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PERCEIVED SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN ROMANIAN RURAL PENSIONS: A PILOT STUDY*

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Introduction

The development of rural tourism in Romania, although it is thought to be a major component of the tourism industry, has not been harmonious. The difference in rural tourism development can be attributed to natural, cultural, historical and religious resources available, since most of the rural pensions were created in the areas best known to both the national market and the international one: Alba – historical and natural sites starting from 1995 until 2008, followed by a drop in 2009; Brasov – Bran Castle, Suceava – the Moldavian Monasteries.¹ Despite that, investment in rural tourism has had positive results. The data from the National Institute of Statistics show a steady increase in the arrivals of tourists to rural pensions from all over the country in 2010, and then a powerful recovery in 2011, proving once again that tourism can be a very important element in beating the economic crisis (INSE, 2012). Romanian tourists dominate the scene, making up for 93.15% of arrivals in 2011, compared to foreign tourists which only amounted to 6.85% (e.g. Fig. 1).

However, the development of Romanian rural tourism has not been without negative aspects. According to a number of studies² some of the policies adopted by ANTREC (Association for Rural, Cultural and Ecological Tourism) and the Romanian Ministry of Tourism

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¹ Giannetto & Souca, 2011.

² Ilieș, Ilieș, Josan, Grama, & Gozner, 2008.

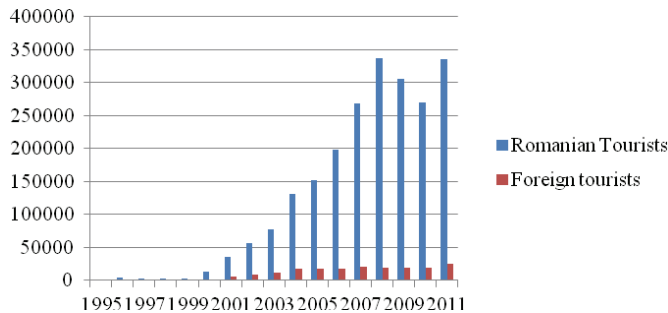


Figure 1. Arrivals in Romanian rural pensions in the 1995–2011 period

Source: own research based on data provided by INSE, 2012.

involving the Romanian tourism, had less than desirable effects on preserving the authentic patrimony of the regions where they were implemented. The unfortunate consequence of both the lack of knowledge and the lack of institutional framework preserving authenticity has resulted in “kitsch” in the architecture of accommodation structures. This is something that needs to be avoided as one of the marks of rural tourism as a sustainable economic activity is preserving the available resources, especially the cultural ones.³ Another mark of sustainable tourist and economic activity are high quality services. That is because service quality promotes customer satisfaction, stimulates intention to return, and encourages positive word of mouth.⁴ At the same time, customer satisfaction increases profitability, market share, and return on investment.⁵ Therefore, those who are part of the hospitality industry will improve their market share and profitability through quality services.⁶ A question that arises in this situation is: how are high quality services defined and measured? According to the SERVQUAL model⁷ service quality can be measured by identifying the gaps between customers’ expectations of the service that is about to be provided and their perceptions of the actual performance of the service. SERVQUAL is based on five dimensions of service, known as RATER:⁸

- **Reliability** – the service provider’s ability to provide accurate and dependable services,
- **Assurance** – features that provide confidence to customers,
- **Tangibles** – the physical surroundings and the appearance of the employees,
- **Empathy** – the service firm’s readiness to provide each customer with personal service,

³ Lanfranchi, Giannetto, & Souza, 2012.

⁴ Nadiri & Hussain, 2005.

⁵ Anderson & Fornell, 1994; Fornell, 1992.

⁶ Oh, 1999.

⁷ Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988.

⁸ Parasuraman et al., 1988.

- **Responsiveness** – a firm’s willingness to assist its customers by providing fast and efficient service performances.

Because of the fact that the SERVQUAL model uses the perceptions minus expectations approach in measuring service quality ($SQ = P - E$), and that expectations are not easily defined,⁹ and also several criticism related to the model’s dimensionality,¹⁰ several other researchers have sought to define and measure the concept of service quality in a different way,¹¹ which they thought expressed better how customers view service quality. The best alternative to SERVQUAL has been found to be the SERVPERF scale which only uses the perceptions on performance from SERVQUAL,¹² based on the fact that the model explains more of the variance in the overall measure of service quality than the original scale involving expectations. Therefore, the present pilot study is trying to diagnose the perceived service quality of Romanian rural pensions as marked down by students, through the SERVPERF scale.

