

## **AN ASSESSMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN THE HOTEL SECTOR**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to offer an empirical examination of the service quality in the hotel sector. While service quality is considered as an important factor on generating customer satisfaction and repurchase intention, little is done on assessing and exploring it in the Albanian context. So, this paper aims to offer an assessment of the quality of the service offered by the hotels in the Albanian coast and also an assessment of the effect of service quality on the satisfaction of hotel customers.

**Methodology** – An instrument was built in order to gather important data and to assess the variables of the study. It consists of a structured questionnaire used as a self-administered one. A revised SERVPERF with 5-Likert scale is used to collect the tourists' perceptions on service quality and customer satisfaction while, factorial analyses are used to assess service quality and the impact of quality on customer satisfaction. The sample is composed of tourists who were staying at the hotels of the sun and sand sector in the Albania coast line.

**Findings** – The results of the statistical analyses of the collected data show the significant importance of the perceptions of the tourists about the service quality and the significant impact of the perceived service quality on customer satisfaction for hotel guests.

**Contribution** – This paper contributes to the existing empirical literature exploring service quality and its impact on customer satisfaction. It presents a methodology for developing the service quality and customer satisfaction. So, businesses and institutions in the hotel sector have a better understanding of the factors that are considered important from the customer point of view to create and maintain high service quality and customer satisfaction.

**Keywords:** service quality, customer satisfaction, hotels, Albania

### **INTRODUCTION**

The tourism industry has played an important role in the economy of different countries in the last decades. Many countries have considered tourism as a mean of generating more travellers and tourists and as a result more business and profits in their home countries. Regions and destinations are competing with each other on attracting as many tourists as they can. The developed countries are engaged in doing marketing for their destinations and they are improving continuously their services and are striving to offer excellent experiences for their guests.

Not only the developed countries are strongly oriented towards tourism industry, but also the less developed and the non-developed ones have understood the profits generated from the development of tourism and are putting more efforts in attracting as many tourists as possible.

Travelling is one of the benefits of living in a globalized world. Despite the economic crisis that have stuck the world, the number of international tourists has increased in the last years (UNWTO, 2015). An ever-increasing number of destinations worldwide have opened up to, and invested in tourism, turning it into a key driver of socio-economic progress through the creation of jobs and enterprises, export revenues, and infrastructure development (UNWTO, 2015). International tourist arrivals have increased from 527 million globally in 1995 to 1133 million in 2014 while International tourism receipts reached US\$ 1245 billion worldwide in 2014, an increase of 3.7% in real terms (UNWTO, 2015). International tourist arrivals in Europe were (+3%) up in 2014 and the region's growth was driven largely by Southern and Mediterranean Europe (+7%).

As an emerging destination, Albania reported a double-digit increase. Referring to UNWTO (2015), Albania is geographically situated in the world's most visited region and among many of the world largest and most mature destinations. This said, has the chance to benefit from this strategic positioning to attract new visitors and tourists by enhancing its touristic offers.

The data about the tourism development in Albania in the recent period have shown a yearly increase in the number of tourists travelling to Albania. From a small sector on the past economy aiming the country self-industrialization it started its growth experiencing many changes since the fall of the communist regime. During the last two decades, the hospitality industry in Albania has gained many attention, investments and interest from the institutions, businesses and tourists. From a country with a few structures that could accommodate, a lot has been done in improving hospitality units in a short amount of time. Many new properties have opened, offering hospitality services to travellers and tourists. Restaurants, bars, motels and hotels were built almost everywhere there was an attraction, especially a natural one. The phenomena of building without having or respecting a structured urban plan led to the increase of the number of many uncontrolled buildings and as a result, the competition and especially the informal one has grown faster.

As the number of tourists increased, more attention is dedicated to various elements of tourism. Among others, the hotel sector is one of the most important ones. On the other hand, little has been done in establishing and offering high service quality and customer satisfaction. Referring to researches, only a few studies have explored service quality and its impact on customer satisfaction from the tourists' point of view. Different studies have shown that despite a long-term interest in understanding service quality and its correlation with consumer satisfaction, the relationship between these variables still remains unclear (Ekinçi et al., 2008).

