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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2022

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **RIT Croatia / RIT Croatia**

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Service Failures in Five-Star Hotels in Dubrovnik – Neretva and Istria
Counties

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HSPT.490.700-702 – Senior Capstone Project

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May 6th, 2022

Abstract

The goal of this research was to identify key categories of customer complaints in five-star hotels. Qualitative analysis, in this instance content analysis was used to discover imperfect service areas. This research aimed at analyzing the content of online customer feedback focusing on five-star hotels in Croatia. By analyzing 244 customer reviews in 18 five-star hotels in Dubrovnik-Neretva and Istria counties, patterns in service gaps were identified, including rudeness, slowness, lack of attention, lack of skills, poor supervision, lack of problem-solving. In this research, the highest number of service failures have been identified in Food and Beverage department, followed by Front Office, Housekeeping, Sales, Management and Spa. Another category "Multiple Departments" indicates that a service failure had impacted the entire operations and guests did not mention a specific department in the review.

Keywords: service failures, five-star hotels, Croatia, electronic word of mouth, customer complaints, service gaps, service quality

Service Failures in Five-Star Hotels in Dubrovnik – Neretva and Istria Counties

Service quality in the hotel industry has been extensively researched and the body of knowledge in this area is both wide and deep. Yet, research dealing with the service quality in five – star hotels in Croatia is still limited and scarce. Therefore, this topic needs to be further explored and understood. Service is defined as anticipating and addressing guests' needs in the relationship between the guest and the host. In that light, customer complaints are a major indicator of customer dissatisfaction (Oliver, 1997). Customer complaints are an objective source when seeking which areas require a more thorough practice of service delivery.(Lewis & Morris, 1987).

This research aims to analyze the content of online customer feedback focusing on five – star hotels in Croatia. The goal is to identify key categories of customer complaints about services that these properties offer since travelers' feedback regarding service quality has a significant influence on other travelers' willingness to make bookings. eWOM has become an important attribute for business success since the worldwide adaptation of internet technologies. In the travel industry, travelers search the internet to find information about hotels and travel destinations. Information published online is considered as a source of data that influences tourists' travel intention and choice of destination (Soderlund & Rosengren, 2007).

There are two key research questions that this paper will try to address: “What are customer complaints about five – star hotels in Croatia?” and “What should five – star hotels do in order to improve their service?”. As part of this research, we will develop a set of recommendations for five – star hotels in order to improve their service and consequently reduce the number of complaints. Ultimately, this may result in having higher ratings that can potentially draw even more interest to book these properties.

Electronic Word of Mouth

Hospitality is an industry whose entire philosophy revolves around incorporating and providing soft and hard gestures which merge into a perfect service . Service is the process of fulfilling guests' needs supported with politeness and courtesy (Kapur, 2020).

Customer complaints are defined as manifestations of displeasure toward companies' service with an aim to signal service failure points (Knox and Van Oest, 2014; Faed and Forbes, 2010).

In that light, customer complaints are a major indicator of customer dissatisfaction (Oliver, 1997). Complaints serve as an objective analysis of service areas that did not meet guest expectations (Lewis & Morris, 1987).

Electronic word of mouth is the dominant practice of informing customers and influencing their decision making and behavior via online reviews. As a result of the reach of Online Travel Agents and social media, information availability and its impact extend beyond cultural and national boundaries (Chung et al., 2018). When used effectively, electronic word of mouth has increased customer expenditure by 15% (WOMMA, 2014).

The risk of bias reviews affecting customer purchase intentions and behaviors has decreased due to an increasing pool of Electronic Word – of – Mouth (Ahani, et al., 2019; Abubakar, et al., 2016).

Electronic word of mouth has enabled users to publicly post their experience through the usage of customer review web site TripAdvisor ((Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016; Xie, Zhang, & Zhang, 2014), Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) such as Expedia (e.g., Stringam & Gerdes, 2010) and Booking (e.g., Mellinas, María-Dolores, & García, 2016).

Importance of Customer Feedback

Product or service feedback is customers' opportunity to voice opinions and potential areas for improvement (Chen et al., 2012). Online Customer Feedback (OCF) has become the main differentiation tool and value proposal as a consequence of its influence on customer intentions (Litvin et al., 2008). OCF, alongside encouraging customer engagement, affects future demand as a result of OCF's extensive archive available to everyone (Zhang et al., 2010), whilst creating an environment that cannot be biased (Chen et al., 2012).

