

Q LABEL AND TOURIST SATISFACTION IN THE SPANISH HOTELS

M. Lilibeth Fuentes Medina

Universidad de La Laguna

Estefanía Hernández Estárico

Universidad Europea de Canarias

Sandra Morini Marrero

Universidad de La Laguna

smorini@ull.edu.es

Nowadays, the widespread use of reviews portals and social networks has increased the available information and its accessibility. Since 2010, the experience of the other guests is the first factor in the choosing of a hotel; indeed, more important than location or price (Anderson, 2012). The huge amount of user generated opinions and the influence of these opinions over other people, who take them into account, have a significant economic impact directly on sales, according to Ye *et al.* (2011).

Therefore, never before users satisfaction/dissatisfaction had been so important, both for its direct economic impact and for its influence on the decisions of other potential customers. Several studies, as Swan and Bowers (1998), Lee *et al.* (2000) or Soutar (2001), have determined that there is a direct and positive relationship between service's quality and satisfaction. The pair quality-satisfaction has driven a change of tourism development policies in Spain, which since 90s has focused on customer satisfaction as the key to enhance competitiveness. This change is consolidated through the Spanish Tourism Quality System which develops a tourist quality label, known as *Q*.

The management of total quality includes service quality and customer satisfaction (Khan, 2003). As it was said before, both of them are narrowly interrelated and their joint analysis, because of its economic implications, is of growing interest. However, there is no consensus about who influences who; although Dabholkar (1995) notes that causation depends on the time the service is assessed. It is also important take into account that customers do not perceive service's quality as a unity but they divide the information on different dimensions (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). Indeed, for McCain *et al.* (2005) these dimensions influence in different manner according contextual variables.

With respect to satisfaction, there are a lot of definitions, see for example Gundersen *et al.* (1996), Woodside *et al.* (1989). Most of these definitions focus on the customer's assessment of the different dimensions of the service; this evaluation depends on the real

experience and the previous expectations. Thus, customer's satisfaction is a measure of how customers assess the services of the company (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2005).

Internet has changed the way the tourist information is distributed and how travelers design, plan and consume their trip (Buhalis and Law, 2008). Nowadays, user generated content in social networks, online communities or review portals, has climbed to the first place in the set of information sources that consumers consult before making a decision (Cox *et al.*, 2009). As far as previous reviews have a direct economic impact in the firms which provide the service and also can affect other users' expectations and satisfaction; both of them, companies and consumers, are concerned about their credibility.

Regarding to accommodation services there are two big networks: 1) *TripAdvisor* which is the largest one, with 65 million of unique visitors per month and a total of 60 million of reviews in 2012 and 2) *Booking* where it can be booked for over 185000 tourist accommodation establishments in 163 countries and which reaches over 30 million of unique visitors per month. There are two fundamental differences between them: (1) *TripAdvisor* is strictly a review portal although indirectly allows reservations through other sites, while *Booking* is a *booking* portal that collects reviews from its buyers and (2) the views expressed by *TripAdvisor* may be issued by any person registered in the portal, has been or not in the hotel that evaluates, while the reviews recorded in *Booking* are written by the guest in a limited period of time after the end of her stay.

Therefore, the reliability of the information provided on *Booking* is greater to those provided on *TripAdvisor* and this feature has been the key in choosing *Booking* as source of information in this paper. The reviews expressed in *Booking* include the valuation from 0 to 10 of six items: cleanness, comfort, location, services, staff and quality-price relation which results in the average score of each accommodation establishment. These scores are a proxy for customer satisfaction, since it seems reasonable to assume that the more satisfied we are at a hotel, higher is the score given to it.

To build the sample, we select all the *Q-branded* three or more stars hotels which are offered through *Booking*. And hotels without *Q-brand* are selected through a random proportional-stratified sampling by region and hotel's category. All the scores, for each individual item and the average of them, are dated December 1st, 2011. Also, it is recorded the category of the hotel and its location, to be used as control variables; because in a previous paper, we conclude that the scores differs significantly by categories and location. The sample has 857 establishments, 430 *Q-branded* and 427 without the *Q* quality brand. The distribution by categories can be seen in Table 1.

The paper analyzes whether the effort made to obtain the *Q quality brand* is perceived in some way by the customer, who, if true, would give higher scores to the *Q-branded* hotels. When such difference among both sorts of hotels is detected, it is analyzed whether it is the same for all hotels or depends on their category or geographical location. This analysis is performed both over the average score and for the score of each individual item. Thus, the following hypothesis is tested: "The *Q* quality brand increases the satisfaction of guests". Actually, a total of 147¹ hypotheses

1 7 scores (overall, cleanness, comfort, location, services, staff and quality-price relation) by 21 (1 sample + 20 subsamples (one for each of the categories and region)).

are tested, one for each sort of score (overall, cleanness, comfort, location, services, staff and quality-price relation) in the whole sample (all the hotels of any category and location) and for each subsample (only 3 stars' hotels, etc.).

