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EXPLORING CATERING SERVICES QUALITY USING MYSTERY SHOPPING

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present mystery shopping as a method for evaluating the quality of catering services.

Design/ Methodology/ Approach – The paper is based on desk and field research. A literature review and empirical research were conducted, including 72 catering facilities in the Republic of Croatia. The quality of restaurant, bar and hotel services was investigated. Mystery shoppers used a semi-structured form as a research instrument and evaluated the quality of services according to 36 criteria classified into seven categories.

Findings – The research results are encouraging, although there is room for improvement in some categories. The categories *Bill and farewell of the guest* and *Staff and service* were rated the best. The worst ratings were given in the *Location of the catering facility* category. Mystery shoppers also gave 47 suggestions for improving the quality of services.

Originality of the research – This research complements existing scientific research on mystery shopping in tourism and hospitality. It also has significant practical value because it clearly shows how, with relatively little effort, the service quality of a catering facility can be examined, and opportunities for improvement can be identified.

Keywords service quality, catering service, catering facilities, mystery shopping

INTRODUCTION

In a current competitive global economy, the quality of products and services is *a condition sine qua non* of success. This is especially important in service industries such as hospitality since services have several characteristics that differentiate them from products. What distinguishes services from products are their characteristics: intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability (Kotler et al. 2017, 57). Moreover, one of the major ways that a company can differentiate itself is by delivering consistently higher quality than its competitors (Kotler et al., 2017, 62). Therefore, hospitality companies need to investigate the quality of their services to discover weak points, eliminate shortcomings and improve the quality of services and thus the satisfaction of their customers.

The quality of services can be measured by different methods such as customer feedback, operational measures, analysis and reporting (Wirtz and Lovelock 2021, 481). One of the helpful methods for investigating service quality is mystery shopping. However, according to ESOMAR research (Statista 2022 according to ESOMAR 2020) on the global distribution of the spending in market research services by the method of a survey in 2020, mystery shopping is in last place with a share of 0.6%. In comparison, CRM systems/ customer satisfaction surveys account for 20.1% of global spending (Statista 2022, according to ESOMAR 2020). So the question arises why this method of market research has been neglected.

Although there are previous scientific studies on mystery shopping, according to the authors' knowledge, there is insufficient research focused on the application of mystery shopping in researching the quality of catering services. Thus, this research complements the existing research gap. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present mystery shopping as a method for evaluating the quality of catering services. Hence, this paper should answer the following research questions: (1) What is mystery shopping?; (2) Is the mystery shopping method suitable for assessing the quality of catering services?; (3) What are the results of assessing the quality of services of Croatian catering facilities using mystery shopping? and (4) What are the possibilities for improving the quality of services in Croatian catering facilities?

The paper is structured as follows: after a short introduction, a literature review is given, followed by a presentation of empirical research and the conclusion.

1. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

1.1. Service quality

Due to its importance, the concept of service quality has been attracting the attention of scientists for many years. The complexity of service quality assessment stems from its characteristics, so many authors have tried to define service quality, determine its dimensions and find an appropriate instrument for measuring service quality. Even 40 years ago, Lewis and Booms (1983) considered service quality as a measure of how well the service level delivered matches the customer's expectation. Grönroos (1984) developed a service quality model which describes how the customers perceive the quality of services. He concludes that the quality of services depends on two variables: expected service and perceived services (Grönroos 1984). Furthermore, Parasuraman et al. (1988, 5) highlighted that service quality "perceived by customers stems from a comparison of their expectations or desires from the service provider with their perceptions of the actual service performance." Although there are different approaches to defining the quality of services, what they have in common is that they have customers in focus. This is the reason why the quality of services is linked to customer satisfaction. However, satisfaction is a broader concept, whereas service quality focuses specifically on dimensions of service (Zeithaml et al. 2017, 79). The dimensions of service quality were identified by Parasuraman et al. (1988) in their pioneering work by which they determined five dimensions of service quality: 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), empathy (caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers).

When it comes to catering services, they can be defined as "the preparation, storage and, where appropriate, delivery of food and drinks for consumption by the consumer/client/patient at the place of preparation, at a satellite unit or at the premises/venue of the client" (Boyano et al. 2017, 5). Górka-Chowaniec (2018, 101) define catering service as "production-service activities of entities in order to satisfy disclosed consumer needs,

the basis of which is interdisciplinary and specific culinary knowledge combined with the art of consumer service”. According to her research “the main factor determining the quality of catering services is varied menu, appearance of a dish and cleanliness” (Górka-Chowaniec, 2018, 105). Hence, she concluded that “quality is the key factor in the development strategy of entities in the catering industry” (Górka-Chowaniec 2018, 98).

