

## **SATISFACTION AND LOYALTY FACTORS OF SKI RESORTS - THE CASE STUDY OF SLOVAKIA AND AUSTRIA**

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**Abstract.** In order to keep up with the current challenges, a high level of awareness of the special demand patterns of customers is mandatory. The primary reason organizations measure service quality and customer satisfaction is to better understand how they may enhance customer value and loyalty, and thus, the overall financial performance of the firm. Providers of ski resorts must have a good understanding of their customers if they are to understand their quality perceptions or have a chance of successfully implementing service quality programmes. The paper investigates the relationship of factors influencing the satisfaction and loyalty according to ski resorts customers and ski resort providers. The qualitative data were collected in ski resorts of Slovakia and Austria. A total of 58 depth customer interviews of 3 ski resorts in Slovakia and depth provider interviews of 3 ski resorts in Slovakia and 3 ski resorts in Austria were analyzed using software Maxqda. The results of the research show that there is a gap between perception of satisfaction and loyalty factors of customers and providers of ski resorts. The findings suggest that providers of ski resorts should focus more on factors of the satisfaction and loyalty according to ski resorts customers' expectations. Theoretical and managerial implications of these findings are being discussed.

**Key words:** Satisfaction, loyalty, ski resort, customer, provider

**JEL code:** M310

### **Introduction**

This paper represents the initial phase of the project aimed at researching the topical factors with their relationships and links influencing satisfaction and loyalty of ski resorts customers in selected countries. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship of factors influencing the satisfaction and loyalty of customers of ski resorts in Slovakia and which factors providers of ski resorts in Slovakia and Austria consider important for their customers.

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Satisfaction has been a concern for a number of years (Cardozo, 1965) and is generally recognized as a post purchase construct that is related to how much a person likes or dislikes a product or service after experiencing it (Woodside, Frey, and Daly, 1989). It can be defined as an evaluation that an "experience was at least as good as it was supposed to be" (Hunt, 1977). Satisfaction is a response to a perceived discrepancy between prior expectations and perceived performance after consumption (Oliver, 1981; Tse and Wilton, 1988). Satisfaction is often described as a confirmation of expectations (Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins, 1987) and, while there has been some discussion as to whether satisfaction and dissatisfaction are opposite poles on the same dimension (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982), most researchers seem to have accepted that dissatisfaction and satisfaction reflect the same continuum (e.g., Westbrook and Oliver, 1991).

The influence of image on destination choice process has been studied by various authors (e.g., Crompton and Ankomah, 1993; Gartner, 1989; Goodall, 1988). It is believed that destinations with more positive images will be more likely included in the process of decision making. In addition, destination image exercises a positive influence on perceived quality and satisfaction. The degree of visitors' loyalty to a destination is reflected in intentions to revisit the destination and in their willingness to recommend it (Oppermann, 2000). Previous research on winter sport destinations which have hosted big sport events presented that there might be a gap between the relevance of the systematic considerations of the specific challenges of tourism destination marketing and common practice (Kaiser et al., 2013).

The connection between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty generally depends on the number of choices a customer has. The dominant view in the literature is that satisfaction is the more global of the two constructs, and that perceptions of service quality affect feelings of satisfaction, which will then affect loyalty and future buying decisions (Hurley and Hooman, 1998).

The factors affecting customer satisfaction and service quality are as many and as varied as the number of potential customers themselves. Different things are important to different people for different reasons and as such are perceived in different ways. For example, the same factor can be interpreted in many different ways, by many different people, and even, on occasion, by the same person depending upon the time of day, mood, attitude, and so on. Evidence suggests that successful organizations are able to diagnose their customer expectations fully and satisfy them completely, during each and every service encounter (Zemke and Schaaf, 1990).

