

PERCEPTION OF THE AMBIANCE - COMPONENT OF THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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Abstract

The ambiance in the hospitality industry is represented by the material, social or moral environment, where customers can enjoy the facilities. The correct perception of this has a very important role in creating a truthful experience.

In the actual context, the customers are not willing to compromise anymore, accepting some services of bad quality. Because they have a various scale of restaurants and hotels, they are looking for good experiences, which means serving excellent food, sleeping in great places, living unforgettable moments in an agreeable surrounding, this way benefiting by the best services.

The present paper is made of four components synthetically presented. The first one, named "Outlooks of client experience in the hospitality industry" contains the main aspects about what experience means in hotels and restaurants, the second one "Hotel and restaurant ambiance – a tool used to outline the client experience" explains what ambiance is in the hospitality industry. The third part contains "Main components of hotel and restaurant ambiance". In the last part named "The impact of hotel and restaurant ambiance over Romanian tourists" the results of two quantitative investigations are presented, applied to find out what characteristics related to the restaurant and hotel surroundings are influencing the creation of a positive experience.

The aim of this investigation is to discover the importance of the perception of a restaurant and hotel's surroundings has in creating the experience of customers. The success in this meaning can come from a professional landing regarding a succession of surroundings factors, which can determine the improvement of the restaurants' and hotels' services.

Keywords: restaurant ambiance, hotel ambiance, client experience, design, client satisfaction, perception, ambiance in hospitality industry

JEL Classification: L83, L84, M1

Introduction

The hospitality industry knows a continuously growth all over the world. The number of hotels increased significantly and tourists have many options from which they can choose to change their home temporary. When the guests benefit by the services offered by a hotel, they are evaluating in a cognitive way their experience in that place. In the hospitality industry, the clients use ambiance and staff behavior as guide marks for contouring the experience. This combination of elements can create a perception about the quality of services than to the improvement of client fidelity.

People behavior has changed in the last years as a result of the technological and demographic development. The majority of people are doing remunerated activities to spend most of their free time, being determined to want more journeys.

In the current context, the clients are not able to sacrifice accepting bad services or a wrong ambiance in hotels. Knowing that there is a large variety of hotels from which to choose, they are looking for pleasant experiences. This means serving excellent dishes in a great ambiance, benefiting from the best service.

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Eating out in a restaurant means more than serving the food in a different background. The clients are looking for an unforgettable experience away from home and the ambiance has a critical role in creating it. Interior design, decorations, staff behavior are only a part of the elements which have an important impact over the clients' experience and convincing them to come back in a restaurant.

In the last years, customer satisfaction became a frequently discussed topic both in economy and academia. Customer satisfaction also implies growing their number, being a significant element used to create the business image.

The present paper is made of four components synthetically presented. The first one, named "Outlooks of client experience in the hospitality industry" contains the main aspects about what experience means in hotels and restaurants, the second one "Hotel and restaurant ambiance – a tool used to outline the client experience" explains what ambiance is in the hospitality industry. The third part contains "Main components of hotel and restaurant ambiance" (the interior design, the lighting, the music, the cleanliness, the hygiene, the staff clothing and attitude, the decorations). In the last part named "The impact of hotel and restaurant ambiance over Romanian tourists" the results of two quantitative investigations are presented, applied to find out what characteristics about the restaurant and hotels' surroundings are influencing the creation of a positive experience.

The aim of this investigation is to discover the importance of the perception of a restaurant and hotel's surroundings has in creating the experience of customers. One of the paper's aim is to make evident the aspects of a restaurant and hotel's surrounding that determine a good experience, which will afterwards go on their devotion.

