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DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY

CONTRIBUTIONS TO MEASURING CUSTOMERS' SATISFACTION WITH HOTEL SERVICES

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATOR:

PROF. UNIV. DR. PLĂIAŞ IOAN

PHD STUDENT:

SOUCA MARIA LUIZA

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Customer satisfaction, perceived quality of service, SERVQUAL, Romania, hotel services, tourism, customer delight, customer dissatisfaction, satisfaction antecedents, predictive expectations, normative expectations, customer perceptions on performance, expectancy disconfirmation with performance paradigm, affect, equity, satisfaction consequences, customer loyalty, word of mouth, repeat purchase intentions, complaining behaviour, service value, satisfaction model, research instrument, importance-performance analysis.

3. INTRODUCTION

Tourism, through all it forms, is an old human activity dating back to ancient times, but as an industry, it has known true development in the second half of the 20th century (Stănciulescu, Țîrca, Chiş, & Souca, 2010; Țîrca, Chiş, Souca, Băcilă, & Ciornea, 2010). According to the latest data, in 2011 there have been 983 millions international tourists, who generated a revenue of 1030 billion $ (740 billion €), and the prognosis sees an increase in tourists' numbers for 2030 up to 1.8 billion (WTO, 2012). Even in 2009, period highly affected by the economic crisis and in some regions by epidemiologically and terrorists' threats, saw only a 4% decrease in tourists' numbers to 880 million international tourists, while in some regions from Africa and Asia, those numbers actually increased (WTO, 2012). This is further proof of both the industry's dynamism and the fact the tourism industry vulnerability to economic crises can be significantly diminished as long as the consumer of tourism services is a satisfied one (Souca, 2010). And satisfying the consumer is impossible without offering a complex tourism product, perfectly adapted to customer's needs, in which a large part is represented by accommodations – also known as "hotel industry" in tourism literature.

In the case of Romania, although from a geographical and anthropogenic point of view, our country should be a prime European tourism destination, from the Romanian tourists' perspective, there is a negative attitude reflected by the fact that a large number of Romanians have a mediocre perception of the value of tourism services, especially

accommodation services, as they would rather spend their tourism budgets on foreign destinations instead of national ones.

This is mainly the cause of existing economic context, the transition that followed 1989 having been characterized by political and legislative instability, economic restructuring and inflation, all aspects that have a deep impact on individual attitude towards consumption, and tourism – a holiday-related activity – became less a priority compared to the need for the daily shopping basket. This is a possible explanation why, according to the data provided by the National Statistics Institute, during 1990-2002 there has been a decrease in the numbers of Romanians going on holiday abroad, although the missing numbers didn't appear as Romanians spending their holiday on the national territory. The period between 2002-2011 shows a relatively more optimistic situation, with a maximum point reached in 2008, while the 2009 economic crisis having had modified once again the Romanian's tourism behaviour. (INSE, 2012).

From another point of view, the tourism product is characterised by the client having to go to where the offer is being made, an element which increases the perceived risk factor, which in turn will influence the degree of expectations the consumer has about the tourism experience. If he experiences a disappointment – a negative expectancy disconfirmation based on the fact that what he receives is completely or partially different from what he was led to believe he will receive, coupled with the fact that in the tourism industry customers have a narrow zone of tolerance for service variability – the contrast theory states that the customer will react by exacerbating the differences he perceives until reality is distorted. In that situation, also considering the lack of satisfaction studies on Romanian tourism, it can be deduced that the general impression is that of disappointment, while tourism abroad is seen as something to be admired and proof of high standards. The Romanian accommodation structures are affected by a particularly low reputation, while many see them as having fees to high compared to the quality of the services they provide, while their managers don't know their target market, and their customers' needs and desires (Maniu & Marin-Pantelescu, 2012).

Therefore judging by the situation relative to the number of nights spent by customers in hotels, it can be seen that the prominent choice goes to the less expensive units, even though a small price is assimilated to low quality, while, at the same time, there has been an increase in the numbers of higher quality hotel units. In this care it can be said that

Romanian tourists start from the beginning with very low expectations, and if the result is better than they expected it to be, they may not feel genuine satisfaction, but at least they weren't disappointed.
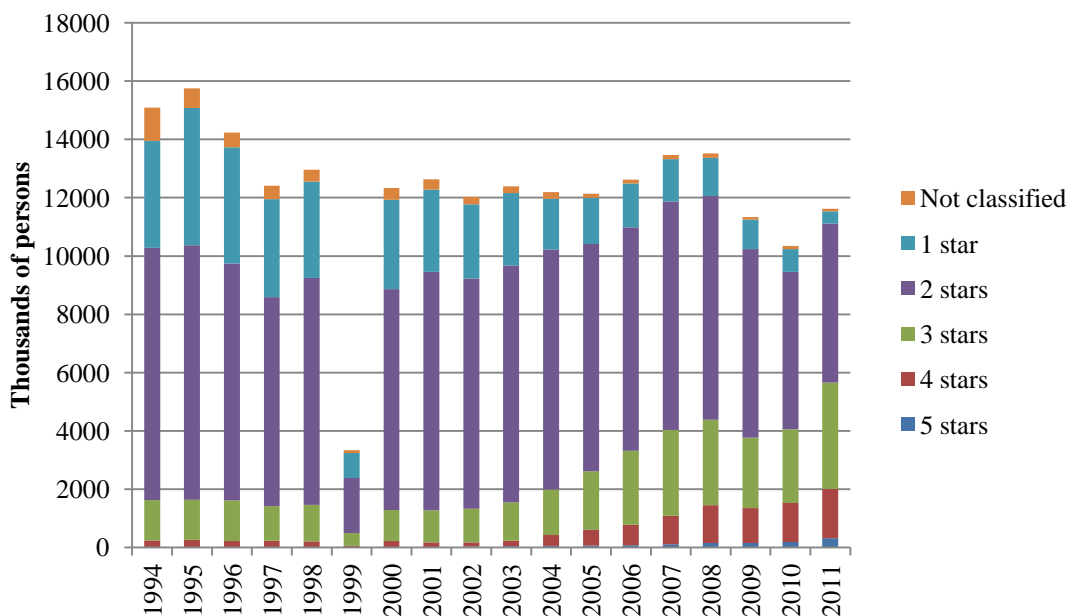
Figure 1: Nights spent by Romanian tourists in hotels divided by comfort categories, for the period between 1994 - 2011 (source: author's own development based on the data provided by INSE, 2012)

Another aspect of the period following 1989 is the damage that has been done to Romania's image abroad, caused in part by the lack of a clearly defined and attractive national brand, which could have brought in more international tourists. Because of this, their numbers have fallen during the 1990-2002 period, followed by an increase until 2008, when a maximum point of 8862000 individual tourists was reached – a consequence of having Sibiu as a European Capital of Culture, while 2009 brought fewer numbers. The situation for 2011 is more positive as the numbers of international tourists have risen a bit to 7611000 individuals (INSE, 2012).

