Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and Rural Development
Vol. 21, Issue 3, 2021
PRINT ISSN 2284-7995, E-ISSN 2285-3952

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF SERVICES PROVIDED BY RURAL TOURISM TOUR OPERATORS IN OVERCOMING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CONSEQUENCES IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

In the context of overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic consequences, the concept of total quality management should serve as the basis for rethinking the role of customer service for travel services, in accordance with the requirements of the international service quality standards. The paper aimed to approach the theoretical, methodological and practical problems of assessing the quality of the travel services of regional enterprises that organize rural tourism tours in Ukraine. The main attention was paid to the analysis of the quality of components of standard travel services on the directions of rural tourism routes having hidden features. To assess the services quality, in accordance with their latent features in the field of rural tourism, the authors used the benchmarking methodology, which combines the number of statistical comparison methods based on multidimensional objects. The article offers an algorithm for the benchmarking of the quality of services provided by rural tourism tour operators. As part of the benchmarking tools for assessing the quality of service provided by travel business entities, the authors used the taxonomic analysis method. The approaches proposed by the authors to assessing the quality of travel services allow rural tourism business entities to form the measures to restore the sale and rendering of travel services in the context of overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic consequences.

Key words**:** *tour operators, rural tourism, benchmarking, taxonomic analysis, security*

INTRODUCTION

During the crisis caused by the global pandemic and quarantine, the tourist flow in Ukraine fell by 75%. A lockdown in the tourism, culture and creative industries can lead to the loss of about 10% of GDP over the next 5 years [26]. To overcome the crisis and restore mobility, the enterprises of the international travel industry are actively looking for the ways to stimulate the tourist flow. For example, the tour operator ANEX Tour, participating in the program "Certification of Healthy Tourism" of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey in the framework of measures to combat the coronavirus epidemic, became the first certified Turkish tour operator. To guarantee the safety in the hotels of the International Accor Group, enhanced hygiene and prevention measures were introduced. The ALLSAFE Certificate, developed in collaboration with Bureau Veritas, introduces new protocols and standards of high cleanliness and ensures that all anti-epidemic measures are met in the Accor Group Hotels. The possibility of contactless check-in at the hotel and subsequent check-out, including contactless payments are also provided [1]. Therefore, since July 07, 2020, Egypt tour operators have started receiving inbound tourism in certified hotels and resorts located in the coastal governorates (Red Sea, South Sinai and Matrouh) with a maximum occupancy rate of 50%. Obtaining the "Hygiene Safety Certificate" given by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Egypt and complying with the new set regulations, are prerequisites for hospitality establishments to operate [19].

In the conditions of the limited mobility of travelers, a new direction in the development of rural tourism can be "Gastronomic Routes" – an innovative tourism product for Ukraine, with high potential to promote rural development: by supporting producers of traditional products, preserving, enhancing biodiversity and cultural heritage of local

communities; through the integrated development of agricultural production and tourism, which provides diversification of production activities in rural areas and attraction of additional financial income from tourists, tour operators and investors. European experience shows that this area of tourism provides the basis for the development of a regional network and cooperation of agricultural producers and tour operators for the development and commercialization of culinary routes as a regional tourist product [13]. Therefore, enterprises of the travel business developing this direction of travel should focus on the measures to improve the safety and quality of travel services under quarantine restrictions and overcome the pandemic consequences [23]. Therefore, the destinations that strongly depend on the provision of travel services need to achieve a balance between health issues and economic interests, as indicated by scientific researches [11].

In the current limited conditions of restoring the tourist flow, the use of technologies and methods for assessing the quality of services and sanitary safety measures is relevant for enterprises that focus on the quality of domestic tourism services.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of the study is to improve the tools for benchmarking the quality of the services of small businesses in the rural tourism sector based on taxonomic analysis for further management decisions to improve the services quality. The analysis of the quality of travel services is based on the hypothesis that the indicators that characterize its quality depend both on the objective characteristics of tourist consumption (conditions of service to consumers in travel agencies and agricultural hotels, conditions for providing food services, booking, transportation), and on some values that are not directly observed and assessed (hobby interests of tourists, attractiveness of recreational resources, gastronomic tastes). The knowledge of the specific features of travel services allows us to formulate the main criteria for quality assessment, according to which the consumer expresses his attitude to a service [8]. Based on the analysis of scientific literature, we can assume that some characteristics of service quality indicators are latent indicators, that is, they are not amenable to direct assessment, and are described by a set of so-called signs-symptoms [30]. Conducted researches give us the grounds to consider the quality of service in the field of rural tourism as a set of properties, characteristics of a tourist product, resources and forms of service that give it the ability to meet the predetermined or expected needs of consumers [12], [14], [17]. The scientists also consider the quality system of service enterprises as a set of organizational structure, methods, processes and resources necessary for the implementation of general quality management and propose measures to improve it [1], [7], [16].

