The psychology of vacationers’ hotel brand choice in a post-pandemic world

Jinkyung Jenny Kim
Youngsan University, South Korea
Myong Jae Lee
California State Polytechnic University Pomona, USA
Heesup Han
Sejong University, South Korea

Abstract
The present study investigated patrons’ intricate psychological process for hotel brand choice and preference. This research uncovered hotel selection attributes in shaping brand loyalty through customer experience, brand trust, brand attachment, age, and gender in the post-pandemic world. This paper categorized hotel selection attributes into what vacationers appreciate in the domestic tourism context. The findings indicated the significant effect of hotel selection attributes on customer experience, which in turn affect brand preference. Also, the moderating effect of age was identified in the relationship between hotel selection attributes and customer experience. This research is among the first to revisit hotel selection attributes for domestic tourism amid the pandemic and the way to cultivate the loyalty toward a hotel brand.

Keywords
Hotel selection attributes, customer experience, brand trust, brand attachment, brand loyalty, age, gender, COVID-19

Introduction
Hotels are especially vulnerable to the threats of various external factors including economic downturns, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks (Gursoy and Chi, 2020). Similarly, the emergence of epidemics is one of these catastrophes, which adversely affects the hotel sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the most drastic disruption in the hotel industry (Jiang and Wen, 2020; Wong et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021). According to 2020 year-end lodging data firm Smith Travel Research (STR), many markets reported all-time lows in revenue per available room (RevPAR), which is the key financial indicator of hotel sector (STR, 2021). Even though the hotel industry remains fragile, there are optimistic views of domestic tourism, driven by strong recent growth (Arbulú et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021).

Hotel selection attributes are determining features of offerings that induce consumers to select a specific hotel over others (Chan and Wong, 2006; Lewis, 1984). Hotel selection attributes are an important piece of evidence upon that hotels should concentrate (Kim et al., 2019; Spoerr, 2021). In other words, the enhancement

Corresponding author:
Heesup Han, College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Sejong University, 98 Gunja-Dong, Gwanjin-Gu, Seoul 143-747, South Korea.
E-mail: heesup.han@gmail.com
of key hotel selection attributes is crucial to gain market share in this competitive marketplace. The existing studies indicate that attributes that customers consider in hotel selection depend on the diverse range of factors such as demographic characteristics and the purpose of visit. For instance, Kim et al. (2020) examined hotel choice attributes across the different set of customers and they discovered the significant heterogeneous preference for selection attributes across different age group and leisure travelers compared to business travelers. Wang et al. (2020) identified the clear differences in hotel selection attributes of five kinds of travelers: business travelers, travelers with family and friends respectively, couples, and solo. One of the findings was that business and solo travelers pay more attention to the quality of bed and bedding for a good night sleep, whereas couples and friend travelers place more importance on cleanliness in their hotel selection.

In addition, hotel selection attributes are affected by diverse environmental conditions. Likewise, studies discovered how vacationers deemed technological innovations important for hotel selection in the age of digital revolution (Chiang et al., 2019; Kim and Han, 2020). There are also urgent needs to tackle climate change, and studies addressed that individuals pay attention to pro-environmentally and socially responsible activities that hotel companies set in place for their hotel selection (Han et al., 2018; Njite and Schaffer, 2017). Meanwhile, some scholars (e.g. Henderson and Ng, 2004; Lo et al., 2006) contended the importance of case studies utilizing primary data to assess the effectiveness of crisis management and they conducted studies pertaining to the previous contagious diseases such as 2003 SARS. These authors observed that customer decision making is largely affected by cleanliness and hygiene of the service environment during such time. The stream of extant literature has clearly shown how hotel selection attributes vary by factors such as customer segment, demographic profile, and situational factors, and therefore it implies the prospect and the need for re-evaluation of hotel selection attributes for domestic tourism for the post-pandemic era.

A great deal of evidence supports the notion that loyalty is the core asset for a firm’s success (Chua et al., 2021). Reichheld and Sasser (1990) indicated that a five percent increase in customer loyalty enable profit increase by twenty-five to eighty-five percent. On the other hand, Holmlund and Kock (1996) determined that acquiring new customers costs five times more than retaining current ones, and accordingly they accentuated the importance of loyalty. With this respect, brand loyalty has been widely studied, and efforts in identifying key drivers of brand loyalty suggested customer experience as one of the essential antecedents. Specifically, creating an exceptional customer experience is vital in the hotel industry due to the intangible and inseparable characteristics of hospitality products and services (Williams, 2006). In addition, prior studies tested various brand related variables in forming brand loyalty, and brand trust and brand attachment were frequently validated with a substantial effect (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016; Boateng et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2019). The above discussion outlines, of necessity, the following three research questions in domestic tourism context:

RQ1: What attributes are perceived as important for a hotel selection, and what influence do they make on customer experience in the post-pandemic world?

RQ2: How does customer experience affect brand preference during the pandemic?

RQ3: What effect do age and gender have on the brand loyalty development in the post-pandemic era?

