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UNETHICAL CONSUMER PRACTICES IN THE PERCEPTION OF HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY EMPLOYEES

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Abstract
Introduction. Unethical consumer practices in the hotel industry pose a global problem. They are encountered in countries and regions with a rapidly developing tourism sector and a growing number of tourists. Demanding or even impolite customers pose a challenge for hotel employees. These problems are also encountered in Poland. ***Materials and Methods.*** In the presented case study, a mixed method model combining qualitative and quantitative analyses was applied to investigate unethical tourist practices in Polish hotels. Five four-star hotels belonging to the same capital group in north-eastern Poland were analyzed. ***Results.*** The study demonstrated that hotel staff members, in particular frontline employees, are confronted with unethical customer behaviors. Five types of unethical practices that are most often encountered by hotel employees, in particular young staff members, have been identified. ***Conclusions.*** The ability to deal with difficult customers is one of the most highly valued skills in frontline employees. Hotel employees should have an opportunity to participate in regular training programs on hospitality ethics and strategies for coping with difficult situations. These skills will play a pivotal role after the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic when hotels will be struggling to bring back clients. However, excessive leniency towards guests in difficult times could have adverse consequences when businesses resume normal operations.

Introduction

De George defines ethics as a systematic attempt to create a coherent, rational whole from our individual and social moral experiences [1]. In simpler terms, ethics is a moral philosophy or a moral code that is practiced by a person or a group of people. In the face of contemporary challenges, ethical issues are becoming an important topic of consideration not only among philosophers, but also representatives of various social and professional groups. According to Przecławski [2], the source of many negative phenomena plaguing contemporary societies is the lack of compliance with basic ethical standards. This also applies to the tourism industry. Unethical practices and behaviors have been encountered in the hospitality industry for many years, and they are observed in all groups of tourism participants, including visitors, local residents and service providers. The unprecedented growth of tourism prompted the WTO to implement the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism in 1999 [3]. Ethical codes have also been introduced in other segments of the hospitality industry. These documents have a global, national or local reach, and some of them address specific groups of tourists. Ethical codes play an increasingly important role to the face of rapid tourism growth because the structure of visitors, their motivations, needs and behaviors continue to evolve. These processes affect all segments of the tourism market, in particular the hospitality industry which provides not only accommodation, but also a variety of other services for travelers and involves direct communication with the visitors. In the contemporary world, tourism and hospitality play a key role in the global economy, and they require the observance of the highest ethical standards on a daily basis [4]. Ethical tourism has grown in prominence in recent years, and it is defined as tourism in which all stakeholders involved apply principles of good behavior (justice, fairness, and equality) to their interactions with one another, with society, with the environment, and other life forms [5]. Personal ethics and integrity are the key indicators that influence an employee's ethical behavior in the hospitality industry [6]. However, the hotel industry creates many opportunities for unethical conduct [7, 8, 9]. Harris [10] found that hotel employees frequently misbehave and that customers are aware of their actions. Such behaviors can be unpleasant for the guests, and they can also increase a hotel's operating costs [7]. Customers require professional services that meet universal quality standards. Visitors want hosts to be courteous, friendly and respectful, and they expect honesty and equity during their stay, beginning from the operator to frontline employees [7]. Guests are fully entitled to pursue their rights, but many tourists violate the basic norms of social behavior in the process. The prevalence of unethical consumer practices in the hotel industry continues to increase, and it has attracted considerable attention from business practitioners [7]. Customer relations are the critical determinant of success in tourism and hospitality sectors [11]. For this reason, the development of a standard code of practice for dealing with unethical customers poses a challenge. The above also applies to the Polish hospitality industry which has witnessed a significant growth in recent years. Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze unethical customer practices in selected Polish hotels.

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Materials and methods

The study was conducted in north-eastern Poland, which is a predominantly agricultural region with a weakly developed industrial sector. The region is renowned for its unspoiled nature, and it was nominated in The Wonders of Nature Competition in 2009. For this reason, the local authorities focus primarily on the development of tourism which drives economic growth in the region. The research strategy was a case study [12, 13, 14] with *a mixed method model* [15]. Five four-star hotels belonging to the same capital group were analyzed. The hotels are not chain-branded, and they form a group of cooperating venues. The hotels specialize in business tourism (e.g. congresses, incentive tourism, business meetings) and family tourism (in summer season and winter holidays). All facilities have a SPA area. The area and scope of the group's operations constitute the boundaries of the case.

