	0,2539	3	0,0779	6
Integration	BCI	0,5054	1	0,0751	7
	FRI	0,1941	3	0,0288	11
	HRI	0,3005	2	0,0446	9
Defensive	SHR	0,3696	2	0,0802	5
	RTR	0,1225	3	0,0266	13
	DVS	0,0880	4	0,0191	17
	LQD	0,4199	1	0,0911	3
Diversification	CCD	0,4954	1	0,0512	8
	CGD	0,2323	3	0,0240	16
	HRD	0,2723	2	0,0281	12
Generic	CSL	0,1169	3	0,0262	15
	DFF	0,6859	1	0,1539	1
	FCS	0,1972	2	0,0442	10

**Source:** own elaboration.



In the same vein, market development and penetration strategies, pertinent to the dimension of intensive strategies, exhibit preference revealing how the sector focuses on the specialization of its services and quality management as a means to increase the degree of interaction, attraction and retention of customers. However, for this approach to serve as a possible solution for price regulation and informal digital platforms, it must be complemented by efforts to meet consumer expectations. This involves ensuring that opinions and overall service improvements are evident in digital channels, contributing to an increase in external ratings and the number of stars as a symbol of quality and reputation of hotels, as recommended by Goryushkina et al. (2016) together with Aznar et al. (2018). Despite these recommendations, the effectiveness of these strategies in the current health situation could not be confirmed.

Finally, regarding the least preferred strategies, some aspects stand out. Notably, the low proportion of cost leadership is consistent with the preference for differentiation and service development as measures to avoid reducing the profit margin of new customer acquisition, as described by Leonidou et al. (2013) and Kaliappen and Hilman (2017). Strategies related to strategic and conglomerate alliances to mitigate the current juncture are not deemed via-

ble, as evidenced by the low scores that position them among the last 5 global rankings. Once again, the liquidation strategy achieved high relevance in the overall weightings, suggesting that, given the persistence of the economic lags caused by the pandemic, a significant percentage of hotels will be forced to close permanently.

Based on the results obtained from the proposed methodology and the direct perception of the group of experts regarding the usefulness of the strategies to mitigate the challenges of the sector, it can be inferred that the set of strategies within the intensive and generic dimensions would be highly suitable for this purpose. On the other hand, dimensions such as integration and diversification strategies, were perceived as suitable only for certain problems or contexts, not fully applicable at a general level, as shown in Table 6.

In contrast to the aforementioned, even though the effectiveness of applying such tactics was presumed and the experts showed some favor for those framed in the intensive and generic dimension, the entire group of experts unanimously affirmed that, given the restrictions and the almost total closure of the economy, it is not possible to confirm the effectiveness that their real application would have in mitigating the effects of the pandemic.

**Table 6.** Perception of the Effectiveness of the Strategic Dimensions in the Face of Challenges

Strategies	Weights	Global health emergency (Pandemic)			Digital Platforms			Informality and price regulation		
		Rating	Valuation	W*V	Rating	Valuation	W*V	Rating	Valuation	W*V
Intensive	0,3069	HA	0,6000	0,1841	HA	0,6000	0,1841	HA	0,6000	0,1841
Integration	0,1485	HA	0,6000	0,0891	NA	0,0667	0,0099	NA	0,0667	0,0099
Defensive	0,2170	HA	0,6000	0,1302	MA	0,3333	0,0723	HA	0,6000	0,1302
Diversification	0,1033	NA	0,0667	0,0069	HA	0,6000	0,0620	MA	0,3333	0,0344
Generic	0,2244	HA	0,6000	0,1346	HA	0,6000	0,1346	HA	0,6000	0,1346
Score			0,5449			0,4629			0,4933	
Normalized score			<b>0,3630</b>			<b>0,3084</b>			<b>0,3286</b>	

Note: the data correspond to the mode of the experts' ratings.

Source: own elaboration.

## CONCLUSIONS

In addition to the turbulent dynamics of the hotel sector, the current situation of COVID-19, the informal competition of digital platforms such as Airbnb, and the lack of price regulation in the sector (Jabela et al., 2016; Cotelco, 2020), are factors that collectively threaten the stability and profitability of hotel firms and further validate how the choice of strategies and their proper implementation play a decisive role in the survival of these firms. This study successfully determines, based on the perception of Colombian hoteliers, the preferred and most effective strategies to confront these challenges. To this end, a conceptual framework is constructed, comprising a robust set of competitive strategies and their assessment using the AHP model and their decomposition into successive levels according to proportions of importance.

The general results show a preference for intensive strategies aimed at increasing the purchase frequency of regular customers through the expansion of services and hospitality packages. Differentiation emerges as the most used strategy to mitigate the challenges related to price regulation and informal competition, in line with previous studies (Forgacs & Dimanche, 2016; Franco, 2017; Aznar et al., 2018). However, it is also recognized that traditional competitive strategies alone may not be sufficient to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis in the hotel sector (Hafsa, 2020; Indrianto et al., 2020; Jain, 2020). Thus, this study contributes by demonstrating the need for a combination of approaches, including hygiene protocols, digital channels, and alternative packaging. From a practical perspective, the findings provide guidance on prioritizing customer loyalty and ancillary services.

Given the similarities with other studies, it is recommended to prioritize development and market penetration strategies, since through the reinvention of operational and commercial activities it will be possible to propose tourism and lodging alternatives to mitigate the current health situation. At the same time, to address the ongoing situation, this study adds to the recommendations of Sarwari et al. (2020), which focus on keeping calm and planning each decision in detail regarding the strategy to follow. Additional recommendations include avoiding excessive discounts to attract customers, not restricting marketing budgets, prioritizing digital strategies, and expanding the portfolio of services with activities such as food and beverages, beauty services, spa, transport, training and customized tourism packages. It is recommended for government institutions that pay increased attention to the hotel sector through the formulation of local, departmental, and national policies and strategies. This proactive approach aims to reduce 'hotel mortality' and provides support for the implementation of reactivation strategies within the sector.

While this analysis enriches our understanding of strategy selection in Colombian hotels, it is true that this single-country perspective limits the generalizability of our findings. Some limitations offer opportunities for future research. The analysis extends to different regional contexts within Colombia, allowing for a more nuanced unders-

tanding of crisis management strategies across the country. In addition, while the AHP method proved valuable in evaluating hotel strategies, its subjective nature must be considered. The reliance on managers' perceptions could be supplemented with profitability data. Likewise, the use of quantitative methods or a hybrid combination of techniques alongside AHP in future studies could strengthen the objectivity and robustness of our conclusions, especially when assessing the effectiveness of specific strategies against the current hotel crisis. Finally, longitudinal data could show how preferences and COVID-19 impacts change over time.

Overall, this study makes significant theoretical and practical contributions to the hospitality literature and management through the application of multi-criteria modeling. There remains significant potential to build on these findings by addressing limitations through expanded samples, metrics, methods, and continuity of strategic analysis. This will assist the hospitality industry in addressing competitive and diverse event challenges worldwide.

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Diego Alejandro López-Cadavid designed the research methodology, took part

in analyzing the collected data, and participated in writing the manuscript.

Jorge Aníbal Restrepo-Morales was involved in analyzing the data, contributed to developing the research methodology, and assisted with the literature review.

Juan Gabriel Vanegas-López led the research, took part in analyzing the data, contributed to developing the methodology, and was involved in writing the manuscript.

María Alexandra Arango-Mesa developed the conceptual framework and contributed to the collection of the data.

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