Methodology

The sample used in this study consisted of Romanian students from the Faculty of Geography, majoring in Tourist Geography, which have visited rural pensions as part of their practical experience sponsored by the faculty (39.39% of the respondents), or as tourists (60.61% of the respondents), during April–May period 2012. 72.73% of the respondents were female, with an average age of 21.67 years old, mainly third year students (54.55%), and most of them (78.79%) had an annual budget for tourist activities up to 2000 lei. They have analysed 30 rural pensions situated in 20 different regions (e.g. Tab. 1), mainly located in Transylvania.

These regions are the popular tourist destinations in Transylvania because they are located in mountainous areas; near sources of mineral and thermal waters or in places with rich cultural history, and the rural pensions were selected on the basis of a non-probability convenience sampling technique¹³. The sample analysed here (33 respondents) is part of a larger database which contains 409 questionnaires regarding perceptions on hospitality service quality and were selected only because they indicate rural pensions as the lodging unit. The original questionnaire applied had 56 variables taken from SERVQUAL¹⁴ and three other derived instruments, on four different types of answers (two types of expectations, perceptions and degree of importance) and the responses were given on a seven-point Likert scale, with specific detailed definitions given to 1 (the lowest value), 4 (the medium value) and 7 (the highest value). The survey was applied in Romanian and then analysed

⁹ Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993.

¹⁰ Buttle, 1996; Saleh & Ryan, 1991; Souca, 2011.

¹¹ Carman, 1990; Cronin & Taylor, 1992, 1994; Teas, 1993, 1994.

¹² Cronin & Taylor, 1994.

¹³ Janssens, De Pelsmacker, Wijnen, & Van Kenhove, 2008.

¹⁴ Parasuraman et al., 1994.

Table 1

The locations for the rural pensions and the number of respondents

No.	Region/County	No. of tourists	Percent
1.	Alba-Iulia	1	3.03
2.	Arieșeni	1	3.03
3.	Băile Felix	3	9.09
4.	Băile Tâșnad	2	6.06
5.	Băile Tușnad	1	3.03
6.	Bicaz	3	9.09
7.	Blaj	1	3.03
8.	Bran	3	9.09
9.	Brașov	2	6.06
10.	Cluj	3	9.09
11.	Oradea	1	3.03
12.	Poiana Mărului, Brașov	1	3.03
13.	Săcălaia	1	3.03
14.	Sălciua de Jos	1	3.03
15.	Sânmartin, Arad	1	3.03
16.	Sighișoara	1	3.03
17.	Sinaia	1	3.03
18.	Sînmartin, Băile Felix	1	3.03
19.	Sulina	2	6.06
20.	Valea Mare	3	9.09
Total		33	100.00

Source: own research.

with IBM SPSS 20.0 for means, standard deviations and frequencies. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used as a measure of reliability¹⁵ and the perceived service quality dimensions were defined with exploratory factor analysis.

Findings

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the SEVPERF measure failed to form the assumed 5 dimensions as indicated by (Parasuraman et al., 1988), and the subsequent analysis and reduction of factors through exploratory factor analysis resulted in three dimensions: reliability, tangibles and customer relations. (e.g. Tab. 2), which have been discussed further below.

¹⁵ Ping, 2004.

Table 2

The final form of the survey instrument for rural pensions

Code	Survey item	Source dimension	Source model	Reference	New dimension	Cronbach alpha
Q2	Dependability in handling customer' service problems	Reliability	SERVQUAL	Parasuraman et al., 1994	Reliability	0.93
Q3	Performing services right the first time	Reliability	SERVQUAL	Parasuraman et al., 1994		
Q5	My reservation was handled efficiently	Reliability	Lodging Quality Index (LQI)	Getty & Getty, 2003	Tangibles	0.80
Q45	Equipment and facilities are easy to use	Tangibles	HOLSERV	Mei, Dean, & White, 1999		
Q13	Employees responded promptly to my requests	Responsiveness	Lodging Quality Index (LQI)	Getty & Getty, 2003	Customer relations	0.93
Q23	Employees who are consistently courteous and polite	Assurance	SERVQUAL	Parasuraman et al., 1994		
Q29	Giving customers individual attention	Empathy	SERVQUAL	Parasuraman et al., 1994		
Q30	Employees who deal with customers in a caring fashion	Empathy	SERVQUAL	Parasuraman et al., 1994		
Q34	Sympathetic employees	Empathy	LODGSERV	Knutson et al., 1990		

Source: own research.

