

Polish Tourists' Perceptions of Service Quality Offered by Summer Resort Hotels in Romania

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The paper presents the results of a secondary data analysis examining Polish tourists' perceptions of service quality offered by summer resort hotels in Romania. The researchers examined tourists' comments regarding their satisfaction with their holiday experience in Romania presented on Polish leading travel websites over last years. Comparing to other countries, Romania is not among popular package holiday destinations and it is not promoted sufficiently in Polish market, however, more and more tourists might show their interest in visiting Romania. Assuming the further increase in the number of Polish travelers spending their holidays in Romania, the analysis of tourists' opinions on tourism product quality will enable a more effective response to customers' needs. The aim of the present research was to analyze tourists' comments and opinions regarding their holiday experience in summer resort hotels in Romania in order to identify positive experiences as well as areas of tourists' discontent. The surveyed sample comprises tourists that spent their summer holidays in one of 11 hotels, including three-star and four-star hotels between 2011 and 2014. The conclusions of the study are useful for hotel owners and managers, presenting a series of recommendations for service quality improvements.

Key words: hotel product attributes, service quality perception, qualitative analysis

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

As competition between tourist destinations and between resort hotels inside destinations has intensified over the last years, one of the most significant challenges for hotel managers is to identify attributes that determine the accommodation choice of tourists, as well as attributes that are perceived as the most important for travelers. The empirical research in this subject area will enable hotel managers to develop a relevant product policy by eliminating gaps between customer expectations and product quality perception. The recent studies show that tourism product offered by resort hotels should be regarded as a combination of various factors including: location of the hotel, standard of rooms, quality of customer service, quality and diversity of meals, animation programs offered to entertain hotel guests, as well as attractions located in the vicinity of the hotel and quality of local beaches (Johann, Anastassova, 2014). Moreover, cultural differences among tourists should be taken into consideration while designing and adjusting tourism products to visitors coming from various countries.

The paper presents the results of a secondary data analysis examining Polish tourists' perceptions of service quality offered by Romanian summer resort hotels. The researchers examined tourists' comments regarding their satisfaction with their holiday experience in Romania presented on leading travel websites. Romania is not a typical travel destination for Polish visitors, however, the number of Polish travelers visiting Romania might increase over next years. Thus, it is reasonable to analyze Polish tourists opinions regarding their holiday experience in Romania in order to respond more effectively to customers' needs. The researchers decided to analyze comments of Polish tourists who spent their summer holidays in selected hotels located at the Romanian seaside. The aim of the research study was to identify positive experiences, as well as areas of tourists' discontent. The results of the qualitative analysis of tourists' comments and opinions regarding their holiday experience in summer resort hotels are presented in the following sections.

2. Tourist perception of service quality

In 1985, Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry were defining service quality as zero defects (doing it right the first time). Later definitions gave the concept a superior perspective, as quality now represents exceeding what customers expect from the service (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990). In the service sector, the quality and its perception are influenced by the four service's characteristics: intangibility, perishability, variability and inseparability, which may lead to a gap between customer's expectations and the final perception of the service quality.

This concept represents one of the ongoing concerns both for the service marketing specialists (such as A. Parasuraman, V. Zeithaml, L. Berry, C. Gronroos, R. Rust or R. Oliver) and the business environment, considering that high service quality has an impact on organizational outcomes such as improving profitability, high market share, customer loyalty and probability of purchase (Brady & Cronin, 2001).

There are various methods of service quality evaluation, most of them relying on the customer perception, by comparison with his expectations. One of the most valuable methods is SERVQUAL, system developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, representing a multiple-item scale for measuring customer perceptions of service quality. These perceptions are being measured on five dimensions: tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel), reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence) and empathy (caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers) (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988).

As every service sector has its own characteristics, quality must be evaluated according to the specifics of each market and the particularities of customer's needs and demands. The tourism sector is one of the most important in terms of national revenue, country's image and use of natural and cultural potential, thus a high quality of the services from this sector exceeds the individual objectives of hotel owners.

The high quality of tourism services in Europe makes tourism here attractive and constitutes a competitive advantage. This is the reason why, on 20 February 2014, the European Commission proposed a set of voluntary European Tourism Quality Principles to help tourism service providers promote the quality of their services and strengthen consumer confidence. These principles are focusing on four areas of tourism services: employee training, consumer satisfaction policy, cleaning and maintenance and information provided to tourists (European Commission, 2014).

The importance of tourism service quality evaluation determine a positive reaction from specialists, thus we have numerous methods and instruments of quality assessment in the tourism industry, such as "Tourism service quality toolkit" provided by the Australian governmental institutions (Queensland Government, 2014); Correspondence Analysis for Mapping service quality in the tourism industry (Atilgan, Akinci & Aksoy, 2003); "National Quality Assessment Scheme", a standard that was created to ensure that all properties from the UK market are assessed against the same criteria (VisitEngland, 2015); Tourist Satisfaction Index and Tourism Service Quality Index (PolyU TSI and PolyU TSQI) developed by Hong Kong Polytechnic University together with a series of academics and tourism practitioners (Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2012); "Qualmark quality assurance" developed by New Zealand Tourism Board, granting a star classification system for accommodation providers and venues, and a quality endorsement programme for other tourism businesses (Tourism New Zealand, 2010).

