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**AN ANALYSIS AND MEASUREMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY: THE CASE
OF BELARUSIAN DAY SPAS**

Master Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

The author of this Masters Thesis will begin with justification for the research topic. There are several reasons signifying the importance of research on spa service quality and its measurement.

Firstly, service quality is a key to building relationship with customer and ensuring their return. In the context of Belarus where spa culture is just emerging, service quality is also seen as an important factor that can attract and bring customer back. Prices at existing outlets are affordable only to a limited number of consumers and the use spa services are more a luxury than a necessity. Those who come to a spa are modern spa clients expecting to receive value for money and exceptional customer service from the moment they make an appointment to the time they leave. The service they receive from the spa employees will set the stage for the guests' experience during and after their treatment, and whether to return.

Secondly, the importance of service quality cannot be undermined in the current competitive market place where customers express continuous expectations and demands for better value for money. In spite of the fact, that the spa industry is quite a recent phenomenon in Belarus, one can say that the spa market is developing rapidly with different types of spas being present for the choice of a consumer. To ensure the competitive edge spas use differentiation strategy expressed in the concept, interior design, the use of innovative techniques in delivering spa treatments or use of branded products characterized by special properties. Service quality remains central but underdeveloped area of competitive advantage. In a situation where customers have a lot of alternatives offering exceptional service quality can be a powerful source of differentiation strategy and securing a business with competitive edge.

Thirdly, at present there is no well-established system for certifying spa service quality in Belarus. However, service quality, being an internal characteristic of a business, remains under control of it and can be influenced, developed and improved. Measurement of service quality is the first step that leads to control and finally improvement. It leads to better understanding of underperforming areas that once identified can be controlled and eventually improved. As it is wisely noted by quality

guru James Harrington (1994) “If you can’t measure something, you can’t understand it. If you can’t understand it, you can’t control it. If you can’t control it, you can’t improve it”.

Lastly, regardless of the great importance of service quality to the spa industry the research on service quality and its measurement in the context of spa is limited and was addressed by only a few scholars. Snoj & Mumel (2002), González et al. (2007), Blesic et al. (2009), Boonyarit & Phetvaroon (2011) and Lo et al. (2015) are among them. The research took place in Slovenia, Spain, Serbia, Thailand and China respectively. The lack of information on the spa sector in Belarus represents potentially serious problems. For example, it is known that perceived service quality has a significant impact on firm’s choice and intention to return. If service providers lack information on what is actually quality spa service and how well or badly it is perceived by their customer, their abilities to control and manage service quality are diminished. The author of this Masters Thesis aims to compensate for the lack of research in this field that is hoped to be beneficial for organization of spa sector. The research on spa service quality is going to be an ice-breaking one since there was no prior research of this type on the territory of Belarus before.

The research question of this Thesis is twofold “To what extent Belarusian day spas meet the criteria of existing and adapted models and how service quality can be improved?” The aim of the Thesis is to make proposals on spa service quality improvement. Based on the aim and objective of this research paper the following tasks are set:

- To provide an overview of theoretical literature on service quality, its measurement and importance to the spa industry;
- To measure spa service quality by exploring customers’ perceptions;
- To identify under-performing areas that need improvement and to make recommendations.

The author of this Masters Thesis used four research methods to meet the research aim and tasks and answer the research question. These methods are literature review,

customer survey; mystery shopping and semi-structured interview with spa managers. Customer survey for the present study was based on service quality dimensions suggested by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1990); however the author opted for a modified and more user-friendly SERVPERF format of the questionnaire suggested by Cronin and Taylor (1994). To measure service quality using survey method a sample of 150 spa customers of three day spas was taken. Non-probability self-selective sampling method was used to gain access to the target population. Mystery shopping was used to collect additional information on underperforming areas and determine the extent to which Belarusian day spas meet the existing international criteria for the spa treatment. The interviewees with spa managers broaden the understanding of the service quality issues. These methods for data collection form a flexible basis for formulation suggestions on spa service quality improvement.