Online Customer Feedback assists travelers evaluate a property's service prior to arrival. Since services are intangible and high – risk purchases, OCF is the essential tool used to evaluate them since the focus has shifted from consumption to experience (Browning et al., 2013; Pantano and Servidio, 2011). OCF has necessitated the tourism sector to continuously adapt to market changes.

As a consequence of TripAdvisor's increasing popularity, guests have generated more than 700 million reviews (Marine-Roig, 2019) and due to OCFs being voluntary and publicly accessible, 9 out of 10 travelers seek advice and suggestions through TripAdvisor (Okazaki et al., 2017).

OCF creates a challenge for the hotel industry since future guests establish expectations based on reviews priorly made available to the public. Tourism destinations are required to review customer feedback in order to understand areas of service failure and provide exceptional service (Pantano, and Di Pietro, 2013).

Online social media comments have become the fundamental tool in influencing customer behavior and marketing strategies, even among well-established firms in the market (Aral et al., 2013). Such environment has given smaller hotels growth opportunities in segments in which they have a limited presence (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). This is of crucial importance in an industry such as hospitality, as a result of fragmented supply and revenue streams from foreign tourists.

Service Quality

Different tangible and intangible factors contribute to the attractiveness of a destination. Standards for service quality are constantly improving, and their application depends on the geographical area. Concerning service quality in the tourism sector, Narayan et al. (2008) conducted research in which they wanted to analyze a fusion of all potential service moments of truth in India (Narayan, 2008).

In a similar manner, Hallak et al. (2018) decided to define the impact of service quality on perceived value, satisfaction, and trust in Australia through tangible aspects of service (Hallak et al., 2018).

Further research has found positive correlation between a positive guest experience and their intention to return (Nadarajah and Ramalu, 2018). The conducted studies have shown the increasing importance and use of OCF. The studies have outlined the evidently changing customer behavior, where emphasis is placed on experience and not solely on consumption (Pan and Zhang, 2011; Pantano and Servidio, 2011).

OFCs influence guests' intentions to visit a particular destination (Pantano, and Di Pietro, 2013). According to Narangajavana et al., after conducting research about a destination, guests' expectations tend to increase (Narangajavana et al., 2017).

Service Quality in Accommodation

The luxury hotel market has been in rapid growth due to the customers' increasing financial earnings and emerging destinations (Deloitte, 2019). Estimates suggest that the global luxury hotel market will grow by 4.7% between 2018 and 2023 (Mordor Intelligence, 2019) and achieve US\$115.8 billion by 2025 (Grand View Research, 2018). In order to remain competitive, efforts were directed towards improving infrastructure and simplifying technology use to improve customer experience (Mordor Intelligence, 2019).

Studies show that high – rating hotels place more importance on photos as a result of the visual effect of photos impacting travelers' perception of judgement (Ren et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2014). Pictures with richer details presented on hotel websites improve customer satisfaction (Bogicevic et al., 2017), but also the website quality influences sensorial and cognitive online brand

experience (Jiménez Barreto et al., 2019). In addition to improving customer satisfaction, a recent study showed that high – rating hotels invested more resources into creating property photos than lower – rating hotels (Ren et al., 2020).

Service quality is guided by customers' evaluation of the excellence of service received (Zeithaml, 1988). Research suggests that service is evaluated based on the social interaction between the customer and service provider (Hepple et al., 1990; Reuland et al., 1985; Burgess, 1982).

The physical aspect is shown through the interior and exterior parts of the property that provoke a special feeling to guests (Line & Hanks, 2020; Marić et al., 2016; Han & Ryu, 2009;) which include hotel facilities, accommodations, building exteriors, and parking areas (Kim et al., 2006). The intangible aspect includes the emotions and skills that an employee puts into the service while providing it (Kim et al., 2006; Rauch et al., 2015).

Customers' overall service evaluation is not only based on the performance of the core product, rather their final assessment includes the combined effort of all the intangible and tangible elements that went into crafting the service. In an effort to simplify the process of evaluating a service comprehensively, customer satisfaction models have been created to study the correlation among service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Dani 2014; Deng et al. 2013; Hsu et al. 2006; Hu et al. 2009).