The definition of the concept "benchmarking" (English "bench" and "mark") first appeared in 1972 at the Cambridge Institute for Strategic Planning during the research activities of the PIMS Consulting Group. Then the basic principle of benchmarking was formulated: "in order to find an effective solution in the competitive field, it is necessary to know the best experience of other enterprises that have succeeded in similar conditions" [22]. Thus, benchmarking is used to analyze the effectiveness of individual functions and processes in the enterprise. This allows you to more accurately determine the causes of production activities inefficiency and provide recommendations to solve the identified problems. In the modern literature, there are a huge number of interpretations of benchmarking [21]. Some consider it a product of the evolutionary development of the concept of competitiveness, others a program to improve quality, and still others consider it an innovative product of modern business practice. The most famous definition of benchmarking is provided by the American scientist R. Camp. He defined it as "a constant process of studying and assessing the products, services, and experience of the most

serious competitors or those companies that are recognized leaders in their industries" [6].

In our opinion, benchmarking in a travel company reveals its problems or problems in the travel market with costs and quality, reveals competitive advantages or disadvantages in the activities of travel companies. It reveals problems in the work, specifies them. For example, the management of the German travel corporation "TUI" is convinced that the benchmarking should be an ongoing process aimed not only at supporting competition, but also at winning over it. In the travel business, the basis of benchmarking is to compare the tourist service of a competitor or any part of it (transfer, accommodation) with the travel service of the enterprise under study in order to improve the quality of its own services. The collected information allows you to get an idea of the nature of competition, innovative technologies in the activities of leaders of the competitive environment, factors of their success in the travel business, summarize and use the collected data to improve management in the process of building a model of high-quality service of the company [10]. The main content of benchmarking methods is to identify reference travel companies that have achieved significant success in any functional areas, carefully studied their business processes and adapted the information obtained to the conditions of their own business [4], [15], [24].

The researchers use various benchmarking methods to analyze the performance of sectoral enterprises in the tourism industry [5], [27]. Some scientists are of the opinion that the benchmarking is a key tool for checking the effectiveness of travel services in the field of sports and event tourism to further determine the directions of development of tourist destinations [29]. Then, modern benchmarking is a research and analytical tool that consists in finding and studying the best-known methods of doing business, which helps to improve business processes relatively quickly and at the lowest cost.

In this study, the authors offer an algorithm for the benchmarking of the quality of services in the travel companies, which is shown in Fig.1. For further analysis, we used the methodology to determine the priority areas for improving the quality of service for consumers of rural tourism services, which includes a number of consecutive stages carried out using taxonomic analysis of tour operators [28]. In our opinion, it is advisable to use the taxonomic analysis method as a part of the benchmarking tools for assessing the quality of travel services. The taxonomy method is characterized by the simplicity of the mathematical apparatus, the absence of any requirements for the totality of the studied objects, and a more convenient scale of the obtained estimates, which facilitate the objects analysis and ranking.

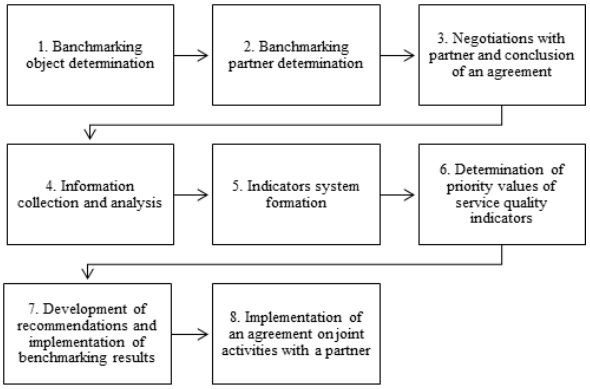

Fig.1. Algorithm of the benchmarking process in the study of the quality of travel services
Source: compiled by the authors.

