

## SERVQUAL METHOD IN ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF RURAL TOURISM SERVICES

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### *Abstract*

*The main supply factors at the rural tourism services market (on the example of rural tourism households of the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine) are characterized. The SERVQUAL method has been modified taking into account the usage of certain elements and assessment principles of the most important criteria for the rural agritourism services quality. A marketing research of the proposed rural tourism products with a comparison of the expected and perceived quality of the tourist product was conducted. The rural tourism services quality assessment depends primarily on the personal perception of tourists during their stay at rural tourism households and is assessed through the prism of hospitality, competence, propensity to provide qualitative tourist services, family atmosphere, obscurity with tourists' needs and ability to meet safety and security, willingness to respond to guests' complaints.*

**Key words:** rural tourism, services quality, SERVQUAL method, consumer satisfaction, rural tourism product, rural agritourism household

### INTRODUCTION

In the process of tourist services market development and under the influence of competitors' actions there is a necessity to expand the offer and improve the tourist products quality.

The determinant of the quality level of each product and service in tourism is a consumer (individual) with all his cultural, psychological and physical aptitudes and preferences. At the same time, a person as a consumer is an expert in assessing the good or service quality level, formulating a conclusion according to the personal satisfaction level. The consumer expresses his opinion not only based on the technical quality of the tourist service; he also pays more and more attention to its functional side [2, p.365].

According to M. Shapoval, evaluating the provided service, the consumer uses only his subjective opinion and seldom informs the organization on his own initiative. In case of dissatisfaction with the services the consumer is likely to stop using or buying them. The

impression of consumer satisfaction based on the absence of claims can lead to mistaken conclusions [6, p.237].

Therefore, an important problem in the field of tourist services quality is to determine their level in the most objective way.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

To determine the guests' satisfaction level with the provided services in rural agritourism households, the SERVQUAL method was used. The authors slightly modified this method using certain principles of assessing the most important criteria for guests during their stay at green tourism households and while forming their expectations. To determine the provided services quality, the direct reporting method among 42 guests who rested in July 2019 in 28 green agritourism households of Mizhhirya and Berehiv districts, Transcarpathian region of Ukraine was used.

We took into account criteria which are most important for "rural" tourists [5, p.43-44]:

1. The technical quality, which includes the household's figuration, aesthetics and adaptation to the tourist services provision; view, area and furnishing of rooms; number, type and equipment of sanitary facilities; inventory and facilities for recreation; tourist facilities condition located near the rural agritourism household; 2. Meal – menu variety, portion size, nutritional value, way of presenting and setting the table; 3. Activities (animation) – encouraging the owners to organize integration meetings by the bonfire, walking and cycling tours, horseback riding, providing equipment, involvement into farm work etc; 4. Prices – the prices level for accommodation, meals, rental equipment and other payments; 5. Reliability – providing the service in the appropriate way and time; 6. Responsiveness – appropriate response to the guests needs, the effectiveness of the desires implementation, the ability to give advice, tact; 7. Competence – possession of relevant knowledge, experience and necessary skills; 8. Hospitality – kindness, family atmosphere, politeness and respect, friendly attitude to guests [7, p.40]; 9. Faithfulness and safety – responsibility, trust and sincerity as well as financial and material security; 10. Sociability – facilities of establishing contacts and providing any information in the understandable language for tourists, the ability to recognize their needs, listen to and understand their problems, find an individual approach to each guest.

Determining the quality level of the provided tourist services in the rural tourism household in every of the 10th elements was carried out on a five-point scale, in which 1 means the lowest, and 5 – the highest degree of a service quality assessment. In addition, the evaluation structure and the weighted average evaluation indicator are characterized.

The degree of realization of the guest's expectations in each of the 10 elements was found using the difference of estimates. The first assessment was to compare the provided services quality with the minimum guests' requirements. The second assessment reflected the difference between the quality of provided services and the expected guests'

requirements. Two approaches define the services structure at lower, acceptable and higher levels.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The service quality for the customer arises from his expectations comparison related to the process of the service providing and its actual provision. Quality assessment is preceded by a condition of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the provided service, if expectations are met (or not met). The emotional customer's condition after receiving the service is satisfaction or lack thereof. If the quality of the purchased service exceeds expectations, it can be described as an impressive quality, a condition of pleasant surprise, satisfaction and even admiration (Fig. 1).

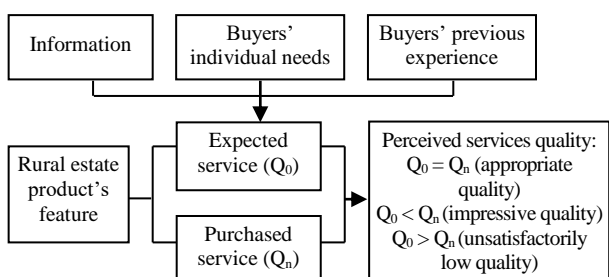


Fig. 1. Perception of the tourist services quality according to the *SERVQUAL* model  
 Source: Based on [5, p.48].

