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USE OF THE SERVQUAL MODEL TO EVALUATE THE QUALITY OF TOURIST SERVICES OF SPA TOURISM IN SERBIA

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Abstract

The growing importance of tourism for the economic development of the country has led to a change in the awareness of tourism service providers towards continuous improvement of their quality. Improving the quality of tourist services is one of the keys to meeting the needs of increasingly demanding tourists. Tourist satisfaction with the provided service is recognized as one of the key factors by which tourists measure service quality, which also influences their choice of tourist destination. The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between service quality and tourist satisfaction using the SERVQUAL model. Based on data collected from 87 tourists, it can be concluded that the overall quality of tourist services provided by spa tourism is somewhat satisfactory and requires constant improvement in service quality.

Key Words: *Tourism, Quality, SERVQUAL model, spa tourism, Serbia.*
JEL classification: Z32

Introduction

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020), prior to the pandemic, tourism had been continuously growing for decades and was the most dynamic sector in the global economy. In 2019 alone, there were 1.46 billion international tourist arrivals, generating \$1.481 trillion in revenue. Europe maintained its dominance with 744 million

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international arrivals (+4%), followed by Asia and the Pacific (362 million, +4%), the Americas (219 million, +2%), Africa (70 million, +1%), and the Middle East (65 million, +8%), all showing growth. Tourism revenues also followed similar trends, with Europe leading in revenue (\$576 billion, +4%), followed by Asia and the Pacific (\$443 billion, +1%), the Americas (\$342 billion, +0%), the Middle East (\$81 billion, +8%), and Africa (\$38 billion, +1%). According to the analysis and estimation of tourism growth in 2023 at the global level and by regions, UNWTO stated that international tourism is on track to reach 80 to 95 percent of pre-pandemic levels. Tourism, according to UNWTO, continued to recover by 87 percent in the period from January to September 2023 compared to pre-pandemic figures. UNWTO states that if the growth trend continues, tourism recovery in 2023 will reach almost 90 percent compared to pre-pandemic levels.

International tourism revenues could reach \$1.4 trillion in 2023, which is about 93 percent of the revenue generated from tourism in 2019 when it amounted to \$1.5 trillion. Tourism, besides influencing macroeconomic indicators and stability, also contributes to regional and local development and reduces unemployment (Vujičić et al., 2016). Considering that tourism plays a crucial role in the economy, many countries actively promote their tourism potentials. However, tourist satisfaction with service quality becomes an increasingly important factor in tourism development and achieving competitive advantage. Quality is increasingly emphasized as the main indicator of organizational market success, surpassing parameters such as productivity, profitability, and liquidity (Milanović et al., 2020). For organizations aiming to maintain stability and success in the market, service quality is essential (Dile et al., 2019). Service quality in tourism is defined as meeting all legitimate needs for products and services in tourist destinations, along with tourist satisfaction resulting from meeting requirements and expectations, as well as a balance between price and value (UNWTO, 2014). Consistent provision of services to tourists according to expected standards and continuous fulfillment of tourist expectations should be a priority for tourism service providers. Therefore, continuous interactive communication with tourists through tourism market research becomes a key mechanism for monitoring and improving the quality of tourism services.

In the opinion of many authors, the key trends in spa tourism in recent years have been the increasing awareness of health and a healthy lifestyle,

intensive innovation of tourist products (treatments and services), design that aligns with fashion, and changes in customer behavior (lifestyle). If a product or service meets customer expectations, they will be satisfied. According to the most well-known definition of service quality provided by Parasuraman et al. (1988), service quality encompasses five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Additionally, dimensions of service quality can be divided into tangible aspects, which relate to the physical aspect, and intangible aspects, which pertain to the human aspect of service delivery, such as empathy, reliability, and responsiveness of staff. High service quality can lead to high customer satisfaction and increased loyalty towards the brand or product.