This study wants to offer a review of the exiting literature about service quality and customer satisfaction. On this basis, it aims to offer an empirical assessment of service quality perceived by tourists staying in the hotel sector in Albania and its impact on tourists' satisfaction. It wants to offer higher knowledge and some recommendations to practitioners and managers who operate in this industry in order to create and maintain satisfied customers.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW ¶

### 1.1. Service quality

Services have gained an enormous place in the national and international exchanges worldwide. Services are the main offer of the hospitality and tourism industry and this industry is responsible of the main increase in services' exports. Different studies have explored the quality of the service in different backgrounds and its impact on other variables (Cronin, Brady, and Hult 2000; Ko et al., 2011). It has attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners as it has an important impact on customer loyalty and business profitability (Seth et al., 2005). Several studies have analysed the conceptualization, definition, dimensions, measurement and impact of service quality on customer satisfaction, behaviour intention, brand loyalty and other variables (Akbaba, 2006; Ladhari, 2008; Olorunniwo and Hsu (2006); Malhotra et al., 2005) while they still call for other ones in order to offer a deep understanding of these important factors. It becomes even more important to understand how to offer constantly high quality in the service sector because of the distinctive characteristics of services. In labor-intensive services where the interaction between the employees and providers is intense, such as hotels, quality is created during the process of service delivery.

Despite many studies, there is still a lack of consensus about the definition of service quality. Zeithaml (1988) defined service quality as the customers' assessment about a product overall superiority or experience while Kotler and Armstrong (2011) defined it as composed of service characteristics reflected in the ability to fulfil stated and implied needs.

Based on the conceptualizations of service quality there are some models in the literature that have been used to measure the quality of the services. Gronroos (1984) stated that the technical and functional aspects are important elements of assessing and measuring the service. He identified three dimensions of service quality: technical quality, functional quality and image. Technical quality is related to the quality of what customers receive from the interaction with the company/service provider and has an important part on evaluating service quality. Functional quality is related to the way how the service is delivered while image is built up by technical and functional quality.

Parasuraman et al. (1985) proposed that service quality is a function of the difference between the expectations and perceptions of the service. Based on the gap analysis and on the 5 dimensions of quality, they developed the gap model called SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al. 1988). After several reviews the SERVQUAL scale was composed by five dimensions named reliability, responsiveness, tangibles, assurance and empathy and it was composed of 21 items. This model has been used in several studies where different dimensions have proved to be more important than others. In some of them the dimensions have resulted to be all the five and in others there were less than 5 dimensions of service quality.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) stated that it is not necessary to measure the expectations because in the formation of perceptions, expectations play an important role. They proposed that it is not necessary to measure both expectations and perceptions of the items of the SERVQUAL scale but instead the measure of perceptions only is a better way of measuring service quality. This model which is based on the perceptions measurement is called SERVPERF. During the years, numerous studies have been undertaken to assess the superiority of two scales, but there is still a lack of general consensus as to which one is a better scale. The items used to assess service quality of the SERVPERF model are the same as the SERVQUAL one. SERVPERF is considered to be more efficient as it reduces the number of items to be measured (perceptions only) and it is found to explain better the greater variance in the overall service quality measured through the use of a single-item scale (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Dabholkar et al., 2000). Because of that, SERVPERF scale has attracted considerable support over time.

Different studies in the hospitality industry have shown that service quality is a significant condition to delivering superior experience (Akbaba, 2006; Wu and Ko, 2013). The hotels that offer good service quality can improve their profitability (Oh and Parks, 1997; Seth et al., 2005) and retain their customers. It is considered an important antecedent of other behaviour variables as repeat purchase and brand loyalty (Wilkins et al., 2007; Zehir et al., 2011).

## **1.2. Customer satisfaction**

During the last decades, researchers and practitioners have tried to assess the service quality and its relation with significant variables of consumer behavior as customer satisfaction. Some of them have found that service quality may have an important effect on customer satisfaction and other behavioral variables (Cronin et al., 2000; Yavas et al., 2004). Customer satisfaction is an important element of creating and maintaining long term relationships with customers. Customers are more likely to take again the same product or other products of the brand they are satisfied with and ignoring other brands that have not met their expectations. Oliver (1980) based his theory of customer satisfaction on the evaluation of expectations and perceptions about the product or service use. As a result of this comparison three different situations may occur and what companies want is positive disconfirmation; when the perceptions about the product/service are higher than the expectations. Companies and service providers should be careful on the messages they deliver in order to create the right customer expectations for having positive disconfirmations or satisfaction. Some studies have used several items to measure customer satisfaction (Pizam et al., 2016), others (eg. Assaker et al., 2011) have used a single measure of tourists' satisfaction named overall satisfaction, as a better measure of this construct and future purchase intentions. Other researchers (Hu et al., 2009, 115) stated that customer satisfaction is a cognitive or affective reaction in response to a single or prolonged set of service encounters.

Customer satisfaction is very important for creating and reinforcing customer loyalty and the long-term relationship between the service provider and the customer. A satisfied customer may spread positive word of mouth to many others while an

unsatisfied one may represent a danger for the provider because of negative word of mouth. Particularly in a competitive hotel sector, where services are perceived to be homogeneous, hoteliers must be able to satisfy customers better than their competitors (Choi and Chu, 2001) if they want their share of wallet.