1. Literature review

1.1 Outlooks of client experience in the hospitality industry

The perception process means purchasing, interpreting, selecting and organizing sensory information. People's perception represents an approximation of reality. Our minds are trying to find the connections of the stimuli we are exposed to. For example, when we see a lot of people in a restaurant, we think that it is the best in the area. (Gagic, Jovicic, & Tesanovic, 2013)

The client experience is clearly determined by their reaction to stimuli. The sight, the hearing, the smell, the taste and the tactile sense are influencing the mind sketch of some perceptions about the environment. Interior design can determine clients' emotions (relaxing, having fun, satisfaction) which also influences their habits (time spent in a hotel or restaurant, loyalty, social interactions, price sensibility, "world of mouth"). (Park, Back, Bufquin, & Shapoval, 2019)

The experience is known as a dominating objective of organizational strategy, outlining the differentiation among competitors. Also, the experience can be used as a tool to secure customer loyalty.

Some of researchers think that the hospitality industry must be seen as the best field to study the experience because tourism itself is an amount of human experiences.

Most of the theories about customer satisfaction point out that this is a relative concept which every time can be judged differently, relating to a standard. The results vary depending on the perceptions of the people who participate on the study. The selection of a comparison standard that can be used for a research is a dilemma both for managers and researchers. (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2003)

Ambiance has a central role in contouring the client behavior, the reactions relating to the space and the social interactions. Clients spend more time and money in spaces which give them a pleasure feeling than in unpleasant spaces. For example, the elements of ambiance (seat placement, design, furniture) influence the time that a client spends in a hotel or restaurant. The ambiance perception can create cognitive responses, affecting the beliefs of previous clients about the products that are offered in the restaurant. This can also be considered a non-verbal communication method. (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2003)

The perception is the process of acquiring, interpreting, selecting and organizing sensory information. People's perception represents an approximation of reality. Our minds are trying to find the sense of the stimuli we are exposed to.

Evaluating services is more complex than evaluating products because of the intrinsic nature of their heterogeneity, the inseparability of consumer production, perishability and intangibility. (Gagic, Jovicic, & Tesanovic, 2013)

In the hospitality industry, the perception of a client referring to a restaurant, for example, is reflected by the accumulation of consumer experiences in that place (atmosphere, services). Also, the perception referring to service quality influences the perception about the restaurant image. (Kisang, Hye-Rin, & Woo Gon, 2012)

The value of customer perception can be defined as the result of the personal comparisons between the perception of the benefits they thought they would have before the service was done and the perception of the costs paid by the customer.

1.2 Hotel and restaurant ambiance – a tool used to outline the client experience

In 1992, the first mention of the ambiance in the hospitality industry belongs to Mary Bitner who affirmed that "physical environment" where can happen different services can be characterized by the following elements: environmental conditions, functionality and layout and design.

The ambient conditions are also the atmosphere features as temperature, air quality, noise, music, lighting and smell. Through this ounce, music, the smell, the colors and lighting are the characteristics that have attracted the most attention of people, but also the researchers. (Pijls & Groen, 2011)

Functionality and the arrangement of the interior space are essential for hotels and restaurants. The furniture is the element that affects directly the comfort and the staff's performance and also the clients. The visual interpretation of the furniture contributes in particular to shaping the perception on the quality of the services. The arrangement of spaces is also important because it can give clients the sensation of being crowded or spacious. (Pijls & Groen, 2011)

The ambiance of a restaurant is represented by the material, social or moral environment in which its customers can enjoy the offered services. In the case of restaurants, it contains the main aspects that influence the customer experience: interior design, lighting, music, cleanliness/ hygiene, the staff's appearance, the appearance of the dishes, the quality of the furniture, decorations, the attitude of the staff.

The cleanliness of the public areas of the restaurant and the hotel, such as the salon, the toilets is considered as one of the most important indicators of the quality of services.(Manhas & Tukamushaba, 2015)

Hotel and restaurant staff's appearance helps the tourists to create their first impression about the business. The waiters must be a pleasant presence, successfully interacting with people. They should have a balanced, friendly and confident demeanor even in times of stress. Also, they have to be capable to finish their activities (opening the restaurant, changing the shifts, cleaning, closing, provisioning), to be in time at work and to be fast in serving clients.