Spa tourism in the Republic of Serbia

Tourism plays a crucial role in the economic, social, and political life of many countries. Providing high-quality tourism services becomes essential to meet the increasingly demanding needs of travelers. Quality has become an essential factor for survival in the market, achieving profitability and competitiveness, and for the overall economic development of countries (Alkier et al., 2020). It is increasingly recognized as a key success factor that enables organizations to stand out from the competition. According to Nikolić (2021), continuously monitoring contemporary market trends and adjusting the tourism offer to the desires and preferences of travelers is crucial for achieving this goal. Tourist satisfaction with service quality becomes imperative, as emphasized by Radović Marković et al. (2019), while the importance of competitive advantage has been highlighted in recent years (Naeini et al., 2019). Innovation stands out as a key factor for business competitiveness in modern business conditions (Vujičić et al., 2021). According to Stojković Hadži et al. (2022), innovation is a strategy that enables the creation of competitive advantages, improvement of existing services, and the introduction of new, more efficient, cheaper, and faster services. Tourism as an employment sector is of great importance, and according to WTTC data (2022), in the period before the pandemic in 2019, tourism employed 333 million people, accounting for every fourth employed person in the world. Although the COVID-19 pandemic led to a decrease in the number of employed to 271 million people in 2020, the sector's rapid recovery suggests that this number will continue to grow.

The development strategy of tourism in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025 emphasizes the need for the tourism sector to adapt to contemporary trends in the global market and offer authentic experiences that will be recognizable compared to the competition (Legal Information System of the Republic of Serbia, 2016). An analysis of the arrivals and overnight stays of foreign tourists in the Republic of Serbia from 2000 to 2020 shows a trend of growth and decline in tourist traffic. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a transformation of traditional business models into sustainable business models focused on resilience (Roblek et al., 2021). The crisis has also sparked thinking about the future of tourism and the need to build a stronger, more sustainable, and resilient tourism economy (Alkier et al., 2022).

Table 1: *Tourist arrivals and overnight stays in the Republic of Serbia from 2000-2023. years*

Year	Tourist arrivals			Overnight stays		
	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign
2015.	2.437.165	1.304.944	1.132.221	6.651.852	4.242.172	2.409.680
2016.	2.753.951	1.472.165	1.281.426	7.533.739	4.794.741	2.738.998
2017.	3.085.866	1.588.693	1.497.173	8.325.144	5.150.017	3.175.127
2018.	3.430.522	1.720.008	1.710.514	9.336.103	5.678.235	3.657.868
2019.	1.846.551	1.843.432	1.846.551	10.073.299	6.062.921	4.010.378
2020.	1.820.021	1.374.310	445.711	6.201.290	4.936.732	1.264.558
2021.	2.591.293	1.720.054	871.239	8.162.430	5.732.833	2.429.597
2022.	3.869.235	2.096.472	1.772.763	12.245.613	7.306.219	4.939.394
2023.	4.192.797	2.058.492	2.134.305	12.440.935	6.858.331	5.582.604

Source: *authors calculation according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020;2021;2022;2023).*

Spa tourism holds an extremely important place in the tourist offer of the Republic of Serbia. This form of tourism encompasses complex therapies and recovery in spas and climatic resorts, as well as various activities such as vacations and excursions to surrounding areas. According to Stanković (2009), Serbia has great potential for the development of health tourism due to the expertise of staff, variety of content, length of stay, intensity of tourist promotion, as well as the quality of infrastructure and services in healthcare facilities. An analysis of data on the number of tourists and overnight stays from 2015 to 2022 in 15 spas across Serbia (Arandelovac, Banja Vrdnik, Vranjska Banja, Vrnjačka Banja, Vrujci – Gornja Toplica, Gamzigradska Banja, Gornja Trepča, Koviljača, Lukovska Banja, Mataruška Banja, Niška Banja, Palić, Prolom Banja,

Sijarinska Banja, Sokobanja) shows a continuous growth in the number of tourists during the observed period. However, in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant decrease in the arrivals of domestic and foreign tourists (see table 2). This decrease is a result of restrictive measures and travel limitations imposed to prevent the spread of the virus.

Table 2: *Tourist arrivals in Serbian spas*

Year	Tourist arrivals			Overnight stays		
	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign
2015.	427.456	348.539	78.917	1.854,582	1.623,761	230.821
2016.	477.102	391.085	86.017	2.085,044	1.831, 205	253.839
2017.	519.151	429.065	90.086	2.227,945	1.956,656	271.289
2018.	596.884	487.302	109.582	2.542,391	2.226,627	315.764
2019.	670.044	547.239	122.805	2.781,627	2.427,434	354.193
2020.	522.947	491.879	31.068	2.184,602	2.075,951	108.651
2021.	677.404	602.806	74.598	2.636.000	2.382.736	253.264
2022.	703.972	610.077	93.895	3.054.744	2.701.335	353.409

Source: *authors calculation according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2016; 2017; 2018;2019; 2020;2021;2022).*