Further calculations of indicators for assessing the quality of services will be carried out according to the following stages:

(1)Based on the initial data, an initial taxonomic analysis is carried out in the context of individual components of the quality of services of travel companies in the field of rural tourism.

(2)Based on the results of the initial taxonomic analysis, the percentage distance of the analyzed enterprise from the leading enterprise in terms of the level of taxonomic indicator is determined (h_o^{μ}):

$$h_o^{\mu} = \frac{\mu_l - \mu_a}{\mu_l} \times 100, \quad (1)$$

where: μ_a, μ_l is the level of the taxonomic indicator of the analyzed enterprise and the leading company, respectively, calculated based on the results of the initial taxonomic analysis.

(3)Step-by-step taxonomic analysis is carried

out with the isolated use of reserves for improving the j factor indicator of the analyzed company. At the same time, at each step, the actual value of the j factor indicator is replaced with the best one, while the values of other indicators remain unchanged.

Based on the results of taxonomic analysis, each step determines:

-distance of the analyzed company from the leading company in terms of taxonomic indicator level (h_j^{μ}), as a percentage:

$$h_j^{\mu} = \frac{\mu_{l.j} - \mu_{a.j}}{\mu_{l.j}} \times 100, \quad (2)$$

where: $\mu_{a.}j$, $\mu_{l.j}$ is the level of the taxonomic indicator based on the results of taxonomic analysis with isolated use of reserves for improving the j factor indicator at the analyzed enterprise, respectively, for the analyzed company and the leading company;

-the value of reducing the distance from the leading company in terms of the level of taxonomic indicator due to the improvement of the j factor indicator at the analyzed company (Δh_j^{μ}), as a percentage:

$$\Delta h_j^{\mu} = h_o^{\mu} - h_j^{\mu} \quad (3)$$

This indicator, in our opinion, is highly informative, since its values fully characterize the existing reserves for improving the quality of travel services at the analyzed company by improving the corresponding j factor indicator. The larger the latter, the higher the value Δh_j^{μ}.

(4)Based on the calculated values, Δh_j^{μ} the priority of each indicator is determined. The higher the value Δh_j^{μ}, the higher the priority of the j factor indicator, and accordingly this direction of improving the quality of services of the travel companies, will be.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study of the quality of services provided was conducted on the example of tourism operators of Odesa region. Ten small travel companies that are participants of the pilot project of enogastronomy tourism "Roads of Wine and Taste of Danube Bessarabia" within the framework of the EU project "Support for the System of Geographical Indications in Ukraine" were selected for experimental research [20]. We emphasize that Article 404 of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union provides for cooperation in the field of quality policy and requirements for the production of products and services in rural areas, quality schemes [25]. To implement the project, international experts chose Odesa region precisely because there is a modern Odesa-Reni autobahn, in the south of the region there are cohesive national wine producers and rural tourism and hospitality infrastructure. The touristic route "Roads of Wine and Taste of Danube Bessarabia" is aimed at introducing the best experience of the European Union in the field of diversification of agricultural tourism services and rural development. This will allow the business owners to attract tourists not only from Ukraine, but also from Europe, and thanks to the project, the travel companies will be able to learn from the experience of the European Union in promoting enogastronomy route services. Modern gastronomic routes are the tool for creating a travel offer in rural areas, attracting tourists, and developing destinations through community partnership with tourism entrepreneurs [2], [9], [31], [18].

It is advisable to provide information about the enterprises included in an impersonal form, that is, they are provided with two-digit numbers, under which they will appear in the process of presenting the research results. Note that differences in the methods of calculating the taxonomic indicator inherent in classical and modified algorithms, as a rule, cause differences in the values of the obtained estimates. The classical algorithm more accurately determines the scores for leading objects, while the modified algorithm determines scores for outsider objects.

Based on the unified taxonomy algorithm, a study of the quality of services for ten travel companies was conducted. According to the results of an expert assessment, the company "01" was identified as the leader among the studied travel companies. To compare the results of the analysis of service quality levels related to the comparative enterprise, the experts selected the travel company "04".

Table 1 shows the primary values of service quality indicators in travel companies and their weight coefficients determined by experts. Stimulant factors include indicators 1-2, 4-6 (Table 1). The third indicator – the average time spent on tour preparation should be attributed to distimulants.

