

Quality in rural tourism services

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Abstract

This review paper brings closer comparison of current scientific attitudes towards quality of services in rural tourism. The quality in rural tourism is a hot issue; it is applied by UNWTO and many national organizations. The review reveals trends in quality accessing, models for measuring quality and commonly used tools. The outcome of this paper should provide not only a sole description of the attitudes but also it should point on the limitations of each mentioned approach. Quality of services is with no doubts what shapes visitors view on the service itself, on the destination or products. However there exist several more or less different attitudes towards quality in rural tourism – namely on what factors are critical for overall quality of the services and visitors satisfaction.

Key words: rural tourism, service quality, GAP analysis, SERVQUAL, IPA analysis

JEL classification: Z32

1. Introduction

Tourism is developing and dynamic field. According to Simon et. al (2008) the changes in tourism are seen in the shift from simple tourist activities and services to sophisticated systems of recreation from what tourist can benefit. This is possible thanks to better economic performance, income level, standards and requirements on living as well as leisure time.

The quality of services in (rural) tourism is a frequently discussed topic, not only among entrepreneurs, visitors, and clients but among scientists and researchers as well. The scientific publications number to 137 papers/studies on this topic between 2005 and 2015. The topic quality is closely and undividable connected with satisfaction and its relation to and influence on customer/visitor loyalty has been subject to a number of researches. Tourist satisfaction has been measured and assessed by a variety of tools – namely overall satisfaction, performance, expectation, positive recommendation, etc. (Yoon and Uysal 2005). The most common used model considers satisfaction to be a difference between quality perceived and quality expected. Here some researchers (Chi and Qu 2008) point out loyalty to be a better predictor of actual behaviour compared to satisfaction. Level of satisfaction is one of the most dominant variables in explaining revisit intention in destination tourism. In today's highly competitive business environment delivering high quality service and creating superior customer value can result in achieve high customer satisfaction, thus affecting the firm's corporate image, and ultimately leading to consumer retention (Hu and al. 2009). According to Dmitrič and Žabkar (2010) perceived tourism supply quality is crucial for destination's competitive advantage. Quality of services that a visitor expects and meet in this broader point of view than stands in the beginning and is the alfa-omega of what should be considered by the service providers, destination managers and other interested people/groups at the first place.

2. Methodology

The main objective of this paper is to provide a review of current scientific attitudes towards quality in rural tourism services. Also the paper offers closer definition of the core terms such as rural areas, rural tourism, quality, etc. The authors attempted to bring a comparative view on commonly used models and recent trends in this field, taken from general tourism and applied to the specifics of rural areas. The analysed information has been gained from published work of authors who specialize in the inter-related themes. This paper is at the same time a set resource of available scientific literature on the topic service quality in rural tourism that will be closely researched in the dissertation works of both authors.

3. Results and discussion

There follows a closer description of main topics and definitions related to rural tourism services.

3.1 Rural destination

Rural tourist destination is unclearly defined. For the purpose of drawing financial means from European funds was formulated a definition by OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). The definition says that rural tourist destination is the destination, where are living more than 50% habitants in rural village. The rural village is the type of village where is density of population less than 150 persons/km². The definition is valid for all rural destinations not only for rural tourist destinations.

Sharpley and Sharpley (1997) have made a research, which was focused on rural tourist destination. From their point of view is the rural tourist destination an area that is located away of big cities. The area is also characteristic by small villages, low density of population, economy, which is based on agriculture and traditions. Roberts and Hall have the similar view. They define rural tourist destination as a destination with low density of population, soil is used for agriculture and people follow traditions. Šíp and Vystoupil (2005) have made another definition, which says that this type of destination is a peripheral area, which form a base for cities. The destination is economically and administratively dependent on the city. The territorial system of division of labour ensures agricultural production, small services and recreation. All these definitions are constructed on the same parameters.

A different definition made Bářnski (2005). He perceives rural destination as a place with low economic potential, which is a marginal part of the city or region and which is not easy to access by transport. The transport accessibility is questionable. The question is what he meant of transport accessibility. Air transport in these areas is problematic, but ground transportation has evolved in these areas, due to rural tourism. The economic potential of these areas is not high, but because of rural tourism, it is possible to improve and build infrastructure.

3.2 Rural destination

Rural tourism is seen as an environment - friendly and permanently sustainable. Rural tourism is based on the need of getting closer to nature. This type of tourism is an important economic resource for the destination. It does not entail only financial benefits, but also creates new jobs and restores and maintains the local traditions.

The scientists cannot agree on the exact definition. Getz and Page (1997) argues that the definition is important only for politicians and the public sector. To define an area is not main problem of private sector. OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2006) concurred with this approach and says that the main reason why you

cannot find a single definition are different ideas about what is and what is not rural. Furthermore they consider the problem of a lack of relevant information about the destination and see also the fact that the definitions are made pursuant to a specific location or interests of creator of the definitions. It is not important to use an exact definition of rural tourism, but rather need to focus on the elements that are characteristic for rural tourism. To Long and Lane opinion (in Trends in outdoor recreation, leisure, and tourism, 2000) tourists want a personal contact, an authenticity of environment, historical heritage and individualism. Gopal et al. (2008) perceive as a main characteristic traits of rural tourism a personal contact, to present life at the rural destination and the opportunity to participate on activities, which people at rural destination make every day.

