

Sustainability Measures Implemented in the Hotel Industry. Case study: Romania

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Abstract

The paper aims to identify the main quality strategies applied in the accommodation units and discover the opinions, attitudes and perceptions of Romanian tourists regarding the quality strategies and sustainability measures applied in the Hotel Industry. In order to achieve the purpose of the paper, the authors combined an exploratory analysis with a qualitative market research based on a semi-directive in-depth interview. The exploratory analysis aimed to identify the quality strategies and sustainability measures implemented in the Romanian Hotel Industry in recent years. Following this analysis the results show that the most used quality strategies in the hospitality industry are: quality diversification strategy; continuous improvement strategy; quality differentiation strategy and quality certification strategy. The paper shows that sustainability is an important factor for the future of the Hotel Industry, but not all hotels have the resources to implement this concept. An unexpected result of qualitative research shows that most of the interviewed tourists (64.29%) stated that they do not know the concept of quality management. Further, the research results show that although many of the interviewed tourists have heard about sustainability and consider it important, they do not know this concept very well. The majority of respondents (73.81%) defined sustainability as a method of rationally using resources so that they can be used for as long as possible. In the end, based on the results of the paper, the authors recommend that the authorities, as well as the accommodation units, become more involved in the adoption of appropriate sustainable development measures that support the local community and protect the environment. At the same time, actions are needed to educate tourists about the concept of sustainability.

Keywords

Sustainability measures, Quality management, Hotel Industry, Quality certification, Strategy

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Introduction

Tourism is a driving force for some regions (which is behind economic growth). The rapid increase in the number of tourists has both positive and negative consequences in the future. Therefore, the issue of sustainability is frequently discussed in connection with the tourism industry (Jurigová1, Tučková, Kuncová, 2016). The development of unsustainable tourism can lead to serious damage both to the environment, to the entire society, but also to the entire tourism industry (Dutescu et al., 2014). Sustainability is a long-term process and involves the development of medium and long-term strategies and involves increasing the responsibility of companies towards people and the planet (Bratucu et al., 2017).

Quality assurance has become a major priority at both the microeconomic and macroeconomic levels, with more and more companies in the hospitality industry (especially hotel chains) developing their own service standards and implementing various quality strategies. The quality standards were created by the hotel chains out of the desire to ensure a unitary system of facilities, services and staff in order to promote and maintain a brand image. These standards, although they have common elements, differ from one chain to

another, while in the case of independent hotels only some of them have developed their own standards (Cristea, 2009).

The paper aims to identify the main quality strategies applied in the accommodation units and to discover the opinions, attitudes and perceptions of Romanian tourists regarding the quality strategies and sustainability measures applied in the hotel industry. To this end, the authors combined an exploratory analysis with a qualitative market research such as a semi-directive in-depth interview. The procedure used to collect the data in the research was the semi-structured interview, and the interview guide was used as a tool.

In order to achieve its objectives, the paper is organized as follows: a brief review of the literature, research methodology, research results and discussions. The paper ends with the conclusions.

1. Review of the scientific literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption to businesses around the world, with travel and tourism severely affected. In response, governments and businesses have implemented drastic responses to reduce the impact of the virus and mitigate appropriate business losses (Kenny and Dutt, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic has been found to have multiple effects on the hotel industry, leaving behind an *uncertain industry* that has turned its attention to *safety and hygiene concerns to regain the trust of its guests* (Heredia-Colaço and Rodrigues, 2021).

As competition in the hospitality industry becomes more intense, accommodation units face the challenge of continuously adapting, improving, changing and renewing the range of services, structure and ways of doing business (Iorgulescu and Ravar, 2013). A research paper (Kumar and Sheoran 2021) highlights that the diffusion of innovation in industry has a significant positive influence on the environmental marketing system.

It is found that the *marketing strategies applied* by the units in the hotel industry remain the *main lifeline* that helps them stay in the market. It is already noticeable that consumers are increasingly demanding sustainable tourism products and requiring companies to comply with specific environmental commitments (Sanchez-Ollero, Cappa, Febrero-Panos, 2016). Thus, hotels are increasingly considering *sustainability issues* in their *business models and strategies* (Sakshi et al., 2020). Sustainability has long been a buzzword and is also now one of the *top priorities* of tourism around the world, including for the hotel industry (Scholz, Linderova, Konecna, 2020). The practices applied in order to increase the level of sustainability of activities in the hotel industry refer to the lowest possible consumption of energy from polluting sources and replacement with renewable resources (solar, wind), installation of water meters and possibly automatic batteries that substantially reduce the consumption of water, the implementation of a system for the selective collection and storage of rubbish, the reuse and recycling of certain materials, the predominant use of cloth napkin or reprocessed paper napkin, the use of sustainable materials for the construction of new buildings, or interior and exterior design, as well as training and educating employees to develop sustainable behavior (Ham and Lee, 2011; Doğan et al., 2015; Iamkovaia et al., 2019). Moreover, the units that apply ecological practices manage to solve much more easily the various economic, social and environmental problems that are directly or indirectly determined by the operations carried out (Iamkovaia et al., 2019).

