UDC: 004.896:007]:640.4(497.11)
DOI: 10.69899/limes-plus-en-24212-3193d
Original scientific work

THE IMPACT OF AI-SUPPORTED SERVICES ON CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: A CASE STUDY OF THE HOTEL INDUSTRY IN SERBIA

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Abstract: *Based on literature and current findings on the potential of digitalisation to enhance service quality models, this research aims to better understand the potential impact of service quality and personalization supported by artificial intelligence technologies on improving customer experience in the hotel industry. Responses from 218 participants from Serbia, who stayed at high-category hotels in Zlatibor, Vrnjačka Banja, and Kopaonik from May to July 2024, were collected. Using a five-point Likert scale and processed via regression analysis, these responses helped determine the significance of these effects. Results of this empirical research indicate that convenience, personalization, and digitalized hotel services leveraging AI technologies have a significant impact as exogenous factors in improving customer experience. This paper contributes to further analyses of new technologies and their potential to improve user interaction with services, as well as understanding the need for increased investments in AI, business modernization, service enhancement,*

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operational capacity expansion, cost reduction, and development in the highly competitive tourism market.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, service quality, experience economy, hotel industry.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations face increasing customer demands, requiring shortened strategic planning periods and effective responses to market and technological pressures. Technological innovations, including those based on artificial intelligence, can assist businesses in the digital economy in accelerating the shift to digital ways of working, managing, organizing, and adapting to changes in organizational processes (Attaran, 2020; Rosario & Dias, 2022; Špiler et al., 2023; Miškić et al., 2024). Various theorists have explored aspects of service quality across different contexts, including Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1994), Collier and Bienstock (2006), Scheidt and Chung (2019), and Suhartanto et al. (2019). However, they have rarely focused on the potential of AI-based shopping experiences, which could significantly alter perceptions of service quality. Understanding these changes enables organizations to adapt their commitment to customer relationships and evaluate the overall experience facilitated by AI, potentially leading to stronger connections between users and organizational services (Wang, Molina, and Sunder, 2020).

Implementing artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to transform the way organizations in both private and public sectors interact with their clients (McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2019). AI technologies, supported by data analytics, enable businesses to convert information about existing and potential user behavior into customer data, enhancing customer experience through increased insights into preferences and purchasing patterns (Evans, 2019). These technologies allow for service and recommendation personalization, guiding users towards the company's strategic objectives (Paschen et al., 2019). By analyzing past customer preferences (Maras, 2020), using AI-powered

chatbots, and examining customer insights at various key points of contact, organizations can automate their functions, reduce costs, increase flexibility, and streamline client interaction. These studies have inspired the authors to delve deeper into the possibilities of achieving a positive AI-based customer experience (Shank et al., 2019). This research focuses on areas of user interaction through modern AI technologies (Amin et al., 2020), used by service organizations to develop relationships with clients and improve their services.

The theoretical contributions include enhancing knowledge of human interaction with AI-supported services, while the practical implications of the research can assist service organizations in shaping investments and strategies for providing customer experiences through AI. Impact factors are defined based on the results of previous studies (de Medeiros et al., 2016), service quality models (Parasuraman et al., 1994), and user-related issues tied to AI-supported services (Davenport et al., 2020). As intermediary factors in the context of AI-based customer experience, personalization, convenience, and service quality in Serbia's hotel industry have been selected.

Hospitality is a vital and rapidly developing industry that operates in a highly competitive, service-based market and relies on customer reviews. Innovative technologies such as AI, if implemented by hotels, can place customer perspectives at the center of business operations. The global hotel industry is one of the most important and fastest-growing in the world (Ruel & Njoku, 2021). The use of AI technologies in hospitality services significantly impacts employee productivity. The quality of AI-based services contributes considerably to the overall service quality, necessitating a better understanding of how these technologies can affect customer satisfaction and loyalty, as well as employment, employee engagement, and service quality. Modern technological applications, including AI and robotics, alongside increased digital connectivity, affect all business sectors, including hospitality. Companies use these advanced technologies to improve operational processes, reduce costs, and enhance the customer experience (Mingotto et al., 2021). These technologies are applied in hotels, hospitality, and event management (Jiang, 2020; Berezina et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2021; Thong-On et al., 2021).

