

Peter Čuka

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8044-2746>
Pedagogical University of Kraków
Institute of Geography
cukapeter@gmail.com

Bohuslava Gregorová

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8544-9493>
Matej Bel University
Department of Geography and Geology
Bohuslava.Gregorova@umb.sk

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN SLOVAK SPAS: CASE STUDIES OF RAJECKÉ TEPLICE, PIEŠŤANY AND BRUSNO¹

Abstract: This work aims to present a customer satisfaction model using selected examples from the spa industry. Specifically, it is a presentation of the satisfaction of spa customers and visitors to the Slovak spa of Rajecké Teplice, in comparison with Piešťany and Brusno. Customer satisfaction is a multiple phenomenon which is evaluated mainly by qualitative methods. Our motivation is to draw attention to the difficulty and subjectivity of qualitative research concerning such satisfaction, especially at in-service facilities in selected Slovak spas. Customers ranked them and created a 'top 12', according to their importance in the subjective perception of spa environments, services, health services and attractions in terms of satisfaction. In addition, the result is a comparison of the individual satisfaction of spa customers in heterogeneous spa towns. Piešťany is the most important Slovak spa center, Trenčianske Teplice is a medium-sized spa town, and Brusno a small stagnant spa.

Keywords: Rajecké Teplice spa, Piešťany spa, Brusno spa, customer satisfaction, elements of customer satisfaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are 23 official spas in Slovakia (Fig. 1): Bardejovské kúpele, Bojnice, Brusno, Číž, Dudince, Horný Smokovec, Dolný Smokovec, Štrbské Pleso, Vyšné Hágy, Lučivná, Lúčky, Nimnica, Rajecké Teplice, Sklené Teplice, Turčianske Teplice, Trenčianske Teplice, Štós, Sliach, Vyšné Ružbachy, Novoľubovnianske kúpele, Smrdáky, the National Rehabilitation Center at Kováčová, and Piešťany. Water is their basic locating factor, and thermal and mineral springs have been known in Slovakia since prehistory. The literature highlights both mineral and thermal springs (e.g. Bel, 1735; Čuka, 2004; Gregorová, 2010; Heksch, 1881; *Hydrological and phenological conditions of Czechoslovakia*, 1970).

The level of their services varies, but customer satisfaction is important for all. The sources for this article are:

- individual spas,
- health insurance company,
- field research.

The results differ according to the year, but also according to sources and methodology. The starting points of the customer satisfaction research methodology used are described and research on customer satisfaction in Rajecké Teplice is presented as a model. At the same time, however, a comparison of research on satisfaction in Brusno and the most famous Slovak spa, Piešťany, is also presented.

Field research was undertaken among visitors based on several sources from the following ranking of Slovak spas according to customer satisfaction:

- Ranking of a health insurance company (*Dôvera zverejnila prvý rebríček kúpeľov*, 2009): 1. Brusno, 2. Dudince, 3. Nimnica, 4. Číž, 5. Piešťany.
 - Ranking according to research by Nagyová (2009): 1. Brusno, 2. Číž, 3. Bardejovské kúpele, 3. Piešťany, 4. Nimnica, 5. Dudince, 6. Sliach.
 - Ranking according to field research (Čuka, Matušiková, Šenková, 2013): 1. Brusno, 2. Piešťany, 3. Rajecké Teplice, 4. Kováčová, 5. Bardejovské kúpele.
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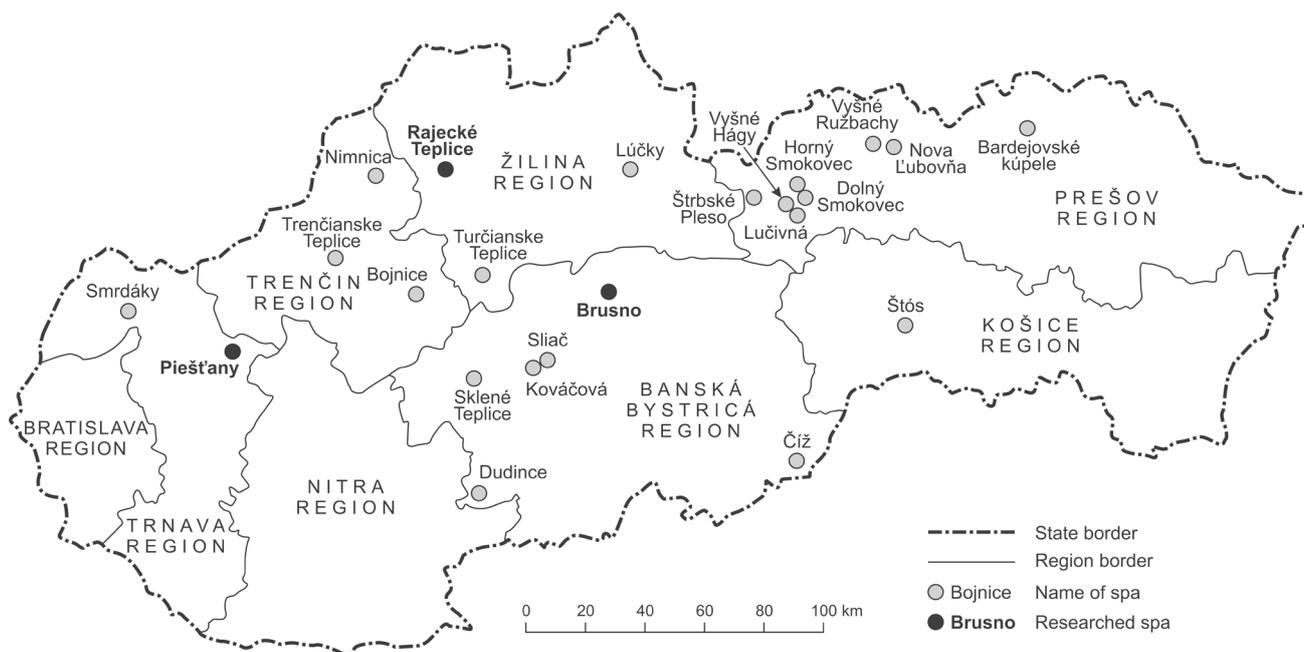


Figure 1. The location of Slovak spas
Source: authors

2. METHODS AND AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

This work aims to present a customer satisfaction model using selected examples from the spa industry. Specifically, it is a presentation of the satisfaction of spa customers and visitors to Slovak spas, especially Rajecské Teplice. Another aim is to point out the complexity of the decision-making processes which directly influence customer satisfaction results. Furthermore, a survey and comparison of customer satisfaction based on this methodology in the spa towns of Piešťany and Brusno is presented. Comparison of research in Rajecské Teplice with the results for Piešťany and Brusno spas also has value.

In the market and planned mixed economic space of the EU, in which Slovakia finds itself, supply, demand and profit are among the most decisive market forces. Profit is expressed not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. Customer satisfaction can be included in the quantitative element as profit, but it is subjective as well and can take many forms such as emotional satisfaction, or repeated return to a product that is found satisfying. Emotional satisfaction is currently measured, for example, in the Slovak banking environment where Tatra Banka uses artificial intelligence software that is capable of autonomously identifying an 8-degree range of emotions (Tatrabanka používa AI technológiu, 2017).

Research of spa customer satisfaction is often overlooked within the Slovak academic literature. In Poland, such research is conducted using the KANO method (Walas, 2018) and comprehensive qualitative research has been provided by Szymańska (2013). As can be

inferred from the works of many researchers, satisfaction is to a large extent reflected in customer behaviors (Gotowska, Jakubczak, 2012; Mont, Plepys, 2014; Rudnicki, 2015; Zmysłony, Nawrot, 2009). There are several opinions and definitions of customer satisfaction, and that of the quality standard STN EN ISO 9000:2006 explains the concept as the level at which customer demands are fulfilled. From these definitions, it can be said that customer satisfaction is connected with emotions and feelings but these are very difficult to grasp. Satisfaction as a whole is made up of specific partial satisfactions and these can have different weightings. Customer satisfaction and its measurement is one of the tools for getting feedback and this measurement is part of the quality management of an organization. One of the activities that fosters satisfaction is customer-oriented attention which means approaching each person individually (Foster, 2002; Kárná, 2014; Rudnicki, 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY

Satisfaction is manifested by complex multi-element phenomena. Rudnicki (2010) described a) external (socio-cultural and economic) and b) internal (psychological, personnel-demographic) factors of consumer behavior. These factors shape customer satisfaction simultaneously.

