WHO ARE WELLNESS CUSTOMERS?
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN THE
CROATIAN HOTEL INDUSTRY

Kdo so velneški gosti?
Empirična študija v hrvaški hotelski industriji

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Abstract

Although wellness is becoming an increasingly popular concept in practice, academic research regarding wellness services, in general, and tourists as wellness customers, in particular, is lacking. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the main characteristics of wellness customers in hotel wellness settings. The study was conducted in hotel wellness centres in the Opatija Riviera (Croatia). The empirical research was organized in two steps, using two different instruments for collecting primary data: the modified ATLAS wellness questionnaire and the modified SERVQUAL questionnaire. The first questionnaire was used to determine the main demographic and travel characteristics of wellness customers and identify their habits regarding wellness services. The second questionnaire aimed to assess wellness customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality. Questionnaires were distributed in 11 hotel wellness centres in the Opatija Riviera during the spring months of 2010. In order to meet the study goals, descriptive, bivariate and multivariate (exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis) statistical analyses were conducted. The study contributes to a better understanding of the particular lifestyle characteristics of hotel wellness customers. Furthermore, the findings offer wellness managers a better understanding of customers' expectations and perceptions of the performed service.

Key words: wellness customers, expectations, perceptions, hotel industry, statistical analysis, Croatia

Izvleček

Čeprav je velnes v praksi vse bolj priljubljen, je pomanjkanje splošnih znanstvenih raziskav o velneških storitvah in specifičnih raziskav o turistih kot uporabnikih teh storitev precejšnje. Izhajajoč iz tega, je namen naše raziskave identificirati ključne značilnosti uporabnikov velneških storitev v okviru tovrstnih hotelskih ponudb. Raziskava je bila izvedena v velneških centrih na Opatijski rivieri (Hrvaška). Empirična raziskava je bila sestavljena iz dveh korakov, pri čem sta bila uporabljena dva instrumenta za zbiranje primarnih podatkov, in sicer prilagojen vprašalnik o velneških storitvah ATLAS ter prilagojen vprašalnik SERVQUAL. Prvi vprašalnik smo uporabili za določanje glavnih demografskih in potovalnih značilnosti uporabnikov velneških storitev ter za ugotavljanje njihovih navad glede tovrstnih storitev, z drugim vprašalnikom pa smo želeli oceniti pričakovanja in zaznavanja uporabnikov glede kakovosti velneških storitev. Vprašalnike smo razdelili v 11 hotelskih velneških centrih na Opatijski rivieri v pomladnih mesecih leta 2010. Za doseganje ciljev raziskave smo

izvedli več statističnih analiz (deskriptivno, bivariatno in multivariatno analizo – eksploratorno faktorsko analizo in analizo zanesljivosti). Študija prispeva k boljšemu razumevanju specifičnih značilnosti življenjskega sloga uporabnikov velneških storitev. Ugotovitve raziskave lahko pomagajo velneškim managerjem bolje razumeti pričakovanja uporabnikov in njihova mnenja o opravljenih storitvah.

Ključne besede: uporabniki velneških storitev, pričakovanja, zaznavanja, hotelska dejavnost, statistična analiza, Hrvaška

1 Introduction

The increasing importance of business performance demands that a service design approach be aligned with the customers' requirements. According to Vargo and Lusch (2004), providers should strive to maximize customers' involvement in service performance, as customers should become co-producers of a delivered service. With this in mind, service providers should know who their customers are and understand their needs and preferences. This paper aims to discuss this issue from the wellness customers' standpoint.

Wellness is becoming an increasingly popular concept in practice, particularly in the tourism context, resulting in growing competition among wellness service providers on the one hand and a heterogeneous customer segment on the other. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the main characteristics of wellness customers regarding their travel patterns, wellness habits and healthy way of life as well as to determine their expectations and perceptions concerning the hotel wellness service attributes.

The paper is structured in four sections. First, a brief conceptual background is provided. Second, the study methodology is explained. Third, the study results are presented. In the final section, conclusions and implications are discussed.

2 Conceptual background

According to the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008), service is a fundamental basis of all transactions between providers and customers, including those in a wellness service context. The output of wellness service providers is a result of their knowledge and skills based on their interactivity and ongoing relationship with customers. Yet previous research makes it difficult to develop a meaningful profile of the wellness customer. In general, wellness customers are middle-aged, are educated and hold jobs with higher incomes. They are demanding and expect high-quality services (Mintel International Group, 2004.).