All these aspects analysed together might not be seen as being extremely threatening for a still developing industry such as the Romanian hotel industry, but as competition intensifies, hotel managers are put in the position of having to become competitive through service quality and customer satisfaction. And the fact competition is about to intensify in national level is obvious when one looks at the numbers: the higher-quality

hotels with 3, 4 and 5 stars have increased their numbers, while those of lower quality: 1 and 2 stars and units unclassified on comfort standards have become fewer during the 2007-2011 period (INSE, 2012).

This is an aspect that shows a growing preoccupation for higher standard quality, but unfortunately, it provides with no insights regarding how the consumers perceive these improvements. Furthermore, available data show that Romanian hotel services attract 81.24% of demand from the national market and only 18.76% of demand from the international market. Because of this, it has become imperative for hotel managers to determine, which are the quality dimensions Romanians have come to expect as a basis for their satisfaction, and also, which are the expectations and customer perceptions on the hotel services they are provided.

In conclusion, it has become obvious to me the need to develop an instrument of research adapted to the Romanian reality, which can be used to easily determine customer satisfaction. One possible solution has been using a tried and tested model such as SERVQUAL, which has proven its usability. However, in its case, researchers have pointed out its flaws for years, underlining the fact that using the model in a multicultural context, outside of the US where it has been developed and tested, necessitates its adaptation to the local reality. This is why; any proposal for an instrument of research of hotel services perceived quality, and implicitly customer satisfaction, must pass through a rigorous validation from a statistical and methodological point of view before being used in practice.

Starting from all the aspects shown previously, the main direction of the current paper has been the clear definition of the customer satisfaction concept and developing a viable model for its determination, because, as research shows, customer satisfaction together with quality, are the key elements for financial performances and profitability. (Anderson & Fornell, 1994; Fornell, 1992). Because of this, it is crucial for service organizations such as the hotel industry, to identify, which are the offer dimensions which generate satisfaction, and, which are the dimensions which still need to be improved, especially those that the consumers consider important, yet they generate low levels of satisfaction.(Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994; Anderson, Fornell, & Rust, 1997).

4. SYNTHESIS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS CHAPTER'S CONTENTS

Starting from the hypothesis that customer satisfaction is absolutely necessary for the successful development of the Romanian hotel industry, and through it of Romanian tourism, the present paper wants to determine a starting point for a field largely unexplored as part of the Romanian economy, by critically evaluating the available literature on satisfaction and implementing a specific study. Because of this, the Doctoral Thesis named "Contributions on measuring customers' satisfaction with hotel services", written by **Souca Maria Luiza,** under the scientific guidance of University Professor PhD. **Plăiaş Ioan**, comes to the completion of scientific and practical knowledge on satisfaction with the following section: an introduction to the Romanian hotel industry environment, two theory chapters dedicated to defining satisfaction and measuring it, a chapter which details the practical research and finally, the study's conclusions.

Introduction chapter

The introduction chapter radiographies the Romanian hotel industry identifying its tendencies for improvement of the standard service quality, while, at the same time, the competition between hotel services provides is also increasing, although the general population continues to be quite reluctant about the hotels' offer. This aspect will be visible during data analysis as well, as proven by the low level of expectations from the analysed population. Another concerning aspect is the small number of customer satisfaction studies for Romanian customers, and also of the way they perceive the quality of the services they are provided, seeing as reality, for the customers, is not necessarily that represented by objective standards, but by individual perceptions of it.

First theory chapter – Customer satisfaction

The theory begins with an extensive literature review for customer satisfaction, spanning several decades of studies in the effort to find the most appropriate definition for customer satisfaction. However, considering the fact that literature is abound with confusing and often contradictory definitions, satisfaction has been conceptualized in time as a process, the result of a process, cognitive evaluation, affective evaluation, general sentiment of fulfilment and even as having conative elements. Because of this, I have selected 30 definitions of customer satisfaction written in the 1969-2011 period, which were then

evaluated by the framework provided by Giese and Cote (2000), who identify satisfaction as a type of response, which has a focus, and it is determined by a specific trigger.

Therefore, the oldest definition I've taken into consideration is that from 1969, which views satisfaction as "The buyer's cognitive state of being adequately or inadequately rewarded for the sacrifices he has undergone"(Howard & Sheth, 1969, p. 145), while the newest analysed definition is from 2011: "Consumer satisfaction is (…) a complex human process involving extensive cognitive, affective, and other psychological and physiological dynamics"(Sanchez-Gutierrez, Gonzalez-Uribe, & Coton, 2011, p. 18). Starting from here, a framework for defining satisfaction can be described (adapted after Giese & Cote, 2000):

1. *Satisfaction is a global affective answer, based on cognitive evaluation, which varies in its intensity – the holistic nature of satisfaction;*
2. *The central point of satisfaction is the product and/or service choice, acquisition and consumption;*
3. *The trigger for satisfaction varies based on context, but satisfaction's duration is limited – the temporal existence of satisfaction;*

Still in the first chapter, from literature review I have identified the conceptual limits of customer satisfaction: the superior limit has been identified as customer delight and the lower limit was described as customer dissatisfaction.

Therefore, in the care when customer satisfaction is being measured as a global construct, *customer dissatisfaction* is seen as its opposite on the same continuum construct. However, in the case where satisfaction is assessed based on multiple factors, the analysis gets more complicated because, as satisfaction literature states with the *Three factors satisfaction theory* (Fuller & Matzler, 2008)*,* product and service attributes fall into one of the following categories:

1. *Basic factors* – are minimum requirements that cause dissatisfaction if not fulfilled but do not lead to customer satisfaction if fulfilled or exceeded;
2. *Excitement factors* – are the factors that increase customer satisfaction if delivered but do not cause dissatisfaction if they are not delivered;
3. *Performance factors* – can go both ways, leading to satisfaction if performance is high and to dissatisfaction if performance is low.

Starting from these aspects identified during literature review, the drawn conclusion is that the link between satisfaction and dissatisfaction is far more complex than it is generally portrayed, the dissatisfaction field needing more research as the current studies are too few at the moment.