This work proceeds from the complexity of psychological and cognitive processes which are best described by Evans (1982, 2004), and it develops this knowledge in the psychological field according to Beach, Connolly

(2005). From newer socio-economic-marketing studies, the results of Foster (2002) and Kärnu (2014) have been used. Finally, our own original methodology for evaluating the satisfaction of spa customers is presented. This takes into account:

- Health services – these are an absolute priority for a spa because its main goal is to improve a customer's health.
- Business services – spas have profiled themselves as trade centers, business services and congress centers in recent decades.
- Geographical potential – the immediate urban and natural environment assets.
- Other values - socio-cultural such as the presence of international customers and the social activities provided.

Satisfaction has emotional and rational components. Emotional satisfaction is expressed by a good feeling when using a product (spa services in this case), or by a variety of feelings such as dissatisfaction, reservations, bad feelings, etc. Rudnicki (2010) describes emotional satisfaction as the “satisfying of emotional and aesthetic needs”. Of course, the main element concerning spas is the satisfaction associated with the therapeutic effect of a spa stay.

Rational satisfaction is expressed either verbally, for example in a survey, in the form of a written ‘inquiry’, an appreciation (e.g. for the staff), but mainly it is expressed by a repeated selection of the product (spa services in this case). Rational satisfaction is thus a form of product profit (Evans, 1982).

Both types of satisfaction are found at varying levels through restaurants, accommodation, medical and additional services, but they also reflect the complex nature of a spa town and its background (culture, architecture, business infrastructure, natural environment assets and so on).

All of these forms of satisfaction can be derived from the decision-making processes. Recent research shows that these processes, and hence spa customers, are much more complex than was thought decades ago. It is important to understand that the objectification of research on satisfaction considers the neuropsychological processes addressed by neuropsychology and partially by neuromarketing as a branch of economics. This duality of thinking is also pointed out in the classic works of Evans (1982, 2004) which have been later developed by many authors including Bačová (2010), Beach, Connolly (2005), and Glimcher, Fehr (2008). These works also highlight what conditions thinking and decision making which has ultimate consequences for satisfaction.

These conditions are also manifested through the influence of financial stimuli, personal (actual and reminisced), the ability to create dopamine in the body, and so on (Bačová, 2010). The duality of thinking is shown for

instance in dual decision-making which may be 1. automatic, non-implicit, uncontrolled, or 2. explicit, conscious, and controlled (Evans, 1982). In practice, this duality means that many factors in the spa product are exposed to the biased, non-cognitive, uncontrolled or emotional influences of human thought. Therefore, the results of spa customer satisfaction research will be always largely determined by both of these, however neuromarketing, and the psychological research based on e.g. ‘brain-scanning’, is beyond the scope of this work.

Of course, we wanted to know the results of satisfaction surveys from the PR management of the spas in our research, but these referred only to the reviews of spa guests available on the internet, for example on the website: *Rajecké Teplice léčebný pobyt* (2019) or Tripadvisor (2019). However, survey results published on the internet can be filtered (negative ratings can be deleted). Similarly, such texts are usually narrow, with the customer describing and evaluating only one part, reducing their value.

In principle, it can be argued that although spa managements monitor customer feedback on satisfaction internally, but research based on personal contact with managers responsible has shown that they are generally more interested in the spa's economic condition and its profit financially. It has been shown that there is no interest in a deeper study on the satisfaction of spa customers.

After an analysis of the current state of research on customer satisfaction in spas, rankings were created on the basis of a survey carried out by the health insurance company *Dôvera zdravotná poisťovňa a.s. Dôvera zverejnila prvý rebríček kúpeľov* (2009). There are also other satisfaction surveys from the accommodation facilities at Hotel *Afrodita* (c.f. *Hotel Aphrodite*, 2019, *Referencie hostí*, 2019). In the case of Rajecké Teplice spa, not only these surveys (c.f. *Hodnotenie klientov*, 2019) are used, but also the results of the authors' own research on customer satisfaction (conducted by qualitative methods) are available.

