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## **Customer experience in the tourism industry – Determinants influencing complaint behaviour**

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**Abstract:** The customer service experience with a specific travel agency is a kind of moment of truth. Customer satisfaction is the outcome they have experienced when service performance met expectations. Contrary to satisfaction, consumers may experience dissatisfaction with the provided service. One of the responses to dissatisfaction is a consumer complaint. Apart from feeling satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the provided service, consumers may also be satisfied or unsatisfied with the complaint process. The aim of this paper is to identify differences in the determinants of complaint behavior (tendency to file a complaint, justice of interaction, perception of fairness, satisfaction with the complaint handling process and loyalty) between female and male respondents. Field research was conducted meaning that the primary data were collected through a survey. The paper presents the respondents' assessments of the set statements regarding experiences during the complaint process. To meet the research objectives, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied, which is used to examine the differences between the two independent groups as a nonparametric alternative to the t-test of independent samples.

**Keywords:** travel agencies, consumers, services, experience, complaint behavior

**JEL classification:** L83, Z32

## **Iskustvo korisnika u turističkoj industriji – Determinante žalbenog ponašanja**

**Sažetak:** Uslužno iskustvo korisnika sa konkretnom turističkom agencijom je svojevrsni trenutak istine. Zadovoljstvo korisnika je ishod koji su oni doživeli kada su performanse usluge ispunile očekivanja. Suprotno zadovoljstvu korisnici mogu ostvariti nezadovoljstvo pruženom uslugom. Jedan od odgovora na nezadovoljstvo je žalba korisnika. Kao što korisnici mogu osetiti zadovoljstvo ili nezadovoljstvo pruženom uslugom, tako mogu osetiti i zadovoljstvo ili nezadovoljstvo žalbenim procesom. Cilj rada je identifikacija razlika u determinantama žalbenog ponašanja (sklonost ka podnošenju žalbe, pravda interakcije, percepcija pravičnosti, zadovoljstvo procesom rukovanja žalbom i lojalnost) između ispitanika ženskog i muškog pola. Sprovedeno je terensko istraživanje tako da su primarni podaci prikupljeni metodom ankete. U radu su prikazane ocene ispitanika na postavljene tvrdnje koje se odnose na iskustva tokom žalbenog postupka. Da bi se ispunili ciljevi istraživanja primenjen je Mann-Whitney U test kao neparametarska alternativa t-testa nezavisnih uzoraka, koji se upotrebljava za ispitivanje razlika između dve nezavisne grupe.

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**Ključne reči:** turističke agencije, korisnici, usluge, iskustvo, žalbeno ponašanje  
**JEL klasifikacija:** L83, Z32

## 1. Introduction

The interest in this research topic stems from the fact that the user's complaint - as a consequence of unsatisfactory experience, represents an important resource for the application of the so-called recovery paradox. This means that service companies have great resources but are not able to utilize them properly and efficiently. This arises the question such as in which ways organizations can best use their resources in order to achieve maximum results. The customer filing complaint is one of the tools that would comply with such a purpose. Dissatisfied customers who make a complaint provide feedback to a service company. This information is the starting point for changes in the service process, for the specific service. Therefore, employees on the first line of service should behave adequately towards customers from the very first moment. The importance of the research is reflected in the identification of differences in the determinants of complaint behavior depending on the gender of the respondents. Respondents' assessments to the offered statements arose as a result of experience in complaint processes.

Travel agencies treat their customers as direct partners. According to [Topalović and Marinković \(2020\)](#), "the main goal of conducting all marketing activities in tourism is to provide the expected value to consumers and make long-term profits. By creating appropriate value for their customers, travel agencies create satisfied and loyal consumers, who represent one of the results of a successful marketing application" (p. 50).

Consumers gain different experiences after using specific tourist services. Each individual has different socio-demographic and psychographic characteristics, which determine his/her choices. Therefore, every person reacts differently to the same service. This defines the very aspect of the experience. In addition to personal, there are environmental factors affecting the experience. Co-creation of services occurs as a result of the simultaneous development of production and consumption. In the process of co-creation, on the one hand, there are participants who provide the service (employees from the first line of service) and other possible participants outside the service (e.g. other users), and on the other hand, there are service users. The result of a service encounter is a user experience formed in the present or past based on the interaction of all participants ([Jaakkola et al., 2015](#)).

The so-called moment of truth is the first contact that is realized between the employees from the first line of service and the users. It participates in creating a subjective experience of the service from the particular user ([McCull-Kennedy et al., 2015](#)).

The experiences of one user could influence the perception of another one. With this being said, it can be concluded that the tourist experience is an impact factor, affecting personal experiences of other users, as well ([Rihova et al., 2015](#)).

