The quality of hotel service as a factor of achieving loyalty among visitors

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Abstract: The quality of service, as well as the impact of hotel business on achieving loyalty among hotel visitors, has always been a topic of research in the world. The aim of this research was to determine the level of service quality achieved in hotels at Mount Zlatibor, as well as whether quality factors influence the creation of loyalty among hotel visitors. The results of multiple regression analysis showed an evident influence of both tangible and intangible quality factors on loyalty. However, a slightly greater degree of influence of intangible factor was noted. Research can have theoretical and practical importance, as a complement to existing research, as well as for creating a hotel's business strategy.

Keywords: service quality, loyalty, hotel service
JEL classification: O14, L83, Z32

Kvalitet hotelske usluge kao faktor postizanja lojalnosti posetilaca

Sažetak: Kvalitet usluge, kao i uticaj hotelskog poslovanja na postizanje lojalnosti među posetiocima hotela, oduvek je bila tema istraživanja u svetu. Istraživanje je imalo za cilj da utvrdi nivo kvaliteta usluga koji se postiže u hotelima na Zlatiboru, kao i da li faktori kvaliteta utiču na stvaranje lojalnosti kod posetilaca hotela. Rezultati višestruke regresione analize pokazali su evidentan uticaj oba faktora kvaliteta (materijalni i nematerijalni faktori) na lojalnost, s tim što je utvrđen nešto veći stepen uticaja nematerijalnog faktora. Istraživanja mogu imati teorijski i praktični značaj, kao dopuna postojećim istraživanjima, kao i za kreiranje poslovne strategije hotela.

Ključne reči: kvalitet usluge, lojalnost, hotelska usluga
JEL klasifikacija: O14, L83, Z32

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1. Introduction

A very important aspect of business in tourism and hotel industry is the achievement of quality service of all material and immaterial elements (Ahmad et al., 2018). The creation of trust among consumers is based on meeting the demands of tourists, and this can only be achieved with a quality offer (Amin et al., 2013). Serbia is known for its natural and anthropogenic resources, which from year to year are more and more adapted to the visits of domestic and foreign tourists. Mount Zlatibor, as a tourist center, is distinguished by the successful provision of tourist and hospitality services, especially if we take into account that the business is characterized by a seasonal character (Seočanac & Sekulić, 2020; Vukolić et al., 2021). Precisely for the reason of prominent seasonality at Zlatibor, the study of the quality of services of hotel facilities is of great importance for strategic, continuous and long-term business and survival on the market (Gajić et al., 2018; Hayati & Novitasari, 2017). Sivakumar et al. (2014) in their research point out that quality service contributes to the creation of loyal visitors to hotel facilities and increases the possibility of their returning to the same facilities or destination. Moreover, the same authors claim that every hotel company can achieve competitiveness through quality service (Hossain, 2012). Total quality includes all aspects of the service provided to hotel visitors (Ho et al., 2013). If the dimension of service quality is not in accordance with the expectations of the guests, then a high degree of dissatisfaction of the visitors is definitely expected. Modern business and innovations impose new trends in the marketing of hotel facilities, and they strive to accept new trends in order to attract visitors, and to create loyal customers with quality service (Nurittamont, 2021). The views on the achieved quality of service, as well as the impact on the creation of loyalty are different depending on the author's perception and the area of research (Majid et al., 2018; Zrnić et al., 2021). Although most authors agree on the fact that quality service dictates loyalty, there are certain opposing theories claiming that quality is still an overrated category (Anabila et al., 2022).

Based on the research problem, as well as the researched literature on similar issues, the authors conducted a survey in order to determine the current quality of the offer in three hotels at Zlatibor, i.e. the Mona, Hotel Olymp and Hotel Tornik. The aim of the current research was determining the influence of certain quality factors on loyalty. Similar research was conducted by Akbaba (2006), and the authors used a modified questionnaire, taking questions related to quality, and making small changes during the translation into the Serbian language in order to include quality. Descriptive statistical analysis determined the average ratings for each item. Then, multiple regression analysis was used to determine the influence of the obtained factors on the criterion variable loyalty. The results of the multiple regression analysis showed an evident influence of both quality factors on loyalty, i.e. material and non-material ones. However, the results point to intangible factors as those positively and directly influencing loyalty to a greater extent.

Research has multifaceted significance, primarily in determining the level of quality of the hotel offer at Zlatibor. The results reached by the authors can certainly serve as a basis for a larger-scale research on the same issue. Also, by pointing out certain business shortcomings, it will be possible to influence the future business of hotel facilities in the direction of providing a better service, and therefore overcoming strong competition in the modern market.