The obtained results prove that the overall reliability of each dimension of the scale has a Cronbach Alpha coefficient equal to or above 0.80, which has been deemed acceptable.¹⁶ The exploratory factor analysis, using the equimax rotation proved the dimensionality of the data set, as the three factors: reliability, tangibles and customer relations explained a cumulative variance of 80.71%, with all factor loading for their items greater than 0.8, due to the small size of the sample.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010.

¹⁷ Hair et al., 2010.

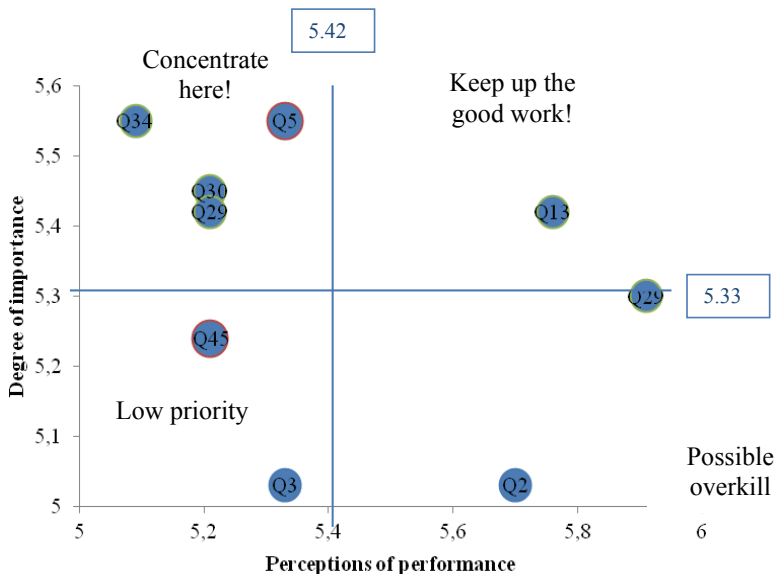


Figure 2. The means and degree of importance for each item of the final version of the instrument of research for rural pensions

Source: own research.

The distribution of SERVPERF values (e.g. Fig. 2) indicate that Romanian students have relatively high scores for perceived performance of hospitality services provided by rural pensions. This is consistent with the mean calculated for satisfaction, which was 5.79 (where 7 represented “Total satisfaction”). The highest score is that for “individual attention given by employees” (5.91), followed closely by “prompt response to customer’s request” (5.76) and “service performed right the first time” (5.70). These items also scored well on the degree of importance, however, only when we analyse these results combined and against the average for perception on performance (5.42) and degree of importance (5.33) can we see the whole picture. Known as the importance-performance analysis (IPA), this simple test was introduced by Martilla and James in 1977,¹⁸ and it is perfectly applicable on data sets created using SERVPERF. Using the average values for perceived performance and degree of importance of each item, the variables analysed are distributed in four quadrants:

- **Low priority** – lower than average importance and perceived performance.
- **Concentrate here!** – higher than average importance, but lower performance.
- **Keep up the good work!** – higher than average importance and perceived performance.
- **Possible overkill** – lower than average importance, but higher performance.

¹⁸ Bacon, 2003.

Using this, the following conclusions can be reached:

The Low Priority dimension

This dimension has those items which have both lower than average scores for performance and degree of importance – one from reliability and one from tangibles. This shows that while customers might not consider these variables very important, the managers think the same. In this case, there are no changes recommended here, just to keep a satisfactory level overall.

The Concentrate Here! dimension

This dimension is characterised by importance higher than average, yet low performance is the most problematic, as it includes most of the items identified as relevant to consumers. This comes to show that rural pensions' managers do not completely understand their customers and they still have a way to go until they can provide high quality services.

The Keep up the Good Work dimension

Items placed in this quadrant are in the best position as they are not only highly valued by consumers but they also benefit from investments. Unfortunately, only one item from the customer relations dimensions: “employees respond promptly to customers’ requests” is here, which only proves further that the tourism industry can only benefit from satisfaction and perceived quality studies which can help bridge the gap that currently exists between what customers want and what hospitality managers think customers want.

The Possible Overkill dimension

Being categorized as the dimension where the performance is above average, yet the importance given by consumer is lower than average, this quadrant usually shows the areas where managers are concentrating on improving the current conditions, while the customers might not think the investment is necessary. As the results show, two items – one from reliability and one from customer relations is in this situation.