When it comes to *customer delight*, this was introduced as a "superior form of satisfaction" in the studies analyzing satisfied customers churn and their defection to the competition, considering the fact that satisfaction has been identified as an essential element to customer loyalty. Rust & Oliver (2000) conceptualize customer delight as the surprisingly positive expectancy disconfirmation, which in turn generates emotions with a high degree of excitement, such as euphoria and enthusiasm, while customer satisfaction implies only exceeding the customer's expectations. Seen from this point of view, customer delight has on satisfaction the element of surprise and a more pronounced affective component; and while it can be considered as the cause for a higher degree of loyalty from customers, at the same time it is also the source for considerable and lengthy costs for companies. From another perspective, delight differs from satisfaction because it is an emotional response to the fulfilment of a different consumption objective, than satisfaction. Chitturi, Raghunathan & Mahajan (2008) conclude related to the two concepts:

1. Transactions which fulfil, or exceed *utilitarian consumption objectives* have a significant influence on customer satisfaction;
2. Transactions which fulfil, or exceed *hedonic consumption objectives* have a significant influence on customer delight, but only if satisfaction was previously attained.

A problem which generated several polemics in the academic world and which is also discussed in this chapter is the relationship between customer satisfaction and perceived service quality for products and/or services. Although scientific literature has reached a consensus that the two concepts are distinctive (Oliver, 1997; Taylor & Baker, 1994), the two share a very close relationship (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Gotlieb, Grewal, & Brown, 1994; Patterson & Johnson, 1993; Spreng & Mackoy, 1996), and in some cases they have been used as if they have the same meaning (Iacobucci, Ostrom, & Grayson, 1995; Mittal, Ross, & Baldasare, 1998; Oliver, 1997; Taylor & Baker, 1994). The problem accentuated by the fact that there are many causal theories in

literature, which describe the relationship between the two concepts often from opposite stances. Some authors see satisfaction as the quality's antecedent, while others consider quality to be the essential determinant of satisfaction. Largely, the position I consider the most acceptable is the one explained by Rust & Oliver (1994) who see satisfaction as supraordinated to quality – in other words, quality is just one of the potential service dimensions, which influence satisfaction, although, according to the same authors, satisfaction can indirectly increase the perceptions of service quality. Another point of view worth considering is the temporal distinction between the two concepts Lovelock & Wright (1999) make, when they define perceived quality to be the long term cognitive evaluation of the service provided to the customer, while satisfaction is the short term emotional evaluation, an argument which underlines the fact that satisfaction is re-evaluated with every service experience, and the result, be it a positive or negative emotional response will modify the way the consumer sees the service's quality. On the same avenue, Oliver (1997) considers the causal relationship between the perceived quality of service and customer satisfaction as dependent on the level where the measurement is taking place:

1. For one transaction, there is a strong relationship: *perceived quality influences satisfaction*;
2. When taking into account several transactions, the relationship turns around: *satisfaction influences perceived quality* as the service evaluation comes from the general impression of it.

An important part of the first chapter is dedicated to satisfaction antecedents, or the variables which create satisfaction while interacting: customer expectations (identified on two levels: a minimum one called predictive and a desirable one called normative); customer's perceptions on performance for products and services; expectancy disconfirmation with performance, affect and equity. The first three of them are presented in detail as they are also part of the proposed general model for determining satisfaction, which was also tested with specific research data.

The relationship between *customer expectations* and satisfaction has been the subject numerous of debates in literature. Although their role in determining satisfaction is strongly supported by notable researchers (Oliver, 1980, 1993, 1997; Oliver & Burke, 1999; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991a; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988,

1994a), this role has been countered in the light of the close relationship that exists between satisfaction and perceived quality, and the fact that perceived quality needs only perceptions on performance in order to be measured (Buttle, 1996; Cronin & Taylor, 1992, 1994; Teas, 1993, 1994). For this reason, it was argued more than once that in the measurement of satisfaction should be employed only the perceptions on performance, thus eliminating from research expectations and their consequences: the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm. Furthermore, studies have identified more than one levels for expectations: a *minimum acceptable, adequate* or *predictive* level – known in the thesis as *predictive expectations*; and a *desirable, excellence measuring* or *normative* level, known in the thesis as *normative expectations* (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993), and because of all that satisfaction analysis becomes exponentially more complicated.

In the section dedicated to performance, the thesis makes a clear distinction between the concept of standardized performance – which can be measured and the subject of quality norms and regulations; and the *perception on performance* implied in satisfaction analysis – or how the customer sees a product or a service, image influenced by numerous internal and external factors.

Another antecedent of satisfaction presented in detail in this theory chapter is the *expectancy disconfirmation paradigm.* This theory is necessary to explain how satisfaction is formed from the interactions between customers' expectations and their perceptions on product or service performance. As it was initially described by Oliver (1980), expectancy disconfirmation takes place when the product is bought or consumed, in the moment when the consumer compares his expectations prior to the experience with his perceptions created during the experience. If the perceptions are higher than expectations (positive disconfirmation – P > E) then the resulted sentiment is that of satisfaction, in the opposite case resulting dissatisfaction (negative disconfirmation – P < E). The described relationship is clear and logical, yet it leads to confusion in scientific literature, especially when considering that Parasuraman et al. (1988) placed this paradigm as the basis of their SERVQUAL model, used to determine perceived service quality – something which led to numerous criticisms. For this reason, the SERVQUAL model can be considered, and arguably is, better suited to determine satisfaction rather than quality,

ground on which the present research uses it as a basis for the newly developed research instrument.

Satisfaction is then discussed from the perspective of its consequences: *customer loyalty* – where satisfaction is seen as the essential determinant of *repeat purchase intentions and behaviours* and *word of mouth* (Athanassopoulos, Gounaris, & Stathakopoulos, 2001) and *complaining behaviour* (Oliver, 1987); and finally, the chapter reviews the factors that influence satisfaction studies, and a possible explanation to all the different and often contradictory results presented in literature. Among these factors, the paper points to the following: comparison standards (although expectations are the favourite standard they are not alone in that role); measuring satisfaction (as a one-dimensional, multidimensional and global construct); research methodology (using experiments instead of surveys); studied populations (students versus other groups of respondents); and the type of analysed offer (customer satisfaction studies on products or on services).

Chapter two – Measuring satisfaction

The second theory chapter presents the evolution of the satisfaction concept in relations with other related variables: perceived service quality and service value through various *macro-models* proposed by literature.

