Tourist accommodation in households - perception of service quality

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TOURIST ACCOMMODATION IN HOUSEHOLDS - PERCEPTION OF SERVICE QUALITY

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Abstract

Purpose – The research focuses on analysing the service quality in tourist accommodation in households. The aim of this paper is to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the perception of quality service (technical and functional quality aspect), with emphasis on quality improvement.

Methodology – The research was based on a structured questionnaire, which was carried out during the summer months of 2020, on a sample of 168 tourists who stayed in tourist accommodation in households. According to the type of data obtained, statistical differences between multiple groups are examined using nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis H Test in IBM SPSS Statistic software.

Findings – The results indicate that there are statistically significant differences in the perception of service quality with regard to socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Foreign guests visiting Croatia and staying in tourist accommodation in households rate the quality of service at a higher rate compared to domestic guests. Regarding the differences based on qualification levels and age, individuals with university degrees, and those in the age group 60-77 tend to give statistically significantly higher ratings to quality elements.

Contribution – The scientific contribution of the research is seen in widening the knowledge on service quality as well as the development of a measuring instrument for measuring service quality taking in to account tourist accommodation in households. Its practical contribution can be seen in the comparison of service quality dimensions, taking into account socio - demographic characteristics of respondents, based on which improvement of quality can be made in this segment of accommodation offer.

Keywords: tourist accommodation in households, service quality, quality improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Since service quality is a major competitive factor and therefore vital for the development and improvement of tourist accommodation in households, this research focuses on the entire process of providing services, both technical and functional aspect of quality.

The paper explores the topic of service quality in tourist accommodation in households, this category includes four types of facilities (Room, Apartment, Studio-type suites, Summer homes). Given that the service industry is specific due to its characteristics, service quality is a highly researched topic. Every contribution in this field can help significantly to improve the quality of services, especially when it comes to services in tourism. Although this topic has been well researched with regard to accommodation

facilities, hotel facilities in particular, there is nevertheless a lack of research on this topic in the context of tourist accommodation in households.

The paper focuses on developing a measuring instrument and defining the concept of service quality based on the entire process of providing service – technical and functional aspect. The research methodology is based on the use of nonparametric tests that allow multiple groups (Kruskal-Wallis H Test) that are not normally distributed to be compared. The aim of the research is to determine whether there are differences in the perception of service quality in tourist accommodation in households, based on the respondents' age group, qualifications, and country of origin.

1. SERVICE QUALITY

Quality in services is difficult to measure, because services are multidimensional and complex (Chang 2009) and have specific characteristics, such as intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity, and simultaneity between production and consumption (Zehrer 2009).

The difficulty in operationalizing the concept of quality in services and how to measure it (Chang 2009) is often overcome by measuring the consequences of service quality, namely satisfaction or value perceived by the customer, as it is methodologically easier to perform (Bigné et al. 2005). Most authors choose to assess quality in services through the quality perceived and reported by the customer (Benítez; Martín and Román 2007; Nusair and Kandampully 2008), and recognise service quality as the main cause of the subjective processes of customers, even considering it to be the main strategic element to gaining competitive advantage (Avelini Holjevac 2008; Campo and Yague 2009; Alvarez et al. 2012). In fact, all personal characteristics are manifested in the service provision: in face-to-face contact, when a customer contacts an organization, i.e., in the service encounter (Gopalan and Narayan 2010), or in the moment of truth (Svari et al. 2010), where the perception of quality emerges as a consequence of the customers' predispositions and interactions with the organizational environment and guides them to remain loyal or not to the organization (Ladhari 2009; Moliner-Velázquez, Gil-Saura and Ruiz-Molina 2011).

The service quality literature presents several models, emphasizing different aspects of quality (Blesic, Cerovic and Dragicevic 2011). Nitin et al. (2005) carried out a detailed survey and evaluation of service quality models emerging between 1984 and 2003, none of which was universally accepted. On the contrary, there was a tendency to apply the various models indiscriminately to any type of service, which was criticized by Miguel and Salomi (2004).