The general consensus is those are activities, which take place in rural destinations, such as agritourism, ecotourism and adventure tourism (OECD, 1994; Lane, 1994).

3.3 Service quality in rural tourism

The term quality is much discussed theme. The quality can be viewed from various angles. To define this term is very difficult task. It usually depends on a consumer perspective; it is often a subjective evaluation of services. A lot of definitions agree with the fact that the quality is the ability to satisfy the needs of consumers (Deming: in Quality and Reliability in Engineering (UNWTO, 2003). The quality can be seen, for example, as a sum of properties of service, which create the ability to satisfy expressed or implied needs (Kotler et al. 2007). That the organization did not depend solely on the subjective assessment of customers, have in recent years managers begun clamping on quality management systems, as it is an important instrument for achieving customer needs and business objectives. The following systems provide an objective evaluation.

One of the possibilities is the quality management standard International Organization for Standardization (ISO), which have a mark from 9000. A part of the standards are definitions, principles and requirements for quality management systems and maintaining these standards. Holders of ISO certificate in tourism, e. g. travel agencies, bus transports, use it to reflect the interest of the company for the customer.

Another possibility in quality management is using the model European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). This system is based on eight pillars of excellence, which include not only focus on the customer, but also put emphasis on employee, company partnerships or corporate social responsibility. In tourism is this system used for example by hotel resorts.

The necessity of quality management in tourism has developer, so called, national quality systems. Single states have developed their own standards and awards. Among the highest-quality systems include Switzerland, which is guaranteed by the Swiss Tourism Federation. This system chased „Q“ as its quality brand. The organization can receive from one to three Q. The first is awarded for the quality of services, the second Q evaluates the quality of leadership, the third Q evaluates the quality of management. Q system assesses the accommodation and destinations. Similar quality systems are in place in other European countries (Germany, Czech Republic, Austria and others).

Usually among researchers quality is seen to be an elusive and indistinct construct (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Performance quality was conceptualized as the attributes of a service which are controlled by a tourism supplier (Baker and Crompton, 2000). However quality as itself it is a problematic theme, the explanation varying among authors, often connected with contradictory results (Monroe and Krishnan, 1983; Baker and Crompton, 2000). Quality and requirements are quite hard to be exactly expressed by the consumers

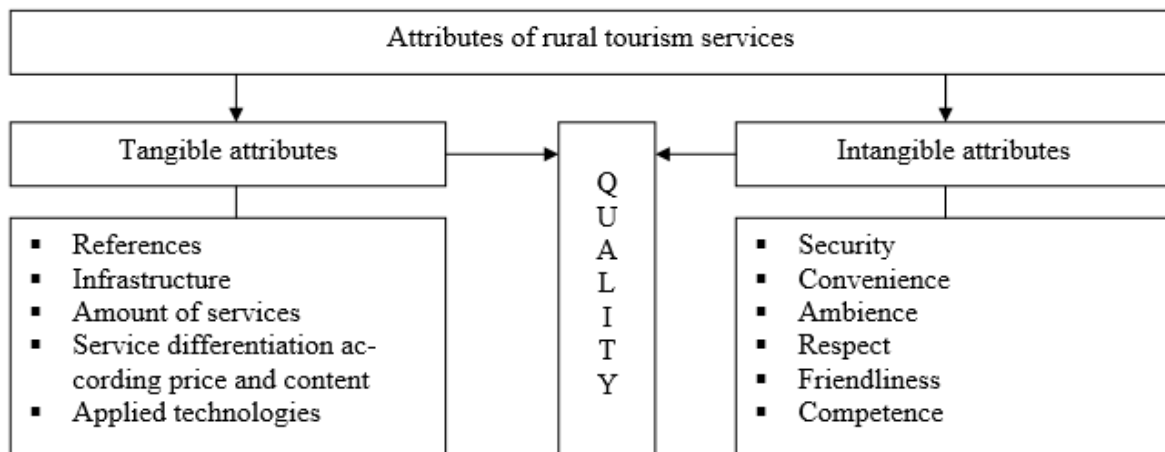
(Takeuchi & Quelch, 1983). Many researchers have proven that quality is a vital point and often a key element for entrepreneurs and companies (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Quality is highly dependable on consumers' expectations with actual service performance and service delivery process. Parasuraman, Zeithalm and Berry (1985) define the main differences of industrial services and other services.

3.4 Service quality in rural tourism

In destination management, there are commonly used several methods for assessing quality of services. One of them is a method developed by authors Alegre and Garau (2010) that composes of identification most important attributes and where tourists are asked to evaluate their relationship towards attributes on a symmetric one-dimensional scale. On the basis of above mentioned information it we are able to discover how are the tourists satisfied with different attributes of service, or what influences the overall satisfaction of tourists in the destination.