The research outcome will be forwarded to a third person (spa managers of participating spas) with the purpose of giving recommendations for spa service quality improvement. Additionally, the recommendations can be used by similar organization of the sector. Therefore, the outcome of this study is not only stating the level of spa service quality performance but a contribution to future spa service quality improvement.

The Master thesis is structured accordingly: Chapter 1 reviews literature and scientific articles to understand theoretical background of service quality. Chapter 2 follows, presenting the justification for the selected Methodology and discusses the nature of research and its methods. It explains data collection process and presents data analysis. Chapter 3 discusses the results of the research and makes suggestions on spa service quality improvement. Chapter 3 is followed by the conclusion of this work, presenting the key findings, outlining the limitations and making suggestions for the future research. This Masters Thesis is ended with references, appendices and summary in Russian language.

1. THEORETICAL APPROACH TO SERVICE QUALITY

The author of this Masters Thesis will commence the first Chapter of this work with a theoretical context. At first the concepts and key ideas of the original quality gurus will be examined as they form the foundation of service quality theory. These concepts and ideas will be viewed as applicable to the spa and wellness industry. Further, service quality theory will be reviewed by means of comparative analysis of the Scandinavian and North American schools of service quality. It will be followed by underlying the reasons pointing out the importance of service quality to the spa and wellness industry. Measurement of service quality is of focus in the following part of this Masters Thesis which is centered on the leading SERVQUAL model for measuring service quality and the criticism related to it, and briefly presents alternative models. Theoretical review is completed by analyzing the multidimensional nature of quality customer service and its components. Hence, the first Chapter forms a flexible basis for the spa service quality assessment and formulation of suggestions on spa service quality improvement.

1.1. Conceptualization of Service Quality

The research on product quality started in the first half of the twentieth century and preceded the research on service quality that has been growing in the world since the late 1970s. As theories and concepts of quality and its management have percolated into service industry from manufacturing and form the foundation of service quality theory, it is important to look at them in order to better understand what service quality means in general and its relation to spa. Among those who made a considerable contribution to the development of the quality management movement were Shewhart, 1939; Deming, 1986; Juran, 1999; Crosby, 1979; Feigenbaum, 1991 and Peters, 1987. This chapter will examine the main concepts and ideas on quality developed by these early quality gurus as applicable to the spa and wellness industry.

One can say that the history of quality management commenced with Shewhart, who was the President of the American Statistical Association and the founding member of

the American Society for Quality. Shewhart defined quality as ‘conformance to requirements’ (as cited in Williams & Buswell, 2003: 45). One of the main quality techniques, statistical process control (SPC), was developed by Shewhart as early as 1931. Shewhart’s development of the SPC technique is based on his concept that products have qualities, rather than quality, and they can be partially measured. These qualities are classified into objective qualities, which can be measured by SPC, and subjective qualities, which cannot (Williams & Buswell, 2003: 38). The same author attempted to give objective values to the tangible elements and subjective values to intangibles. The realization that intangible elements are judged subjectively is very important to the spa industry, which is trying to fulfill abstract and even elusive customer needs. For example, the “anti- cellulite package” can be one customer’s dream but another one’s nightmare, even when an identical experience is offered.

Deming (1986) as well as Shewhart applied SPC for detecting mistakes, known to quality practitioners as ‘non-conformances’ (as cited in Williams & Buswell, 2003). Deming is an advocate of continuous improvement, also known as a ‘customer-oriented quality’, a quality goal relevant to any industry. Knowing what customer needs are, is of paramount importance to an organization working towards the ever-moving goal of continuous improvement of services it provides. Whilst the user is central to judging product qualities, Deming considers that “it is not easy to comply with as consumers’ needs are changing constantly’ (Williams & Buswell, 2003: 39).

