

Comparative Evaluation of Service Quality Perceptions in Rural Tourism Among Different Tourist Groups

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Abstract. Rural tourism is a dynamically evolving sector showing both a rising number of tourists as well as an increasing variety of touristic offer. As in other sectors, service quality can be considered a key determinant for creating a competitive rural tourism environment. In order to offer a high level of service quality, we must first understand how different groups of tourists perceive service quality. While existing literature points towards the existence of differences across socio-demographic groups, the results vary across sectors. The purpose of this paper is to examine differences in perception of service quality in rural tourism between different socio-demographic groups.

The research is based on a survey with a sample of 307 rural tourists in Croatia. A modified RURALQUAL model was used as the main research instrument. Following the data collection, a descriptive statistical analysis has been carried out to describe the sample as well as a bivariate statistical analysis using Mann–Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests. The research focused on four socio-demographic characteristics: gender, age, level of education and country of origin. The comparison of service quality perceptions across socio-demographic groups was carried out on the level of 29 service quality attributes grouped into 8 service quality dimensions.

The results of the bivariate statistical analysis indicate that statistically significant differences mainly exist for service quality perceptions of tourists with different levels of education. The findings also show that there is some difference in the perception of service quality between domestic and foreign tourists as well as across different age groups. Lastly, the results suggest that, in general, male and female tourists have similar perceptions of service quality provided in rural tourism. A post hoc test was performed for statistically significant results to identify the specific groups where the difference exists.

The results of this research can be useful to rural tourism managers in fulfilling the expectations of tourists and increasing the level of service quality in rural tourism. The results allow for market segmentation and can enable rural tourism managers to tailor their offer to different types of visitors.

Keywords: service quality, RURALQUAL, rural tourism, quantitative analysis, socio-demographic profile

1 Introduction

Rural tourism is characterized by the intensive development in the last decades which brought it into the focus of many researchers (Hurst et al., 2009, Osman and Sentosa, 2013b).

The benefits of rural tourism provide one of the possible solutions to the challenges of tourism development, including the extension of tourist season and diversification of the tourist offer (Grgic et al., 2017). Furthermore, it contributes to the local development by generating jobs and increasing income of rural areas (Choi, 2018). Rural tourism is also one of the answers to the stressful urban life (Kastenholz et al. 2018) and the pandemic situations such the one the world is currently facing.

However, the long-term sustainability of rural tourism can only be achieved by providing the high level of service quality (Chatzigeorgiou and Simeli, 2017). As tourists' expectations and service quality perceptions may vary among different tourists' profiles, it is essential for the rural tourism managers to know how different tourists' groups assess service quality attributes.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine differences in perception of service quality in rural tourism between different socio-demographic groups. The main research objectives of this study are: (a) to assess service quality in rural tourism, and to (b) to evaluate the relationship between service quality and different tourist groups.

The paper is organized in five sections. The following section provides an overview of the recent literature dealing with the concepts and measurement of service quality, primarily in rural tourism. The next section describes the methodology and is followed by the results of the research. The final section discusses main conclusions, limitations, and future research proposals.

2 Literature review

Many researchers agree that the concept service quality can be defined as fulfilment of tourists' expectations (Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985; Lewis and Mitchell, 1990). Service quality is a multidimensional concept that should be adapted to the specific features of a measured service (Babakus and Boller, 1992).

One of the most popular and frequently used service quality measurement models is the SERVQUAL model. The SERVQUAL was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1985. It consists of 22 items which measure five service quality dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. The SERVQUAL instrument was widely used for measuring service quality in tourism industry: travel agencies (Bigne, Martinez, Miquel and, Andreu 2003; Shahin and Janatyan, 2011; Katircioglu, Mehtap-Smadi, Kiliç and Ünlücan 2012; Setó-Pamies, 2012; Rajesh, 2018), hotels (Marković, 2004; Ladhari, 2009; Markovic and Raspor, 2010; Marković, and Raspor, 2013; Kim-Soon and Rahman, 2014; Ounsri and Thawesaengskulthai, 2019), restaurants (Marković, Raspor, and Komšić 2010; Marković, Komšić, and Štifanić 2013; Nam and Lee, 2011; Hansen, 2014; Saneva and Chortoseva, 2018). SERVQUAL was also adapted and applied to measure the quality of rural tourism. A RURALQUAL model was developed by Loureiro and Gonzalez (2008). The model consists of 22 variables divided into 6 factors (Professionalism, Reservations, Tangibility, Complementary benefits, Rural and cultural environment and Basic benefits). A research on a sample of 198 rural tourists was conducted in 2008 in Portugal. The research proved that the lowest rated service quality dimension is Rural and cultural environment, and the highest rated dimensions are Professionalism, Reservation, Tangibility and Basic elements.

