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SURFING THE SERVICE GAP: A STUDY ON MANAGERIAL AND GUEST PERSPECTIVES IN PORTUGUESE SURF HOSTELS

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, Portuguese surf tourism has been on the rise, experiencing a steady increase of surf tourists and with them contributions to the local economic development. Surf enthusiasts are always searching for the ideal wave and Portugal's rising popularity after successful marketing campaigns such as the Big Wave Surfing in Nazaré is helping to establish the country as one of Europe's leading surfing destinations (Bradshaw, 2021). An increasing number of surf tourists also brings an increasing number of offers of accommodation providers, and especially hostels and surf camps along Portugal's coastline emerged as visitors' favourites. Therefore, it is important to deliver high service quality within these lodgings, not only to attract new customers and offer a reasonable price-for-value experience but also to ensure the continuous purchase of recurring guests, helping to build a favourable reputation for Portuguese surf tourism locally and nationally. However, the managerial approach to delivering high service quality and the customer's perceptions of high service quality do not always match (Brochado and Rita, 2018).

This research aims to investigate and explain the gap between managers' and guests' perceptions of high-quality service in surf hostels in Portugal while addressing the shortage of research on surf tourism (Veríssimo and Costa, 2019). Additionally, this study is meant to be used as managerial implications in the future to bridge the gap between hostel management and guests, ensuring a high standard of service quality, will lead to higher customer loyalty, increasing business profits, and a more attractive view of Portugal as a tourist destination.

Surf hostels are a preferred universal choice due to their budget-oriented yet 'cool' market positioning (Veríssimo and Costa, 2019; Wilson *et al.*, 2021). Recently, there has been a shift in the image of hostels, with a focus on diversifying hostel services to increase their strength in the hospitality industry and leave behind the low-quality stigma (Kuzmanović and Vukić, 2021; Veríssimo and Costa, 2019). At the same time, hostel managers are facing the challenge of continuously providing high-quality service to better position their business, reach customer satisfaction, deliver a positive service experience, and build customer loyalty (Veríssimo and Costa, 2019).

Factors such as direct customer contact, willingness to interact, clean facilities, and a comfortable feeling of safety and warmth can all impact the guest's impression, as noted by Brochado and Rita (2018). Surf tourists are rarely looking for just a place to sleep; instead, they seek arrangements that reflect the surfing lifestyle: close to nature, sustainable, in contact with like-minded people, and willing to share available resources.

While there is a lot of research on service quality in hotels, there is a lack of research on service quality in hostels, particularly in the context of surf hostels, despite their growing popularity (Veríssimo and Costa, 2019).

A mixed-method analysis was employed to pursue the main objective. The managers' perspective was explored through a qualitative methodology in the form of structured and self-reported interviews (n=10), providing insights into their strategies and operational priorities for delivering service quality. The content analysis and coded process were made with the assistance of the software MAXQDA. The codes were then organized into categories, allowing for a systematic analysis of the data, culminating in the identification of five key themes, reflective of the managers' viewpoints on crucial factors for achieving high service quality.

To analyse the significance of service quality from the guests' view, a quantitative research approach was adopted. This approach involved employing a survey structured based on the SERVPERF model (n=199), which allowed for an analysis of guest perceptions and experiences regarding service quality. The statistical software SPSS was used to generate descriptive and inferential statistics.

The presented results provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between manager and guest perceptions of service quality and the existing gap between them. The qualitative research results suggest that a guest-centered approach, along with staff efficiency and sustainability regulations, is the most important factor for surf hostel managers in delivering high service quality, while facilities and amenities are considered the least important.

The quantitative research results indicate that tangibles, such as appealing and well-equipped facilities with a welcoming environment, are of most importance for surf hostel guests in perceiving high service quality. This gap can be diminished by encouraging managers to maintain a guest-centered approach while ensuring the provision of presentable, updated, and clean facilities that create a welcoming atmosphere for hostel guests.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on surf tourism in various ways. The research not only provides insights into surf tourism in general, which remains an under-researched topic (Veríssimo and Costa, 2019), but it also offers deeper insights into Portuguese surf tourism, feeling the gap.

Moreover, it also offers crucial insights with significant managerial implications, such as placing guests' needs and preferences at the forefront of service delivery strategies (Kuzmanović and Vukić, 2021). Simultaneously, a concerted effort should be directed toward maintaining and enhancing the provision of well-maintained, updated, and aesthetically pleasing facilities. The physical aspects of the hostel play an indispensable role in shaping guests' perceptions of service quality (Nok *et al.*, 2017; Veríssimo and Costa, 2019). By focusing on these aspects, surf hostel managers can foster a welcoming and enjoyable environment that resonates with guests and aligns with their expectations (Brochado and Rita, 2018).

Keywords: Customer Expectations, SERVPERF, Service Quality, Surf Tourism

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