2. Literature review

Modern consumers have increasing demands in terms of quality service, which further dictates the creation of loyalty and the repeated return to visitors (Gajić et al., 2019). In order to achieve long-term business and competitive advantage, satisfied guests are needed in the hotel industry (Nair & Choudhary, 2016). The quality of hotel service is becoming an indispensable segment in business on the modern market, and only a quality product can win over loyal visitors and ensure their return (Jasinskas et al., 2016). On the other hand, Arbelo-Perez et al. (2017) indicate that quality hotel service, provided in an adequate manner, can be considered a factor in attracting visitors, whose expectations will be met, and thus the gap between the expected and provided service will be reduced (Sharma & Srivastava, 2018). The main task of the hotel is to provide the highest quality service that visitors will remember and pass on as their positive experience (Gaunker & Gaonkar, 2021). Research shows that constant monitoring of quality from the beginning of service provision to the actual delivery to the visitor creates sure loyalty (Gajić et al., 2020). When the complete satisfaction of hotel visitors with quality service is achieved, there is a high probability of creating loyal visitors who will pass on their satisfaction to other potential visitors (Nair & Choudhary, 2016). It is certainly the promotion of the name and reputation of the hotel facility, and a way to beat the competition in the domestic and foreign markets (Amin et al., 2013). Quality standards are certainly elements of meeting needs and high quality long-term business (Duman et al., 2019). As for the quality elements of a hotel service, these are most often material and immaterial elements of quality (Benko et al., 2022; Getty & Thompson, 1994; Kovač-Žnideršić et al., 2008). The material elements include all types of services related to the comfort of accommodation, the comfort and appearance of rooms, the entire interior and everything that is tangible and visible to a visitor during his stay at a hotel (Dabholkar et al., 2000; Dávid et al., 2003; Novotny et al., 2015). The non-material elements of the service also have a very important influence on the visitors satisfaction, as well as on creating loyalty to returning to the hotel. Material elements of quality refer to service staff and interpersonal relations, more precisely the interaction of service providers with visitors (Alreahi et al., 2023a; 2023b; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000).

Quality is the primary task of the business of every hotel, and the service that is provided with all the aspects of quality, undoubtedly creates future loyal visitors, which potentially leads to the loyalty of hotel services users (Steiger, 2011; Varley & Medwey, 2011). The provision of the best possible service by the hotel enables the achievement of a competitive advantage, with the quality not being reduced in relation to the business season and similar limiting factors (Bello & Bello, 2017). In many cases, it is not possible to achieve the satisfaction of visitors, primarily because of the lack of quality service provided, and as a result of comparing the expected and received service, mistrust is created on the part of visitors, i.e. disappointment among visitors and the decision not to return to the same hotel (Kandampully et al., 2015; Ismail & Yunan, 2016). The assessment of hotel service quality, before and after its use, contributes to the assessment of the size of the gap between the expected and received service (Berezan et al., 2013; Sharma, 2014). Chen (2015) asserts that visitor loyalty is the most important segment of research in business, and that this type of research in the hotel market is a holistic approach. Based on such an approach, it is possible to expect the return of visitors (Mason et al., 2006).

Creating satisfied and therefore loyal visitors who will most likely return to the same hotel is one of the most important tasks in hotel business research (Saleem & Raja, 2014). Gajić et al. (2020) have established that the quality of hotel service in mountain centers in the Republic of Serbia is at a satisfactory level, maintaining that a high level of loyalty among visitors can be expected. A similar survey was conducted by Duglio and Beltramo (2014), who found

that achieving excellence in hotel service quality is the most important segment in long-term business. In their research, they included 372 visitors to hotel facilities in the Piedmont region. Quality service must be provided regardless of the size of the facility, as confirmed by Scott et al. (2007), investigating the quality of lodging services in the Canadian Rockies. Moreover, they arrived at results that confirm the loyalty of visitors and their return. Banki et al. (2014), on a total sample of 217 visitors to Obudu Mountain Resort, confirmed the inextricable link between loyalty and visitor return.

In this research, the authors started from the following hypotheses:

H_1: The quality of the existing service is at a satisfactory level.

H_2: Material and non-material elements of quality affect the loyalty of visitors.