A survey of customer satisfaction in the form of questionnaires was undertaken in Rajecké Teplice and then results were compared with Piešťany and Brusno. The survey consisted of five steps:

1. The first step was for part A of a questionnaire to be filled in to determine which factors are most important for customer satisfaction. At this stage 50 possible satisfaction factors were presented to the respondents. Customers ranked them and created a ‘top 12’, according to their subjectively perceived importance. At this level, customers identified: 1. level of health services, 2. attractiveness of the spa environment, 3. price level, 4. attractiveness of the natural environment of the spa area, 5. cultural background of the spa, 6. cognitive activities, 7. social activities, 8. events, 9. attractiveness of the town, 10. transport

accessibility, 11. international customers, 12. business background.

2. The second step (part B) was scoring the specific spa centers by customers (namely Rajecké Teplice, Piešťany, and Brusno, by their assessment on a 1-10 scale. Thus, the three spa centers were directly compared.
3. Customers were then asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with the spa in the third step (part C) on a 6-degree scale.
4. In the fourth step (part D), customers who had visited other spas besides Rajecké Teplice were asked to order them according to degree of satisfaction.
5. Finally (part E), the customers were asked to rank spas they had yet to visit in the order in which they would like to visit them in the future.

4. THE RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE TOOL

The customer satisfaction assessment questionnaire designed by the writers was composed of five parts with the following instructions:

- A. Write as many elements of spa customer satisfaction as possible (for example, satisfaction with the spa medical treatment, food, accommodation, price, etc.) and arrange them in an order of 1-12 according to their importance.
- B. Score the following elements of spa customer satisfaction from 1 to 10 (10 being the most satisfying):
 1. level of health services,
 2. the attractiveness of the spa environment,
 3. price level,
 4. the attractiveness of the natural environment spa facilities,
 5. the cultural background of the spa,
 6. cognitive activities,
 7. social activities,
 8. events,
 9. the attractiveness of the town,
 10. transport accessibility of the spa,
 11. international customers,
 12. business background.
- C. Mark the degree of your overall spa satisfaction:
 1. absolute satisfaction,
 2. high satisfaction,
 3. medium satisfaction,
 4. low satisfaction,
 5. dissatisfaction,
 6. absolute dissatisfaction.
- D. If you were a customer of other spas in the past, please order them according to your degree of satisfaction (the order in which you would recommend them).
- E. Write down other spas in Slovakia which you have not visited, but would like to do so in the future,

and arrange them in order starting from the most desired.

Please give your own observations and notes on spa customer satisfaction.....

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This is for the comparison of the authors' survey with similar available satisfaction measurements. The selection of analyzed spas was determined by three fundamental factors:

1. Rajecké Teplice – a spa town in the hinterland of the town of Žilina, near the residence of the authors and having their greatest empirical knowledge. This spa is one of the most attractive in Slovakia.
2. Piešťany is the most significant Slovak spa.
3. Brusno – the authors have been researching this spa for a long time, are co-authors of a monograph (Čuka, 2004) and have empirical experience. Brusno was discovered to be the spa giving the greatest satisfaction to spa customers.

Fig. 2 represents the relationship of the most important elements of customer satisfaction in Rajecké Teplice, Piešťany and Brusno. Rajecké Teplice interestingly on average received the least points for medical procedures (9, compared to 10 in Piešťany and Brusno), but a 10% standard deviation value is not significant. Rajecké Teplice received similar or higher ratings than other spas for attractiveness of the spa environment, attractiveness of the natural environment, spa facilities, transport accessibility and, surprisingly, business background. On the other hand, the biggest drawback of Rajecké Teplice compared to Piešťany was 'international customers', at just 40%.

