

# Has COVID-19 influenced the perceived quality of service of hotels?

Carlos Díaz-Santamaría, Jacques Bulchand-Gidumal and Santiago Melián-González

## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to analyze the perceived quality of service by guests in the reopening process during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The authors analyzed 1,679 TripAdvisor reviews from 2019 and 2020 that were written for hotels in Gran Canaria, Spain. The authors compared the average rating for 2019 and 2020 and the authors performed a content analysis of the reviews.*

**Findings** – *Guests perceived the quality of their stay to be worse during 2020, especially regarding food and beverage and staff behavior. The only service quality dimension that showed an improvement was related to open-air hotel installations.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *The authors only analyzed reviews in one language. The authors were not able to determine if the lower ratings in 2020 were due to the way in which they perceived the quality of service or to the fact that the quality of service was objectively worse.*

**Originality/value** – *This paper contributes to theory development in the field of hospitality management by providing new insights into how external events can influence hotel services and guests' perceptions. This research shows how a health crisis that is external to the tourism industry has caused an impact on hotel staff management and on how hotel staff behavior is perceived. However, it is also possible that regardless of anything managers do, the rating that a guest awards a hotel will be lower than it would have been before the pandemic.*

**Keywords** COVID-19, Staff, TripAdvisor, Food and beverage, Online ratings

**Paper type** Research paper

Carlos Díaz-Santamaría, Jacques Bulchand-Gidumal and Santiago Melián-González are all based at Institute of Sustainable Tourism and Economic Development, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously affected the tourism industry and the hotel sector, leading to more losses and to the need for different strategic responses than in previous crises (Le and Phi, 2020). Professionals in the hotel sector are working under high pressure, dealing with potential closures, financial losses and uncertain costs and forecasts of hotel room demands in the short and medium term (Jiang and Wen, 2020). Research has also shown that there may be a psychological component that affects hotel guests (Pappas, 2021; Yu *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, there has been a call for research regarding specific issues related to hospitality (Tracey, 2021), such as the impact of COVID on the quality of service.

In fact, most studies assume that hotel managers can influence the quality of service through management (Sohail *et al.*, 2007). However, little has been analyzed regarding how external factors can influence the quality of service. The influence of an external factor such as a pandemic on the quality of service can take place in several ways. It may make it difficult for hotels to manage services in the same way as they did before the pandemic (e.g. there may be changes in the way the service is provided). It can also affect the way in which guests perceive quality due to the circumstances that surround them (e.g. a halo effect due to coming from home confinement or strong restrictions on mobility). This is, we can expect that COVID has caused an

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impact on perceptions of hotel guests, and as a consequence, on how they evaluate performance.

Therefore, our research objective was to analyze whether COVID-19 has affected the perceived quality of hotel services. Because of lower demand and legal requirements, hotels have had lower occupancy rates during the pandemic, and when occupancy rates decrease, hotels have to make adjustments in their operational costs and tend to reduce services and staff (Mattila and O’Neill, 2003). In addition, hotels have had to impose certain security procedures that could influence guests’ perceived quality of service. However, due to a halo effect caused by the lockdown, it could also be the case that guests might perceive the hotel services more favorably than ever.

In this sense, although 2020 came with numerous tourism-related restrictions due to the pandemic, there were a few months in which there was a return to normal, just before the second wave of the pandemic at the end of 2020. These relatively normal months (July to October) of 2020 provide an interesting opportunity to analyze guests’ perceptions of the COVID-19 influence on hotel services.

### Methodology

In January 2021, we downloaded all the reviews from TripAdvisor that all the hotels in Gran Canaria, Spain, received during 2019 and 2020. This resulted in 12,637 reviews. To have two comparable samples from both 2019 and 2020, we focused our analysis on reviews regarding stays that took place during the months of July, August, September and October of each year, since from March to mid-June 2020, the island of Gran Canaria was under an administrative closure and hotels were closed (Table 1); a similar situation occurred during November and December. We also excluded the hotels that had received less than 10 reviews during the months considered for either of the two years. This guaranteed that we excluded any hotels that remained closed during the months that we analyzed. The hotels left in the sample were all located in the sun and beach tourism destinations of the island. Even with borders open, international traveling was severely restricted. Therefore, we decided to keep only reviews that were in Spanish since there were far fewer reviews in other languages in 2020 than in 2019 (a proportion of approximately 20:1). Our final sample

