







**ICEMIT**  
BLACE

The Second International Scientific Conference on Economics,  
Management and Information Technologies – ICEMIT 2025  
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

## Guest reviews as a measure of service quality in mountain hotels of Serbia

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### Article info

#### Original scientific paper

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.71159/icemit2537T>

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**Acknowledgement:** The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (Grants No. 451-03-137/2025-03/200125 & 451-03-136/2025-03/200125)

### Abstract

*Mountain destinations in Serbia represent an important segment of the country's tourism offer, attracting both domestic and international visitors throughout the year. As these destinations continue to grow in popularity, the quality of the guest experience becomes increasingly important. Guest satisfaction is a fundamental aspect of the hospitality industry, as it directly influences customer loyalty, brand reputation, and long-term business success. In the digital era, guest reviews on online platforms have become a key source of information, influencing perceptions of service quality and destination choice. This study analyzes guest reviews of mountain hotels in Serbia, collected from the TripAdvisor platform, with a focus on five major tourist destinations: Kopaonik, Zlatibor, Tara, Divčibare, and Stara Planina. Using qualitative text analysis, the study aims to extract and interpret the key topics that contribute to guest satisfaction as well as those that lead to dissatisfaction, offering insight into the aspects of hotel services and experiences that most strongly influence guest perceptions. Positive reviews reflected satisfaction, while negative ones indicated dissatisfaction. The following topics stood out in the positive reviews: Quality of service, Child-friendly amenities, Food, and Additional facilities. On the other hand, the sources of dissatisfaction identified in the negative reviews were: Unpleasant odors, Additional charges, Bathroom conditions, and Overall impression of the property. The findings of this study provide useful insights for hotel managers highlighting specific areas that require improvement, as well as those that should be further developed to enhance guest satisfaction.*

**Keywords:** reviews, satisfaction, quality, mountain hotels, Serbia

## 1. Introduction

Hotel service quality relates to how well the service meets guest expectations, and most hotels may achieve customer satisfaction by providing high-quality services (Top & Ali, 2021). In the hospitality business, service frequently entails guests actively contributing to value creation (Anwar & Surarchith 2015). Typically, guests prioritize service quality over price when evaluating their options. As a result, hotels should ensure they deliver a consistent level of quality that satisfies customer needs and showcase this quality through their practices (Othman et al., 2019). Implementing an effective service quality strategy is critical since it is widely acknowledged that service quality has a significant impact on guest satisfaction (Othman et al., 2019). Poor service quality in hotels can result in dissatisfied consumers, which reduces demand and, consequently, hotel performance. While the sales and marketing division is responsible for acquiring new consumers (Demir et al., 2020), the operations section is in charge of retaining existing customers and developing loyalty through provision of outstanding service (Anwar, 2017).

Successful hotel operations are dependent on effective control of service quality. Hotels can strategically focus their efforts on the most important areas to improve overall service performance, increase guest satisfaction, and cultivate customer loyalty by identifying the critical factors that influence service quality and guest satisfaction (Padlee et al., 2019; Sharma & Srivastava, 2018). Although the majority of previous studies on hotel service quality relied on quantitative research methods (e.g., Ali et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2019; Padlee et al., 2019), there is an increasing amount of research that uses online reviews and other types of unsolicited data (e.g., Alrawadieh & Law, 2019; Padma & Ahn, 2020). A comprehensive review of guest feedback uncovers multiple issues affecting service quality, from operational lapses to variations in customer interaction practices (Rezaei et al., 2024; Sann et al., 2024). This finding is especially important

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since modern travelers increasingly rely on digital platforms to capture their hospitality experiences, providing a wealth of actual input to guide service improvement strategies (Bulchand-Gidumal et al., 2024).

The research question aims to identify the factors of service quality in Serbian mountain hotels that influence guest satisfaction and dissatisfaction. It analyzes how certain service characteristics affect how guests feel about them, both positively and negatively. This question seeks to pinpoint the most significant factors that influence the overall assessment of service in this hospitality setting.