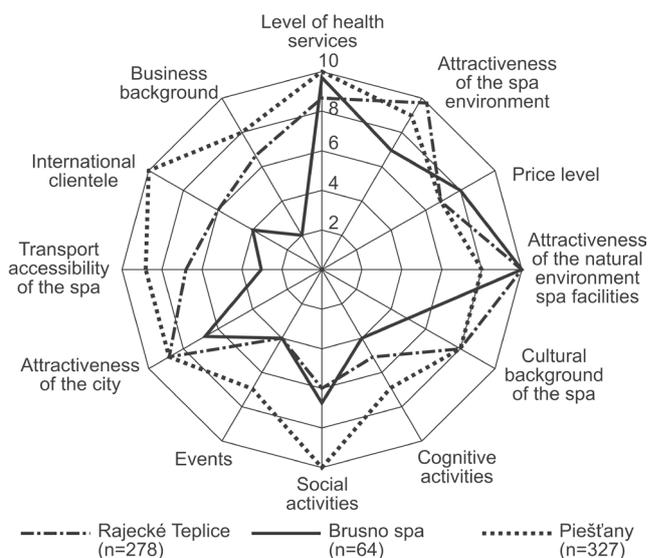


Figure 2. Evaluation of customer satisfaction factors in spas
Source: authors

Fig. 3 shows desired spa destinations. Out of those spas which have not been visited by respondents, but which they would like to visit in the future, Piešťany received 57 responses, Trenčianske Teplice 32, and Turčianske Teplice 28. Brusno was marginalized.

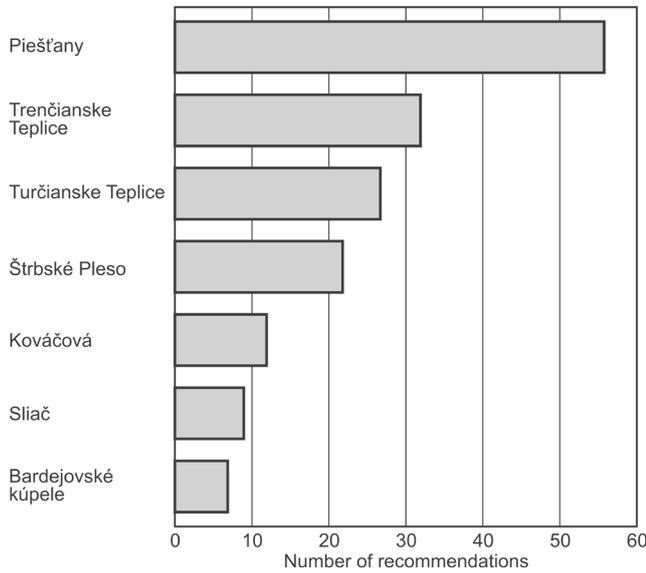


Figure 3. Recommendations for other Slovak spas
Source: authors

Fig. 4 shows the ranking of spas visited according to order of customer satisfaction representing a customer's empirical reflection of their stay at a spa. The first places were taken by Piešťany, Rajecké Teplice and Kováčová all of which are spas focusing on the 'locomotive' sys-

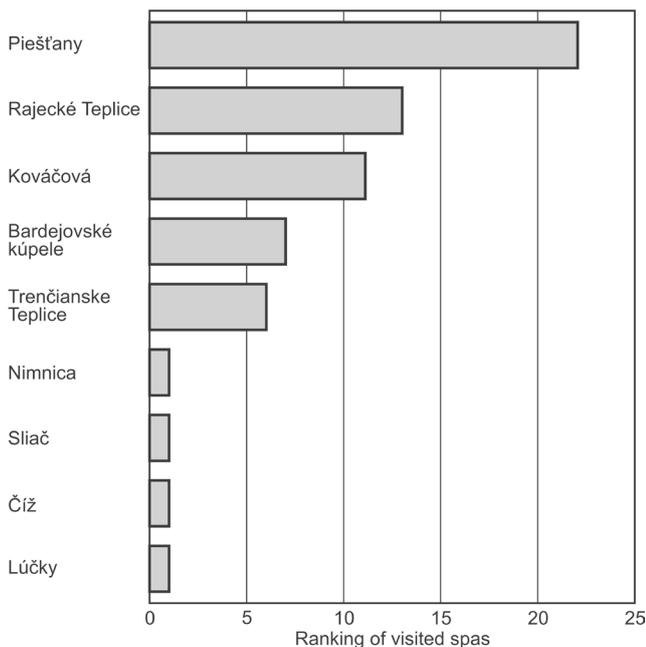


Figure 4. Ranking of spas visited according to customer satisfaction
Source: authors

tem. The ranking confirms results in the field of medical treatment, but also of positive memories (Nilson, Mariott, Be, Player, 2017).