Apart for RURALQUAL, the research of service quality in rural tourism was conducted by the following authors as shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Service quality research in rural tourism

Author, year	Country	Sample size	Number of items	Analysis method	Reliability
Albacete-Saez et al., 2007	Spain	185	36 items	EFA*	0.93
Hurst et al., 2009	USA	125	18 items	EFA	0.82 - 0.98
Rozman et al., 2009	Slovenia	103	22 items	multi-criteria decision analysis (DEX)	-
Loureiro, S.M.C. and Kastenholz, 2011	Portugal	161	22 items	CFA, PLS-SEM	0.92
Su and Fan, 2011	China	320	-	SEM	0.77 - 0.85
Osman and Sentosa, 2013	Malaysia	295	31 items in total	PLS-SEM	0.84 - 0.91
Rozkee et al., 2016	India	420	22 items	regression	-
Chatzigeorgiou and Simeli, 2017	Greece	400	22 items	SEM	-
Choi et al., 2018	South Korea	442	18 items	IPA**	0.96
Chi et al., 2020	China	495	40 items	CFA	0,81-0,93
*EFA - Exploratory factor analysis					
**IPA – Importance performance analysis					

Adapted by authors.

Theoretical framework analysis indicates that researches on service quality in rural tourism were conducted in many tourist countries including Spain, USA, Portugal, Slovenia etc. The research model in most researches is based on SERVQUAL with a sample size ranging from 100 to more than 400 with a high reliability (above 0,7).

Some of the previous studies conducted segmentations of rural tourists based on different socio-demographic profiles, including age, education, income, motives etc. (Kastenholz et al., 1999, 2018, Molera and Albaladejo, 2007, Park and Yoon, 2009).

Based on the literature review the following hypotheses were tested:

H1 There are statistically significant differences of the service quality score in accordance with the gender of the respondents.

H2 There are statistically significant differences of the service quality score in accordance with the country of origin of the respondents.

H3 There are statistically significant differences of the service quality score in accordance with the age of the respondents.

H4 There are statistically significant differences of the service quality score in accordance with the educational level of the respondents.

3 Methodology

Service quality of rural tourism was measured by using a modified RURALQUAL model. The model is based on the SERVQUAL model, the original RURALQUAL model (Loureiro and González, 2008) and the model used by Albacete-Saez, Fuentes-Fuentes, and Lloréns-Montes (2007). Modifications include adaptation of the items to the specific features of rural tourism in Istria.

The scale consists of 29 items divided into 8 factors measured on 7-point Likert-type ordinal scale.

The survey was conducted from June to September 2017 in central Istria as one of the most developed rural tourism regions in Croatia. There were 1 400 paper questionnaires in 4 languages distributed to the tourists staying in 22 rural accommodation. 307 valid questionnaires were returned (return rate 21.93%) using a convenient sample meaning that only tourist who were available and willing to participate in research filled the questionnaires. Descriptive statistics and bivariate statistics including Mann–Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed using SPSS 20.0 to test the research hypotheses.

4 Research results

The data analysis of socio demographic data indicates that there was an almost equal number of female and male respondents. Out of 307 respondents, 68.32% are foreign tourists. Majority of respondents are between 30 and 49 years old (58.17%) with middle or high school level of education (84.97%) and dominant marital status “married” (48.36%). Most of the respondents visited the rural destination facility for the first time (72.04%) and are travelling with partner or friends (55.88%). The main tourist motives for visiting the rural facility are spending time with friends and family (51.14%) and relaxing (40.39%).

Perception was rated relatively high with an overall average score of 5.79. The highest score (6.28) was given to the variable P16 *The lodging is located in a calm place.*, while the lowest score was given to the variable P21 *The RE observes safety measures during excursions and complementary activities offered* (5.20). The reliability of the scale measured by the Cronbach Alpha coefficient is 0.952, which presents a high level of reliability.