The changing consumer needs are very noticeable in the spa industry as fashions for spa experiences come and go. For example, as it was stated in Spafinder magazine (2014) a distinct “suspending gravity” also called floating trend is rising up. It means that traditional on-floor fitness classes in some of the most up-to-date wellness centers are being substituted by anti-gravity-classes and aerial yoga. Traditional pools are being transformed into weightless, stress- and mind-melting flotation tanks, chambers and pools at spas (Spafinder, 2014: 23). As long as the spa and wellness industry is aware of the importance of monitoring customer needs on a regular basis, many elements of its services can be changed relatively quickly. For instance, since the trend toward more nutritious, diet-customized, farm-sourced food and beverage is also heating up, more

hotels are making healthy F&B offerings more comprehensive and appealing than just a steel-cut oats option at breakfast (Spafinder, 2014: 10).

Juran (1999) defines a user-based approach to quality management in which the customer is central. Juran's concept of 'fitness for use' includes the judgement that users make about how beneficial the goods and services are to them. This concept is also applicable to the spa and wellness industry, as many experiences are marketed on the basis of the benefits they will give to the customer. Juran (1999) considered that service industry users have a variety of needs, both psychological and physiological, including amusement, freedom from disagreeable chores, opportunity for learning and creativity. Juran's description seems to fit tourism and leisure industry as well as spa and wellness industry better than other sections of service industry. In addition, Juran is widely credited for adding the human dimension to quality management. He pushed for the education and training of managers. For Juran, human relations problems were the ones to isolate and resistance to change was the root cause of quality issues. Education is seen as an important aspect for the wellness and spa industry and not only managers but also staff must be regularly informed about and involved into the training opportunities (ISPA, 2015).

Feigenbaum's theory (1991) is built upon the previous quality writers and requires the application of quality systems to manage the whole of the organization. Quality management is seen as a framework for all aspects of the business and is known as "total quality management" (TQM). Due to the active development of the spa and wellness industry, the organization of this sector have recently started to embrace quality management concepts, some are only just moving to implementing quality control and assurance tools and techniques (e.g. development of specific SPA standards, Mystery checks) while others move to the more sophisticated holistic quality system (e.g. British International Spa Accreditation Scheme).

Feigenbaum (1991) agreed with the previous quality writers that customers determine the quality by judging whether or not the goods or services purchased meet their requirements. This "total customer satisfaction approach" is the foundation of this theory. One of his popular statement goes "Quality is what the customer says it is". Feigenbaum (1991) was one of the first writers on quality to distinguish between

tangibles (the décor, uniforms of the staff, etc.) and intangibles of service, stating that the service sector is ‘heavily dependent upon human skills, attitudes and training’. This acknowledgement of the importance of the interaction between customers and staff is fundamental to managing spa and wellness service quality.

Haksever & Render (2013: 254) note important things on achievement of quality based on Total Quality Management that can be summarized in three key points. Firstly, quality cannot be achieved simply by mechanical application of a few quality techniques in service establishments: creating quality services requires a fundamental change in management philosophy. Secondly, the same authors note that this change cannot be accomplished quickly and easily: it is a continuous process of change. Thirdly, produced services must be the ones desired by customers, rather than trying to sell the services that are being produced. In other words, service organizations must be customer-focused.

Crosby’s approach revolves around Zero Defects which is a management tool aimed at the reduction of defects through prevention. It is directed at motivating people to prevent mistakes by developing a constant, conscious desire to do their job right the first time (Crosby, 1979). According to Crosby (1979), doing things right the first time is always cheaper than trying to fix defects after they have been created and costs of poor quality are higher than organizations realize. Also Crosby’s famous work and slogan goes “Quality is free”, although, since service is not given special consideration in Crosby’s theory, it is necessary to be aware of its limitations. Introduction of a quality culture can be initially very expensive for spa and wellness organizations. Some of the expenses include training costs and fees for engaging quality management consultants and receiving quality assurance seals and awards.