Fig. 5 illustrates the scale of overall satisfaction with Rajecké Teplice compared to that of customers at Piešťany and Brusno. A high level of satisfaction dominated the compared spas, reaching 85.25 % in Rajecké Teplice, 86.54 % in Piešťany and 87.3 % in Brusno.

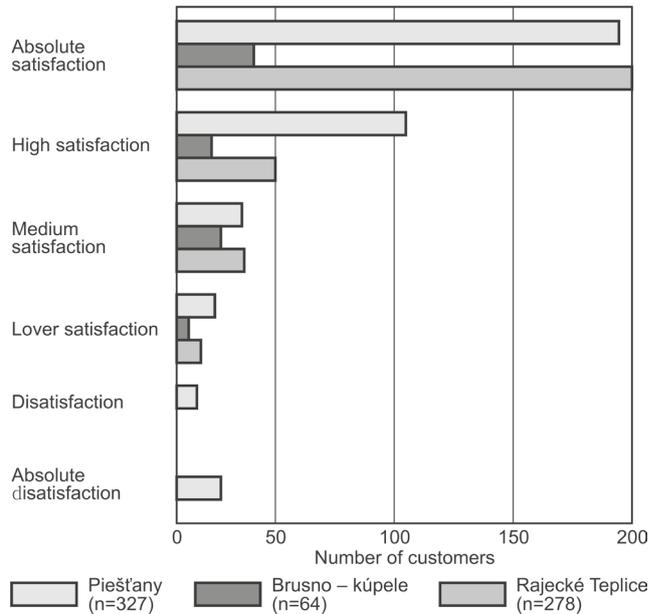


Figure 5. Overall customer satisfaction
Source: authors

Lack of parking space and the unqualified practice of the service staff (especially in restaurant services) appeared most frequently as a problem in the last part of the survey where customers could list their positive or negative experiences.

6. CONCLUSION

The research covered three heterogeneous spas (in terms of size, function and spa value) and showed that customer satisfaction in these spas differs significantly. Profit is partially an economic reflection of satisfaction, however there is no direct link between customer satisfaction and profit in the economic condition of Slovakia. Many spas are owned by private companies, for example, the spa complex and Hotel *Afrodita* in Rajecké Teplice, and financial profit is measured as a mix of the products offered and the investments made by private managers. Rajecké Teplice made a profit of 471 833 euros in 2018 and employs up to 250 people (*Slovenské liečebné kúpele Rajecké Teplice a.s.*, 2018). Customer satisfaction however is not reflected by the financial stability or actual profit as Piešťany had a profit of approx. 175 000 EUR in 2018 (*Kúpele Piešťany a.s.*,

2018) while Brusno is now in bankruptcy with about 620 000 EUR of debt (Kúpele Brusno a.s., 2018).

The factors of customer satisfaction dominant in Piešťany were the attractiveness of the spa environment, the cultural background of the spa, cognitive activities, social activities, events, the attractiveness of the town, transport accessibility, international customers and business facilities. On the contrary, Brusno was rated more highly in the attractiveness of the natural environment and prices. All spas were awarded top rank for the level of health services.

The ranking of customer satisfaction of spas within Slovakia was last publicly presented in 2009. The insurance company *Dôvera a.s.* published a ranking where the highest level of satisfaction was expressed by customers of Brusno with Piešťany being ranked 5th. In Nagyová (2009), similar results were found with Brusno in the first place and Piešťany ranked third. Health insurance companies do not publish rankings; only customer satisfaction questionnaires or feedback forms are available (Maria M – Hotel Rubín, 2019). The issue of customer satisfaction with services is a complex problem that has solutions mainly in sociological, psychological, and sophisticated qualitative measurements (Angrosino, 2010; Przeclawski, 1996).

ENDNOTE

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