



Article

Identification of the Quality Gaps in the Services Offered in Accommodation Facilities in Rural Areas: The Case of the Lublin Region

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Abstract: The quality of services offered in accommodation facilities is one of the factors determining the development of this business activity. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly examine the level of customer satisfaction, their expectations and needs. The systematic collection and analysis of the opinions of tourists make it possible to learn about their changing expectations and allows the service providers to adapt to them. The purpose of the research that constituted the basis of this article was to identify the quality gaps in the services provided in the accommodation facilities in rural areas of the region of Lublin. The Servqual method was used in the study, thanks to which it was possible to assess the quality criteria and the validity of the provided service. A total of 699 respondents took part in the research. According to the study, the reliability and timeliness of the service, the adherence to the terms and conditions of the service, as well as the willingness to solve customers' problems, were of the greatest importance for the clients, while the completeness and reliability of the advertising materials turned out to be the least important. With the obtained results, it can be concluded that the expectations of the customers in the accommodation facilities in rural areas exceed the actual state of the offered services. The areas that need to be improved, such as reliability and empathy, were identified.

Keywords: quality of accommodation services; Servqual; rural areas; quality improvement; dimensions of quality



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1. Introduction and the Literature Review

The competitiveness of the product, which is rural tourism, largely depends on the quality of services offered by the accommodation facilities in rural areas [1]. Nevertheless, the implementation of a categorisation system for rural accommodation facilities is not yet a common phenomenon, for various reasons. The quality standards of rural accommodation facilities included in the European categorisation systems are comprehensive and cover all aspects of a stay and recreation in rural areas that are satisfactory for a tourist [2].

Rural areas are the territories located outside of cities and industry-dominated centres, which are characterised by a different way of spatial development and use of land. Usually, they are associated with agriculture; however, in recent years, their multifunctional nature and the pursuit of sustainable development have become more and more noticeable [3,4]. The countryside is becoming a place of non-agricultural activities, it performs multiple functions to meet the constantly changing human needs, mainly of the local communities. One of non-agricultural activities conducted in rural areas, which has a great potential for development, is tourism [5]. Contemporary directions of the development of tourism,

growing competition, as well as the constantly changing preferences and tastes of travellers make the issue of the quality of services offered to tourists increasingly important [6–9].

According to Batyk [10], the quality in tourism is affected by the material standard of services, the manner of the provision of services, as well as the expectations and attitudes of customers [10]. The above is also confirmed by the studies conducted by Foris, Popescu and Foris [11], and Cruz et al. [12]. To meet the customer's requirements and expectations, to face the competition and have a good position in the market at the same time, each tourism enterprise or organisation must identify the quality parameters of its services and implement an effective system for their management. The assessment of the quality of services depends primarily on a client's expectations, and customer satisfaction with the purchased services is a function of the fulfilled expectations [13–15]. Customer satisfaction is also largely dependent on their previous experience [16–18]. The opinions of other people about a given service also play an important role in shaping customer satisfaction. It should be remembered that customers share their views and experience with other people, who are potential guests in the accommodation facilities [19,20]. Thus, the users of services have a certain set of expectations and perceptions, most of which are beyond the control of the service provider. Gralak and Kacprzak claim that the tourist experience does not start and end with a visit to the facility, but it begins before the arrival and finishes long after the departure. This means that creating experience covers every stage of a journey: from dreaming about going on holiday, through planning, booking, and staying, to sharing the memories upon returning home [21]. According to Batyk, for the entrepreneurs operating in the tourism industry, the priority element in the perception of the quality of their services is the identification of customer expectations. The expectations are influenced by many factors, such as: fashion, overheard opinions, reputation, market position of the companies, affiliation to a chain, facility ranking, location, type of facility, as well as the price of services and customer experience. The correct identification of the expectations makes it possible to shape the features of the service in such a way that they are generally approved by the purchasers [22]. As Anna Sieczko [23] emphasises, the satisfaction of purchasers of tourist services is of utmost importance and it requires focusing on the needs, preferences and expectations of customers [9,23–25]. Parasuraman et al., [26] suggested that when perceived service quality is high, then it will lead to an increase in customer satisfaction. The owners of the accommodation facilities, who wish to meet the expectations of their guests, should constantly take care of the quality of the tourist product and the standard of the offered goods and services [27–29]. Niedziółka [30] points out that quality should refer to the high standards of accommodation, gastronomic, and recreational facilities.