In any case, the SERVQUAL service quality measurement model (Parasuraman et al. 1988; 1991) has been the most widely accepted model. For the authors, perceived quality is the appropriate way to measure the quality of services offered, through the difference between consumers' expectations and perceptions of the company's performance. The SERVQUAL scale is used to analyze the expectations of service quality and the perceptions of the service received by customers.

1.1. Service quality in tourism

The tourism sector experienced rapid growth in the second half of the 20th century (Gibson and Yiannakis 2002) and today, tourism has the potential to generate huge positive social and economic externalities by creating jobs and raising incomes across the skill spectrum, improving infrastructure and standards, creating rural-urban linkages and improving connectivity (WTO 2019, 47). From this growth new challenges have emerged, promoting the diversification of products offered to customers and generating an age characterized by over-segmentation and a growing demand by customers for better-quality products and services. These challenges are driving the tourism sector to improve its service quality.

When we refer to service quality in the tourism sector, we have to consider, on the one hand, the external variables that intervene in the process of offering tourism services and, on the other hand, the requirements of the tourist.

As for external variables, which are not controllable by organizations or tourism providers, it is known that the overall experience of a tourist is affected by several players, such as the staff at airports, the policy makers for investment in transport infrastructure, the managers at various tourist attractions (Gopalan and Narayan 2010), government guidelines, development policies, local culture, public safety, and the presence or absence of natural attractions (Narayan, Rajendran and Sai 2008; Barros and Assaf 2012).

As for tourist requirements, they depend, among other things, on the motivation of the trip, and it is not possible to establish a single set of global and transversal requirements for all destinations or components of those tourist destinations. However, there are requirements associated with satisfying the basic needs of any individual, which will always have to be met, such as issues relating to security (of goods, people, and food), cleanliness and maintenance conditions of infrastructure and equipment.

In this context, there is a factor that stands out for its high importance and for being mandatory in any travel - accommodation. There can be no tourism without accommodation, since the definition of a tourist is based on a stay of, at least, one night, this being the factor that distinguishes the tourist from the traveler. Thus, tourist accommodation plays a central and indispensable role in the tourism sector. People have different motivations to travel, which leads them to choose new tourism products, which, as a result, leads to their need to be offered new experiences (Martín and Recio 2006), such as, new accommodation options closer to the experiences of the locals. In fact, when someone is received into the home of a local inhabitant, they are likely to experience the local culture in a different way (Heo 2016).

With regard to accommodation, there are different attributes that jointly determine service quality. On the one hand, there are the physical attributes referring to the characteristics of the accommodation (e.g. location, type of accommodation (Monty and Skidmore 2003; Zhang, Ye and Law 2011; Viglia and Abrate 2017). Service attributes relate to different amenities offered in the accommodation (e.g. air conditioning services)

technical facilities Abrate, Capriello and Fraquelli (2011), Viglia and Abrate (2017) differentiate internal and external attributes of the accommodation.

The concept of service quality itself is multidimensional, and in this study, service quality is viewed as a two-dimensional concept. The technical aspects of service management can be defined as the visible or physical tangibles used or experienced by the customer during the service delivery process (Ferguson et al. 1999, 59). The functional aspects of service management can be defined as how the customer experienced the human interactions during the simultaneous production and consumption of the service (Ferguson et al. 1999, 59).

1.2. Service quality in tourist accommodation in households

Although a large number of papers deal with the topic of service quality in tourism, there is a noticeable shortage of the literature pertaining to the field of tourist accommodation in households. Gunasekaran and Anandkumar (2012) investigated the elements that influence choosing alternative accommodation, including tourist accommodation in households. They identified a homely atmosphere, value for money, local touch, and the guest-host relationship as the four most important elements and key motivators for choosing this type of accommodation. Moreno-Gil and Martín-Santana (2013) focused their research on the motivators that greatly influence the perceived image of tourist accommodation in households. Guttentag et al. (2018) focused on motivators for choosing tourist accommodation in household using the Airbnb Internet reservation platform, and found that the most important elements are indeed the elements of functional quality such as interaction with the hosts, home benefits, and local authenticity. Priporas et al. (2017) found that guests value the convenience and flexibility offered by tourist accommodation in households, especially appreciate the warm hospitality provided by the host, and have low expectations of the amenities and additional services available at the accommodation.