High service quality and customer satisfaction are fundamental factors that improve considerably the company performance in the hotel and tourism industry (Oppermann, 1998; Dominici and Guzzo, 2010). Although the different studies exploring this relationship, there is a need of further analysis on these constructs in different environments and economies, especially in the context of a developing country such as Albania. While other studies have been focused in specific segments in the hotel sector, this study does not focus in any segment in particular as there does not exist yet any classification of the hotels in Albania regarding the “stars” as a measure of standard definition.

Based on previous research and theoretical review, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: Service Quality influences Satisfaction positively

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A survey instrument was developed in order to assess service quality and customer satisfaction in the hotel sector in Albania. After a thorough literature review there were chosen several items measuring service quality and customer satisfaction. They were developed starting from other studies where have been proved to be of strong reliability and validity. The 9 items used to measure service quality were adopted from previous research and were modified and reworded to fit the hotel sector context. They were taken mainly from the study of Parasuraman et al. (1985). While the 4 items used to assess customer satisfaction were adopted from the study of Andreassen and Lindestad (1998), Caruana (2002), Olorunniwo and Hsu (2006). The items were reviewed by specialists, academics of marketing and tourism and the questionnaire was first tested by 20 hotel customers. A five-point Likert scale, from 1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree was utilized to measure customer agreement/disagreement with each item. The final items are presented below:

The hotel is visually appealing  
The facilities of the hotel are modern  
The hotel staff provides quality timely and manner service  
The hotel offers stable quality service  
The hotel staff performs the right service  
The hotel staff is always willing to help clients  
The hotel staff is courteous  
The hotel staff is trustworthy  
The hotel staff offers personalized services  
Overall, I am very satisfied with the services offered by the hotel  
I am satisfied with my decision to stay at this hotel

Overall, the service offered at this hotel meets my expectations  
 Compared to other hotels I've stayed in I'm very satisfied with this hotel

The questionnaire was distributed to customers of the hotels in the Albanian seaside. A group of trained students who had prior experiences with data gathering helped the customers to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed among the customers of the hotel sector in the sun and sand segment in Albania. They were tourists who were staying there at the time of the study completion. First it was reviewed the list of the hotels and accurately was assessed the number of the rooms and guests in the period of the study completion. Referring to the number of rooms per hotel and the sample quantity needed when using SEM (Hair et al., 2009) it was decided the number of the questionnaires to be completed for each hotel. The questionnaires were distributed and completed in the months of July and August which corresponds to the peak season of this kind of tourism in Albania. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed and 361 of them were found useful to proceed with the statistical analyses.

Firstly we conducted the reliability and validity analyses. The reliability test was used to assess consistency of measurement items. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the measurement items. The value of Cronbach's alpha should exceed 0.70 as suggested by Hair et al. (2009). Table 1 provides the Cronbach's alphas for questionnaire items used in this study.

Table 1: Cronbachs' alpha values

Scales	No. of items	Sample size	Cronbachs' alpha
Service quality	9	361	0.786
Customer satisfaction	4	361	0.752

Source: own

Table 2: Descriptive statistical analysis

Variable	Mean	St.deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	z-skewness	z-kurtosis
SQ 1	4.00	0.990	-0.279	-0.183	-2.16**	-0.71*
SQ 2	3.67	1.075	-0.194	-0.379	-1.50*	-1.47*
SQ 3	4.14	1.023	-0.028	0.321	-0.22*	1.24*
SQ 4	4.14	0.946	-0.073	0.648	-0.57*	2.52**
SQ 5	4.46	0.878	-0.226	0.057	-1.75*	0.22*
SQ 6	4.20	0.919	-0.310	0.341	-2.40**	1.32*
SQ 7	4.65	0.688	-0.178	0.532	-1.38*	2.06**
SQ 8	4.46	0.774	-0.314	0.423	-2.43**	1.64*
<b>SQ 9</b>	<b>4.04</b>	<b>1.058</b>	<b>-0.162</b>	<b>0.987</b>	<b>-1.26*</b>	<b>3.83</b>
CS 1	4.29	0.879	-0.288	0.633	-2.23**	2.45**
CS 2	4.28	0.930	-0.241	0.514	-1.87*	1.99**
<b>CS 3</b>	<b>4.09</b>	<b>0.970</b>	<b>-0.034</b>	<b>0.710</b>	<b>-0.27*</b>	<b>2.75</b>
CS 4	4.06	1.073	-0.030	0.453	-0.23*	1.76*

\* p < 0.01  
 \*\* p < 0.05

Source: own

Only SQ9 and CS3 present problem about kurtosis but it was decided to continue the analysis with these data and not trying to bring them to normality, following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2009) that the impact effectively disappears when the sample size is greater than 200 (Hair et al., 2009, p. 76) as the case of this study.