The purpose of the study was to identify the quality gaps in the services provided in the accommodation facilities in rural areas of the region of Lublin. The Lublin region is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped regions in Europe [31,32]. The intensification of tourism is seen by the local authorities as an opportunity for the development of the region [26]. The rural areas of the region of Lublin have high natural and cultural values and are characterised by great biological and landscape diversities [33,34]. The condition for the development of tourism in the Lublin region is the establishment of a tourist base that would meet the expectations of visitors, in terms of quantity and quality. Its most essential element is accommodation. In 2021, there were 448 tourist accommodation establishments in the Lublin region. It accounted for 4.5% of all facilities in the country [35]. It should be emphasised that the quantitative share of accommodation facilities located in the Lublin region has been, for years, at a low level, compared to other Polish regions. The development of the accommodation base, which is very important for the development of a region, is more intensive in other voivodships. The current situation inspired the authors of the article to conduct research, the results of which have both cognitive and practical values. The research should become the food for thought and an impulse to take action for national and local administrations that are responsible for creating solutions to facilitate the development of businesses, including those operating in the tourism services market.

The following research questions helped to achieve the goal of the study:

RQ1: Is there a quality gap in the analysed areas of the services offered by the accommodation facilities in rural areas?

RQ 2: How big is the discrepancy between the customer expectations and their satisfaction with the offered service?"

RQ3: What areas of the service provided by the accommodation facilities are most important to the service users resting in the rural areas?

The paper consists of five sections. The Section 1 presents the quality of the services in the accommodation facilities located in the rural areas. The Section 2 demonstrate the methodology of the used research tools (the Servqual method) and concentrates on presenting the results of the study. The Section 3 concentrates on presenting the results of the research conducted among the clients of the accommodation facilities located in the Lublin region. The Section 4 refers to the findings of other researchers who have studied similar topics in their own countries. Finally, Section 5 presents the conclusions resulting from the research, including the study's limitations and recommendations for further research.

2. Research Methods and Study Material

Establishing the quality of services in the accommodation facilities located in rural areas at a level that satisfies their purchasers, requires obtaining information that allows to select those features of the created product that consumers consider particularly important. A source of this information can be the results of consumer satisfaction surveys carried out using the Servqual method, which involves capturing the hierarchy of importance of the individual quality factors and diagnosing the degree of meeting the expectations of customers of the accommodation establishments located in rural areas. Accommodation services provided by the facilities located in the countryside, additionally contribute to the budgets of the residents in the rural areas; therefore it is worth taking care of the level of the services. A service that is of a high quality for one person may not meet the standards of someone else, and vice versa. In that context, it is most appropriate to define quality as the fulfilment of customer requirements, and not as specific technical parameters that are very difficult to distinguish in the case of services. The Servqual method enables the service providers to anticipate customer expectations and determine the level of evaluation of their services (Figure 1).

The Servqual method is designed to determine the difference between the perceived service quality and the expected quality.

$$S = P - E \quad (1)$$

where:

S—the result of the Servqual method, shows the dimension of the gap, P—customers' perception of the service, E—customers' expectations of the service, whereby: P = E—desired state: customers are fully satisfied with the service, P > E—ideal state: customers' perceptions of the service greatly exceed their expectations, P < E—conditional state: customers' expectations of the service have not been fully met.

The assessment is made, based on five dimensions of service quality: the material elements of a service (tangibles), the accuracy of a service (reliability), the responsibility of the service providers/following customer expectations (responsiveness), the certainty of a service (assurances) and the affordability of the service (empathy) [26]. The tangibles include the appearance of the facility, equipment, and personnel, while reliability is the ability to perform the services properly and accurately, responsiveness is the desire to help customers and to offer a fast service, and assurances mean having the required skills and knowledge necessary to perform the service, and empathy is attention, sensing the needs of the consumer.