**Table 1** Administrative situation regarding COVID-19 by month in Spain

<i>Months</i>	<i>Situation</i>	<i>Occupancy rates<sup>a</sup> (%)</i>
2019		60–85
January to mid-March 2020	Normal pre-COVID-19 situation	75
Mid-March to mid-May 2020	Normal pre-COVID-19 situation	0
Mid-May to June 2020	Administrative closure and lockdown. No traveling allowed	10
July to October 2020	Return to normal over several phases through which hotels were gradually reopened	20–50
November and December 2020	New normal. Most hotels reopen, Spanish traveling allowed, some international travel allowed	10–20
	Significant restrictions due to the second wave of COVID-19 in Spain and in the most relevant origin markets for the Canary Islands	

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>Hotel occupancy rates of the area in which the hotels in the sample are located

**Source:** Authors and INE (2022)

included 1,679 reviews, 744 from 2019 and 935 from 2020. A total of 68.0% reviewed in which the guest awarded the hotel 5-stars, 17.5% were 4-star reviews, 6.2% were 3-star reviews, 4.2% were 2-star reviews and 4.2% were 1-star reviews. Of the 1,679 reviews analyzed, 9.3% correspond to 3-star hotels, 47.4% to 4-star hotels and 43.3% to 5-star hotels.

The literature shows that quality of service can be measured based on guests' perceptions (Brady and Cronin, 2001). To compare how guests valued the hotels, we performed a *t*-test comparing the ratings from 2019 and the ratings from 2020. For the content analysis of the reviews, a deductive approach was performed (Braun and Clarke, 2012) that drew on 12 dimensions of hotel service quality (García and Picos, 2009). The dimensions were as follows: staff competence and courtesy, complementary services (e.g. SPA, gym and entertainment activities), service reliability and suitability (e.g. quickness, efficacy and failures), tangible elements outside the hotel building (e.g. swimming pools, gardens and hammocks), tangible elements inside the hotel building (e.g. reception area, corridors and hall), rooms (e.g. layout, air conditioning and beds), hotel accessibility (e.g. parking and easily accessible), cleaning, environment (e.g. restaurants, beaches and noise levels), price, food and beverage and COVID-19 (e.g. compliance with the pandemic rules). This last category was included to incorporate comments regarding the ways in which the hotels managed COVID-19 procedures and naturally was only found in reviews regarding stays in 2020. Because many reviews included an overall assessment of the hotel or the stay (e.g. "our experience in this hotel could be summarized with the title of the review: unbeatable"), we also considered a global assessment category.

For each review, the researchers independently analyzed which of the 13 categories were mentioned and their valence (i.e. positive, negative or positive and negative aspects simultaneously). For example, regarding the staff competence and courtesy dimension, a positive comment was "gran profesionalidad del personal" ["great professionalism of the staff"], a negative comment was "el personal de recepción era muy distante y con poca capacidad resolutoria" ["the reception staff were very distant with little resolution capacity"], whereas a comment that includes both positive and negative aspects was "Camareros de piscina encantadores y atentos. Pero con respecto a los camareros del restaurante, algo agobiados y alguno que otro con malas caras todo lo contrario a las camareras que estaban pendientes a todo y siempre intentando hacerte todo más fácil. ["Lovely and attentive pool waiters. But with regard to the restaurant waiters, somewhat overwhelmed and some with bad faces, quite the opposite of the waitresses who were pending to everything and always trying to make everything easier."].

Once we had detected in each review the categories that were mentioned and the valence of each category in each of the reviews, we used a  $\chi^2$  test to compare the differences in guests' perceptions of hotel service quality between 2019 and 2020.

## Results

The mean of the ratings in 2019 was 4.52 (sd = 0.34), whereas the mean of the ratings in 2020 was 4.32 (sd = 0.37). The difference between the means of the two years was significant ( $t = 3.95$ ;  $p < 0.000$ ), as was the difference between the standard deviations ( $f = 0.68$ ;  $p < 0.000$ ). The difference between the means of the two years was consistent across the three hotel categories included in our sample (3-, 4- and 5-star hotels). Thus, ratings were higher in 2019, whereas the standard deviation was significantly higher in 2020 than in 2019. In 2020, there were proportionally more 1- and 2-star reviews than in 2019.

Table 2 provides the distribution of the perceptions of the service quality dimensions in hotels in 2019 and 2020.

There were significant differences in 5 out of the 12 hotel service quality dimensions analyzed. The category COVID-19 was not compared between 2019 and 2020, as this