Validity is the degree to which an instrument measures what it intends to measure (Lawrence and Martin, 2001). Validity is measured through three validity tests: content discriminant and unidimensionality validity. The evaluations of these validities were assessed by conducting factor analysis. So, first was conducted the Confirmatory Factor analysis. It was performed using SPSS AMOS 18 to measure the unidimensionality, convergent and discriminant validity. The values of the confirmatory factor analysis are presented in the table 3. The CFA results provide overall fit indices ( $\chi^2 = 347.18$ , chi-square degree of freedom = 630, RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation) = 0.05, GFI (goodness-of-fit) = 0.95, AGFI (adjusted goodness-of-fit) = 0.97, CFI (comparative fit index) = 0.98. SRMR (root mean square residual) = 0.042 and NNFI (nonnormed fit index) = 0.92).

Table 3: Results of confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Construct	Path	Coefficient	St. error	t-value	R2
Service quality	Service quality – SQ1	0.88	0.085	7.56	0.64
	Service quality – SQ2	1.30	0.084	8.89	0.71
	Service quality – SQ3	0.94	0.089	16.76	0.78
	Service quality – SQ4	1.07	0.077	15.24	0.88
	Service quality – SQ5	1.32	0.076	16.39	0.69
	Service quality – SQ6	1.21	0.084	17.98	0.86
	Service quality – SQ7	0.95	0.052	12.59	0.77
	Service quality – SQ8	1.04	0.067	11.67	0.72
	Service quality – SQ9	1.13	0.045	8.46	0.77
Satisfaction	Satisfaction – SAT1	1.13	0.084	1.087	0.76
	Satisfaction – SAT1	1.08	0.061	11.14	0.66
	Satisfaction – SAT1	1.05	0.059	11.41	0.51
	Satisfaction – SAT1	1.07	0.078	11.63	0.69

Source: own

The data show that confirmatory factor analysis for the final measurement model reasonably supported the model's fit. After that, the structural equation model was conducted and the AVE values were found to be within the proper limits. The structural equation model (SEM) is used to assess the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction by using SPSS AMOS 18.

Table 4: Hypothesis testing

Path	Coefficient estimate	p-value	Hypothesis testing
Service quality $\rightarrow$ satisfaction	0.33	0.000	supported

Source: own

The hypothesis of the study was supported. So, the quality that customers perceive from the experience with the hotel has an important impact on the creation of customer satisfaction. This result support the findings of other studies in the tourism industry and the hotel sector (Loureiro et al., 2011; Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000; Nam et al., 2011; Nadiri et al., 2008).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to contribute to the existing empirical literature on service quality and customer satisfaction assessment. It gave an analysis of these important constructs in the hotel sector in Albania. A sample of hotel customers staying in the hotels at the time of the study were part of the empirical testing of the relationship between the quality of the service offered and customer satisfaction. The items used to measure these variables were refined to adapt to the hotel sector and their validity and reliability was confirmed.

This paper confirms the findings found in other studies about the positive effect of service quality on customer satisfaction. It offers a contribution in the existing theoretical literature about these significant variables of consumer behaviour. The findings provide some implications for the practitioners and institutions operating in the tourism industry and the hotel sector. It is of vital importance that hoteliers understand comprehensively the critical factors that are necessary to achieve high service quality and customer satisfaction. They should understand that the quality of the service, perceived from each dimension of service quality has an important positive effect on customer satisfaction. In practise, they should know that the physical appearance of their buildings and surroundings plays a significant role on customer perceptions. So has the interaction with the employees in different areas of the hotel and with all types of employees in the front-row. They have a key role in creating positive customer perceptions and offering high quality services. This is even more difficult to be achieved in this sector due to the fact that tourism is a seasonal industry in Albania. As the sun and sand sector is the main one that attracts the major number of tourists it is very important that managers and hoteliers be focused on selecting the employees who have the needed qualifications to serve customers. Their politeness, professionalism and individual care for each customer creates perceptions of high service quality and customer satisfaction. Practitioners have actual and empirical elements where to put their efforts for delivering high quality and creating customer satisfaction. The institutions responsible for creating and monitoring the sector have now some important indicators where to base their strategies and regulations which aim the improvement of the hotel sector and the tourism industry in Albania as it is considered a strategic industry for the country development.

Although the usefulness of the results of this studies it have some limitations. First, a sample of 66 hotels was representing the hotel offer in Albania but there are other hotels that operate in the tourism industry (although there are not exact figures due to informality). Second, the sample of the tourists were taken from the sun and sand tourism while there are other forms of tourism in Albania as cultural, adventure, alpine tourism. Other studies are needed to explore the hotel sector and tourism industry in



Albania. There is need for further empirical research studies in the tourism industry in Albania as many elements of the consumer behaviour are still unexplored.

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