Yet a recently observed trend is that the average age of this target group is becoming younger. Smith and Kelly (2006) stated that the majority of wellness tourists are already active at home in some form of wellness activity (e.g., yoga, meditation, massage). Furthermore, the population predominantly consists of females, who are self-aware and are active seekers of enhanced well-being, health and happiness. Müller and Lanz Kaufmann (2001) identified four segments of health and wellness customers: demanding health guests, independent infrastructure users, care-intensive cure guests and undemanding recreation guests. In this context, the characteristics of health and wellness customers vary from traditional guests receiving health treatments, to business people and conference participants and even young families on holiday (Snoj & Mumel, 2002).

The comprehension of customers' requirements results in the quality of the provided service. Based on the disconfirmation paradigm, service quality is usually defined as a comparison of what customers expect services should be (i.e., their expectations) with their actual perceived performance (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) designed the SERVQUAL model, an instrument that has been widely used to evaluate customers' expectations and perceptions and, consequently, service quality in customer-focused settings. The model includes five main service dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance) that refer less to services outcomes than to the manner in which services are delivered (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The model was developed to provide a generic instrument for measuring service quality across diverse industries. However, some researchers have suggested that developing and adopting industry-specific items and dimensions may be more appropriate (Ladhari, 2008), which has led to a number of adaptations that vary in the number of items and dimensions—although the five SERVQUAL dimensions are generally retained (Ladhari, 2008, 2009).

Within the context of the wellness industry, service quality dimensions relate to professional employees, safety and security, customer-oriented services, service performance, ethics, price-performance ratio, wellness ambience, cleanliness, friendliness and information, facilities and programs (International Spa Association and German Wellness Federation). Similarly, according to Müller and Lanz Kaufmann (2001), prerequisites for comprehensive wellness quality are wellness infrastructure, corresponding services and qualified staff. These basic requirements include a variety of relaxation and physical activities as well as the presence of wellness professionals who will provide individual care and advice.

Empirical studies relating to service quality measurement in the health and wellness tourism sector are rare. Snoj and Mumel (2002) measured perceived service quality in Slovenian health spas. They revealed that the most important quality attributes in health spas were "medical and other professional programs", "guests' safety and security", "employees' appearance" and "employees' commitment to the comfort of their guests". The most important quality dimension was empathy, followed by reliability, assurance and physical evidence. Marković et al. (2004) investigated the service quality expectations and perceptions in Croatian health tourism. The findings imply that the most important

expectation variables in health tourism settings are "clean equipment and facilities" and "skilled staff", while the best perceived health service variables were "skilled staff" and "neat staff appearance". The most important expectations dimension appeared to be assurance; accessibility was the best assessed perception dimension. Alén González et al. (2007) investigated the relationship between perceived quality and satisfaction in Spanish spa resorts. The results showed that satisfaction depends on perceived quality and that both variables have a positive and significant influence on customers' behavioural intentions.

3 Study methodology

Research objectives and hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to identify the main characteristics of wellness customers in hotel wellness settings. The particular aims of the study are to:

a) examine the demographic characteristics of wellness customers;

b) establish wellness customers' travel patterns and habits concerning a healthy way of life;

c) identify the frequency of experiencing particular wellness services;

d) determine wellness customers' expectations and perceptions regarding service quality in hotel wellness settings;

e) identify factors that best explain wellness customers' expectations and perceptions; and

f) test the reliability of the modified SERVQUAL instrument in the context of wellness tourism.

In order to meet the study's objectives, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_1: Wellness customers represent a heterogeneous customer segment with regard to travel habits, the frequency and nature of experiencing wellness services and the everyday way of life.

H_2: Reliability is the most important expected service quality feature in hotel wellness settings.

H_3: Reliability is the highest-performing service quality feature in hotel wellness settings.

H_4: A significant difference exists between wellness customers' expectations and perceptions.

H_5: Wellness customers explain their expectations and perceptions based on tangible and intangible aspects of service performance.