Peters (1987) adopted a slightly different perspective from all the previous quality writers. This author is the only one of these early researchers on quality who defines quality in terms of excellence. Peters (1987) defined quality as ‘the customer’s perceptions of excellence’. By this definition he recognized the importance of customer expectations and perceptions. This is central to managing a customer-focused spa and wellness industry organization and many service quality theories, including

SERVQUAL developed in the mid-1980s by Zeithaml et al. (1990) have devised methods to measure these factors.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into great detail on each of the gurus, their philosophies, teachings and tools so only a brief overview of their contribution to the quality journey was given. In spite of the manufacturing industry backgrounds of these writers, they have made a considerable contribution to the development of service quality theory. They gave first definitions to quality underlying the importance of keeping a customer in mind as he is the only judge of quality. They were the first quality theorists who suggested looking at customers' changing needs and supported continuous improvement as a means leading to customer satisfaction. Quality gurus highlighted the importance of customer-staff interactions in service industries and claimed the necessity of staff and management education and training. In spite of the fact that their theories were originally centered on product quality management, quality writers developed the underlying concepts of service sector such as tangibles and intangibles of service, and acknowledged the role of customers' expectations and perceptions in assessing service quality.

1.2. Service Quality Theories

The application of quality management research specifically to the service sector commenced in the 1980s (Brogowicz et al., 1990). The research developed into two separate schools: the Scandinavian school, with Gronroos and Gummesson as the main writers and the North American school, with research led by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry. Further comparative analysis between these two schools in regard to service quality is presented.

The majority of service quality writers concentrate on user-based approach when trying to define service quality (Parasuraman, 1994; Gronroos, 1994). User-based approach is known also as 'customer-oriented' quality. According to this approach, customer needs are paramount to the continuous improvement of a service, a factor that, if ignored by the spa industry, could see customers moving to an organization's competitors. This

approach is also closely linked to the idea of customer satisfaction and says that ‘service quality level is correct when customers are satisfied’ (Parasuraman, 1994). On the basis of user-based approach quality is defined as meeting and exceeding customer expectations (Gronroos, 2007; Parasuraman et al., 1991).

Customer focus was widely advocated by quality gurus as well as service quality theory writers (Parasuraman et al., 1991; Gronroos, 2007; Deming, 1986; Juran, 1999) by claiming that ‘customers are the sole judge of service quality’ (Berry et al., 1990: 29). For service organizations to be customer-focused customers’ needs, requirements and expectations that are ever-changing must be monitored and collected on a regular basis and this in turn must have implications on how services are designed and produced. Different ways of soliciting customers’ feedback (i.e. actively or passively solicited, keeping records of unsolicited feedback) can allow the management to collect this valuable information from their customers.

Holistic approach to service quality in the Scandinavian school was expressed in defining service quality as a multidimensional concept. Gronroos (1990) argued that service quality comprises of three dimensions: technical, functional quality and corporate image. Technical quality represents ‘what’ is delivered to the customer. The example of technical quality from spa service industry may include a hot stone massage, chocolate wrap or anti-age facial. The second dimension, or functional quality, represents ‘how’ the service is delivered. Attitude, tact, skills, knowledge, and friendliness are examples. They are seen subjectively by the customers. Together, technical and functional quality represent a bundle of goods and services that create a corporate image, which Gronroos sees as a third dimension of service quality. This model takes a holistic approach in which the expected quality is affected by external factors such as customer needs and word of mouth from others.

Gummesson’s 4Q model (Gummesson, 1993) shows that there are various sources of quality that have an impact on the total outcome of customer’s perceived quality. The sources of quality are design and delivery, while the results of how well services are designed and delivered are relational and technical quality. Design quality deals with how well the goods and services are designed to meet the needs of the customer while delivery quality signifies consistently meeting the standards promised to customers.

Relational quality is about the perception the customer has about the service encounter and technical quality about the perception the customer has about the actual technical aspects about the service or product.

The North American scholars created the Gap Analysis Model. According to this model service quality is determined by the extent of discrepancy between customer's expectation and the customer's perception of the service. Guests' satisfaction or dissatisfaction depends on how much guests expectations and customer perceptions are similar or different (Parasuraman, et al., 1994). This coincides with the definition given by Peters (1987) where it is defined as "customers' perceptions of excellence". The Gap Analysis model similarly to the Total perceived quality model suggests that there are a number of certain key factors that influence customer expectations: word-of-mouth, external communications, personal needs and past experience are among of them. Additionally the Gap analysis model identifies the determinants or dimensions of service quality which are evaluated by the customer. Finally, this model allows a researcher to identify failings in quality perceived by the customer and the service provider's internal gaps, to find an approach capable of removing or at least reducing these failings.