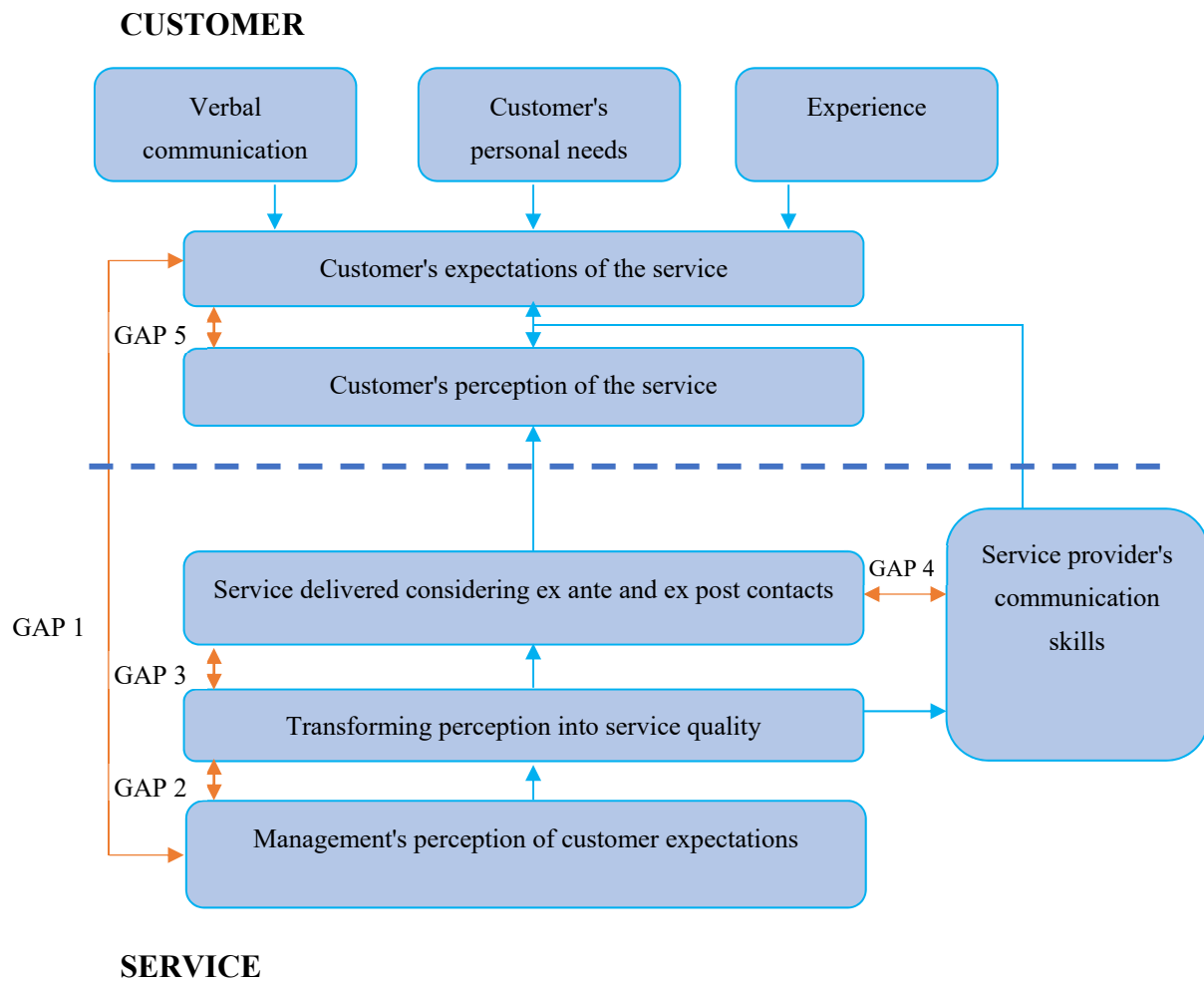


Figure 1. Conceptual model for service quality. Adapted from: Parasuraman, V. A. Zeithaml, L. L. Berry: "A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research", *Journal of Marketing*, Fall 1985, number 49, 41–50 [26].

The applied method creates a basic framework of expectations and perceptions, which includes references to each of the five dimensions of service quality (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy). Thanks to the research conducted using the Servqual method, it is possible to determine whether the services meet the customer's expectations by asking the same questions about the requirements for the service before it is provided and after it is completed. Once the obtained results are compared, it is possible to see which areas need to be improved or perfected.

Research conducted with the support of the Servqual method involves the need to use a specially designed questionnaire that consists of two parts, each of which contains 22 questions. The ratings of the statements were measured using a five-digit scale (from 1 to 5), which allowed grading the level of expectations and perceptions of the service: strongly disagree (1)—disagree (2)—neither disagree nor agree (3)—agree (4)—strongly agree (5). The evaluation criteria developed for the purposes of the study are presented in Table A1 Appendix A.

When using the method, it was crucial to determine the importance of individual dimensions for the client. For that purpose, a table was created in which the appropriate weights were assigned to individual dimensions. The respondents were asked to indicate the importance of each of the listed features from their perspective. The fixed sum method was used for the calculations. The respondents had 100 points at their disposal, which they had to allocate to the listed areas. If a feature was more important, more points were allocated to it (Table A2 Appendix A).

