

Quality Strategies and Sustainability Measures in Romanian Spa Tourism

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Abstract

Balneary tourism represents an essential segment of the economy and the tourism sector, addressing essential requirements for maintaining health and well-being. Implementing quality strategies and sustainability measures is essential for thriving in a competitive environment and securing customer loyalty. This paper aims to identify the most relevant quality strategies and sustainability measures applied within the Romanian spa tourism market and their impact on attracting and retaining tourists. The research’s findings emphasize the critical role of quality and sustainability in boosting Romanian spa tourism’s competitiveness and attracting and retaining tourists. Spa tourism in Romania is valued for its therapeutic benefits, environmental quality, and year-round services, with recent economic growth leading to modernization. Quality strategies like ISO 9001:2015 certification, quality differentiation, and new technologies are crucial, though not widely recognized. Sustainability measures, such as efficient resource use, are increasingly necessary to consumers, enhancing the competitiveness of Romanian spa tourism.

Key words: balneary tourism, quality strategies, spa tourism, sustainability measures, Romania

J.E.L. classification: L83, Q56, M31

1. Introduction

Balneary tourism is an important segment of the economy in general and tourism, in particular, in the context of the need to meet certain requirements related to maintaining people’s health and well-being. This form of tourism can only work with the existence of therapeutic natural resources and the conditions offered by spa resorts.

Competition in the tourism market is observed in practice through the level of tourism services offered. This is why the issue of service quality has become increasingly important. From a conceptual and operational point of view, the quality of touristic services refers to aspects such as the perceived quality of the services, the role of normative expectations taken as determinants or components of perceived quality, as well as the relationship between perceived quality and customer satisfaction.

Quality has become a key variable of competitiveness, impacting the main indicators of tourism and business profitability such as the number of overnight stays, average stay, employment rate, average daily room rates, average daily room income available and occupied, etc. (Simancas Cruz et al, 2018, p.70).

Implementing quality strategies and sustainability measures in the market of tourism services is a basic condition to cope in a competitive environment and to convince customers and them preserve.

This paper aims to identify the most relevant quality strategies and sustainability measures applied to the Romanian spa tourism market and their role in attracting and retaining tourists.

To achieve this, the work is organized as follows: presentation of the specialized literature on quality and sustainability, description of research methodology, and presentation of the most relevant results. The conclusions and implications of the study are then presented.

2. Literature review

Quality of service refers to users evaluating some services to see if they meet expectations at the desired level (Taylan Dortyol et al., 2014, p. 473). This is also linked to customer loyalty. The quality of experience in tourism and hospitality is related to consumers' perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Shyju et al, 2021, p.26).

Some authors believe that the research on the quality of tourism services can be classified into seven thematic groups regarding tourist satisfaction, sustainable problems in tourism, the value of the quality of customer service, the quality of restaurant services, the quality of the services, perceived quality of tourist services by customers, quality assessment of tourist services and influence of quality of services on customer behavior (Park et al, 2019, p.15).

Quality service can be achieved by competent human resources supported by adequate infrastructure or facilities capable of delivering positive values. In tourism, quality is created by providing outstanding services in terms of hospitality, courtesy, efficient accommodation, food, and recreation facilities (Rahmiati et al, 2020, p.961).

Considering the customer orientation, some authors like Kosar et al. (p.36) appreciate quality as a market category aimed at creating and producing tangible products and services at the level at which their properties ensure compliance with the application's requirements. The quality approach covers the entire organization and includes all processes on which customer satisfaction depends. This holistic approach to quality in the organization's context is called generic "Quality Management."

Sustainable development is defined as a process that meets the needs of present generations without jeopardizing the ability of future ones to meet their own needs. Decision makers and practitioners must consider in the planning and management of organizations and destinations aspects regarding the complexity of the area, the social perspectives (such as the quality of life and the satisfaction of tourists), as well as the ecological (such as water quality and climate change), economic, marketing (respectively the quality of services and the image of destinations), the medical, the differences in culture and relevance of information technologies and social networks (Garrigos-Simon et al, 2019, p.4).

The literature acknowledges that sustainability and how to approach responsibility in tourism production and consumption can be differentiating factors in positioning destinations in tourist markets. The transformation towards a sustainable tourism model begins with implementing a comprehensive tourism management policy to ensure the sustainable development of the destination (Lopez-Sanchez et al, 2013, p.57).