It is observed that sustainability has multiple significant positive effects on the improvement of the activity planning in the Hotel Industry. With the purpose of identify the quality strategies and sustainability measures implemented in the Romanian Hotel Industry, the authors conduct an exploratory analysis. The authors of the article analyzed a number of documents, such as: internal publications and websites of hotel chains and accommodation units, annual reports, industry analyzes and reference materials for the hospitality industry business. Among the analyzed documents are also Romania National Tourism Development Strategy 2019-2030. In this strategy it is estimated that in Romania 75% is business tourism, 6.36% leisure in mountain resorts, 5.34% tours, 2.83% City breaks, 2.48% leisure in seaside resorts. From all the studied materials, the authors identified the most used quality strategies in the hospitality industry, namely:

- The strategy of diversification;
- The continuous improvement strategy;
- The strategy of quality differentiation;
- The certification strategy.

2. Research methodology

The methodology used in this paper combined an exploratory analysis with a qualitative market research such as a semi-directive in-depth interview.

The exploratory analysis aimed at identifying the quality strategies and sustainability measures implemented in the Romanian hotel industry in recent years. For this purpose, internal publications and websites of hotel chains and accommodation units, annual reports, industry analyzes and reference materials for business in the hospitality industry were studied.

The qualitative research aimed at determine the opinions, perceptions and attitudes of Romanian tourists regarding the quality strategies and sustainability measures applied in the Hotel Industry. The procedure used in the research was the semi-structured interview, and the interview guide was used as a tool.

The specific objectives pursued by the research were:

- Determining the opinions and perceptions of Romanian tourists regarding the hotel services market;
- Identify the opinions of tourists regarding the quality strategies applied by the accommodation units;
- Identifying the attitudes and perceptions of tourists regarding the sustainability measures implemented in the Hotel Industry;
- Determining the opinions of tourists regarding the services of the food units within the accommodation units.

The researched population consists of all adults in Romania, who have traveled in the last 5 years at least twice and have used the services of tourist reception units. The sample included 42 subjects selected on the basis of compatibility with the general purpose and objectives of the research. The semi-directive in-depth interview was conducted face to face between January and February 2022. The interviews were conducted based on the interview guide that came out of the purpose of the study and the objectives. The authors sought detailed information on all aspects of the subject under investigation and to achieve the specific objectives. Each interview lasted 40-50 minutes. The answers obtained were recorded and stored in electronic files. Subsequently, these files were transcribed, the information being processed by the technique known as content analysis.

Table 1 shows the demographic characterization of the sample of respondents. It is structured as follows: 57.14% women (respectively 24 people) and 42.86% men (respectively 18 people), of which 59.52% are from urban areas and 40.48% from rural areas.

Tabel no. 1. Descriptive statistics

Percent (%)	Percent (%)
Gender	Age
Male 42.86%	25 or below 11.90%
Female 57.14%	26 - 35 21.43%
Place of Residence	36 - 45 23.81%
Rural 40.48%	46 - 60 23.81%
Urban 59.52%	60 or above 19.05%

Source: Authors' own research

3. Results and discussion

Hoteliers, depending on market conditions to gain a competitive advantage, adopt different quality strategies. The authors identified the most used quality strategies in the hospitality industry, namely: quality diversification strategy, continuous improvement strategy, quality differentiation strategy and certification strategy.

The strategy of diversification involves the conquest of new markets and offers superior quality services and superior classes in relation to the competition. An example of an accommodation unit that applies this strategy is *The Hoxton Hotel in Amsterdam*, which, in addition to the standard services offered by any hotel (accommodation, dining, event and conference rooms), also offers services dedicated to guests' dogs. The Hoxton has created a special website dedicated to the four-legged guests, which contains all the information

that "the puppy needs" translated into "dog language" and illustrated by London designer Alice Bowsher (The Hoxton, 2022). In addition, The Hoxton Hotel in Amsterdam (and all other hotels in the Hoxton Chain) offers dogs their own bed, their own bowl, "Please don't bother!" ("Do Not Disturb") and a guide for puppies - Manual Mutt, translated into their language (as Hox Guide, a guide for humans). The guide for puppies includes complete information on: local dog walks, the best parks in the area, pet spas, vets and more. Thus, The Hoxton has managed to diversify its range of services, entering the "niche" tourism market, namely tourism with pets, offering services dedicated to those who want to travel with their four-legged friend.

