WHAT DO BOOKING.COM REVIEWS SAY ABOUT THE SERVICE QUALITY OF SERBIAN SPA HOTELS?

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Abstract

Information and communication technologies are the most important component of modern business. This is especially emphasized in industries whose services are characterized by intangibility and inability to try out services before purchase. Therefore, these industries show extremely high sensitivity to information. Today, the availability of information has reached a higher level thanks to the wide spreading of the Internet. This paper investigates guest reviews on Booking.com website, in order to determine the service quality in Serbian spa hotels. The research included 20 spa hotels, for which a total of 3,617 reviews were analyzed. The data was analyzed through the SPSS platform, using descriptive statistics. The results show that hotel guest are satisfied with service quality in Serbian spa hotels.

Key Words: *service quality, online reviews, Booking.com, spa hotels, Serbia*
JEL classification: *L15, L83*

Introduction

The quality of services is important for the business of a hotel company. It needs to be managed and controlled in an adequate way to ensure the guests satisfaction. Satisfied guests are the best advertisement for the hotel, especially nowadays when their satisfaction can be seen worldwide through reviews on online platforms. The primary goal of this paper was to investigate the service quality of hotels in the spa destinations of Serbia by analyzing guest reviews on the Booking.com website. Spa destinations

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were selected because, according to the report of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, for the period January-September 2018 they were the most frequently visited tourist destinations, measured by the number of tourist overnights. About 2.1 million overnight stays were recorded in the spas, representing 28% of the total number of tourist overnights in the Republic of Serbia. The visitors were mostly domestic tourists (87.6% of the total number of overnights) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). Although various factors may have an impact on visiting the spa, Lučić et al. (2016) pointed out that, besides health centers, the spa offer has been supplemented with wellness and spa facilities, which led to the spa being visited throughout the year. Such spa offer contributed in making these destinations popular for people who realize that health is the most valuable thing one can have (Čelić et al., 2019), as well as for young and healthy people (Čerović, 2015).

This situation on the market also requires an adequate offer of accommodation capacities. Today, various accommodation facilities are available in spa destinations, from private apartments and rooms, motels, tourist resorts, to hotels. The focus of this research will be on hotels in spa destinations. According to the data of the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications in the Republic of Serbia there are 371 categorized hotels (hotels, garni hotels and apart hotels) (Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, 2019), of which 30 are located in spas. Of the total number of hotels in Serbia, 255 hotels offer the possibility of online booking via the Booking.com platform (Mašić & Konjikušić, 2017).

The emphasis of this paper will be on defining the quality of hotel services, exploring the quality attributes on the Booking.com platform and presenting the results of the conducted research.

Service quality in the hotel industry

Quality can be everything that a consumer thinks it is. Thus, the ability of a product or service to meet or exceed consumer expectations is crucial (Sekulić & Mandarić, 2013). According to Kosar (2015), "the quality of a hotel product is a market category that includes the emergence of its material and non-material components, integrating it into an integrated whole, as well as the realization of related services, at the level that ensures the compliance of these processes with the requirements of users - hotel guests" (p. 232).

Service quality measurement is becoming more and more important (Vojinović et al., 2016). Ryglová et al. (2013) stated that the quality of services in the hotel industry can be measured by expectations and perceptions of customers, when the contradiction between these two characteristics is expressed by customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In the tourism and hotel industry, some models have been developed to assess the quality of services such as HOLSERV and LODGSERV (for accommodation sector), DINESERV (for restaurants), CASERV (for casino sector) (Al-Ababneh, 2017).

To measure attitudes and customer satisfaction, SERVQUAL can be used. This research instrument covers five dimensions of the service quality: *Tangibles* (physical objects, equipment and staff appearance); *Reliability* (the ability to perform the promised service reliably and accuracy); *Assurance* (knowledge and kindness of employees and their ability to inspire confidence); *Empathy* (the amount of caring, individualized attention the company provides to its clients); *Access* (includes accessibility) (Stefano et al., 2015). The research findings of SERVQUAL technique in the West Moravian spa zone of Serbia show that the determinants of quality, such as safety, reliability and responsibility, are most important, whereby employees in the hotel industry are most responsible for creating good service (Blešić et al., 2009). Blešić et al. (2010) stated that quality is most perceived in the determinant of safety, followed by responsibility and reliability, and, finally, least perceived in tangibility.

