

Service Quality in the Hotel Industry: Tourist Satisfaction and Loyalty. Case of Albania and Montenegro¹

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Abstract: The hotel industry has become a driving force of economic development in Albania and Montenegro. The number of arrivals and the number nights spent has increased each year. The purpose of the study is three-fold: first to examine tourists' perceptions of service quality in the Albanian and Montenegrin hotel industry; secondly to empirically examine the dimensions that impact tourist satisfaction and their loyalty; third, it assesses whether there is any relationship between tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty. This study adopted SERVQUAL scale with some customizations to measure perceived service quality dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Data were collected from 9 hotels in Shkodra, 15 hotels in Saranda, 19 hotels in Ulcinj and 21 hotels in Budva, using a self-administered questionnaire.

To find out the service quality dimensions that impact tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty, the factor analysis and reliability were used. We also performed the multiple regression analysis, using the ‘tourist satisfaction’ or ‘tourist loyalty’ as the dependent variable and dimensions as: ‘tangibles’, ‘reliability’, ‘responsiveness’, ‘assurance’ and ‘empathy’ as independent variables. We found several dimensions with a significant impact on tourist

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satisfaction and their loyalty. Moreover, we run with a simple regression analysis and correlation showing a positive relationship between tourist satisfaction as an independent variable and tourist loyalty as dependent variable.

Findings of the study can be used from hotel managers as a guide to improve their service quality and hotels' performance.

Keywords: service, dimension, tourist, SERVQUAL, regression, Albania, Montenegro.

1 Introduction

In today's fast-paced world, the tourism sector emerges as a swiftly growing industry², characterized by robust competition and the resulting hurdles in winning and keeping a customer base. This is particularly evident in the hospitality sector, where the dynamic nature of consumer needs and desires puts pressure on hotels and associated accommodations to stay ahead. To address this issue, entities in this domain have placed a strong emphasis on the continuous improvement of service quality, recognizing it as the critical action to ensure consumer gratification and encourage their return. (Rao & Sahu, 2013; Shyju et al., 2021; Nyagadza et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022). A qualitative service keeps customers satisfied therefore increasing the chances for hospitality structures to differentiate from competitors and increase customer loyalty over time.

Positive opinions about the hotel lead to positive word-of-mouth recommendations, repeated visits, enhanced efficiency, ultimately increasing revenues and profitability (Duncan & Elliott, 2002; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Khan et al., 2013; Malik et al., 2020; Yoon & Suh, 2004). In today's digital age, where online reviews and social media play an important role about customer perceptions, hotels are not in a position to underestimate the importance of service quality. Hotels should prioritize service quality and cultivate long-term relationship with customers. By doing so, hotels can ensure sustainability and competitive advantage (Butnaru & Licau, 2017; Koyuncu et al., 2014; Pereira-Moliner et al., 2016).

Montenegro's tourism industry and hotel stays have experienced significant growth in the recent years, positioning the country as one of the most popular destinations in the Western Balkans. The Montenegro Tourism Development Strategy 2022-2025, released by the Ministry of Economic Development, indicates that in 2019, the tourism and travel sector's direct and indirect contributions accounted for 30.90% of Montenegro's overall GDP. Additionally, the sector's total impact on employment was 31.90%. The number of tourist arrivals and the number of overnight stays has increased as well in the last three years according to the data

² <https://www.unwto.org/news/tourism-s-importance-for-growth-highlighted-in-world-economic-outlook-report>

published by Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT). According to MONSTAT the number of tourist arrivals was 1 670 879 in 2021; 2 183 975 in 2022; and 2 613 300 in 2023 (MONSTAT, 2021;2022;2023). Also, the number of overnight stays increased each year respectively, from 9 872 573 in 2021, to 12 428 787 in 2022, and 16 389 279 in 2023 (MONSTAT, 2021; 2022; 2023).

In recent years, Albania's tourism sector has flourished, particularly following the pandemic period. A report on Tourism and Hospitality in Albania, jointly produced by the UNDP in collaboration with the Albanian Tourism Association, sheds light on this growth. According to the report, the direct contribution of the travel and tourism sector to the Albanian economy has ranged from 8.5% to 8.7% of GDP. However, when considering the indirect impact, this contribution amounts to approximately 20%³.

Analyzing data from the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), we observe a significant increase in the number of international tourist arrivals from 2018 to 2023. Specifically, the figures rose from 5,926,803 in 2018 to 10,155,640 in 2023. Despite a temporary decline due to the pandemic in 2020 (2,657,818), subsequent years have witnessed a robust upward trend⁴.

