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Changing Foreign Customers' Evaluations İn The Hotel Industry Amid The Covid 19 Pandemic: An Investigation On Online Customers' Reviews **

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Abstract

Customer satisfaction theories suggest that epidemics and pandemics might have an impact on customers' evaluation of hospitality services. The aim of this study is to investigate changing patterns of foreign customers in Sapanca hotels during the COVID-19 outbreak through online customers' reviews. Sapanca region is a popular destination in tourism in terms of both location and hotel diversity. Customers' evaluations were taken from TripAdvisor web site, findings were revealed by thematic analysis method and the MAXQDA 24 qualitative analysis program was used in the study. In order to analyze change, foreign customers' evaluations in 2019 and in 2023 have been taken into account and to detect pre-pandemic and post-pandemic situation. According to findings, new themes have emerged after the pandemic phase and identified ten most discussed topics after pandemic. The study also found that main sources of dissatisfaction have changed. Findings of this study will help hotel managers understand the new trends that have changed after the pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 has caused major global changes in social and economic areas. Tourism and hospitality industry is one of the most affected sector from this pandemic. Due to pandemics' significant effects, changes in customers' practices and behaviors are came into question. Most of the studies about the subject in the literature have focused on investigating the effects of pandemics based on a micro and/or medium-scale perspective. However, there are very few studies on how sudden and destructive events such as pandemics affect tourists' expectations (Hu, Teichert, Deng, Liu, & Zhou, 2021). On the other hand, it can be predicted that expectations of hotel customers and the factors affecting their satisfaction have changed significantly during the COVID-19 period (Song, Liu, Guo, Yang, & Jin, 2022). According to another view that supports this situation, major dominant themes in the pre pandemic phase were replaced by new ones in the post pandemic phase (Ongsakul, Kajla, Raj, Khoa, & Ahmed, 2022). In this context, the stakeholders in the tourism sector have had to find ways to survive and to adapt to the new situation (Pricope & Baltescu, 2022).

In the age of internet technology, speed has become increasingly important in every field and traditional recommendation systems have not been able to keep up with this speed and capture users' satisfaction and complaints in real time (Utku & Akcayol, 2018). Frequent use of internet applications in the field of accommodation and tourism allows consumers to share their experiences in tourism activities with others through online reviews. Websites that publish consumer evaluations, which are widely used in the field of tourism and travel today, can positively or negatively affect the number of reservations made in hotels (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009). TripAdvisor and similar applications allow travelers to share their experiences in the places they visit with other people through comments (Aydın, 2016). In the light of these findings, the aim of this study is to detect changing patterns of foreign customers in Sapanca hotels during the COVID-19 outbreak through online customers' reviews. This study also investigates to reply the following questions: Do significant differences exist in foreign customers' evaluations pre and post COVID-19 outbreak? Does any change their satisfaction patterns? Findings of this study will help hotel managers understand the new trends that have changed after the pandemic. It will also help them improve in providing new and effective services that can satisfy customers. In addition, the study contributes to tourism literature by offering evidences that the emergence of major pandemics, like COVID-19, also changes customers' expectations.

Literature Review

The Effects of Pandemics on the Hotel Industry

Global tourism has faced many crises over the years. One of these crises is epidemic and pandemic diseases. Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) emerged in 2003 and then Swine Flu (H1N1 Influenza A) affected tourism activities in 2009. The Ebola epidemic in 2013 and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) epidemic in 2015 had a serious negative impact on tourism activities (Hu et al., 2021; Ongsakul et al., 2022; Srivastava & Kumar, 2021; Sun, Jiang, Feng, Wang, & Zhang, 2022). Previous studies have mostly examined the following topics: perceived risks to attend tourism activity (Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009; Wen, Gu, & Kavanaugh, 2005), travel intentions of tourists (Lee, Song, Bendle, Kim, & Han, 2012), changing habits of tourist flow (Cooper, 2005) and revenue topics (Chen, 2011; Haque & Haque, 2018). However, few investigated the dynamics of individual customer preferences due to pandemic situations.