Table 2 Descriptive analysis results of the perceived service quality

	Item	Average score	St. Dev.
P1	The rural lodging foods are well presented and flavorful.	5,93	1,030
P2	The rural lodging employees have a clean neat appearance.	6,07	0,952
P3	The clients are treated cordially and affably.	6,07	1,003
P4	A personalized attention is provided to each client.	5,84	1,156
P5	Arrival schedules are established but they are quite flexible.	5,76	1,186
P6	Room reservation is easily to do.	5,82	1,194
P7	The reservations are confirmed in the most convenient way for client, other information of interest is sent back too (e.g. access map).	5,72	1,205
P8	The rural lodging facilities are in good state.	5,96	1,052
P9	The rural lodging facilities and rooms are clean.	6,08	0,994
P10	Internal decoration (furniture, ceilings, lighting, floors, etc.) is pleasant, simple, homey and in harmony with the rural surroundings.	6,08	1,016
P11	External decoration (facade, gardens, etc.) is attractive and in harmony with the rural surroundings	6,11	1,000
P12	Advertising is truthful.	5,99	1,015
P13	Price is in accordance with the service provided	5,86	1,206
P14	The lodging architecture has the region style.	5,91	1,072
P15	The lodging is located in the area of great nature's beauty.	5,95	1,043

P16	The lodging is located in a calm place.	6,28	0,887
P17	Staff at our disposal know the traditions, celebrations and history of the place.	5,64	1,217
P18	Staff give us good advice regarding complementary activities that are available.	5,65	1,212
P19	Staff give us good advice regarding the gastronomy of the place	5,50	1,327
P20	The rural establishment is fitted with all necessary safety measures.	5,32	1,579
P21	The RE observes safety measures during excursions and complementary activities offered.	5,20	1,532
P22	All areas are well indicated with signs.	5,23	1,564
P23	The communication (access) routes are well indicated with signs.	5,45	1,299
P24	The rural establishment has staff that speak other languages.	5,99	1,143
P25	Staff go out of their way to make sure customers understand them.	6,02	1,056
P26	The rural establishment attends to customers individually (not as a group).	5,87	1,166
P27	The clients are integrated in region's rural lifestyle.	5,30	1,478
P28	Typical gastronomy of the region is included on the menu.	5,64	1,294
P29	In the surrounding region there are fairs, local festivities, and other aspects of cultural interest.	5,62	1,293
	Total average score	5,79	
	Cronbach Alpha	0,952	

Adapted by authors.

The analysis of statistically significant differences of service quality scores was conducted in accordance to the gender, age, level of education and country of origin.

Table 3. Results of the Man Mann–Whitney U test in relation to gender

Item	AS-F*	AS-M**	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
P4	5,71	5,97	-2,082	0,037
P14	5,80	6,01	-2,281	0,023
P17	5,51	5,77	-2,046	0,041
P19	5,34	5,68	-2,707	0,007
P20	5,14	5,51	-2,059	0,040
*AS-F- Average score - female respondents				
**AS-M - Average score - male respondents				

Adapted by authors.

The results of the Mann-Whitney U test show that the differences in perception between men and women, apart from being small, are not statistically significant for the largest number of observed items. The statistically significant difference was found in 5 out of 29 items. The differences in perception between men and women refer to the following service quality attributes: individual treatment of the tourists, regional style of architecture, knowledge of tradition, celebrations and history of the place and advices on the gastronomy of the place. In all these cases, women assessed service quality lower than men.

Based on the results of the analysis, the H1 *There are statistically significant differences of the service quality score in accordance with the gender of the respondents* is rejected ($p < 0,05$).

The analysis of the significance of the differences in perception scores among foreign and domestic tourists shows that the differences exist in 16 items and are not accidental but statistically significant.

The significant differences were found in the following attributes of service quality: condition and arrangement of buildings, regional style of architecture and harmonization with the rural environment, accommodation in a location of exceptional natural beauty, individual approach of staff to tourists, giving advice on additional activities and facilities and knowledge of foreign languages.

Based on the analysis results, the H2 *There are statistically significant differences of the service quality score in accordance with the country of origin of the respondents* is partially rejected ($p < 0,05$).

The results of the analysis are shown in the Table 4.