Identification of service quality dimensions aids in the measurement, understanding, and satisfaction of customer needs and wants. This information comes from customers themselves and also from frontline staff who daily come into contact with them. While extensive research has been carried out in the area (Berry, 1983; Gronroos, 1984; Garvin, 1987; Fitsimmons and Maurer, 1991), the work of Parasuman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) stands out in terms of helping clarifying how customers define service quality. Their initial qualitative study

recognized underlying dimensions of service quality, each of which is related to the customer's confidence in those providing the service. As a result of further extensive research these criteria were collapsed into five more specific components: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance, which have formed the basis of many measurement techniques.

Geng-Qing Chia and Hailin (2007) studied an integrated approach to understand destination loyalty and they examined the theoretical and empirical evidence on the causal relationships among destination image, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty. A research model was proposed and tested. The model investigated the relevant relationships among the constructs by using a structural equation modelling (SEM) approach. The empirical data for the study were collected in a major tourism destination in the state of Arkansas—Eureka Springs. The main purpose of the study was to develop and test a theoretical model, which represented the elements contributing to the building of destination loyalty: destination image, attribute satisfaction, and overall satisfaction. The results supported the proposed destination loyalty model that destination image directly influenced attribute satisfaction; destination image and attribute satisfaction were both direct antecedents of overall satisfaction; and overall satisfaction and attribute satisfaction in turn had direct and positive impact on destination loyalty.

## **Methodology**

In order to answer the qualitative research questions semi-structured interviews were conducted, confronting the interviewees with statements deduced from the body of theories described in the theoretical framework section as well as with factors influencing the satisfaction and loyalty of ski resorts customers, as described in the relevant literature. The relative advantages of qualitative compared to quantitative methods become highly significant. These methods limit the range of answers by the interviewee by basing the interview on a questionnaire, which can provide precise formulations and ordering of the questions as well as possible answers. A total of 58 depth customer interviews of 3 ski resorts in Slovakia and depth provider interviews of 3 ski resorts in Slovakia and 3 ski resorts in Austria were rewritten by using software Dragon, which is speech recognition software. The data were analyzed by using software Maxqda, which is professional software for qualitative and mixed methods data, allowing for easy sorting, structuring, and analyzing of large amounts of text by using code system. The satisfaction and loyalty factors of ski resorts with name of the code were assigned to the coded segment. The coded satisfaction and loyalty factors of respondents were compared and analyzed. The quota sample position consists of providers of 3 ski resorts in Austria (Skiwelt Wilder Kaiser Brixental, Schladming-Dachstein, Ischgl) and 3 ski resorts in Slovakia (Park Snow Donovaly, Jasna, Jasenska Dolina) from different departments, such as head of marketing, managers and 21 customers of ski resort Park Snow Donovaly, 20 customers of ski resort Jasna, and 17 customers of ski resort Jasenska Dolina in Slovakia. The

comparison was provided between providers of ski resorts in Slovakia and Austria who considered important satisfaction and loyalty factors for their customers and customers of each ski resort in Slovakia.