The structure of the paper is organized so that after the abstract and introduction, the theoretical framework, research model, and scientific hypotheses follow. The empirical research is presented in the third section with key results, discussion, and conclusion. The scientific literature used is shown at the end of the paper.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts the most widely used definition of artificial intelligence (AI) from the European Commission's Independent Expert Group, describing AI as the intelligent behavior of AI-based systems in analyzing the environment to achieve specific goals with a certain level of autonomy. These systems can be purely software-based, operating in virtual environments such as voice assistants, image analysis software, search engines, as well as speech and facial recognition systems. Alternatively, AI can also be integrated into hardware devices, including advanced robots, autonomous cars, drones, or devices connected to the Internet of Things. This definition provides a comprehensive overview of various forms and applications of artificial intelligence in the modern world (European Commission, Independent Expert Group, 2024). Previous research has highlighted the significant impact of artificial intelligence (AI) in the service sector, particularly in hospitality (Bisoi et al., 2020; Citak et al., 2021; Khatri, 2021; Srebro et al., 2024; Srebro & Jevtić, 2024). The paper defines the following research variables: customer experience, user personalization, and the AI-supported services themselves, which are further explained and analyzed.

2.1 Customer experience in AI-supported services

This experience can be analyzed as hedonistic, providing unforgettable, exciting, comfortable, entertaining, and educational experiences. Additionally, AI aids organizations in recognizing users and tailoring service design, enabling users to feel valued, respected, welcome, safe, and satisfied when using the service. Customer experience encompasses the entirety of a customer's

interaction with a seller, based on their interactions with and perceptions of the brand. Theories, models, and frameworks of customer experience allow for user-centered design activities, facilitate the choice of constructs and measures, and contextualize findings within a broader knowledge base. Customer experience includes users' perceptions and reactions resulting from actual or anticipated use of a product, system, or service (Davenport et al., 2020). According to Nielsen's definitions, customer experience represents a set of statements explaining observed phenomena, with a "model" used as a descriptive simplification of those phenomena and a "framework" as a lexicon for organizing constructs. In modeling customer experience, the authors focus on the following aspects:

- *User life cycle-oriented design development* – This includes a cognitive socio-technical framework and a framework of tasks, users, representations, and functions. These frameworks define user interactions in detail to facilitate the acquisition of customer experience at any stage of service development. The activity cycle, linking iterative design thinking with the software development life cycle for new technologies, includes AI. This process encompasses the pre-design phase, where customer experience elements are prepared during project planning, the design phase, where the organization defines user needs and designs system components, and the system integration and routine usage phase (Hartson & Pyla, 2012; Nielsen, 1994).
- *Cognitive socio-technical framework* – This framework integrates two complementary characterizations of user interactions: cognitive models, which explain how people process information, and socio-technical models, which show how technology affects work processes. This framework proposes evaluating interactions throughout the technology's life cycle. In the early stages, researchers study interactions between technology and individuals, while in later stages they analyze work processes within groups in context.

- *The framework of tasks, users, representations, and functions* – This socio-technical model consists of four steps, emphasizing interactions between users, tasks, and functions. The first step involves identifying all system users. The second step includes developing an ontology of activities, interactions, and knowledge to better understand work processes. The third step involves task analysis, where researchers catalog tasks related to complex activities to assess their complexity and duration. The fourth step relates to identifying and defining functions needed to support users in task completion, ensuring alignment between the system's technical and social aspects.

Based on previous studies, the following elements of customer experience can be analyzed: *cognitive* elements, such as perception, memory, language, problem-solving, and abstract thinking (American Psychological Association, 2016). According to Keiningham et al. (2017), these elements include service functionality, speed, and availability; *emotional* elements, which are complex in nature (Ladhari et al., 2017), encompassing positive or negative emotions like excitement, regret, anger, joy, or surprise during service use; *physical and sensory* elements, which distinguish offline from online customer experiences. Offline experiences are characterized by physical artifacts, lighting, appearance, and signage, while online experiences are associated with technology, including intuitive user interfaces and clear design; and *social* elements, which relate to the influence of others, including family, friends, and broader social networks. These elements also encompass users' social identity, referring to their self-perception and how they are perceived in a social context.

Since AI technologies, such as machine learning, natural language understanding, and natural language processing, can aid in analyzing user sentiment and gathering feedback with precision, speed, and scale that is difficult to achieve solely through human engagement (Gartner, 2020), AI has the potential to become a crucial tool for service providers in continuously

enhancing customer experience, helping them remain competitive in the market (Newman, 2019). Therefore, AI-supported customer experience in hospitality is defined as the dependent variable in this research. In particular, AI in hospitality and tourism is increasingly used alongside augmented reality, image recognition through computer vision, and predictive inventory (Saponaro et al., 2018). For these technologies to effectively enhance customer experience, a detailed understanding of users through data and client profiles, including their preferences and past experiences, is essential.