Europe remains the primary source of international tourists, with a focus on the Southern part. Notably, over 70% of non-resident visitors have Albanian origins, hailing from neighboring countries such as Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, as well as Albanians from the diaspora in Italy, Greece, the USA, UK, Germany, and beyond⁵. The majority of international tourists visiting Albania during the period 2018-2023 did that for personal reasons, while a very small percentage visited the country for business or professional reasons⁶. Based on data collected from the hospitality industry, from August 2023 to January 2024, the average monthly number of visitors staying in the Albanian accommodation infrastructures amounts to 212,223, from which 125,919 are non-resident visitors. In addition, the average monthly count of overnight stays totals 548,014, with 352,661 attributed to non-resident visitors⁷.

³ <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/tourism-and-hospitality-albania-2022>

⁴ <https://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/industria-tregtia-dhe-sh%C3%ABrbimet/statistikat-e-turizmit/#tab2>

⁵ <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/tourism-and-hospitality-albania-2022>

⁶ <https://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/industria-tregtia-dhe-sh%C3%ABrbimet/statistikat-e-turizmit/#tab2>

⁷ As above

2 Theoretical background

Various frameworks have been developed in order to measure service quality, each one offering a unique perspective on the dimensions and factors that influence customer perceptions (Caro & Garcia, 2007; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Dabholkar, 1996; Dabholkar et al., 2000; Frochot & Hughes, 2000; Gounaris, 2005; Grönroos, 1984; Haywood-Farmer, 1988; Jabnoun & Khalifa, 2005; Mattsson, 1992; Sower et al., 2001; Spreng & Mackoy, 1996; Vandamme & Leunis, 1993; Fatima et al., 2019; Endeshaw, 2020). While these models have been used in several industries there are also models used and developed especially for the hotel industry (Akan, 1995; Akbaba, 2006; Choi & Chu, 2001; Ekinci et al., 2003; Oberoi & Hales, 1990; Saleh & Ryan, 1991; Wong Ooi Mei et al., 1999; Rao & Sahu, 2013; Shyju et al., 2021; Nyagadza et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022).

Many of the above-mentioned frameworks are based on the SERVQUAL model of service quality, which is a result of the work of Parasuraman et al., 1985 and Parasuraman et al., 1988. At first, in 1985 they published a conceptual paper identifying five service quality gaps influencing the quality of service as perceived by the consumer. They used an exploratory study based on in-depth interviews with executives from four nationally (American) recognized firms and focus groups interviews with consumers. The result of the study was a framework, consisting of the five service quality gaps, defined as follows: difference between consumer expectations and management perceptions of consumer expectations, difference between management perceptions of consumer expectations and service quality specifications, difference between service quality specifications and the service delivered, difference between service delivery and what is communicated about the service to consumers, difference between consumer expectations and perceptions.

The focus group interviews revealed that regardless of the service type, consumers usually use the same criteria in evaluating service quality. These criteria were grouped into 10 categories, which were known as the “service quality determinants or dimensions”, and were: reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding the customer, and tangibles.

Later, in 1988, they conducted additional research to determine the underlying dimensions used by consumers in evaluating service quality. They included in their study customers from four different service settings such as retail banking, credit card companies, long-distance telephone, real estate brokers and domestic appliance repair and maintenance. Respondents had to answer 97-paired questions, related to their expectations and perceptions of service quality. Based on the results of this survey the items used to evaluate service quality by the consumers' viewpoint were reduced from 97 to 22 and dimensions from 10 to 5. The resulting questionnaire represented the famous instrument called SERVQUAL, which was then tested for reliability and validity. The test study proved that SERVQUAL was reliable and valid in measuring service quality as perceived by the customers in many service and retail organizations. The five underlying dimensions of SERVQUAL, as

defined by Parasuraman et al. (1988) consist of the following: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy.

In the following years several researchers have provided theoretical and empirical evidence, recognizing the contribution of Parasuraman et al. in service quality literature, but, on the other hand, they have also identified some problems related to the SERVQUAL measure. These problems can be grouped into two main categories: conceptual and operational. Conceptual problems consist of: 1) the use of difference scores (perceptions scores minus expectations scores) to measure perceived service quality; 2) the ambiguity of the expectations construct; and 3) the appropriateness of the measure in different service industries. Operational problems, on the other hand, are the result of the afore-mentioned conceptual problems and include generally low reliability, unstable dimensionality and poor validity (Carman, 1990; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993; Paulin & Pierrin, 1996; Van Dyke et al, 1999; Jian J.J. et al. 2000).