Customer satisfaction, perceived service quality, service value, customer sacrifices and behavioural intentions are in a complex and tight relationship, although is not always clear which concept is in the middle. As argued by Cronin, Brady & Hult (2000), during the period where satisfaction, quality and value were studied intensely, the developed models of research often placed in the central position the concept which was the main point of the analysis. If the study was focused on satisfaction, this was the variable which was identified as the mediator between quality and customer loyalty(Choi, Cho, Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2004), but the same thing happened with service quality as well when quality was the central point of the study (Bitner, 1990). Although none of the studies mentioned can be considered false, it is clear, however, that they were influenced by their research objective and the period in which they were written.

Next to macro-models which explain the role satisfaction plays in relationship with other similar variables, the second theory chapter also shows *micro-models,* which underline the nature of the variables involved in creating satisfaction. The best-known model is the

Expectancy disconfirmation model which shows the interaction between customer expectations and perceived performance through the difference between the two: if expectations are lower than perceived performance, the result is satisfaction, otherwise the result is dissatisfaction. Other models which were presented here are the perceived performance model, the norms model, the multiple process model; the attribution model, the affective model and the equity model (Hom, 2000). Considering the fact that both satisfaction literature and personal research point to the expectancy disconfirmation model as the main model for determining satisfaction, for its practical application, I have identified the nearest practical solution, which has already been tested and applied in numerous studies: SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1991a; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991b; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; Parasuraman et al., 1988, 1994a; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994b).

In the case of the SERVQUAL model, it cannot be applied without a detailed discussion regarding several aspects of it. Firstly, there is the case of what exactly the model determines, because its initial form was destined for measuring perceived quality, while its latest variant takes into account two expectations levels, which make the model more suitable to determining satisfaction.

Secondly, the chapter reviews the model's limitations – the fact that it was developed and tested almost exclusively in the US, which makes its adaptation to a multicultural environment problematic, especially for non-English speaking cultures (Ueltschy, Laroche, Eggert, & Bindl, 2007) – and a detailed analysis of the criticisms it received over the years (Buttle, 1996; Saleh & Ryan, 1991; Souca, 2011). These criticisms are related to using expectations as a comparison standard and implicitly the use of the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm (perceptions minus expectations) as a basis for analysis; and also the number and universality of the service dimensions and items used for research – SERVQUAL's five original dimensions (reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness) rarely stay the same after analysis, while the 22 original items usually need to be completed with items related to the analysed context. Another important criticism is the one related to the methodology of research for the applied instrument, because the items are split into categories – they necessitate two specific questionnaires. The first survey is dedicated to evaluating expectation's levels for the studied population,

and after a certain period of time, the second survey should be applied in order to find out the studied population perceptions on performance.

Although the existing criticisms demonstrated that the SERVQUAL model is not a perfect fit to determining satisfaction, they also show the way the model can be improved. Taking this into account, for the practical research, I didn't use the original SERVQUAL scale, but I've built a *new research instrument* taking items from SERVQUAL and four other instruments dedicated exclusively to tourism and hotel services.

Another part of this chapter was the extensive analysis of the use of SERVQUAL and parts of it in analysing elements of the hotel industry – 23 studies spanning a period between 1988 and 2010 – from where I've reached the following conclusions later incorporated into the research methodology:

1. Although the majority of studies use SERVQUAL as a starting point, rarely the resulted dimensions from the research are consistent with the original SERVQUAL ones. There are differences in both contents, when their number stays the same, or in their numbers, varying from two to nine factors.

2. There is a consensus that evaluating satisfaction for the hotel services doesn't differ too much from the evaluating other types of services. The elements that set apart services from goods: intangibility, heterogeneity, variability and inseparability (Zeithaml, 1981) affect the way hotel services are analysed and evaluated, and even though there are some differences (for example, example hotel accommodation takes much longer than serving dinner in an restaurant); these differences are not so important as hotel services to necessitate a completely new instrument of research for customer satisfaction and perceived quality of service.

3. Any research in the customer satisfaction field which applies the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm needs to adapt the instrument of research in order to eliminate or restrain the effect of the problems associated with using expectations as a comparison standard.

As a final note regarding Romania, the situation of satisfaction studies regarding services, or the ones that use the SERVQUAL model is evaluated in this part of the chapter. Searching the literature revealed a small number of notable results: Şandor & Raboca (2007) – apply the SERVQUAL modified scale on six dimensions to determine the

perceived quality of public services in the city of Cluj-Napoca; Prejmerean & Vasilache (2009) – evaluate the perceived quality of medical services using a modified SERVQUAL scale; Maniu & Marin-Pantelescu (2012) – make an overall evaluation of customer satisfaction with hotel services and reported a high degree a satisfaction for Romanian customers (66%) and State & Istudor (2009) – who evaluate the perceived service quality and customer satisfaction with hotel services for a four-star hotel located in Bucharest, using the original SERVQUAL scale.

Chapter three – Research methodology

The third chapter is the one dedicated to research methodology, which details both the research hypotheses and the study results. Starting from the definition of satisfaction as a ***global affective response, limited in time and based on cognitive evaluation, which varies in intensity, and it is related to the product or service acquisition and consumption;*** the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm Oliver (2010), the existence of multiple levels of customer expectations (Zeithaml et al., 1993), and the fact that the zone between those levels is also known as „zone of tolerance'' which is representative for determining satisfaction(Teas & DeCarlo, 2004), I have identified several major research objectives, proposed a general model for determining satisfaction and a method for evaluating satisfaction.

The ***identified general objectives*** were:

1. Using an exploratory analysis, to determine the perceived quality factors for hotel services, which have the biggest impact on customer satisfaction with hotel services;
2. To verify the applicability of the general accepted model for expectancy disconfirmation by the point of view of the Romanian consumer and to adapt the model where it is needed.
3. To adapt the SERVQUAL model in order to obtain an instrument of research for determining the Romanian customer satisfaction with hotel services;
4. To verify the applicability of several elements poorly analysed on an international level, such as the existence of several levels of expectations and their direct and mediated influence on satisfaction;

5. To determine conclusions with valuable implications from both a theoretical point of view and a practical one for Romanian hotel managers.