Considering the significant differences between the tourism offer from each country or region, the analysis must be undertaken separately, emphasizing the strengths and weaknesses, as they are the main determinants of tourists' decision when choosing the future destination. The scientific literature provides us with dedicated studies on tourism service quality, each paper focusing on the influence factors and practical implications for the region (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001; Yurtseven, 2005; Correia, Oom do Valle & Moço, 2007; Butnaru, 2009; Ukwayi, Eja & Unwanede, 2012; Sun, Ryan & Pan, 2014; Ragavan, Subramonian & Sharif, 2014; Ramseok-Munhurrun, Seebaluck & Naidoo P., 2015; Sun, Zhang & Ryan, 2015). From a managerial perspective, the studies show that global analysis of the contribution of tourism experience elements is meaningless and each destination management organization needs to conduct a specific study without neglecting the human factor (Camelis & Maunier, 2014).

Most papers focusing on service quality emphasize the strong relationship between high quality perception and satisfaction (Augustyn & Ho, 1998; Chi & Qu, 2008; Alegre & Garau, 2010; Rajesh, 2013;

Della Corte, Sciarelli, Cascella & Del Gaudio, 2015), considering that understanding what drives satisfaction for a tourist is one of the relevant research areas for the tourism industry, as satisfied tourists tend to transmit their positive experience to others (Armario, 2008).

One of the most used means of communication through which tourists express their perception and level of satisfaction after visiting a country/region/resort/hotel is online reviewing.

Interpersonal influence and word-of-mouth are ranked the most important information source when a consumer is making a purchase decision. This influence may be especially important in the hospitality and tourism industry, whose intangible products are difficult to evaluate prior to their consumption (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). This type of communication is important both for other tourists who rely on reviews from real customers in their purchase decision process, and for hotel owners who can receive rich information about their clients' satisfaction. This is the reason for which we have decided to further investigate this rich source of data, in order to determine Polish tourists perception of service quality offered by summer resort hotels in Romania, using their reviews from the most important travel websites.

3. Research methodology

The purpose of this study was to analyze Polish tourists' perception of the services quality offered by Romanian hotels located in the main summer resorts. The research task included the identification of the quality gaps and areas of discontent with regard to the attributes valuable for tourists related to their holiday experience in the selected hotels located at the seaside.

The main research objectives were related to standard of rooms, location of the hotel, entertainment, customer service, food services, attractions and beaches located nearby. Tourists' evaluations presented on travel websites were carefully examined in order to identify good experiences as well as areas of discontent.

The research method used in this study consists of a qualitative secondary data analysis of tourists' comments and opinions regarding their holiday experience. All leading travel websites were investigated in order to find tourists' comments regarding their holiday experience in summer resort hotels in Romania. Eventually, the researchers examined tourists' opinions on such travel websites as www.holidaycheck.pl, www.easygo.pl and www.travelplanet.pl as detailed comments were only presented on those websites. All travelers' comments written between 2011 and 2014 were analyzed in December 2014.

The analysis presented in this study includes tourists' evaluations with regard to their summer holidays in Romania in 11 hotels located at the seaside: including three-star hotels and four-star hotels. 54 tourists made detailed comments about their holidays in summer resort hotels in Romania.

4. Discussion of results

The results of the qualitative analysis are presented according to each research objective, highlighting the most mentioned comments and the components of the tourism offer that they refer to. Each component has an impact on the perception of Polish tourists regarding Romanian summer resort hotels, facts that determines the overall level of satisfaction.

The general opinions about the hotels were positive. In many cases, the tourists perceived hotels as nice, clean, and well maintained. Good price/quality relationship was perceived as an important advantage for numerous tourists (25.93%). Many guests appreciated comfortable and well equipped rooms (14.81%), as well as very nice and spacy rooms (12.96%), however, some visitors complained on old and neglected equipment in the rooms (7.40%). A large number of travelers appreciated everyday cleaning (51.85%) and frequent changes of towels and bedclothes, however, many guests indicated not sufficient cleaning as a disadvantage (22.22%).

The location of the hotel, which refers to the environment of the hotel as well as the distance from the beach, was considered along with the attractions situated near the hotel and the quality of the local beaches. According to the opinions of many tourists, hotels are nicely situated in the vicinity of the beaches, close to attractions, including: cafes, restaurants, gift market, shops, shows, and performances (66.67%). The hotel guests described the beach as nice, sandy and wide and the sea as warm, shallow and safe (33.33%). Some visitors were disappointed with uncleanliness of the beach due to trash (12.96%).

The most frequently repeated positive and negative tourists' comments regarding their holiday experience are presented in Table 1.