Service quality judgement is often viewed through the lenses of the Signaling Theory which suggests that consumers have the tendency to seek details that might impact their perception of quality. The challenge for service providers is the lack of complete information that customers obtained at the moment of quality evaluation (Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Spence, 1978) as customers tend to predict service failures based on the overall cues (Dover, 1982). Customers' quality perception is influenced by the degree of visual aesthetic appeal. Visual aesthetic appeal describes one's product positioning meaning it examines the feelings generated from external sources such as light (Baker & Cameron, 1996), color (Sherman et al., 1997), furniture (I. Y. Lin & Mattila, 2010), layout (Bitner, 1992), artifacts (Han & Ryu, 2009), and design (West & Purvis, 1992).

Method and Sample

This study uses qualitative analysis to interpret service failures in five – star hotels in Croatia. Qualitative analysis, in this instance content analysis is a research method that analyzes textual material and generates potential assumptions. This approach provides solid possibilities to discover and reinforce imperfect service areas (Duriu et al., 2007). Textual coding schemes will be used to analyze guest reviews. An advantage of content analysis is that it provides behavior patterns among the examined content, which confirms the reliability of this method since it reproduces systematic processes (Phils, 2013).

We believe that this method is appropriate to identify weak areas of service in hotel accommodation. While alternative studies have identified quantitative research methods, content analysis seeks precise patterns in customer reviews. The intent is to create a market baseline with the collection of samples in order to gain an understanding of service failures in five – star hotels in Croatia. The fundamental idea will be to identify a list of reasons that guests communicate as service failures in Croatian five – star hotels.

The sample for this research were five – star and special category hotels (Q standard and special standard hotels) categorized and approved by the Croatian Ministry of Tourism and Sport in the Dubrovnik–Neretva and Istria County. These two regions host approximately 50% of all five – star hotels in Croatia. As a baseline, we decided to look at hotels that have a minimum of 500 reviews and a capacity of minimum 50 rooms. This ultimately narrowed our research to a total of 18 hotels, 13 in Dubrovnik-Neretva and 5 in Istria. TripAdvisor was used as the source for this study's qualitative research. Traditionally, customers evaluate their experiences on a 5-point scale (1 star to 5 stars) – with 1 star being the lowest and 5 stars being the highest possible rate. We decided that for a 5-star hotel the threshold of acceptable guest satisfaction is a 4-star review. Hence, our focus will be on customer reviews that attained 3-stars (or lower) on TripAdvisor. We deem that a three-star review for a five-star hotel represents a failed service.

Results

Table 1 presents the ratings that were posted by hotel guests with reviews from 1 to 3-star ratings. These results show, that 10.93% of total reviews possess some sort of service failure in five – star hotels.

Table 1

Failed Service Reviews as Part of Total Number of Reviews

Region	Number of Hotels	# Total Reviews	Failed Service Reviews	%
Dubrovnik – Neretva	13	22,471	2251	10.02%
Istria	5	2,056	429	20.87%
TOTAL	18	24,527	2,680	10.93%

Source: Author

To identify service failures in five – star hotels in our research, a total of 244 TripAdvisor comments have been considered by using content analysis. By analyzing a total of 15 reviews or how many were available per property rated as 1 – star, 2 – star and 3 – star in TripAdvisor in the last year prior to the pandemic period which was 2019 in our case, patterns in service gaps were identified, including rudeness, slowness, lack of attention, lack of skills, poor supervision, lack of problem – solving. The results of 1,004 failures identified are shown in figure 1 (Figure 1 – Failure Areas).