To this we can add the final version of *proposed general model for determining customer satisfaction with hotel services,* which is as follows:
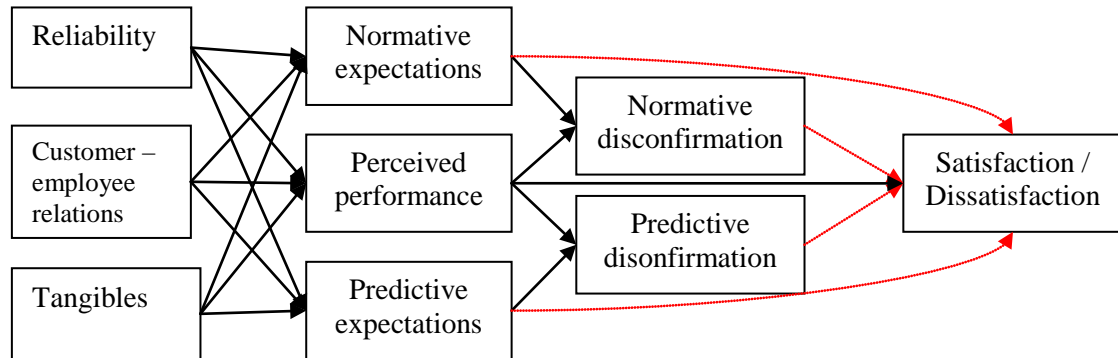
Figure 2: The proposed general model *Determining Satisfaction*, based on the links established during statistic determinations (source: own research)
* represented with red are the links between variables which are not statistically relevant

When it comes to evaluating satisfaction, I have used the following notations: **AP** – predictive expectations (minimum acceptable), **P** – performance perceptions; **AN** – normative expectations (desirable and achievable), **MAS** – the measure of service adequacy and predictive expectations and ZOT – zone of tolerance, for which I have developed the subsequent *calculation* based on the relationships found in literature:

$$AP < P \ (1)^1$$

$$P \leq AN \ (2)^2$$

From (1) and (2) there is the following relationship between constructs:

$$AP < P \leq AN \ (3)$$

Where AP and AN represent the limits of the zone of tolerance in which it can be evaluated how satisfactory was the perceived performance of hotel services. For a better interpretation of the results, the inequality was developed further:

$$AP < P \leq AN \ | \ -AP$$

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[1] The perceived service quality that leads to satisfaction is that where perceptions are higher than the minimum level of expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1994b)
[2] Considering that all that passes the normative expectations level – the standard on which excelent services are evaluated – it is a surprise, it's not too forward to consider that level as pertaining to „customer delight".

$$(AP\text{-}AP) < (P\text{-}AP) \leq |AN\text{-}AP|$$

$$0 < MAS \leq ZOT \ (4)$$

The relationship is interpreted as follows:

- $0 < MAS \leq ZOT$ – customer satisfaction, otherwise:
    - $MAS < 0$ – customer dissatisfaction;
    - $MAS > ZOT$ – customer delight.

In order to collect the data needed for testing the variables, the relationship between them and finally, the proposed general model I have utilised in the study a specific population whose choice I have argued extensively in a special section dedicated to it – the Tourism Geography students enrolled at the Faculty of Geography, bachelor's degree level in the May-June 2012 period.

The instrument of research was specifically designed to be applied in two stages in order to clearly capture both customer expectations and their perceptions on hotel service's performance, and after several statistic determinations, it has reached its most compact form. There were ***790 participants***, from who, after the selection, have resulted in ***254 valid answers,*** which contain the answers from both surveys: the expectations one and the perceptions one as well. Through them, ***157 hotel units*** were evaluated on national level (196 units) and from abroad (58 units), but the data was jointly analysed after statistics determined there was ***no*** significant difference in the answers provided by those who evaluated Romanian hotels, compared to those who evaluated foreign hotels.

From the initial instrument of research which included ***56 variables*** for which four types of answers were needed (normative expectations, predictive expectations, performance perceptions and degree of importance for the analysed variable) the final instrument had only ***11 variables,*** which required only three types of answers (normative expectations, predictive expectations and performance perceptions). These 11 variables are grouped into ***three new dimensions: reliability in providing the service, customer-employee relations*** and ***tangibles¸*** compared to the five original SERVQUAL dimensions. Furthermore, the research has confirmed the hypothesis that perceptions on performance are the principal component which influences service quality, and through it satisfaction, but the analysis of the proposed general model showed that the links between variables are much more

complex than what it was initially considered, this element pointing out to a future direction of potential research.

Table 1: The final items grouped into dimensions, as a result of exploratory research (source: own research)

Dimension	Item description	Item origin		Calculated Degree of Importance	
Reliability in providing the service (3 items)	Q1. Services provided as promised	SERVQUAL	(Parasuraman et al., 1994a)	6,12	**6,05**
	Q2. Dependability in handling customer' service problems	SERVQUAL	(Parasuraman et al., 1994a)	6,00	
	Q3. Services performed right the first time	SERVQUAL	(Parasuraman et al., 1994a)	6,03	
Customer – employee relations (3 items)	Q19. Staff shift where needed	LODGSERV	(Knutson et al., 1990)	5,81	**5,90**
	Q20. Staff do special request	LODGSERV	(Knutson et al., 1990)	5,78	
	Q21. Employees who instil confidence in guests	SERVQUAL	(Parasuraman et al., 1994a)	6,11	
Tangibles (5 items)	Q42. Employees have a neat, professional appearance	SERVQUAL	(Parasuraman et al., 1994a)	6,39	**6,50**
	Q50. The reservation was according to the customer's particular needs	Lodging Quality Index (LQI)	(Getty & Getty, 2003)	6,52	
	Q51. The hotel room was visually attractive	LODGSERV modified	(Ekinci, Riley, & Fife-Schaw, 1998)	6,53	
	Q53. The hotel was clean	Lodging Quality Index (LQI)	(Getty & Getty, 2003)	6,71	
	Q55. The hotel's interior and exterior were well maintained	Lodging Quality Index (LQI)	(Getty & Getty, 2003)	6,33	

When it comes to items' origin, for the final research instrument, the basis is the SERVQUAL model (5 items), followed by LQI (3 items), LODGSERV (2 items) and modified LODGSERV (1 item). This shows that starting from the original model and then adapting it, and not automatically using one of the derived instruments was the best approach.

The proposed general model for determining satisfaction is the *first* in literature, which tried to capture two levels of expectations and their interactions with perceived performance. The results are mixed and necessitate further validation through more than one set of data, which is another direction for future research.

A surprising conclusion of the SERVQUAL analysis shows a very high level of customer satisfaction with hotel services, but this situation is possible to reflect the recent increase in hotel services standardized quality – proven by the high perceptions' marks; and the possibility that public opinion has yet to catch up with the quality level, showing resistance to change – as proven by the low expectations' marks, on both levels. This is not a situation which I expect to continue, given the current tendency for improving hotel service's quality. In this section I have also discussed the study limits and the possible motives for the surprising results I've found, and also a warning related to how these should be interpreted.

As a supplementary analysis, the methodology chapter is ended with an ***importance-performance analysis,*** which shows an interesting picture of Romanian hotel industry reality.