The COVID-19 crisis has seriously affected economies, creating significant negative effects on both employment and organizations. Tourism activities have almost come to a halt due to the closure of the country's borders and even the inability to leave the house in order to control the spread of the virus. For these reasons, the tourism sector was one of the sectors most affected by the pandemic (OECD, 2020). The requirement for social distance has significantly destroyed the hospitality industry, forcing it to operate with fewer rooms and fewer staff. The unforeseen, serious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have raised a serious question about how the tourism industry should behave during crises and whether it is ready for the change in customer expectations (Mehta, Kumar, & Ramkumar, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the behavior of tourists. Tourists preferred to stay isolated zones by avoiding crowded places during the pandemic period due to safety and hygiene concerns. They were also reluctant to stay in a foreign destination outside their safe zone. However, then, the opening of international borders has also been a ray of hope for the accommodation industry. In order to regain the trust of guests in the post pandemic period, the changing preferences of tourists need to be examined comprehensively (Ongsakul et al., 2022: 298).

Customer satisfaction theories claim that epidemics and pandemics might have an effect on customers' evaluation of accommodation services (Srivastava & Kumar, 2021). Although customer demands are different, it is very important to understand and meet customer demands and expectations in order to increase service quality. It can be predicted that customer satisfaction and needs will also affect post-consumer service behavior, especially with the significant contraction in demand after pandemics like COVID-19 (Sun et al., 2022).

Hotel customers mostly focused on rooms, F&B issues, staff, price/benefit, atmosphere, management, service, hotel features and facilities in the pre-pandemic situation (Arkadaş & Ayyıldız, 2020). Li et al. (2012), examined online reviews on TripAdvisor web site and concluded that important criterias for customer satisfaction were transportation, food and beverage facilities, front office services and rooms.

During the pandemic, the most important issues for customer satisfaction were “staff,” “hotel,” “restaurant,” “COVID-19,” “room,” “pool,” “entertainment” and “family” (Saydam, Olorunsola, Avci, Dambo, & Beyar, 2022). Moreover, the results highlight concepts like “staff,” “hotel,” “restaurant,” “entertainment,” “room” and “area” belong to the high-satisfaction group (excellent/very good), whereas “queue,” “lift,” “waiting,” “guidelines,” “social distancing,” “restrictions,”“hygiene” and “cancellation” belong to the low-satisfaction group (poor/terrible).

On the other hand, in the post-COVID, the hygiene and cleanliness issues of hotels should become the critical point (Pillai, Haldorai, Seo, & Kim, 2021). Additionally, hygiene and cleanliness issues affect hotel selection decision. The issue of cleanliness is mostly associated with the cleanliness of the rooms for hotel customers (Genç, 2023). In other words, customers are very sensitive about the cleanliness of the rooms in the hotels they stay in. In addition, the cleanliness of the staff is also important for customers. The theme of cleanliness and hygiene related to meals is in third ranking. Finally, it is revealed that the cleanliness of the property is also taken into consideration in customer reviews. COVID-19 was found to have an immediate negative effect on the occurrence of hygiene-related words in the negative aspects of online reviews during the early phase of COVID- 19. However, the extent of this impact diminishes during the later phase (Yousaf & Kim, 2023).

In addition, after the pandemic, it has been observed that customers now have new expectations regarding "service" and the definition of "service" has changed (Nilashi et al., 2022). Today, customers are more worried about

their health and safety issues. Thus, it is expected that even after the crisis, safety and hygiene measures will still be essential dimensions of the quality of the services.

After the pandemic, the attributes of staff, location, room amenities, and decorations have remained performance attributes like pre-pandemic period (Xu, Wang, Zhang, Huang, & Lu, 2022). However, there are two important changes regarding these attributes. First, the effect of location increased and became the most important attribute post-COVID-19. Second, new terms associated with the attributes of staff and location emerged.

According to another research (Şengül, 2024), it was determined that the main issues that caused customer dissatisfaction after the pandemic are rooms, F&B issues, staff, front office and price. Complaints such as heating/cooling of rooms, poor quality and low variety of food and beverages, high prices, indifference of staff, and lack of interlocutor in the enterprises were determined as the most dissatisfied issues of the customers.

