
EXPLORING THE CRAFT BEER EXPERIENCE IN SERBIA: THE CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

One of the main things driving the growth of culinary, or more accurately, beverage tourism, is the “beer revolution,” or the proliferation of craft beer production. Investigating the reasons and perceptions of tourists about the beer tourism experience is vital in the lack of comparable studies. The purpose of this study is to add to the extremely little that is currently known about Serbia’s beer tourism industry. Authors specifically looked at the factors that affect craft beer experience and customer loyalty among craft breweries’ consumers. Considering that consumers of craft beer have different motivations, it was discovered that craft beer experience has a positive but the lowest impact on perceived quality.

Introduction

The most frequent motives of travel for tourists are the search for enjoyable experiences, entertainment, and new discoveries. They appreciate relaxation, stress-

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free opportunities, and have a growing interest in local gastronomy and high-quality food and beverages (Bujdosó & Szűcs, 2012, Popescu et al., 2019). Beer, as a widely consumed global drink, has excellent potential for attracting tourists; however, beer tourism is not sufficiently developed in Serbia (Kalenjuk, 2014). Plummer et al. (2005) define beer tourism as “visiting breweries, beer festivals, and beer shows for which beer tasting and experiencing the attributes of the beer region are the main motivating factors for visitors” (p. 449). It can be said that beer related events increase opportunities for developing tourism destinations and play a key role in promoting the region as well as creating loyalty to food and beer (Mason & Piggiano, 2012). Carvalho et al. (2018) state that beer tourism is intended for beer drinkers who are looking for new tastes, while Bujdosó & Szűcs (2012) express that beer drinkers and other tourists are often interested in “visiting breweries and other beer-related attractions” (p. 105). According to some data today in Serbia, beer began to be made in the 5th-6th centuries by the Slavic and Celtic tribes that immigrated. Beer consumption per capita, as far as European countries are concerned, is in the Czech Republic with 143 l of beer per year, Germany with 106 l, Austria with 105 l, Poland with 98 l of beer per year, and Lithuania with 92 l of beer per year. In 2018, Serbia ranked 43rd in the world with 5.56 million hectoliters produced (Andrei & Darvasi, 2012; Gajić et al., 2021).

The “beer revolution”, or the expansion of the manufacture of craft beers, belongs to the major factors affecting the development of gastronomic, or more precisely, beverage tourism (Krogmann et al., 2020, p. 37), or as said by Kraftchick et al. (2014), beer tourism. Compared to other sectors, there is a clear deficit in studies devoted to investigating craft breweries as well as beer tourism routes that would connect breweries as elements of tourism facilities (Alonso, 2011; Krogmann et al., 2020). According to Flack (1997), there has been a development within the sector in the form of blending craft brewing with hospitality and tourism, which leads to the need for an active approach.

In the absence of similar research, it is necessary to investigate the motives and impressions of visitors about the beer tourism experience. This paper aims to contribute to the very limited existing knowledge regarding the beer tourism sector in Serbia. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of craft beer in tourism, focusing on the visitor experience. The components that influence satisfaction with craft beer and lead to great loyalty among visitors to craft breweries were examined in particular.

Literature review

Creating attractive gastronomic experiences in a certain destination can positively influence tourism and have a significant impact on various sectors (Mora et al., 2021). Visiting a tourist destination represents a unique and differentiated experience when some gastronomic experiences are combined with others, such as wine tourism (Haven-Tang & Jones, 2005) or beer tourism. Beer tourism is often based around beer festivals, walking tours, and beer tastings, with the addition of visits to specific breweries and first-hand interactions with master brewers (Brown & Getz, 2005; Yeoman &

McMahon-Beattie, 2016). According to Plummer et al. (2005), during a three-year research, on a total sample of 2,136 respondents, the author states that it is necessary to create beer routes, such as wine routes, because beer tourism is recognized as a local product and has the potential to interest tourists. The experience of beer tourism can be influenced by numerous dimensions. In terms of gastronomic experience, the following three dimensions were respected: first, processing, color, or texture were evaluated; secondly, the atmosphere and possibility of interaction with employees, as well as the physical environment, were considered; and thirdly, individual factors such as the feeling in the restaurant or the time spent tasting were observed (Taar, 2014; Mora et al., 2021). Allowing for the above, in order to research the experience in beer tourism, five hypotheses were defined in the paper.