Chapter four – Research conclusions and discussions on them

The final chapter points put the conclusions identified throughout the paper, while having a discussion over the research results from both their managerial implications and the limits of research. Several future research directions have been identified, which shows that satisfaction research, although quite old, is in some ways still at the beginning, and can only gain from incorporating particularities specific to the Romanian economy.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The current thesis conclusions can be split into two major categories: theoretical conclusions which were already presented throughout the chapter synthesis and practical conclusions from the study. The practical conclusions are grouped as well: conclusions for the research hypotheses, SERVQUAL type of conclusions and "Importance-Performance" type of conclusions.

Study hypotheses analysis

Having as a starting point the available that I have verified several work hypotheses for which I'm about to present the results:

H1. Perceived hotel services attributes are grouped into several dimensions, their contents being the same for each type of latent variable (normative expectations; predictive expectations and perceptions);

The current research aligns itself to many important prior studies in the perceived service quality and customer satisfaction fields, by identifying a different number of dimensions than those proposed by Parasuraman et al., (1994a). Showing an affinity to the results advocated by the North European school of thought (Ekinci et al., 1998; Grönroos, 1984) when it comes to service quality, the present study identifies only three dimensions, which impact satisfaction: reliability in providing the service, customer-employee relations and tangibles. From them, *tangibles* is the most important, followed by *reliability in providing the service* and finally *customer-employee relations.* This result shows that next to the physical premises, which necessitate important investments, the elements that, according to customers, have the most impact on satisfaction are respecting one's promises and employee attitude towards customers.

H2. The determined dimensions are relevant for the global evaluation of the variables: normative expectations, predictive expectations and perceptions.
In order to determine the general model, but also its partial forms: normative disconfirmation and predictive disconfirmation, it was very important that the dimensions determined for normative expectations; predictive expectations and perceptions have high reliability. The Cronbach Alpha scores reported, used in literature as a standard for reliability; prove that this hypothesis was demonstrated.

H3. Expectations have a direct and indirect influence on satisfaction;

Regression analysis for the proposed general model shows that the influence of expectation is strongly mediated by disconfirmation, yet, for both disconfirmation and expectations the link to satisfaction was proven to be insignificant statistically.

H3.1. There's a significant difference between the level of predictive expectations and normative expectations used in evaluating satisfaction.

The hypothesis was demonstrated, something that is further argument for involving both levels of expectations in determining satisfaction.

H3.2. Normative expectations have a direct and negative influence on satisfaction.

This hypothesis was completely disconfirmed through the general model for determining satisfaction, although there a negative link between normative expectations and normative disconfirmation – the higher the expectations, the harder positive disconfirmation gets. When it comes to the link between normative expectations and satisfaction, it is positive although not statistically significant.

H3.3. Predictive expectations have a direct and negative influence on satisfaction;

In the proposed general model for determining satisfaction the link between predictive expectations and predictive disconfirmation is negative, just like the link with satisfaction. Unfortunately, the link between predictive expectations and satisfaction is not statistically significant, even though the ***p.*** coefficient is very close to the threshold (0.058>0.05). The negative effect of expectations is logical, as they represent the minimum acceptable conditions necessary to feel satisfaction, and the higher the minimum level, the harder it gets to finally obtain satisfaction.

H4. Perceptions on performance have a direct and indirect influence on satisfaction.

The results confirm the general opinion that perceptions on performance are the main driver to influencing perceived quality, and through it, customer satisfaction. What can be observed is the fact the perceptions have a stronger influence on normative expectations – the measure of service superiority (MSS=P-AN), compared to their influence on predictive expectations- the measure if service adequacy (MAS=P-AP)

H5. Expectancy disconfirmation has a direct influence on satisfaction.

There are authors, who considering the preeminent influence perceptions play on quality, think expectancy disconfirmation to be obsolete (Cronin & Taylor, 1992, 1994). The results of this hypothesis, although they disconfirm it, are interesting as a subject of discussion. Among the two types of disconfirmation analysed, MAS had the stronger effect on satisfaction, while MSS had a far lower influence. Furthermore, while predictive disconfirmation has a negative relationship with satisfaction, while normative disconfirmation has a positive relationship. In other words, the higher the level for predictive expectations and lower the level for perception, the harder it is to get customer satisfaction, but at the same time, overcoming the level of normative expectations will lead to an even higher satisfaction.

H6. The importance degree has a significant effect on the way used to determine satisfaction.

The hypothesis was disconfirmed, because the analysis made on the general model shows that the variant which takes into account the stated degree of importance for the analysed items is not fit to explain the way customer satisfaction is formed, while the simple alternative of the general model fits the data far better.

H7. Customer experience has a significant influence on the expectation levels (normative and predictive)

From the analyses made, experience quantified in the survey as two variables: university year and frequency for buying hotel services in the last 12 months had no significant influence on the level of declared expectations. This aspect can be explained through the assumption that in the case when consumers get so experienced that only a surprising performance can make them change their views, expectation levels lose significance in the analysis. For this reason, a very experienced buyer, such as Tourism Geography students, no longer consider important expectations in their evaluation of the services, basing their judgement only on perceptions.

H8. Customer experience has a significant influence on the perceptions' levels (normative and predictive)

The hypothesis was confirmed with mixed results, something that shows the experience that matters when evaluating satisfaction comes from the regular use of hotel services,

while buying them only twice a year[3] has no significant influence on perceptions on performance.

H9. Standardized quality for hotel services has a significant influence on the level of perceived performance.

The hypothesis has been confirmed. This aspect has important consequences for hotel managers, because it underlines the importance of having an official classification, source for image, prestige and also a powerful mediator for customer satisfaction. This is a lesson Romanian hotel managers have started to learn as the data from the National Statistics Institute show an increase in the numbers of 3,4 and 5 star hotels in the last five years, while the numbers for 1 and 2 star units and those unclassified have started to decline (INSE, 2012). Still, the number of nights spent for Romanian tourists is significantly higher for 2 and 3 star hotels, something that shows that the family budget and the standard of living has yet to catch up with quality innovations – a further reason for hotel managers to consider satisfaction studies.