Questionnaire design

The empirical research was organized in two steps, using two different instruments for collecting primary data. First, the questionnaire that was originally developed by the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (ATLAS) was used. ATLAS designed this questionnaire to examine the health and wellness tourism in Hungary. In order to capture specific features, when used in some countries (e.g., Italy, Slovenia), the questionnaire was subsequently slightly modified. The modified ATLAS wellness questionnaire was used in the present study to determine the main demographic and travel characteristics of wellness customers as well as identify their habits regarding wellness services and a healthy way of life.

The second step of the empirical research employed the modified SERVQUAL questionnaire to assess wellness customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality. The questionnaire was designed in accordance with the research of Parasuraman et al. (1988), Snoj and Ogorelc (1998) and Marković et al. (2004). Although SERVQUAL represents a general measurement instrument for service industries, it needs to be adapted to the specific features of each service for which the research is conducted. Therefore, after reviewing previous studies conducted within the context of wellness services, several modifications were made.

Wellness customers evaluated 26 wellness service attributes. Most of them (19 items) were adapted from Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) study; the others were selected to measure attributes specific to a wellness setting environment. The following items were added: "facilities according to the type of services provided", "reliable and error-free services" (Snoj & Ogorelc, 1998), "comfortable inventory", "clean equipment and facilities", "clean and tidy wellness centre", "feeling safe and secure", "staffs' professional skills" (Marković et al., 2004). The attributes in the questionnaire represent five main aspects of service quality—namely, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. All statements in the questionnaire were positively worded. A 7-point Likert-type scale was adopted to assess wellness service attributes. Items addressing respondents' expectations and perceptions were rated from one ("strongly disagree") to seven ("strongly agree").

Both questionnaires (ATLAS and SERVQUAL) were prepared in the Croatian language and were additionally translated into the English, Italian and German languages to capture both domestic and international wellness customers.

Sampling procedure

The survey was carried out during March, April and May 2010. The sample was taken from the hotel wellness centres in the Opatija Riviera. To make it more representative, the sample included wellness centres of different sizes and situated in hotels of different categories. Before the data collection started, wellness managers were contacted for permission to include their centres in the study. Thus, the questionnaires were administered only in those settings where the managers agreed to participate. Ultimately, the sample consisted of 11 hotel wellness centres that offered a complete range of services, from ancient Chinese phi-

losophy to modern wellness programs. They are based on man-made hotel wellness features and, as such, are not referred to as spas with natural mineral waters.

The wellness centres' staff helped distribute and collect the survey sheets from the participating customers. Participation was voluntary. Thus, the data were collected using a convenience sampling approach. Questionnaires were distributed to customers who were willing to participate in the research after their wellness experience (at the reception desk, before they left the wellness centre). Wellness customers first completed the ATLAS wellness questionnaire, after which they were asked to complete the SERVQUAL questionnaire.

A total of 300 questionnaires of both types were distributed. Among the returned questionnaires, 61 ATLAS wellness questionnaires and 95 SERVQUAL questionnaires were deemed complete and usable, representing response rates of 20,3% and 31,7%, respectively.

Data analysis

Data analysis included descriptive statistics, paired samples *t*-test, exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis.

Descriptive statistics were used to examine demographic profiles of the respondents, determine wellness customers' predominant travel characteristics, identify their habits regarding wellness services and evaluate customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality in wellness settings. At this stage, the first three hypotheses were tested. The paired samples *t*-test was performed to determine the significance of differences between customers' perceptions and expectations and to test the fourth hypothesis. An exploratory factor analysis was employed to derive factors from wellness service attributes for the expectation and perception scale. This method was used to test the fifth hypothesis. A reliability analysis was conducted to test the reliability of the scales and assess the inner consistency of each extracted factor.

This study adopted principal component analysis with varimax rotation as the method for identifying perceived and expected service quality factors in the hotel wellness centres. To apply this technique appropriately, several conditions should be respected. First, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure (KMO) should be greater than 0,7; it is considered to be inadequate if it is less than 0,5 (Stewart, 1981). Further, Bartlett's sphericity test should be significant (i.e., the significance value should be less than 0,05) (Leech et al. 2005). Finally, items with eigenvalues equal to or greater than 1, factor loadings above 0,4, and factors which contain at least three items were retained (Hair et al., 2006).

To test reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. Coefficients greater than 0,6 were considered acceptable, indicating reasonable internal consistency and reliability (Hair et al., 2006).