Williams (2009) argues that a basis for evaluating quality of rural tourism services are the tangible and intangible attributes of services. As per Collier (1990) rural tourism services link to attributes related to an associations covering idea, information, entertainment, knowledge, positive influence on consumers' health, social events, convenience, food, security and others.

Picture no. 1 Attributes of rural tourism



Source: Rasa Rukuižienė (2007)

Generally, there exist many different methods for measuring the visitors' satisfaction with service quality:

- Micro a macro models;
- National indexes of customer satisfaction;
- IPA (Martilla a James, 1977);
- Technical-functional model of quality (Grönroos, 1984);
- SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al. 1985);
- REQUAL (Crompton, Mackay, Fesenmaier, 1990);
- SERVPERF (Cronin a Taylor, 1992).

3.5 GAP model and SERVQUAL

Parasuraman, Zeithalm and Berry (1985) provide three generic views on service quality analysis:

- 1) Service quality depends upon consumers expectations prior to experiencing the service with service delivery system performance (advertising, previous expectations, culture),
- 2) Service quality is focused on specific interactions between consumer service and quality level (CS-QL),
- 3) Service quality is defined by the gaps, that exist between service delivered and service quality. There are distinct 5 different gaps:
 - i. discrepancy between consumer expectations and management perceptions of those expectations;
 - ii. discrepancy between management perceptions of what features constitute a target level of service quality and the task of translating these perceptions into executable specifications;
 - iii. discrepancy between service quality specifications and their implementation;
 - iv. discrepancy between actual service delivery system performance and external communications with consumers;
 - v. all four discrepancies lay the foundation for making the function for fifth gap with reliable measures;

The most used and accepted method for service quality assessment based on gap model is with no doubts SERVQUAL. This method works with 22 statements that are further split into 5 dimensions:

1. **tangibles** (physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel),
2. **reliability** (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately),
3. **responsiveness** (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service),
4. **assurance** (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence)
5. **empathy** (caring, individualized attention the provider offers to its customers)

(Parasuraman *et al*, 1988).

In the tourism industry Knutson (1990) developed LODGSERV – model that harnesses service quality measurement in hospitality industry. The model is based on five originally SERVQUAL dimensions. Getty and Thompson (1994) introduced another specific model for hotel environment (LOGQUAL), Ooi Mei, Dean and White (1999) created HOLSERV model. Such modifications are results of a deeper discussion about the basic 5 dimensional model and its validity (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Thomson, 1988; Rukuziené, 2007; Baker and Crompton, 2000; Oh, 2000). Some authors emphasise a big influence of nostalgia for

natural life style, authentic experience, rural tourism in some sense can be serving as an expression of national identity (Nygard and Storstad, 1998; Ray ,1998).

3.5 IPA

IPA stands for Importance – Performance Analysis. This type of analysis was used for the first time by James Martilla in 1977. The analysis is good for tourism, but not only for it. Also for other disciplines where there is a need of knowledge about behaviour and attitudes of customers, for example education (Dawn, 2014) or health service (Carr et al, 2003). IPA reveals, which attributes is necessary to improve (Wong et al, 2011)

IPA is based on a grid with four quadrants. The horizontal line represents the performance and vertical line represents importance. According to Martilla and James (1977) are the grid quadrants defined this way:

1. quadrant: Concentrate here – attributes, which are necessary to concentrate on
2. quadrant: Keep up with the good work – these attributes are necessary to sustain
3. quadrant: Low priority – attributes, which are not important
4. quadrant: Possible overkill – attributes with performance, but which are not important for customer.

The IPA has been used in rural tourism. Barbieri (2010) has made a research in rural tourism in Canada with this method. His research was looking for an answer, which factors were important to maintain a market position and achieving goals. Fotiadis and Vassiliadis (2010) used IPA when he was looking for attributes, which encourage tourists to visit destination that he selected and whether there are differences, between perception and expectations. His expectation was confirmed. In rural tourism is a lot of sectors, which are possible to explore by IPA. Choi (2015) analysis used to measure the quality of accommodation in a rural area. Randall and Rollins (2009) have used Importance – Performance Analysis for evaluation tour guide services in the nature based areas.

4. Conclusion

This paper brought a review of commonly used models for assessing quality in services in general and their possible application in rural tourism. Such type of tourism is poorly getting accordance when the scholars define what rural tourism actually is. The paper provides views of authors that are taken as influential in the research area in question. Consequently a rural destination has been described with help of available scientific literature.

Service quality has its specifics in the rural tourism as well. The construct of quality in this term covers more than just “measurable” and “empirical” attributes. Numbers of researchers have proven that also psychological, behavioural ad cultural schemes (back-to-roots, traditions, localism, national identity, etc.) come to the “play” and influence the recognition of quality and its evaluation by the consumers in rural tourism.

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