SERVQUAL type of results

Although the analysis of the work hypotheses showed the advances made with the theoretical model, the SERVQUAL analysis is made because it offers relevant results, which are easily interpreted from both a theoretical and practical point of view.
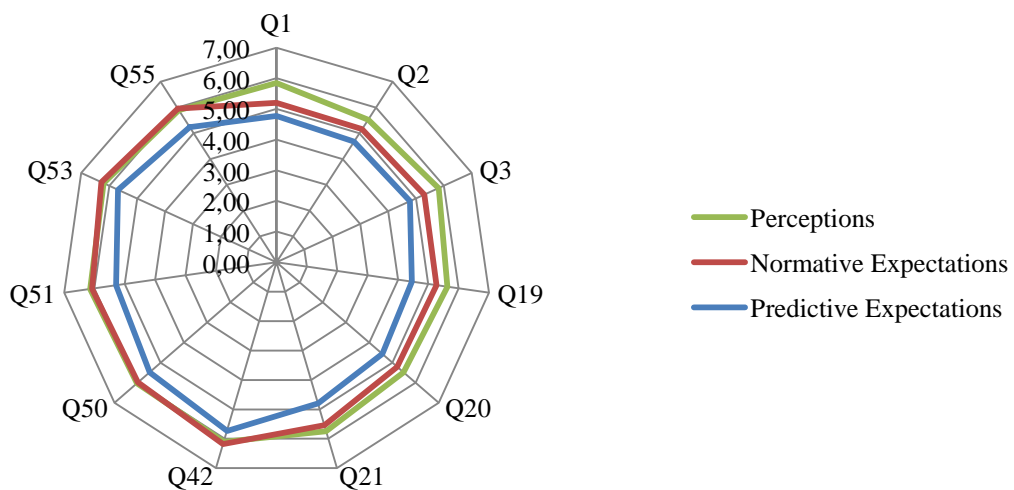
Figure 3: Comparison between the levels of Predictive Expectations, Normative Expectations and Perceptions of performance for hotel services (source: own research)

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[3] The Faculty of Geography sponsors at least 2 practical applications a year, which include both traveling and accommodation.

The overall marks for each variable lead to the following conclusion: the marks given to perceptions of performance are better than all the marks selected for the predictive expectations' scale and most of the marks for the normative expectations' scale, and this is the reason why there's no surprise that the perceptions of performance variable was proven to be the main predictor and determinant of customer's satisfaction. When it comes to the studied population, they declare an unusually high degree of satisfaction, with the offer provided by the hotel industry they analysed during the study.

At first, impression the situation is clear and straightforward: the study participants are very satisfied with the hotel services they were provided, perceptions of performance being ranked higher than any level of expectations. In this case, in literature the term used is delight as a superior form of satisfaction and total customer loyalty generator.

What needs to be discussed here is an additional aspect. While at first glance the results indicate that the services provided are excellent - however, caution is advised when it comes to taking these results at face value. There are several points to consider that can lead to the same data, without implying necessarily the existence of "delight."

1. *Problems adapting the SERVQUAL scale*

The SERVQUAL scale has been developed and used mainly in the US, something that the satisfaction literature considers to be a big limitation of the SERVQUAL model (Souca, 2011; Ueltschy et al., 2007). Furthermore, the small number of satisfaction studies on Romania and the lack of an already developed model made this first attempt not without flaws, some of them identifiable only after the data analysis. As it can be seen, although statistically different, there is a very small difference between the means of predictive expectations and those for normative expectations. On one hand this can be considered a confirmation of several other studies, which have reported a narrow zone of tolerance for hotel services (K. Nadiri & Hussain, 2005; Yilmaz, 2010), but on the other hand, this could also mean that some of the respondents didn't quite understand the difference between the two levels of expectations. For this reason alone, for future research more caution should be applied when selecting the right wording for each item.

2. *"Uncertainty avoidance" for the analysed population*

Analysing the cultural dimensions determined by Hofstede, Romania has a score of 90 for the uncertainty avoidance dimension (Hofstede, 2012). This aspect means that the Romanian consumers are more reluctant to purchase products and services that come with a high risk, and in order to avoid that consumers have the tendency to make familiar choices, or that they may establish from the beginning a lower than the normal level of expectations. Therefore, in order to avoid disappointment, it is possible that the level of normative expectations was very close from the beginning to the minimum level, further reason why the study results show them being exceeded, considering that prior studies have reported just the opposite. (State & Istudor, 2009).

3. *The cultural influence*

Another cultural dimension that influences the choices made by the Romanian customers is their collectivism versus individualism inclination. The Hofstede score for this dimension is 30 (Hofstede, 2012), which means that Romania is considered a collectivist society, in which its members place a great importance on social relationships and interactions. Considering the fact that almost half of the service experiences have taken part during the practices organized by the Faculty of Geography, meaning the respondents were parts of a group consisting of close friends and colleagues, and the fact that atmosphere and companionship have a definite influence on mood and therefore, on how satisfaction is being judged, (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Huang, Scott, Ding, & Cheng, 2012), then it is no wonder that the hotel services were evaluated so highly, while this is not necessarily the objective reality.

IMPORTANCE-PERFORMANCE analysis of factors

Considering the fact that perceived performance is the main determinant to customer satisfaction, an additional analysis that can offer important clues on the way the three quality dimensions are being evaluated is the importance-performance analysis introduced in literature in 1977 by Martilla and James (Bacon, 2003).

Starting from the average for perceived performance per item at **5.86** and the average for the degree of importance of **6.21** it can be seen that the resulted items as part of the research instrument are part of only two of the four quadrants of the model: "Low priority" and "Keep up the good work!"