2.2 Service convenience and personalization through AI technologies

These factors are key areas in the modern relationship between service organizations and customers, requiring significant investments. However, these investments are still insufficiently prioritized in overall technological investments, where a focus typically lies on technologies that enhance business processes and the service itself, rather than communication and these aspects. Service convenience is achieved by saving time and effort and enabling mobility, which can be crucial for attracting service-interested customers. The time-saving aspect of convenience has been studied through the impact of perceived waiting time on customer experience. AI-powered chatbots can proactively initiate conversations with users, provide relevant information, and assist at every point of contact throughout the customer lifecycle, allowing users to get answers when they need them without waiting for an available employee, which improves resolution time and customer satisfaction (Walch, 2019). Convenience contributes to a positive customer experience by reducing or eliminating barriers for users, thereby increasing the trust that users have in the service and the technology used to deliver it. Additionally, the perception of convenience influences users' overall evaluation of the service's utility. Enhancing service personalization and customer experience through AI is particularly important in the modern

communication mix of service organizations. Personalization involves tailoring information to the specific needs of each user, leading to positive experiences (Zhang, Edwards, & Harding, 2007). Data mining techniques enable a higher level of purchasing interest, and personalization in online services can be observed through the following dimensions: personalization of the user interface, which includes adaptability of screen appearance and overall presentation; content personalization, which involves differentiating information based on individual user profiles, including product or service offerings and prices; and personalization of the interaction process, where AI algorithms autonomously decide when and how to communicate with users. Personalization strategies that generate highly positive reactions from users strengthen their commitment to the service and organization. Based on these insights, perceived time and spatial convenience of services, interface personalization, content, and interactions – all through AI technologies – can have positive implications for the customer experience.

1.3 Quality of services supported by AI technologies

This includes interface design, customer support, security, and reliability. Since many AI-supported services are based on a self-service model, a well-designed user interface is often considered a key success factor for these services. Artificial intelligence can transform the user interface by controlling all design aspects, including visual elements, typography, animations, and graphical information (Irfan, 2020). Previous research confirms that technical and functional service quality influences how customers evaluate brands. Studies on self-service technologies suggest that users most commonly assess service quality based on security, reliability, customer support, and interface design dimensions (McKecnie, Ganguli & Roi, 2011; Wolfinbarger & Gilli, 2003). The quality of AI-based services largely depends on the quantity and quality of

personal information that the service provider can collect about users. Although most of this data is not highly sensitive, the combination of artificial intelligence and seemingly insignificant data, such as marketing choices and preferences, can lead to the creation of extensive user profiles, making their protection more challenging. Nevertheless, research (Saratchandran, 2019) suggests that artificial intelligence can significantly enhance the reliability of customer services. Chatbots and other AI-based customer support tools are increasingly used as an automated and efficient means of improving customer services (Treasure Data, 2019; Curčić, Grubor, and Jevtić, 2024). Previous studies also confirm the impact of service quality on perceived value, which relates to the balance between the benefits users receive and the sacrifices they must make in exchange for the service. The challenge of providing hospitality while maintaining social distancing can be effectively addressed through AI-based interactions. These interactions include service encounters that are supported, mediated, or fully generated by AI technologies. Traditionally, service encounters are viewed as a form of social exchange between the user and the service provider. Based on academic literature and practice, numerous AI applications in customer encounters have been identified across various service contexts, using a technology-context matrix.

3. METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research model

Based on the theoretical framework, a research model was defined (Figure 1), comprising two independent variables:

- $F_{1=}$ AI-supported service personalization and convenience
- $F_{2=}$ Quality of services supported by artificial intelligence (AI)

and one dependent variable:

- $F_{3=}$ Customer experience supported by artificial intelligence (AI)

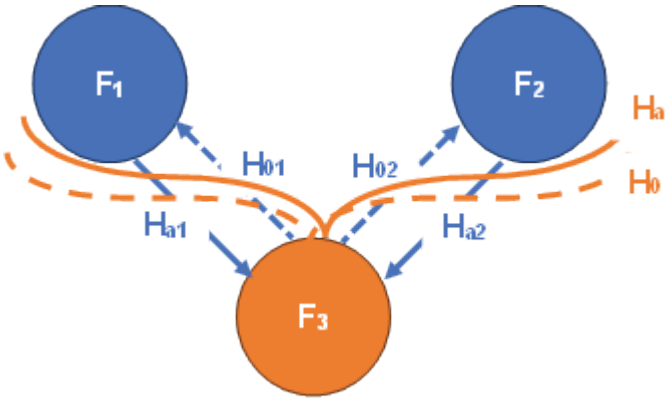

Figure 1. Research model

Source: Authors

The research objectives are:

- To determine whether F_1 significantly impacts F_3.
- To determine whether F_2 significantly impacts F_3.