Figure 1 – Failure Areas



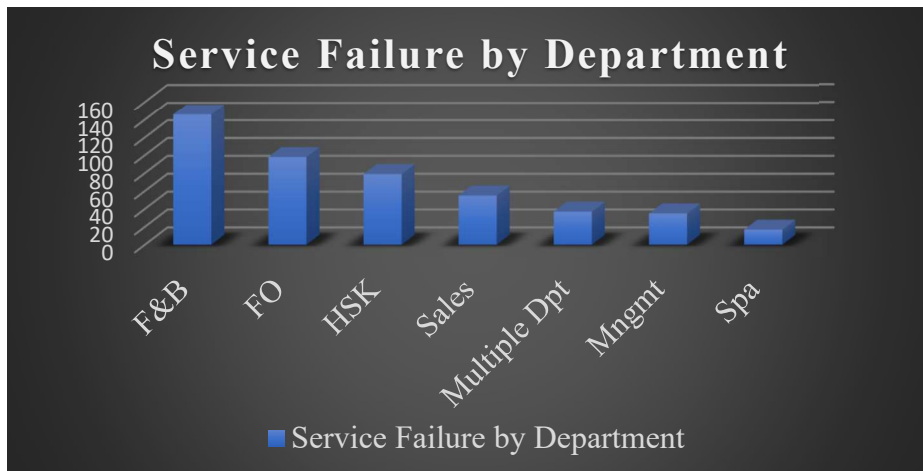
Source: Author

After a thorough analysis, the table confirms that "Lack of attention" is the most common service failure reported in 232 cases.

"Lack of skill" was another service failure identified with a high number of complaints communicated with 194 cases.

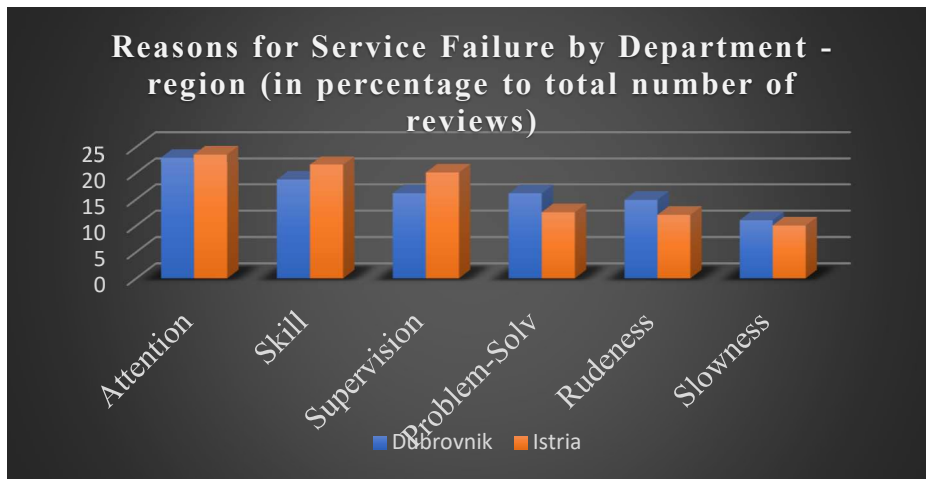
Figure 2 illustrates which departments did not meet guest expectations. In this research, the highest number of service failures have been identified in Food and Beverage department, followed by Front Office, Housekeeping, Sales, Management and Spa. Another category "Multiple Departments" indicates that a service failure had impacted the entire operations and guests did not mention a specific department in the review.

Figure 2 Total Service Failure by Department



Source: Author

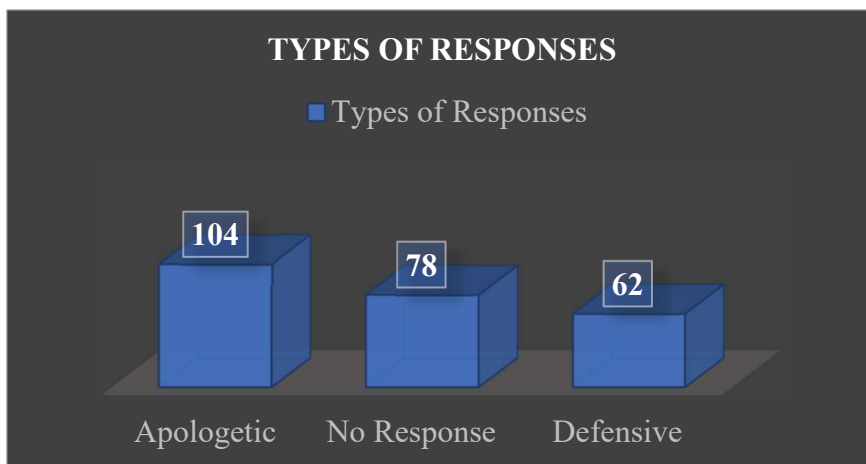
Figure 3 presents service failures by department based on region. When comparing service gaps in geographical terms, it is evident that the Dubrovnik-Neretva and Istria counties have a similar score in "Lack of Attention" and "Slowness" (Figure 3). The Dubrovnik-Neretva County has the highest score in "Lack of Problem-Solving" and "Rudeness". The Istria County has the highest score in "Lack of Skill" and "Poor Supervision".