Tourism development must consider the current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts and the needs of visitors, industry, the environment, and host communities. These factors help to identify sustainable management strategies in tourism, which should promote the optimal use of resources (McLoughlin et al, 2018, p.79).

Considering the environmental, social, and cultural effects of tourism activities, some authors appreciate that new educational approaches are needed to change the contemplative vision of tourists and tour operators into one of awareness of their power and responsibilities in cogeneration of an experience of sustainable tourism (Galuppo et al, 2020, p.10).

3. Research methodology

The paper's main objective is to determine the most relevant colour quality strategies and sustainability measures applied to the balneary tourism market in Romania and the role they play in attracting and keeping tourists loyal.

The methodology used in this paper combined exploratory analysis with quantitative marketing research.

The exploratory analysis aimed to identify quality strategies applied in spa tourism in Romania in recent years. To this end, the internal publications and the websites of the accommodation units from the spa resorts in Romania, annual reports, industry analysis, and reference materials were studied.

Quantitative research aimed to determine Romanian consumers' opinions, perceptions, and attitudes regarding quality strategies and sustainability measures applied to the Romanian spa tourism market.

The specific objectives were:

- O1 - Determining respondents' perceptions and opinions on spa tourism in Romania;
- O2 - Identifying the main quality strategies adopted in spa tourism in Romania;
- O3 - Identifying respondents' opinions on the sustainability measures adopted in spa tourism in Romania.

The respondents to this questionnaire are from different backgrounds and age groups, with different professional and educational backgrounds (Table 1). Regarding gender distribution, the sample had the following structure: 58.15% female and 41.85% male.

Tabel no. 1 Sample structure

| | | | | | |
|------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Age | 18-24 years | 25- 34 years | 35-44 years | 45-65 years | Over 65 years |
| | 19.5% | 22.1% | 18.3% | 22% | 18.1% |
| Gender | Female | | | Male | |
| | 58.15% | | | 41.85% | |
| Studies | Gymnasium | Highschool | Post secondary school | University studies | Post university studies |
| | 0% | 45.44% | 10.27% | 33,29% | 11% |
| Occupation | Student | Unemployed | Employee | Entrepreneur | Pensioner |
| | 10.5% | 1.1% | 59.54% | 8% | 20,86% |

Source: Authors' own research

The CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) technique was used for data collection. This technique involves displaying the questionnaire on a web page, and respondents fill in the responses directly in the browser. The research was carried out between 01-21 April 2024. The data was collected based on a questionnaire containing 28 questions answered by 724 people. The questionnaire has two parts: the first part includes questions regarding spa tourism and quality strategies and sustainability measures used in this field, and the second part includes eight questions identifying respondents (age, gender, income category, residence).

4. Findings

Next, the study's primary results will be presented and structured according to each objective.

- ***Objective 1 – Determining respondents' perceptions and opinions on spa tourism in Romania***

Balneary tourism is an important segment of the economy in general and tourism, in particular, in the context of the need to meet essential requirements related to maintaining people's health and well-being. Romania is among the European countries with a significant balneary fund, and the spa activity is known as an authentic tradition.

During the 1990s, spa tourism experienced a strong crisis, driven mainly by the degradation of the technical-material base of the spa resorts and the low level of investments in this sector.

The Romanian balneary tourism potential is characterized by the presence of several groups of therapeutic substances, such as mineral and thermo mineral waters, therapeutic sludges, salines, mofetil and solfatara gases, salt lakes, and others. These therapeutic substances are recommended

for the effective treatment of several types of conditions, such as respiratory, dermatological conditions, allergies, rheumatic and posttraumatic conditions, diseases of the central and peripheral nervous system, gynaecological diseases, diseases of the cardiovascular system, digestive system, kidney disease, hepatobiliary, nutrition and others.

Romania has the potential to develop quality spa tourism with the about 8,500 mineral and thermal springs it owns. The economic growth that was registered in Romania after 2000 materialized in a return of the Romanian spa tourism offer and a trend of modernizing hotels and related treatment bases (Asociația Română de Balneologie [Romanian Balneology Association], 2019).

The tourist products offered by the spa resorts focus mainly on treatment, medical care, and care during the convalescence period, but some of the resorts also offer wellness packages. Tourists who benefit from tickets offered through the state social insurance system represent a significant percentage of the clients of the spa resorts. The spa resorts in Romania are the main tourist assets due to the quality of the springs, the location of these resorts, the historical heritage, the tradition of spending holidays in spas, and the current international trend of promoting spa and wellness tourism.