Positive comments	% of indications	Negative comments	% of indications
Nice, good, great location	66.67	Not sufficient cleaning	22.22
Clean rooms, everyday cleaning	51.85	Limited choice, small portions of meals	20.37
Nice, friendly, helpful hotel personnel	46.30	Problems with communication in English	20.37
Delicious, diversified, very tasty meals	37.04	Repetitive menu	14.81
Nice, wide, sandy, beach, warm sea	33.33	Trash on the beach, unclean beach	12.96
Good price/quality relationship	25.93	Limited access to WI-FI	12.96
Very good animation program	22.22	Not friendly, distant personnel	12.96
Nice, big, clean swimming pool	18.52	Lack of animation programs	7.40
Personnel able to communicate in English	16.67	Old equipment in the rooms	7.40
Comfortable, well-equipped rooms	14.81	Lack of Polish channels on TV	7.40
Very nice, spacy rooms	12.96	Lack of attractions near hotel	3.70
Access to WI-FI in rooms	5.56	Small rooms	3.70

Table 1. The most repeated tourists' comments regarding their holiday experience

Customer service is a significant component of the overall service experience. Professionalism, friendly attitude, communication skills, and good command of foreign languages are very important for a positive evaluation of customer service. Considering all the tourists' opinions regarding service personnel, positive comments prevailed. The hotel guests appreciated nice and helpful staff (46.30%), able to communicate in English (16.67%), however, there were also areas of discontent. Some tourists expressed problems related to communication in English (20.37%). The visitors also noticed that sometimes it was easier to communicate in Russian than in English, but nice and welcoming attitude, friendliness, and hospitality of hotel personnel compensated difficulties with communication. In some cases personnel was perceived as not friendly and distant (12.96%).

The quality and diversity of meals is also a very important part of a holiday experience, especially when tourists buy package holidays with the all-inclusive option. In general, Polish visitors appreciate Romanian cuisine and praised the taste of regional dishes. Many guests described meals as delicious, diversified and tasty (37.04%), however, many were dissatisfied with too small portions of meals and limited selection of dishes and perceived food as not tasty (20.37%). Some hotel guests complained about a repetitive menu (14.81%). Some tourists suggested that it is better to go to local restaurants that offered good and tasty dishes at reasonable prices instead of eating in the hotel restaurant.

In general, tourists enjoyed hotel entertainment including nice swimming pool (18.52%) and animation programs (22.22%), but some critical comments were concerned with the lack of animation programs and other forms of entertainment organized for tourists (7.40%) which is so important for creating nice and friendly atmosphere and having good time and fun. Moreover, limited access to WI-FI was also pointed as a disadvantage (12.96%) as well as lack of Polish channels on TV (7.40%).

5. Conclusions

The qualitative analysis of Polish tourists' comments regarding their holiday experience in the selected hotels enables to draw conclusions with regard to positive experiences as well as areas of discontent. The most appreciated features were: very good location of the hotels which are situated close to the beach; clean rooms; friendly and helpful hotel personnel, able to communicate in English; delicious and tasty meals; and nice, sandy and wide beach as well as reasonable prices for delivered services. Moreover, visitors enjoyed comfortable, spacy, and well-equipped rooms, good animation programs and nice swimming pools. The critical comments refer to: limited choice and small portions of meals, repetitive menu, not sufficient cleaning, difficulties with communication in English, and unclean beach. Some guests complained on the limited access to WI-FI, some perceived hotel personnel as unfriendly and distant and room furnishing as used and neglected.

The results of the analysis allow to formulate recommendations for hotel owners and managers. Beautiful beaches, warm sea, very good location of hotels and services offered at reasonable prices are among main advantages of summer resorts in Romania. However, it is important to improve the quality of provided services. Serving more diversified meals, including Romanian specialties and wine is highly recommended. Additionally, organization of animations, evening programs, and other forms of

entertainment would significantly enhance customers' experience. Free access to WI-FI within hotel area should be also guaranteed. Service personnel need to have good communications skills as well as a good command of English. Beautiful beaches and the seaside are crucial for tourists' holiday experience; therefore, they should be cleaned and maintained daily. Moreover, it is necessary to improve overall cleanliness.

In order to increase the number of Polish tourists visiting Romania, it is also important to put much efforts in marketing communications and encourage tour operators to sell package holidays to Romania. Furthermore, there are no charters to Romanian summer resorts available from Poland, which definitely limits travelling opportunities. Whereas tour operators offer a large number of package holidays to Bulgaria, there are no offers of package holidays to Romania besides those involving own means of transportation. Thus, hotel owners could be more concerned with organizing study tours, farm trips and incentive programs for tour operators, travel agents, and journalists. They could also focus more on senior tourism and spa and wellness segment due to therapeutic mud and mineral waters available in Romania. They could emphasize great location of hotels, services offered at reasonable prices, traditions, regional dishes, friendliness of people, treatment opportunities, natural beauty of the Black Sea, wide and sandy beaches, a pleasant climate in summer as well as the Danube Delta – Europe's largest and best preserved delta.

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