4 Study results

After eliminating unusable responses among the completed questionnaires, a data analysis was performed. The results are presented in the following sections.

Respondents' characteristics

This section presents the demographic analysis. As research was conducted in two steps, two different questionnaires were utilized and two samples were obtained (some respondents that completed the ATLAS wellness questionnaire did not complete the SERVQUAL questionnaire and vice versa).

Of the 61 respondents who completed the ATLAS wellness questionnaire, 55,7% were female. Most of the respondents (34%) were between 30 and 39 years old, with a relatively significant percentage (19,7%) being between 50 and 59 years of age. The majority of the respondents (77%) were domestic visitors. Almost 66% of wellness visitors in this sample had college or university education and about 53% of them stated that they were in good health.

Of the 95 respondents who completed the SERVQUAL questionnaire, 54,7% were female. In terms of age distribution, almost 58% of the respondents were between 26 and 45 years old. The majority of the respondents (61,1%) were domestic visitors. Most of the wellness customers in the sample had completed college or university. In addition, almost 50% of the respondents had visited a particular wellness centre two or more times, indicating a degree of loyalty.

According to these findings, wellness customers could be characterized as young to middle-aged, well-educated, and most likely female.

Wellness customers' profile

This section incorporates the main characteristics of wellness customers, regarding their travel patterns, wellness habits and healthy way of life. The results are based on data acquired through the ATLAS wellness questionnaire.

Regarding wellness customers' travel behaviour, the data indicate that almost 30% of visitors in the sample spend between 10 and 20 days per year on health-related trips and usually stay in a spa hotel or hotel (21,3%). During their trips, wellness customers mostly spend on food and drinks (42,6%), health- and wellness-related services (39,3%), and transportation (34,4%). In addition to experiencing wellness services (72,1%), a relatively large percentage of wellness customers spend their time shopping (39,3%) and sightseeing (37,7%). Most wellness customers in the sample (31%) selected a particular wellness centre based on the recommendation of a friend or relative or because they had already visited the setting. More than 21% of visitors responded that they always come to a particular wellness setting, indicating that wellness customers are loyal customers. In addition, visitors tend to select a

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particular wellness setting based on its good image (18%), location (14,8%), specific qualities (14,8%) and good offerings (13,3%).

When considering habits in experiencing wellness services, respondents revealed that massages (68,9%) and saunas (62,3%) are the most popular services, while almost 25% of wellness customers experienced beauty treatments. In this sample, only 1,6% of respondents experienced complementary natural medicine services. Most of the wellness customers (42,6%) tend to visit wellness centres in the company of another person, while 36,1% of the respondents usually experience wellness services alone. In addition, most of the wellness customers (52,5%) characterized the nature of their visit as relaxation and rest oriented. A relatively large percentage of visitors (18%) responded that the main motivation for their visit to the wellness centre was rehabilitation (e.g., recuperation). However, spiritual and mental well-being generally does not motivate wellness customers to visit a wellness centre; only 1,6% of respondents stated that this was the motivation for their visit to wellness centre.

When referring to wellness customers' everyday healthy habits, the data revealed that almost 46% of respondents have never smoked, while 18% of them has at one time but had subsequently stopped. However, 21,3% of respondents are occasional smokers and 11,5% of them smoke regularly. Furthermore, 40% of wellness customers stated that they occasionally pay special attention to their diet (e.g., buy products with low fat content.), but only 8,2% of visitors responded that a special diet is part of their lifestyle. A total of 34,4% of respondents occasionally pursue some kind of sports activity and 27,9% regularly pursue a sports activity, while for 16.4% of wellness customers pursuing sports is a part of their lifestyle.

The frequency of experiencing particular wellness services in everyday life was assessed on a weekly, monthly and yearly basis. The data revealed that 21,3% of respondents go to the sauna at least once a year and 18% at least once a week. Massages are popular as well, with 21,3% of respondents experiencing this kind of wellness service once a week, 29,5% of them once a month and 14,8% once a year. Furthermore, beauty treatments are usually used once a month (23%), while 23% of wellness customers in the sample go to fitness classes or pursue some other kind of sports activity at least once a week.