The "Low Priority" dimension is characterised by both performance and importance below the average, and it contains six items from two dimensions: *reliability in providing the service* and *customer-employee relations*. At first glance, it can be said that these items are not a priority to both hotel managers and customers. But appearances can be deceiving as argued by Oliver (1997), because some items may be seen as low importance, as they are part from the offer of all hotels, therefore, no longer competitiveness factors. If from the perceived quality these items have a low priority, from the satisfaction point of view, they may actually be dissatisfies. In other words, their performance exceeding expectations won't lead to satisfaction, but their lack of performance will lead to dissatisfaction, which has far stronger negative effects than the positive ones of satisfaction.
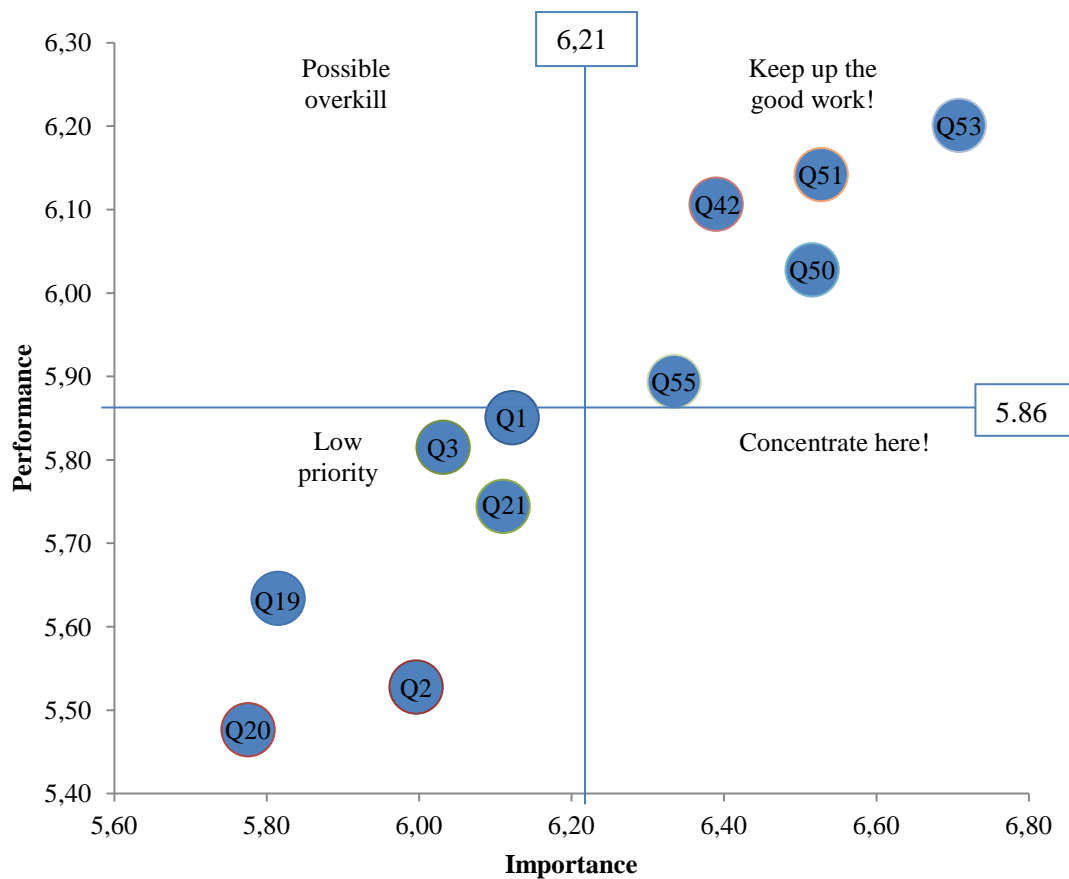
Figure 4: The means and degree of importance for each item of the final version of the instrument of research for hotel services (source: own research)

The "Keep up the good work" dimension has the best positioning: high degree of importance and a high level of perceived performance. Here all the items of *tangibles* can be found. This is further proof of the conclusion reached before while evaluating the

SERVQUAL scores: the hotel industry has made some major investments in improving service quality, but their clients have also become more demanding when it comes to their accommodations.

Study limitations

Using students as study participants comes with a series of advantages – a high response rate and ease of approach, but as literature points out, there are disadvantages as well, like a certain lack of results' representation and elimination of certain variables from the analysis that other studies have considered important.

Although it was identified as key variable in determining satisfaction in several studies, all variables referring to price and fees have been eliminated from the final version of the instrument according to statistics.

Another characteristic imposed by the studied population was the elimination of all variables related to additional hotel services, such as dining services. No variable dealing exclusively with the dining experience has passed the statistical determinations; this is the reason why it can be considered that the restaurant's image is completely integrated with that of the hotel. Considering that the Romanian hotel industry is still developing, this is an understandable conclusion, as this type of differentiation is to be expected from a more mature market with intense competition.

Another aspect that is related to the specific of the studied population has to do with the marks given to perceptions, which are higher than all the marks given to expectations. If initially, students' experience with hotel services was considered an advantage, it is possible that their vast experience had a negative impact on their levels of expectations, something that may explain why both the expectations – satisfaction link, and the one between disconfirmation and satisfaction were not statistically relevant. Furthermore, students being more open to the opinions of those around them, it is possible to have given the marks on performance according to the company they had during holiday and not necessarily on the standardized quality they encountered or the expectations they had prior to the experience.

On the other hand, this conclusion can be applied to every type of groups, when there are groups holidays organized, as literature recognizes the amplifying or diminishing effect ambiance has on individual mood.

All the aspects previously presented can be considered as specific traits of the analysed population, although with the lack of another research on Romanian customer satisfaction, I can't really state how representative are the results for the general population[4]. For this reason, I recommend starting a stream of research on the general population that could lead to studies with comparable results.

Managerial implications

Doing the research on Tourism Geography students, enrolled at the Faculty of Geography was not a random choice. This aspect was taken into consideration from two perspectives: firstly, as participants to the practical applications organized by the faculty and also their affinity for tourism and travel, they are a market that should be seriously considered; and secondly, these students are the next specialists and employees of the tourism industry. Therefore, they are in the unique posture of knowing also the customer point of view – by personal experience and that sponsored by their faculty – but also the service provider's point of view. This can be extremely important for the Romanian hotel industry, which is currently in full development, but also shown signs of intensified competition.

A second managerial implication of the current study is that related to the instrument of research. Although from an academic point of view, a more complex instrument is preferred, as a large number of variables show a more complex image of the hotel services, from a practical point of view, a simpler instrument (11 variables) is a more inspired choice. Furthermore, eliminating from the study the section dedicated to importance, shown as not statistically significant, simplifies the survey completion by hotel's guests even further.

Another important discovery is that related to the dimensions of perceived service quality, and implicitly customer satisfaction with hotel services. The three identified dimensions: *tangibles -* or everything that is relevant to the room, hotel and staff functionality and appearance; *reliability in providing the service* or providing the service right the first time and keeping up with the promises made during promotion and *customer-employee relations* in which accent falls on the adaptability of the employees and their willingness to answer customer requests, show what exactly determines customer satisfaction and how to make customer spread positive word of mouth and return with other occasions.

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[4] Maniu & Marin-Pantelescu (2012) which report a high degree of satisfaction with hotel services (66%) have also students as their main respondents group – 70,93% (122 respondents out of 172)

Studying satisfaction is not even close to its end, each variable involved in it still keeping secrets. From the role, expectations truly play in determining satisfaction to finding the exact way perceptions interact with expectations and the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm, all are aspects that wait for international studies, but especially local ones.

In conclusion, the study of satisfaction, although an important element in the consumer behaviour literature for nearly fifty years, in some aspects is still at the beginning, and Romanian examples, with their characteristics and particularities, can only help improve a field from which everyone can benefit: companies which providing satisfaction ensure a present and future profit and customer who, through satisfaction, gain better living.

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