Quality dimensions can be different. Barjaktarović (2013) stated that in addition to the technical and functional dimensions of quality, spatial, ecological, aesthetic, economic, ethical, security, ergonomic and other dimensions should be considered. Senić & Senić (2008) explained that technical quality, for example, includes food in the restaurant, room and bed in the hotel, while the functional quality is the looks of the receptionist, the behavior of waiters. The quality of hotel services, according to research carried by Knežević et al. (2017a) and Knežević et al. (2017b), is determined by the following dimensions: *Cleanliness* (in corridors, the cleanliness of kitchen and restaurant, surroundings of a hotel); *Comfort* (comfortable beds, room comfort, comfortable chairs in the restaurant, pleasant atmosphere, noise reduction); *Location* (near a bus station, distance from an airport and the city center, distance from cultural and historical attractions); *Amenities* (wellness facilities, spa facilities, opportunities for sport and recreation, entertainment facilities,

possibilities of organizing different meetings); *Staff* (kindness of staff, professionalism of staff, communication of staff, knowledge of foreign languages, ability of employees to cope with unexpected situations); *Free Wi-Fi*; *Value for money*.

For spa tourists or visitors, the quality consists of several elements that can affect their perception of the spa or destination, even before their arrival. Information obtained before arrival, infrastructure, air quality, water, environment, food, attractiveness, etc. can have a major impact on the overall perception of quality (Berber et al., 2010). Phillips et al., (2016) conducted a survey that examined the impact of online reviews on hotel performance. The results indicate that hotel attributes, including room quality, the Internet and hotel building, have a great impact on the performance of a hotel as well as on tourist demand. The service quality is also reflected in the guests' reviews on different Internet portals. Some of these portals are Travelocity, Expedia, Booking.com, TripAdvisor (Knežević et al., 2014). Therefore, these reviews should be included in the quality research as they can be valuable source of information.

Social networks as instrument for assessing the quality of hotel services

The development of modern information and communication technologies has contributed to the improvement of the hotel industry. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have significantly revolutionized the travel industry in the last decades (Li et al., 2009).

Today, hotels use different technologies to improve the services they provide and thereby gain an advantage on the market. These technologies are used before, during and after the service delivery process. For example, social networks and websites that help customers find and reserve accommodation, and later share their experiences. Thus, it is important to seriously understand and take advantage of the growing importance of information and communication technologies, especially online business (Pavlović & Čelić, 2018).

Brake & Safko (2009) stated that "social networks relate to activities, practices and behaviors among communities of people that are gathering on the Internet to share information, knowledge and opinions, using the media for conversation" (p. 6). Dickinger & Mazanec (2008) noted that online hotel reservations have risen dramatically over the years.

According to users, the advantages of this type of reservation are: time savings, advance bookings and discounts (Kumar et al., 2017).

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), especially on-line reviews by guests, significantly influences decisions for online hotel reservation (Emir et al., 2016; Alabdullatif & Akram, 2018). Öğüta & Cezara (2012) stated that customers who are more likely to leave reviews are actually those with extreme satisfaction or those who were extremely dissatisfied.

Many companies have recognized the importance of such communication, which further led to the development of companies with online business only, and the best examples are TripAdvisor, Booking.com and others (Đurić, 2018).

Booking.com

Booking.com is a company that connects travellers with the largest choice of places to stay (apartments, holiday homes and family boarding houses with breakfast, luxury 5-star resorts, tree houses and even igloos) (Booking.com, 2019). Only reviews of users who booked accommodation via this portal are published on Booking.com (Balagué et al, 2016).

Ilieva & Ivanov (2014) stated that a higher category does not necessarily mean a higher rating on Booking.com. Wulandari et al. (2017) recognized that the price is the most dominant variable that affects the loyalty of Booking.com users, in terms of further use of services on this website.

Booking.com has defined six criteria for assessing the quality of hotel services. These criteria are related to the price and quality, kindness and expertise of staff, free WiFi, comfort, location, facilities (Čerović et al, 2016), cleanliness and comfort (Rodríguez-Díazet et al., 2017). Limberger et al. (2016) stated that comfort and facilities affects the assessment of other criteria, as well as the overall satisfaction of tourists.