Grönroos' model (1984) of service quality is based on two dimensions: technical (i.e., what is delivered) and functional quality (i.e., how the service is delivered). The Grönroos'model describes how service quality is perceived by customers and what influences service quality (Kasiri 2017, 92; Kang 2006). This study used this approach, modified specifically to measure these two aspects in tourist accommodation in households. Guests staying in tourist accommodation in households are interested not only in what the facility has to offer (technical quality) but also how it provides intangible services (functional quality).

One of the objectives of this research was to develop a measuring instrument adapted to the special features of tourist accommodation in households. Special emphasis in the measurement instrument was placed on service quality. With the emergence in the market of online booking platforms for quick and easy booking, tourist accommodation in households is becoming increasingly popular and an important category in accommodation capacities. Data from the Eurostat online Data Explorer regarding the "Holiday and other short-stay accommodation" segment in the overall structure of the accommodation offering are presented for the year 2019. On average, in European Union

countries, the category of tourist accommodation in households accounts for 25.9% of accommodation capacities (beds) and for 27.1% of overnight stays, on average. In Croatia, tourist accommodation in households accounts for 61.3% of total accommodation capacities (beds) and for 50.6% of total overnight stays, further highlighting the importance of service quality management in this segment of offer.

2. METHODOLOGY

A structured questionnaire in the Croatian, English, German, and Italian language was developed as the research instrument for primary research. The survey was conducted from July to September 2020. in the tourist destinations of ten Croatian counties. The research is based on a sample of 168 respondents. SPSS Statistics software was used.

The research included domestic and foreign guests who stayed in tourist accommodation in households facilities, which includes rooms, apartments, studio-type suites and summer homes. This study spatially included both coastal and mainland Croatian counties. Seven coastal counties (Istria, Primorsko-Gorska, Splitsko-Dalmatinska, Ličko-Senjska, Šibensko-kninska, Zadarska and Dubrovnačko-neretvanska) and three continental counties (Karlovačka, Osiječko-baranjska, City of Zagreb) were included. In 2019 these counties account for 99.2% of the total number of establishments in the category of tourist accommodation in households and 99.4% of the total number of beds (Croatian National Tourist Board).

The questionnaire was developed based on the previous scientific research (Gunasekaran and Anandkumar 2012; Guttentag, et al. 2018; Hyunsuk et al. 2018; Moreno-Gil and Martín-Santana 2013; Priporas et al. 2017 and Tussyadiah 2016).

Professional sources of literature were also used as a basis for creating the questionnaire. Special emphasis was given to studies such as *Tomas summer 2017 - attitudes and consumption of tourists in Croatia*, conducted by the Institute of Tourism. The criteria for evaluating tourist accommodation in households on international online booking platforms such as booking.com were reviewed and analyzed. A pilot study was conducted prior to field research, and corrections were made as needed. Service quality elements analyzed in this research are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. **Service quality elements in tourist accommodation in households**