Wellness customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality

Wellness customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality were evaluated based on data gained through the SERVQUAL questionnaire. Table 1 reports the results for the respondents' expectations and perceptions as well as the significance of difference in the mean scores.

The mean scores of customers' expectations ranged from 6,14 to 6,88. The lowest expectation items were "mo-dern-looking equipment" and "visually appealing physical facilities". Meanwhile, the highest expectations focused on a "clean and tidy wellness centre". The overall mean score for service quality expectation items was 6,50, indicating high customer expectations regarding the hotel wellness service quality.

Meanwhile, the mean scores of customers' perceptions ranged from 6,02 to 6,45. The lowest perception item was "responding to guest's needs", meaning that hotel wellness centres should pay more attention to customers' needs. Customers' highest perceptions related to "clean and neat staff". The overall mean score for service quality perceptions items was 6,18, showing rather high customer perceptions of hotel wellness service quality.

Table 1 shows the dimensions' mean scores. The most important expectations dimension appears to be tangibles, followed by assurance, reliability, responsiveness and empathy. On the other hand, the highest mean score for perceptions dimensions was given to dimension assurance, followed by responsiveness, tangibles, empathy and reliability.

An analysis of the difference between expectation and perception scores for each item indicated negative gaps for all wellness attributes. The overall gap is also negative (-0,32), implying that customers' expectations are higher than their perceptions of delivered service. The attributes "clean and tidy wellness centre" and "clean equipment and facilities" had the largest gaps between customers' expectations and perceptions. Thus, wellness customers expected a higher level of cleanliness than was actually provided. The smallest difference between customers' expectations and their perceptions related to modern-looking equipment and visually appealing physical facilities. This result suggests that perceived service attributes are close to the expected hotel wellness service quality.

The differences between expected and perceived scores were examined using a paired samples *t*-test. The results (see Table 1) indicate that, in 15 of the 26 wellness attributes, significant differences were found between customers' perceptions and their expectations of service quality. These attributes are "clean and neat staff", "comfortable inventory", "clean equipment and facilities", "clean and tidy wellness centre", "delivering promised service on time", performing services when promised", "reliable and error-free service", "performing prompt service", "staff has time to answer customers' questions", "instilling confidence", "courteous staff", "staff's knowledge to provide information", "staff's professionalism", "having customers' best interest at heart" and "available and clear information". As can be seen, the widest identified gaps are statistically significant whereas the narrowest ones are not.

In addition, 26 wellness service attributes were factor analyzed using the principal component method with varimax rotation. The purpose was to identify the main factors that best explain customers' expectations and per-

ceptions of provided service quality in hotel wellness centres. The results for the expectations scale are presented first. The KMO value is high and scores 0,782, indicating sufficient items for each extracted factor. The Bartlett's Test is significant (χ^2=1580,528, df=300, Sig.=0,000), meaning that there are strong correlations between the items in each factor. Hence, conducting an exploratory factor analysis was justified.

The results of factor and reliability analyses of wellness customers' expectations are presented in Table 2. The analysis for the expectations scale extracted seven factors that explained 74,765% of the total variance in the data. Most of the factor loadings were greater than 0,6, meaning that the correlation of the items with the factors on which they were loaded is reasonably high.

However, three factors (F5, F6 and F7) contain fewer than three items and cannot be considered as factors. Thus, the final solution retained four factors that represent the main dimensions of expected service quality in hotel wellness centres. After examining the items' descriptions, the remaining four factors for customers' expectations were interpreted as follows:

- *Factor 1, "empathy and staff quality"*, contains ten items and explains 25,669% of the variance. This factor indicates a professional and courteous staff that has the customer's best interest at heart, instils confidence and safeness, and provides individualized attention.