Online Reviews and Customer Satisfaction

The increase in the usage of the Internet has expanded consumers' options to learn about the services they receive from other consumers and provides consumers with the opportunity to offer recommendations regarding their own experiences through electronic word-of-mouth marketing (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Online customer reviews are a valuable source of information where customers can share their opinions. From online customer reviews, customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction points can be clearly revealed (Nilashi et al., 2021) and through online customer evaluations, the primary worries of guests may be easily discovered, as well as their degree of satisfaction (Saydam et al., 2022).

One growing area of interest in the hospitality research stream is the salience attached to hotel service attributes in eliciting consumer satisfaction in the post-pandemic period (Yousaf & Kim, 2023). According to Google data, more than 80% of people choose their holidays by researching online, usually visiting 26 websites and spending more than 2 hours for these transactions (Trend, 2013). While tourism and travel industry consumers decide on their holidays using online consumer reviews, they may not prefer tour operators and travel agencies. Consumers' online reviews about places to stay, places to visit and places to eat also influence potential consumers' decisions (Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015). Online reviews are an inexpensive means to gather rich, authentic, and unsolicited consumer feedback (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007). Information technology advances and increasingly large numbers of online reviews facilitate online reviews monitoring as a cost-effective method for destination marketers to assess their service quality and improve customers' overall experiences.

In the hospitality and tourism field, scholars have studied online reviews mainly from two perspectives (Li et al., 2012). The first one is from behavior perspective that search the effect of online customer reviews on other factors. The second one is from technology perspective to determine the most helpful online reviews using online review platforms. In this study, online customer reviews are evaluated from a behavioral perspective.

Methodology

Sapanca region is a popular destination in tourism in terms of both location and hotel diversity. This location is preferred by both families with children and for business meetings or Spa facilities. There are five five-star hotels in Sapanca region and all of them constitute the sample of this analysis. Customers' evaluations were taken from TripAdvisor web site. TripAdvisor.com is one of the most popular online review platforms in the hospitality and

tourism industry (Zhao, Xu, & Wang, 2019). In particular, travellers across the globe use the platform site and application to browse more than 878 million reviews and opinions of 8.8 million accommodations, restaurants, experiences, airlines and cruises (Sun et al., 2022). For this reason, TripAdvisor, which is the largest platform for reviews of hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions (Srivastava & Kumar, 2021), was used in the study. All customer evaluations in English about five-star hotels in Sapanca on the TripAdvisor online website in 2019 and in 2023 were used. While 2019 represents the pre-pandemic period; 2023 represents the post-pandemic period. English is an universal language. Thus, English reviews were used to learn the general tourist trend. Rather than English, other foreign language evaluations are not too much. Thus it is assumed that their exclusion will not affect the study findings. TripAdvisor is an application that provides online travel agency services around the world and customer reviews on this site offer a wide range of information to analyze hotel customers in Turkey.

For data analysis, MAXQDA 2024 qualitative analysis program was preferred in the study. The research objectives were achieved by using the technique of thematic analysis through coding. According to this method, certain themes in which a group of concepts are associated with each other are tried to be reveal (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The resulting codes and the relationship between these codes serve as the cornerstones used to explain the phenomenon or theory underlying the data. The coding method made within general framework was used in the research. In this method, codes obtained from new data were added to the codes coming from the previously determined conceptual structure; a new code list has been created or updated (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In order to investigate the change, foreign customers' evaluations in 2019 and in 2023 are taken into account to reveal pre-pandemic and post-pandemic situation. This comparison between evaluations from different periods is significant, as it allows for a deeper understanding of how the pandemic has influenced customer perceptions and expectations of hotel services.

Findings and Discussion

In this research, totally 1004 codes were made. While 456 codes belong to 2023, 548 codes belong to 2019. As it can be seen a coding example in Figure 1. Six examples of customers' reviews coded under the "professionalism" are shown.

Figure 1. Coding Example for "Professionalism"

According to study findings, there are changes in foreign travelers' satisfaction patterns. As it can be seen in Figure 2, «hospitality» and «normal» are the new subthemes that are not mentioned in 2019. Subcodes with the same color indicate that they are connected to the same themes or parent code. In addition, food related themes such as tasty, price, healthy or terrible were replaced by new themes. There are also many same subcodes that affect foreign travelers' in both years like satisfaction, helpful or Spa and treatments. In other words, these same subcodes are always taken into account by travelers.