In this paper, the content is organized as follows. In the first chapter, an introduction to the topic is given and the context of the research is presented. The second chapter includes an overview of the relevant literature and previous research related to the problem the paper deals with. The third chapter describes the methods and procedures used in the research. The fourth chapter presents the research results and their analysis. Finally, in the conclusion, the key results are summarized and recommendations for future research are given. The work ends with a list of used literature.

## 2. Literature review

Many research has shown that service quality plays a key role in business performance within the hospitality sector (e.g., Bowen & Shoemaker, 1998; Pizam & Ellis, 1999). It is widely recognized that service quality serves as an indicator to customer satisfaction (e.g., Caruana, 2002; Parasuraman et al., 1994), and in turn, customer satisfaction leads to customer loyalty (Caruana, 2002; McDougall & Levesque, 2000). The literature has paid more and more attention in recent years to studies on the quality of hotel services based on online reviews. In a number of countries, including the US (Kim et al., 2016), Brazil (Peres & Paladini, 2021), China (He et al., 2017), Malaysia (Padma & Ahn, 2020), India (Chittiprolu et al., 2021), and Vietnam (Thu, 2020), such studies have been conducted to examine different aspects of hotel service quality. In line with the findings of Nunkoo et al. (2020), which showed that the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction depends on differences between hotels, customer type can also influence how service quality is perceived (Aksu et al., 2021). Chittiprolu et al. (2021) highlighted several essential dimensions of service quality in heritage hotels, including the guest rooms, dining options, physical elements (such as ambiance, architecture, style, and décor), staff behaviour and professionalism, hotel facilities, overall service, and conventional offerings. Padma and Ahn (2020) identified hotel-related, room-related, staff-related, and travel-related attributes as the main factors influencing hotel customer experience based on their analysis of online reviews from hotels in Malaysia. These elements correspond to the room, facilities, employee, and reliability dimensions of the HOLSERV model. Furthermore, multiple research (e.g., Peres & Paladini, 2021; Suvachart, 2021; Thu, 2020; He et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2016) have consistently identified hotel location as a critical component of service quality, with a significant relationship with overall service perception.

Berezina et al. (2016) and Chittiprolu et al. (2021) claimed that hotel guests generally express higher satisfaction with intangible aspects of service, such as staff friendliness and courtesy, while dissatisfaction tends to stem from tangible factors like room conditions and furnishings. In essence, customers are more likely to complain about physical and financial shortcomings. Moreover, service attributes that increase satisfaction can also lead to dissatisfaction if they are lacking or poorly delivered. Supporting this, Padlee et al. (2019) found that food quality, room amenities and employee behavior are three essential quality dimensions that affects hotel customer satisfaction, which influence behavioral intentions.

## 3. Methodology

For the purposes of the study, leading mountain tourist destinations were selected from which hotel and restaurant reviews would be collected. Five of the most frequented sites were selected based on data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, identified as locations with the biggest tourist influx in the preceding period (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). The chosen mountain destinations include Kopaonik, Zlatibor, Divčibare, Tara, and Stara Planina.

Online reviews were gathered from the TripAdvisor website, a globally recognized authority for travel recommendations that helps customers plan their vacations from booking to accommodation (Litvin et al., 2008; TripAdvisor, 2021). A Python script was developed in PyCharm using the BeautifulSoup module to retrieve reviews only in English. The data were collected between 2023 and 2024, beginning with the collecting of URLs for the selected hotels and ending with the exportation of reviews for each property into individual files. Bigrams were extracted from the text in addition to keywords.

A bigram is a series of two contiguous items from a string of tokens, often comprising words, characters, or syllables (Jurafsky & Martin, 2009). In natural language processing (NLP), bigrams are employed to elucidate the relationship between two adjacent words, offering insights into linguistic patterns and structures. Bigrams are crucial in text analysis, as they facilitate comprehension of the context and relationships between words in a text.

**4. Results of research**

The study included reviews from 33 mountain hotels in Serbia, with the dataset consisting of 1,180 positive and negative reviews. In this research, LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) was applied to identify the dimensions of service quality, the importance of these dimensions, and the words associated with them, based on previously processed reviews. Referring to Tirunillai and Tellis (2014) and Guo et al. (2014), a dimension (or topic) can be defined as a latent construct represented through the vocabulary users employ to describe their experiences, commonly referred to as a *topic* in LDA literature.