The qualitative research method was participant observation [15, 16, 17]. Observations were carried out by trainees over a period of three weeks in the summer in selected hotels. The trainees monitored the daily operations of employees working in different departments (marketing, SPA, reception desk) and assisted them in selected tasks. The trainees stayed in the analyzed hotels during the study, which enabled them to observe the hotels' operations from the customers' perspective. The trainees collected data in field logs [15, 18].

The quantitative research method was a face-to-face survey involving a questionnaire. Forty-four frontline employees (marketing, reception desk, SPA) with at least one year of work experience in the tourist industry participated in the survey. The employees were also asked to relate unethical incidents that had occurred in the hotel in the previous year. The interviewed subjects recounted stories and identified ethical issues that pose a challenge for hospitality employees. The survey was conducted on a voluntary basis, and not all selected employees agreed to participate.

The results of the survey was processed statistically in the Statistica v. 13.3 program, and the significance of differences between two proportions was determined at $\alpha = 0.05$. Probability values were interpreted as followsdifferences are not statistically significant at the probability level of $p \geq \alpha$, differences are statistically significant at the probability level of $p < \alpha$.

A total of 44 employees participated in the survey, including receptionists (56.82%), employees of the marketing department (27.27%) and SPA personnel (15.91%). Participant observations revealed that marketing personnel were responsible for organizing group events, direct communication with customers, and monitoring the organized events. On weekends, marketing specialists also performed managerial duties and supervised the hotels' operations. The majority of the respondents were female (65.91%). The surveyed subjects differed considerably in age – the youngest respondent was 19, and the oldest was 60. The employees aged 37-48 were the largest group in the surveyed population (31.82%), followed by persons aged 29-36 (27.27%) and 49-60 (20.45%). The youngest employees were least well represented: the respondents aged 25-28 accounted for 13.64% and the respondents aged 19-24 – for 6.82% of the studied population. More than half of the surveyed subjects (63.64%) resided in urban areas, mostly towns and small cities (with a population of up to 30,000) which are predominant in the studied region. The majority of the respondents had university education (56.82%), followed by employees with secondary education (36.82%) and vocational education (6.82%). One-half of the surveyed subjects described their financial status as satisfactory, 45.45% – as

Table 1. Unethical behaviors of hotel guests – types, causes, frequency

Factor	Respondents (n = 44)	
	N	%
Definition of ethics		
Behavior that is morally right	19	43.18
Set of rules of conduct	18	40.91
Observance of rules	7	15.91
Unethical customer behaviors*		
Refusal to pay for services	13	29.55
Requesting additional services at no charge	15	34.09
Aggression	20	45.45
Disrespectful behavior towards employees	21	47.73
Illegitimate complaints	4	9.09
Employees who have experienced unethical customer behaviors*		
Unethical behavior directly targeted at employee	20	45.45
Unethical behavior witnessed by employee	31	70.45
Unethical behavior recounted by other employees	7	15.91
Types of unethical behaviors*		
Aggression	22	50.00
Illegitimate requests for additional products or services	16	36.36
Illegitimate complaints	14	31.82
Refusal to pay for services	6	13.64
Property theft and damage	4	9.09
Causes of unethical customer behaviors*		
Lack of respect for other people	17	38.64
Low standards of personal conduct	16	36.36
Sense of impunity	6	13.64
Personal gain	4	9.09
Lack of familiarity with hospitality rules	1	2.27
Frequency of unethical customer behaviors		
Low	24	54.55
High	18	40.91
Very high	2	4.55
Prevalence of unethical customer behaviors relative to previous years		
Higher	20	45.45
Similar	24	54.55
Reasons for the increase in unethical customer behaviors**		
Online booking	2	10.00
Frustration	11	55.00
Personal gain	7	35.00

Notes: * – The percentage of responses does not add up to 100 because the respondents could give more than one answer.
** – n = 20 – only respondents who reported an increase in unethical customer behaviors answered this question.

average, and 4.55% – as highly satisfactory. The percentage of married respondents was determined at 56.82%. The largest group of respondents had 6 to 10 years of work experience in the tourist industry (36.36%). In the surveyed group, 27.27% of the employees had up to 5 years of work experience, 15.91% had 11 to 15 years of work experience, and 15.91% had more than 20 years of work experience in tourism. 63.64% of the respondents had no formal training in tourism and hospitality. Interestingly, 86.9% of the employees in the Turkish hospitality industry have no educational background in tourism [7].