Most respondents (72%) see spa tourism in a narrow sense, only as treatment tourism for people with certain conditions or over a certain age (+60 years). Consumers select spa resorts based on environmental factors, such as air or water quality.

Most of the respondents (88%) consider spa tourism an advantageous alternative to classic holidays because it offers the possibility to be realized throughout the year because its specificity is not influenced by atmospheric conditions, which is an important advantage in the provision of these services.

- ***Objective 2 – Identifying the main quality strategies adopted in spa tourism in Romania***

Romania is one of the wealthiest countries in Europe in terms of the balneary resource, holding about one-third of Europe’s mineral and thermal springs. The contribution of Romanian researchers to the level of knowledge in the spa field has allowed us to highlight the potential of natural therapeutic factors.

The prolonged transition period, the economic conjuncture, the poor management, and the lack of investments have generated the degradation of the material base in the spa resorts, both from the perspective of obsolete and morally obsolete equipment from the treatment bases and from the perspective of protection and research of natural cure factors, which have also suffered degradation. The economic growth recorded after 2000 was reflected in the trend of modernization of hotel and treatment structures. Currently, there are 33 spa resorts in Romania (Ministerul Antreprenoriatului și Turismului [Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2022).

Implementing adequate quality strategies by entrepreneurs in the field revived spa tourism in Romania.

Most respondents (88%) do not know much about certification and quality standards, although a quality strategy often adopted in spa tourism is the ***certification strategy***.

An example in this regard is given by the Society of Spa Treatment and Recovery of Work Capacity” TBRCM” SA Bucharest, which has several work sites in the country (such as the Amara Balneary Treatment Society, Covasna, Geoagiu Băi, Moneasa, and, Olănești, etc.) The company is certified for healthcare activities (bale treatments) and hotel, restaurant, and bar services. It has implemented and maintains a quality management system according to the requirements of SR EN ISO 9001:2015 standard, which means that the organization has adopted the certification strategy, which, respectively for the implementation of the procedures required by the quality standards (S.C. TBRCM S.A., 2021).

Another spa tourism example is S.C. Turism Felix S.A. in Băile Felix, which adopted a quality certification strategy by implementing the ISO 9001:2015 standard throughout the company (S.C. Turism Felix S.A., 2021).

International Hotel 4*, the most luxurious hotel owned by S.C. Turism Felix S.A., is designed as a modern centre for spas, relaxation, and conferences. Renowned for its therapy programs, the hotel’s Wellness & SPA and treatment centre ideally uses the curative properties of water, thus continuing the millennial tradition of thermal baths.

Instead, research has shown that a large proportion of respondents appreciate the quality differentiation strategy (83%) and the strategy of implementing the latest technologies (67%). Perla Hotel, located in the spa resort of Slănic Moldova, has successfully implemented both quality strategies.

Thus, the quality differentiation strategy is based on the knowledge of the forms of manifestation and the level of achievement of the quality characteristics of products or services. Perla Hotel offers its clients a wide range of services, including medical recovery, physiotherapy, salt therapy, crenotherapy, Tecar therapy, access to a swimming pool, wet and dry saunas, facial therapies, and various wellness, beauty, and spa services. This comprehensive strategy allows the company to capitalize on its research and development potential and employ different technologies. It also helps it conquer new markets and offer services of a higher quality relative to the competition.

Perla Hotel successfully adopted the strategy of implementing the latest technologies. It has modern physiotherapy and recovery equipment, such as the BTL-6000 Super Inductive System, a non-invasive therapeutic device used in SIS therapy.

- **Objective 3 – Identifying respondents’ opinions on the sustainability measures adopted in spa tourism in Romania.**