The research was conducted in the Lublin region, from June to September 2021. The survey was carried out with the use of IT tools (internet platform) and a direct interview was conducted during the stay at the facility. People who declared that they had stayed in the accommodation facilities located in rural areas of the region of Lublin in the above-mentioned period took part in the study. For the purposes of this study, the definition of rural areas was adopted in accordance with the Central Statistical Office, which characterises rural areas, on the basis of the territorial division of the country, according to the National Official Register of Territorial Division (TERRIF). The rural areas are areas outside of the administrative borders of cities; they include communes (name of the Polish territorial unit), and the rural areas of urban-rural communes [36]. Participation in the study was voluntary and fully anonymous. The information that could determine the socio-demographic profile of the respondent included: gender, education, age, and place of permanent residence. A total of 699 individuals were involved in the study.

In the research sample, of the customers of accommodation facilities in rural areas, 59.2% were women, and 40.8% were men. Most of the respondents were 26 to 40 years old—45.3%, while those aged 40–60 accounted for 22.7%, the individuals under 25 years old accounted for 12.1%, and clients aged 61 and over constituted 19.9%. Most of the respondents had a higher education—49.4%, 37.1% of the respondents had a secondary education, 12.3% had a vocational education, and 1.2% had primary level education. The residents of large cities (over 100,000 inhabitants) accounted for 59.4% of the research sample, and the residents of cities with the number of inhabitants less than 100,000, constituted 26.5%, those from small towns of up to 30,000 inhabitants accounted for 14.1% of the studied population.

3. The Results of the Research on the Size of the Gaps in the Quality of the Services Offered in the Accommodation Facilities

Table 1 below, shows the results of the research conducted among the clients of the accommodation facilities located in the Lublin region. In the study, the division of accommodation facilities, according to the Tourism Services Act [37], in force in Poland since 1997, was taken into account; i.e., hotels, motels, boarding houses, camping grounds, excursion hotels, youth hostels, shelters, and tent campsites. The remaining facilities, that is: holiday resorts, weekend and holiday recreation centres, agritourism accommodation, etc., are classified as “other facilities providing accommodation services”, within the meaning of the Act. The lodging base is made up of facilities where various types of services related to a tourist’s stay are provided. The lodging base is part of the facilities and, according to Polish law, consists of hospitality facilities which are characterized by: room division, number of rooms exceeding the minimum specified by law and the provision of hotel services (such as bed making, cleaning, food services).

Accommodation facilities in rural areas are those located in areas outside of the administrative borders of cities, i.e., in rural municipalities or rural parts of urban-rural municipalities. They include, inter alia: hotels, motels, and guest houses. According to the current legislation and the classification adopted by the Central Statistical Office (GUS) [6]:

- hotels are establishments with at least 10 rooms, most of them in single and double rooms, providing a wide range of services related to the stay of customers;
- motels are roadside establishments with car parking, at least 10 rooms, most of which are single and double rooms;
- guesthouses are establishments with at least seven rooms, providing all-day catering for their clients.

Hospitality services may also be provided in other lodging facilities. According to the classification adopted by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), other accommodation facilities include, in accordance with the classification adopted by the Central Statistical Office (GUS): guest houses and inns, as well as hotels, motels, boarding houses, which have not been hotels, motels, and boarding houses which have not been assigned any category [38].

Table 1. Evaluation of the quality of services of the surveyed facilities of rural lodgings in the Lublin region.