**Table 2** Frequency and valence of the hotel service quality dimensions

Dimensions	Reviews that mention the dimension (%)		Positive reviews (%)		Negative reviews (%)		Positive and negative reviews (%)		$\chi^2$
	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020	
General	81.0	74.2	93.5	89.9	6.1	9.8	0.3	0.3	5.83 <sup>†</sup>
Staff	75.2	75.5	94.1	89.7	3.6	6.7	2.3	3.7	8.17 <sup>**</sup>
Comp. serv	35.2	26.3	74.4	71.1	20.6	25.2	5.0	3.7	1.85 <sup>ns</sup>
Reliability	32.2	28.8	70.8	61.0	27.9	36.8	1.3	2.2	5.64 <sup>†</sup>
Tang. out	58.7	55.3	88.8	91.9	5.7	5.6	5.5	2.5	5.67 <sup>†</sup>
Tang. in	43.2	41.5	92.8	91.8	3.4	5.7	3.7	2.6	2.68 <sup>ns</sup>
Rooms	42.3	37.7	77.5	75.0	15.6	17.6	7.0	7.4	0.59 <sup>ns</sup>
H. access	7.3	5.2	50.0	42.9	44.4	49.0	5.6	8.2	0.65 <sup>ns</sup>
Clean	24.5	24.5	91.8	89.1	6.0	9.2	2.2	1.8	1.46 <sup>ns</sup>
Environ	20.3	16.0	94.7	95.3	4.6	4.7	0.7	0.0	1.00 <sup>ns</sup>
Price	6.1	6.6	51.1	50.0	46.7	50.0	2.2	0.0	1.44 <sup>ns</sup>
F&B	59.4	56.8	79.4	64.4	12.4	24.7	8.1	11.0	28.42 <sup>***</sup>
COVID-19	–	37.3	–	84.0	–	11.2	–	4.9	–

Notes: <sup>†</sup>0.1; <sup>\*\*</sup>0.05; <sup>\*\*\*</sup>0.00; ns = non-significant

category only applied to comments in 2020. The five categories with significant differences were general valuation of the stay and the hotel; staff competence and courtesy; service reliability and suitability; tangible elements outside the hotel building; food and beverage. The reviews in these five categories were worse in 2020 than in 2019.

## Discussion

The first result that we found was that the ratings were worse during 2020. This lower rating could be caused by several reasons. It could be the case that even in the midst of a pandemic, guests' perceptions about how hotel services should be delivered had not significantly changed. Therefore, new procedures such as temperature checks, less available areas in the hotel and lower service quality, which we detected in the reviews while we did the content analysis, and even a psychological component that affects travel in periods of rapid change and high uncertainty (Pappas, 2021) could be the cause for these lower ratings.

On the other hand, the standard deviation was higher in 2020 than in 2019, which means that there was a higher dispersion in the ratings. Those satisfied were more satisfied in 2020, while those unsatisfied were also more unsatisfied in 2020. We believe this is logical since while many guests probably appreciated the possibility of enjoying a holiday after months of lockdown ("Sin duda, después de todo el confinamiento y la pandemia, de tantas malas noticias, fueron los mejores 10 días para mi de este 2020 gracias a todo el equipo", ["Without a doubt, after the lockdown and the pandemic, of all the bad news, it was the best 10 days for me of this 2020 thanks to all the team"]), others found the new COVID-19 procedures and protocols to be uncomfortable ("Debería haber algo más de personal para evitar las aglomeraciones y colas en los servicios de hostelería debido a las restricciones por el Covid", ["There should be more staff to avoid crowds and queues in the services due to the restrictions by the Covid"])).

When analyzing the service quality dimensions in which differences were found, certain issues stand out. First, guests perceived their stays to be worse during the pandemic than they did before it. The proportion of positive comments decreased in 2020, whereas the number of negative ones increased. It seems clear that users do not enjoy their stays as much when certain restrictions are imposed.

The second issue is the worsening of comments about the staff competence and courtesy. A hotel's staff has always been important in hotel settings, as confirmed by the fact that

three of every four guest reviews mentioned it. The staff has always been one of the main concerns of hotel managers (Enz, 2009). In principle, staff competence and behavior should not be different in a COVID-19 scenario. This dimension does not refer to workers' performance regarding pandemic requirements (this is collected in the specific COVID-19 dimension). It could be that hotel procedure intended to manage COVID-19 placed strain on employees or that there were not enough workers, so the staff was overworked. Personnel costs are the main costs for hotels, so the low occupation percentage during the pandemic period may have caused hotels to employ fewer personnel than they might have otherwise. It is true that taking a look at Table 2, guests were overall satisfied with staff, but there was a 5% decrease in positive comments and almost a duplication in negative ones.

In the same vein, perceptions of service reliability and suitability also worsened significantly, as did perceptions of food and beverage. Most hotel services rely on workers' performance (e.g. when guests are waiting to be served in a bar), and the worsening in service reliability and suitability could be explained by the same reasons that potentially contributed to the decline in the comments for the staff competence and courtesy dimension. The drop in perceived quality of food and beverage, the most significant in our sample, can also be explained by the restrictions imposed on hotels during the reopening process (e.g. bans on buffets and the use of single-use plastics whenever possible). Additionally, low hotel occupation and the subsequent income decrease could have resulted in costs being cut in this area, ultimately affecting the amount and quality of food and beverage. In this sense, some reviews contained specific complaints about food and beverage.

