

# HABILITATION THESIS

## ANALYSIS OF TOURISM CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE QUALITY OF TOURISM PRODUCTS / DESTINATIONS ACCORDING TO QUALITY ATTRIBUTES

PROFESSOR PH.D. OLIMPIA-IULIANA BAN

### ABSTRACT

The habilitation thesis is structured in two sections. The first section contains five chapters covering three major research themes and a chapter devoted to temporary projects and also chapter containing evolution and development plans of personal professional, scientific and academic career. The second section addresses the requirement to demonstrate the individual capacity to coordinate research teams, to organize and manage the teaching activity, to explain and facilitate learning and research.

A key theme of marketing research in tourism and hospitality industry is the consumer satisfaction. The quality of service and customer satisfaction are two crucial concepts in marketing (Spreng and Mackoy, 1996). Customer satisfaction is considered a precondition for maintaining and attracting the consumer and for achieving the economic goals. There is an undeniable link between the tourism consumer satisfaction and the quality of tourist services, as stated by Parasuraman, Zeithamal and Berry, prestigious names in the field of service quality. The perception about the quality of tourist services is the key theme of my own research, which I have studied considering the following aspects: Chapter 1. *Investigation of consumer perceptions about the quality of tourism services*, Chapter 2. *Online evaluation and tourism consumer satisfaction* and Chapter 3. *Investigation of tourism destination image*.

In Chapter 1 entitled *Investigation of consumer perceptions about the quality of tourism services*, we

have presented our own research in the context of literature on: the identification of attributes that underpin the assessment of tourism services quality (based on SERVQUAL scale), the determination of the importance of quality attributes by direct methods versus the determination of the importance of attributes by indirect methods, the identification and improvement of decision-making tools of development/reduction of investments in quality attributes (Importance-Performance Analysis, Kano's two-dimensional quality model).

To capitalize the information obtained either from the processing of data collected directly or indirectly, we used and we refined the Importance-Performance Analysis, launched by J.A. Martilla and J.C. James in 1977 and perfected by J. Abalo, J. Varela, V. Manzano (2007) and others. The Importance-Performance Analysis has two weaknesses: determining the importance of quality attributes and interpreting the positioning of attributes at the limit between the dials. The efforts that we have made so far and that I intend to keep were to reduce/eliminate these vulnerabilities. My contributions to the topics discussed in this chapter are: application of the SERVQUAL scale in different variations and adaptations to test consumer reaction, especially the Romanian ones, to the quality features/attributes; ascertainment of the minuses of the SERVQUAL scale, as found in other similar empirical studies; testing different sizes of Likert scale, the most used non-metric scale in the research of the tourism market in order to eliminate the problems related to the recording of data (grouped positioning of responses in the positive or medium end of the scale); modeling the responses collected with Likert scale with instruments of fuzzy mathematics, for a more accurate reflection of reality; application of indirect methods for determining the importance of quality attributes of tourism services (entropy calculation and calculation of Spearman's coefficient and partial correlation); comparative analysis of the importance of attributes as measured by direct methods *versus* indirect methods and drawing conclusions regarding the best approach; testing the influence that certain features of respondents (such as previous experience with accommodation) have on the importance given by quality attributes; steps to eliminate the problem encountered by other researchers, namely the inter-item small variation of the values associated to the importance of the attributes, steps which consisted of testing different variations of fuzzicated Likert scale, modeling with fuzzy mathematics and improving the Importance-Performance Analysis.

The practical utility of such research for tourism managers is reflected in the construction of Importance-Performance Matrix, which allows making decisions to increase the investments to improve certain quality attributes, maintaining or removing others. As a result, every step to building the matrix is important to obtain accurate results. The accurate and precise determination of the importance of quality attributes is essential, focusing the efforts in this direction being justified. The

increase of accuracy in the distribution of attributes will facilitate the decision-making by marketing managers. The research direction will be continued with customizing the Importance-Performance Analysis for every research, in terms of identifying the number of relevant quality attributes in a given situation.