Table 1. Primary values of indicators for assessing the quality of services in travel companies

Company	1.Safe tourist service environment, points	2.Services focusing on local food traditions, points	3.Average time spent on online tour booking, min.	4.Quality and safety of tourist accommodation services, points	5.Compliance of advertising with the actual security state at the place of consumption, %	6.Compliance of the tourist's expectations with the actual services provided in terms of volume, %
01	9	8	45.0	7.0	100.0	90.0
02	7	6	65.0	6.0	75.0	75.0
03	8	7	50.0	8.0	80.0	80.0
04	6	6	60.0	7.0	70.0	65.0
05	5	5	60.0	5.0	50.0	70.0
06	6	4	70.0	4.0	45.0	60.0
07	4	3	55.0	6.0	60.0	55.0
08	8	7	50.0	8.0	75.0	75.0
09	7	6	65.0	6.0	65.0	65.0
10	6	7	60.0	7.0	70.0	70.0
Weight coefficients	0.10	0.25	0.15	0.15	0.10	0.25

Source: original data, resulting from own experiences.

In our case (when using the taxonomy method as a tool for comparative analysis of the quality of services provided by travel company), high accuracy is required in the assessments of all objects – both leaders and outsiders. Achievement of this goal is possible by combining these algorithms based on the calculation of the results for each object of the total combined assessment (Table 2).

Table 2. The results of taxonomic analysis of the quality of services at travel companies, performed on the basis of the combined taxonomy method

Company	Classic algorithm		Modified algorithm		United results	
	μ^c_i	R^c_i	μ^m_i	R^m_i	μ^u_i	R^u_i
01	0.9103	1	0.9490	1	0.9490	1
02	0.5141	5	0.5201	5	0.5279	5
03	0.7693	2	0.7647	2	0.7829	2
04	0.4633	6	0.4774	6	0.4802	6
05	0.3409	8	0.3311	8	0.3428	8
06	0.1428	10	0.1731	10	0.1601	10
07	0.1687	9	0.2684	9	0.2125	9
08	0.7045	3	0.7250	3	0.7297	3
09	0.4161	7	0.4349	7	0.4343	7
10	0.5381	4	0.5656	4	0.5633	4

Source: original data, resulting from own experiences.

The authors used the algorithm of comparative assessment of the quality of travel services at travel companies, which is carried out on the basis of the combined taxonomy method [3].

(1)The value of the taxonomic indicator for the leading company "01" (μ_l) according to the results of the unified analysis is 0.9490, for the analyzed company "04" (μ_a) – 0.4802 (Table 2). Use formula (1) to calculate the

value h_o^{μ}.

$$h_o^{\mu} = \frac{0.9490-0.4802}{0.9490} \times 100 = 49.40\%$$

(2)We perform a step-by-step taxonomic analysis.

At the 1st step, the actual value of the indicator "Safe tourist service environment", which is six points, is replaced with the maximum value – nine, which was achieved at the company "01" (Table 1). We perform taxonomic analysis using modified data. The new values of the taxonomic indicator for the leader and the analyzed company will be:

$\mu_{l.1} = 0.9424$; $\mu_{a.1} = 0.5238$.

(3)Using formula (2), we calculate the distance of the analyzed company from the leading company by the level of taxonomic indicator (h_1^{μ}):

$$h_1^{\mu} = \frac{0.9424-0.5238}{0.9424} \times 100 = 44.42\%$$

Similar calculations will be made for all indicators that determine the quality of services. The results of calculations performed for all six indicators are presented in Table. 3.

Table 3. Change in the distance of the company "04" from the leading company in terms of taxonomic indicator level with isolated use of reserves for improving the quality of services at the analyzed company

Indicators	Value of the taxonomic indicator in case of isolated use of improvement reserves of j factor indicator at the company "04"		Distance from the leading company in terms of taxonomic indicator level (h_j^{μ}), %
	leader "01" (μ_{1j})	analyzed company "04" (μ_{4j})	
1. Safe tourist service environment, points	0.9424	0.5238	44.42
2. Services focusing on local food traditions, points	0.9391	0.5433	42.14
3. Average time spent on online tour booking, min.	0.9367	0.5382	42.54
4. Quality and safety of tourist accommodation services, points	0.9502	0.5024	47.13
5. Compliance of advertising with the actual security state at the place of consumption, %	0.9411	0.5180	44.96
6. Compliance of the tourist's expectations with the actual services provided in terms of volume, %	0.9219	0.6166	33.11

Source: original data, resulting from own experiences.