The result of the services impressive quality contributes to the consumer's loyalty growth to the provider that is confirmed by the repeated services purchase and their promotion among other customers (friends, relatives, colleagues etc.).

From the tourism product providers' point of view, the quality is expressed by the degree of compliance with tourism legislation, compliance with standards or compliance with the requirements they set for themselves according to their own experience and imagination [3, p.76].

Rural tourism households' owners, if they want to succeed, have to take into account the preconditions and trends in rural tourism. The tourists' demand in the rural tourism field is influenced by the following factors [1, p.25]:

- appropriate provision by fixed and working

capital required to receive tourists (house, number and rooms area, sanitary equipment, the yard view and order, meal offer, etc.);

- professional service for tourists and atmosphere of hospitality, which is an important social aspect, because every customer wants to be the object of attention and be in a cozy atmosphere created by the host family. Guests pay more and more attention to the hostess' culinary skills, the organization of interesting meetings and spending time together, acquiring new skills and more. This requires relevant knowledge not only in the rural tourism household management, but also in the field of culture, history, art, foreign languages skills;

- the territory attractiveness – unique landscapes, saturated with forests, lakes, hills, glades are an important motive for tourists wishing to spend their free time outdoors, breathe fresh air and consume clean water;

- tourist value of the territory – traditional rural buildings, cultural landscape, the presence of sports and tourist facilities, SPA-centers with appropriate infrastructure.

Within the subjective assessment of the rural tourism products quality by tourists, we can distinguish two categories [8, p.37]:

1. Material and technical quality, so that the customer receives from the provider as a part of the tourist package (e.g., cozy bedrooms, well-equipped living room, rental equipment, furnished place for recreation which allows to meet guests' needs);
2. Abstract quality, so that the emotional service component, the way of serving the tourists, which includes the host family attitude to guests, its loyalty, courtesy, competence, ways of complaints satisfaction etc).

The quality of supply in rural tourism has much broader dimension and provides:

- natural environment quality;
- recreational, natural and anthropogenic resources quality;
- social and technical infrastructure quality.

The aim of the research was to examine the guests' opinion who rested in rural tourism households, on the services quality and its comparison with their own requirements. This assessment will make it possible to determine

the extent to which the offered services quality meets the rural tourism households' guests' expectations.

Tourists aged 21-45 years (66.8%) with higher (54.4%) and secondary (32.8%) education dominated the study group. People aged 46-65 were 18.6% and up to 20 years 14.6%. In the study sample there were 54.5% women and 45.5% men. Tourists come to the studied rural tourism households mainly from Kyiv (26.3%), Lviv (19.6%), Kharkiv (12.7%), Ternopil (9.1%) and other (22.5%) regions of Ukraine, foreign tourists were 9.8%, mainly from Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. More than half of the respondents (64.8%) came in an organized group for cognitive and recreational purposes; 21.6% rested in the company of friends; 11.1% rested with family and 2.5% came to relax alone.

The motives for choosing rural tourism facilities as a place of recreation differed slightly in the administrative districts of Transcarpathia, Ukraine (Figs. 2 and 3), which is mainly related to the geographical location, relief, climate, cultural and historical heritage and the territory image.

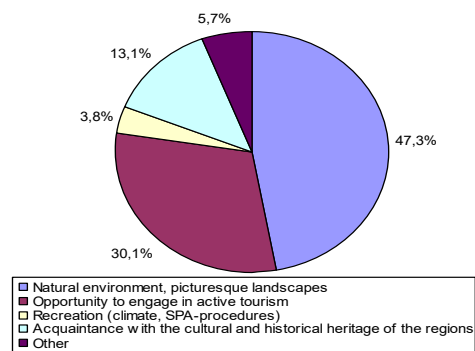


Fig. 2. Rural tourism households of Mizhhirya district  
Source: Authors' own results.

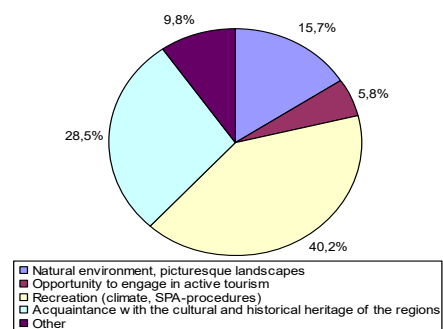


Fig. 3. Rural tourism households of Berehiv district  
Source: Authors' own results.