The ultimate objective is to determine whether both F_1 and F_2 significantly impact F_3.

Main hypotheses:

- H_0: F_1 and F_2 do not impact F_3
- H_a: F_1 and F_2 impact F_3

Sub-hypotheses:

- H_{01}: F_1 does not impact F_3
- H_{a1}: F_1 impacts F_3
- H_{02}: F_2 does not impact F_3
- H_{a2}: F_2 impacts F_3

1.2 Sample for empirical research

For this research, an online survey was used to collect responses from 218 participants from Serbia who stayed in five- and four-star hotels in Zlatibor, Vrnjačka Banja, and Kopaonik between May and July 2024.

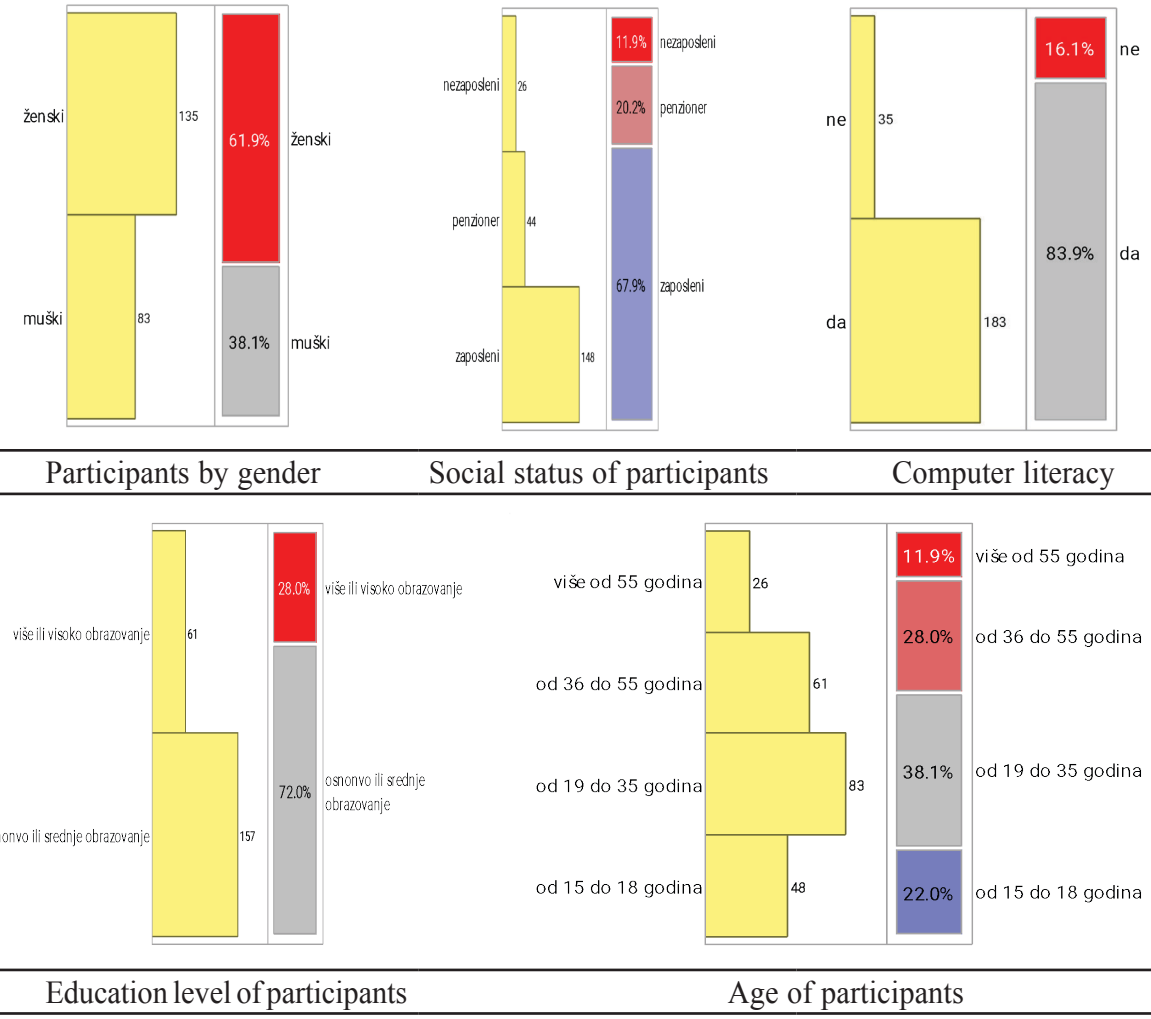

Figure 2: Frequency and probability of participant characteristics

Participants responded based on their hotel experience concerning the quality of hotel services, the level of service personalization, and the convenience of AI-supported hotel services, assessing the significance of these modernized services on their experience. Correlation and regression analysis was used, and processed in SAS JMP Pro 18 statistical software. The survey used a questionnaire where participants rated statements related to the research model variables F1, F2, and F3 on a five-point Likert scale, with 5 as the highest score.

The frequency and probability of participant characteristics by gender, age, education level, computer literacy, and social status are shown in Figure 2. Of the total 218 participants, 135 were women (61.92%), and 83 were men (38.07%). The majority were between 18 and 35 years old (83 participants, 38.07%), with the least number over 55 years old (26 participants, 11.92%). There were more participants with completed primary or secondary education (157, 72.01%), and 61 (27.98%) had higher education. A total of 183 participants (83.94%) had basic computer literacy, while 35 (16.05%) did not. In terms of social status, most participants were employed (148, 67.89%), with the least number unemployed (26, 11.92%) out of the total 218 participants.

1.3 Results

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation for the statements (3 x 3 = 9) related to the research variables F_1, F_2, and F_3.

Table 1: Results for research variables

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
F1		
F1a	3.7201834862	1.0158449586
F1b	4.0275229358	0.874194461
F1c	3.9449541284	1.0545915617
F2		
F2a	3.9311926606	1.1559660709
F2b	3.8532110092	1.0675411092