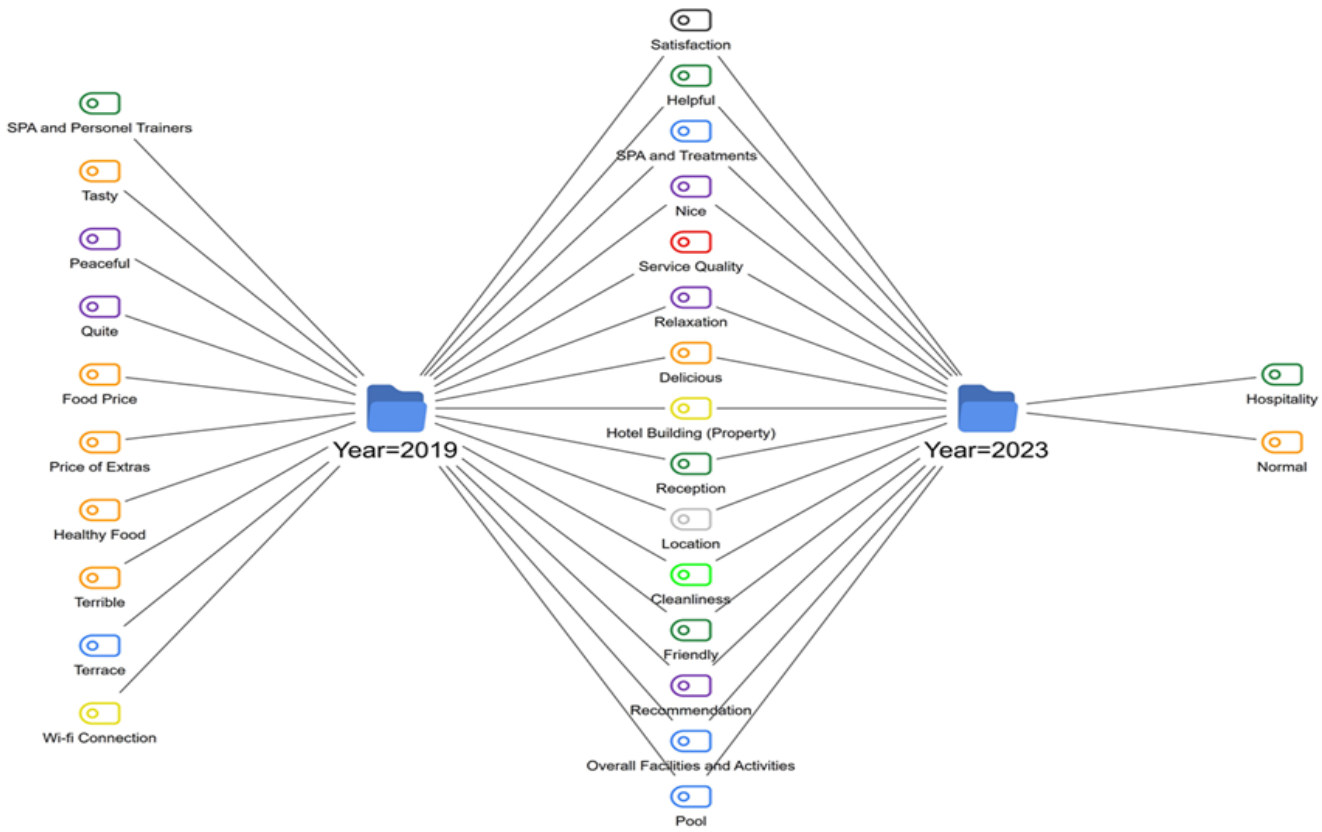

Figure 2. Changes in Foreign Travelers' Satisfaction Patterns

In order to evaluate pre-pandemic dynamics, Table 1 shows 10 most discussed topics. Spa and treatments, helpful and service quality emerged as main themes during the pre-pandemic phase respectively. Subthemes relaxation, recommendation, reception, location, delicious, view and room quality emerged as prominent subthemes in respective themes.