Results

The largest group of respondents (43.18%) defined ethical conduct as behaviors that are morally right, 40.91% were of the opinion that ethics is a set of principles of conduct, whereas 15.91% of the surveyed subjects associated ethics with the observance of rules. The respondents' attitudes towards the concept of ethics were not significantly affected by the respondents' sex or marital status. However, education was a significant differentiating factor. The employees with vocational education were significantly more likely to define ethics as the observance of rules than the respondents with university ($p = 0.0433$) and secondary education ($p = 0.0084$). Most university graduates were of the opinion that ethics is a set of principles of conduct, whereas the remaining respondents regarded ethical conduct as behaviors that are morally right. Significant differences in the definition of ethics were also observed between income groups. The respondents with the highest financial status were significantly more likely ($p = 0.0497$) to define ethics as a set of rules of conduct than the subjects with average financial status. All respondents declared that they followed moral rules.

Disrespectful behavior towards hotel personnel was the most frequently identified type of unethical conduct (47.73%).

All respondents have experienced unethical guest behaviors. The largest group of employees have witnessed such situations (70.45%), and 45.45% of the surveyed subjects have been directly confronted with such practices. One-half of the respondents claimed that customers are aggressive towards hotel staff, which, in the employees' opinion, could be attributed to the lack of respect for other people and low standards of personal conduct. Low levels of personal conduct were significantly more often ($p = 0.0339$) identified as the root cause of unethical customer practices by employees with a longer history of employment (16-20 years) than those who had been working in the tourist industry for 6 to 10 years. Differences were also observed between work posts, and a significantly higher number of marketing ($p = 0.0466$) than SPA employees were of the opinion that unethical behaviors result from low standards of personal conduct.

More than half of the respondents (54.55%) argued that ethical issues are rare, whereas an opposing opinion was voiced by 40.91% of the surveyed subjects. A significantly higher number of the youngest employees than the oldest respondents ($p = 0.047$) claimed that ethical problems occur frequently. The frequency of unethical practices was regarded as fairly constant by 54.55% of the respondents, whereas the remaining subjects held the opposing view. Employment history and work post were significant differentiating factors. The belief that the number of impolite customers is on the rise tended to be higher among employees with a longer history of employment ($p = 0.0170$). This opinion was also significantly more popular among marketing employees than SPA staff ($p = 0.0274$). The respondents claimed that the challenges faced by customers in daily life are the root cause of the increase in aggressive behavior.

Discussion

According to most of the surveyed hotel employees, ethics denotes behaviors that are morally right. The theoretical value of moral behavior was more frequently recognized by better educated respondents with a higher financial status, whereas a more practical approach was adopted by less educated and lower-earning employees who regarded ethics as the observance of a set of rules. Unsurprisingly, all respondents claimed that their behavior was ethical and that they never crossed moral boundaries.

The surveyed hospitality employees were asked to list unethical customer practices. Their responses were used to identify five main types of customer behaviors that run counter to the employees' personal values and are unacceptable. The two key issues were aggressive behavior and lack of respect for frontline staff. These behaviors directly undermine the employees' personal integrity. The remaining misbehaviors (requesting additional services at no charge, refusal to pay) generate financial losses for the employer. However, these issues have to be resolved by frontline employees who often bear the brunt of the guests' aggressive behavior.

Hotel employees have to deal with the customers' unethical conduct [6, 19]. Nearly half of the respondents have experienced unethical behaviors, and 70% have witnessed such situations. The receptionists are frontline employees who communicate directly with all clients, and they are exposed to impolite behaviors significantly more often than marketing personnel and SPA staff. The employees' age plays a role, and the youngest respondents have had significantly more experiences with customer aggression than the employees in the 37-48 age group. It is highly likely that some guests regard young and inexperienced employees as easier to influence or even intimidate.