- *Factor 2, "reliability"*, contains five items and explains 12,981% of the variance. This factor gathered items reflecting delivering services when promised, respon-

Table 1: *Customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality in hotel wellness centres (N=95)*

Attributes	Expectations		Perceptions		Gap	t-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
V1-modern-looking equipment	6,14	1,31	6,12	1,07	-0,02	0,148
V2-visually appealing physical facilities	6,14	1,26	6,09	1,13	-0,05	0,277
V3-clean and neat staff	6,81	0,47	6,45	0,82	-0,36	3,834*
V4-comfortable inventory	6,59	0,74	6,09	1,09	-0,50	4,590*
V5-clean equipment and facilities	6,79	0,65	6,09	1,19	-0,70	4,891*
V6-clean and tidy wellness centre	6,88	0,58	6,15	1,13	-0,73	5,365*
Mean–Tangibles	**6,56**		**6,17**		**-0,39**	
V7-facilities according to the type of services provided	6,41	1,08	6,11	1,21	-0,30	1,824
V8-delivering promised service on time	6,41	0,88	6,05	1,32	-0,36	2,166**
V9-interest in solving guests' problems	6,46	0,95	6,19	1,27	-0,27	1,595
V10-performing services right the first time	6,43	1,04	6,20	1,04	-0,23	1,655
V11-performing services when promised	6,55	0,86	6,08	1,28	-0,47	2,839*
V12-reliable and error-free service	6,66	0,65	6,17	1,16	-0,49	3,676*
Mean–Reliability	**6,49**		**6,13**		**-0,35**	
V13-performing prompt service	6,51	0,78	6,19	1,16	-0,32	2,129**
V14-willingness to help customers	6,46	1,04	6,34	1,19	-0,12	0,920
V15-staff has time to answer customers' questions	6,53	0,74	6,22	1,19	-0,31	2,212**
V16-responding to guest's needs	6,37	1,14	6,02	1,28	-0,35	1,936
Mean–Responsiveness	**6,47**		**6,19**		**-0,28**	
V17-instilling confidence	6,53	1,06	6,16	1,20	-0,37	2,787*
V18-courteous staff	6,64	0,94	6,38	1,15	-0,26	2,411**
V19-staff's knowledge to provide information	6,51	0,99	6,18	1,19	-0,33	2,280**
V20-feeling safe and secure	6,42	1,15	6,21	1,20	-0,21	1,484
V21-staff's professional skills	6,67	0,81	6,33	1,14	-0,34	2,978*
Mean–Assurance	**6,55**		**6,25**		**-0,30**	
V22-providing individual attention	6,37	1,00	6,17	1,24	-0,20	1,381
V23-having customers' best interest at heart	6,44	1,01	6,13	1,23	-0,31	2,401**
V24-understanding customers' specific needs	6,22	1,11	6,12	1,22	-0,10	0,695
V25-promptly solving customers' problems	6,44	1,02	6,18	1,24	-0,26	1,851
V26-available and clear information	6,75	0,58	6,23	1,14	-0,52	4,279*
Mean–Empathy	**6,44**		**6,17**		**-0,28**	
Overall mean (26 attributes)	**6,50**		**6,18**		**-0,32**	

Note: Expectations' and perceptions' mean ranges from 1 to 7; SD = standard deviation; * p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05.

Source: Authors

ding to a guest's needs, and the staff's ability to answer customers' questions.

- *Factor 3, "cleanliness and neatness"*, contains three items and explains 8,538% of the variance. This factor refers to clean and neat staff, equipment and facilities, as well as to providing reliable and error-free service.

- *Factor 4, "appearance of facilities and availability of information"*, contains three items and explains 7,385% of the variance. This factor includes items referring to the appearance of facilities and equipment as well as to available and clear information.

The reliability analysis for the expectations scale was conducted on four factors, containing 21 items. The results showed that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the extracted factors varied between 0,664 and 0,938. The

Cronbach's alpha value for the overall expectations scale was 0,919. These values suggest good internal consistency of the factors and indicate a high reliability of the expectations scale.

Next, the results of factor and reliability analyses of customers' perceptions are provided. The KMO value is high and scores 0,933, indicating sufficient items for each extracted factor. The Bartlett's Test is significant ($\chi^2=3234,967$, df=325, Sig.=0,000), meaning that strong correlations exist between the items in each factor. Conducting an exploratory factor analysis was justified.