Based on current evidence how the coronavirus is spread, hotels around the world have placed various precautionary measures to minimize the spread of COVID-19 cases. For example, Hilton initiated CleanStay program that promises the focused disinfection of high-touch areas throughout the hotel and contactless service delivery (Hilton, 2021). In fact, cleanliness, hygiene, and safety have not been ignored in the past, and technological solutions have been embraced in the pre-pandemic era as well. Yet, no sufficient endeavors have been made to examine hotel selection attributes and their effect on vacationer responses that reflect the significant changes of hotel operations in the wake of the COVID-19. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, domestic tourism deserves more attention based on its potential to drive economic recovery in hotel industry around the world (Arbulú et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021). This research will contribute in both academia and industry through revisiting hotel selection attributes that are valid for domestic tourism and the way to cultivate
the loyalty toward a hotel brand amid the pandemic.

**Literature review**

**Hotel selection attributes amid COVID-19 surge**

In decision theory, a multi-attribute utility function is core in quantifying the preferences of multi-attribute goods that influence selection behavior (Tsaur and Tzeng, 1996). The multi-attribute utility theory stands on the basis of the assumption that individuals perceive offerings as a mix of attributes (Njite and Schaffer, 2017). Following this logic, hotel selection attributes have long been a subject of research. Previous studies found that determining attributes for a hotel choice depends on various factors. This means that there are attributes that vacationers constantly perceive as fundamental, but these attributes change with the times and situations (Kim et al., 2020; Spoerr, 2021).

Kim and Perdue (2013) categorized hotel selection attributes into cognitive, affective, and sensory attributes, observing that customers seek cognitive attributes such as price and quality, and they also assess affective and sensory attributes which include comfort and overall atmosphere, respectively. Njite and Schaffer (2017) assessed the relative importance that customers ascribe to the green attributes of hotels, and their findings showed that customers still heavily rely on the traditional choice set which includes brand, price, and location. More recently, Chiang et al. (2019) derived the essential technological innovation in hotels and their analysis based on the Kano model indicated that attributes such as technological solution for convenience check-in/out became attractive feature in hotel choice. Kim et al. (2019) examined how Korean vacationers assess hotel attributes when choosing a hotel for a staycation. Their results identified that intangible attributes are more meaningful for them, more specifically, cleanliness, value for money, accessibility, safety and security are deemed most important attributes to Koreans. Furthermore, without exception, these studies emphasize the comprehension of attributes, which are impetus for the hotel selection, is critical for the success of hotels.

New rules and regulations have been implemented around the world since the COVID-19 outbreak which was first identified in December 2019. Most of these new protocols were related to restricting interactions between people due to the nature of the coronavirus, and this disrupted hotel operations that highly rely on human capital in providing services. Specifically, the prolonged COVID-19 lays hotel professionals under a necessity of adjusting operational manuals or adopting new measures. Many hotel professionals asserted that enhancement of hygiene and cleanliness, as well as the option of contactless service are regarded as the way for hotel guests to rest assured that their hotel stay experience is safe from the coronavirus (The Korea Herald, 2020). As a result, a set of attributes deemed important for a choice of hotel in the current period is distinguished in light of the long-lasting COVID-19. In this respect, situational factors of the COVID-19 pandemic have been discussed and studies have dealt with hygiene, safety, higher quality amenities in the hotel sector (Guo et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021).

The above discussion outlines the common hotel selection attributes for this study that include accessibility, amenities, comfort, friendly employees, interior design, quality of food & beverage, value for money, and view. In addition, following the approach of Kim and Perdue (2013), who observed the incremental value of characterizing cognitive, affective and sensory attributes in hotel selection criteria, the current study delineated hotel attributes into cognitive, affective, and sensory attributes.

**Effect of hotel selection attributes on customer experience**

Customer responses about a hotel stay are driven by accumulated numerous service encounters during their stay period. This means that vacationers take a comprehensive approach for the whole journey when they evaluate the hotel stay (Kim and Han, 2020). Meanwhile, individuals’ buying behavior no longer depends on economic exchange itself but also rely on emotional, sensory and hedonic aspirations (Gilmore and Pine, 2002; Maklan and Klaus, 2011). Accordingly, the focus is shift to value-in-use which conceptualizes customer experience, and the significance of customer experience has now become apparent in the hotel industry. Specifically, prior studies provide evidence of how customer experience is triggered by the performance of determining attributes (Kim and Han, 2020; Mohd-Ramly and...
Kim and Perdue (2013) argued that much research limits hotel selection attributes to cognitive aspect and experience clues are relatively less investigated in the hotel context. Hence, they encompassed affective and sensory attributes in examining attributes that affect the choice of hotel and their results revealed that comfortable feeling and entertaining, room quality, and overall atmosphere are equally important in creating customer experience. Wong and Wu (2013) claimed that customers seek experiential attributes in the hospitality industry, and their study in the domain of casinos showed how vacationer experience is affected by experiential attributes such as atmosphere, architecture, and employee appearance. Kim et al. (2016) discussed the cognitive, emotional, and sensory attributes of airlines lounges, and they determined that an individuals’ evaluation of these facets formulates customer experience. These findings imply that total customer experience arises from a set of attributes in the experience-oriented hospitality context. Therefore, the above discussion outlines the first hypothesis about the positive effect of hotel selection attributes on customer experience. This is also supported by the empirical evidence in other service settings. For example, Josiam et al. (2017) summarized atmosphere/ambience, food quality, menu variety, service quality, consistency of food and service, cost/price-value relationship, and hygiene/cleanliness as common restaurant attributes and confirmed the significant impact of these attributes on the overall evaluation of customer experience. Mohd-Ramly and Omar (2017) supports service-dominant logic as a novel marketing thought and their empirical evidence in the retail context indicates the substantial associations between store attributes and customer experience.