## **Research results and discussion**

Data collection was completed with 58 samples of customers visiting ski resorts in Slovakia. Descriptive statistics of demographic factors provided the structure of the quota samples of this study, the details of many variables were provided, such as gender, age group, marital status, number of children and variables such as skiing skills, visit rate, length of stay. The age group of the customers visiting ski resorts in Slovakia was identified based on a sample of 58 respondents. The majority of them were aged between 25 to 39 (84.48%). According to this study, the number of male customers (55.17%) is greater than the number of female customers (44.83%). For the marital status, most ski resort customers were single (63.79%). About two-thirds of all the sample had children (31.04%), which is important fact in the selection of ski resort as they give a priority to ski resorts which offer attractions for children, ski schools, animators. A majority of respondents were intermediate (27.58%) and advanced (56.90%) customers of ski resorts, which is important fact in the selection of ski resort as they give a priority to ski resorts which offer diversity and length of slopes. From 58 samples, the results shows that ski resort Jasna was for the Slovak ski resorts customers the most popular ski resort in Slovakia (37.93%). Due to a limitation to the length of this paper, some of the results where the research was undertaken were discussing. Table 1 shows a comparison of factors, which provider of ski resort Jasna considers important for their customers and factors of 20 customers of ski resort Jasna, which influence their satisfaction and loyalty of the ski resort Jasna. In the depth interview with open questions there are some factors, which are important for provider and also for customers of the ski resort Jasna (number of identical factors). Some factors are important for ski resorts customers of ski resort Jasna but the provider does not consider them important for their customers (number of different factors). The results show that there is a gap between perception of important satisfaction and loyalty factors of provider of ski resort Jasna and its customers. The most important gap is between the customer perception of the satisfaction and loyalty factors such as price of accommodation, distance from the car park to the ski slope, choice of restaurants, waiting time on ski lift, price of skipass, music and image, which provider of ski resort Jasna does not consider so important for its customers. If customer of ski resort Jasna is not satisfied with a service of the ski resort, an alternative programme is the motivation to stay in the ski resort and a voucher is the loyalty factor for the next visit but provider of ski resort Jasna considers the solution of the problem as an important satisfaction and loyalty factor for its customers. The result of study Geng-Qing Chia and Hailin (2007) proposed destination loyalty model that destination image directly influenced attribute satisfaction, which is corresponding with the perception of customers of ski resort Jasna.

**Table 1 Comparison of satisfaction and loyalty factors of provider of ski resort Jasna and its customers**

Area	Factors of provider of ski resort Jasna	Number of identical factors	The other factors of customers of ski resort Jasna	Number of different factors
<b>Accommodation</b>	Directly in ski resort	9	Price of accommodation	6
	Accommodation package	3	Quality of accommodation	2
	Discount for skipass	11	Breakfast / half board	4
	Wellness	9	Distance to the slope	4
<b>Transport</b>	Parking for free	6	Access to ski resort	2
	Safety	7	Ample parking	5
	Ski bus	12	Distance to the ski slope	6
<b>Restaurant</b>	Restaurants with view	4	Choice of restaurants	9
	Après ski bar	7	Price of meals	3
			Traditional cuisine	5
<b>Ski piste</b>	Diversity of slopes	12	Ski lift	3
	Connection of north and south	3	Weather	3
	Slope conditions	8	Waiting time on ski lift	6
	Snow quality	5	Free ride	1
	Safety	3	Technology	1
<b>Skipass</b>	Gopass	1	Discount for students, families, groups	3
	Discount for wellness and other products	7	Off season skipass	1
	Voucher	6	Price of skipass	8
<b>Attractions/ Activities</b>	Events	2	Music	7
	Competitions	2	Ski school/rental	6
	Tobogganing	3	Attractions for children	4
	Event - Happy end	2	Concerts	3
	Evening attractions	1	Snow park	1
<b>Loyalty</b>	Complexity of services	7	Voucher	2
	Events	1	Diversity of slopes	3
	Attractions	2	Altitude	2
	Skipass	1	Service quality	3
	Marketing	1	Image	5
	Service satisfaction	4	Atmosphere	2
	Professional staff	2	Localization	2
<b>Satisfaction - motivation</b>	Feedback	1	Alternative programme	6
	Solve the problem	4	Attractions	2
	Professional staff	4	Discount for skipass	7
<b>Satisfaction - loyalty</b>	Professional staff	3	Voucher	3
	Solve the problem	5	Investment	2

