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**Service Delivery Standardisation and Customisation in the
Hungarian Hotels**

Ph.D Thesis Summary

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1 Aims and importance of the research

The topic of standardisation and customisation is an interesting issue which mixes the elements of service science, service marketing, service management and service quality. This frontier position explains that every field of science has an opinion or perspective about these two concepts. I think that all of these approaches are worth knowing and understanding but it is not compulsory to accept them the way they are phrased or formed.

The significance of services and companies providing services has increased in the past decades. According to Teboul (2005) more than 70% of the GDP is added by services in the developed countries and this number is expected to grow in the future. The quality has to be assured in case of these services and considering many of them it is not an easy task to accomplish. Standardisation can be the solution for this 'problem' although it has to be considered that the service industry is very much customer centred and the guests want novelty and special treat. The question is how this contradiction can be solved.

The object of the research is the Hungarian hotel sector. The Hungarian tourism industry is a very successful source of revenue for the Hungarian economy. In 2012 the balance of tourism export and import was 2243 million euros, which could not have been accomplished without the Hungarian hotel sector as a significant factor of tourism infrastructure. The role of hotels can be explained by the revenues produced by the Hungarian accommodations, which was 270.8 billion forints, and hotels contributed to this number by 242.3 billion forints which is 89.5% (HAH, 2012).

According to these facts it can be stated that the thesis analysis an important issue (standardisation and customisation) in a significant sector which is able to provide work places, revenue and it can contribute to the GDP as well.

The topic of the thesis was not difficult to choose but not easy to phrase and put into a framework which fits the scientific requirements. I started to think about the role of standardisation and customisation when I had to experience their practice as an employee of a chain member hotel. Using standards belonged to the everyday life and I had the chance to see how strict they are, how they are controlled and what advantages and disadvantages can be identified. At the hotel I began to believe that standards make hotel operation much more predictable and the guest can always count on the quality they expect to receive. At the same time the role of customisation came to my mind when the flexibility of the hotel operation was the question and a lot of changes were not possible because of the lack of flexibility or the strictness of the standards.

It was the time when I decided to prove that these two concepts can co-exist and maybe they can even strengthen each other and contribute to the performance of the hotel.

After summarising my practical experience and reviewing several authors' work, articles and books considering the concept of service as a base of hotel services and standardisation and customisation, the following research goals were formed.

- How can the level of standardisation and customisation be determined?
- Are there any connection between standardisation and customisation or are they independent as it is often suggested in the literature?
- Are some group of standards more important than others?
- What kind of performance indicators are there in hotels? How their relations look like?
- Is hotel chain membership the only factor which influences the level of standardisation?
- Do standardisation and customisation help hotels increase their performance?

These research goals are going to be answered at the end of the thesis.

2 Statements and results on which the research is based on

The theoretical background of the doctoral thesis included the concept, the development and change in service literature but concentrated on the introduction and analysis of the ideas considering standardisation and customisation. This part was meant to present the hotel performance measurement tools as well as the role of customer satisfaction.

2.1 Service

In the thesis the critical review has demonstrated, the service literature is not unified or integrated. There is a chance to define different eras according to the different dominant theories but it is important to mention that all the theories used from the 1960s are still alive and applied by other authors and play significant roles in today's research as well.

The analysis was separated into three eras and evaluated the different theories according to their content and the time they were born. The significance to define services for this thesis was to find the hidden values in different theories and practices and determine where the approaches of the authors to standardisation and customisation differ that much.

It is easy to see that in the goods paradigm era, standardisation was a commonly used concept and its application was popular among manufacturing firms which were the subject of research. In the next era which concentrated more on the differences between goods and services, standardisation became a characteristic which it was

argued could not be applied for services because of their intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability and inseparability. Despite the previous era the latest one broke out of the product cage and started to consider services as the leading sector in the world which makes it compulsory to put forward. They suggested that the industrialisation of services has to be forgotten and every service needs to be customised according to the needs of the consumer. That is the reason why they emphasised the role of the customer in the 'production' process as well, they stated that the customer is the co-producer of the product and the value co-creation is inevitable (Vargo, Lush, 2004, Vargo et al., 2008).

The author is presenting her own definition in the topic: Service is a labour intensive activity, a process which aim is to provide benefit for the customer to satisfy their needs with involving them in the service process itself.