Spa centers in Serbia, as destinations enriched with healing properties, have the potential to offer their visitors a significant tourism experience, encompassing historical, educational, aesthetic, and experiential elements (Jovanović Tončev et al., 2015). In order to enhance and elevate tourism in spas to a higher level, it is necessary to continuously research the market, utilize international experiences in the development of spa centers, and develop innovative and high-quality tourism offerings (Andrijašević & Bartoluci, 2004; Bartoluci, 2007). Additionally, Hendija and Boranić (2020) emphasize the importance of continuous staff education in spas about the latest trends in tourism and medicine to provide the best possible service to guests. Furthermore, special attention should be paid to preserving the natural resources and cultural heritage of spa areas for the sustainable development of tourism in those regions.

SERVQUAL model

Service quality represents the ability of service providers to meet the needs of their users. The SERVQUAL model is the most commonly used tool for measuring service quality, with a unique set of questions that help better understand users' expectations and perceptions. This model focuses

on measuring the difference between what users expect and what they actually receive. The original SERVQUAL model, proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), includes ten dimensions of service quality: reliability, assurance, tangibles, responsiveness, and empathy. Over time, this model has evolved, reducing the number of dimensions to five key aspects: Reliability - the ability to deliver promised service accurately and safely; Assurance - providing a sense of trust and security through the knowledge and courtesy of employees; Tangibles - physical aspects such as the appearance of equipment, staff, and communication materials; Responsiveness - prompt and efficient response to user needs, with a special emphasis on individual attention; and Empathy - showing care and understanding towards user needs. The SERVQUAL model is used to highlight the difference between user expectations and actual experience, enabling the identification of shortcomings and areas for service improvement. The commonly used seven-point Likert scale is used to measure user perception, ranging from completely disagreeing to completely agreeing.

Service quality analysis in Serbian spas resorts using the Servqual model

For the purpose of this study, aiming to assess the quality of tourist services in spa tourism, the research was conducted on a sample of 87 respondents in spa centers of Vrnjačka Banja, Sokobanja, and Niška Banja. The research was carried out from June to September 2023. Written questionnaires were provided to the respondents, consisting of three segments. The first part of the questionnaire covered basic demographic data about the service users, such as gender, age, and education. The second part of the questionnaire contained 22 statements related to users' expectations, reflecting five dimensions of quality adopted from the original SERVQUAL model. In the third part, the same 22 statements were reformulated into questions concerning the perception of service quality. Before using the services, respondents were first asked a series of 22 questions measuring their expectations, and after using the services, another set of 22 questions was administered, focusing on their experiences or perceptions of the provided service. A 7-point Likert scale was used to measure user attitudes, where 1 was labeled as „Strongly Disagree“ and 7 as „Strongly Agree“. Table 3 presents basic demographic data about the respondents. Considering the collected data, the research provided insight into the attitudes and perceptions of users of tourist services in these spa destinations

Table 3: *Basic data on respondents*

Data	Category	%
Place of residence	Serbia	89
	Foreign countries	11
Sex	Male	59
	Female	41
Age group	24 and below	5
	25-35	21
	36-45	14
	46-55	23
	56+	37
Education	Elementary school	5
	High school	51
	College	39
	Master's degree	5

Source: *authors' research.*

As seen from Table 3, the majority of respondents are from Serbia (89%), while only 11% are from abroad. Most respondents were male (59%), with a female proportion of 41%. Observing the age structure of respondents, it is evident that the largest proportion (37%) belongs to the age group of 56 and older. In terms of education level, 51% of respondents have completed high school. Table 4 presents statements related to user expectations reflecting five dimensions of quality taken from the original SERVQUAL model and reformulated into questions concerning the perception of service quality.

Table 4: *Questions from the SERVQUAL model of adaptation to research*

	Statements
Tangibility	1. The spa facilities are modernly equipped. 2. Spa facilities are visually pleasing. 3. Employees in health facilities are properly dressed and are of clean appearance. 4. Materials related to the service of the spa facility (brochures, price lists, food and drink menu...) are visually attractive.
Reliability	5. In the health resort, promises made to the guest are fulfilled on time. 6. The staff of the health facility shows an interest in solving the problem. 7. In the spa facility, the first service provided is impeccable. 8. In the health facility, services are done on time. 9. In the health facility, services are error-free.
Responsibility	10. The staff of the spa informs the guest about the exact time of service. 11. Employees in the health facility provide services quickly.