3. Methodology

Sample, operationalization and measuring model

The questionnaire was distributed to hotel visitors on a random basis, in th period January - April 2022. Out of 700 distributed questionnaires, only 540 completely filled questionnaires were analysed. To collect primary data, a modified questionnaire from Akbaba (2006) was used to examine the attitudes and opinions of guests about the quality of services in three hotels at Zlatibor: hotel Mona (228 questionnaires), Olymp (106 questionnaires) and Tornik (206 questionnaires). The questionnaire consisted of three parts with a total of 20 questions, and the parts were devoted to examining the quality of material service, immaterial service and general satisfaction of visitors. A total of ten items from the questionnaire described the material elements of hotel service, seven items looked into the non-material ones and three items related to the loyalty of hotel visitors.

Data on the sociodemographic structure of respondents are as follows: a total of 18.5% are aged 18 to 25, followed by 40% aged 26 to 40 and 41.5% older than 41. Then, there are a total of 56.2% of respondents with university education, 38.9% with high school education and 4.9% with MSc and PhD degrees. In the sample of the total number of respondents, 32.5% have a monthly salary below 500 euros, 51.1% from 500 to 1,000 euros, while 16.4% earn above 1,000 euros. A five-point Likert scale was used (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree). Data analysis was performed using the statistical program IBM SPSS 23.00 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS 23.00). Arithmetic mean and standard deviation were calculated for each element through descriptive statistical analysis. For each item, reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha analysis, and it was shown that each statement is internally consistent. Determining the influence of factors on loyalty was done using multiple regression analysis.

4. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the results of descriptive statistical analysis. When looking at the average ratings of the material elements, it can be seen that the highest average rating is carried by the items *Appearance of accommodation* m= 4.1, followed by *The presence of gyms and swimming pools and spa centers* m= 4.02. The lowest graded element is *The appearance of the restaurant* with an average grade of m=2.22. The quality of the equipment, *The position of the hotel*, *The quality of food and drinks* were rated above 3, which is a satisfactory rating.

Table 1: Descriptive values of each item

Factor	Statement	m	sd
Material elements	The position of the hotel	3.992	1.164
	Appearance of the hotel	3.998	1.424
	Appearance of accommodation	4.192	1.336
	Quality of equipment in the hotel	3.131	1.408
	Accommodation comfort	2.167	1.334
	Accommodation equipment with additional content	2.137	1.341
	Appearance of the restaurant	2.072	1.285
	Quality of food and drinks	3.610	1.464
	The presence of gyms and swimming pools and spa centers	4.027	1.302
	Other additional hotel facilities	2.222	2.169
Non-material elements	Quality of staff	3.897	2.074
	The quality of the manager's work	3.565	2.130
	Courtesy of the employees	3.092	1.970
	Quality of information service	3.311	2.015
	Reception quality	3.931	2.156
	Easy booking method	3.039	1.968
	The possibility of changing the room	3.576	2.105
Loyalty	Overall loyalty	3.533	2.025
	Positive attitude about the hotel	3.376	2.0318
	Return to the hotel again	3.500	2.0470

*m – arithmetic mean; ***sd** – standard deviation
Source: Authors' research

Regarding non-material elements, the item of *Reception quality* (m=3.9) has the highest average score, followed by *Quality of staff* (m=3.8) and *The possibility of changing the room* (m=3.5). The lowest grade in this group of elements belonged to the item *Easy booking method* (m=3.03). Loyalty elements were assessed with an average score above three, which is considered a good average score based on the given scale. Given that most of the items related to quality were rated with a good average rating, it can be said that the first hypothesis H_1 is confirmed: The quality of the existing service is at a satisfactory level.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was used to measure the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Given that the obtained values are satisfactory (KMO =0.916; X^2=5158.8; df=190; p=0.00), further EFA analysis was undertaken (Tucker & MacCallum, 1997). With promax rotation EFA analysis, three factors were identified based on 20 characteristics (Table 2).

Table 2: Rationalization of the number of items through promax rotation (factor loading)

Items	Factor Loading		
	F1	F2	F3
Quality of staff		.920	
The quality of the manager's work		.910	
Courtesy of the employees		848	
Quality of information service		.716	
Other additional hotel facilities	.569		.331
Reception quality		.485	.451
Appearance of the hotel	.410	.330	
Quality of equipment in the hotel	.395		
Accommodation equipment with additional content	.853		
The presence of gyms and swimming pools and spa centers	.751		
Appearance of the restaurant	.731		
Appearance of accommodation	.727		
Accommodation comfort	.722		
The position of the hotel	.551		
Quality of food and drinks	.443	.	
Return to the hotel again			.849
Overall loyalty			.782
The possibility of changing the room		.762	
Positive attitude about the hotel			.740
Easy booking method		.642	

Source: Authors' research

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the internal consistency of he questionnaire, where all values above 0.7 were accepted as very good borderline values (Tucker & MacCallum, 1997) (Table 3).