Table 1. 10 Most Topics in 2019

2019	**Frequency**	**%**
SPA and Treatments	32	6,53
Helpful	28	5,71
Service Quality	22	4,49
Relaxation	19	3,88
Recommendation	18	3,67
Reception	18	3,67
Location	16	3,27
Delicious	16	3,27
View	14	2,86
Room Quality	14	2,86

The study's findings confirmed the change in foreign travelers' satisfaction patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 2 shows 10 most discussed topics in 2023. According to the table, besides the same themes, new themes emerged in the post pandemic phase. Nice, hotel building (property) and service quality are top words to describe the hospitality experience at the hotel. Other prominent subthemes are helpful, pool, cleanliness, friendly, delicious, enjoyment and location respectively.

Table 2. 10 Most Topics in 2023

2023	**Frequency**	**%**
Nice	31	7,56
Hotel Building (Property)	20	4,88
Service Quality	18	4,39
Helpful	15	3,66
Pool	15	3,66
Cleanliness	14	3,41
Friendly	14	3,41
Delicious	14	3,41
Enjoyment	13	3,17
Location	13	3,17

In addition to new themes, the study findings revealed that service quality, helpful, delicious and location all impact customer satisfaction in both period. Even though their rankings change, these subthemes are always important for customer satisfaction.

According to the study findings, comparison of the top ten codes of 2019 and 2023 can be seen in the Figure 3. The findings show that hotel customer satisfaction before and after the COVID-19 outbreak has a difference. The effect of the cleanliness, nice and enjoyment as values, pool as a facility, hotel building as an attraction and friendly staff are stronger in 2023 than in 2019 possibly because customers have higher expectations for these aspects in the post pandemic phase.

Figure 3. Comparison of the Top 10 Codes of 2019 and 2023

In addition, recommendation and relaxation values, Spa and treatments as facilities, reception staff and room related issues like room quality and view affected customer satisfaction higher before the pandemic. The table also show that specific dominant themes and subthemes describe the customer satisfaction in both periods. These are location, delicious food and service quality. In other words, the hotel location, delicious food and quality of service are the most attractive themes in order to satisfy hotel customers no matter in which period it is. These findings are consistent with studies in the literature (Ongsakul et al., 2022; Song et al., 2022).

The study's findings confirmed the change also in foreign travelers' dissatisfaction patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 4 shows foreign travelers' dissatisfaction patterns in 2019. Reception, room quality and management issues were main sources of dissatisfaction in respectively.