According to Bitner (1992), servicescape implies a built physical environment where servicescape components affect the internal cognitive, emotional states, which contribute to the socialization of customers and employees in their roles, behaviors, and relationships. The components of servicescape that Pizam and Tasci (2019) distinguished are the sensory (hedonic) component, the functional component, the social component, the natural component, the cultural component, and the hospitality culture component. The servicescape encompasses the tangible aspects of service setting (Pizam & Tasci, 2019). Manis et al. (2020) suggest that the servicescape elements have a significant impact on satisfaction. Intangible aspects are necessary, as stated by Schmitt (2003), to offer a holistic experience resulting from the interaction of a set of intangible experiences. The social component of the servicescape includes “social density, context, and displayed emotions of people in the servicescape” (Pizam & Tasci, 2019, p. 28). Schmitt (1999), within the components of experience and the context of the social environment, singles out senses, feels, acts, and relates. In accordance with the above, the overall social atmosphere, along with the physical, can significantly affect perceived quality in the context of beer tourism. Thus, the first hypotheses about the components that leads to the perceived quality of craft beers and breweries are the following:

H1: The Servicescape positively influences Perceived quality

H2: The Socialscape positively influences Perceived quality

Perceived quality differs from objective quality because it involves a thorough evaluation of the product and an appreciation of specific product attributes (Zeithaml, 1998). Perceived quality is defined as “the consumers’ judgment about an entity’s overall excellence or superiority” (Snoj et al., 2004, p. 159). The benefits of products/services are measured through the perceived level of quality, which is often concentrated in the value of the price (Snoj et al., 2004). The third hypothesis states that value for money is determined based on perceived quality:

H3: Perceived quality positively influences Value for money

Positive experience, in terms of getting sufficient value for money, is positively

related to satisfaction. Homburg and Giering (2001) find that satisfaction is linked to service evaluation and tourist experience. Satisfaction is also defined as “an evaluation of emotion” (Hunt, 1977, p. 459). Although good products/services are the basis of satisfaction and loyalty, Roberts and Sparks (2006) state that value for money is important to visitors, which leads to the fourth hypothesis:

H4: Value for money positively influences Satisfaction

As stated by Mason and Paggiaro (2012), “satisfaction is a partly affective and partly cognitive evaluation of the consumption experience” (p. 1331). According to Oliver (1997), satisfaction is considered to be a consumer’s evaluation of goods and services. The outcome of this is a subjective assessment of whether the selected goods or services meet or exceed consumer expectations. The definition of loyalty can be explained as repeat purchasing behavior, and it is characterized in terms of repeat purchases and word-of-mouth recommendations (Lee et al., 2006). Oliver and Burke (1999) estimated that the achievement of loyalty depends on customer satisfaction, which is influenced by expectations. They suggested that there is a significant satisfactory correlation between consumers and their future intentions. Camargo et al. (2012) indicate that authenticity is very important for the success of product quality as well as consumer loyalty. They emphasize the importance of the sensory quality of food and beverages in achieving greater production and marketing. Baker and Crompton (2000), as well as Chen and Huang (2019), point to the positive influence of gastronomic satisfaction on loyalty, which can also be applied to the beer experience. The last hypothesis is the following:

H5: Satisfaction positively influences Loyalty

Methodology

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed to gather quantitative data on the factors that influence guests’ experience and loyalty towards breweries. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: the first section collected information on the socio-demographics of brewery guests, while the second section consisted of closed-ended questions with a 7-point Likert scale related to various factors discussed in the section above. The former section was developed by adapting concepts from previous research in tourism, consumer behavior, and brand loyalty. Servicescape was measured through seven statements adapted from Bitner (1992), such as The smells in the brewery are pleasant and The lighting in the brewery is pleasant. The socialscape or social component of the environment was measured using five statements adapted from Pizam and Tasci (2019), e.g. The crowd level is comfortable and Employees are friendly. Perceived quality consisted of three statements proposed by Francioni et al. (2022), while to measure value for money, three statements were adapted from Sweeney and Soutar (2001). To measure satisfaction, two statements were adapted from Füller et al. (2011) and one from Mora et al. (2021). Loyalty was measured using two statements from Kim et al. (2010) and one statement from Füller et al. (2011).