In order to express their satisfaction / dissatisfaction with the quality of hotel services, guests fill out a survey containing six questions with scales ranging from 1 to 10 (1 = very poor rating and / or experience, 10 = very good rating and / or experience) (Agušaj et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2018). This survey is optional, and is intended only for those who have booked accommodation via Booking.com. According to Bjørkelund

et al. (2012), for over 80% of reviews on this portal, the average rating is greater than 6.0.

Research methodology

Using Booking.com, one of the largest and most well-known online booking platforms, as a data resource, this study involves the use of various research methods. First, content analysis was used to analyze guests reviews related to the quality of services in Serbian spa hotels. Analysis of collected data was completed in the SPSS (SPSS 20), using descriptive statistics, in order to acquire standard deviaton, minimum, maximum and mean values of hotel service quality attributes, as well as to compare the mean values from the perspective of a particular spa.

For better understanding of the guests reviews, text analysis was also performed. After the key words have been extracted and after the weight factor has been assigned, visual representation of text data is applied using word cloud. In a word cloud, the words that are used more frequently in the text appear larger, while words that are less frequent appear smaller.

The aim of this study is to analyse the guests ratings and reviews using statistical analysis, and to explore whether guests who leave reviews on Booking.com are satisfied with the service quality in Serbian spa hotels.

The study included nine Serbian spas, with a total of 22 hotels offering online booking on this platform. Other spas in Serbia do not have hotels on Booking.com, so they are not the subject of this research. Data were gathered from February 1 to March 1, 2019. The research included 20 spa hotels (for 2 hotels there are no reviews yet). A total of 3,617 reviews were analyzed. Each of the 20 hotels was analyzed according to different criteria (rating of reviewers, type of travel, country of origin, keywords used in reviews). Summarizing reviews for all 20 hotels, a general picture of the service quality in Serbian spa hotels is provided.

Results

The quality of hotel services was analyzed through eight different attributes offered on Booking.com. Obtained results based on customer ratings showed that mean value for each variable were over 8, which point to the fact that they were generally satisfied with all aspects of hotel

service quality (Table 1). The lowest rating is 6.5 (Value for money) while the highest is 9.7 (Cleanliness and Comfort). The highest mean value recorded a variable that refers to the staff (8.83), while the lowest was for the attribute "Value for money" (8.04).

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics of service quality*

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Staff	20	7.60	9.60	8.83	.66671
Facilities	20	6.90	9.20	8.22	.69802
Cleanliness	20	7.30	9.70	8.59	.79333
Comfort	20	6.90	9.70	8.42	.80973
Value for money	20	6.50	9.60	8.04	.82556
Location	20	7.50	9.60	8.76	.60210
Free WiFi	20	6.50	9.40	8.18	.84808
Breakfast	5	7.70	9.00	8.28	.47645

Source: *Research by the authors*

In order to obtain the complete information that may be helpful to potential guests, after booking a hotel, customers are asked about who they are traveling with. This is useful because after that, potential guests are able to see how different groups of travellers rated their stay at the hotel. Based on the analyzed reviews, it can be concluded that the majority of guests who stayed in one of the spa hotels were couples (49.73%), while the smallest number traveled with a group of friends (Table 2).

Table 2: *Type of travellers in Spa hotels*

Type of traveler	Number of reviewers (%)
Families	**868** (24.39%)
Couples	**1,770** (49.73%)
Groups of friends	**99** (2.78%)
Solo travellers	**449** (12.62%)
Business travellers	**373** (10.48%)

Source: *Research by the authors*

Reviews on Booking.com also provide information on the home countries of the users who book hotels on this website. Based on a sample of 3,617 reviews, it was found that 1,791 reviewers or 49.52% of persons, who booked Serbian spa hotels via Booking.com, were foreigners. The data are presented in the following table.