First, an exploratory analysis using confidence intervals (C.I.) is performed in order to get a first look about the differences in the scores of both groups of hotels (with *Q* and without *Q*). Also, data were tested for normality using Saphiro-Francia and Saphiro-Wilk tests and skewness/kurtosis test. Moreover, data were tested for homoscedasticity or homogeneity of variance using Levene's test.

In order to detect relationships between variables, a graphical analysis of the 95% confidence interval of the overall average score and the individual average score for both the sample and the subsamples considered is performed. From the information provided by we can observe that there are differences between the average score of hotels with *Q* and hotels without *Q*, being lower in the latter. For all the items, except for staff and quality-price relation, the C.I. do not overlap, indicating great differences between the two groups of hotels. The same analysis is performed but subsampling by categories and the results indicate differences between the two groups of hotels (with *Q* and without *Q*) at three and four stars hotels. To five stars hotels, the *Q* brand generates no significant greater satisfaction.

In relation to the geographical location of the hotel in *Comunidades Autónomas* it is worthwhile to mention: (1) there are significant differences in the overall mean score of both groups (with *Q* and without *Q*) in Andalucía, Castilla y León, Cataluña, Islas Baleares and Madrid, so in this regions worth the investment made in obtaining the *Q*. (2) According to the individual items in Andalucía, Cataluña, Islas Canarias and Madrid there are a significant numbers of items which shows differences between the two groups of hotels. (3) The same as for hotel category, there are no differences between both groups of hotels (with *Q* and without *Q*) in relation to the price-quality ratio.

The results of the above tests lead to use non-parametric tests. Therefore, it is used the U Mann - Whitney test to find whether the differences observed in the exploratory analysis are statistically significant or not.

The univariate analysis confirm the findings exposed in the previous subsection: (1) there are no statistically significant differences between the two groups (with *Q* and without *Q*) for five stars hotels, (2) there are no statistically significant differences for the quality-price relation, (3) for the staff score, there are no statistically significant differences for four stars and five stars hotels.

In addition, it can be highlighted the following results:

- For the sample as a whole, the higher differences between the two groups of hotels are found in comfort and service scores, and the lower differences are in staff score. Also, in terms of overall score the probability that a hotel with *Q* get a greater score than any other hotel is estimated at 73.7%.
- For three stars hotels the higher differences are in the comfort and service scores and the lower one in the staff score.
- The differences are greater for three stars hotels than for four stars hotels, except for location which is, indeed, the most important item at these hotels.

- When the geographical location by regions is considered, the differences in the overall mean score is almost of half a point in Canarias, Madrid and Extremadura. For cleanliness, also a difference above half a point is computed in Canarias and La Rioja. And, in relation to comfort, in Madrid and Canarias, hotels with Q have a score almost 0.8 points above to those without Q .

CONCLUSIONS

In five-star hotels the difference among both groups of hotels (with and without Q) is not significant. This could be due in this category the average of quality is by itself high, and the customer cannot perceived a significant difference among one group and another.

The difference inter-groups is higher in three-star hotels, thus, for them, the investment in obtain the Q quality certification is profitable. Some three-star hotels with Q reach a satisfaction score as high as those of four-star hotels without Q . According to the results of Anderson (2012) a hotel with Q could have a higher revenue per available room and they could price more than homogeneous hotels without Q . However the positive effect of quality certification is not showed in all the regions.

This paper extend existent literature by analyzing the Q certification from the perspective of the customer and its perception (measure in terms of satisfaction) about the efficiency of the quality system, which it is reflected in an higher score. However, as Alén y Rodríguez (2004) suggested, the way in how customers evaluate the quality of the service, does not depend exclusively of the service itself but also of the own customer, so future research should incorporate the demand segmentation as a variable to take into account.

The findings provide relevant information for managers of hotels because it is specified by category which items really are perceived by the customer as more valuable. The results seem to confirm that, in general, the effort made by Spanish hotels to reach the standard of tourism quality (Q quality brand) is perceived by customers, since they score them higher. However, the impact of quality certification is not uniform and depends on the category of the hotel. The managers of the hotels have this result a source of motivation beyond the internal factors that seem to prevail in deciding adherence to the certification process, as indicated in Hernández *et al* (2012).