As noted in Table 3, two factors representing 76,213% of the explained variance were extracted from perceptions variables. Factor loadings indicate that the correlation of the items with the factors on which they were loaded is reaso-

Table 2: *Factor analysis and reliability analysis results of hotel wellness customers' expectations (N=95)*

Factors/Items	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cronbach's alpha
Factor 1:		**6,417**	**25,669**	**0,938**
V21-staff's professional skills	0,876			
V23-having customers' best interest at heart	0,830			
V19-staff's knowledge to provide information	0,813			
V25-promptly solving customers' problems	0,796			
V18-courteous staff	0,764			
V22-providing individual attention	0,759			
V24-understanding customers' specific needs	0,735			
V14-willingness to help customers	0,709			
V17-instilling confidence	0,709			
V20-feeling safe and secure	0,683			
Factor 2:		**3,245**	**12,981**	**0,830**
V11-performing services when promised	0,747			
V10-performing services right the first time	0,733			
V8-delivering promised service on time	0,652			
V16-responding to guest's needs	0,549			
V15-staff has time to answer customers' questions	0,538			
Factor 3:		**2,135**	**8,538**	**0,747**
V5-clean equipment and facilities	0,811			
V12-reliable and error-free service	0,779			
V3-clean and neat staff	0,681			
Factor 4:		**1,846**	**7,385**	**0,664**
V1-modern-looking equipment	0,783			
V2-visually appealing physical facilities	0,757			
V26-available and clear information	0,636			
Factor 5:		**1,808**	**7,233**	**-**
V9-interest in solving guests' problems	0,858			
V13-performing prompt service	0,522			
Factor 6:		**1,649**	**6,596**	**-**
V7-facilities according to the type of services provided	0,738			
V4-comfortable inventory	0,620			
Factor 7:		**1,591**	**6,362**	**-**
V6-clean and tidy wellness centre	0,823			
Total		**18,691**	**74,765**	**0,919**

Source: Authors

nably high. The two-factor solution for customers' perceptions is labelled as follows:

- *Factor 1, "service performance"*, includes 18 items and explains 48,957% of the variance. This factor refers to the intangible aspect of wellness service, including staffs' courtesy and professionalism, ability of performing reliable service, providing individual attention, and customers' safety.

- *Factor 2, "appearance of facilities and staff"*, includes eight items and explains 27,256% of the variance. This factor deals with the tangible aspect of wellness service, referring to the appealing appearance of facilities and the cleanliness of equipment and staff.

In addition, the results of the reliability analysis for the perceptions scale showed that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the extracted factors varied between 0,934 and 0,983. The Cronbach's alpha value for the overall expectations scale is 0,919. These values suggest good internal consistency of the factors and indicate a high reliability of the perceptions scale.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated the characteristics of wellness customers in hotel wellness settings. Through statistical analyses, wellness customers' demographic characteristics, travel patterns and habits concerning a healthy way of life were identified. Customers' expectations and perceptions regarding service quality in hotel wellness settings were also empirically examined. Therefore, all objectives have been achieved and all hypotheses tested.

The results of the descriptive analyses suggested that wellness customers are a specific travel segment. They differ regarding their demographic characteristics, travel behaviour, and habits concerning wellness service experience and healthy way of life. Thus, wellness customers represent a heterogeneous customer segment, which supports hypothesis H_1.

The results of wellness customers' expectations analysis suggested that the most important expectations item is "clean and tidy wellness centre", which falls under the

Table 3: *Factor analysis and reliability analysis results of hotel wellness customers' perceptions (N=95)*

Factors/Items	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cronbach's alpha
Factor 1:		**12,729**	**48,957**	**0,983**
V14-willingness to help customers	0,900			
V15-staff has time to answer customers' questions	0,885			
V13-performing prompt service	0,864			
V21-staff's professional skills	0,858			
V19-staff's knowledge to provide information	0,838			
V17-instilling confidence	0,826			
V22-providing individual attention	0,825			
V25-promptly solving customers' problems	0,817			
V12-reliable and error-free service	0,809			
V9-interest in solving guests' problems	0,800			
V16-responding to guest's needs	0,792			
V24-understanding customers' specific needs	0,786			
V18-courteous staff	0,784			
V23-having customers' best interest at heart	0,783			
V20-feeling safe and secure	0,779			
V11-performing services when promised	0,760			
V8-delivering promised service on time	0,730			
V10-performing services right the first time	0,597			
Factor 2		**7,087**	**27,256**	**0,934**
V2-visually appealing physical facilities	0,843			
V6-clean and tidy wellness center	0,817			
V1-modern-looking equipment	0,810			
V4-comfortable inventory	0,805			
V5-clean equipment and facilities	0,779			
V7-facilities according to the type of services provided	0,671			
V26-available and clear information	0,659			
V3-clean and neat staff	0,610			
Total		**19,816**	**76,213**	**0,981**

Source: Authors

tangibles dimension. Tangibles are also the highest assessed dimension of expected wellness service quality. Based on this finding, hypothesis H_2 is rejected.