In addition, cognitive-experiential self-theory developed by Epstein (2003) supports the proposed integrations. The theory suggests that individuals operate analytical-rational which is deliberate and logical, and intuitive-experiential, which is automatic and simulating emotionally driven. This means that people use clues of cognitive, affective, and sensory attributes for information processing, and this applies in the hotel industry. Hence, this study posited the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Hotel selection attributes positively promote customer experience.

### Effect of customer experience on brand preference

Individuals with a high level of brand loyalty behave positively that foster brand profitability and consequently the success of a company (Šerić et al., 2017; Thomson et al., 2005). Likewise, many academicians examine the antecedents of brand loyalty and various brand-related variables were frequently adopted in the empirical investigations. Among them, brand trust and brand attachment are treated as essential variables that are related to the customer experience as well as brand loyalty. Brand trust describes the degree of individuals to count on the capability of the brand to deliver its stated function (Schau et al., 2009). On the other hand, brand attachment illustrates the strength of the bond linking individuals with the brand (Park et al., 2010).

Customer experience is built by an individuals’ evaluation of his and her cognitive, emotional, and sensory expectations of offerings (Kim et al., 2012; Ryu et al., 2020). Experience marketing theory is a valid theoretical basis for the crucial role of customer experience in brand formation (Berry, 2000; Goldsmith and Tsiotsou, 2012). The recent literature has begun to recognize the effect of customer experience in enticing customers’ responses, which include brand trust (El Naggar and Bendary, 2017; Kang et al., 2017), brand attachment (Chinomona, 2013; Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka, 2019), and brand loyalty (Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown, 2019; Khan et al., 2020; Otoo et al., 2020; Wong and Wu, 2013). Rajaobelina (2018) adopted multi-dimensions proposed by Schmitt (1999), which are act, think, feel, sense, and relate to quality customer experience, and their results found their significant influence on relationship quality, which includes brand trust.

In addition, positive customer experience significantly promotes the bond between service providers and individuals (Berry et al., 2002; Spena et al., 2012). Likewise, an individual’s subjective and internal responses which encompass sensations, feelings, and cognitions towards a specific brand are important predictors of brand attachment (Chinomona, 2013). We accordingly proposed the followings hypotheses:

**H2:** Customer experience positively promotes brand trust.

**H3:** Customer experience positively promotes brand attachment.
Similarly, Mascarenhas et al. (2006) explained how customer experience is generated by emotional and functional attributes of the service encounter. Furthermore, the authors validated that physical, emotional involvement, and value chain moments capture customer experience and they determined how customer experience sustains lasting customer loyalty. Kim et al. (2016) tested the role of customer experience in the airline lounges, and they confirmed that customer experience significantly affects subsequent individuals’ behavioral intentions. Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019) explored the determining factors of customer experience in the hotel context, and their findings showed its meaningful effect on brand loyalty. In accordance with the experience marketing theory and the evidence described above, we developed the following hypothesis:

**H4:** Customer experience positively promotes brand loyalty.

**Effect of brand trust and brand attachment on brand loyalty**

The existing studies constantly observed that brand trust can cement the bond that individuals have with a brand (Wardani and Gustia, 2017). Chinomona (2013) examined the associations between brand trust and brand attachment, and the analysis results supported the author’s claim that individuals become attached to a specific brand that they perceive to be trustworthy. On another hand, scholars determined how brand trust exerts a positive effect on brand loyalty (Shin et al., 2019). For instance, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) investigated the antecedents of two facets of brand loyalty, which are purchase loyalty and attitudinal loyalty, and their findings indicated that brand trust determines purchase loyalty, which results in maximizing market share and attitudinal loyalty, which in turn, leads to a premium price for the brand. Moreover, the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing, which was proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), claims that trust is as a key construct in maintaining enduring and successful brand relationships. Thus, this study suggested the following hypotheses:

**H5:** Brand trust positively promotes brand attachment.

**H6:** Brand trust positively promotes brand loyalty.

Brand attachment indicates emotional bond which remains unchanged over time (Park et al., 2010). A strong brand attachment will lead to persistent positive behavior toward a brand which involves the resistance to change and the ability to withstand service failure (Petty and Krosnick, 2014). Furthermore, a considerable amount of work provides evidence of the significant impact of brand attachment in the development of brand loyalty (Boateng et al., 2020; Tsiotsou, 2010). Bahri-Ammari et al. (2016) investigated the impact of brand attachment in the luxury restaurant sector, and their findings confirmed that brand attachment is a salient indicator of the behavioral loyalty of consumers. This evidence prompted us to postulate the following hypothesis:

**H7:** Brand attachment positively promotes brand loyalty.

**Effect of age and gender**

Past studies addressed the differing role of age in consumer behavior, including the disparity of hotel selection attributes by age (Anuar et al., 2017; Chua et al., 2019). Josiam et al. (2017) demonstrated that customer responses towards restaurant attributes significantly differ between different generations. Kim et al. (2021) explored the essential benefits that customers expect towards smart hotels and their findings showed how customers exhibit different attitudes according to age group. This means that customers of different age groups not only perceive differently towards environmental stimuli, but also they subsequently behave differently. Thus, age potentially moderates the effect of hotel selection attributes on customer experience. In addition, age is considered as a significant moderator in the development of brand loyalty. Consumers’ needs, preferences, and responses to the offerings tend to shift through their life cycle (Khan et al., 2020), and it is likely that the effect of customer experience on brand related variable could differ across age profiles. Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka (2019) tested the moderating impact of age in the link between brand experience and brand attachment, and their results indicated the effect of brand experience on brand attachment is much stronger for younger age group. Rather and Hollebeek (2021) discovered that the influence of customer experience on intentions to revisit and recommend the destination intensifies
as they get older. Given these observations, we advanced the following hypotheses:

**H8a~H8d:** Age moderates the relationships between hotel selection attributes and customer experience (Hypothesis 8a), between customer experience and brand trust (Hypothesis 8b), between customer experience and brand attachment (Hypothesis 8c), between customer experience and brand loyalty (Hypothesis 8d).

Similarly, the gender differences have repeatedly received attention as an influencing factor in forming consumer behavior. Meyers-Levy and Loken (2015) assessed the research, which were published from 2000 to 2013, pertaining to the gender difference in consumer behavior, and they concluded that female consumers are more other-oriented, more cautious responders, more responsive to negative data, and more sensitive to differentiating cues than males. Whereas male consumers are more self-oriented and process data more selectively than females. Likewise, the disparity of hotel selection attributes by gender were frequently examined (Gumaste et al., 2019; Josiam et al., 2017). Herjanto et al. (2020) discovered the unique criteria that solo female travelers consider important in hotel selection. Moreover, gender is also regarded as a determining moderator in the development of brand loyalty. Khan et al. (2020) tested the moderating effect of gender in the links between key customer experience with hotel brands and brand loyalty, and their findings explained how gender amplifies or reduces the relationships. Concretely, their results indicated that the associations between hotel location and brand loyalty, and between guest-to-guest interactions and brand loyalty are more prominent when customers are female. Meanwhile, the effect of staff competence on brand loyalty becomes stronger for male guests. Following these background, we propose the following hypotheses 9a, 9b, 9c, and 9d:

**H9a~H9d:** Gender moderates the relationships between hotel selection attributes and customer experience (Hypothesis 9a), between customer experience and brand trust (Hypothesis 9b), between customer experience and brand attachment (Hypothesis 9c), between customer experience and brand loyalty (Hypothesis 9d).

Based on a thorough literature review discussed above, Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework that this research proposed.

**Methods**

**Measurement development**

This study developed the measurement items for each study construct on a basis of the prior research, and they were slightly amended in wording to be proper for the hotel context. These multiple measurements were all assessed using a seven-point Likert scale. The measurement items for the performance of hotel selection attributes were cited from Kim et al. (2019), so the respondents were required to rate how each attribute, a total of fifteen attributes, at the hotel they stayed was adequate to their needs. This study measured customer experience by asking the participants to rate the degree that “At this hotel brand, I have a pleasant experience.” (Kim and Choi, 2013; Lemke et al., 2011). Brand trust and brand attachment were measured each with three items that were cited from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Kang et al. (2017). Last, brand loyalty was assessed by three items that were adapted from Han et al. (2018), Xu et al. (2018), and Byun and Jang (2019). The first form of the survey questionnaire was pre-tested and refined by academic specialists and stakeholders in the hotel industry.

**Survey design and data collection**

A self-administered online survey questionnaire was developed and composed of five sections to access hotel selection attributes, customer experience, brand related constructs, hotel stay experience, and demographic profiles. The data were collected with the help from an online research company that has more than 1.4 million panels in South Korea. An email invitation for a survey was sent out to those who were randomly chosen by their database with screening questions to recruit individuals who have stayed in hotels after the COVID-19 outbreak. The survey began by introducing the objectives of study, and respondents were asked to answer the hotel brand, companions, and length of stay to refresh their memories. A total of 364 valid responses were retained for a data analysis after the removal of 16 outliers by using the Mahalanobis distance. Furthermore, the
common method bias was assessed by Harman’s single-factor analysis (Podsakoff et al., 2003). All measurement items of the study constructs were loaded into one common factor, and the results showed that a single factor was extracting less than 50.00% of total explained variance, confirming there was no threat of CMB.

The respondents of the survey comprised of 184 females (50.5%) and 180 males (49.5%), and their average age was 44.5 years old. With respect to their educational background, 248 (68.1%), the majority of respondents, were university degree holders and 45 (12.4%) were post-graduate degree holders. Regarding their monthly income level, 83 participants (22.8%) make below $3,000, 69 individuals (19.0%) make between $3,000–$3,999, and 42 respondents (11.5%) make between $5,000–$5,999. When participants were asked about their occupation, 172 (47.3%) indicated they are office workers. Table 1 provides the details of respondents’ demographic profiles.