F2c	3.7247706422	1.0193660236
F3		
F3a	4.0596330275	0.9113335816
F3b	3.7752293578	1.0204955843
F3c	3.9633027523	1.0939852778

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation for variables

Variable	F1	F2	F3
Mean	3.8975535168	3.8363914373	3.9327217125
Standard Deviation	0.8961453143	0.7277970222	0.6701595388

Variable F_3 has the highest mean response value of 3.93, while variable F_1 has the highest standard deviation of 0.90.

Correlation analysis

Pearson correlation in Table 4 shows the highest correlation coefficient between variables F_1 and F_2 at 0.8574, indicating that independent variable F_2 can be explained by independent variable F_1 by 73.51%, and the lowest is between variables F_1 and F_3 at 0.7677, meaning dependent variable F_3 can be explained by independent variable F_1 by 58.94%. A positive correlation was found among all research variables.

Table 4. Correlation model

	F1	F2	F3
F1	1.0000	0.8574	0.7677
F2	0.8574	1.0000	0.8329
F3	0.7677	0.8329	1.0000

The statistical significance of F_1 on F_3 is shown in Table 5, with the ANOVA test confirming the null hypothesis that $r^2 = 0$, with a significance level below 0.0001 [$F(1,216) = 310.0897$, $p < 0.0001$]. This confirms a significant impact of F_1, related to AI-supported service convenience and personalization, on F_3, i.e., customer experience in hotel services.

Table 5. F1 and F3 ANOVA

Source	DF	Sum of squares	Mean Square	F ratio
Model	1	57.443869	57.4439	310.0897
Error	216	40.013827	0.1852	Probability > F
Total	217	97.457696		< 0.0001

Table 6 presents the contribution values of F_1 in predicting dependent variable F_3 at 0.767739, meaning 58.94% of F_3 can be explained by F_1. The VIF level is 1.000, confirming the alternative hypothesis H_{a1} that F_1 impacts F_3 as valid.

Table 6. F1 and F3 coefficients

Variable	Value	Standard error	t ratio	Probability >|t|	Standard Beta coefficients	VIF
Intercept	1.6950023	0.130376	13.00	< 0.0001	0	.
F_1	0.5741344	0.032604	17.61	< 0.0001	0.767739	1

Regression equation (1) is derived based on data from the table above:

$$F3 = 1.6950023 + 0.5741344 \cdot F1$$

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(1)

Further calculations in Table 7 and ANOVA test confirm the null hypothesis $r^2 = 0$, with a significance level below 0.0001 [$F(1,216) = 489.3207$, $p < 0.0001$], indicating a significant effect of F_2 on F_3.