		Technical aspect	Mean	Std. Dev.
TSQ1		The property has a modern and attractive appearance	4.04	.887
TSQ2		The property retained its authenticity	4.13	.800
TSQ3		The property is well equipped	4.31	.800
TSQ4		The property is clean and tidy	4.56	.766
TSQ5		The location of the property is good	4.43	.682
TSQ6		The property has a landscaped natural environment	4.20	.979
TSQ7		The property is spacious / comfortable	4.42	.731
TSQ8		The contents and appearance of the property correspond to the information on the sales channels	4.49	.743
TSQ9		Internet connection in this property is free	4.62	.734
TSQ10		Internet connection in this property is fast	4.19	.884
TSQ11		Accommodation offers additional facilities (swimming pool, barbecue, storage, children's facilities)	3.64	1.231
		Functional aspect	Mean	Std. Dev.
FSQ1		I am well informed about the services	4.46	.790
FSQ2		I am well informed about the offering in the destination (info map)	4.23	.905
FSQ3		Renter/Host has the necessary knowledge to fulfil the requirements of the guest	4.29	.873
FSQ4		The host has an individual approach to the guests	4.41	.885
FSQ5		The host responds promptly to the guest's inquiries and is always ready to assist the guest	4.48	.826
FSQ6		The host is always ready to help the guest	4.65	.616

Source: Author's research

The values of the mean and standard deviation for each variable are shown in Table 1. The standard deviation for all variables, with the exception of TSQ11 (*Accommodation offers additional facilities (swimming pool, barbecue, storage, children's facilities)*), is less than 1, indicating a small scatter of data from the mean. Average values for both technical and functional service quality elements range from 3.64 to 4.65, which is relatively high, with the variable TSQ11 having the lowest average value. This leads to the conclusion that guests rate the quality of service in tourist accommodation in households as being high.

3. RESULTS

As part of the primary survey based on the questionnaire, 168 respondents participated. Methods of descriptive and inferential statistical analysis are used for analyzing research results that are presented below. Socio-demographic data of the respondents are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: **Profile of the Respondents**

Characteristics of respondents		N	Percentage
Gender	Male	77	46.1
	Female	90	53.9
Age group	19 and under	7	4.3
	20 - 39 years old	100	60.6
	40-59 years old	47	28.4
	60-77 years old	11	6.7
Education level	High school	53	32.9
	Undergraduate	63	39.1
	Master/PhD	45	28.0
Status	Employed	133	79.2
	Unemployed	3	1.8
	Student	25	14.9
	Retired	7	4.2

Source: Author's research

As can be seen in Table 2, the sample is dominated by female respondents (53.9%). The respondents are mostly aged 20 to 39 (60.6%). There are minor differences as to the level of education of respondents, with 39.1% of respondents holding undergraduate degrees. Almost 80% of respondents are employed.

The sample includes respondents from 17 countries: Croatia (35%), Germany (18%), Italy (13%), Austria (7%), and other significant emitting countries: Poland, Slovenia, Hungary, England, Czech Republic, Sweden, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Estonia, France, and Switzerland as well as Brazil and Costa Rica. The largest number of respondents stayed in apartments (58.9%), while others stayed in rooms (19.0%), summer homes (14.3%), and studio-type suites (7.7%).

The period of study is specific given the COVID -19 pandemic that affected the entire world. As a consequence, the hospitality and tourism operations of many countries have been virtually shut down and international travel (and, in some countries, domestic travel as well) has all but ceased (Baum and Hai 2020, 2397). According to Uğur, and Akbiyik (2020) the fear of COVID -19 led to considerable uncertainty and chaotic conditions in many industries, including the tourism industry. The shock affected both the demand side (movement restrictions, border closures, guests' fear of infection) and the supply side through the closure of facilities used by tourists.

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, the number of tourist overnight stays in 2020, the year of the pandemic caused by the coronavirus, is back to the level from 20 years ago (Effects of the COVID-19 disease pandemic on socio-economic indicators; 2020). Travel restrictions, border closures, quarantine regulations and the implementation of epidemiological measures in the Republic of Croatia and the world, with the aim of prevention the spread of infection had a direct impact on the decrease in tourist arrivals and overnight stays. In 2020, 7.0 million tourist arrivals and 40.8 million tourist overnight stays were realized in commercial accommodation establishments, which means 64.2% less tourist arrivals and 55.3% less tourist overnight stays compared

to 2019. Due to the peculiarities of this situation, the structure of guests who visited Croatia has changed significantly; therefore, the sample of this research is not typical for family accommodation. Foreign guests predominate in the guest structure in Croatia, but in 2020 the share of domestic guests increased. Thus, in 2019, domestic tourists accounted for 7.8% of overnight stays and foreign tourists for 92.2%. Compared to 2020, where 13.3% of overnight stays were accounted for by domestic tourists and 86.7% by foreign tourists (Croatian Bureau of Statistics).