Even though SERVQUAL Model is among the first frameworks used to evaluate the service quality and despite its criticisms (Bhat, 2012; Smith, 1995; Williams, 1998), it still remains a leading measure of service quality and largely used in the hotel industry (Ali et al., 2021; Chand, 2010; Akbar et al., 2010; Hossain, 2012; Mey et al., 2006; Mohamad et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2015; Thi et al., 2020, Rao & Sahu, 2013; Shyju et al., 2021; Nyagadza et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022).

SERVQUAL Model, which as mentioned-above emphasizes on five dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy – has been widely adopted in hospitality research. Various researchers have described the dimensions as follows:

Tangibles are described as the physical evidence of service including physical facilities, appearance of personnel, tools, and equipment used to provide the service. Several studies highlight the importance of the tangible dimension on customer satisfaction (Devi Juwaheer, 2004; Hossain, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2015, Bayad Jamal Ali et al., 2021; Zhang, 2022). While tangibles are important in shaping initial impressions of the hotel, research indicates that they are not sufficient to guarantee high level of service quality (Ekinci et al., 2003; Markovic & Raspor, 2010).

Reliability is described as the ability to perform the service dependably, consistently and accurately. Studies have shown that guest value reliability highly, as it instills confidence and trust in the hotel brand. For instance, Markovic & Raspor (2010), Ali et al. (2021), found that reliability significantly influences customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Responsiveness is described as the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Research indicates that responsiveness plays a crucial role in shaping customers perceptions of service quality and overall satisfaction. A study demonstrated that customers perceptions of responsiveness positively influence

their satisfaction levels and their likelihood of returning to the hotel (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000, Zhang, 2022).

Assurance is described as the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. Customers expect hotel staff to possess the necessary skills and knowledge to meet their needs and provide a sense of assurance throughout their stay. Finding suggest that assurance is positively related with customer satisfaction and loyalty (Rao & Sahu, 2013; Ali et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2015).

Empathy is described as Caring, individualized attention of hotel employees to its customers. Research suggest that empathy of the hotel employees contribute positively to customers satisfaction and loyalty (Rao & Sahu, 2013; Ali et al., 2021; Hossain, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2015), while other finding suggest that empathy is the factor with the strongest relationship with customer satisfaction (Ekinci et al., 2003).

3 Research questions and hypotheses

Based on the above-mentioned discussion, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the potential service quality factors impacting tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty?
- Is there a significant relationship between tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty?
- Are there any significant differences in tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty based on the destination (four cities)?

Consistent with the research questions raised, the following hypotheses are derived:

H1a: There is a significant impact of service quality dimensions on tourist satisfaction.

H1b: There is a significant impact of service quality dimensions on tourist loyalty.

H2: There is a positive relationship between tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty.

H3a: There are significant differences in customer satisfaction based on the destination.

H3b: There are significant differences in customer loyalty based on the destination.

4 Method

4.1 Subjects & Procedure

Data were collected through questionaries, distributed to tourists visiting four cities: Shkodra (9 hotels) located in northern Albania, Saranda (15 hotels) located in southern Albania, Ulcinj (19 hotels) located in southern Montenegro, Budva (21 hotels) located in central part of Montenegrin coast, during summer 2023. A random sampling method was utilized; subjects were approached by the interviewer and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. In-person based administration of the questionnaire provides the interviewer with the opportunity to directly interact with the participants of the study, as well as introduce the research topic and eliminate any area of confusion. A total of 467 usable responses were received. Of 467 participants, 201 were females and 266 were males. With regards to education, 35 completed secondary education, 193 completed high school, 143 completed undergraduate studies, and 96 completed graduate studies. The following descriptive statistics pertained to the destination: of 467 participants, 119 were from Shkodra (Albania), 105 were from Saranda (Albania), 127 were from Ulcinj (Montenegro), and 116 were from Budva (Montenegro). The data were uploaded into SPSS®.

4.2 Independent Variables

Five service quality dimensions were used in this study: ‘Tangibles’ (X1), ‘Reliability’ (X2), ‘Responsiveness’ (X3), ‘Assurance’(X4) and ‘Empathy’(X5). It should be noted, that based on Parasuraman’s et al. SERVQUAL model (1985; 1988), perceived, expected, as well as the gap between perceived and expected values were used in this study. We will only be presenting the factor and reliability analyses for perceived measures. To measure each of the dimensions, some items were included in the questionnaire. A principal component analysis, using eigenvalue greater than one criterion, revealed a simple structure with factor loadings greater than 0.6. Each factor explained greater than 70% of the total variance. The results of the reliability analysis for each dimensions indicated a Cronbach alpha greater than 0.8, respectively Tangible (6 items) with Cronbach alpha = 0.907; Reliability (6 items) with Cronbach alpha = 0.891; Responsiveness (6 items) with Cronbach alpha = 0.889; Assurance (4 items) with Cronbach alpha = 0.848; Empathy (4 items), with Cronbach alpha = 0.857.