The consumer experience is multidimensional and focuses on customer cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory, and social responses to the company's offer during the travel period ([Lemon & Verhoef, 2016](#)). Experience-based spending largely focuses on hedonistic value for the consumer, time, and effort on such trips (before, during, and after). For all these reasons, consumers are not only passive agents who react to stimuli, but also producers of their own experiences. Planning, considering options and choosing leisure travel can be seen as a positive activity in itself, increasing the overall value of the tourist travel experience ([Gill et al., 2005](#)).

## **2. Service experiences as a subjective category**

If the research of users can be observed through certain phases, then their behavior during the purchase can be stated as the first phase. Once the needs are identified, it is time to find a way to meet them. The result is services tailored to meet those needs (Bowen & McCain, 2015). According to Bharwani and Jauhari (2013), “service users do not buy services, but they buy experiences; they do not buy quality of service than memories” (p. 825). In order to successfully identify customer ratings after the service has been provided, catering companies must maintain their perspective. Products are interchangeable and tangible while services are intangible, but what is common is that experiences are memorable. To achieve a competitive advantage, employees from the first line of service can be used as a key “resource” in creating a customer experience. Hence, there is the need for special competencies of employees on the first line of service (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013).

Although the “memorable experience is influenced by many other aspects” (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013, p. 833), the competence of first-line staff plays a key role in the interactions between employees and users. As Chen and Chen (2010) stated “service experience points out as a personal reaction and feeling of service users, and therefore it has a significant impact on their satisfaction” (p. 29).

Users have their own expectations of how their needs and desires should be met. Based on the provided service, users shape impressions compared to their expectations. Customer loyalty is the goal of every organization, regardless of whether it provides them with a service or a product. In order to achieve customer loyalty, it is necessary to achieve satisfaction beforehand. Satisfaction arises as a positive difference between anticipated expectations and realized service experience. Users’ expectations arise as a result of believing that the service will be provided to them in a desired way. They are influenced by many factors.

Satisfaction with the service is the result of previously formed expectations about the service and perception of the same. Based on the user’s assessments, a perception is created before the service is provided. Service is a process that results in the simultaneous action of production and consumer assessment (William et al., 2016). Customer satisfaction is the outcome they experienced when service performance met expectations. As opposed to satisfaction, there is dissatisfaction. As a reflection of dissatisfaction, a user complaint may occur.

If users’ expectations were to be seen as favorable, adjusted, or initial, experience should be taken as a key criterion for distinguishing them. After having the experience with a certain service, adjusted expectations arise. This type of expectation is characterized by continuous changes, but they also lead to repurchases. If there are favorable expectations, they increase over time. Initial favorable expectations are used as a standard in assessing customer satisfaction. The perception of performance arises after the service experience (Lin & Lekhawipat, 2016).

According to Payne et al. (2008), “within client processes, there are three elements of the relationship of experience that can be recognized: cognition, emotion, and behavior” (p. 87). The traditional flow of consumer information refers to the research of cognition, influence, and behavior. When considering experience related to a relationship, these elements should be taken in a broad context. Emotions and feelings expand beyond the influence that emphasizes attitudes and desires. We use emotions as an expression for “feelings of mood and personality traits based on influence” (Payne et al., 2008, p. 87). Satisfaction is a positive emotion as opposed to an unsatisfactory experience that creates negative emotions.

### 3. Creating a tourist experience as a starting point for loyalty

One of the factors influencing the user experience is the performance of each organization. It is this on which how well the service company satisfies its sophisticated customers depends. [Richard and Zhang \(2012\)](#) emphasize that “customer satisfaction can be seen as a response to the perception evaluation of a discrepancy between previous expectations and the actual performance of services perceived after its consumption” (p. 573). Loyal customers continue to buy services. As a result, [William et al. \(2016\)](#) consider that there has been a change in the focus of quality of the original manufacturers’ point of view under different names such as *quality-based services, objective and subjective quality and operational management*.

Subjective quality has received a lot of attention and benefits, especially in the free market economy, to gain customers. The quality of service affects the intention to buy existing and potential customers. The logical consequence of not meeting the expectations of the service results in the departure of the user. The reduction of the base of users of the company's services affects the reduction of profits, and thus the overall business performance of the company. [William et al. \(2016\)](#) point out that “during the consumption of experiences, different types of consumer emotions express important information about how the user will finally evaluate the service and later the overall quality of the relationship” (p. 2).