Of the survey respondents, 40.4% stays at hotels three to four times a year, and 22.5% and 20.9% stay one to two times and five to six times a year, respectively. Their hotel stays in year 2020, which is after the COVID-19 outbreak, was in August (27.5%), followed by July (16.8%), and May (14.8%) and their stays were in either 5-star rated (54.1%) or 4-star rated (45.9%) hotels in Korea. The majority of them stayed at hotel for their leisure purpose (82.7%), and 37.1% and 35.4% stayed at hotels with their partners/spouse and family,

Table 1. Demographic characteristics (n = 364).

| Variable                  | n   | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-----|------------|
| Gender                    |     |            |
| Male                      | 180 | 49.5       |
| Female                    | 184 | 50.5       |
| Age                       |     |            |
| 20s                       | 68  | 18.7       |
| 30s                       | 71  | 19.5       |
| 40s                       | 75  | 20.6       |
| 50s                       | 80  | 22.0       |
| 60s                       | 70  | 19.2       |
| Education level           |     |            |
| High school diploma       | 39  | 10.7       |
| Associate’s degree        | 32  | 8.8        |
| Bachelor’s degree         | 248 | 68.1       |
| Graduate degree           | 45  | 12.4       |
| Monthly household income  |     |            |
| $9,001 and over           | 39  | 10.7       |
| $8,001–$9,000             | 28  | 7.7        |
| $7,001–$8,000             | 23  | 6.3        |
| $6,001–$7,000             | 39  | 10.7       |
| $5,001–$6,000             | 42  | 11.5       |
| $4,001–$5,000             | 41  | 11.3       |
| $3,001–$4,000             | 69  | 19.0       |
| Under $3,000              | 83  | 22.8       |
| Occupation                |     |            |
| Specialized job           | 42  | 11.5       |
| Office worker             | 172 | 47.3       |
| Service personnel         | 14  | 3.8        |
| Sales                     | 10  | 2.7        |
| Technical post            | 15  | 4.1        |
| Student                   | 14  | 3.8        |
| Housewife                 | 34  | 9.3        |
| Self-employed             | 29  | 8.0        |
| Freelancer                | 10  | 2.7        |
| Others                    | 24  | 6.6        |
respectively. Most of them had either one night two days stay (44.0%) the two nights three days stay (41.2%).

**Table 2.** Results of confirmatory factor analysis: items and loadings.

| Construct and scale item | Standardized loading* |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Cognitive attributes     |                       |
| Accessibility            | .724                  |
| Convenient check-in/out  | .816                  |
| Value for money          | .763                  |
| Quality of food & beverage | .775               |
| Affective attributes     |                       |
| Comfort                  | .826                  |
| Friendly employees       | .777                  |
| Customized services      | .640                  |
| Sensory attributes       |                       |
| Bed & bedding            | .812                  |
| Amenities                | .712                  |
| Soundproof               | .792                  |
| Interior design          | .741                  |
| Indoor air quality       | .724                  |
| View                     | .772                  |
| Brightness               | .713                  |
| Well-maintained furniture/facilities | .745 |
| Customer experience      |                       |
| At this hotel brand, I have a pleasant experience. | .885 |
| I have had memorable experiences from this hotel brand. | .903 |
| Thinking of this hotel brand brings back good memories. | .822 |
| Brand trust              |                       |
| I trust this hotel brand. | .902                  |
| I think this hotel brand strives to keep its promise to customers. | .888 |
| The offerings from this hotel brand are reliable. | .909 |
| Brand attachment         |                       |
| I love this hotel brand. | .886                  |
| This hotel brand is important to me. | .871 |
| I am emotionally attached to this hotel brand. | .865 |
| Brand loyalty            |                       |
| I would like to use this hotel brand in the future. | .922 |
| I am willing to visit this hotel brand again. | .903 |
| I would say positive things about this hotel brand to others. | .832 |

**Results**

**Measurement model**

A confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess the adequacy of construct measures. Table 2 displays the results for the measurement structure of the proposed conceptual model, which confirmed the satisfactory fit to the data (χ² = 667.898, df = 303, χ²/df = 2.204, p < 0.001, NFI = 0.925, IFI = 0.958, CFI = 0.957, TLI = 0.951, and RMSEA = 0.058) (Byrne, 2001). Also, the values of the factor loadings (p < 0.01) ranged from 0.640 to 0.922.

As Table 3 demonstrates, the convergent validity was supported as all values of the average variance extracted (AVE) were bigger than 0.50, which is the suggested cutoff by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Furthermore, all values of the composite reliabilities (CR) were higher than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2006), indicating that multiple measurement items employed in the current study had a satisfactory degree of internal consistency. Lastly, the AVE value of each latent variable exceeded the squared correlation coefficient between the variable and other variables. Therefore, the discriminant validity is warranted (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988).