Source: Author

In this research we also observed how did hotels respond to customer complaints (Figure 4). Out of 244 comments, 166 were answered. In all 166 responses to customer complaints did not offer any concrete action for service recovery. As visible in figure 4, most management responses were apologetic in nature.

Figure 4 Types of Responses



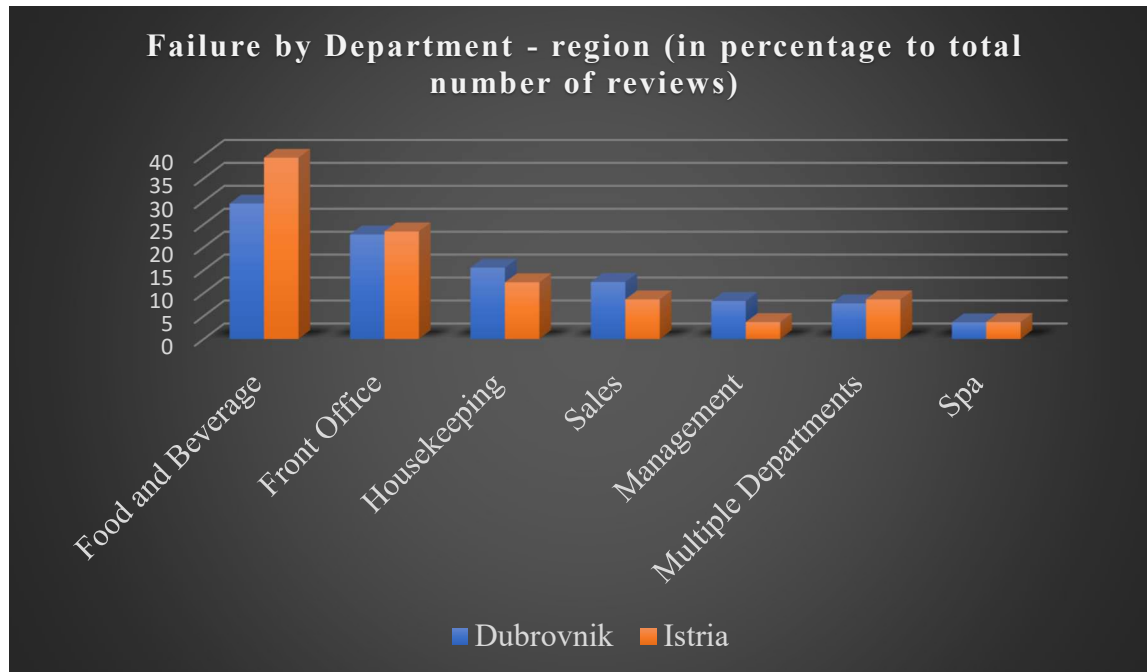
Source: Author

Note:

out of 244 reviews,
166 were answered

Figure 5

Failure by Department – region (in percentage to total number of reviews)



Source: Author

Discussion

The purpose of this research paper was to identify service failures and the reasons of their occurrence in five – star hotels in Dubrovnik – Neretva and Istria counties. In order to suggest solutions to service failures one must primarily identify them, and this was the purpose of conducting this research. Once this is understood, hotels may aim at reducing or eliminating service gaps and achieving the desired service quality

The leading service failure refers to "Lack of Attention", which suggests that improvements in soft skills and etiquette training have to be made. Lack of attention category also includes overlooking details that guests find important. Choi and Kandampully researched the effect of the designed physical layout on overall customer engagement in upscale hotels and have concluded that employees are the central characters that adjust the atmosphere. That is the reason why businesses

must focus on continuous training in order to achieve returning customers (Choi & Kandampully, 2018).