There are many conservative restaurants which have numerous staffing requirements. In these situations, tattoos and jewelry are forbidden because they are considered an "attack" to the image of the restaurant, instead, there are standard uniforms with unique design.

The hotel and restaurant staff have a very important role because they are the only people who come in contact with the customers, and their purpose is to make them return.

1.3 Main components of hotel and restaurant ambiance

The perceptions about the environment (music, smell, color, equipment, architecture) help customers to distinguish and classify the organizations that provide services in terms of expected quality.

In many hotels it is recognized that the physical environment has an effect on the customer experience and thus the emphasis must be placed on the design of the environment.

Understanding the effect differences of colors can be used by hoteliers as a strategic tool to manipulate the emotions and feelings of their guests both in hotel rooms and in the other spaces of the hotel. (Siamionava, Slevitch, & Tomas, 2018). For example, the light furniture has a positive effect on people's mood, and this fact is already noticed and exploited in the hospitality industry. This furniture is especially created from translucent artificial materials such as PVC or acrylic. It has been found that people not only prefer to look at a bright space, but they especially enjoy staying in illuminated areas by the floor or in illuminated furniture. (Wardono & Soelami, Effects of Luminous Furniture on Mood, 2015)

Also, for a restaurant, the room temperature is supposed to increase when it is full of people. It is important for the restaurant's staff to predict the time of day when the restaurant is crowded in order to set a temperature that suits with the customers' needs. If the temperature is too high or too low, customers will feel uncomfortable and will not be able to fully enjoy the offered services.

Table tops, towels, chair covers are available in different colors. Table tops can be of various designs, materials. Seat covers are often the ones that differentiate the types of restaurants. Also, colorful or beaded covers can be used at events to give an air of elegance.

A certain atmosphere can easily be created through decorations. A correct judgment, taking into account the specificity of the restaurant is the key factor in choosing photos, paintings, floral decorations, balloons, furniture and special effects. (Nicolescu, 1998)

Food handling operations should be correlated with the most appropriate light, depending on the time of day, season, and event. The low light can be used to create a relaxing atmosphere conducive to serving food and drinks. (Walker, 2008)

Customers expect to have background music during an event, but also during meal service, which can add value to the atmosphere. Specific times for listening to certain types of music should be noted and respected. (Nicolescu, 1998)

The conditions in the hotel room such as the interior design and the layout of the room are elements that hoteliers want to highlight from the perspective of the personality of a resort. For example, many tourists are traveling to Malaysia from Indonesia or Singapore. Thus, it is encouraged the design of rooms that follow the principles of Islam that assure Muslim tourists that the hotel respects Shariah Compliant Hotel (SCH). (Hanum, 20019)

Starting with previous years, the Ibis team decided to create "story" rooms. This activity has two main purposes. First of all, some rooms are customized on some interesting topics for some tourists in particular (for example: for the sports enthusiasts at Ibis Sibiu a "Sport Room" was created, for music lovers at the Ibis Gara de Nord a Music Room was created, also in Ibis Sibiu for dreaming guests was created "Flower Room" and for theater lovers "Theater Room", in Ibis Constanța, "Sea Room" was created for sea lovers, and in Ibis Parliament Palace for traditional lovers of color "Blue Room" and "Red Room" were created). (IbisHotels, 2017)

Secondly, this redevelopment of certain rooms was used as an instrument of motivation and involvement of the employees. They have received the budget and had the possibility to propose various designs in the form of a competition. (IbisHotels, 2017)

According to the researches of Ruth Pijls and BrendeaGroen from 2011, who both used a textual and a visual approach, the targeted clients had the opportunity to perceive the comfortable or welcoming environment. In this situation, "comfortable" is associated with soft, easy, spacious, calm, while "welcoming" is associated with orderly, clean, comfortable, attractive.