In addition to conceptualizing service quality, scientists have tried to find an answer to how to measure service quality. Measuring the quality of services is very complex due to the multidimensionality of the concept and specifics of the services. Gilmore (2003, 38) specifies the following methods of measuring service quality: SERVQUAL and SERVPÉRF scales, scales for measuring customer satisfaction and loyalty, critical incidents technique, observation studies, focus group discussion and in-depth interviews. Mystery shopping as a method for examining the quality of services belongs to observational studies and is discussed more below.

1.2. Mystery shopping

Mystery shopping is a method of qualitative research (Malhotra 2015, 112). It is “a tool used by companies to measure the quality of service, food, and the overall experience of the everyday customer” (PamInCa 2009, 3). Wilson (1998, 148) states that “mystery shopping, a form of participant observation, uses researchers to act as customers or potential customers to monitor the processes and procedures used in the delivery of a service”. Before mystery shopping was introduced as a research method, participant observation was first used in anthropology (Wilson 1998). As a research method as we know it today, it was first introduced in financial institutions (Anantharajah et al. 2020), and then other industries, including tourism and hospitality, embraced it.

Wilson (1998) revealed that mystery shopping results could be used for three main purposes: (1) to act as a diagnostic tool identifying failings and weak points in an organization’s service delivery; (2) to encourage, develop and motivate service personnel by linking with appraisal, training and reward mechanisms and (3) to assess the competitiveness of an organization’s service provision by benchmarking it against the offerings of others in an industry.

Mystery shopping “measures service performance across the full range of present quality standards, including the behavioural aspects of staff performance” (Minghetti and Celotto 2014, 568). Companies “hire individuals to pose as ordinary customers and provide feedback about their service experiences. During their unannounced visits to service sites, these “mystery shoppers” observe both the physical environment and the interactions between customers and employees” (Lovelock and Wright 2016, 278). They collect customer–employee interaction data and other marketing variables, such as prices, displays, layout, etc. (Malhotra 2015, 113). Mystery shoppers assess service performance by completing questionnaires about service standards or answering open-ended questions. Therefore, mystery shopping can effectively reinforce service standards (Zeithaml et al. 2017, 131). Today, mystery shopping appears in different forms, such as mystery observation, mystery visits, mystery telephone calls, mystery mail or fax, and mystery e-mail/website visit (Abdel Rady, 2019).

Mystery shopping has been the subject of research by many scientists. It was applied in primary research in the hospitality industry and tourism as a research method. For example, Sebova et al. (2021) examined the mystery shopping method's use to evaluate the sales process in hospitality facilities. Adel Rady (2019) evaluated the advantages of the mystery shopper to measure staff performance and assess staff's communication skills in travel agencies. Further, Minghetti and Celloto (2014) compared the features of mystery shopping and customer satisfaction research to assess the performance of tourist offices. They summarised the features of mystery shopping as follows: (1) the purpose is to gain an understanding of the entire information and service delivery process and to uncover the factors behind tourists' satisfaction or dissatisfaction; (2) it is a qualitative research method; (3) small groups not randomly selected (few visits or only single visit) are studied; (4) data is collected using participant observation based on predetermined tasks to be performed and supported by specific guidelines; (5) data are reported in the form of rating scales, checklists, and open-ended responses. Descriptive reports summarising the main aspects of the encounter with the service providers are used; (6) it is a subjective and objective method, and (7) results are considered exploratory and/or investigative findings.

The quality of restaurant services was also investigated using the mystery shopping method (Bichler et al. 2020; Linderová et al. 2020; Ma et al. 2021). However, despite applying the method in practice and conducting scientific research, Anantharajah et al. (2020) revealed that hospitality students lack knowledge about mystery shopping before entering the real working environment. Therefore, this paper can contribute to a better understanding of mystery shopping as a method for exploring the quality of services in catering facilities and beyond.

2. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Empirical research was conducted in the Republic of Croatia on a sample of selected catering facilities.

2.1. Methodology

Empirical data were collected by mystery shoppers - students of the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, who were previously educated about mystery shopping as a market research method. It was explained to them how they should behave, collect information and write a report. Mystery shoppers chose a catering facility of their choice, came to the facility unannounced, consumed food and/or drinks, and evaluated the quality of services according to previously determined criteria.