Table 3: Descriptive values and reliability for all factors

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation
Material elements	0.781	6.99	1.164
Non.material elements	0.817	6.19	1.424
Loyalty	0.879	5.00	1.336

Source: Authors' research

Exploratory factor analysis extracted exactly three factors, i.e. material elements (10 questions), intangible elements (7 questions). Three questions are related to loyalty, and values were also calculated for the loyalty factor (Table 3). All values are given in Table 3. Factor analysis starts from measures of connection between variables, correlation coefficients or covariance. Due to the large number of variables and their coefficients, a deeper and clearer insight into the laws and structure of the studied phenomena is difficult. It serves to check the used questionnaire and reduce the number of variables, i.e their grouping.

Table 4 shows that the percentage of explained variance is 57%, while the first factor had the highest saturation (38.3%), the second factor had a saturation of 11.8%, while the third factor had a saturation of 6.4%.

Table 4: The results of exploratory factor analysis

Factors	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings[a]
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	7.669	38.347	38.347	6.370
2	2.373	11.865	50.212	5.141
3	1.289	6.444	56.656	5.582

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis
Source: Authors' research

Multiple regression analysis examines the dependence of one phenomenon over two or more independent phenomena. Regression analysis measures the influence of all factors on the criterion variable Loyalty (Table 5).

Table 5: Impact of material and non-material factors on guest loyalty

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p-value
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.600	.076		20.992	.000
	Material elements	.161	.027	.250	5.914	.000
	Non-material elements	.371	.026	.593	14.030	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Loyalty, p<0.01
Source: Authors' research

The results of the multiple regression analysis indicate a significant partial contribution and a statistically significant influence of both factors on the criterion variable Loyalty: material elements (material elements – ß =0.250, p=0.00, t= 5.914; non-material elements ß=0.593, =0.00, t=14.030). The results show that both material and non-material elements have influence on loyalty, with the observation that non-material elements have a stronger impact than material ones. This confirms the hypothesis H_2.

5. Conclusion with future implications and limitations

One of the key problems of establishing quality in hotels in Serbia is certainly the lack or insufficient application of existing standards. The quality of service is certainly an important factor that influences the creation of a positive image of tourists about a hotel and a destination. In this way, if a high-quality service is achieved, it is possible to achieve a high degree of loyalty among visitors, and therefore the possibility of returning to the same hotel.

The primary task was to determine the influence of the quality factor on the creation of loyalty among visitors to hotels at Zlatibor. The authors conducted field research in three hotels at Zlatibor, on a total sample of 540 respondents. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the grades for each item (Akbaba, 2006), as well as for all factors obtained by factor analysis. The existence of three factors was determined, one of which served as a criterion variable – loyalty. A high degree of reliability was achieved based on the reliability analysis. After that, the authors performed a multiple regression analysis to see the impact of tangible and intangible elements on visitor loyalty. The set hypotheses were confirmed and it was established that all factors had a partial direct and positive influence on the loyalty criterion.

The operation of hotels in the mountains of the Republic of Serbia has a pronounced seasonality and is therefore specific, and it is necessary to examine the level of quality of the offer in order to ensure continuity in operation.

Since the literature on hotel business at the mountains of Serbia is very scarce, the significance of the research is reflected in contribution to the existing literature. Moreover, the practical implications of the research are reflected in the use of the obtained results for future research, as well as in the application in hotel business management, in order to improve the offer and achieve long-term positive business. The results of the research can serve as a good strategic tool for planning the development of quality services in the hotels where the research was carried out. Additionally, managers can correct operations and minimize mistakes by looking at the results and answers of respondents, and to reduce costs. By affecting the increase in the quality of the offer, it will achieve a certain degree of loyalty among visitors.

The limitations of the research are primarily reflected in non-cooperation of the respondents with the researchers. The fear of the pandemic is still present, but visitors also give socially desirable answers. In addition, one of the limiting circumstances of the research is the fact that the respondents are only domestic visitors. Foreign respondents mostly refused to cooperate, and those who participated did not give complete answers in the questionnaire. Respondents with an older age structure very often gave socially desirable answers.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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