The most important perceptions item was "clean and neat staff" from the tangibles dimension. However, the highest assessed dimension of perceived wellness service quality was the assurance dimension. Thus, hypothesis H_3 is also rejected.

The results of the importance of a particular wellness attribute or service dimension based on customers' perceptions are somewhat different compared to the results presented in similar studies. Snoj and Mumel (2002) reported that the best assessed wellness service attributes were medical and other professional programs, physical safety and security of guests and employees' appearance. Marković et al. (2004) stated that the most important attributes were variety of medical programs, professional staff and employees' appearance. Furthermore, Snoj and Mumel (2002) revealed that empathy was the most important perceptions dimension, followed by reliability, assurance, responsiveness and physical evidence. On the other hand, in the study conducted by Marković et al. (2004), accessibility was the highest-rated dimension, followed by assurance, reliability, empathy, output quality, tangibles and responsiveness.

The findings of the *t*-test analysis show significant differences between expectations and perceptions of customers on 15 out of 26 hotel wellness attributes, supporting hypothesis H_4. All of the gaps were negative, including the overall gap (-0,32), implying that room exists for service quality improvement in hotel wellness centres as service attributes fell below customers' expectations.

The exploratory factor analysis extracted a four-factor solution for customers' expectations and a two-factor solution for customers' perceptions. According to these results, features upon which customers explain their expectations regarding provided wellness services are "empathy and staff quality", "reliability", "cleanliness and neatness" and "appearance of facilities and availability of information". On the other hand, wellness customers' perceptions can be best explained with the following service features: "service performance" and "appearance of facilities and staff". It is evident that wellness customers' evaluations and explanations of expected and perceived service in hotel wellness centres comprise both tangible and intangible aspects of provided service. Thus, hypothesis H_5 is supported.

When analyzing expectations and perceptions factors it can be seen that they somewhat overlap. The "service performance" perceptions dimension covered all items from the "empathy and staff quality" and "reliability" expectations dimensions. Thus, "appearance of facilities and staff" perceptions dimension could be regarded as similar to "cleanliness and neatness" and "appearance of facilities and availability of information" expectations dimensions.

Furthermore, dimensions that convey similarities have the same rank order. Both expectations and perceptions dimensions that comprise intangible aspects of provided service rank as the most important.

The results of the reliability analysis indicate the inner consistency of the extracted factors and high reliability of both the expectations and perceptions scale. Thus, the modified SERVQUAL instrument tested in this study is suitable for use in wellness centres in gaining easily interpretable and reliable data. By administering the modified SERVQUAL questionnaire to wellness customers, managers can acquire information about customers' expectations as well as how customers view a wellness centre's quality. Furthermore, using this methodology, managers can easily identify potential problems that occur because the service provider failed to meet or understand customers' wants and needs.

There are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. The results of this study are based on a small sample size chosen from a limited geographical area. The process of collecting data was relatively long because respondents were asked to complete two questionnaires. In addition, the measurement of wellness customers' perceptions and expectations was limited to 26 hotel wellness attributes. Although these attributes have been included in other studies and their validity has been tested, there could be other relevant features of wellness service that are also likely to influence customers' overall wellness experience.

Nevertheless, the study provides important implications for theory and practice. The SERVQUAL methodology was tested in a specific and rapidly growing tourism segment in Croatia. The results may broaden existing knowledge about hotel wellness customers' expectations and perceptions and are suitable for international comparison. The study also contributes to a better understanding of the particular lifestyle characteristics of hotel wellness customers.

In order to be able to generalize the findings, similar studies should be conducted on a larger sample and in other wellness destinations in Croatia. Moreover, this study focused only on hotel wellness centres. Thus, future research should be conducted in other types of wellness settings (e.g., spas, city wellness centres). In addition, future research could also assess the differences in customers' travel behaviour, wellness habits, perceptions and expectations regarding their demographic characteristics as well as the relationship between their assessment of service quality and their satisfaction with overall experience in a wellness setting.

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