To ensure only valid respondents were approached, a pre-screening question (e.g., “Have you visited a brewery?”) was asked before inviting potential participants to take part in the survey. The online questionnaire was distributed via email and social media platforms, while the print version was distributed in person at breweries and brewery events. The responses from the printed questionnaires were manually entered into the same database used for the online responses to ensure consistency in the data analysis. Over a three-month period from March to May 2024, a total of 198 responses were collected, with 103 valid cases being used for data analysis.

The data were analyzed using IBM-SPSS statistics software version 25.0 and SmartPLS version 4.1.0.4. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic profile of brewery visitors, while partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the theoretical model and the defined hypotheses, following the procedure presented by Seočanac (2024).

Results

The sample consisted predominantly of male respondents (72.82%), with 27.18% of participants being female. The majority of respondents were between 26 and 35 years old (27.18%) and between 36 and 45 years old (26.21%). Educational attainment was evenly distributed, with the largest groups having a faculty degree (27.18%) or a master’s degree (26.21%). The income distribution shows that a significant proportion of respondents (42.72%) earn more than EUR 1,000 per month.

Table 1. Respondent profile

Variable	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	75	72.82
	Female	28	27.18
Age	18–25	18	17.48
	26–35	28	27.18
	36–45	27	26.21
	46–55	23	22.33
	56+	7	6.80
Education level	High school	24	23.30
	Faculty	28	27.18
	Master	27	26.21
	PhD	24	23.30
Monthly income (EUR)	<300	6	5.83
	301–500	7	6.80
	501–700	9	8.74
	701–1,000	23	22.33
	>1,000	44	42.72
	No answer	14	13.59

Source: Authors

The results presented in Table 2 show that the constructs used in the study are reliable and exhibit good convergent validity, thereby supporting the robustness of the measurement model. First, the standardized loadings of the indicators have a minimum value of 0.708 (Hair et al., 2011). Additionally, both Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability values are greater than 0.7 and less than 0.95, while the average variance shared between the variable and its individual indicators exceeds 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2. Construct reliability and validity

Constructs	Indicators	Indicator loadings	Cronbach's alpha	rho_a	CR	AVE
Servicescape	SERV 1	0.818	0.919	0.920	0.935	0.675
	SERV 2	0.877				
	SERV 3	0.828				
	SERV 4	0.822				
	SERV 5	0.813				
	SERV 6	0.814				
	SERV 7	0.774				
Socialscape	SOCIAL 1	0.743	0.898	0.908	0.925	0.713
	SOCIAL 2	0.898				
	SOCIAL 3	0.869				
	SOCIAL 4	0.887				
	SOCIAL 5	0.816				
Perceived quality	PQ 1	0.889	0.812	0.818	0.888	0.726
	PQ 2	0.824				
	PQ 3	0.843				
Value for money	VFM 1	0.931	0.898	0.899	0.936	0.831
	VFM 2	0.910				
	VFM 3	0.893				
Satisfaction	SATISF 1	0.890	0.869	0.869	0.920	0.792
	SATISF 2	0.902				
	SATISF 3	0.879				
Loyalty	LOYALTY 1	0.938	0.898	0.927	0.936	0.830
	LOYALTY 2	0.946				
	LOYALTY 3	0.847				

Source: Authors

To assess discriminant validity, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criterion was used, as recommended by Sarstedt et al. (2022). Table 3 shows that there are no issues with discriminant validity for any of the variables, except for loyalty and satisfaction. All variables have values less than 0.85, with socialscape and servicescape having values less than 0.9, which is acceptable for conceptually similar constructs (Henseler, 2015). However, the variables satisfaction and loyalty have values slightly above the upper limit of 0.9. After additionally checking the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the cross-loading values for these two variables, which indicated no problems, and considering that the HTMT values were only slightly above the upper limit for conceptually similar constructs, it was decided to confirm the discriminant validity of all variables.