Dimensions	Claims to be Evaluated from the Questionnaire	Expectations (E)	Perceptions (P)	S = P – E
Tangibles	1. Visual attractiveness of the building and the interior of the farmhouse	4.23	3.80	−0.43
	2. Modernity of the interior of the rooms, a novelty in solutions	4.12	3.91	−0.21
	3. The neat appearance of employees	4.33	4.21	−0.12
	4. Completeness and reliability of advertising materials	4.05	3.96	−0.09
Reliability	5. Keeping up with the conditions of the services provided	4.57	4.08	−0.49
	6. Correctness of the service performance by staff	4.53	4.13	−0.40
	7. Interest in solving the customer’s problem	4.57	3.96	−0.61
	8. Reliability and timeliness of service delivery	4.63	4.27	−0.36
	9. Flawless recordkeeping	4.36	4.25	−0.11
Responsiveness	10. Prompt and efficient staff service	4.45	4.19	−0.26
	11. Professional assistance in providing information	4.31	4.17	−0.14
	12. Information about the timing of services	4.37	4.19	−0.18
	13. Response of staff to problems reported by the customer	4.43	4.05	−0.38
Assurances	14. Knowledge and confidence in the information provided by the staff	4.33	4.05	−0.28
	15. Courtesy and friendliness of staff serving guests of the facility	4.55	4.27	−0.28
	16. Safety assurance	4.49	4.19	−0.30
	17. Confidence-inspiring behaviour of rural lodging facility employees	4.48	4.00	−0.48
Empathy	18. Individual approach to the customer	4.23	4.00	−0.23
	19. Hours of staff available to meet customer needs	4.37	3.88	−0.49
	20. Full attention to the customer	4.31	4.03	−0.28
	21. The facility’s attention to execution and security	4.52	4.19	−0.33
	22. Knowing and understanding the customer needs by the facility staff	4.36	3.93	−0.43

Source: Own elaboration, based on the survey results.

Depending on the equipment and scope of the services provided, hotels, motels, and guesthouses are classified into one of five categories marked with stars (the highest being five stars, the lowest one star). The register of accommodation facilities and the awarding of categories is managed by the Marshal of the Voivodship. A register of other facilities in which, in accordance with the law, hotel services may be provided, is kept by the head of the local authority (mayor, town president), competent for the place of their location [7]. In five groups of quality dimensions, 22 statements were presented, which were assessed by customers. According to the study, the reliability and timeliness of the service, the adherence to the terms and conditions of the service, as well as the willingness to solve customers’ problems were of the greatest importance for the clients (4.63, 4.57, and 4.57, respectively—the highest score that could be obtained was 5), while the completeness and reliability of the advertising materials turned out to be the least important. The perception of the provided services, according to the customers, is much worse—it falls short of expectations, in all cases (1).

The difference between the expectations and perceptions of services makes it possible to determine which shortcomings among certain quality features would need to be eliminated. At the beginning of Table 2, the features for which perception of the actual state differs the least from the customer’s expectations, are listed. The features with the lowest values and listed at the bottom of Table 2, require repair first. The indicators determining the arithmetic value striving for 0, indicate the correct standard of service quality ($P = E$). Three items from the dimensions: “Reliability” (Interest in solving the customer’s problem -0.61 ; Keeping up with the conditions of the services provided -0.49), “Empathy” (Hours of staff availability to meet customer needs -0.49) are, according to the consumers of

rural lodging base services, well below the standard, significantly deviating from customer expectations ($P < E$).

Table 2. Ranking of quality features of services provided by the surveyed facilities of the rural lodging base of Lublin Region.

Dimensions	The Statement	S = P – E
Tangibles	Completeness and reliability of advertising materials	−0.09
Reliability	Flawless recordkeeping	−0.11
Tangibles	The neat appearance of employees	−0.12
Responsiveness	Professional assistance in providing information	−0.14
Responsiveness	Information about the timing of services	−0.18
Tangibles	Modernity of the interior of the rooms, a novelty in solutions	−0.21
Empathy	Individual approach to the customer	−0.23
Responsiveness	Prompt and efficient staff service	−0.26
Assurances	Courtesy and friendliness of staff serving guests at the facility	−0.28
Assurances	Knowledge and confidence in the information provided by the staff	−0.28
Empathy	Full attention to the customer	−0.28
Assurances	Safety assurance	−0.30
Empathy	The facility’s attention to execution and security	−0.33
Reliability	Reliability and timeliness of the service delivery	−0.36
Responsiveness	Response from staff to the problem reported by the customer	−0.38
Reliability	Correctness of service performance by staff	−0.40
Tangibles	Visual attractiveness of the building and the interior of the farmhouse	−0.43
Empathy	Knowing and understanding the customer needs by the facility staff	−0.43
Assurances	Confidence-inspiring behaviour of the rural lodging facility employees	−0.48
Reliability	Keeping up with the conditions of the services provided	−0.49
Empathy	Hours of staff availability to meet customer needs	−0.49
Reliability	Interest in solving the customer’s problem	−0.61

Source: Own elaboration, based on the survey results.

The survey found that “Tangibles” (22.93 points) was the most important for the customers of lodging facilities, followed by “Reliability” (20.20 points) and “Responsiveness” (19.67 points), and to a lesser extent “Empathy” (19.20 points) and “Reliability” (18.00 points) (Table 3).