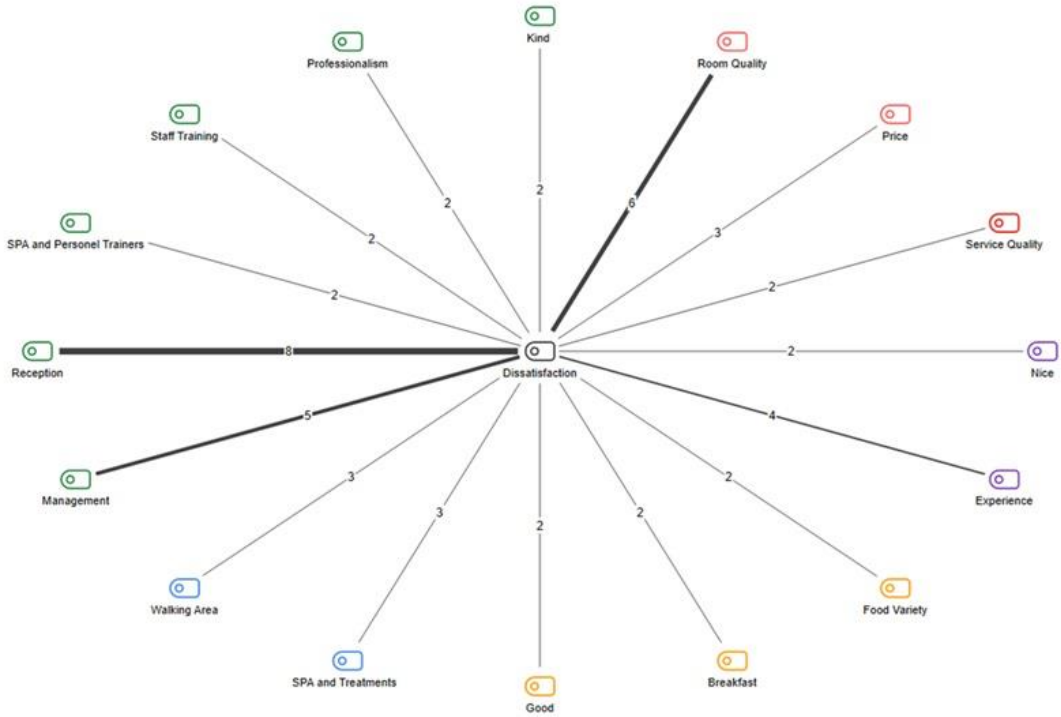

Figure 4. Foreign Travelers' Dissatisfaction Patterns in 2019

However, after the COVID-19 Pandemic, the results show that there are differences in foreign travelers' dissatisfaction patterns. According to Figure 5, cleanliness, room quality and hotel building (property) were the main sources of dissatisfaction. To sum up, when travelers' dissatisfaction patterns are compared, room quality is always a reason for dissatisfaction. After the pandemic, cleanliness and hygiene issues became main sources of dissatisfaction. Issues related to hotel property (such as design and hotel ground) are another source of dissatisfaction after the pandemic phase.

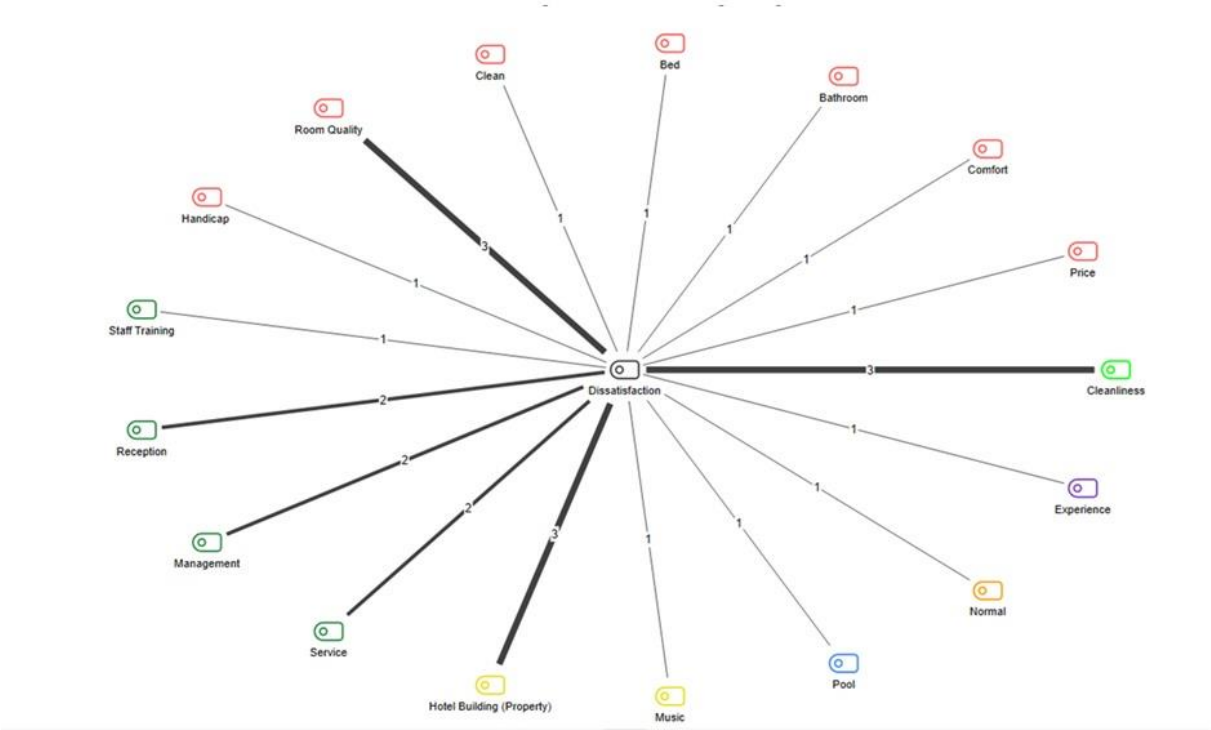

Figure 5. Foreign Travelers' Dissatisfaction Patterns in 2023

The results of the research are generally consistent with the literature, but also offer some contributions to the literature. In the pre-COVID-19 period, rooms, staff, F&B and front office issues were important topics for customer satisfaction, which is consistent with the literature (Arkadaş & Ayyıldız, 2020; Li et al., 2012). Since the hotels are located in the Sapanca region, it is not surprising that SPA and relaxation concepts are in the top ten themes in the pre-pandemic phase.