In the analysis of mountain hotel reviews, the topic model coherence was tested depending on the number of topics, separately for positive and negative reviews. Coherence is a measure of how meaningful and consistent topics are, or how tightly related and logically interpretable the words within a topic are (Röder, Both, & Hinneburg, 2015). The examination of the highest coherence index values revealed the best number of topics: four for positive reviews (Coherence index = 0.263), and five for negative reviews (Coherence index = 0.203). This method enables the identification of the most relevant and clearly expressed themes in the reviews, assisting in the understanding of the critical components of service quality.

Positive reviews commonly featured bigrams such as *indoor\_pool*, *swimming\_pool*, *value\_money*, *half\_board*, *friendly\_helpful*, *friendly\_staff*, *everything\_need*, and *free\_charge*.

The first topic identified in the positive reviews of mountain hotels, based on key terms such as “quality,” “high,” “best,” “star,” and “satisfy,” could be labeled as *Service Quality*. Keywords like quality, high, best, star, and satisfy are present, suggesting that visitors usually highlight how satisfied they are with the overall level of services received. The idea that excellent service is a key factor in determining guest satisfaction and loyalty is supported by these expressions, which convey a sense of excellence and professionalism (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Thus, this reflects how effectively the hotel succeeds in meeting or surpassing guests' expectations in terms of providing exceptional service experiences. Numerous studies have confirmed the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction (e.g., Zhong & Moon, 2020; Zhao & Huddleston, 2012), and the prominence of this topic in reviews highlights the importance of service quality for customer satisfaction.

The keywords within the second topic – “kid,” “family,” “child,” “vacation,” “school,” “playground” – indicate stays with children and highlight the importance of child-friendly amenities as an aspect of perceived service quality. The presence of facilities tailored to children directly affects guest satisfaction and their assessment of the overall quality of the hotel offering, which is why this theme is labeled *Child-Friendly Amenities*. Accommodation facilities aiming to increase revenue by diversifying their products and services gain a competitive advantage by offering amenities that cater to families with children (Tuna, Özyurt & Kurt, 2019). Providing child-friendly facilities leads to higher guest satisfaction and an improved experience, increased customer retention, enhanced corporate image, and greater revenue (Gaines, Hubbard, Witte & O'Neill, 2004; Liu & Filimonau, 2020).

It has been proven that food and beverage services in hotels have a significant impact on customer satisfaction (Poon & Low, 2005), which was also confirmed in this study. Keywords such as “buffet,” “variety,” “dinner,” “perfect,” “food,” “dish,” and “table” refer to the dining experience and food consumption in hotel restaurants; therefore, this third theme, representing one of the key determinants of satisfaction in mountain hotels, was labeled *Food*. The quality of food, the diversity of the offer, and the manner of serving strongly shape the perception of overall service quality, as guests often evaluate their entire hotel experience through the gastronomic offering.

Keywords like "wellness," "sauna," "pool," and "massage" emphasize the significance of additional services and facilities that enhance the guest experience, which is why this theme is titled *Additional Services* (Table 1). According to Marković and Raspor (2010), the quality and availability of these facilities have a substantial impact on customers' perceptions of overall service quality, enhancing their sense of comfort, relaxation, and value.

**Table 1.** Extracted aspects of service quality from positive reviews

Number of topic	Extracted keywords	Weight of keywords	Extracted keywords	Weight of keywords	Name of the topic
<b>Topic 1</b>	Quality	0.021	Quite	0.014	<b>Service quality</b>
	High	0.019	Feel	0.013	
	Best	0.018	Mountain	0.013	
	Stay	0.017	Star	0.013	
	Guest	0.016	Satisfy	0.013	
<b>Topic 2</b>	Kid	0.074	Vacation	0.016	<b>Child-friendly amenities</b>
	Family	0.045	School	0.015	
	Child	0.032	Free	0.014	
	Year	0.028	Nature	0.014	
	Perfect	0.018	Playground	0.014	