2.2 Standardisation and customisation

Summarising the two concepts is not an easy task considering the different phrasing and word using of the authors listed in the chapter of thesis. Although there are common characteristics of both which is mentioned or understood by almost everybody.

In case of standardisation the understanding of the concept is much more similar than in case of customisation. Standardisation is a way of unifying the processes or the outcome or both (however, it is essential to mention that the thesis only deals with the standardisation of processes) which aims the assurance of quality, the reduction of costs and the increase of productivity. Customisation is harder to define but every author agreed that the role of the customer and their needs are significant in explaining the concept. In customisation flexibility is very important that is the reason why it is often called adaptation (to the circumstances or different needs).

The chapter presented those ideas that strictly consider the two concepts as independent variables and those perspectives, which are already able to 'mix' the two and create new categories.

This thesis is committed to the latter approach and going to prove the connection between the two concepts and the significant of the application of them at the same time at the same company, in this a Hungarian hotel.

2.3 Customer satisfaction and performance indicators

As one of the aims of this thesis is to show the benefits of standardisation and customisation, one of the most important goals of the hotels has to be introduced and later examined; this is customer satisfaction, which can influence the image of the company as well. Retaining customers or loyal customers could be seen in several

customer satisfaction models (Deng et al., 2013, Anderson and Sullivan, 2013, Lee et al., 2011) which made the loyal guest percentage a performance indicator.

Word of mouth was highly emphasised in the thesis as a way to observe customer satisfaction. That is the reason why Booking and Tripadvisor evaluation were considered to be performance indicators.

Other performance indicators were supported by hotel management literature and customs as well. The following indicators were chosen: revenue per available room, average daily rate, occupancy rate, foreign guest percentage (according to the Hungarian hotel statistics) and stars as an objective measurement for quality.

2.4 Hotels

The hotel industry in Hungary has several problems to deal with nowadays after the economic recession. There are 997 hotels (KSH, 2012) in Hungary which are competing with each other and sometimes with foreign hotels as well. Their survival depends on quality. The topics of standardisation and customisation can be the solution in times of bankruptcy and hotel closures.

3 Hypotheses

3.1 Developing the hypotheses

The generally accepted approach of service standardisation and customisation can be presented using Teboul's work (Teboul, 2005). Traditionally standardisation and customisation are the extreme points of a continuum where they share on the characteristics of processes and outcomes.

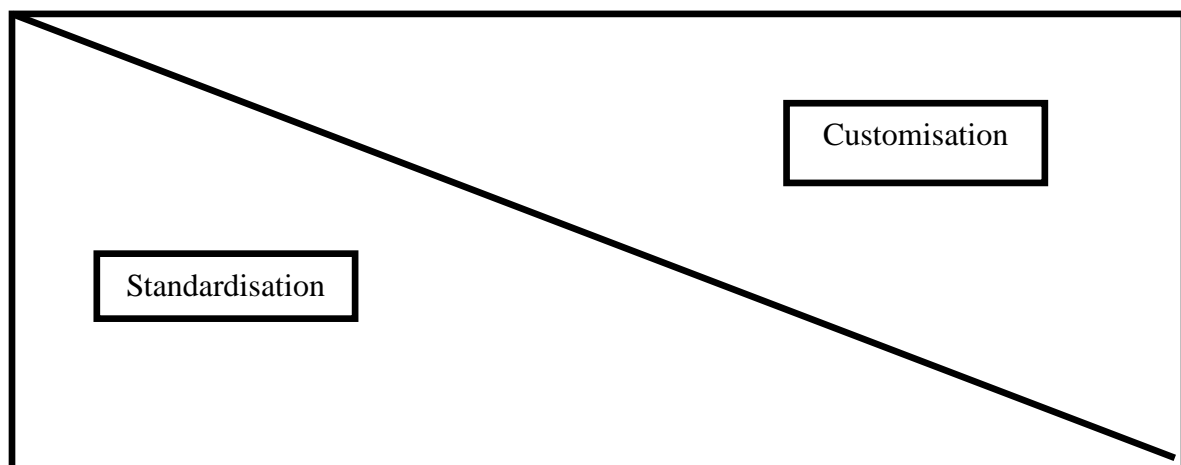


Figure 1 Standardisation and customisation illustrated another way

This figure (Figure 1) demonstrates that these two concepts are mutually exclusive, which means that standardisation and customisation are the opposite of each other; they cannot exist at the same time in case of a process.