The continuous improvement strategy was used by the *Accor Hotel Chain* when it decided to partner with Visa to provide superior payment experiences to ALL (All-Accor Live Limitless) loyalty club members. This partnership aims to combine Accor's loyalty program and Visa's global payment capabilities to create the new ALL Visa card.

The strategy of quality differentiation is based on the knowledge of the forms of manifestation and the level of achievement of the quality characteristics of the products or services. *The Mera Hotel Group* on the Romanian Coast applies this quality strategy. Mera Group includes: Mera Resort in Venus, Mera Onix in Cap Aurora and Mera Brise in Mangalia. Mera Resort in Venus (which includes the Mera Blue, Mera Sky 4 * and Mera Villas 4 * hotels) is the largest All-Inclusive Resort in the south of the Romanian Coast. Through the quality and diversity of services, oriented towards satisfying the highest requirements of the modern tourist, as well as through the comfort offered by the accommodation spaces, the Mera group has gained its prestige on the market of tourism services in the area. The Mera hotel group has applied the strategy of differentiating according to the tourist segments, thus creating Mera Onix for couples, Mera Resort for families with children and Mera Brise Mangalia for business tourism, the latter hotel having a business event room with a view to the Black Sea. Another example is the *Ramada Hotel in Brasov*. It differentiates itself from other accommodation units in the area by providing tourists with a Japanese restaurant - Sakura Restaurant, serving live cooking, designed to offer guests a unique experience.

The certification strategy defines procedures and methods in the Quality Manual and in other documents depending on the specifics of the organization, these being effectively applied in practice. Most countries that realized the importance of the quality of services provided to customers, have developed for several years, at the national level, a complex system of service standards in the Hotel Industry that require services to be characterized, in addition to material issues and criteria such as: reactivity, credibility, courtesy, flexibility of staff, respectively, of services. For example, the *Swiss standards* have included, since 1995, the criterion of "welcoming customers" in the norms of classification and implicitly of the quality of services in the hotel field. Currently, the hotel classification rules in Switzerland developed by the Hotel Association are more complex, addressing both quantitative and qualitative issues that aim in particular at diversifying services, personalizing them and improving staff behavior. This Swiss classification system comprises 14 criteria, each consisting of a set of rules which are presented in a data sheet on comfort categories. The criteria underlying the classification are: security rules, perimeter and exterior of the building, reception, common areas, rooms, bathrooms, breakfast service, room service, restaurant service, additional services, quality of leisure and sports facilities (Hotellerieesuisse, 2022). Another representative example is the reference standard of the *HOTELcert brand in France*, which is the result of combining the following approach: the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Federation of Tourism Trade Unions, the Quality Certification Body and the French Tourism Directorate. This quality system was developed in 2001 and was tested on 12 hotels in France, being published in February 2002 in the "Official Gazette". Thus, HOTELcert imposes 7 quality commitments, related to: staff smile, cleanliness and hygiene, quality linen, staff availability, peace of mind, practical and tourist information provided to customers and quality controlled (Afnor Groupe, 2022).

The findings of the qualitative research are structured on each topic of the in-depth interview.

Topic 1 - The opinions and perceptions of Romanian tourists regarding the hotel services market

Respondents listed a number of criteria that guide them when choosing a hotel. Thus, the most selected criteria were "location" (28.57%), "distance from tourist attractions" (21.43%), followed by reviews on "hotel cleanliness" (17.86%), "breakfast included" (16.67%) and "changing towels and linen" (15.47%).

Regarding the additional services provided when staying in a hotel by the interviewees, the most important additional service sought by tourists was the provision of car parking (38.10%). In addition, the subjects also identified as important the following aspects: access to Wi-fi (35.71%), the minimum tourist information service (11.90%), foreign exchange services (9.53%) and the preservation of valuables (4.76%).

Topic 2 - The opinions of the tourists regarding the quality strategies applied by the accommodation units

Regarding the quality practices, most of the interviewed tourists (64.29%) stated that they do not know the concept of *quality management*. The rest of the respondents (35.71%) stated that they have some information about this concept and that, occasionally, when they choose an accommodation unit, they are informed about this aspect, checking the information available on the hotel website. For the respondents, the most important quality strategies that are applied by the accommodation units are: the certification strategy and the quality diversification strategy. For respondents, the hotels that apply the certification strategy offer an extra security regarding the products and services offered. Quality standards are of several types: standards developed by the competent administrative bodies of each country (example: standard from the classification of comfort categories - stars), occupational standards and standards developed by organizations (example: standard of facilities, standard procedures, management standard), used mainly by hotel chains. According to the respondents, the accommodation units that implement different quality standards manage to ensure a higher customer satisfaction.