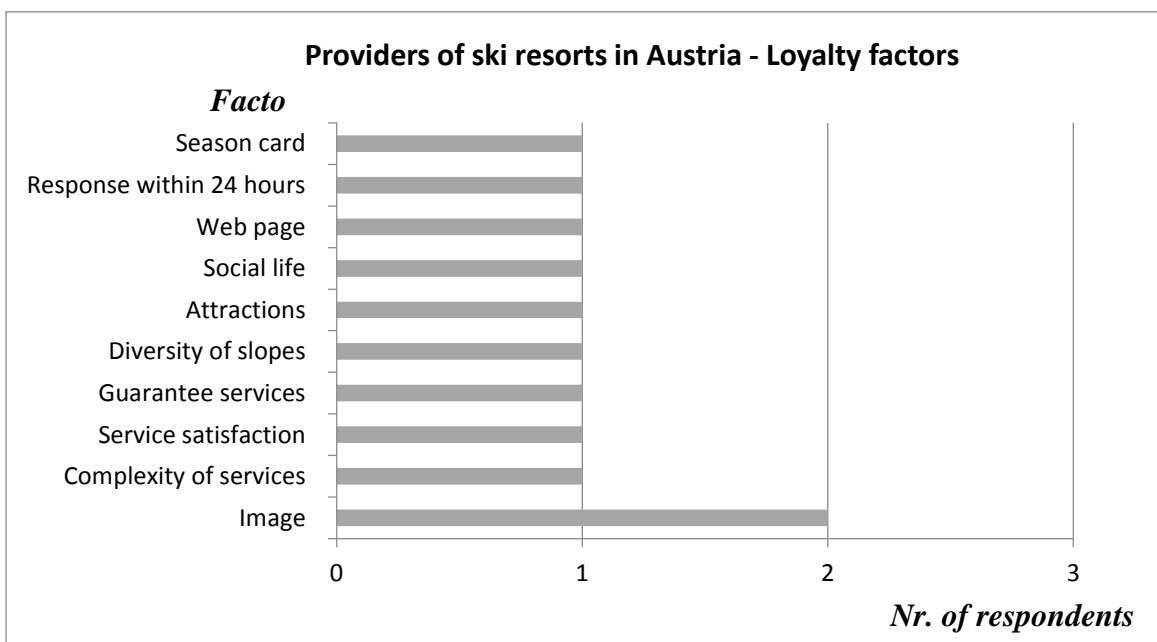
Source: author's results based on research in ski resort Jasna

Figure 1 shows the most important loyalty factors for providers of ski resorts in Slovakia. They consider the most important loyalty factors for their customers as a localization, professional

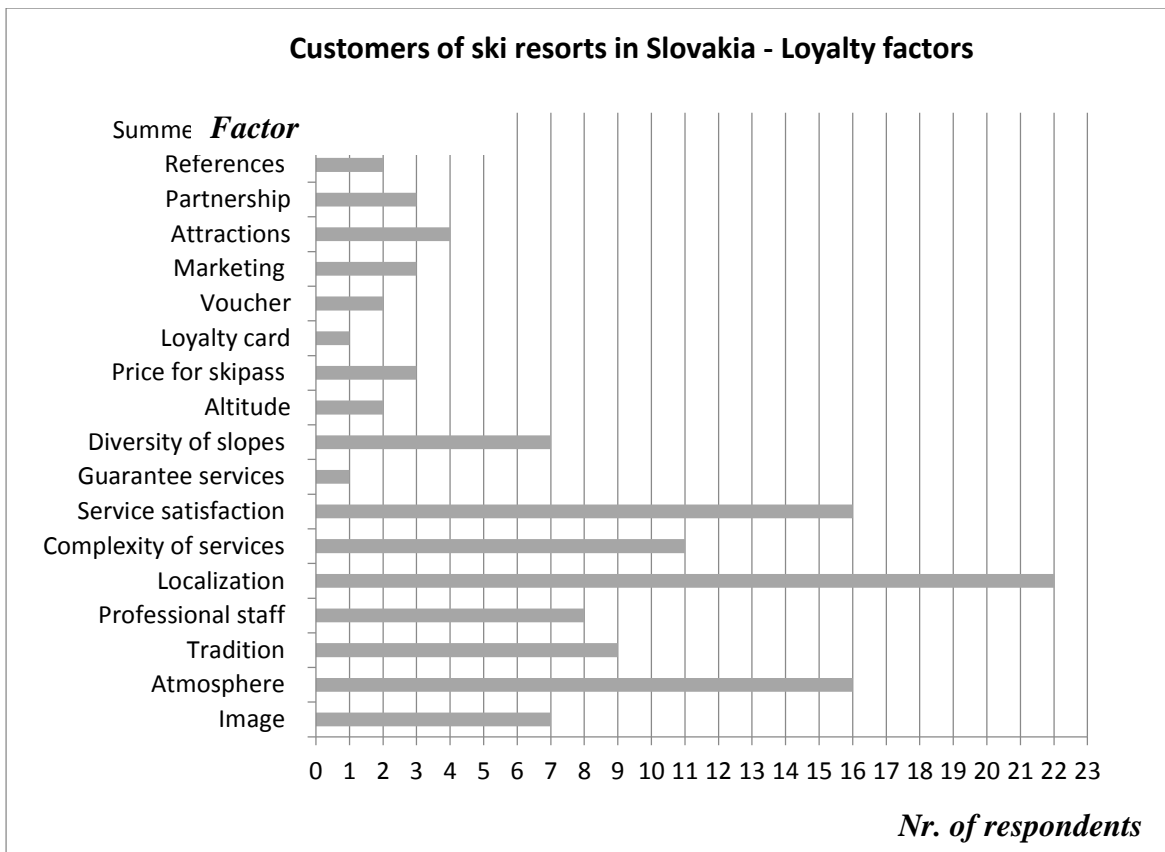
staff, service satisfaction, complexity of services, atmosphere. Figure 2 shows the most important loyalty factors for providers of ski resorts in Austria, which consider an image as the most important loyalty factor for their customers. Figure 3 shows the most important loyalty factors for customers of ski resorts in Slovakia. They consider the most important loyalty factors as service satisfaction, complexity of services, localization and atmosphere. There is a gap between providers' and consumers' perception of the important satisfaction and loyalty factors of ski resorts. Providers of ski resorts do not consider the factors so important and they should more concern on it.