Table 7. F2 and F3 ANOVA

Source	DF	Sum of squares	Mean square	F ratio
Model	1	67,611895	67,6119	489,3207
Error	216	29,845801	0,1382	Probability > F
Total	217	97,457696		< 0,0001

Table 8 shows the impact values of F_2 on the projection of F_3 at 0.83292, meaning 69.38% of F_3 can be explained by F_2. VIF is 1.000, and the alternative hypothesis H_{a2} that F_2 impacts F_3 is accepted.

Table 8. Coefficients for variables F1 and F3

Variable	Value	Standard error	t ratio	Probability >|t|	Standardized Beta coefficients	VIF
Intercept	0.9903718	0.135376	7.32	< 0.0001	0	.
F_2	0.7669577	0.034672	22.12	< 0.0001	0.83292	1

The regression equation (2), based on the data in Table 8, is:

$$F3 = 0.9903718 + 0.7669577 \cdot F2$$

$$F3 = 0.9903718 + 0.7669577 \cdot F2$$

(2)

The independent variables are F_1 and F_2, and the dependent variable is F_3. The statistical significance is presented in Table 9, and the ANOVA test confirms the null hypothesis that $r^2 = 0$, as the significance is less than 0.0001 [$F(2,215) = 256.4180$, $p < 0.0001$].

Table 9. F_1, F_2 and F_3 ANOVA

Source	DF	Sum of squares	Mean square	F ratio
Model	2	68.669063	34.3345	256.4180
Error	215	28.788633	0.1339	Probability > F
Total	217	97.457696		< 0.0001

Table 10 provides the multiple contributions of the independent variables F_1 and F_2 in predicting the dependent variable F_3. The independent variable F_2 has a greater contribution to the dependent variable F_3 (0.659416), while F_1 has a smaller contribution (0.202364). The total combined contribution is 70.46%. The multiple correlation coefficient is 0.8394, which is highly positive. The VIF level is 1.000, confirming the alternative hypothesis Ha that F_1 and F_2 impact F_3 as valid.

Table 10. Coefficients for cariables F_1, F_2 and F_3

Variable	Value	Standard error	t ratio	Probability >|t|	Standardized Beta coefficients	VIF
Intercept	1.0134608	0.133518	7.59	< 0.0001	0	.
F_1	0.1513331	0.053858	2.81	0.0054	0.202364	3.7752061
F_2	0.6071935	0.066316	9.16	< 0.0001	0.659416	3.7752061

The multiple linear regression equation (3), derived from Table 10 is:

$$F3 = 1.0134608 + 0.1513331 \cdot F1 + 0.6071935 \cdot F2$$

$$F3 = 1.0134608 + 0.1513331 \cdot F1 + 0.6071935 \cdot F2$$

(3)

All alternative hypotheses are accepted – (H_{a1}: F_1 impacts F_3), (H_{a2}: F_2 impacts F_3) i (H_a: F_1 and F_2 impact F_3).

4. CONCLUSION

The use of artificial intelligence is a strategic and critical factor in the economic development of the service industry, especially hospitality, which already invests significantly in new technologies and business modernization, service digitization, and customer communication. AI technologies enabling the use of large amounts of data are increasingly becoming digital assistants, helping service enterprises improve services for customers, expand operational capabilities, reduce costs, enhance customer experience, and retain tourists by offering pleasant, longer-term interactions with them (Khatri, 2021; Jevtić & Dedjanski, 2013).

Results from this study, using data from tourists in Serbian hotels during the first half of 2024, demonstrate a high level of interest in innovative technologies through the perception of AI experiences. New methods of service user interaction, communication, personalization, and digitalization are increasingly important endogenous factors that hoteliers should consider when introducing AI technologies. Study findings indicate that these elements of services play a significant role in users' experiences with AI. The complexity of AI technology from the user perspective, gaining their interest in services before use, trust during their hotel stay, and the influence of their views shared on social media post-usage pose a considerable challenge for service organizations. These organizations must invest in innovations to effectively apply AI technologies and enhance customer experience, which is a crucial exogenous factor for development.

From the perspective of future research, the results of this study, focused on the individual's customer experience in the context of AI-supported services, encourage further examination of other endogenous factors that may provide a more nuanced perspective on the success factors of AI-supported services, as well as on demographic customer segments (Jevtić et al., 2024).

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