Table 3: *Country of origin of Booking.com reviewers*

Country of origin	No.	Country of origin	No.	Country of origin	No.
Russia	177	Poland	29	Finland	2
Bulgaria	141	Israel	26	Kazakhstan	2
Hungary	125	Belgium	16	Kuwait	2
Macedonia	113	Canada	16	Latvia	2
Germany	108	United Arab Emirates	16	Luxembourg	2
Romania	97	Norway	15	Bhutan	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	88	Slovakia	14	Estonia	1
Montenegro	82	Spain	11	India	1
Switzerland	78	Turkey	9	Indonesia	1
Sweden	68	Denmark	9	Japan	1
Austria	64	Greece	7	South Sudan	1
Slovenia	62	Malta	7	South African Republic	1
Croatia	61	Ukraine	6	Kenya	1
China	50	Portugal	4	Liechtenstein	1
United States	43	Brazil	3	Malaysia	1
Italy	39	Georgia	3	Samoa	1
United Kingdom	39	Ireland	3	Sudan	1
Czech Republic	34	Qatar	3	Tanzania	1
Australia	32	Cyprus	3		
France	32	Libya	3		
Netherlands	30	Belarus	2		

Source: *Research by the authors*

Based on Table 3, it can be seen that reviewers come from 60 different countries around the world (Figure 1), with the largest number of reviewers from Russia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Macedonia and Germany.

Figure 1: *Territorial distribution of foreign reviewers of spa hotels*

Source: *Work by the authors*

As previously mentioned, the authors have analyzed eight key dimensions: Staff, Facilities, Cleanliness, Comfort, Value for money, Location, Free WiFi and Breakfast. In order to get a more detailed insight into the service quality, the obtained results for these attributes were observed for each spa separately (Table 4).

Table 4: *Mean values of reviewers ratings for each spa*

Spa	Staff	Facilities	Cleanliness	Comfort	Value for money	Location	Free WiFi	Breakfast	Total
Bukovička Banja	9.10	9.20	9.30	9.10	8.20	8.80	8.70		8.91
Vrnjačka Banja	8.81	8.01	8.44	8.31	7.99	8.71	8.00	8.27	8.32
Sokobanja	8.50	8.00	7.90	8.00	7.00	8.20	7.20		7.83
Banja Koviljača	8.10	7.70	7.70	7.70	7.70	8.50	6.50	8.20	7.76
Prolom Banja	8.40	7.70	8.30	7.70	7.30	8.20	8.00		7.94
Banja Kanjiža	8.60	8.15	8.55	8.30	8.40	8.65	9.00		8.52
Banja Vrdnik	9.50	9.00	9.50	9.40	8.00	8.60	9.40	8.40	8.98
Palić	8.95	8.45	8.82	8.60	8.30	9.27	8.27		8.67
Lukovska Banja	9.60	8.70	9.20	9.10	8.80	8.80	8.80		9.00

Source: *Research by the authors*

Based on the results given in the table above, we can conclude that the hotel guests who booked the hotel via Booking.com were most satisfied with the quality of the *staff* in Lukovska Banja (rating 9.6), and the least satisfied in Banja Koviljača, as evidenced by the score of 8.1.

Guests assessed the quality of *hotel facilities* with the highest rating in Bukovička Banja (rating 9.2), while guests who stayed in Banja Vrdnik highly rated the *cleanliness and comfort* of the hotel. Guests, who stayed in Banja Koviljača, together with the guests who stayed in Sokobanja, were least satisfied with facilities and comfort.

The attribute that received the lowest average rating, *value for money*, is best rated by guests who stayed at a hotel in Lukovska Banja (rating 8.8), while the least satisfied guests were those who stayed at hotels in Sokobanja.

Location is highly rated by Booking.com reviewers. With the average rating of 9.2 it can be concluded that guests who visited Palić were very satisfied with the location of the hotel.

Compared to all observed attributes, *free WiFi* recorded the highest difference in ratings. The highest average score of 9.8 was received from guests who stayed in Banja Vrdnik, while the lowest average score recorded Banja Koviljača (6.5).

For the last component, *breakfast*, there were data for only three spas from the observed sample. The data show that this attribute is almost identically rated by all reviewers.

Booking.com converts each grade into a set of linguistic terms (very poor, poor, okay, good, superb) so that people who read reviews can also see which range of ratings is considered terrible, or very well rated. We applied this standardized grading method to our data, which converted the average grades we previously obtained for each attribute, into their linguistic counterparts (Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows that each of the observed attributes in the highest percentage is rated in the range of 7 to 9, which is perceived as good service. None of the attributes has an average grade of less than 5, while a small percentage is rated by grades 5 to 7. A significant percentage of

reviewers estimate the service quality in Serbian spa hotels, for almost all attributes, as superb (except for breakfast).