The research instrument was a semi-structured questionnaire which was created according to the idea of Minghetti and Celotto (2014). Tangible and intangible elements of service quality were evaluated. In addition to the name and location of the catering facilities and the date of the visit, the form contained 36 features that needed to be observed and evaluated. These features are grouped into seven categories: *Location of the catering facility*, *Appearance of the catering facility*, *Staff and service*, *Table and menu*, *Dishes (cuisine)*, *Drinks* and *Bill and farewell of the guest*. Observers or, more precisely, mystery

shoppers could assign one of three possible grades to the characteristics: “0” if the characteristic is not present or is insufficient or bad, “1” if the characteristic is partially present or mediocre, and “2” if the characteristic is present and assessed as excellent. The second part of the form contained open questions, which enabled collecting comments, conclusions and recommendations for improvements.

Data were collected from October to December 2018 and 2019 along Croatian coast and continental part. A total of 72 different catering facilities were visited and evaluated. According to the Croatian Hospitality and Catering Industry Act (Narodne novine 2021), these different facilities are classified as restaurants (58.33%), bars (37.5 %) and hotels, camps and other types of catering facilities for accommodation (4.17 %).

The collected data were entered into the database and analyzed using Excel 2016 and MonkeyLearn - Word Cloud Generator (<https://monkeylearn.com/word-cloud>).

2.2. Results

The results of the survey are summed up in Table 1.

Table 1: **Quality ratings of catering facilities**

CATEGORIES OF QUALITY OF A CATERING FACILITY	% OF FACILITIES		
	Not present	Mediocre	Excellent
1. LOCATION OF THE CATERING FACILITY			
Signposts to the facility at the entrance to the destination/locality	50.0	20.8	29.2
Signpost in proximity to the facility	29.2	30.6	40.3
Easiness of arrival to the facility	0.0	11.1	88.9
Availability of parking near the facility	8.3	27.8	63.9
Accessibility for people with disabilities and elderly	27.8	33.3	38.9
AVERAGE	23.06	24.72	52.22
2. APPEARANCE OF THE CATERING FACILITY			
The outer appearance of the facility (tidiness and cleanliness of the facility, the terrace and the surroundings)	2.8	27.8	69.4
Prominence of the working hours of the facility	1.4	9.7	88.9
Prominence of the menu at the entrance	45.8	13.9	40.3
Prominence of the menu in different languages at the entrance	55.6	18.1	26.4
Inside appearance of the facility - tidiness and equipment, appearance of the furniture	4.2	22.2	73.6
Inside appearance of the facility - cleanliness of the facility	0.0	12.5	87.5

Facility's ambient comfort - music	2.8	23.6	73.6
Facility's ambient comfort - fragrances	4.2	25.0	70.8
AVERAGE	14.58	19.10	66.32
3. STAFF AND SERVICE			
Staff appearance (wearing work clothes, the cleanliness of the clothes)	2.8	9.7	87.5
Reception on-site, hospitality during receipt	0.0	12.5	87.5
Staff compliance (mood, professionalism, motivation, commitment)	1.4	13.9	84.7
Recommendations by Staff	18.1	19.4	62.5
Time necessary for the reception of the order by Staff	0.0	4.2	95.8
Time necessary for getting served	1.4	15.3	83.3
AVERAGE	3.94	12.50	83.56
4. TABLE AND MENU			
Appearance/decoration of the table (cutlery, decorations, etc.)	19.4	34.7	45.8
Cleanliness of the table	2.8	9.7	87.5
Variety of the menu (appetizer, main course, dessert, drink)	20.8	15.3	63.9
Possibility of adjusting the dishes according to the guest's requirements (vegetarians and similar)	33.3	23.6	43.1
Menu in different languages	36.1	27.8	36.1
AVERAGE	22.50	22.22	55.28
5. DISHES (CUISINE)			
Appearance/presentation of the dish	26.4	18.1	55.6
Portion size	23.6	9.7	66.7
Quality of the meal	23.6	11.1	65.3
Value for money (quality of meal's proportion to the price)	23.6	12.5	63.9
AVERAGE	24.31	12.85	62.85
6. DRINKS			
Variety of drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, warm and cold drinks, etc.)	0.0	6.9	93.1
Wine list (content of the list, prices of offered wines)	43.1	25.0	30.6
Coffee (quality of coffee, side dish, presentation)	8.3	37.5	52.8
Value for money (relation of quality to the price of drinks)	0.0	23.6	76.4
AVERAGE	12.85	23.26	63.19
7. BILL AND FAREWELL OF THE GUEST			
Time spent for the payment of bills	1.4	8.3	90.3

Presentation of the bill	4.2	15.3	80.6
Possibility of paying by credit cards	22.2	4.2	72.2
Courteousness at farewell	1.4	5.6	93.1
AVERAGE	7.29	8.33	84.03

Source: Authors

The table shows how catering facilities are rated by characteristics in individual categories. It is evident that excellent ratings prevail in all categories. Looking at the average of excellently rated characteristics by category, it can be concluded that the category *Bill and farewell of the guest* is the best rated since there is an average of 84.03 % of the excellently rated characteristics in this category. The following is the *Staff and service category* in which an average of excellently rated characteristics is 83.56 %. The least excellent ratings on average are in the category *Location of the catering facility* (52.22 %).