In terms of space, comfortable is associated with the modern, luxurious style, being defined by warm and light colors, delicate materials and involves spending time in bed, in the bathroom, with pillows and carpets. At the same time, the fresh, light and warm colors, varied shades of light, various shapes, flowers, snacks and drinks, as well as the beautiful view make up the perception of a welcoming space. (Pijls & Groen, 2011)

2. Research on the impact of hotel and restaurant ambiance over Romanian tourists

The ambiance can certainly be considered a "tool" that hotel owners can use to shape the image that their customers make about their business. Through the environment, customers can perceive the space as either welcoming, exhausting or even very pleasant or avoidable. However, this perception is subjective, varying from one individual to another depending on different factors.

In the last years, the hospitality industry has undergone a spectacular evolution. This is due to the increase of the number of trips for several purposes including business, but also for recreational purposes. As a result, the number of hotels has increased significantly due to the numerous tourists who are looking for more and more accommodation units. For hoteliers, this evolution is a challenge because at each step they must define strategies that differentiate them from competitors in order to be successful. The ambiance is one of the aspects that could add value to a hotel in competition with the other hotels in the same category on the market.

Hotel. Therefore, we analyzed the extent to which the elements of the environment influence the potential guests of a hotel. In this regard, using a quantitative research, we interrogated a number of 386 persons: 70.2% (271 people) of them are female, and 29.8% (115 people) male.

The following survey questions invited respondents to appreciate the importance of certain characteristics (interior design, lighting, noise level, smell, staff retention, furniture appearance, furniture comfort, decorations, music, cheerful appearance, food appearance) in different areas of the hotel, such as: room, restaurant, leisure area, hallways and lobby-reception area.

Regarding to the **hotel room**, 85.5% (of the 386 respondents) considered the smell very important, 61.9% considered the noise level very important, 60.9% considered the comfort of the furniture very important, 52, 8% consider the appearance of furniture important. When they were asked about lighting, 44.3% of respondents said that this is important. 41.7% of them claim that the appearance of the staff that can be met in the room is important. For 41.2% of the respondents, interior design is an important aspect. Decorations are considered important by 39.4% of people. (Figure no. 1)

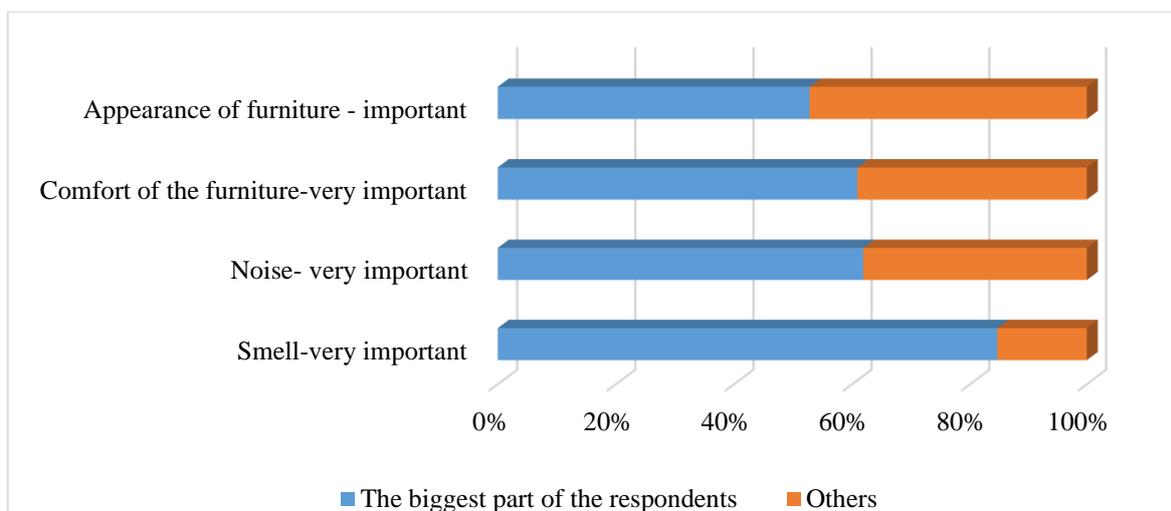


Figure no. 1: Most important aspects in a hotel room

Source: Own processing

The **lobby-reception** area is in most cases the first space in the hotel that tourists come into contact with. For this reason, it may be considered essential to pay particular attention to its environment.