The five identified types of unethical customer behaviors were highly consistent with the list of practices that are unacceptable for hospitality employees. Hotel guests are most often aggressive towards the staff. According to the surveyed respondents, guests vent their frustration on the staff, are unable to hold a polite conversation, lack empathy, and take their negative emotions out on the personnel. Verbal aggressiveness from boorish customers can be unsettling for employees and cause undue stress [19]. Some guests also request additional products or services at no extra charge, which can be a humiliating experience for hospitality employees. These customers will go to great lengths to "get their money's worth". Guests display entitled behavior, but according to some respondents, hotels are partially to blame for that. Many hotels introduce discount programs, guest rewards, point systems and cheap Internet rates to combat economic recession of 2008, and these measures have increased customer entitlement and aggression towards the staff [19]. Some guests also blackmail employees by threatening to post negative opinions on booking sites and social media, even when their demands and complaints are unjustified. Hotel managers do not take these threats lightly. One of the surveyed managers said: "Verbal threats from customers are frequently discussed during industry meetings. All managers agree that we should not give in to these abstract demands. But back in the office, we still let guests blackmail us because competition is fierce, and many customers read online reviews before they make a booking". Customers quickly learn that hotels turn a blind eye on aggressive behavior and that they can get a discount, a gift or

free services by threatening to post a negative opinion on the Internet. Unethical practices may generate benefits for the guests, but not for the hotels. These types of behavior are also a source of considerable stress for the employees, and they decrease staff motivation. The surveyed respondents have also experienced consumer terrorism [20]. For example, some guests deliberately brought cockroaches to their rooms for the sole purpose of requesting a refund, or they disseminated false information about the hotel and its service standards.

"Illegitimate complaints" also pose a challenge for hotel employees. Guests complain about issues that remain beyond the hotel's control (public utilities failure, bad weather, SPA treatments that cannot be booked for specific time slots). Customers also complain about the range and standard of hotel services. Guests expect more even when the hotel fully meets its contractual obligations. One of the respondents remarked that "Many guests are unsatisfied because they do not carefully read the terms of service". According to hospitality employees, some guests refuse to admit their mistakes. They are unhappy with the choice they have made, but they attempt to shift the blame to the hotel staff.

In contrast, refusal to pay for hotel services, theft and damage of hotel property account for only a small percentage of unethical customer practices. However, consumer theft and fraud constitute illegitimate complaining behavior, which is defined as deliberate post-service attempts to gain monetary reimbursement or reparation without justification. Guests often file illegitimate complaints to receive refunds from hospitality operators. They search for inconsistencies between the service promised and that provided, or generate such inconsistencies just to create the background for unjustified claims [21]. Such issues have also been encountered in the analyzed hotels.

According to hospitality employees, the lack of respect for other people and low standards of personal conduct are the root causes of guest misbehavior. This opinion was significantly more often voiced by employees with a long employment history and considerable work experience in the hospitality sector (16-20 years). The occupied post was a differentiating factor, and significantly more marketing experts than SPA employees blamed customers for low levels of personal conduct. SPA treatments promote relaxation, improve well-being and minimize aggression, which could explain why SPA staff members are less exposed to customer misbehavior.

The respondents, in particular frontline employees, claimed that many customers display patronizing behavior. In their opinion, guests automatically assume that receptionists have lower social status and are less educated, which is far from the truth because more than half of the respondents were university graduates, and 36.36% of the surveyed employees had secondary education. Frontline employees often find themselves in a no-win situation: they have to cater to the most abstract demands of customers who speak from a position of privilege. The surveyed employees argued that hotel staff members are "dehumanized" by some guests. They also pointed out that many guests act with complete impunity. As mentioned before, hotels are partially to blame for that by adopting an excessively lenient approach to customer service.

Teng et al. [6] interviewed general managers of hotels in Taiwan and identified 161 critical ethical incidents, eight of which involved unethical customer practices. In the present study, critical incidents could not be identified because they are not officially recorded in the analyzed hotels. However, nearly one-half of the respondents claimed that ethical incidents involving misbehaving customers occur frequently or even very frequently. The youngest employees are more likely to be targeted by aggressive customers, which is why a higher number of younger than older respondents were of the opinion that ethical incidents occur frequently. Nearly 50% of the surveyed subjects also observed that the number of unethical customer practices had increased in recent years. This observation was made mainly by workers who had been employed in the hospitality sector for more than 20 years. Their opinions are based on extensive experience, which further underscores the severity of the problem.