Conclusions and study limitations

The aim of this pilot study has been to try and find a starting point for perceived quality research involving rural pensions in Romania, by employing a modified SERVQUAL perception scale, better known as SERVPERF. While the statistical analysis has demonstrated the existence of three perceived service quality dimensions: reliability (2 items), tangibles (2 items) and customer relations (5 items), the limitations of the study which include the small sample size make the results applicable only as starting point for further research. However, one element that can be noted is that compared to studies on hotel services where the tangibles dimensions was often found to be the most important¹⁹, in this study the focus fell onto the employees responsiveness, empathy and assurance, which were gathered into

¹⁹ Knutson et al., 1990.

one dimension: customer relations. This result shows that employees play a major part in ensuring customer satisfaction, which means that hiring qualified personnel should be a priority for those who manage the hospitality industry.

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Summary

For the providers of lodging services, especially those in a developing market such as agrotourism, it is important to define and to measure service quality. The current study aims to diagnose the applicability of an adapted perceived quality scale to Romanian consumers who have chosen rural pensions as their holiday accommodation. The sample used consists of Romanian students visiting

several rural pensions all across the country. The sampling method was non-probability convenience sampling, while the survey instrument was adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1994), and four other instruments specifically made for lodging services. For statistics the IBM SPSS ver. 20.0 was employed, in order to calculate means, standard deviation and frequencies, regression analysis was used to observe the causal relationship between independent variables and customer satisfaction and the dimensionality of the scale was verified through exploratory factor analysis. Research limitations: this research is limited by the sample study, which is quite small and consists only of Romanian students who stayed in the analysed rural pensions; and also by the fact that measurement of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction was carried out using only a single item scale, which does limit the estimation of reliability. Importance of research: the Romanian hospitality industry suffers from the small amount of research done on both customer satisfaction and perceived quality service. There are literally no studies done on rural pensions and very few studies focusing on hotels. As the number of rural pensions grows each year and agro-tourism becomes more and more competitive, it is important that rural pensions' owners and managers listen to the voice of the consumer, and doing so, discover the areas that offer the most satisfaction, those that can still be improved and those that should be developed further. The results and implications of the current research are a starting point for further studies that need to be developed in an area largely ignored until now.

POSTRZEGANIE JAKOŚCI USŁUG I SATYSFAKcji KLIENTA W RUMUŃSKICH WIEJSKICH PENSJONATAch: STUDIUM PILOTAŻOWE

Streszczenie

Dla dostawców usług zakwaterowania, zwłaszcza na rynkach rozwijających się, takich jak rynek agroturystyki, ważne jest zdefiniowanie miary jakości usług. Badanie ma na celu sprawdzenie zastosowalności zaadaptowanej skali jakości postrzeganej do konsumentów rumuńskich, którzy wybrali wypoczynek w ośrodkach wiejskich. Użyta próba składa się ze studentów rumuńskich, odwiedzających wiejskie pensjonaty na terenie całego kraju. Próbę dobierano w sposób wygodny, nieprobabilistyczny, podczas gdy instrument badawczy został zaadaptowany z Parasuraman et al. (1994), i czterech innych instrumentów, stworzonych specjalnie na potrzeby usług zakwaterowania. Obliczenia średnich, odchyłeń standardowych i częstości były prowadzone z użyciem IBM SPSS w wersji 20.0. Związek przyczynowo-skutkowy pomiędzy zmiennymi niezależnymi oraz zadowoleniem klientów zbadano używając analizy regresji. Analiza wymiarowość skali została przeprowadzona przy użyciu eksploracyjnej analizy czynnikowej. Ograniczenia badawcze: badanie to jest ograniczone przez próbę, która jest bardzo mała i składa się wyłącznie z rumuńskich studentów goszczących w analizowanych pensjonatach wiejskich, a także fakt, że pomiar zadowolenia klienta przeprowadzono przy użyciu jednowymiarowej skali, która ogranicza ocenę wiarygodności. Znaczenie badań: rumuński przemysł hotelarski cierpi z powodu małej liczby badań na temat zadowolenia klienta i postrzeganej jakości usług. Bardzo niewiele badań skupia się na hotelach, a nie na praktycznie żadnych dotyczących wiejskich pensjonatów. Ponieważ liczba wiejskich pensjonatów rośnie każdego roku i agroturystyka staje się coraz bardziej konkurencyjna, ważne jest, aby właściciele i menedżerowie wiejskich pensjonatów słuchali głosu konsumentów i przez to odkrywali obszary, które oferują najwięcej satysfakcji, te, które można jeszcze poprawić i te, które powinny być dalej rozwijane. Wyniki i wnioski z obecnych rozważań są punktem wyjścia do dalszych badań w sferze, która była do tej pory w dużej mierze pomijana.