**Structural equation model**

The examination of proposed hypotheses was managed through the structural equation modeling (SEM) with the maximum likelihood estimation method (see Table 4). The overall evaluation of the model fit observed an acceptable goodness-of-fit statistics (χ² = 663.330, df = 311, χ²/df = 2.133, p < 0.001, NFI = 0.925, IFI = 0.959, CFI = 0.959, TLI = 0.953, and RMSEA = 0.056). Of seven hypotheses, five hypotheses were statistically accepted at p < 0.05. Hotel selection attributes significantly and positively affected customer experience (β = 0.768, p < 0.001), which retains Hypothesis 1. The salient influence of customer experience on brand trust (β = 0.945, p < 0.001) and on brand loyalty (β = 0.328, p < 0.05) were found supporting Hypotheses 2 and 4. Brand trust played an important role in forming brand attachment (β = 0.924, p < 0.001) and brand attachment exerted a positive impact on brand loyalty (β = 0.473, p < 0.001), which confirms Hypotheses 5 and 7, respectively. However, contrary to our expectation, the effect of customer experience on brand attachment (β = −0.008,
p > 0.05), and the impact of brand trust on brand loyalty (β = 0.167, p < 0.05) were statistically insignificant, in contrast to Hypotheses 3 and 6. The hotel selection attributes explained 59.8% of the variance in customer experience, which accounted for 89.3% in brand trust and 89.5% in brand loyalty, respectively. All study constructs explained 87.5% of total variance in brand loyalty. Hence, the proposed theoretical framework was regarded to be valid to predict brand loyalty in the hotel sector.

Moderating effect of age and gender

This research conducted multiple-group analyses to examine the moderating role of age and gender. Table 5 exhibits the results which support Hypothesis 8a and fail to support Hypotheses 8b and 8d. That is, the results showed that the age moderated the relationship between hotel selection attributes and customer experience (Δχ² [1] = 4.201, p < 0.05), which supported Hypothesis 8a. More specifically, the path coefficient for the high age group (β = −0.757 and t = 10.813**) was higher than for the low age group (β = 0.776 and t = 9.222**). However, Hypothesis 8b (Δχ² [1] = 0.294, p > 0.05) and Hypothesis 8d (Δχ² [1] = 1.656, p > 0.05) were not statistically supported. Since our SEM results confirm that the influence of customer experience on brand attachment does not exist, we did not examine the moderating effect of age in the link between customer experience and brand attachment, which is Hypothesis 8c. Meanwhile, the results of the multiple-group analyses to test the moderating effect of gender were beyond our expectation (see Table 6), and no single hypothesis among H9a~H9d was retained.

Discussion and implications

This study attempted to revisit hotel selection attributes in influencing customer experience in domestic tourism, which in turn affect brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty in the time of the COVID-19. Furthermore, this study considers the moderating effect of age and gender, which have been frequently validated as significant moderators in predicting consumer behavior and tests how relationships among study variable vary according to age and gender during the COVID-19. The present research employed a quantitative approach for the achievement of study objectives and the following discussions and implications are drawn from the analysis results.

Discussion

First, the findings indicated that hotel selection attributes composed of cognitive, affective, and sensory attributes exert a positive influence on customer experience. Customer experience at hotels generally involve various moments of truth, which is distinguished from other service settings (Kim and Han, 2020). Our findings support the study of Kim and Perdue (2013), who claimed that customers’ evaluation of hotel includes cognitive, affective, and sensory facets, as well as that of Kim et al.’s (2016), which discussed the significant influence of cognitive, emotional, and sensory attributes on customer experience in the airline industry. Specifically, the context of this study is domestic tourism with a purpose of leisure amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and likewise it is expected that individuals stays at hotels in order to spend more time on pampering and making sure they keep stress to a minimum. This is one of a few studies that

| Table 3. Results of measurement model: correlations, AVE, CR, mean, and SD. |
|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Constructs                  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | CR (AVE) | Mean (SD) |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----------|-----------|
| (1) Hotel selection attributes | 1.000 |     |     |     |     |          |           |
| (2) Customer experience     | .685a | 1.000 |     |     |     | .884     | 5.311     |
|                            | (0.469)b |     |     |     |     | (0.717)  | (.1014)   |
| (3) Brand trust             | .718 (0.516) | .855 | 1.000 |     |     | .915     | 5.582     |
|                            | (0.731) |     |     |     |     | (0.782)  | (.1091)   |
| (4) Brand attachment        | .640 (0.410) | .773 | .836 | 1.000 |     | .876     | 5.403     |
|                            | (0.598) | (0.699) |     |     |     | (0.702)  | (.1074)   |
| (5) Brand loyalty           | .640 (0.410) | .792 | .825 | .814 | 1.000 | .891     | 5.611     |
|                            | (0.627) | (0.681) | (0.663) |     |     | (0.732)  | (.1067)   |

Note: aCorrelations, bSquared correlations.
determined how hotel selection attributes influence customer experience for local vacationers during the COVID-19, which offering new insights.

Second, this study observed that customer experience affects brand trust. Local authorities in Korea have combined many approaches, and the hotel industry has proactively implemented the protective measures against the COVID-19 (Bae and Chang, 2020). For instance, Hilton partnered with industrial cleaning brands which brings over 200 years of cutting-edge science (Hilton, 2021). Customers easily found new equipment and tools installed in hotels and they were presented with options of various contact-free services. Likewise, local vacationers may have a good level of trust in how hotels in Korea operate to ensure a low risk of infections. This potentially leads to the analysis results of a salient effect of customer experience on brand trust, which might be even stronger than pre-COVID. The outcome echoes previous studies (El Naggar and Bendary, 2017; Kang et al., 2017), which denoted the strong association between customer experience and brand trust. In addition, our finding underscores the value of customer experience through the finding of its positive influence on brand loyalty, which supports prior studies (e.g. Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown, 2019).