65.3% of those surveyed considered the smell in the lobby-reception area to be very important. The appearance of the furniture is considered important by 52.6% of the respondents. Lighting represents an important aspect for 48.2% of the respondents. The staff area of the lobby-reception area is considered very important by 45.9%. Also, 44.3% of the people who answered consider the interior design important. Decorations are considered important by 43.8% and relatively important by 27.7%. Of the respondents, 39.1% consider music important. Furniture comfort is important for 40.2%.

The corridors are also an important part of a hotel. Of those surveyed, 66.1% felt that the smell in the halls of a hotel is very important. The noise level is considered very important by 48.4%. The appearance of the furniture on the halls of a hotel is considered important by 46.1%. Lighting is considered important by 42.5%. The staff of the staff on the hotel's halls is considered important by 42.2% of the respondents. Interior design is relatively important for 39.4%. The comfort of the furniture on the halls of a hotel is considered important by 37.3%. The decorations on the hallways are relatively important for 37.3%.

Restaurants. In order to identify the aspects related to the environment that influence the Romanian clients, we decided to conduct a quantitative research, applying a survey on a sample of 210 people, from different areas of Romania. The study also aimed to identify the extent to which the ambience of a restaurant influences customers regarding the choice and return to that place.

Being asked how often are they going to the restaurant, 127 of the 210 respondents (60.5%) replied that they go once a month, 72 (34.3%) several times a week, 6 (2.9%) only once a year, and 5 (2.4%) of them every day.

Respondents had to prioritize the importance of certain aspects they consider when choosing a restaurant: interior design, lighting, music, cleanliness / hygiene, staff care, cheerful appearance, quality of furniture, decorations, staff attitude.

Interior design is an important feature for 57.1% (120) of the people questioned, very important for 20% (42). Lighting is important for 48.1% (101 people) and relatively important for 31% (65). Music represents an important aspect for 41.4% (87) of the respondents and very important for 30.5% (64). (Figure no. 2)