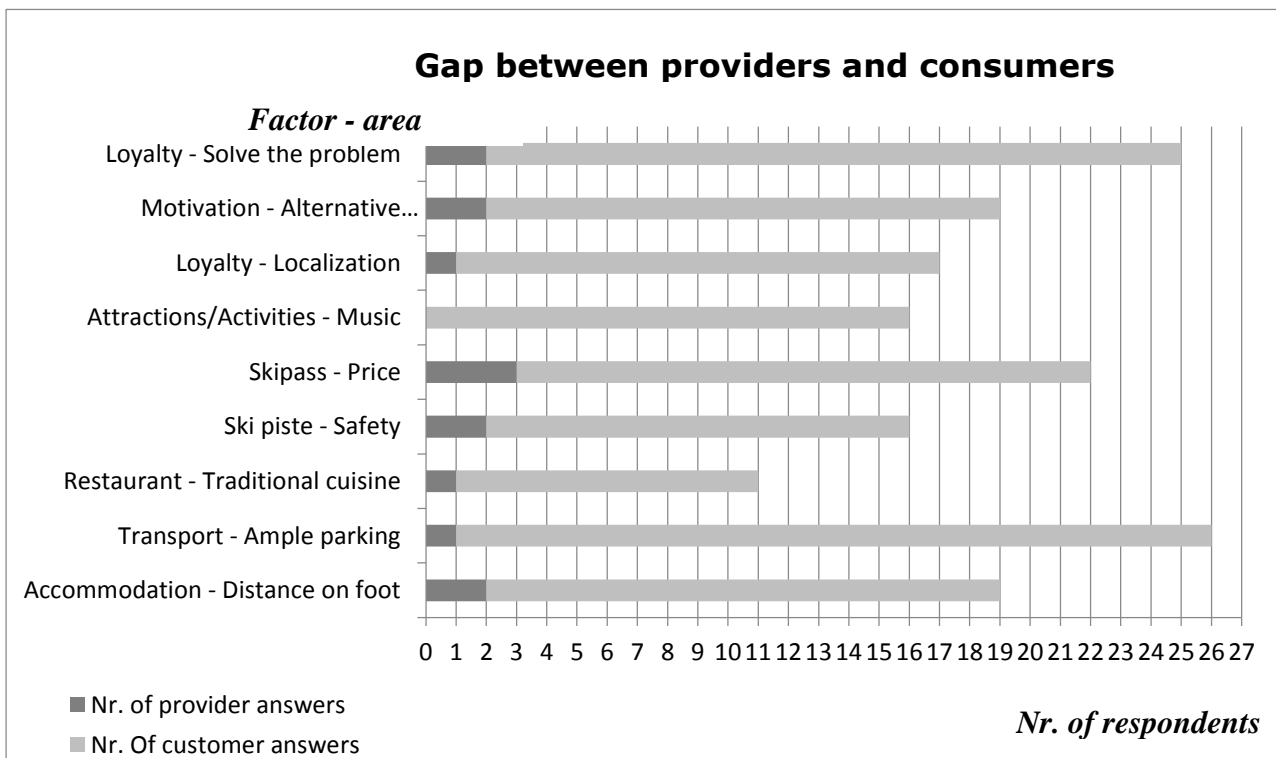
Source: author's construction based on loyalty factors of providers of ski resorts in Slovakia  
 Figure 1 Providers of ski resorts in Slovakia – Loyalty factors