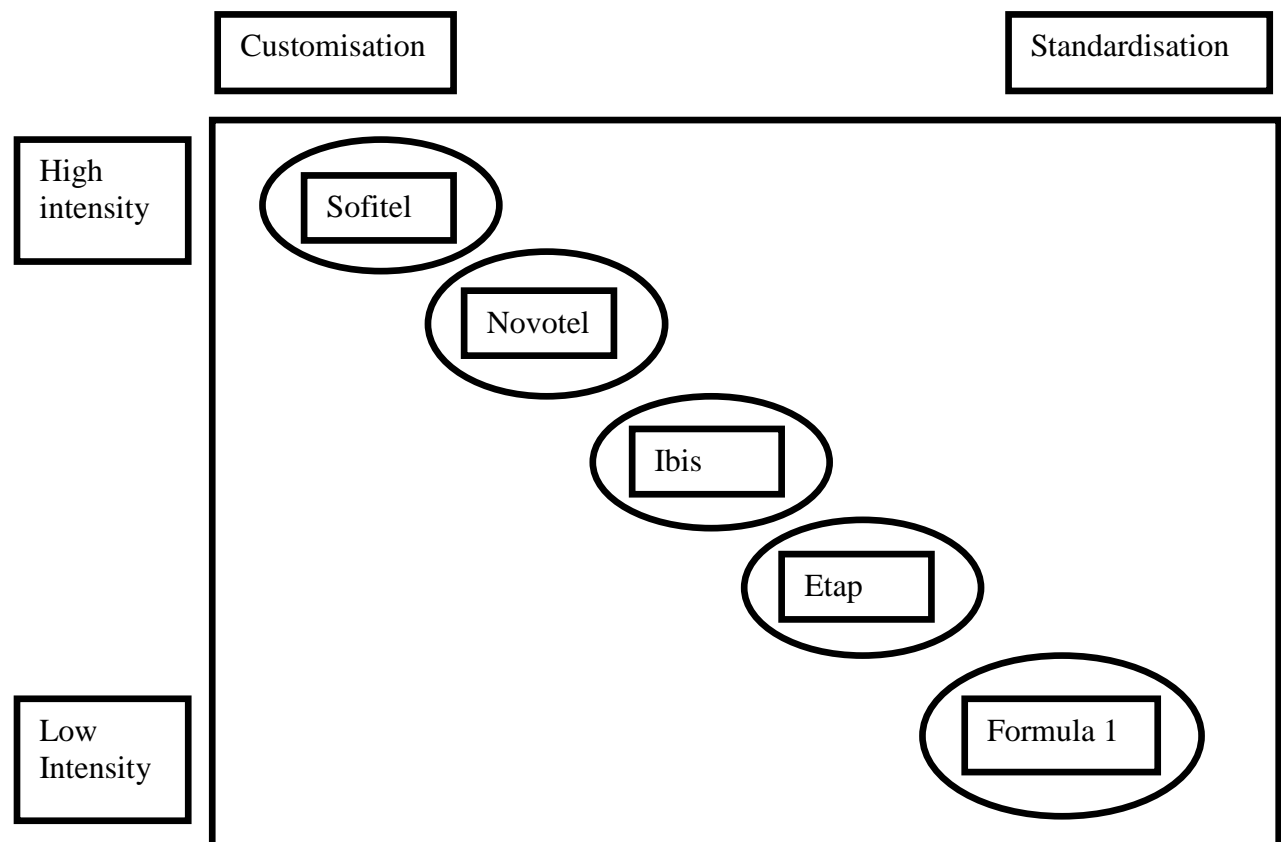


Figure 2 Service intensity matrix using the example of Accor (Teboul, 2005)

Figure 2 shows how to position a hotel company's hotel chains into a matrix. The author uses Accor hotels as an example which is the 6th biggest hotel group in the world with about 3500 establishment.

(<http://www.hotelnewsresource.com/article70429.html> 13/1/2013)

In the model the horizontal continuum represents the above mentioned standardisation/customisation theory; the vertical one shows the intensity of interaction in these hotel chains. It says that Sofitel is wholly customised and there is no standardisation in case of this hotel chain. At the bottom of the matrix Formula 1 hotels are fully standardised, there is no place for customisation in their cases.