The only category that was perceived to be better in 2020 than in 2019 was the one related to tangible services outside the hotel building (e.g. gardens, swimming pools, etc.). As previously mentioned, this was to be expected since most of the guests arrived at the hotels after at least two months of total home confinement.

We also think it is worth noting that no differences were found between the pre-COVID-19 situation and the 2020 reviews in 7 of the 12 service quality dimensions analyzed: complementary services, tangibles inside the hotel building, rooms, accessibility to the hotel, cleaning, hotel environment and price. Especially relevant, from our perspective, was the fact that there were no differences regarding the rooms since guests could have spent more time in their rooms and thus mentioned issues related to this aspect of their stay. However, this was not the case. Comments regarding complementary services were those that revealed the largest drop in the number of mentions from 2019 to 2020 (almost 10%). We believe this was also to be expected, as there were less services available in hotels during the pandemic.

COVID-19 procedures were mentioned in a large number of the comments from 2020 (37.3%), and the observations were mostly positive in nature (84% of the cases). Thus, despite the fact that COVID-19 procedures were a novelty that had to be implemented quickly, it seems that managers and staff of the hotels evaluated were able to provide a satisfactory guarantee to guests regarding their COVID-19 measures.

Finally, regardless of the COVID situation, Table 2 demonstrates that the service quality dimension that was mentioned the most by guests was staff competence and courtesy (75%). Other dimensions frequently mentioned were tangible elements outside the building and food and beverage (each above 50%). In general, staff competence and courtesy, tangible elements inside and outside the building, cleanliness and the hotel environment were typically mentioned with positive remarks (90% or more of the cases). In comparison, prices and hotel accessibility, although not often mentioned (less than 10%), were typically perceived negatively when they were mentioned.

Our results allowed us to derive some managerial implications. First, it is clear that the process of returning to normal will be stressful for all parties. Hotels need to ensure that they maintain their amounts and types of resources (i.e. staff kindness (Wright *et al.*, 2001) and

performance, number of workers, amount and quality of food and beverage) that they had before the COVID-19 lockdown. Nevertheless, COVID-19 will likely continue to restrict the ways in which services are provided, which can tamper guests' enjoyment. Thus, hotel managers must find ways to make up for the guest's poor experience at the hotel. Staff behavior is key in this regard.

## Conclusion

The objective of this research was to analyze how the perceived service quality of hotels by guests compared between 2019 (pre-COVID situation) and 2020 (still when COVID was taking place, but in some months in which there was a certain return to normal). To that aim, we analyzed 1,679 reviews (744 from 2019 and 935 from 2020) corresponding to hotels in Gran Canaria, one of the most well-known tourism destinations in Europe. Our results show that guests perceived the quality of their stay to be worse during 2020, especially regarding food and beverage and staff behavior. The only service quality dimension that showed an improvement was related to open-air hotel installations.

It is possible that regardless of anything managers do, the rating that a guest awards a hotel will be lower than it would have been before the pandemic since the overall experience is inevitably worse, and this deficit is almost impossible to overcome. It is likely that just knowing that this could happen may be important in itself.

This paper contributes to theory development in the field of hospitality management by providing new insights into how external events can influence hotel services and guests' perceptions. In this specific case, our research shows how a health crisis that is external to the tourism industry has caused an impact on hotel staff management and on how hotel staff behavior is perceived. Our research also contributes to the theory by confirming that even under extreme circumstances, guests do not easily change what they perceive of hotel services. Thus, when a guest enters a hotel, they perceive an environment in which they can escape from their daily routine and in which they can relax and have a good time (Prebensen *et al.*, 2010).

## Limitations

The context in which this study was conducted resulted in some limitations. However, these constraints pave the road for future studies that will be necessary in the near future as the world overcomes the crisis and returns to normal. We have identified four main limitations. First, we limited our analysis to one language. It would be interesting to extend this study to analyze other nationalities and destinations. Second, in this study, we only classified the reviews in each category as positive, negative or both positive and negative. However, the intensity of the valence was not analyzed. Future studies could take this intensity into account using sentiment analysis software. Third, we did not have access to information regarding the profiles of those who rated. Thus, it could be the case that the tourists that stayed in a hotel in Gran Canaria in 2020 had a different profile than those who stayed in 2019. Finally, we have not been able to determine if the lower ratings are due to the way in which they perceived the quality of service or to the fact that the quality of service was objectively worse. We believe it is probably a combination of the three elements, but this needs to be confirmed in future studies.

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## Corresponding author

Carlos Díaz-Santamaría can be contacted at: [carlos.diaz@ulpgc.es](mailto:carlos.diaz@ulpgc.es)

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