Scandinavian and US school of service quality management agreed on the point of service dimensions that are important for customers. Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) outlined these five key dimensions of service quality. Four out of five dimensions namely reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy focus mainly on the human aspect of service delivery and the fifth dimension on tangible elements of the service. Scandinavian school added 'recovery' as a sixth dimension (Lewis, 1995), which is the ability of an organization to rectify mistakes in an appropriate way (as judged by the customer) and which can improve customer perceptions of the service provider. Williams & Buswell (2003: 124) note that 'negative comments impinge on an organization's image, whilst a customer who has had a bad experience but has been recompensed at any appropriate level will generally express positive comments to others'. Potential customers feel that if there was a problem this is a company that would try to do something and are therefore not deterred from using that company. The dimension of 'recovery' cannot be considered an additional dimension, as it a factor of

the responsiveness. These dimensions are seen as generic to all services and therefore applicable to those offered by spa and wellness service providers.

The US and Scandinavian school had different attitudes to the service delivery process. The Scandinavian school rejected the need for service protocols and standardization and favored the need for a more personalized service delivery. The US school insisted on the importance of service standards as they saw this as a way to clearly define and communicate the service role to employees. 'Service standards are customer expectations stated in a way that is meaningful to employees' (Berry et al., 1990: 30). If well-conceived, the standards guide and energize employees, clarify the service task, convey a sense of priority and provide benchmarks against which employees can judge their own performance and managers can judge the employees' and the organization's performance.

However, the US service quality researchers admitted that standards alone cannot guarantee the successful service delivery. Numerous and very rigid service standards are said to 'limit the creativity of employees, diminish the ability for employees to grow at work and chase the most able employees out the door in search of more interesting work' (Berry et al., 1990: 32). Service standards rule books produce what Berry et al. (1990) call "by-the-book" service while a flexible "by-the-customer" one is needed. Service standards are best implemented with employees' empowerment.

The empowerment of the front-line staff is seen as an important factor contributing to the overall service quality by both schools. The term is defined by Gemmel et al. (2013: 467) as "providing employees with enough autonomy to allow them to handle unforeseen problem situations such as complaints and allow the employees to make and implement decisions and change the environment in which they work". The US school suggested that part of the service recovery initiatives should be to empower front-line employees to deal with customer complaints (Berry & Parasuraman, 1992). Gronroos (1990) suggested that the interaction between the front-line staff and customers can be used as 'moments of opportunities' to form relationships, to market the organization's services and to collect valuable data.

To deliver high quality services staff must be committed to quality and there are various things that can be done to build employees' awareness. Empowerment of the employees is an important aspect of getting staff committed to quality. The most successful practices show that empowerment helps with problem resolution and it is believed that the first person who receives the problem should be the one fixing it. Moreover, empowerment is seen as way to exceed customers' expectation when an employee is doing something big or small but meaningful to the guest.

Also, a powerful factor contributing to employees' service quality orientation is an organizational culture. The experience of some of the most successful organizations such as for example Ritz-Carlton shows that the process of creation corporate culture starts already with the selection process. As a part of recruitment it is important to select candidates that are committed to serving others. People that are selected must fit a certain profile. For example, if it is a luxury hotel those candidates should be selected that enjoys to be in the luxury environment and that can behave, dress, communicate and feel comfortable in this luxury environment. Additionally, to get staff committed to quality an organization must create the corporate culture centered on dealing with respect towards each other no matter what position an employee is working in, encourage employees to help each other because team-work is of great importance in the process of delivering high quality services.