Looking at the individual categories, the following conclusions can be made:

- In the category *Location of the catering facility*, the easiness of arrival to the property is the best rated, and the weakest point is the existence of signpost(s) giving information about routes and distances to the facility at the entrance to the destination or locality.
- When it comes to the *Appearance of the catering facility*, most of the excellent ratings are assigned to the feature of the prominence of the facility's working hours. In contrast, most of the low ratings are related to the prominence of the menu in different languages when entering the property.
- In the category *Staff and service*, the most excellent ratings refer to the time necessary for the reception of the order by staff. In this category, the feature recommendations received by staff is rated the least excellent, although even within this feature a high share (62.5 %) of the properties received an excellent rating.
- *Table and menu* represent the fourth category. In the 87.5% of objects, table cleanliness was rated the highest. However, many establishments did not have a menu in foreign languages (36.1%) or were unsatisfactory (27.8%).
- Within the fifth category, *Dishes (cuisine)* were evaluated. The top-rated feature refers to the portion sizes, while the appearance/presentation of the dish on a plate got excellent grades only in 55.6% of all visited catering facilities.
- In the category of *Drinks*, the best-rated feature was the possibility of choosing between diverse sorts of drinks (93.1 % were rated excellent). However, the wine list (content of the list, prices of offered wines) was rated excellent only in 30.6 % of involved catering facilities. Moreover, the quality and appearance of coffee were rated excellent in only 52.8 % of involved catering facilities.
- *Bill and farewell of the guest* is the best-rated category overall. Staff expressed courtesy during the farewell of the guests in 93.1 % of involved catering facilities. The worst rated feature in this category appears to be the possibility of paying by card because in 26.4 % of involved catering facilities, this possibility was marked as unavailable or unsatisfactory.

In addition to evaluating the criteria mentioned above, mystery shoppers had the opportunity to provide additional comments and conclusions via their answers to open questions.

Some comments and conclusions repeatedly occurred concerning pros and cons - the things that mystery shoppers liked and appreciated the most and, on the other side, what they did not like. To start with the pros, the following are the things that occurred to be mentioned repeatedly by the mystery shoppers: staff courtesy and staff compliance (good mood, professionalism, commitment), tasty food, nice and comfortable ambient and atmosphere, non-smoking area, cleanliness (including toilet), fast service, nice view, cheap/affordable price and/or the quality justifying the price, variety of the offer of food and drinks, presence of herbs/plants (in interior and exterior), open kitchen concept – where food is prepared in plain sight, the possibility of adjusting the dishes according to the guest's requirements (vegetarian, gluten-free and similar), live music in the background, updated social networks and web page, using local ingredients. In contrast, there are some cons or things that mystery shoppers criticize. Following are such notions that mystery shoppers pointed out: uncleanliness (including cutlery and toilet), staff using mobile phones, odour (with suggestions of the smoking ban and renovation of the toilettes area), lack of (free) parking near the facility, dated inventory, prices too high for the local population, not updated prices as well as the actual offer in the menu, lack of possibility of adjusting the dishes according to the guest's requirements (vegetarian, gluten-free and similar), location near the road, inaccessibility for people with disabilities and the elderly, unprofessional attitude and unprofessional (not unified) work clothing of employee.

In the end, mystery shoppers also had the opportunity to make suggestions to improve the quality of service. A total of 47 responses were collected with proposals for improving the quality of catering services (Table 2). Some suggestions repeatedly occurred, such as improving accessibility for people with disabilities (26.39 %), expanding offers (26.39 %), pointing out signposts (25 %), refurbishing, redesigning and/or decorating interior (18.06 %), and displaying menu (15.28 %).