Hard and soft skills are the foundation of adequate service delivery, but in order to provide unique and memorable experiences, exceeding expectations is required. Standards and checklists serve the means of fulfilling the expected level of service, but in the investigated 5 – star properties, guests strive towards an exceptional service. To achieve this, service providers must focus on creating plans which will aid in service recovery. Training is required to pass on the necessary knowledge to colleagues entering the business(De Grosky, 2013). Job training can be performed simultaneously to daily duties and can be customized to the current standards (Maršikova, 2015). Such methods include demonstration, coaching, job rotation, mentoring, counselling and workshops. Maršikova additionally suggests off – the – job trainings as they focus on attaining new skills and knowledge through lectures and workshops. Another area that requires training includes leadership skills (Brant, 2016).

As this research explored service failures in five – star hotels in Croatia where accommodation categorization is determined by the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, we understand that service providers are unable to prevent 100% of mistakes as service quality is evaluated subjectively. However, patterns of expectation and trends of failures can be analyzed and trained upon, allowing staff to prevent mistakes or use them to create valuable experiences through service recovery in situations of shortcomings. Another crucial area to positively influence the design of a 5 – star experience would be leadership training. Leaders influence each department and should inspire other employees to strive towards taking an additional step and delivering exceptional service. Leaders should be the role models that perfect and pass on company's values to employees.

High failure scores that were found in this research were in the Food and Beverage and Front Office Department leads to the assumption, that departments that include higher level of interaction create a greater possibility for failures. Spa areas did not prove to be a major service center. An explanation may be that guests simply disregard seeking for imperfect areas.

10.93% of overall comments have reported service failures. When booking a five – star hotel, guests require high end service as they pay high prices and therefore demand high quality service. These expectations do not allow errors. However, when we consider the nature of five – star hotels, the number of reported failures is simply too low. What is worrying is that one must assume that

the number of service failures that are not presented are higher as the ratio between what is considered in this research a positive review (4 – star and 5 – star) and as a negative review (1 – star, 2 – star and 3 – star) is almost 90:10. To conclude, this research has confirmed that training is an important factor when designing a five – star experience.

As this research as shown, 6 service gaps could be identified: rudeness, slowness, lack of attention, lack of skills, poor supervision, and lack of problem-solving.

First, " Rudeness " is a service gap which suggests a lack of emotional intelligence or employee engagement and overall satisfaction at their workplace. If a company would stimulate a purpose – driven approach, individuals would apply the organizational values, which means practicing friendly service – oriented manners and treat guests accordingly. Additionally, this can include the idea of hiring appropriate staff, which naturally does not execute rude behaviors. In order to pass on company values to employees, etiquette training prepares employees to perform welcoming manners and standards of behavior. In some situations, it was visible that employees lacked empathy and guests perceived such behavior as rude. Focusing on cultural awareness and empathy are strategies in preventing rudeness. Geographically, Dubrovnik – Neretva County scored the highest score in the service failure gap of rudeness. It can be assumed, that workers in Dubrovnik – Neretva County lack the level of emotional intelligence to meet guests' expectations of professional behavior in personal interaction.

Secondly, " Slowness " was most commonly identified in the Food and Beverage department. Guests needed to wait to notice a waiter approaching them or wait for a longer period for their order payment. It can be concluded that staff scheduling can be the cause of slowness. During rush hours, it is advisable to have to have sufficient staff working to approach and serve guests. Communication between the servers and the kitchen can be the source of occurrence of failure. Lack of clear communication between Front Office and Housekeeping departments has cause delays and waiting times at guest check – ins. For instance, Housekeeping did not inform Front Office that a room is ready, so the room could not be provided to the guests. Therefore, it is important to create a system on a company level that would accelerate communication between departments.