	<p>12. The employees of the health facility are always ready to help service users.</p> <p>13. The employees of the health facility are always ready to answer questions of the service users.</p>
Security	<p>14. The behavior of the employees in the health facility instills trust.</p> <p>15. Guests feel safe during the provision of services by the staff of the spa facility.</p> <p>16. The employees in the health resort are always kind to the guests.</p> <p>17. The employees in the spa facility know how to respond to every request of the guest.</p>
Empathy	<p>18. The employees of the health resort pay attention to every guest.</p> <p>19. The working hours of the spa facility correspond to the needs of the guest.</p> <p>20. The spa facility has employees who pay special attention to the guest.</p> <p>21. Employees in the spa facility take care of the guest.</p> <p>22. Employees in the spa facility understand the specific needs of the guest.</p>

Source: *authors' research*

Discussion

The research results were analyzed for each individual question and for each of the five dimensions to arrive at a final conclusion illustrating differences in tourists' perceptions and expectations. Tourists' expectations were highest regarding the tangibility of spa facilities (5.86), followed by reliability (5.36). The difference between perceived and expected service quality is positive for all aspects of quality. The first four questions in the research pertained to tangibility, with their final average result being +0.02. Questions 5 through 9 focused on reliability, with the final average result being +0.10. This dimension is particularly important as reliability is crucial for successful service delivery. Questions 10 through 13 explored responsiveness and had an average result of +0.24. Questions 14 through 17 related to assurance and showed an overall average result of +0.35 in the adapted SERVQUAL model. Positive results indicate that service users are satisfied and that tourist facilities strive to meet their needs. Questions 18 through 22 investigated empathy, with an average result of +0.56. Positive results indicate that service users are satisfied and that tourist facilities strive to meet their needs. The final positive result suggests that tourists received more than they expected. The overall average result for all five dimensions is +0.25. In Table 5, we can see the difference between expected and perceived service quality.

Table 5: *The differences between Expected and Perceived Service Quality (SERVQUAL Gap)*

Quality determinants	Perception (P)	Range	Expectation (E)	Range	SERVQUAL gap (P-E)
Tangibility	5.88	1	5.86	1	+0,02
Reliability	5.46	3	5.36	2	+0.10
Responsibility	5.38	4	5.14	4	+0,24
Security	5.64	2	5.29	3	+0,35
Empathy	5.05	5	4.49	5	+0.56
Total SERVQUAL gap	5.48		5.23		+0.25

Source: *authors' research.*

Conclusion

The evaluation of the quality of tourist services is becoming increasingly significant due to the accelerated development of the service sector in the global economy. In today's business environment, the tourism sector faces the need to provide top-notch services to maintain competitiveness, which requires responding to the needs of tourists in the best possible way. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze service quality in order to understand what tourists expect and desire. According to many experts, tourist facilities have a significant advantage if they manage to consistently provide satisfaction to their visitors. By measuring user satisfaction with tourist services, we can obtain precise information about the quality of the service provided, enabling effective steps towards improving the offering. This not only contributes to improving service quality but also stimulates increased demand for them. The results of conducted research indicate that spa resorts actively monitor the needs of tourists and strive to satisfy them in the best possible way. Additionally, the analysis of the quality of tourist services is vital not only for the tourist facilities themselves but also for the entire tourism industry. Understanding the needs and expectations of tourists enables destinations to adjust their offerings and become more attractive to visitors. Improving service quality not only leads to greater tourist satisfaction but also stimulates positive reactions, such as positive reviews and recommendations, contributing to the destination's reputation and increasing its attractiveness potential. Therefore, investing in the analysis and improvement of service quality represents a key step towards sustainable tourism development.

Limitations of the research can be observed through several aspects. The first aspect is the sample size because the conclusions of the research are based on a specific sample size and do not represent the entire population of tourists visiting spa resorts in the Republic of Serbia. A larger sample could provide more comprehensive insights. Another limitation is subjective perceptions - the assessment of service quality is based on tourists' perceptions and expectations, which are subjective and may vary among individuals. The research is also subject to time constraints, potentially limiting the depth of analysis or the inclusion of longitudinal data to track changes over time.

Guidelines for future research include conducting comparative analyses between different types of tourist destinations in Serbia or with other countries, which could provide valuable insights into factors influencing service quality and tourist satisfaction.

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