Figure 2: *Recorded ratings*
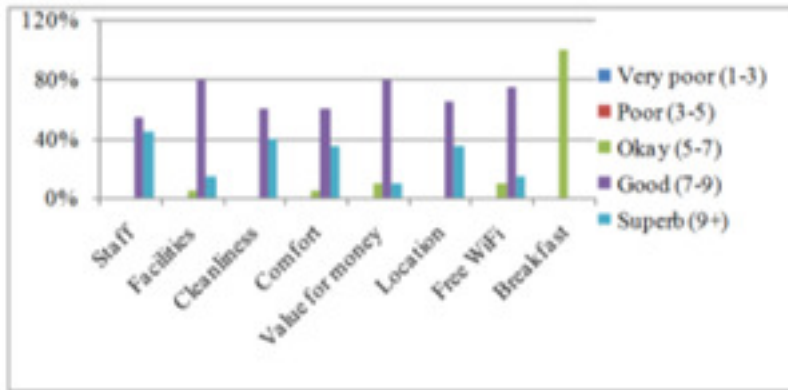
Source: *Research by the authors*

In order to further understand customer satisfaction with hotel services in Serbian spas, text analysis was performed on the reviews. Reviews were analyzed for all 20 hotels. Based on the identified key words, Word cloud is formed (Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Key words from Booking.com reviews*

Source: *Research by the authors*

Based on the text analysis, the most frequently used words were staff, food, location, hygiene and bed. The most positive comments of the guests are related to the staff. Positive characteristics of hotel staff, according to guest reviews from Booking.com: friendly, professional, helpful and speak English. Opinions about food, location and hygiene are

divided, but they are certainly one of the most frequently mentioned words. Guests' comments were often about the room, with a special accent on the size of the room and the comfort of the bed. Most of the comments about the hotel room were positive. On the other hand, guests often complained about noise, lack of facilities for children and additional hotel facilities.

Discussion and conclusion

Tourism and hotel industry are industries with intangible character of the final service (Dimitrovski & Seočanac, 2018). Such nature of service has made tourism and hotel industry extremely sensitive to information. This is especially important after the wide spreading of the Internet, when information becomes available worldwide (Kraguljac, et al., 2019).

The results of the study conducted by Google/IPSOS OTX (2011) showed that 45% of people are planning their vacation based on online reviews. This indicates that information on the Internet, and in particular reviews and ratings of tourists who have already visited the destination/hotel, play an important role in the travel decision-making process. It also serves as a means of reducing uncertainties caused by the nature of services in tourism and hotel industry (Castro & Ferreira, 2018).

The website Booking.com discloses, for each hotel, guests' ratings for Staff, Facilities, Cleanliness, Comfort, Value for money, Location and Free WiFi. In order to determine the quality of hotel services in Serbian spa hotels, published reviews, for each of these categories, were used as inputs for this study.

One of the important conclusions of the conducted study is the fact that reviewers were generally satisfied with the service quality in the spa hotels they stayed in. Such results confirmed some of the earlier studies that examined the service quality in Serbian hotels (Knežević et al., 2017).

Reviewers expressed their satisfaction with high ratings for hotel quality attributes but also with comments that emphasized the positive side of hotel service. The average rating of service quality is 8.44. This result is in line with a study conducted by Bjørkelund et al. (2012).

Reviews also provided insights into the types of travelers visiting spa hotels. Their analysis led to the conclusion that 49.73% of guests who booked their stay via Booking.com were couples.

It was interesting to investigate the home country of the foreigners who have booked their stay in spa hotels. The collected data showed that foreigners came from 60 different countries, with the most tourists from Russia.

Observing the reviews from the aspect of individual spa, Lukovska Banja proved to be the spa with best average rating on Booking.com. Lastly, the quality of service in spa hotels was rated as good by the majority of reviewers.

Limitation of the study is the fact that only guests who booked and reviewed their stay via Booking.com were taken into account when analyzing the quality of hotel services. Future research should include not only guests who reserve their stay via Booking.com, but also other guests in Serbian spa hotels.

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