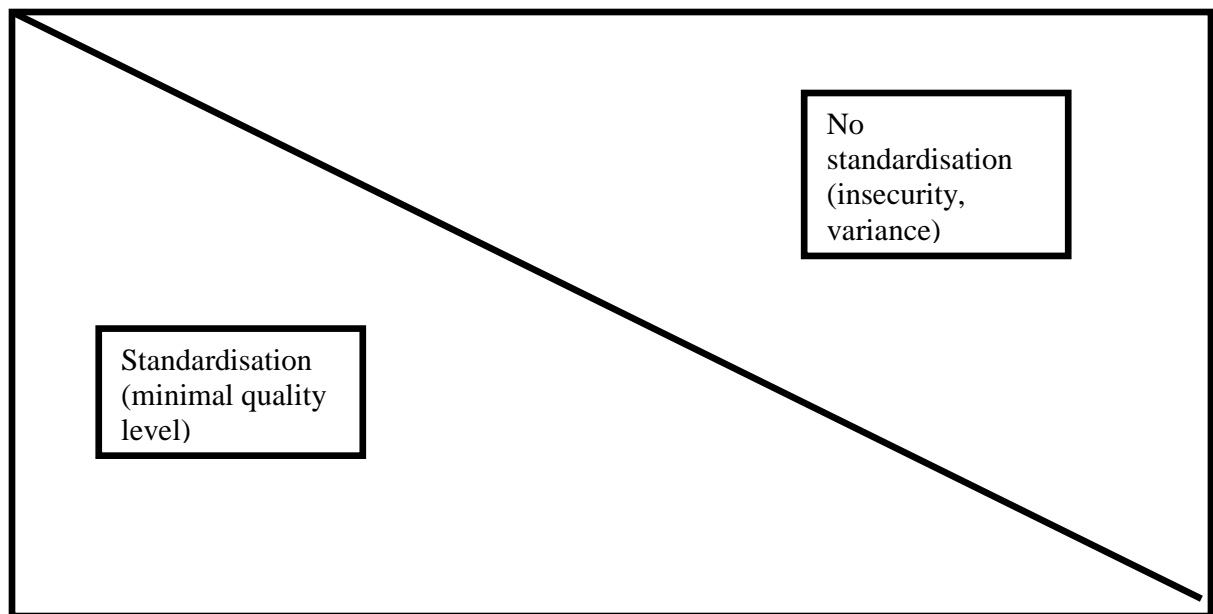


Figure 3 The opposite of standardisation is no standardisation

Standardisation in a quality context can provide a minimal quality level to the hotel but no standardisation on the other hand can only provide insecurity and variance as it was mentioned before. According to this theory standardisation is necessary for a hotel to be able to ensure a certain quality level and satisfy their guests' needs.