The subjects chose the strategy of diversification through quality because they consider that the implementation of this strategy offers them additional services of superior quality.

Topic 3 – Attitudes and perceptions of tourists regarding the sustainability measures implemented in the Hotel Industry

Although most of the tourists interviewed have heard about sustainability and consider it important, they do not know this concept very well. The majority of respondents (73.81%) defined sustainability as a method of rationally using resources so that they can be used for as long as possible. Other definitions given to sustainability by the subjects were: technical systems / tools / equipment and procedures for saving resources in order to protect the environment (7.14%), environmental protection (11.9%), use of intelligent lighting systems (7.14%) such as LED-based lighting, card-based room power system, motion sensor-based lobby lighting.

Respondents noted that in the hotels where they were accommodated, the administrators implemented various sustainability practices. Thus, the most common practice is the lighting of hallways based on motion sensors (57.14%). Other sustainability measures identified by the subjects were: card operating systems in card-based rooms (16.67%), the use of paper and not plastic cups in water and coffee dispensers (11.91%), the existence of shower faucets which save consumed water (9.52%) and very rarely the selection of waste in the hotel (4.76%). Respondents formulated various sustainable practices that should be implemented in the future by accommodation managers. Thus, the most suggested measures were: rational water consumption by installing special batteries (23.81%), waste selection (16.67%), reuse of certain packaging (14.28%), rational heating system of the building (19.05%), rational consumption of electricity by applying the lighting system with sensors for common rooms and the operation of the electrical system in rooms only on the basis of the card (19.05%). A small number of subjects (7.14%) proposed other sustainability measures, which in their view would have medium and long-term effects: educating and informing customers and educating employees about the role and impact of sustainable development practices.

A large proportion of respondents (80.95%) considered that investing in sustainable practices and activities is an important factor for the future of the Hotel Industry, but the problem is that not all hotels have the financial resources for such actions. On the other hand, 35.71% of the interviewees considered that some managers do not even know the benefits of implementing sustainable practices in their hotel. Several respondents provided as an example of a hotel involved in sustainable development Hotel Vega in Mamaia. It became in 2009 the first hotel in Romania certified Eco-Hotel Management System by Tuv-Rheinland Romania. In addition to the minimal impact on the environment, the Eco-Hotel system guarantees conditions of maximum safety for the health of guests and employees. The Eco-Hotel principles that govern all the processes carried out within the Vega Hotel are (Hotel Vega, 2022):

- Control of energy consumption: starting with March 2013, the Vega Hotel in Mamaia became the first hotel consuming renewable energy in Romania (wind energy, hydropower and solar energy, which significantly supports the reduction of CO₂ emissions);
- Control of water and paper consumption, control of waste and hazardous substances management;
- Purchase and use of biodegradable products.

Topic 4 – Opinions of tourists regarding the services of the food units within the accommodation units

The most important aspects that respondents take into account when eating at the hotel where they were: the cleanliness of the location (38.10%) and the freshness of the products (26.19%), the diversity of the menu (21.42%), the number of meals (4.76 %), staff behavior and kindness (9.53%). Regarding the

opinions of the respondents regarding the catering units in the hotels, most of them (76.19%) stated that the services provided met their expectations, and 23.81% of them stated that the menu was poor.

Conclusions

Research has shown that most respondents perceive the concept of sustainability as a method of using resources rationally so that they can be used for as long as possible. They believe that sustainability is an important factor for the future of the Hotel Industry, but not all hotels have the resources to implement this concept. Regarding the concept of *quality management*, most of the interviewed tourists (64.29%) stated that they do not know this concept.

Out of a desire to ensure a unified system of facilities, services and staff in order to promote and obtain a brand image, the hotel chains have created internal standards. Although these standards have elements in common, they differ from one hotel chain to another, while in the case of independent hotels, only some of them have established their own standards. The introduction of a quality system benefits all parties involved (the country, as a destination, direct providers of tourism services, consumers and intermediaries), which involves ensuring an invariable level of quality. At the same time, obtaining quality does not only involve the development of quality standards, but also the implementation of appropriate quality strategies.

Based on the results of the paper, the authors recommend that the authorities, as well as the accommodation units, become more involved in the adoption of appropriate sustainable development measures that support the local community and protect the environment. At the same time, actions are needed to educate tourists about the concept of sustainability.

The authors consider that the paper has academic contributions in the field of the analyzed topic and this should be the starting point for future research. A future direction of study could be a qualitative research among hotel managers, in order to identify their opinions on the advantages but also the barriers to the implementation of quality and sustainable development strategies.

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