Third, " Lack of attention " has been the most frequent failure in this research and covers a more comprehensive range of issues, predominantly in the Dubrovnik – Neretva County. Starting from

not approaching a guest in the restaurant to a bad room makeup. In order to prevent these failures from reoccurring, standards and generalized procedures have to be put in place. In housekeeping, each employee has to be given and communicated a checklist. In F&B, standards such as " Each guest has to be greeted upon entry to the restaurant " or " Each guest has to be approached within 10 seconds from sitting down" provide a more guest – friendly service. Combined with emotional intelligence, experiences can be personalized to every individual in order to add value for the entire duration of the stay. Personalized service and attention to every detail are the little bits too 5 – star experiences and are required for closing the service gap. As this failure has mostly been recorded in the Dubrovnik – Neretva County, it can be assumed that this area has less resources to provide training in this field or guest expectations are maybe higher.

Fourth, " Lack of skill " includes not being familiar with the required technical or hard skills. Product knowledge training is essential in order to act successfully on the stage in the Servicescape. Across all departments, employees need to be knowledgeable about the property and its amenities, but also about the guests. Even in situations where a guest asks security, whose main role is not connected to hotel services, he / she should be able to answer questions related to the tourism offer. In the Food and Beverage department, this refers to the menu and the technical skills such as serving etiquette. Minor details can influence guests' perception, as the target group is very sensitive to high quality standards. Employees need to be able to adapt to upcoming trends. In Front Office, employees need to be familiar with the reservation system. Off – site simulations acting different scenarios will aid in preparing Front Office employees to perform challenging tasks (Brant, 2019).

The fifth service gap, " Poor supervision ", points out that the cause of failure in caused in several reviews. Despite supervisors or managers did not directly communicate with guests, it was assumed, that poor management and supervision were the cause of the failure. In situations where failures occurred in multiple departments, guests concluded that the reason was poor management. In this case adequate leadership training may impact the entire picture of guest experience. Consequently, it is possible that a clear difference between leadership and management has not been set. Leadership is more focused on teaching and reminding employees of a company's mission, vision and values, whereas management is more leaned towards giving directions and setting a hierarchy.

Finally, "Lack of Problem – Solving Skills" is the building block to successful service recovery. As mentioned before, mistakes occur in human interaction. This might be a broader understanding of the 5-star hotel guests; however, this segment apparently lacks patience if employees are not able to successfully conduct a service recovery. This failure can be connected with other service failures, including "Lack of Skill" or "Lack of Attention", as employees may disregard the issue as being unimportant or not have the required skills to perform the service. In these situations, the guest is frustrated as employees are unable to resolve the problem and are tempted to leave negative feedback of social media like TripAdvisor. In these instances, workshops would be a great solution as through them employees could learn how to deal with the problem, but also how to cope with stress with which they are presented (Maršikova, 2015). This will majorly increase employee confidence and enable employees to better handle guest complaints.

This research additionally observed management's responses to the analyzed reviews. 166 out of 244 comments considered were answered by the hotels. The nature of the content has been identified in those responses: "apologetic", "defensive", and "ignored" (Figure 4). Presumably, hotels did not find it equally important to respond to reviews. It has been observed that some properties used identical response templates regardless of the review's content. In other cases, hotels only answered positive reviews or argued with the guest through a response to a review. Hotels have to understand that not responding to a review is a wasted opportunity to conduct effective service recovery and ultimately leaves a negative impression for future guests.

Employee training impact may be limited by high turnover rates in international properties, which discourages companies to invest in training programs. Additionally, it can be concluded that, that guests' expectations might be set in a manner which is impossible to achieve. Limitations of this particular research was a limited time frame to collect information. The sample size of 18 hotels has been appropriate for the time and resources available. As a result, this is an exploratory study, which could be extended to a larger sample size generating more evident results. It is important to mention that, in this sample selection, the age of each property has been disregarded, even though it may impact the total number of comments and portion of 3 – star and less than 3 – star ratings accordingly.

This research leaves opportunity for further exploration and discussion on how to prepare employees to deliver this kind of high-end service. As emotions drive experiences, further study

of emotional intelligence could enrich this topic. Ultimately, it would be beneficial to explore the correlation between training and employee fluctuation.

Limitations and recommendations

While conducting this research, we encountered several limitations. This caused the author of the study to reduce the number of reviews posted by TripAdvisor. These results cannot be generalizable.

Another dimension that needs to be addressed is that this study included only two regions. For future research, we would recommend including all properties ranked as five-star hotels. Furthermore, it is recommended to explore the service failures in chained hotels and independent hotels and find out whether they correlate.

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