According to Croatian National Tourist Board, in 2019, foreign tourists (92.6%) realized most overnight stays in the category *55.2 Holiday and other short-term accommodation* (rooms, apartments, studios, holiday homes). According to eVisitor data for 2019, the leading family tourism markets for Croatia in terms of the number of overnight stays are Germany (22.9%), Poland (10.8), the Czech Republic (8.0%) and Slovenia (6.6%). Among tourists from Poland, the Czech Republic, Italy and Hungary, the tendency to use this type of accommodation is much more pronounced. Thus, 63.8% of Poles visiting Croatia stay in family accommodation, 53.9% of Czechs, 43.5% of Italians and 52.9% of Hungarians.

A normality test was conducted to determine how the data were distributed. The tests showed that the data do not follow a normal distribution. The significance values of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests do not exceed 0.05. For this reason, nonparametric statistical processing procedures were used in this study. In order to determine whether there are statistically significant differences between multiple groups in the perception of service quality the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used. The Kruskal-Wallis is a nonparametric statistical test that assesses the differences among three or more independently sampled groups on a single, non-normally distributed continuous variable (Ostertagová et al., 2014, 115). The Kruskal-Wallis test can be used to determine whether the sums of ranks are so different that they are unlikely to belong to samples from the same group (Horvat and Mijoč, 2019, 516). The Kruskal-Wallis H test assesses the existence of differences between the observed groups. In this study the observed groups are the respondents' age, country of residence, and educational qualification.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis H test suggest there are differences between age groups for four service quality elements. The differences were determined based on the values of the Chi-Square test and the significance levels of the elements TSQ6 (x^2=8.453, p<0.5) and TSQ8 (x^2=8.045, p<0.05). In other words, there is a difference in the way different age groups perceive the element *The property has a landscaped natural environment.* A comparison of mean ranks by age group shows that people in the 60-77 age group tend to give higher ratings to this quality element. This age group also has the highest mean rank (107.32) for the statement *The contents and appearance of the property correspond to the information on the sales channels,* followed by the 20-39 age group with a mean rank of 85.15.

A statistical significance was also established for the elements FSQ4 (x^2=14.991, p<0.05) and FSQ6 (x^2=10.576, p<0.05). The mean rank indicates that respondents in the 40-59 age group statistically rated with the highest score (91.39) the quality element *The host has an individual approach to the guests.* Regarding the quality element FSQ6, referring

to *The hosts' readiness to help the guest*, the mean rank shows that the 60-77 age group gave the statistically highest scores (101.50).

Although guests from 17 countries participated in this study, five categories were created based on the highest numbers of guests from a particular country, to be used in Kruskal-Wallis H Test. The categories were guests from Croatia, Germany, Italy, Austria, and guests from other countries. The aim was to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the way guests perceive service quality by country of origin.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis H Test suggest there are differences among the five observed distributions in three quality elements. The values of the element TSQ11 are (x^2=23.067, p<0.05). There are differences in mean ranks by guest's country of origin for the element *Accommodation offers additional facilities (swimming pool, barbecue, storage, children's facilities)*. The highest ratings to this element were given by guests from Germany (104.48), followed by guests from Austria (103.15), Italy (88.93), and other countries (71.67). Guests from Croatia have the lowest mean rank (60.75).