Third, the effect of customer experience on brand attachment was not statistically supported. This result may be attributed to the characteristics of brand attachment which is developed over time through thoughts and memories that pertain to the brand and the self (Thomson et al., 2005). Particularly, it is not known that the respondent of our survey are repeat customers or first time visitors to that specific hotel.

### Table 4. Results of structural model evaluation and hypotheses testing.

| Independent variable | Dependent variable | β    | t-value | Status   |
|----------------------|--------------------|------|---------|----------|
| H1 Hotel selection attributes → Customer experience | .768 | 14.686** | Supported |
| H2 Customer experience → Brand trust | .945 | 22.392** | Supported |
| H3 Customer experience → Brand attachment | -0.008 | -0.050 | Not supported |
| H4 Customer experience → Brand loyalty | .328 | 2.408* | Supported |
| H5 Brand trust → Brand attachment | .924 | 5.930*** | Supported |
| H6 Brand trust → Brand loyalty | .167 | .910 | Not supported |
| H7 Brand attachment → Brand loyalty | .473 | 4.572*** | Supported |

Goodness-of-fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 663.330$, df = 311, $\chi^2/df = 2.133$, $p < 0.001$, NFI = 0.925, IFI = 0.959, CFI = 0.959, TLI = 0.953, and RMSEA = 0.056.

Total variance explained (R²): R² for customer experience = 0.590; R² for brand trust = 0.893; R² for brand attachment = 0.841; R² for brand loyalty = 0.875.

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.001.

### Table 5. Results of moderating effect of age.

| Linkages | High age group (n = 177) | Low age group (n = 187) | Baseline model (freely estimated) | Nested model (equally constrained) |
|----------|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Hotel selection attributes → Customer experience | .757 | 10.813** | .776 | 9.922** | $\chi^2 (626) = 1039.584$ | $\chi^2 (627) = 1043.786^a$ |
| Customer experience → Brand trust | .967 | 15.490** | .928 | 15.906** | $\chi^2 (626) = 1039.584$ | $\chi^2 (627) = 1039.882^b$ |
| Customer experience → Brand loyalty | .609 | 1.672 | .138 | .885 | $\chi^2 (626) = 1039.584$ | $\chi^2 (627) = 1041.241^c$ |

Chi-square difference test:

| a | $\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 4.201$, p < 0.05 (H8a: Supported)† |
| b | $\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 0.294$, p > 0.05 (H8b: Not supported) |
| c | $\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 1.656$, p > 0.05 (H8d: Not supported) |

Goodness-of-fit statistics for the baseline model: $\chi^2 = 1039.584$, df = 626, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.661$, RMSEA = 0.043, CFI = 0.952, IFI = 0.952, and TLI = 0.946.

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.001.
short, which is less than or equal to two nights. This background possibly explains the insignificant result, which contradicts the findings of Berry et al. (2002) and Spena et al. (2012). Berry et al. (2002) precisely argued that organizations with a competency in customer-experience management could cement the bonds with customers. However, our results do not support this claim.

Fourth, the analysis results showed that brand trust increases brand attachment. The strong association between brand trust and brand attachment was documented in many studies (Chi and Han, 2021; Chinomona, 2013; Wardani, and Gustia, 2017) and our finding is coherent with them. On the other hand, the results of this study indicate that brand loyalty is not affected by brand trust but by brand attachment. It is worthy to note that brand trust is an important predictor of brand attachment, however brand loyalty is not directly triggered by brand trust as it is formed once brand attachment is built. This is somewhat different from earlier studies (e.g. Boateng et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2019), which determined the significant influence of brand trust on brand loyalty. Our study may not be sufficient to explain the reasons of insignificant effect of brand trust on brand loyalty; however, we imply these results are caused by severe emotional depression during the COVID-19. That is, people seek for an emotional bond beyond the trust, and loyalty to a specific hotel brand is built once customers are attached to the brand.

Last, the findings validated the significant moderating role of age, but unexpectedly showed the insignificant moderating effect of gender. In particular, the influence of hotel selection attributes on customer experience was greater for the high age group than the low age group. This finding is in line with prior studies (e.g. Kim et al., 2020) which observed the moderating role of age in the consequence of customers’ evaluation of hotel attributes. Hotel practitioners have introduced new manuals and implemented protective measures and adjusted protocols to keep their property safe from coronavirus. Seniors are concerned more for their health in tourism (Vigolo and Bonfanti, 2016), and thus they probably appreciate new policies that hotels have adopted to minimize human contact during the COVID-19 pandemic. This would support the moderating effect of age in our research framework. Nonetheless, our findings regarding the moderating role of gender contradict previous studies (Herjanto et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020) which accentuated the different responses depending on gender.