4.3 Dependent Variables

Two dependent variables were used in this study: customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Customer Satisfaction – To measure customer satisfaction, five items were included in the questionnaire based on literature. A principal component analysis, using eigenvalue greater than one criterion, revealed a simple structure with factor loadings greater than 0.8. This factor explained 81.7% of the total variance. The results of the reliability analysis indicated a Cronbach alpha of 0.890.

Customer Loyalty – To measure customer loyalty, four items were included in the questionnaire. Using principal component analysis, this factor explained 81.9% of the total variance and Cronbach alpha was 0.924.

5 Analysis & Discussion

5.1 Multiple Regression

To explore the potential factors impacting customer satisfaction, we performed two multiple regression analyses. The five factors : 'Tangibles' (X_1), 'Reliability' (X_2), 'Responsiveness' (X_3), 'Assurance' (X_4) and 'Empathy' (X_5) were used as the independent variables.

5.1.1 The first model

- ✓ Results indicated that the model was highly significant $F(5,461) = 393.4(p = 0.000)$
- ✓ X_4 variable was not significant ($p = 0.112$)
- ✓ adjusted R^2 was 80.8%.
- ✓ the significant variables were: $X_1(p = 0.023)$, $X_2 (p = 0.000)$, $X_3 (p = 0.044)$, and $X_5 (p = 0.000)$.

Consequently, hypothesis $H1a$ was supported given that we found four service quality dimensions, precisely X_1 "Tangibles", X_2 "Reliability", X_3 "Responsiveness" and X_5 "Empathy" to have a significant impact on customer satisfaction.

5.1.2 The second model

- ✓ We found the model to be significant ($F(5,461) = 431.7, p = 0.000$);
- ✓ adjusted R^2 was 82.2%.
- ✓ The significant variables were: $X_2 (p = 0.000)$, $X_4 (p = 0.002)$ and $X_5 (p = 0.000)$;
- ✓ however, X_1 and X_3 variables were not significant.

Consequently, hypothesis H1b was partially supported given that we found three service quality dimensions, such as X2“Reliability”, X4 “Assurance”, and X5“Empathy” to have a significant impact on customer loyalty.

5.2 Simple regression

To test whether or not there is a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, we performed a simple regression analysis, using *tourist satisfaction* as the independent variable and *tourist loyalty* as the dependent variable. The results of the simple regression analysis indicated that there was a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty ($F(1, 465) = 2408.6, p = 0.000$). Furthermore, regression slope coefficient was positive and highly significant ($b = +0.911, p = 0.000$). Lastly, coefficient of correlation was 0.916, indicating a relatively strong correlation between the two variables. *Consequently, hypothesis H2 was supported.*

5.3 ANOVA

To test whether or not there are differences in mean *customer satisfaction (and customer loyalty)* based on the *destination*, two separate ANOVAs were performed. The results of the first ANOVA indicated there was a significant difference in the mean customer satisfaction based on the destination ($F(3, 463) = 26.013, p = 0.000$). On the other hand, the results of the second ANOVA showed a significant difference in mean customer loyalty based on the destination ($F(3, 463) = 16.653, p = 0.000$). Consequently, hypothesis H3 was supported. *Consequently, hypothesis H3a was supported, and hypothesis H3b was also supported.*

Conclusions

The purpose of the study is to examine customers’ perceptions of service quality in the Albanian and Montenegrin hotel industry mainly in the city of Shkodra, Saranda, Budva and Ulcinj. This paper used the SERVQUAL model to evaluate service quality across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The findings of the study indicate that service quality influences customer satisfaction and four service quality dimensions such as X1”Tangibles”, X2 “Reliability”, X3”Responsiveness” and X5 “Empathy” have a significant impact on customer satisfaction. Based on literature review, empirical studies found the linkage between Customer Satisfaction and Reliability (Al Khattab & Aldehayyat, 2011; Markovic & Raspot, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2015) as well as between Empathy and Customer Satisfaction (Al Khattab & Aldehayyat, 2011; Ali et al., 2021; Hossain, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2015). The findings of the study, indicate also that service quality influences customer loyalty and that three service quality dimensions of the SERVQUAL model such as Reliability, Assurance and Empathy have a significant impact on Customer Loyalty. The results

of the simple regression analysis indicated that there was a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Moreover, the results of the first ANOVA indicated there was a significant difference in the mean customer satisfaction and in the mean customer loyalty based on the destination.

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