Source: author's construction based on loyalty factors of providers of ski resorts in Austria  
 Figure 2 Providers of ski resorts in Austria – Loyalty factors



**Source: author's construction based on loyalty factors of customers of ski resorts in Slovakia**  
**Figure 3 Customers of ski resorts in Slovakia – Loyalty factors**



**Source: author's construction based on gap between providers and consumers perception**

**Figure 4 Gap between providers and consumers perception**

Figure 4 indicates the most important gap between providers' and consumers' perception of the important satisfaction and loyalty factors of ski resorts from 58 samples of customers of ski resorts in Slovakia and 6 providers of ski resorts in Slovakia and Austria. If customer of ski resort is not satisfied with a service of the ski resort, an alternative programme is the motivation to stay in the ski resort and a solution of the problem is the loyalty factor for them. Providers of ski resorts do not consider the factors so important and they should more concern on it. Providers of ski resorts should more concern on the satisfaction and loyalty factors as music, price of skipass, safety, traditional cuisine, ample parking, and accommodation distance on foot.

## **Conclusions**

Marketing managers should understand reasons why customers of ski resorts are faithful to destinations and what influences their satisfaction and loyalty. Destination success depends strongly on a thorough analysis of tourist motivation, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. Focusing on the value proposition and ensuring customers of ski resorts to the ski resort are satisfied with their experiences are also important predictors of the attitudinal loyalty from the customers of ski resorts. The results of the Maxqda analysis reveal the discrepancy between ski resorts customers and ski resorts providers satisfaction and loyalty factors perception which brings especially practical benefit of the research. This paper represents the initial phase of the project aimed at researching the topical factors with their relationships and links influencing satisfaction and loyalty of ski resorts customers in selected countries. Hypotheses and quantitative questionnaire for further research will be developed based on the results of this study. It is significant to do a qualitative research before a quantitative questionnaire of the project will be created. The software Maxqda should also allow for various methodological approaches, such as qualitative content analysis, Grounded Theory, discourse analysis, group discussions, and case or field studies, which is significant for the further research.

The results of this paper suggest that:

- 1) by fostering deeper commitment from ski resorts customers toward the ski resort, the management may realize more positive attitudes of loyalty from its ski resort customer;
- 2) providers of ski resorts need to understand how expectations are created and how these expectations are influenced by their customers experiences;
- 3) providers of ski resorts need to identify the drivers of customer satisfaction, measure satisfaction levels, and derive the right strategies to increase satisfaction;
- 4) providers of ski resorts should more concern on the satisfaction and loyalty factors as music, price of skipass, safety, traditional cuisine, ample parking and accommodation distance on foot.

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