According to the above figures, the main motives for coming to selected areas of the mountainous and plains of the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine are: the desire to relax in an attractive natural environment with picturesque landscapes (47.3%) and the opportunity to be engaged in active tourism (30.1%), namely hiking, cycling, rafting. The health-improving qualities of the thermal waters and the warm climate Berehiv district, a large number of tourist facilities, festivals are the main motives for staying at the rural tourism households of Borzhava, Variv and Velyka Bihan areas. The main information sources used by guests when choosing a rural tourism household were the Internet (78.3%); friends', relatives', acquaintances' advices (19.6%); advertising booklets and business cards (2.1%). A small proportion was information obtained from travel exhibitions, media, newsletters, travel guides, travel agencies catalogues. More than 60% of respondents have chosen this form of recreation and stayed at the researched rural tourism households for the first time; 27.7% – for the second time, 11.8% visited households three or more times. Approximately the same number of respondents prefers recreation using rural tourism households for accommodation in other regions of Ukraine. Thus, it can be claimed that more than 1/3 of the respondents are loyal guests of rural recreation at the rural tourism households. The majority of tourists (86.4%) noticed that finding the rural tourism household location is quite difficult, especially in the evening. Exceptions are rural tourism households in Velyka Bihan, which, according to survey, are well (25.3%) or very well (40.9%) marked on the main roads and on the side streets. On the other hand, about 85% of the surveyed households do not have any signs at all that would indicate the place of providing the tourist services. The roads quality in direction to most households - asphalt or paved and, as was noticed by respondents (51.7%), is relatively good; and 48.3% rated it as satisfactory and poor. Respondents rated the tourist attractiveness of the area where the households are located as

highly attractive (54.9%) and attractive (39.1%), and 6% were disappointed because they had different expectations.

Assessing the quality of tourist services provided by rural tourism households based on the analysis of respondents' answers, it can be suggested that the quality elements, which are a part of its comprehensive assessment, are formed at a fairly high but differentiated level (Table 1).

Table 1. Assessment of factors shaping the quality of services of agritourism farmstead

Indicators	The structure of answers (in %) in scale from 5 (excellent) to 1 (very bad)						Weighted average
	5	4	3	2	1	Total	
Services material component	56.0	37.1	4.6	1.4	0.7	100	8.54
Meal	66.6	27.2	4.1	2.1	–	100	8.56
Organization of tourist events	45.9	31.7	12.3	9.4	0.7	100	7.65
Prices	73.5	24.2	1.7	0.6	–	100	8.76
Reliability	63.4	29.8	5.5	1.3	–	100	8.54
Responsiveness	74.5	18.6	5.5	1.0	–	100	8.66
Competence	66.4	27.8	4.7	1.1	–	100	8.72
Hospitality	80.6	14.0	4.3	1.1	–	100	8.77
Faithfulness and safety	79.4	17.3	2.2	1.1	–	100	8.78
Sociability	64.6	31.4	2.2	1.7	0.1	100	8.69

Source: Authors' own results.

Similar studies were conducted in rural tourism households of Lviv region where the vast majority of respondents rated the tourist services quality as good – 4 (60%), 5 points were given by 30% of respondents and unsatisfactory score – 10% of respondents [4, p.141]. Taking into account the individual quality elements weighted average assessment of, it can be pointed out that the highest assessment was given to such factors as faithfulness and safety, hospitality and competence. During the provided services analysis from the technical point of view, their very high price is taken on the first place, which includes the living and meal cost, recreational equipment rental and other costs. However, it can be concluded that prices are usually within the tourists' expectations. For example, more than 94% of respondents admitted that food prices match the portion size. The situation with the assessment of menu diversity is somehow worse; about 60% of guests who used the food services in the household stated that the offer was richer and more diverse. Similarly,

the taste of the dishes prepared by the hostess, which are produced in a personal farm, has been rated. Thus, 66.7% of respondents who ate in the surveyed rural tourism households positively assessed the meal cost, slightly lower – the serving quality. The lower assessment given by the respondents to the services material component (8.54%) covers the aesthetic view and the economy adaptation to the tourist services provision; the rooms’ size and furnishing; sanitary facilities number and equipment; recreation inventory and equipment and tourist attraction of the neighbourhood where the rural tourism household is located.