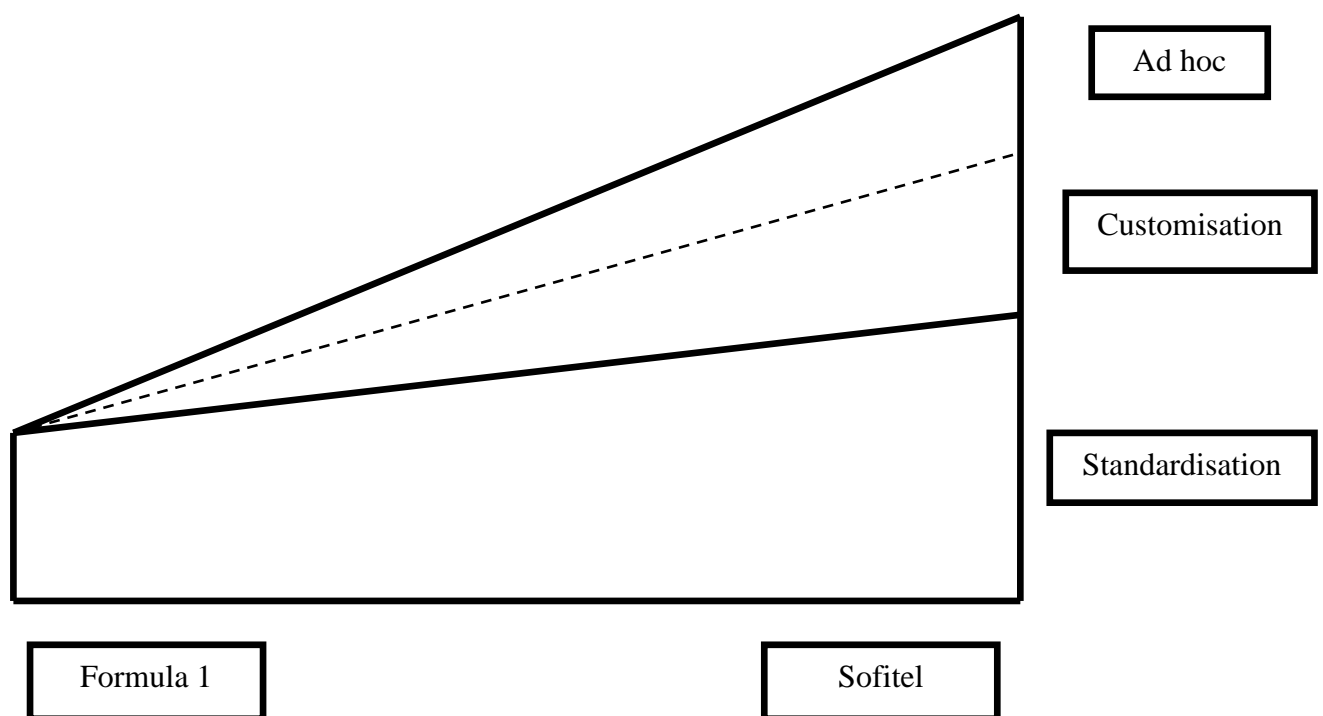


Figure 4 Presenting Accor brands according to the new theory

Hypotesis 1

There is a relationship between the different hotel characteristics and the level of standardisation in the Hungarian hotel industry.

Hypothesis 1a There is a relationship between chain membership and the level of standardisation.

Hypothesis 1b There is a relationship between Hotelstars Union membership and the level of standardisation.

Hypothesis 1c There is a relationship between the number of rooms in the hotel and the level of standardisation.

Hypthesis 1d There is a relationship between the star rating of the hotel and the level of standardisation.

The first hypothesis aims to find out if there is a relationship between different hotel characteristics and the level of standardisation and the extent of the influence of hotel chain membership to the level of standardisation in case of Hungarian hotels. Since the author's experience and hotel standardisation documents (handled confidentially) proved that hotel chains assure quality through the standardisation of the service delivery which is supported by the hotel management books (Hayes and Ninemaier, 2003, Harris and Mongiello, 2006, Rutherford and O'Fallon, 2007,) as well and name it as a reason to enter into a hotel chain. This hypothesis aims to prove that independent hotels can use the strategy of standardisation as well; it is not only a hotel chain member's characteristic. The hypothesis also assumes that those hotels which are already members of the Hotelstars Union organisation are more likely to have their own standards as well. For those hotels which have their own standard system can adapt easier to the Hotelsars Union requirement. The other aim of this hypothesis is to see if there is a difference between the level of standardisation in case of the different star rated hotels. The same issue is asked in case of the different size of the hotels. The author assumes that bigger hotels are more interested in standards and it is more obvious for them to use the standards than small hotels.

Hypotesis 2

There is a relationship between standardisation and customisation in the Hungarian hotel sector.

Most of the reviewed literatures (Cloninger and Swaidan, 2007, Ritzer, 2001, Schmid and Kotulla, 2010, Samiee et al., 2003, Bharadwaj et al., 2009) suggest that standardisation and customisation are two strategies to choose from; they cannot be mixed or used at the same time at the same firm, in this case a hotel, so general managers have to choose from the two strategies. Others mention a possibility to apply

both at the same time but for different processes (Kimes and Mustkoski, 1991, Liu et al., 2008, Moore et al., 2010) but there are authors who consider dealing with standardisation and customisation at the same in case of the same process (Heskett, 1986, Kondo, 2000, Mount and Mattila, 2009). There were also researchers who started to develop new theories which somehow mix the two and create another category (Sundbo, 2002, Gilmore and Pine, 1997). As this topic is not agreed in the literature one of the most important aims of this thesis is to prove that there is a relationship between standardisation and customisation so they can exist besides each other which would mean that they both have their roles in the life of the company.