Table 1. Continued

Number of topic	Extracted keywords	Weight of keywords	Extracted keywords	Weight of keywords	Name of the topic
Topic 3	Fantastic	0.037	Perfect	0.027	Food offer
	Buffet	0.035	Food	0.027	
	Variety	0.034	Dish	0.026	
	Star	0.033	Wellness	0.026	
	Dinner	0.028	Table	0.025	
Topic 4	Perfect	0.025	Pool	0.016	Additional services
	Amazing	0.022	Massage	0.015	
	View	0.019	Recommend	0.013	
	Wellness	0.018	Apartment	0.013	
	Sauna	0.018	Outdoor	0.013	

Source: Results of research

The most frequent bigram combinations that characterized negative reviews of mountain hotels were *smoking\_allowed*, *extra\_cost*, and *mountain\_hotel*. The first topic that appears in negative reviews is *Unpleasant Odors*. The topic is described through the following keywords: “smoke(ing)”, “smell”, “bathroom”, “bad”, “area”. Cigarette smoke, restaurant scents, and unpleasant smells from the surrounding environment all contribute to the existence of unpleasant odors in hotels. This topic suggests a notion of decreased service quality, as customers relate bad odors with uncleanliness and poor maintenance, affecting their overall impression of the hotel and decreasing their level of satisfaction with their stay. Service quality and satisfaction are closely related, which is confirmed by the fact that unpleasant odors have been identified as a determinant of dissatisfaction in numerous studies (e.g., Srivastava & Kumar, 2021; Xu & Li, 2016).

The second topic associated with the perception of lower service quality is *Additional Charges*. This topic was labeled based on the keywords “price”, “extra”, “charge”, “pay”, and “cost”. Complimentary amenities such as free Wi-Fi, breakfast, and parking are considered core hotel services and are often used as key promotional features (Lin, 2017). The provision of these free services positively influences guest satisfaction and the perception of service quality (Liu, Gao, Gallivan & Gong, 2020), while, on the other hand, any unexpected or additional charge creates a sense of distrust and dissatisfaction among guests, leading to the perception of lower service quality.

The *Bathroom*, or issues related to it, has already been recognized as one of the key sources of guest dissatisfaction in city hotels (e.g., Guo et al., 2017). Keywords such as “water,” “temperature,” “shower,” “cold,” “issue,” “door,” and “bathroom” indicate that the technical functionality and cleanliness of the bathroom represent an important dimension of perceived service quality. Deficiencies in this area frequently have a detrimental impact on the overall perception of the hotel, as customers consider the bathroom to be an indicator of the hotel's standards and service reliability.

The fourth topic, *Overall impression of the property* is labeled using the keywords extracted: *star*, *kind*, *impression*. The overall impression of a hotel is an important factor in determining perceived service quality, encompassing all aspects of the guest experience through their stay. According to Wilkins et al. (2007), the overall impression is formed through the interaction of various dimensions of service quality, such as technical, functional, and emotional aspects, which collectively shape the comprehensive guest experience.

The fifth topic could not be assigned a label due to its insufficiently clear and coherent meaning, which is consistent with the findings of Hu et al. (2019), who note that some groups of keywords in review analysis do not form a sufficiently consistent concept for labeling.

Table 2. Extracted aspects of service quality from negative reviews

Number of topic	Extracted keywords	Weight of keywords	Extracted keywords	Weight of keywords	Name of the topic
Topic 1	Area	0.118	Bathroom	0.067	Unpleasant Odors
	Floor	0.097	Facility	0.060	
	Smoke	0.092	Bad	0.057	
	Smell	0.085	Extra	0.057	
	Part	0.067	Check	0.053	
Topic 2	Price	0.163	Charge	0.059	Additional Charges
	Guest	0.138	Pay	0.052	
	Quality	0.112	Swim	0.049	
	Experience	0.062	Leave	0.046	
	Extra	0.059	Cost	0.043	
Topic 3	Water	0.168	Cold	0.064	Bathroom conditions
	Work	0.092	Issue	0.058	
	Temperature	0.078	Door	0.052	
	Shower	0.078	Bathroom	0.050	
	Time	0.066	Minute	0.046	