With this knowledge, a weighted arithmetic difference was calculated for each quality feature. The changes in the initial (arithmetic) values, in relation to the weighted values, are presented in Table 4. Each of the values are negative, which is a consequence of the adopted initial values. While analysing each feature of the examined dimensions, it can be noticed that there are features highly and poorly rated in each dimension. The highest score was given to the record-keeping skills of the accommodation owners, while the lowest score was given to their willingness to solve customers’ problems. As can be seen, with regards to the indicators determining the weighted value of the dimensions, they range

from -13.08 to -0.60 points. The discrepancy is quite significant, which means a different level of quality of the examined dimensions of the provided service.

Table 3. Importance of the service quality dimensions of the surveyed accommodation facilities in the Lublin region.

Dimensions	$\Sigma = 100$ Points
Tangibles	22.93
Reliability	20.20
Responsiveness	19.67
Assurances	18.00
Empathy	19.20

Source: own elaboration, based on survey results.

Table 4. Weighted arithmetic difference for the following quality characteristics of services provided by the surveyed rural lodging facilities.

Serial Number	Dimensions	The Statement	Arithmetic Difference of the Studied Characteristics $S = P - E$	Allocated Weight	Weighted Arithmetic Difference of the Studied Characteristics
1	Tangibles	Visual attractiveness of the building and the interior of the farmhouse	-0.43	22.93	-9.86
2		Modernity of the interior of the rooms, a novelty in solutions	-0.21		-4.82
3		The neat appearance of employees	-0.12		-2.75
4		Completeness and reliability of the advertising materials	-0.09		-2.06
5	Reliability	Keeping up with the conditions of the services provided	-0.49	20.20	-9.90
6		Correctness of service performance by staff	-0.40		-8.08
7		Interest in solving the customer's problem	-0.61		-12.32
8		Reliability and timeliness of the service delivery	-0.36		-7.27
9	Responsiveness	Flawless recordkeeping	-0.11	19.67	-2.22
10		Prompt and efficient staff service	-0.26		-5.11
11		Professional assistance in providing information	-0.14		-2.75
12		Information about the timing of services	-0.18		-3.54
13	Assurances	Response from staff to the problem reported by the customer	-0.38	18.00	-8.47
14		Knowledge and confidence in the information provided by the staff	-0.28		-5.04
15		Courtesy and friendliness of staff serving guests at the facility	-0.28		-5.04

Table 4. Cont.

Serial Number	Dimensions	The Statement	Arithmetic Difference of the Studied Characteristics $S = P - E$	Allocated Weight	Weighted Arithmetic Difference of the Studied Characteristics
16	Assurances	Safety assurance	−0.30	18.00	−5.40
17		Confidence-inspiring behaviour of rural lodging facility employees	−0.48		−8.64
18	Empathy	Individual approach to the customer	−0.23	19.20	−4.42
19		Hours of staff available to meet customer needs	−0.49		−9.41
20		Full attention to the customer	−0.28		−5.38
21		The facility's attention to execution and security	−0.33		−6.34
22		Knowing and understanding the customer needs by the facility staff	−0.43		−8.26

Source: Own elaboration, based on the survey results.

The Servqual index for each dimension was calculated using the following formula. The results for each dimension are shown in Table 5.

$$SQ_{ni} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^5 [(P_1 - E_1) + (\dots) + (P_{699} - E_{699})]}{699} \quad (2)$$

where:

i —is the dimension under study (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy),

P —is the service perception,

E —is the service expectation.

The following formula was used to calculate the weighted index:

$$SQ_{wi} = \sum_{i=1}^5 w_i * SQ_{nwi} \quad (3)$$

where:

SQ_{wi} —Servqual index weighted of dimension i ,

SQ_{ni} —Servqual unweighted index of dimension i ,

w_i —assigned weight of dimension i .

Table 5. Servqual index, unweighted (SQ_n) and weighted (SQ_w).

Dimensions	SQ_{ni}	SQ_{wi}
Tangibles	−0.213	−4.892
Reliability	−0.395	−7.972
Responsiveness	−0.240	−4.720
Assurances	−0.337	−6.060
Empathy	−0.352	−6.758
Average arithmetic measure for the indicators	−0.307	−6.081

Source: Own elaboration, based on the survey results.