The identified causes of impolite customer behaviors were interesting. According to the surveyed subjects, customers vent their anger on hospitality employees because they experience frustration in their professional and/or private lives. Unfortunately, guests take their anger out on hospitality employees who are expected to remain polite and, consequently, are unable to retaliate. Hotel managers should take the necessary steps to discourage such attitudes and firmly respond to impolite behavior.

Recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of people who use the Internet for travel and accommodation services [22, 23]. According to some of the respondents, the popularity of online booking sites is partially to blame for the rise in impolite customer behaviors. The surveyed employees remarked that many guests select hotel sites without checking the terms of service on booking sites. Online guests do not often make the effort to check the type of room they have booked or the services that are included in the price. They have unrealistic expectations, which leads to conflict and complaints. Many online reservations cannot be cancelled, but some hotels are encouraging customers to book rooms without online intermediaries. The respondents also noted that online bookings are more often made by individual tourists or small groups and for short stays only. Guests visiting holiday resorts and families planning longer vacations prefer to communicate directly with the hotel. Customers who book services directly with the hotel have greater access to information about services that are included in the price, which minimizes the risk of misunderstanding and complaints.

The results of the present study indicate that some employees take disrespectful behavior personally. They feel that the recommended customer service scenarios are geared towards customer satisfaction, while the employees' wellbeing is disregarded. The employees refuse to be treated in a disrespectful and patronizing manner. Most of them are well educated, they have high standards of personal conduct and high self-esteem. They do not feel inferior to the guests. Therefore, employers should assist their employees in coping with difficult situations in the workplace. Prolonged stress can decrease staff motivation, compromise customer service standards, and prompt workers to leave the organization. Hotel managers should be made aware that the success of hospitality brands relies heavily on employees [24] who should be provided with an optimal working environment, not only in technical and organizational terms, but also in terms of their psychological wellbeing. Research studies conducted in other countries revealed that hotels should organize ethical training for guide employees to provide them with effective tools and skills for dealing with ethical incidents [6].

The hotels surveyed in this study belong to the same capital group but participant observations revealed that the analyzed hotels are not centrally managed and that the managers have considerable autonomy in making decisions. Managers differ in their approach to unethical behavior and react to it in different ways [25, 26]. Similar conclusions can be formulated based on the results of this study. Participant observations demonstrated that the managers of the surveyed hotels adopted different ap-

proaches to dealing with entitled and rude guests. Some hotels abide by the "customer is always right" principle, and all conflicts are resolved in favor of the complainant. Other managers adopt a more rational approach and refuse to be blackmailed in situations that are clearly detrimental to the hotel's interests. The results of participant observations also indicate that a hotel's approach to handling aggressive customers is largely determined by the personal traits of the employees, in particular higher-ranking personnel. Employees who have high self-esteem and are respectful towards their co-workers are more likely to set boundaries with disrespectful guests. A hotel's market status also plays a role, and hotels which have a well-established market presence and enjoy greater competitive advantage tend to cope better with unethical customer practices.

Conclusions

Unethical practices are encountered in the hospitality industry, but most customers do not violate generally accepted rules of social conduct. However, the results of the presented study and a review of the literature indicate that unethical or even aggressive consumer behaviors pose a growing challenge for the hospitality industry not only in Poland, but also in other countries. Ethical incidents exert a negative influence on the wellbeing and motivation of hospitality employees, in particular frontline workers. The youngest and least experienced employees are most exposed to the customers' disrespectful behavior, and they should receive support from hotel managers as well as more experienced co-workers. The employees should be able to participate in regular training courses, workshops and programs on hospitality ethics and coping with difficult situations in the workplace.

The hospitality industry will be more affected by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic than the financial crisis of 2008. Fears will persist even after the pandemic has been contained. Consumers will be less likely to travel, and they will opt for smaller hotels, pensions, guest rooms or summer cottages rather than large hospitality venues. Hotel occupancy has plunged, and it is unlikely to be restored in the nearest future. Many hospitality companies will adopt more lenient attitudes towards clients to recover from the loss of business. However, hotel managers should bear in mind that *excessive leniency towards guests in difficult times could have adverse consequences when businesses resume normal operations.*

The hospitality industry should strive to develop common standards for coping with illegitimate customer complaints. Lenient attitudes towards the guests' unethical practices are unlikely to improve a hotel's market standing, but they can have far-reaching consequences for the entire hospitality industry.

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