In the post-pandemic period, similar to the literature, the theme of cleanliness emerges as an important factor in customer satisfaction (Nilashi et al., 2022; Pillai et al., 2021). However, the fact that cleanliness is not included in the top five themes in 2023 can be explained by the fact that the extent of this impact diminishes during the later phase (Yousaf & Kim, 2023).

In the study, location and staff attitutes (helpful), which are common themes for customer satisfaction in the pre- and post-COVID period, emerged in line with the literature (Xu et al., 2022). According to the findings of the study, two important themes that were not affected by the crisis were service quality and food and beverage issues (delicious).

Regarding customer dissatisfaction, findings are similar to the literature that hygiene is the most important issue in the post-COVID-19 period. In addition, the research results revealed that room quality is important in customer dissatisfaction regardless of the crisis like COVID-19.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the study revealed the change in hotel customers' preferences before and after the COVID-19 outbreak with the thematic analysis method. The study findings are important in terms of exploring new themes and changing customer preferences that emerged after the pandemic. According to the analysis, «hospitality» and

«normal» are the new subthemes emerged in the post pandemic phase.

The study also revealed that some of the themes that were dominant in the pre-pandemic phase were replaced by new themes. Food related themes such as tasty, food price, healthy food, terrible, price of extras, were replaced by new themes in the post COVID-19 pandemic. In the study, in addition, identified ten most discussed topics after pandemic. COVID-19 altered foreign travellers' satisfaction patterns. A wide range of variations in customers' satisfaction such as nice, hotel building, pool, cleanliness, friendly and enjoyment, are revealed in the post pandemic situation. Besides, the ranking of «service quality» and «delicious» are the same in the pre and post COVID-19 phase. On the other hand, «location» and «helpful» themes are important for hotel customers' satisfaction in both pre and post pandemic period. In addition, in post pandemic phase, value (nice and enjoyment), attractions (hotel property) and cleanliness emerged as the main important themes. Generally, customers pay more attention to hotel attractions and control measures to reduce health risk after the pandemic phase.

According to study findings, main sources of dissatisfaction have also changed. In pre-pandemic phase while customer dissatisfaction was due to issues with reception, room quality and management. However, after the pandemic, besides room quality, cleanliness and hotel building have been major reasons of dissatisfaction.

The results contribute to the literature by identifying new patterns and providing concrete evidence that some themes are replaced by new ones in response to the pandemic. This study compares the impact of COVID-19 by dividing the period into pre and post stage. By this way, it offers concrete evidences that the emergence of major pandemics, like COVID-19, alters customers' satisfaction and dissatisfaction patterns. However, there are also some themes that are not affected by such as crises, like service quality, helpful staff, delicious food and location for customer satisfaction and room quality for customer dissatisfaction. On the other hand, the research could have practical implications for the hospitality industry by providing insights into how hotels can adapt and enhance their services to better satisfy customers, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the study findings will provide useful information for tourism managers in the post-pandemic period. Being aware of customers' changing needs and priorities will help hotels allocate their limited resources effectively. Understanding tourists' expectations is critical for management in the tourism and hospitality industries. The research results provide indicators for the management level and it is possible to meet customer expectations with the help of the presented indicators. These findings are important for increasing guest satisfaction. Furthermore, the study may also have broader implications for society, particularly for developing countries in providing new and effective services that can satisfy customers.

The limitations of the current research are determined by the small sample used. The same analysis could be done with a larger sample. Also, local customers' evaluations could be included in order to compare local and foreign customers' evaluations and could build a comprehensive image. Future research directions on this topic could address these limitations.

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