Table 4 Results of the Man Mann–Whitney U test for the country of origin

Item	AS-D*	AS-F**	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
P1	5,91	5,95	-0,395	0,017
P6	5,67	5,89	-1,554	0,038
P7	5,42	5,85	-3,134	0,000
P8	5,91	5,99	-0,590	0,018
P12	5,80	6,08	-2,019	0,020
P13	5,67	5,95	-1,743	0,018
P14	5,78	5,97	-1,244	0,022
P15	5,85	6,00	-1,363	0,014
P18	5,40	5,77	-2,365	0,000
P19	5,20	5,65	-2,990	0,002
P20	4,87	5,53	-3,541	0,017
P21	4,81	5,37	-3,232	0,024
P22	5,15	5,60	-2,675	0,013
P24	5,61	6,17	-3,546	0,002
P25	5,77	6,13	-2,518	0,000
P26	5,63	5,99	-2,354	0,038
*AS-D - Average score domestic tourists				
**AS-F - Average score foreign tourists				

Adapted by authors.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test show that for more than half of the observed variables there is a statistically significant score difference of the respondents in relation to age. Namely, in 17 out of 29 variables, it was found that the age of the respondents significantly affects the respondents' perception of the service quality. Furthermore, the *post hoc* test with Bonferroni correction was applied to determine age groups between which significant difference exists. Tourists over the age of 60 rated the taste and presentation of food, the tidiness of employees, the application of security measures, the involvement of tourists in rural life and the existence of local fairs, festivals and other cultural events with a higher score than younger respondents. On the other hand, the ease of reservation and the flexible schedule of tourist arrivals are rated higher by tourists under the age of 20 compared to tourists aged 30 to 50.

Based on the analysis results, the H3 *There are statistically significant differences of the service quality score in accordance with the age of the respondents* is partially rejected ($p < 0,05$).

The results of the analysis are shown in the table 5.

Table 5 Results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for the age

Item	H	df	Sig.	Age groups where significant difference exists	Adj. Sig
P1	16,268	5	0,006	50 – 59 and 60+	0,007
				40 – 49 and 60+	0,007
P2	17,145	5	0,004	30 – 39 and 60+	0,034
P4	21,915	5	0,001	30 – 39 and 60+	0,001
				40 – 49 and 60+	0,002
P5	20,205	5	0,001	<20 and 40 – 49	0,014
				<20 and 30 – 39	0,042
P6	11,814	5	0,037	<20 and 40 – 49	0,038
P7	15,851	5	0,007	40 – 49 and 60+	0,019
P18	18,335	5	0,003	<20 and 40 – 49	0,042
				40 – 49 and 60+	0,010
P19	17,834	5	0,003	30 – 39 and 60+	0,022
				40 – 49 and 60+	0,037
P20	26,370	5	0,000	40 – 49 and 60+	0,000
				50 – 59 and 60+	0,009
				30 – 39 and 60+	0,004
P21	21,950	5	0,001	40 – 49 and 60+	0,001
P22	19,259	5	0,002	50 – 59 and 60+	0,032
				40 – 49 and 60+	0,003
				30 – 39 and 60+	0,016
P23	18,866	5	0,002	40 – 49 and 60+	0,001
				50 – 59 and 60+	0,026
				30 – 39 and 60+	0,014
P24	13,532	5	0,028	40 – 49 and 60+	0,026
P26	13,435	5	0,020	-	-
P27	28,412	5	0,000	40 – 49 and 60+	0,000
				50 – 59 and 60+	0,004
				30 – 39 and 60+	0,002
P28	14,058	5	0,015	-	-
P29	23,254	5	0,000	40 – 49 and 60+	0,004
				50 – 59 and 60+	0,000

Adapted by authors.

The level of education is also one of the elements on which the assessment of service quality depends. Service quality assessment varies according to the level of education for almost all aspects of service quality. Respondents with a higher level of education (university, master's degree or doctorate) rated the quality of service worse than respondents with a lower level of education (elementary or secondary school).

Based on the analysis results, the H4 *There are statistically significant differences of the service quality score in accordance with the educational level of the respondents* is supported ($p < 0,05$).

The results of the analysis are shown in the table 6.