To make staff devoted to quality employees must be educated about the whole total quality process. In spite of the complexity of this phenomenon, on a day-to-day basis this process should be broken down into simple procedures. If there is any breakdown in a guest's experiences (for e.g. the treatment room doesn't meet the expectations of the guest, slow service delivery, the water is not hot enough in the shower) it is crucial to document it. It is the responsibility of the staff to document when a guest in one form or another expresses dissatisfaction. As a result, it leads to creation of a huge database that allows to see where the spa has a breakdown and where there is lack or no quality. Katrin Hertz (2012), the Hotel Manager at the Ritz-Carlton, Dubai International Financial Centre, points that additionally to get staff committed to quality staff is requested to also document the things that they think they have done wrong. The

manager's role is to create this environment when an employee is not afraid to document the action that led to a guest's dissatisfaction.

As a result so called top breakdowns are determined and Quality Improvement Team (QIT), also called quality circle, is formed to deal with them. As defined by Kusluvan (2003: 662) 'Quality circles involve groups of employees who meet regularly to discuss common operational issues'. Typically, quality circles are created in a climate of problem resolution related to service quality. In a spa these teams can be headed by a manager or supervisor and the members of the group consist of spa therapists, receptionists and even spa attendants. The members of the group work on finding solutions to eliminate the breakdown for as long until the problem is resolved or once results show.

Finally, education and training included in the working process have a positive impact on building employees' awareness targeted at service quality. Training and education are seen as sources of empowerment. Training and education are integral aspects for continuous service quality improvement. It is true for the wellness and spa industry that lacks professional educational establishments in the field especially in the countries where the spa industry is just developing. This gap can be compensated by providing employees with company-specific training and education they need to perform their roles. To exceed and not just meet customers' expectations an organization should create unique and personal experiences and not just smooth defect free visits because guests are now given a lot of choice from very modern to very unique. Employees should be educated how to pick up these clues from the guests to create the experience. It can often involve spontaneity from the employees to get the feel of what a guest must be pleased about. The employees that can pick up on those clues and be creative are invaluable asset to the organization. If an organization is oriented at being a step ahead of its competitors, guests' needs must be anticipated because fulfilling the needs is the basic.

Two schools have different opinions about the validity of quantitative research methods to ascertain whether or not customers are satisfied with the service. Although SERVQUAL model of five quality dimensions created by the US school produces quantitative data, the use of qualitative data as well to obtain customer feedback is

advocated by representatives of this school (Berry, 1995). SERVQUAL model has been widely accepted in service sector including tourism and leisure industry and adapted when necessary to meet specific needs. What concerns the Scandinavian school, Gronroos considered standardization and quantitative measuring of service quality inappropriate (Gronroos, 1990). Gronroos only listed criteria for good quality service, which gives some idea of appropriate measurements; however the lack of a measurement tools was a criticism of the original quality writers.

The overview of the Scandinavian and US school approach to service quality indicates the differences and similarities between them. To summarize the similarities between two schools, they take a customer-oriented approach to service quality. Customers' expectations and perceptions are determined to have an impact on the overall judgement on service quality and customers' satisfaction levels. They acknowledge the only appropriate target that is working towards continuous improvement of the service. Empowerment of the employees is seen as a factor having only a positive impact on overall service quality. The two service quality management schools see that it is imperative to know what the needs of the customers are and argue that this information should be considered when organizational decisions are being made. An holistic approach to service quality advocated by representative of both schools is represented by defining dimensions of service quality that incorporate both intangible human aspects of service as well as tangible elements.

The area of dispute between the two schools concerns what methods are to be used for collecting information on customer needs and satisfaction. The US school requires numerical data to be generated and favors quantitative research methods. Conversely, the Scandinavian school is in favor of qualitative research method. Additionally, the schools disagree in their attitudes to standardization of service delivery. The US school argues the necessity of service standards, while the Scandinavian school rejects standardization of service and favors the need for a more personalized service. In spite of differences between the service quality schools, Williams and Buswell (2003) note that most current research is pointing to the advantages of using a number of complementary methodologies which leads to an eradication of any major difference between the US and Scandinavian schools' approach to managing service quality.