Differences were also found with regard to functional elements *Host has the necessary knowledge to fulfil the requirements of the guest* (x^2=17.079, p<0.05) and *The host has an individual approach to the guests* (x^2=12.671, p<0.05). Croatian guests also gave the lowest score to both of these elements. This can be linked to the basic motivation for choosing tourist accommodation in households, which involves learning about the culture, local customs, and local residents. With regard to the hosts' knowledge, the mean rank is highest for guests from Austria (104.80) and Germany (99.41). With regard to the *hosts' individual approach*, guests differ in the value of mean ranks, which amount to 97.30 for guests from Austria, 97.22 for guests from Germany, 77.16 for guests from other countries, 76.85 for guests from Italy, and 68.34 for guests from Croatia. Based on the above results, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in the perception of service quality with respect to the guest's country of origin. There is a difference in perception between foreign tourists, who rate the quality elements with high scores (especially Germans and Austrians) and domestic tourists who rate the service quality elements significantly lower.

With regard to the differences based on three qualification levels of the respondents, it was determined that there are statistically significant differences (Kruskal-Wallis H Test) in three elements regarding the technical aspect of service and one functional aspect. Interestingly, a comparison of the mean ranks for the category of educational qualifications reveals that individuals with university degrees tend to give statistically significantly higher ratings to these elements. Hence, it can be concluded that there are differences in the observed distributions for the quality elements *The property has a landscaped natural environment* (x^2=8.492, p<0.05), *Internet connection in this property is fast* (x^2=6.109, p<0.05), *Accommodation offers additional facilities (swimming pool, barbecue, storage, children's facilities)* (x^2=10.169, p<0.05) and *The host has an individual approach to the guests* (x^2=9.717, p<0.05).

CONCLUSION

Quality management in tourism facilities is aimed at meeting the needs of guests in a way that results in their high overall satisfaction with service quality. This study focuses on service quality in tourist accommodation in households, with special emphasis on the technical (tangible) aspect and the functional (intangible) aspect that can be observed as human interaction in the provision of services.

The study was conducted in 2020 during the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the conditions of the pandemic, adherence to epidemiological measures has caused hosts to greatly change the process of providing services. In such circumstances, privacy is a great advantage offered by tourist accommodation in households. The study was focused on analyzing the service quality elements in this accommodation segment, taking into account technical and functional aspect of providing services. Guests gave very high ratings to all items, with minimal standard deviations. The paper used non-parametric statistical test, Kruskal - Wallis H test to test the differences between the multiple groups observed in relation to the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. The test pointed out differences between groups (country of origin, age group, and qualifications of respondents) in relation to service quality elements.

Guests perceive service quality differently depending on their country of origin, with guests from Germany and Austria rating the quality elements statistically significantly higher. Guests from Croatia, on the other hand, gave the lowest scores for all service quality elements measured in this study, indicating a difference in perception according to country of origin. Looking at the results of perceptions of service quality in relation to age, people older than 60 years give higher scores to the elements of quality than respondents from younger age groups.

The research encounters several shortcomings, the size of the sample, the limited area of research and the short and specific time period in which the research was conducted. Namely, the sample of this research is also the result of the current epidemiological situation and, therefore, is not typical for tourist accommodation in households, given the significantly smaller number of visitors in 2020. Based on the conducted tests, it is possible to conclude that there are some statistical difference in the perception of service quality in tourist accommodation in households with regard to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The results indicate the need for further research in order to determine the characteristics and specifics of the guests who choose this type of accommodation.

Hosts should pay special attention to domestic tourists, looking at the results, since domestic tourists rate the quality elements with the lower ratings. This new insights are also a recommendation for future research, given the situation with the COVID -19 pandemic, the number of domicile trips increased because guests did not travel abroad due to uncertainty or inability. Although most of the authors focus both on domestic and foreign guests, future research should focus specifically on domestic guests and examine quality perceptions more closely.

Household tourist accommodation is considered in this study as a group of four types of accommodations (rooms, apartments, studio suites, and summer houses), which may be a limitation because there is a possibility that the perception of service quality of guests staying in luxury summer houses may differ from those staying in rooms or apartments. It is recommended for future research to examine the subcategories of family accommodations in terms of service quality. In addition, future research needs to pay special attention to the functional aspect of quality - *how the service is delivered*, especially in the post COVID period since the range of tourist services has changed significantly.

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