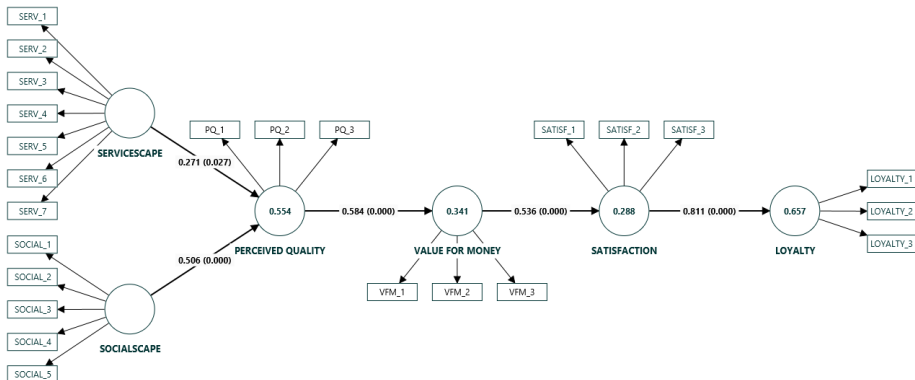
Table 3. Discriminant validity (HTMT)

	SERV	SOCIAL	PQ	VFM	SATISF	LOYALTY
SERV						
SOCIAL	0.889					
PQ	0.786	0.841				
VFM	0.552	0.664	0.678			
SATISF	0.723	0.837	0.734	0.605		
LOYALTY	0.648	0.786	0.732	0.509	0.903	

Abbreviations: Servicescape (SERV), Socialscape (SOCIAL), Perceived quality (PQ), Value for money (VFM), Satisfaction (SATISF).

Source: Authors

After ensuring that the measurement model demonstrated good reliability and validity, as indicated by high factor loadings, acceptable Cronbach's alpha values, composite reliability values and good convergent and discriminant validity, the structural model was estimated. The structural model in PLS-SEM (Figure 1) illustrates the relationships between various constructs in our study. The model proposes that servicescape and socialscape have a direct influence on perceived quality, which in turn influences value for money. Value for money then influences satisfaction, and finally satisfaction influences loyalty. This relationship chain shows a progression that leads from environmental factors (servicescape and socialscape) to perceived benefits (perceived quality and value for money) to emotional outcomes (satisfaction) and finally to behavioral intentions (loyalty). The path coefficients (β) in the model indicate the strength and direction of these relationships, while the R^2 values explain the proportion of variance in the dependent variables and thus provide an insight into the explanatory power of the model. According to Hair et al. (2011), " R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, or 0.25 for endogenous latent variables in the structural model can, as a rule of thumb, be described as substantial, moderate, or weak, respectively" (p. 147). The effect sizes (f^2) reveal the influence of each predictor construct on its respective endogenous construct and emphasize the small (0.02–0.15), medium (0.15–0.35) or large (above 0.35) effect (Cohen, 1988).

Figure 1. Structural model

Source: Authors

The structural model in PLS-SEM was assessed using the path coefficients (β), the t -values (T), the p -values (p), the coefficient of determination (R^2) and the effect size (f^2). The results are summarized in Table 4. Servicescape has a positive and significant impact on perceived quality ($\beta = 0.271$, $p = 0.027$), with a small effect size, and the model explains 55.4% of the variance in perceived quality. Socialscape also has a positive and significant impact on perceived quality ($\beta = 0.506$, $p < 0.001$), with a larger effect size compared to servicescape, which further supports the robustness of the model for perceived quality. Perceived quality has a significant effect on value for money ($\beta = 0.584$, $p < 0.001$), with a large effect size, and the model explains 34.1% of the variance in value for money. Value for money has a positive and significant effect on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.536$, $p < 0.001$), with a large effect size, explaining 28.8% of the variance in satisfaction. Satisfaction shows a very strong and significant impact on loyalty ($\beta = 0.811$, $p < 0.001$), with the highest effect size among the relationships examined, and the model explains 65.7% of the variance in loyalty.