The analysis of the received responses showed that in some farms the services material provision is insufficient. The lowest scores were connected with functionality, bedroom and living room equipment. The guests had the least remarks about the objects cleanliness and aesthetic view. The diversity of the offered recreation equipment is the lowest: almost 2% of respondents gave a grade “well”, 29.4% – “satisfactory”, and – 68.6% – “unsatisfactory”. The organization of tourists’ leisure (animation service) has gained the lowest rate (7.65%). The evaluation parameters include the possibility of organizing free time by the fire; musical accompaniment; hiking, biking; horseback riding or sleigh or cart; participation in agricultural work and other tourist activities offered by the rural tourism households owners. In our opinion, the low scores arose through the providers’ misunderstanding of the importance of diversifying the holiday offer. This confirms the analysis of the leisure usage structure, according to which the dominant forms are walking and cycling (80.3%); active tourism (53.6%); participation in cultural events, especially in festivals organized on rural areas (47.2%); passive rest (25.4%); games, competitions (13.2%), participation in the agriculture (8.8%); horseback riding, sledding (4.1%), other ways of time spending (21.5%). The second way of assessing the services quality level is to compare the service compliance with the previous conditions and the tourist's own expectations about it (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative assessment of factors shaping the quality of services in relation to the minimum requirements of guests

Indicators	Evaluation of service quality in comparison with the minimum requirements			Evaluation of service quality in comparison with the desired requirements		
	Low	Acceptable	High	Low	Acceptable	High
Services material component	7.5	47.0	45.5	6.3	73.7	20.0
Meal	1.3	49.3	49.4	5.9	61.8	32.3
Organization of tourist events	17.0	60.4	22.6	19.7	60.7	19.6
Prices	2.5	58.8	38.7	4.6	72.3	23.1
Reliability	2.0	51.0	47.0	7.8	69.4	22.8
Responsiveness	3.9	44.6	51.5	7.8	68.6	23.6
Competence	2.0	50.1	47.9	5.9	70.6	23.5
Hospitality	2.0	45.5	52.5	3.9	66.7	29.4
Faithfulness and safety	2.0	48.2	49.8	4.1	70.6	25.3
Sociability	3.9	50.0	46.1	3.9	70.6	25.5

Source: Authors’ own results.

The Table 2 shows that the quality indicators of most services components provided by rural tourism households were formed at a fairly high level, compared with the minimum and desired guests’ requirements. The percentage of dissatisfied people has slightly increased. The practice shows that along with the increase in consumer demand, the percentage of people who evaluate quality at a high level decreases. At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to the relatively high percentage of people (about 30%) who are interested in the meal quality and the hosts’ hospitality. On the other hand, the material base quality, reliability, homeowners’ sensitivity and competence received the least (below 24%) positive feedback, compared to the relatively high percentage of assessments according to minimum requirements. The lowest value of the services quality comparative assessment was the indicator of the tourist events organization. The results of the research showed that these services quality mostly met the minimum and desired requirements, while in this area there were the most disappointed tourists (19.7%) and the least – enthusiastic about this activity (19.6%). In the field of accommodation services, the consumer's service quality assessment is based on the formation a positive or negative emotional mood in his mind [9, p.226]. Thus, it can be considered that the service

quality assessment in rural tourism arises from the comparison of the consumer's expectations about this service, including emotional and the actual condition of its provision. Confirmation of the positive opinion about the conditions of rest and psychological atmosphere during the stay in the studied rural tourism households are the responses to two questions concerning the choice of the rural estate and its popularization among relatives, acquaintances, friends. Answering the first question, 86.6% of respondents confirmed a good choice in favor of holidays in the village, 25.5% said that holidays were quite interesting, and only one person (2%) said that the choice of the estate (household) that provides tourist services was unsuccessful. Regarding the rural tourism household recommendation to their friends, relatives, acquaintances, 74.5% of respondents answered "yes", 23.5% – "maybe", and only one person (2%) – "probably not". Tourists especially enjoyed the host family atmosphere in the rural tourism household (51.1%), beautiful views, landscapes, silence, landscaping (23.4%); cooked meals quality (21.1%) and accommodation conditions (4.4%).

## CONCLUSIONS

Lots of subjective factors influence the tourist services quality assessment. It depends primarily on the tourists' personal perception during their stay on the rural tourism household and is assessed through the prism of hospitality, competence, propensity to provide tourist services, family atmosphere, knowledge of tourists' needs and ability to meet them, as well as ensuring safety and response to complaints. Friendly treatment of guests is sometimes more important than the standard of the offered accommodations or the offer originality. The rural tourism household owner turns his own estate into a unique place which should become the most interesting, useful, convenient and comfortable for tourists of different ages, social and financial status and interests. To

satisfy the tourist's wish, it is necessary to anticipate his expectations and use his positive communicative experience with people. It also should be noticed that the vast majority of surveyed tourists confirmed that the host family serves guests with an open heart and in the spirit of meeting their needs. Those rural tourism households in which guests feel like at home, that care about their guests, quickly and efficiently satisfy their needs and desires, deserve this assessment. Thus, it can be confirmed that the product of rural tourism is inextricably linked with the host family, which is an important component of it. The host family ability to provide tourist's services and the hosts' personal skills to interest the guests are a very important part of the tourist services offer. Therefore, peasants who care not only about material benefits but also pay much attention to their guests who are resting in their household, meeting their needs and expectations, should provide rural tourism services.

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