Hypotesis 3

A group of processes/standard groups can be identified which has the most influence on the performance indicators when they are standardised and customised and at the same time when they are only standardised or customised.

One of the most important aims of the thesis is to help hotels optimise or create their own standardised, customised or standardised and customised processes. This hypothesis supports their process management and raise their attention to the most urgent and important topics to consider.

Hypotesis 4

The performance indicators (revenue per available room, occupancy rate, average daily rate, stars, foreign guest percentage, loyal guest percentage, booking evaluations, Tripadvisor evaluations) can be grouped into two factors: operation performance, guest performance.

Hypothesis 4 is searching for grouping the variables and reducing their numbers. In this thesis the goal of grouping the variables and finding out their relations is more essential than reducing the number of variables. The logic suggests that the operational performance indicators belong together and guest performance indicators contain all the numbers coming from guest satisfaction and the number of foreign guests.

Hypotesis 5

The average value of the performance indicators is higher in case of higher level of standardisation and customisation in Hungarian hotels.

Hypothesis 5 is assuming that higher performance indicators can be detected in those hotels which have higher standardisation and customisation level. This fact would be important to get because it could help convince hotel general managers about the significance of standardisation and customisation level.

3.2 Primary Data Collection

The data has been collected via interview and questionnaire.

3.2.1 The sample

The topic of standardisation and customisation required to be decided and answered by hotel general managers. The interview was determined to be replied by hotel chain general managers and the questionnaire by hotel general managers. The hotels which were asked all belong to the Hungarian Association of Hotels, which was meant to be a segmentation of hotel according to quality.

3.2.2 Interview

The first step was to determine the hotels (and hotel general managers) who could belong to the sample. The aim of the interview was to define the different importance of the standard groups and the weight of oral and written standardisation. Six interviews were carried out with hotel chain general managers and the results were used for identifying the standardisation level of hotels.

3.2.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire made for researching the topic consists three parts: general questions, standardisation questions and customisation questions.

Before starting the actual survey pilot questionnaires was carried out (suggested by Brace, 2008) improving the questions and the answer options and make them more understandable for the professionals.

After the pilot tests, the questionnaire was finalised and the actual survey started in June 2013 and closed in November. 20% of the questionnaires were asked personally by the researcher, the rest was sent to the hotel general managers via email. The questionnaire was in an online form but it was attached to the emails in pdf as well.

As final result 81 questionnaires were analysed and evaluated.

3.3 Research Methodology

For analysing the questionnaire data several methods were to use.

Descriptive statistics was applied to present and analyse the basic characteristics of the sample.

Fisher-Cochren theorem was used in Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 3 determining the effect of the chain membership to the standardisation level and the influence of different processes (if they are standardised, customised or both) on the performance indicators.

Correlation analysis was applied for Hypothesis 1 to find out the nature of the relationship between the room number of the hotels and the level of standardisation.

The analysis of variance has been used to examine the data in case of Hotelstars Union membership as well as in case of star rating of hotels and the level of standardisation. In the latter post hoc analysis has also been needed.

Cross tabulation analysis made it able to find out the relationship between standardisation and customisation.

Cluster analysis helped creating groups of hotels according to the level of standardisation and customisation.

Principle component analysis was able to group the performance variables according to their relationships and determined which belong to the same factor.

4 Research results

After the questionnaire data was gathered an analysis spreadsheet was used to work out an indicator and determine the level of standardisation in hotels. The answers were coded according to the existence of standardisation and were multiplied by the weight of the standard groups determined in the interviews. Then those groups were excluded which did not exist in the hotel. The final numbers are able to show the standardisation level of the hotel. The level of customisation was determined the similar way only without using the weights which were originally made to identify the importance of standardisation of the different processes.

4.1 Testing the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

There is a relationship between the different hotel characteristics and the level of standardisation in the Hungarian hotel industry.

Hypothesis 1a There is a relationship between chain membership and the level of standardisation.

Hypothesis 1b There is a relationship between Hotelstars Union membership and the level of standardisation.

Hypothesis 1c There is a relationship between the number of rooms in the hotel and the level of standardisation.

Hypothesis 1d There is a relationship between the star rating of the hotel and the level of standardisation.