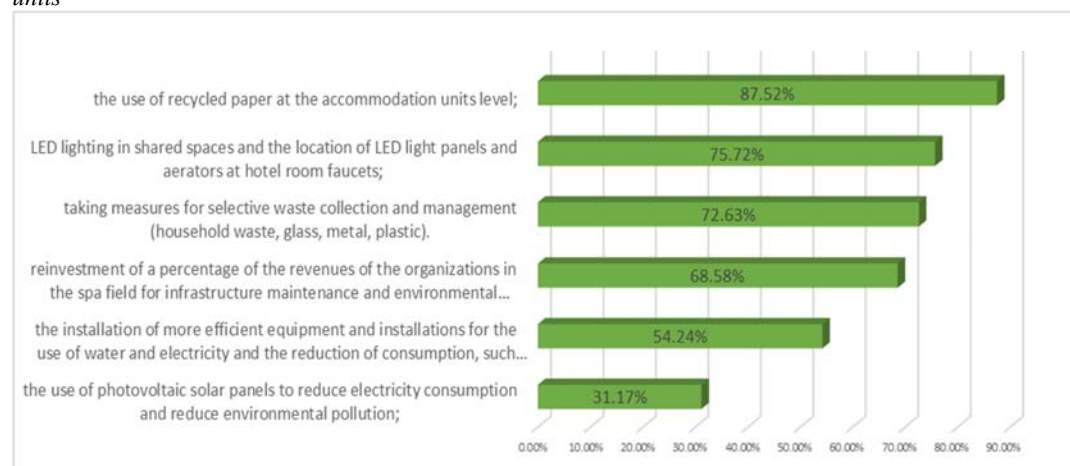
International or intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) have promoted sustainable tourism as the ideal ”balance” between economic viability, the environmental responsibility and socio-cultural prosperity.

Moreover, at the European Union level, this principle of ”balanced coherence” for tourism management was followed as an ideal process for protecting natural resources, promoting cultural identity, increasing competitiveness, and improving the local economy, particularly of less developed destinations (Gkoumas, 2019, p.2).

The sustainable development of spa tourism is a continuous process that requires the active participation of all relevant stakeholders, constant monitoring of impacts, and the introduction of necessary preventive and/or corrective measures, as appropriate. Sustainable tourism can help maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction, ensure a significant experience for tourists, raise awareness of sustainability issues, and promote sustainable tourism practices (UNWTO 2019).

The research showed (Figure 1) that most of the respondents (58.56%) have shown openness to sustainability issues and have stated that they consider environmental issues such as reducing the amount of waste, reducing water and energy consumption, and protecting the environment when choosing an accommodation unit.

Figure no. 1. The most well-known sustainability measures that were implemented in accommodation units



Source: Authors’ own research

The research showed that the most well-known sustainability measures that were implemented in accommodation units in spas are:

- the use of recycled paper at the accommodation units level;
- LED lighting in shared spaces and the location of LED light panels and aerators at hotel room faucets;
- taking measures for selective waste collection and management (household waste, glass, metal, plastic);
- reinvestment of a percentage of the revenues of the organizations in the spa field for infrastructure maintenance and environmental conservation by contributing to forestation measures, spatial planning measures in the spa area, etc.;
- the installation of more efficient equipment and installations for the use of water and electricity and the reduction of consumption, such as economic bulbs and lighting sensors;
- the use of photovoltaic solar panels to reduce electricity consumption and reduce environmental pollution.

These initiatives not only minimize environmental impact but also position these establishments as leaders in ecological responsibility, thereby attracting environmentally conscious customers and setting industry standards for sustainable tourism.

5. Conclusions

From the analysis of the presented data, it turns out that spa tourism is an important component of the economy, with complex influences at the national level and at the level of local economies, which deserve to be developed. Balneary tourism can also contribute to the development other economic sectors, which have developed due to the tourist flows of the spa resorts (Drăghici et al, 2015, p.1576). From the point of view of the contribution of this sector to the local economy, SPA tourism can represent a viable development trend in areas with tourist resources (Drăghici et al, 2016, p.387).

The tourism industry can cause significant environmental damage through air pollution, loss of natural habitat, soil erosion, etc. Another negative impact of tourism on the environment is represented by the energy consumption in tourism activities, such as catering, accommodation, and transport, which leads to higher CO₂ emissions. Both ways of environmental degradation pose a threat to the environment and sustainable development, and the violation of ecological balance is being observed with time. Uncontrolled use of the environment for tourism leads to its destruction and the natural environment will not be ensured for future generations.

Eliminating the harmful effects of tourism on the environment, protecting nature, and future tourism development are important challenges for specialists. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), environmental degradation can be reduced, and sustainability can be achieved through the installation of new environmentally efficient technologies and the establishment of environmental management schemes, requiring direct investment and financial assistance (Mikavilov et al, 2019, p.19390).

The research has limitations due to the non-representative sampling method used. Therefore, the sample was not randomly selected and cannot be statistically validated. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population under investigation. However, the authors consider the work valuable and believe it contributes academically to the field of study. It also provides a foundation for future research on this topic.

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