Table 2: Suggestions to improve the quality of services

Keyword	Repetition rate	% of respondents who used the word
accessibility	19	26.39
expand offer	19	26.39
signposts	18	25.00
interior	13	18.06
display menu	11	15.28
foreign language	8	11.11
parking	8	11.11
exterior	8	11.11
wine list	7	9.72
credit card	7	9.72

decoration	7	9.72
vegetarian offer	6	8.33
cleanliness	6	8.33
employees	6	8.33
music volume	5	6.94
unified work clothing	4	5.56
comfortable chairs	4	5.56
vegan offer	4	5.56
interspace	3	4.17
faster service	3	4.17
ambient temperature	3	4.17
toilet cleanliness	3	4.17
lower prices	3	4.17
professional service	3	4.17
social network	3	4.17
smoking ban	3	4.17
update prices	3	4.17
working hours	2	2.78
offers sweets	2	2.78
motivate employees	2	2.78
QR	2	2.78
terrace	2	2.78
quality control	1	1.39
new cutlery	1	1.39
better lighting	1	1.39
air conditioning	1	1.39
kids' corner	1	1.39
innovate menu	1	1.39
laminated menu	1	1.39
menu design	1	1.39
toilet size	1	1.39
beer offer	1	1.39
new equipment	1	1.39
staff recommendations	1	1.39
local producers	1	1.39
educate employees	1	1.39
dish presentation	1	1.39

Source: Authors

With the purpose of a clear visual representation of the feedback of mystery shoppers, the Word Cloud tool by MonkeyLearn was used (<https://monkeylearn.com/word-cloud>). MonkeyLearn is an artificial intelligence platform that allows companies and service users to analyze text easily with machine learning. The word cloud (also commonly known as a tag cloud) provides a visual representation of words. It is used to highlight popular words and phrases and visually presents the words that are brought into the program based on frequency or relevance. Thus, it provides quick and simple visual insights that can lead to more in-depth analyses. For example, Figure 1 shows how frequently our respondents used what terms and phrases when asked for recommendations for improvement of the assessed catering facilities.

Figure 1: **Word Cloud**



Source: MonkeyLearn, Word Cloud Generator, <https://monkeylearn.com/word-cloud>

The most common suggestions are regarding improving accessibility for people with disabilities, expanding the offer of food and drinks, signaling the way to the facility by signposts, displaying menu (also in foreign languages), interior and exterior design, and introducing or expanding the wine list, giving the possibility to pay by credit cards, decorating the table, increasing vegetarian and vegan offer (including positive responding to the customers with special needs or wants (e.g. soy milk instead of cow milk), paying close attention to the cleanliness of the whole catering facility, cordiality and professionalism of employees and adjusting music volume.

CONCLUSION

Empirical research has shown that the quality of services in Croatian catering facilities is satisfactory. The categories *Bill and farewell of the guest* and *Staff and service* were rated the best. The worst ratings were given in the *Location of the catering facility* category. Mystery shoppers also gave valuable advice that restaurant managers should apply to improve service quality.

This research confirms that the mystery shopping method effectively assesses the quality of catering facilities' services and can supplement client satisfaction surveys. By applying a semi-structured research instrument, independent researchers can assess a range of tangible and intangible elements of the quality of catering facilities' services. Furthermore, structured observation allows paying attention to many details, which the guests of the catering facility might not even notice because they might not be important to them at the moment (for example, the existence of signposts to the facility or accessibility for people with disabilities). As an additional benefit, the suggestions made by independent observers to improve service quality should be emphasized.

This research can be a starting point for future research on service quality in the hospitality industry. However, it is necessary to specify the research's limitations to ensure scientific objectivity. Mystery shopping still represents a subjective assessment of the quality of services, although a semi-structured questionnaire was used. In addition, we applied an ordinal scale with three levels, which is insufficient for a more precise evaluation. Therefore, we suggest using a 5- or 7-point Likert scale for evaluation in future research. Also, the questionnaire may contain other criteria, for example, following the dimensions of the SERVQUAL scale. Also, the observers were students who received instructions on conducting mystery shopping but had no previous experience applying this methodology. Moreover, the selection of catering facilities was subjective. In future research, catering facilities can be selected from a particular reference list, for example, members of catering associations. Furthermore, observing the average results without any correlation with other variables hinders the possibility of providing strategic suggestions or guidelines. Therefore, future research should be expanded with satisfaction surveys of catering facilities consumers and managers of the same establishments.

The contribution of this research is visible in the theoretical and practical sense. It complements scientific research on mystery shopping with an emphasis on catering services. Furthermore, this research has practical value since, in addition to presenting the shortcomings of the service quality of the observing facilities, it also provides suggestions for possible improvements. Moreover, these suggestions are universally applicable and managers can use them to check the quality of their own services. Finally, but not least, respecting the conclusions of Anantharajah et al. (2020), this research contributed to expanding the knowledge of students who learned in practice how mystery shopping is carried out. Maybe, one day they will hire a mystery shopping company to evaluate the quality of services and work of employees in the facilities they run.

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