The obtained general values of the indicators, (SQ_n) and (SQ_w), showed that each of the twenty-two assessed quality features defined for the services provided in the ac-

accommodation facilities was unsatisfactory in the opinion of customers. Upon prioritising the features, the following features were rated as the worst: from the “Reliability” dimension (−7.972)—“Willingness to solve customers’ problems” (−12.32); from the “Empathy” dimension—“Availability of personnel to customers” (−9.41). In the “Responsiveness” dimension, the value of the indicator showed that the quality feature “Responsiveness of personnel to a problem reported by a customer” (−8.47) significantly downgraded that dimension.

Based on the conducted research, it can be concluded that, in the opinion of the customers, the purchased services, in all of the assessed dimensions, did not sufficiently meet the expectations of the clients. in terms of quality.

4. Discussion

The development of the accommodation facilities in rural areas makes it possible to notice an increase in the standard of services. Most of the accommodation establishments in the countryside are facilities of a three-star standard (hotels) with an extended leisure offer tailored to various groups of recipients. The revitalisation of historic buildings and their use as exclusive places for recreation and regeneration, as well as the creation of an attractive accommodation base that makes use of the natural and cultural potential of rural areas, is noteworthy [39].

Increasing the quality and variety of services offered in rural areas means that the accommodation base in the countryside is more and more often associated with exclusive and unique holidays at a relatively affordable price. For a business consumer, such places are an excellent opportunity for physical and mental relaxation away from the urban agglomeration, and are located close enough to quickly reach the destination [40].

The assumed purpose of the study to identify the sensitive areas of the quality of service provided by the accommodation facilities located in rural areas has been achieved. The relevance of the systematic monitoring of the quality of provided services was confirmed. In previous studies, it was indicated [41] that service monitoring, and checking the quality of the offered services to eliminate the gap between expectations and perceptions, had an impact on shaping the high standards of customer service [9]. The outcome of that procedure was an increase in customer satisfaction with the accommodation providers and the prospect of future visits [42]. Based on the research conducted by Amanor-Boad [43], in the last three years, over 62% of Americans have visited rural areas to spend time in accommodation facilities. Obeidat [44], in turn, sees the development of accommodation facilities in rural areas as part of agritourism that contributes to the diversification of the income of the rural population, at the same time. In his opinion, the economic, social, and environmental benefits of tourism in rural areas motivate the local community to support it. The natural, cultural, and historical potential of rural areas contributes to attracting tourists and taking advantage of the accommodations on offer.

With regards to the research conducted in the accommodation facilities located in the rural areas of the region of Lublin, guests attached a great importance to the interaction with the personnel (reliability), which resulted in critical assessments, similar to the results obtained in the study performed by Cetin and Walls [45]. The obtained results are also consistent with the outcomes of studies conducted by Cáceres and Papparoidamis [46] and Aziz [47], in which the quality elements related to the level of service in the facility were also critically assessed, emphasising their importance for assessing the level of the quality of service.

The obtained results are also similar to those obtained by other researchers in Romania and Italy, as well as those in other developing countries trying to improve the situation of the population living in rural areas through the diversification of income [25,48]. Such evaluations and interpretations of the research results allow us to state that the Servqual method is very useful and, at the same time, appropriate to verify and assess the level of services provided by tourist facilities located in rural areas.

Facility managers have access to the results of periodic quality surveys and, as far as they are able to cover the costs, they try to react to the comments and improve the quality of service at the property. The above corresponds to the results of the research performed by Nunkoo et al. [49], Chan et al. [50], and Grobelna and Marciszewska [51], according to what customer expectations are a key issue in the delivery of a satisfactory level of service.

Lui et al. [52] and Pakurár et al. [53], in their studies, confirmed the thesis that the cost of acquiring new customers is much higher than the cost of keeping the existing ones and maintaining customer loyalty is a key issue for businesses that offer customer service, which undoubtedly includes accommodation services. Rural areas compete with other areas that are attractive to tourists, therefore the owners of resorts should focus on quality to meet the growing expectations of customers. Elshaer et al. [54] emphasise the importance of quality of services offered in accommodations in rural areas in Saudi Arabia and stress the significance of the relationship between the owners of a facility and tourists, which contributes to establishing customer loyalty. Research related to the level of satisfaction of customers of accommodation services in Poland in recent years has also been conducted by Kozłowski and Michalak [55], Gołąb-Andrzejak [56], Wrukowska [57], Wojciechowska [58].