Table 6 Results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for the education level

Item	H	df	Sig.	Education groups where significant difference exists	Adj. Sig
P1	12,194	3	0,007	Elementary and PhD	0,014
				Elementary and University	0,026
P2	17,919	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,050
				Elementary and University	0,038

P4	11,537	3	0,009	-	-
P5	26,489	3	0,000	Elementary and PhD	0,001
				Secondary and PhD	0,037
				Secondary and University	0,003
				Elementary and University	0,001
P6	29,098	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000
				Elementary and University	0,000
				Elementary and PhD	0,006
P7	27,935	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000
				Elementary and University	0,005
P8	12,220	3	0,007	Secondary and PhD	0,011
				Elementary and PhD	0,040
P9	11,962	3	0,008	Secondary and University	0,033
P12	9,595	3	0,022	-	-
P13	21,170	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,019
				Elementary and University	0,000
				Elementary and PhD	0,026
				Elementary and Secondary	0,027
P14	11,794	3	0,008	Elementary and University	0,009
				Elementary and PhD	0,028
P15	14,948	3	0,002	Elementary and PhD	0,011
				Elementary and University	0,013
P17	29,316	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000
				Elementary and University	0,003
P18	35,643	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000
				Elementary and University	0,000
				Elementary and PhD	0,037
P19	25,850	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000
				Elementary and University	0,002
P20	39,630	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000
				Elementary and University	0,000
				Elementary and PhD	0,009
P21	35,875	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000
				Elementary and University	0,000
				Elementary and PhD	0,011
P22	31,239	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000
				Elementary and University	0,000
				Elementary and PhD	0,016
P23	26,057	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000
				Elementary and University	0,040
P24	12,556	3	0,006	Secondary and PhD	0,042
				Elementary and PhD	0,028
P25	16,279	3	0,001	Secondary and University	0,011
P26	21,220	3	0,000	Secondary and PhD	0,018
				Elementary and PhD	0,005
				Secondary and University	0,012
				Elementary and University	0,010
P27	23,212	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,003
				Elementary and University	0,001
				Elementary and PhD	0,006
P28	10,155	3	0,017	-	-
P29	19,575	3	0,000	Secondary and University	0,000

Adapted by authors.

5 Conclusions, limitations and future research proposals

High level of service quality is a key to achieving long-term competitiveness of rural tourism. It requires continuous improvement of quality and tailoring the service quality to the specific needs of different socio-economic groups.

The research results indicate that level of service quality in rural tourism is quite high, but it differs across socio-demographic groups of tourists.

Specifically, research results show that women rated the service quality lower than men, but that this difference is not significant, and it can be concluded that the quality of services does not depend on the gender of tourists.

On the other hand, it was found that the service quality differs between domestic and foreign tourists. Namely, foreign tourists rate the service quality higher than domestic tourists. These are the following aspects of service quality: condition and arrangement of buildings, regional architectural style and harmony with the rural environment, accommodation in a location of exceptional natural beauty, individual approach of staff to tourists, giving advice on additional activities and facilities and knowledge of foreign languages. If domestic tourists predominate in a particular rural household, owners should make additional efforts to improve the quality of service in segments that do not meet the expectations of domestic tourists.

The evaluation of service quality varies depending on the age of the tourists. Namely, tourists older than 60 rated the taste and presentation of food, the tidiness of employees, the application of security measures, the involvement of tourists in rural life and the existence of local fairs, festivals and other cultural events with a higher score than younger respondents. On the other hand, the ease of booking and the flexible schedule of tourist arrivals are rated higher by tourists under the age of 20 compared to tourists aged 30 to 50.

The level of education is also one of the elements on which the assessment of service quality depends. Service quality assessment varies according to the level of education for almost all aspects of service quality. Respondents with a higher level of education (college, master's degree or doctorate) rated the quality of service worse than respondents with a lower level of education (primary or secondary school). In depth understanding of the tourist profiles and their service quality scores can be beneficial in strategic planning process and tailoring the rural tourism offer.

There are some limitations of this study that should be considered in future studies. The main limitation of the research is a relatively small sample size that affects the generalization of research results. Furthermore, this study was conducted in a geographically limited tourist destination, including only Istria as most developed rural tourism region in Croatia. Future studies could be conducted in different rural tourist regions and rural tourist destinations. Since, rural tourism is broadly defined, the future research should be conducted for specific activities or rural tourism forms. It is also advised to alter the model by including other constructs such as Tourist Experience.

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