In Chapter 2, entitled *Online evaluation and tourism consumer satisfaction*, we expanded the investigation of tourism consumer perception in the online environment, due to the massive presence of consumers in this environment. I researched the following aspects related to the ratings and comments posted on the travel websites: socio-demographic characteristics of the reviewer and the possible influence on the evaluation of accommodation structures; socio-demographic characteristics and consumption preferences of the reviewer and the possible influence on the assessment of travel and accommodation structures; the accuracy of assessing the comments posted on the travel websites and the relationship between the assessments and appreciation of the comments posted by the site visitors; analysis of the social validation behavior on the travel sites; problems of the relation between the evaluation average on travel websites and the recording of overall satisfaction; identification of relevant (important) quality characteristics for the reviewers posting comments, as it results from the content of comments posted on the travel websites and identification of relevant characteristics of tourist regions, as it results from the comments posted on the travel websites of travel in process. The contributions to world knowledge through the results obtained by me from researching the Amfostacolo.ro communication platform concern: the contribution made by these studies is valuable both in terms of methodological and empirical data, the method being possible to be applied also to other subjects of study or other site similar websites; we suggest a method that can operate with a large volume of data, far beyond the capabilities of a classic and direct market research; new service quality features were identified which set the level of importance from the perspective of tourism consumers; the evaluation system promoted by this site and ways to improve it were established; correlations between the evaluation average made by reviewers and features pertaining to the reviewer's persona or their travel options were tested and emphasized; characteristics specific to tourist destinations as resulting from comments posted were discovered etc.

In Chapter 3, entitled *Investigation of tourism destination image*, we focused on: defining the image of the destination and establishing the relation with the destination brand, research of the dimensions/attributes through which a destination is perceived importance and the ranking of the attributes according to the importance which consumers assign to them and the ranking of destinations according to the way the quality attributes perform. Following these steps allows the building of the Importance-Performance Matrix for a tourist destination to create the development strategy of the

Management Organization of the Destination. Basically, in this issue we expanded the application of the Importance-Performance Analysis from the level of hotel services to the level of travel destinations.

In Chapter 4. called *Other lines of research*, we studied related research subjects. In direct correlation with the themes pursued, two were the focal areas in which we published: marketing and tourism. Most often, these two areas were intersected in pursuit of topics such as: travel market research, promotion in tourism, investigating the perceptions of tourism consumers, distribution in tourism etc. During the course of research and development projects, we worked with samples of local and regional economic operators, circumstances that allowed me to carry out direct research on entrepreneurship activities, the structure of local business market etc. The increase of the interest in online market research opened my path to researching the impact of virtual intermediaries in tourist distribution, research capitalized in the book *Distribution in tourism and e-media* (Ban, 2015). Discovering the extraordinary expansion of virtual intermediaries on more developed travel markets created the expectation of a similar situation on the Romanian market also.

In Chapter 5. *Evolution and development plans for professional, scientific and academic career*, I showed that my intention is to continue the three research directions set in the first part, on the route already validated by the publications issued. The main reasons to maintain the research directions already presented are: demonstrated utility of work tools already in discussion (SERVQUAL, Importance-Performance Analysis, Kano's two-dimensional quality model); successful implementation in many areas, both by theoreticians and practitioners; personal results that we have achieved towards applying and improving them and the current interest shown by researchers to improve them. In this chapter we presented research considered that already are in an advanced form of analysis, formulation and presentation being prepared for publication.

The second section is intended to describe *The individual capacity to coordinate research teams, organize and manage teaching activities, explaining and facilitating learning and research*, structured in two parts: Organization and management of teaching activities, explaining and facilitating learning and research and The individual capacity to coordinate research teams.

Given my professional activity of 18 years and the post doctoral activity, the individual ability to coordinate individual research teams can be highlighted by the following: the works written in collaboration with separate teams dedicated to research; the work of accountability in research and research and development projects; the management administrative work in the university; as a member of committees for guidance in doctoral studies; as a journal reviewer and organizer, scientific reviewer, moderator at conferences etc.

The paper concludes with the bibliography used that includes also personal publications and the list of tables and figures included in the paper.

Prof.Ph.D. Olimpia Ban