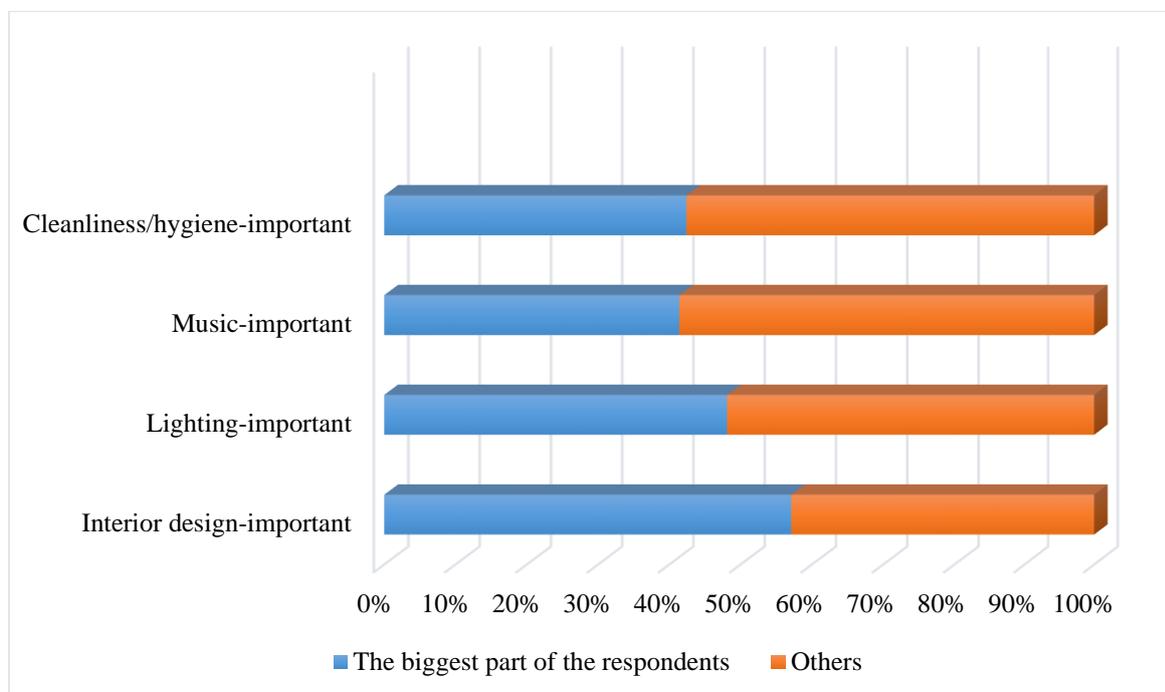


Figure no. 2: The most important features in restaurant

Source: Own processing

Therefore, demanding a firm response on the aspect that influences them the most in choosing a restaurant, they considered the most important: cleanliness / hygiene - 42.4% (89), staff attitude -

35.2 % (74), interior design - 15.7% (33), music - 3.3% (7), cheerful appearance 1.4% (3), staff retention - 1% (2), furniture quality - 0, 5% (1), decorations 0.5% (1), and lighting 0%.

Conclusions

Hotel and restaurant guests decide what their quality standards are, and managers must carefully study the behavior of customers to consider them later. Otherwise, the businesses may suffer, seeing a decrease in the number of guests. Also, customer expectations are very important because, if they are not met, they can share negative opinions. Therefore, for the customer experience to be a positive one, their expectations must be exceeded by adding more value to the services offered.

When people have to choose a hotel, the general tendency is to give importance as follows: rooms, restaurant, lobby-reception area, leisure area and hallways. Therefore, it would be beneficial for hotel owners to pay more attention to the areas targeted by tourists.

The most important aspects of the environment differ depending on the space. For the interviewees, the smell, the noise level and the comfort of the furniture are significant in a hotel room. Therefore, it is recommended to use the furniture from clean, comfortable materials, but also the soundproofing of the hotel.

Among the characteristics that shape the ambience of a restaurant in a hotel, the most important for the respondents are the appearance of the food, the smell, but also the appearance of the dishes. In other words, what is really important in a hotel restaurant is that the service is impeccable.

In the lobby-reception area, the most significant environment characteristics are the smell, the appearance of the furniture and the lighting. Therefore, since in most cases this space is the first in the hotel with which the guests come in contact, the realization of their preferences is essential. The corridors are also important. The environmental characteristics in this case of guests are the smell, the noise level and the comfort of the furniture.

The characteristics of the environment in the recreational areas can easily influence tourists. The most important of these are smell, comfort of furniture, music and lighting. Therefore, the recreational areas are the ones where the guests want to feel good and they demand that all the elements of the ambience are combined harmoniously.

The analysis based on customer satisfaction in certain segments of the market can offer many benefits to managers, so they could unlock some targeted marketing campaigns. Campaigns could allow managers to investigate the differentiated influence that certain aspects have on some customers.

Therefore, among the most important features that should be considered when talking about the ambience of a hotel are the smell, the comfort of the furniture, the appearance of the furniture, the lighting and the level of the noise or the music. These aspects have proven to be among the most important in all areas of the hotel. Instead, in the restaurant, customers seem to appreciate first and foremost the cleanliness / hygiene, staff attitude and the interior design.

Following the research, it was also found that the demand of customers increases when they have to choose a restaurant to return to, comparing to their attitude towards the characteristics of one they go to for the first time.

The environment plays a central role in creating the client's behavior, the reactions to the space and the social interaction. Customers usually spend more time and more money in environments that give them a sense of pleasure than in unpleasant environments.

This paper highlights that the ambience of a hotel or restaurant is one of the components that influence the perception of customers in the formation of the experience. The managers of many restaurants and hotels should use the ambience to create a pleasant experience for their customers. The environment is also considered the "silent component" of the customer experience.

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