In summary, all hypothesized paths are supported, indicating that the constructs in the model are well connected and the overall model exhibits good explanatory power. Servicescape and socialscape have a positive effect on perceived quality, which in turn influences value for money. Value for money has a positive effect on satisfaction, which ultimately leads to higher loyalty. The R^2 values indicate that the model explains a substantial amount of the variance in the dependent variables, especially for loyalty. The effect sizes demonstrate the strength of the individual relationships within the model, ranging from small to large effect.

Table 4. Structural model assessment: hypotheses testing

Path	β	T	p	Support	R^2	f^2
H1: Servicescape -> Perceived quality	0.271	1.925	0.027	Supported	0.554	0.055
H2: Socialscape -> Perceived quality	0.506	3.806	0.000	Supported		0.190
H3: Perceived quality -> Value for money	0.584	8.945	0.000	Supported	0.341	0.517
H4: Value for money -> Satisfaction	0.536	6.578	0.000	Supported	0.288	0.404
H5: Satisfaction -> Loyalty	0.811	24.101	0.000	Supported	0.657	1.915

Source: Authors

Discussion

The study reveals the overall experience of craft beer that can serve as success criteria for creating a unique gastronomic experience in the Republic of Serbia and other destinations. It was found that beer experience has a positive but the lowest impact on perceived quality, which is confirmed by previous research, bearing in mind that craft beer consumers have specific characteristics and motives based on whether or

not they had ever experienced craft beer (Kraftchick et al., 2014; Aquilani et al., 2015; Gómez-Corona et al., 2016; Betancur et al., 2020). Therefore, the study emphasizes the need to evaluate the craft beer experience taking into account the socialscape and value for money, all in terms of satisfaction and loyalty. Consequently, based on the conducted findings, two implications emerge. First, the study corresponds to the findings of previous research studies of the craft beer market, that perceived quality and value for money are very important to craft beer consumers within the servicescape and social landscape, since consumers vary significantly in and react differently to the perception of the value of a brand (Orth et al., 2004). Second, value for money, together with perceived quality, affects consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Howat & Assaker, 2013; Donadini & Porretta, 2017), highlighting the new consumption trend in order to satisfy the new needs and preferences of beer consumers (Aquilani et al., 2015). The results that indicate that servicescape and socialscape influence the perceived quality of consumers, additionally confirm the need for further strategies for the development of loyalty and satisfaction.

In addition to the above, the study identified characteristics specific to the researched region that affect satisfaction and locality. With consumers of craft beer in the Republic of Serbia, attributes such as the decision to consume craft beer and the level of satisfaction have a positive effect on the spread of positive thoughts about craft beer and repeated consumption. However, perceived quality may also depend on the region in which it is measured. The natural and cultural component of the researched environment is the most affected by this, since it, in contrast to the social component, cannot be built in a short period of time. This is in line with Hassler and Kohler's (2014) argument that some parts of the environment (such as social) can adapt to change while natural and cultural must evolve and grow over time.

Conclusions

The research confirms the existence of a clear correlation between social scape and servicescape and their impact on satisfaction and loyalty through value for money. Experiences with the consumption of craft beer should be developed and marketed, considering that they can positively influence the perceived quality and satisfaction and loyalty of the entire community. Therefore, it is important to regulate the further direction and strategy of developing the quality of craft beer.

This study has certain limitations because of the sample that was employed, the small number of questionnaires that were conducted, and the confined location in which they were conducted.

As this topic covers various aspects: Market trends, consumer preferences, economic aspects, impact on the local community, regulations and laws, sustainability and environmental aspects as well as cultural and social impacts. Each of these areas offers room for further analysis and research that will help to improve knowledge and practices related to craft beer production. The beer festivals organized in our country

are the only way to promote this type of beer, which proves to be insufficient. In addition, great attention should be paid to environmental sustainability and reducing the ecological footprint through recycling and efficient use of resources. As craft breweries are constantly working to innovate production techniques and ingredients, educating consumers about the different styles of beer and the quality of beer will also be key to further growth. There is no question that the craft beer industry in the Republic of Serbia has great potential for further growth and development, overcoming the existing challenges and taking advantage of the new opportunities that are increasingly available on the market.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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