(4)Using formula (3), we calculate the reduction of the distance between the leading company by the level of taxonomic indicator due to the improvement of each j factor indicator that determines the quality of services at the analyzed company (Δh_j^{μ}).

For the "Safe tourist service environment" indicator, it will be:

$\Delta h_j^{\mu} = 49.40 - 44.42 = 4.98$ (Percentage item)

The results of similar calculations performed for all six indicators are shown in Table 3. It also provides information on the priorities of indicators and areas for improving the quality of customer service. Based on the results of the calculations, we found that the largest reserves for improving the quality of tourist services are associated with the ensuring that the tourist's expectations meet the actual volume of services provided, correspondence of advertising to the actual security state at the place, and the average time spent on tour online booking (Table 4). It is the use of these reserves that will make it possible to minimize the distance between the analyzed company and the leader in terms of service quality.

Table 4. Determination of priority areas for improving the quality of services at the travel company "04"

Indicators	Distance from the leading company in terms of taxonomic indicator level (h_j^{μ}), %	Reduction of distance from the leading company in terms of taxonomic indicator (Δh_j^{μ}), percentage points	Priority
1. Safe tourist service environment, points	44.42	4.98	4
2. Services focusing on local food traditions, points	42.14	7.26	2
3. Average time spent on online tour booking, min.	42.54	6.86	3
4. Quality and safety of tourist accommodation services, points	47.13	2.27	6
5. Compliance of advertising with the actual security state at the place of consumption, %	44.96	4.44	5
6. Compliance of the tourist's expectations with the actual services provided in terms of volume, %	33.11	16.29	1

Source: original data, resulting from own experience

The authors offer specific measures aimed at improving the quality of rural tourism services at the analyzed company:

(1)Constantly update information on travel safety in the context of overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic consequences, norms and regulations for the functioning of institutions for providing accommodation services at different levels of social contact to increase anti-epidemic resistance and create an image of a safe for recreation territory.

(2)Stimulate the participation of managers in professional online trainings on rural tourism, programs to improve technologies for providing services by local suppliers, information and advertising campaigns aimed at promoting recreation in domestic rural tourism locations with a focus on consumers who have reoriented their demand for domestic tourism.

(3)Carry out digital re-equipment of the operational quality control system of services.

(4)Maintain the established international and national security protocols for organizing travel, modern requirements for processing tourist documents.

(5)Implement the principles of "feedback" with the consumer in the work of managers, conduct exit polls, beta testing of consumers of rural tourism services.

(6)Introduce the monitoring system for complaints of tourists at the place of providing services in accordance with the contracts with suppliers of accommodation and catering services, under the program of agro gastronomic tours "Roads of Wine and Taste of Danube Bessarabia".

CONCLUSIONS

The study of the quality levels of tourist services according to the benchmarking technology, based on the methodology of taxonomic analysis, allows us to compare the quality of services provided by tour operators of the regional rural tourism markets in the context of overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic consequences and complements the developments of other authors to improve the quality of services in rural tourism [7], [12]. The results of our calculations and ranking of companies based on the algorithm of the combined taxonomy for ten travel companies, confirm the hypothesis that a travel service has a higher level of quality, if the degree of approximation of its quality model to the reference model, has a greater value of the taxonomic indicator. The benchmarking tools considered by the authors can complement the modern quality management of services in the field of rural tourism. Based on the results of calculation of the distances to the reference object, ranking tourist business companies, we can conclude that there are areas for

improving the quality of travel services. In our opinion, the introduction of "feedback" technologies with the consumer in the activities of travel companies and the introduction of a monitoring system for complaints of tourists at the place of service provision, according to the contracts with tourists and suppliers of hotel and other services under the program of rural tourism tours, will increase the level of satisfaction of tourists, as well as eliminate the discrepancies between the expectations of tourists and the services actually provided in terms of volume and assortment. The results of the study conducted by business enterprises by themselves using the benchmarking method is the best way to create the measures to improve the quality of travel services. Approaches to the service quality benchmarking based on the unified taxonomy algorithm allow tour operator managers to focus their efforts on improving the safety of service consumption, operational quality control, and service characteristics of rural tourism tours offered for implementation.

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