Theoretical implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented massive global crisis and significant impact to the hotel industry. The existing studies pertaining to the disruption by the COVID-19 in the hospitality context do not address factors that induce customers back to the hotels (Gursoy and Chi, 2020). Meanwhile, hotel selection attributes are highly affected by various factors, including customer segment, external environment, and nationality (Lo et al., 2006; Njitete and Schaffer, 2017; Wang et al., 2020). In this regard, we successfully broadened
our understanding of hotel selection attributes that have been affected by the prolonged COVID-19. More concretely, this study is meaningful since no studies have assessed hotel selection attributes in forming brand loyalty in the post-pandemic era. The originality of this study lies on this and is one of the cornerstones of future studies that deal with vacationer behaviors/intentions during the pandemic.

Despite of a protracted crisis, few attempts have been made to revisit hotel selection attributes amid of the COVID-19. Customer experience is core in the modern hospitality setting and it is considered as a significant predictor of brand loyalty formation. Nonetheless, there is no sufficient evidence of how customer experience is affected by hotel selection attributes during the crisis or how it exerts an influence on preferences to the specific hotel brand. This study nests its discussion within the extant theories which include multi-attribute utility theory and cognitive-experiential self-theory. The findings are in line with these theories and successfully fill the gap in providing empirical evidence on this regard. Furthermore, the outcomes provide an additional clue as to how age makes the difference in those relationships in a crisis. Likewise, this study theoretically contributes to the consideration of pandemic circumstances to discuss hotel selection attributes and customer experience in forming brand preference in the hotel context.

**Managerial implications**

The COVID-19 outbreak disrupted all aspects of daily life. More people tend to lavish hospitality on themselves as the part of a psychology of revenue in the current pandemic environment. Likewise, opportunities were found in domestic tourism in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. To be specific, the hotel RevPAR in Korea, which is attributed to domestic tourism, is relatively more competitive than others. It is mainly due to the demand of staycations, and people exhibit more interest in staying at hotels for leisure because they cannot travel overseas (The Korea Bizwire, 2020). Indeed, the prolonged COVID-19 creates the demand of domestic tourism and hotel practitioners discover business opportunity to recover from the death of international tourism. Even though domestic tourism may not be sufficient for hotels to regain the pre-COVID level of demand, domestic tourism provides an opportunity for a speedy recovery (Arbulú et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021). Meanwhile, earlier studies observed that hotel selection attributes are affected by various factors which include epidemics. It implies that attributes deemed important for a hotel selection amid of the continued COVID-19 may differ from ones previously reported. As such, our findings would aid in improving the current situation of hotel performance through domestic tourism.

Hotel practitioners should pay attention to the attributes which entice local vacationers to choose their hotel, and they should understand that customer experience is affected by the evaluation of various set of hotel attributes. Thus, hotels are recommended to constantly gather genuine customer feedback and assess customers’ evaluation of hotel attributes on a regular basis.

This research accentuated the importance of brand attachment in the development of brand loyalty. Likewise, hotels are suggested to implement campaigns and programs that facilitate brand attachment. The clear comprehension of vacationer needs and interests would be helpful to design the main theme of these strategic plans, and such endeavors will aid in increasing the bond linking individuals with the brand. In a crisis such as a current one, hotels may seek for chances to contribute to mental and physical wellness. As an example, hotels are suggested offering programs to heal the mind and body, providing an exciting form of exercise, and promoting a healthy diet for customers to enjoy during their stay. For a long term perspective, the hotel industry should make efforts to take the lead in the environmental, social, and governance (EGS) activities (Ionescu et al., 2019). The effective communication is also important to ensure these initiatives are properly advertised and lead customer participation to improve engagement level. Likewise, identifying the proper channel for marketing communications to their main customer segment should be done first.

The high age group demonstrated a strong influence of hotel selection attributes on their experience. Based on our earlier discussion, hotels may embrace stricter hygiene practices and safety measures to enhance their experience during the pandemic. This will eventually fuel growth in senior vacationers staying and spending at hotels. On another hand, younger age group may welcome more digital devices to minimize human contact during the COVID-19 pandemic as they are technology savvy (Kim et al.,
Therefore, hotel practitioners may communicate with young generations with a focus on innovative technologies in hotels. Hotels should analyze their main customer segment by their age profile, and then concentrate on selected projects that are relevant to the specific generation.

In addition, the findings of our study offer insights for hotels in other places with growing demands of domestic tourism. For example, there is the positive outlook of domestic tourism in China and Spain (Arbulú et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021). It is suggested that hotel professionals in those areas to understand the determining hotel attributes that local vacationers regard as important for hotel selection and how they contribute for more pleasant experience in hotels.

**Limitations and extensions**

The perception and evaluation of hotel attributes depend on hotel guests’ country of origin (Francesco and Roberta, 2019; Kim et al., 2019). The current study is subject to one nationality, namely South Koreans, and domestic tourism sector; hence the findings of this study may not apply to other nationalities or another subset of tourism. Even though this study is among the first to examine hotel selection attributes during the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars may explore an important set of hotel attributes in forming positive customer responses in other places and nations. On the other hand, the potential application of other demographic variables, such as marital status, is suggested to identify more homogeneous groups of consumers. Based on the increasing COVID-19 vaccination coverage rates, there are positive signs of declaring an end to COVID-19 state of emergency in near future, and this would revive tourism industry (Radic et al., 2021). At a later stage, it may be critical to investigate the avenue how consumer behavior has resumed to the pre-COVID-19 level.

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**ORCID iD**

Heesup Han  
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6356-3001

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