Table 2. Continued

Number of topic	Extracted keywords	Weight of keywords	Extracted keywords	Weight of keywords	Name of the topic
Topic 4	Star	0.196	Problem	0.060	Overall impression of the property
	Center	0.111	Different	0.050	
	Apartment	0.106	Kind	0.047	
	Kid	0.089	Need	0.044	
	Smoking	0.081	Impression	0.044	
Topic 5	Location	0.165	Especially	0.051	-
	Bathroom	0.149	Look	0.048	
	Excellent	0.062	Three	0.048	
	Lobby	0.058	Choice	0.048	
	Order	0.058	Modern	0.045	

Source: Results of research

The previous tables show an overview of the key aspects that influence the quality of service in mountain hotels from the perspective of hotel guests. In addition to the elements that contribute to a positive experience and a high level of satisfaction, the tables also identify those factors that most often lead to dissatisfaction and a perceived lower quality of services. Such an overview enables a more comprehensive overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the offer, which creates the basis for improving standards and raising the overall quality of stay in mountain hotels.

## 5. Conclusion remarks

Online reviews are widely acknowledged as an important tool for determining customer satisfaction and service quality in the hospitality and tourism industries. Previous research suggest that examining online reviews through data mining provides valuable and important insights into hotel service quality and guest experiences (Peres & Paladini, 2021; Thu, 2020). This study used guest reviews from TripAdvisor as its primary source of data to determine which aspects of service quality have the biggest effects on customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Since reviews offer real insights into visitors' experiences and expectations, they are an invaluable resource for comprehending consumer perceptions. They also act as an essential feedback system, assisting hotels in recognizing their advantages, resolving their disadvantages, and improving the overall quality of their services in order to better satisfy customers demands.

In this study, the key aspects of service quality in mountain hotels in Serbia were identified. The service quality aspects that guests were most satisfied with include *Quality of service, Child-friendly amenities, Food and Additional facilities*. On the other hand, the aspects that contributed to guest dissatisfaction include unpleasant odors, additional charges, bathroom conditions, and the overall impression of the property. These factors indicate a lower level of service quality, suggesting that improvements in cleanliness, transparency of pricing, maintenance, and general property upkeep are necessary to enhance the overall guest experience.

The results of this study are in line with what other studies regarding the complex connection between hotel service quality and customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction (e.g., Caruana, 2002; Parasuraman et al., 1994; Nunkoo et al., 2020; Top & Ali, 2021). This study results supports the findings of Padma and Ahn (2020), Berezina et al. (2016), and Chittiprolu et al. (2021) that both tangible and intangible service elements notably influence guest experiences. The findings highlighted the importance of staff conduct, service efficacy, and value-added amenities, which have been identified as significant satisfaction drivers in earlier studies (Padlee et al., 2019). Conversely, dissatisfaction was primarily associated with unpleasant odors, additional charges, bathroom conditions, and the overall impression of the property, indicating lower quality of these tangible and operational aspects. These results provide support to the claim that, although intangible factors frequently increase satisfaction, observable weaknesses can drastically lower the perception of overall service. Based on these insights, it is evident that the overall impression of a hotel results from the complex interaction of multiple dimensions of service quality. Therefore, hoteliers should focus on enhancing all aspects of service to create a positive and memorable experience for their guests.

According to previous research conducted by Wang et al. (2020), the type of traveler has an impact on the service quality requirements. Families value breakfast and suites, friends prefer cleanliness and location, couples focus on bars and surrounds, business travelers prioritize restaurants, lobbies, and guestrooms, while lone travelers choose pricing and location. These discrepancies imply that future research on perceptions and expectations of hotel service quality may take traveler segments into account. Given these discrepancies, future studies examining perceptions and expectations of hotel service quality should consider the type of traveler. Furthermore, prior studies (e.g. Nunkoo et al., 2020) have demonstrated that the quality of service varies according to the hotel's star rating, with various quality aspects affecting guest satisfaction across rating categories. Low-rated hotels prioritize infrastructure and staff knowledge, mid-rated hotels prioritize safety and room quality, and high-end hotels prioritize customer service and wait times (Nunkoo et al., 2020). This implies that future research on service quality and customer satisfaction should take hotel star rating into account as an additional variable.

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