This hypothesis only concentrated on the standardisation of Hungarian hotels. The analysis was able to determine that hotel chain membership explains 5% of the standardisation level of hotels. The strength of the relationship was measured by H indicator which value is 0.22. This hypothesis assumed a difference in the level of

standardisation according to the Hotelstars Union membership, which has been proved since the significance level was 0.06. The same relationship has been explored in case of the star rating of the hotel when the same significance level was 0.03. In this analysis post hoc test was run as well, and the results suggest that the difference is between the three- and the five-star hotels. The positive but weak (0.33) correlation has been found to be significant in case of the number of rooms in the hotel and the level of standardisation.

Hypothesis 2

There is a relationship between the level of standardisation and customisation in the Hungarian hotels.

Several methods were applied to test Hypothesis 2 because of its complexity and importance.

Cramer's V was determined which value (0.954) proved that the relationship between standardisation and customisation is very strong. Then a lambda test was carried out identifying that these two concepts have the same influence on each other (0.907). Then a cluster analysis was made and identified 4 groups of hotels: high standardisation-high customisation, high standardisation-medium customisation, medium standardisation-medium customisation, low standardisation-low customisation.

Hypothesis 3

A group of processes/standard groups can be identified which has the most influence on the performance indicators when they are standardised and customised and at the same time when they are only standardised or customised.

Fisher-Cochran theorem was used to test Hypothesis 3. All the processes' effects one by one was analysed to the performance indicators (RevPar, ADR, occupancy rate, foreign guest percentage, loyal guest percentage, booking evaluation, and tripadvisor evaluation). The results show among others that for example a cleaning procedure should be considered to be customised as well not only obviously standardised. The tables can be found in the doctoral thesis.

Hypothesis 4

The performance indicators (revenue per available room, occupancy rate, average daily rate, stars, foreign guest percentage, loyal guest percentage, booking evaluations, Tripadvisor evaluations) can be grouped into two factors: operation performance, guest performance.

Testing this hypothesis led to a different result than it was supposed to be. According to the results the Tripadvisor guest evaluations have a relationship with the important operational performance indicators. The consequence of this fact should make hotel general managers as well think about their operation and guest relation activities.

Hypotesis 5

The average value of the performance indicators is higher in case of higher level of standardisation and customisation in Hungarian hotels.

Analysing the results showed that the hotels belonging to the high standardisation-high customisation and high standardisation-medium customisation groups have better performance indicators than those belonging to the medium standardisation-medium customisation and low standardisation-low customisation groups.

4.2 Theses

Thesis 1

There is a relationship between hotel characteristics and the level of standardisation.

Thesis 1a

It has been confirmed that there is a weak relationship between hotel chain membership and the level of standardisation.

Thesis 1b

It has been determined that there is a relationship between Hotelstars Union membership and the level of standardisation.

Thesis 1c

It has been proven that there is a positive, weak relationship between the number of rooms in the hotel and the level of standardisation.

Thesis 1d

It has been found that there is a relationship between the star rating of the hotel and the level of standardisation and the difference is between three-star and five-star hotels.

Thesis 2

It has been proved that there is a very strong correlation between the standardisation and customisation level of the Hungarian hotels. The two concepts are not independent from each other and they influence each other in the same high level.

Thesis 3

A group of standards can be identified which has the most important influence on each performance indicators when they are standardised, customised or standardised and customised. The cleanliness and condition processes are not only standardised but customised as well. The guest participation services are not only customised but standardised as well.

Finding 4

The finding suggests that the contribution of Tripadvisor reviews to the performance indicators is worth considering and that frequent guests or loyal guest percentage is in relationship with the percentage of foreign guests in the hotel.

Thesis 5

The average value of the performance indicators is higher in case of medium or high level of customisation and high level of standardisation.

4.3 Further Research Directions

The role and significance of standardisation and customisation can be measured – with the developed method – in other countries as well, the comparison between the results would provide valuable information for the researchers and hotels as well.

The other important research direction would be to continue exploring the different indicators influencing the level of standardisation and customisation.

My other aim is to be able to observe the usage of standardisation and customisation in hotels and determine which standards – not only the 44 groups but the whole book of standards – are easier or more difficult to keep and use.

I would like to research more about the role of employees in the success of standardisation and customisation and determine suggestions for hotels what they should do improve their processes and use the abilities the employees possess.

Considering hotel and the tourism sector it would be a benefit to ask customers what their perceptions are and if they can recognise from the standards and which are more and less important for them.

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