5. Summary and Conclusions

Improving the quality of accommodation in the countryside, necessary to the conditions of growing competition, requires knowledge of customer attitudes towards the factors determining the quality of accommodation services, which are extremely important, when selecting a research method that can be applied by various entities operating in the highly dispersed rural tourism market, in terms of ownership and space. It is of particular importance to diagnose the quality factors that are important, from the perspective of consumer satisfaction, and the description and practical application of the Servqual method presented in this article, to conclude that, with the application of that method, such a research goal can be achieved. The study should be carried out in rural accommodation establishments and the questionnaires used in the research should be designed in a way that allows obtaining relevant information on the assessment of the accommodation service by the customers.

The quality of service is of fundamental importance for the functioning of the customer service sector, including facilities that offer accommodation services. The decision of a guest concerning where to stay and their satisfaction with the service depends on the level of service.

Assessing the quality of service with the use of the Servqual method helps to determine and correct any deficiencies in that area. This makes it possible to meet the expectations of potential customers and adapt the level of service to the market requirements. Accommodation facilities located in rural areas in the region of Lublin should constantly improve and raise the quality of the offered services, especially in the areas of reliability, empathy, and responsiveness.

- The obtained results allow to give an affirmative answer. There is a quality gap in all five analysed areas of the quality of service offered by the service providers (RQ1).
- Based on the obtained results, the biggest discrepancy can be noticed in the area of "Reliability" and "Empathy", the smallest difference—in the area of "Tangibles" (RQ2).
- The most important areas of service are: "Tangibles", "Reliability" and "Responsiveness" (RQ3).

It should be noted that the conclusions formulated, based on the obtained information can be used by the owners of the accommodation facilities in rural areas to optimise their offer and increase the efficiency of outlays by focusing on the quality factors that are particularly important, taking into account the level of consumer satisfaction.

The Servqual method is a concise, useful tool for observing the expectations and perceptions. The number of received responses confirmed the usefulness of the tool, which can be used in future studies to compare the level of the quality of service in accommodation

facilities located in rural areas. A comparative analysis will allow to determine whether, in the opinion of the recipient, the introduced changes had a positive effect.

The limitation of this study can be considered by the period of its conduct—the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, when rural areas were the only available recreational places, especially for people who did not receive the vaccine against COVID-19 and were unable to use different options to rest. The near-full occupancy of the facilities in rural areas and the desire to enjoy a break away from urban agglomerations may have influenced the consumer opinion, as they were happy to be able to take advantage of any leisure offer; therefore, their responses were not as critical.

Another limitation was that the survey sample consisted of respondents selected on the basis of availability and not according to the cross-section of survey samples proposed by the Central Statistical Office.

The area in which the surveys were conducted is predominantly agricultural and was poorly prepared for the wave of rural tourism consumers during the pandemic. The strong interest meant that the owners of accommodation facilities saw a falsified interest in rural areas. Once restrictions were lifted, interest in rural recreation waned, which is also a peculiarity of the work presented—it is not known when there will be a repeat of such an increase in the interest in rural tourism as there was during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the opinion of the authors, the study should be repeated to be able to compare the opinions of consumers after the research results are made available to the owners of accommodation facilities in rural areas and the possibility of introducing corrective measures.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Evaluation of the quality of services of the surveyed facilities of rural lodgings in the Lublin region—dimensions of service quality.

Dimensions	Claims to be Evaluated from the Survey
Tangibles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Visual attractiveness of the building and the interior of the farmhouse 2. Modernity of the interior of the rooms, a novelty in solutions 3. The neat appearance of employees 4. Completeness and reliability of the advertising materials
Reliability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Keeping up with the conditions of the services provided 6. Correctness of service performance by staff 7. Interest in solving the customer's problem 8. Reliability and timeliness of service delivery 9. Flawless recordkeeping
Responsiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Prompt and efficient staff service 11. Professional assistance in providing information 12. Information about the timing of services 13. Response of staff to the problem reported by the customer
Assurances	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Knowledge and confidence in the information provided by the staff 15. Courtesy and friendliness of staff serving guests of the facility 16. Safety assurance 17. Confidence-inspiring behaviour of rural lodging facility employees

Table A1. Cont.

Dimensions	Claims to be Evaluated from the Survey
Empathy	18. Individual approach to the customer
	19 Hours of staff available to meet customer needs
	20. Full attention to the customer
	21 The facility's attention to execution and security
	22. Knowing and understanding customer needs by facility staff

Table A2. Importance of service quality dimensions in surveyed rural lodging facilities.

Dimensions	
Tangibles	Σ = 100 points
Reliability	
Responsiveness	
Assurances	
Empathy	

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