[Tronvoll \(2007\)](#) states that an individual’s purchasing decision depends on the set of emotions being dominated. [Liefeld et al. \(1975\)](#) were among the first to investigate the influence of sociodemographic characteristics on the tendency to complain as a consequence of unsatisfactory experiences. [Reynolds and Harris \(2006\)](#) claimed that the users who complain are most often younger, highly educated, earning above average income. [Homburg et al. \(2010\)](#) show that men and women differ in their purchasing behavior, and consequently in the complaint procedure. The review of papers in this area did not provide an equal view on the issue of differences in the determinants of complaint behavior among users of tourist services. Therefore, there is the call to present the results of research conducted on a sample from the Republic of Serbia.

### 4. Methodology and results of empirical research

Empirical research was conducted using a survey. The sample included a total of 158 respondents from the Republic of Serbia. The findings of the pilot research ([Tomić et al., 2018](#)) served as the basis to which the results obtained after the research in the period from January to April 2018 are added. The questionnaire contains statements which refer to the process of filing a complaint in the business of a travel agency whose services have been used in the last three years. Respondents gave answers using a rating scale, i.e. Likert's scale from 1 to 5. The statements relate to five determinants of complaint behavior: tendency to complain, fairness of interaction, perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints, satisfaction, and loyalty of complainant. In order to identify a statistically significant difference in the determinants of objection handling, the Mann - Whitney U test was used as a nonparametric alternative to the t-test. The importance of the research is reflected in the identification of differences in the determinants of complaint behavior depending on the gender of the respondents. Respondents’ assessments to the offered statements arose as a result of experience in complaint processes. The statements in the questionnaire were adapted to the relevant studies [Homburg et al. \(2010\)](#), [Karatepe \(2006\)](#) and [Mattila \(2001\)](#). The analysis of the gathered data was conducted through the statistical software SPSS 21.

In the structure of respondents, 37.3% are male while 62.7% are female. Most respondents are of the age span 18 to 27, 55.7%. 41.1% of respondents have completed college or university and are the most represented in the sample. In the sample structure, most

respondents travel 2-3 times a year, meaning 29.7%, followed by 29.7% of respondents who travel once a year, while 11.4% of respondents travel 4 or more times a year. The least number of respondents do not travel every year, representing 17.7%. The results of the research showed that 67.1% of respondents spend on average over 200 euros per trip.

The task of this research is to examine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the determinants of complaint behavior between users of tourist services of different gender. The hypotheses set in the pilot study (Tomić et al., 2018) were also applied in this paper. The difference in relation to the pilot research is in a larger number of respondents. The main hypothesis  $H_0$  is defined: “There is a statistically significant difference in the determinants of complaint behavior between users of tourist services of different gender. Afterwards, the main hypothesis  $H_0$  needs to be broken down into the following five hypotheses related to the determinants of complaint behavior.  $H_1$ : There is a statistically significant difference between the users of tourist services of different gender in the trend to make a complaint.  $H_2$ : There is a statistically significant difference in the equality of interaction between users of tourist services of different gender.  $H_3$ : There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness between users of tourist services of different gender.  $H_4$ : There is a statistically significant difference in consumer satisfaction of complaint procedure between users of the tourist service of different genders.  $H_5$ : There is a statistically significant difference in loyalty between users of tourist services of different gender” (Tomić et al., 2018, p. 19).

The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests showed that the assumption about the normality of the distribution was not confirmed. The determination of a statistically significant difference in the propensity to file a complaint in relation to the gender of the subjects was investigated using the Mann-Whitney U test, as a nonparametric alternative to the t-test of independent samples (Table 1). In order for the result to be considered statistically significant, the result of the Z approximation should be less than the required limit value of 0.05.

Table 1: Test statistics for  $H_1$

	<b>Tendency to file a complaint</b>
Mann-Whitney U	2,640.5
Wilcoxon W	7,590.5
Z	-1.041
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.298

Source: Author’s research

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to confirm the differences between the two independent groups (male and female). The obtained values were converted into ranks. Afterwards, it was determined if they are different.

Table 1a: Mean value of rank and median

	<b>Gender</b>	N	Mean Rank	Median
<b>Tendency to file a complaint</b>	Male	59	84.25	2.0
	Female	99	76.67	2.0
	Total	158		

Source: Author’s research

Mann-Whitney U test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the tendency to file complaints of men (Md = 2.0, n = 59) and women (Md = 2.0, n = 99) in Serbia, U = 2,640.5, Z = -1.041, p = 0.298, r = 0.08 (small effect). Men and women in Serbia are equally inclined to file complaints.

The Mann-Whitney U test was used as a nonparametric alternative since the normality of the distribution was not confirmed (Table 2).

Table 2: Test statistics for H<sub>2</sub>

	<b>Justice of interaction</b>
Mann-Whitney U	2,919.0
Wilcoxon W	4,689.0
Z	-0.006
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.996

Source: Author's research

Table 2a: Mean value of rank and median

	<b>Gender</b>	N	Mean Rank	Median
<b>Justice of interaction</b>	Male	59	79.47	4.0
	Female	99	79.52	4.0
	Total	158		

Source: Author's research

Mann-Whitney U test did not find a statistically significant difference in the fairness of the interaction of men (Md = 4.0, n = 59) and women (Md = 4.0, n = 99) in Serbia, U = 2,919.0, Z = - 0.006, p = 0.996, r = 0.0005 (small effect). Men and women in Serbia equally perceive the justice of interaction during the complaint process.

Not only with the fairness of the interaction, but also with the perception of the fairness of the interaction in the complaint handling process, the Mann - Whitney U test was used (Table 3).

Table 3: Test statistics for H<sub>3</sub>

	<b>Perception of fairness</b>
Mann-Whitney U	2,848.0
Wilcoxon W	7,798.0
Z	-0.262
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.793

Source: Author's research

Table 3a: Mean value of rank and median

	<b>Gender</b>	N	Mean Rank	Median
<b>Perception of fairness</b>	Male	59	80.73	3.5
	Female	99	78.77	3.5
	Total	158		

Source: Author's research

Mann-Whitney U test did not identify a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of men (Md = 3.50, n = 59) and women (Md = 3.5, n = 99) in Serbia, U = 2,848.0,

Z = -0.262, p = 0.793, r = 0.03 (small effect). Men and women in Serbia equally perceive the fairness of interaction in handling complaints.

Nevertheless, the Mann - Whitney U test was also used to determine a statistically significant difference in satisfaction with handling complaints (Table 4).

Table 4: Test statistics for H<sub>4</sub>

	<b>Satisfaction of the complainant</b>
Mann-Whitney U	2,681.5
Wilcoxon W	7,631.5
Z	-0.869
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.385

Source: Author's research

Table 4a: Mean value of rank and median

	<b>Gender</b>	N	Mean Rank	Median
<b>Satisfaction of the complainant</b>	Male	59	83.55	3.67
	Female	99	77.09	3.33
	Total	158		

Source: Author's research

Mann-Whitney U test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in satisfaction with the complaint handling process of men (Md = 3.67, n = 59) and women (Md = 3.33, n = 99) in Serbia, U = 2,681.5, Z = -0.896, p = 0.385, r = 0.07 (small effect). Men and women in Serbia are equally satisfied with the travel agency's approach to the complaint process.

Finally, the fifth auxiliary hypothesis was tested using the Mann-Whitney U test, as a nonparametric alternative to the t-test of independent samples (Table 5).

Table 5: Test statistics for H<sub>5</sub>

	<b>Loyalty of the complainant</b>
Mann-Whitney U	2,827.0
Wilcoxon W	7,777.0
Z	-0.340
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.734

Source: Author's research

Table 5a: Mean value of rank and median

	<b>Gender</b>	N	Mean Rank	Median
<b>Loyalty of the complainant</b>	Male	59	81.08	4.0
	Female	99	78.56	3.6
	Total	158		

Source: Author's research

Mann-Whitney U test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in loyalty between men (Md = 4.0, n = 59) and women (Md = 3.6, n = 99) in Serbia, U = 2,827.0, Z = -0.340, p = 0.734, r = 0.03 (small effect). Men and women in Serbia are equally loyal to travel agencies.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The key resource in the service sector are people. The process of production and consumption itself takes place simultaneously. Thus, service providers and users create experiences at the same time. User experiences depend on a large number of factors. The focus of this paper was to look into the differences in the determinants of complaint behavior of users of travel agency services.

The subject of this research is to assess and explore unsatisfactory experiences of tourist services users employing the determinants of complaint behavior. In total, five determinants of complaint behavior were given to the respondents for evaluation. Each determinant included certain claims which importance was measured based on previous user's experience with a particular travel agency. At the beginning of the research, the main hypothesis  $H_0$  was defined, which was broken down into five auxiliary hypothesis referring to the five determinants of complaint behavior. The applied Mann-Whitney U test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the trend of making complaint, fairness of interaction, perception of interaction, consumer satisfaction with the complaint procedure, and loyalty of men and women in Serbia. To conclude, there is little effect of gender on the five determinants of complaint behaviour. The men and women in Serbia are equally inclined to make complaints. Based on the presented results, it is concluded that the main hypothesis was rejected. There is no statistically significant difference in the determinants of complaint behavior between users of tourism services among different gender.

There are some limitations to this study mostly due to the time constraints. As a result of the short time response, the sample was too small. The selection field was limited to only one chosen socio-demographic characteristic.

Further research could look into the extension of this study in two ways: include more socio-demographic characteristics and increase the number of time intervals in which the research is conducted. Moreover, a larger sample could be taken into account. Another suggestion would also concern the analysis of psychographic characteristics of users of tourist services.

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