1.3. Growing Importance of Service Quality to the Spa Industry

There are several reasons for the significance of service quality to the spa industry. There is enormous evidence that service quality is a key element of success in various service-oriented industries including the spa and wellness industry because it contributes to customer relationship and customer loyalty, strengthens competitive position and enhances organizations' profitability and productivity (Kandampully, Mok, Sparks, 2001). The other reasons underlying the importance of service quality to the spa industry are concerned with the appearance of new social structures, growing competition in the market, increasing customer expectations and changes in consumer behavior and population demographics (Harris, 1999; Brown, 1995; Lewis, 1995; Bailey & Hall, 1998; Williams & Buswell, 2003).

Spas are a part of the recreation, tourism and leisure industries. Harris (1999: 46) contended that "ubiquitous connectivity and globalization will help to create a new social structure with important implications for leisure" and, consequently, spa industry which is a part of it. The same author considers the distinction between the following groups the "New Wealthy", "the New Purveyors" and the "Service Army". The "New Wealthy" are those who have education and intelligence to make use of the new opportunities that they see complementing and fitting into their busy schedules. The "New Purveyors", who can identify the needs of the "New Wealthy" and offer to them high-priced, quality services that maximize the use and value of limited leisure time. The "Service Army", who will either be front-line employees of the "New Purveyors" or work directly for the "New Wealthy".

The spa industry is affected as much as any other service industry, if not more, by ever-increasing customer requirements and expectations. The point was illustrated in the Leisure Industry Report (2014: 5) "As competition intensifies the battle for customer loyalty is increasingly being fought in the service arena. All of this has to be seen against a background of changing consumer needs and expectations. Customers want high quality experiences, with a style of service that matches the occasion. They want to

be able to book either by phone or electronically. They want not only to feel safe. They want choice. And they want the whole thing to feel in some way special”.

Particular changes in consumer behavior also point to the increasing importance of service quality since people want to maximize the use of their free time and expect to get as much as possible from the least available time. Williams and Buswell (2003) point to the importance of a “time deepening” consumer trend to leisure industry. “Time deepening” signifies that the individual is involved in more than one activity at the same time. Many people at home combine activities such as watching television while ironing, or reading while listening to music. But there are similar trends in the managed contexts as well. An increasing number of spas offer spa packages that allow people to combine treatments such as, for example, body wrap and facial, to make better use of the time.

Factors such as changes in population demographics can also affect the expectations of the spa clients. Demographic changes mean that population has a higher proportion of older people in it. These people are more discerning about service standards than younger age groups as well as having higher expectations they expect to get “value for money”. Bailey and Hall (1998) also showed how “value for time and money” are important factors. The offerings in the spa industry not only have to appeal to a diffuse and discerning market but also, through their promotion and delivery, have to convince that the benefits are worth the investment in time, effort and money by the individual. Many people appear to be under great pressure working long hours and leisure time with its activities becomes more precious.

In an experience economy, people want to consume services which provide memories rather than simply the pure functions: “The experience of certain kinds of emotions, particularly positive ones such as joy and excitement, is itself a goal for much consumption behavior” (Richins, 2007: 399). Since people visit spas because they want to feel better, rest and relax, indulge a little, and enjoy being pampered, it is possible to say that spas primarily sell an “experience” (Wuttke & Cohen, 2008: 209). Positive emotions that are proved to be linked to service quality perceptions (Lo et al., 2015) are central to bringing customers back. In a competitive market of spa industry generating

positive emotions by means of providing customers with high service quality is important like never before.

The increasing importance of service quality is also linked to the fact that customers nowadays are more aware of alternative service providers than ever before, partly because of the increase in the number of organizations in the service sector. Also the public, via various consumer programs on television, are not only aware of the alternative services but are also given information regarding poor service providers. The ability to purchase services on-line means that the choice of service provider is now global.

Increased competition means that service providers are not only escalating the standard of their core service but also augmenting their services. It is not uncommon for a modern spa to provide alternative services in addition to spa treatments of a “classic” spa menu consisting of massages, body scrubs, wraps and facials. One can now easily make use of consultations with kinesiologists, naturopaths, osteopaths, nutritionists, life coaches and other health and wellbeing specialists. These events lead to an upward movement of customers’ minimum tolerance levels (Lewis, 1995).

In conclusion, service quality being important for any business is extremely important for spa industry too. Traditionally associated with customer loyalty, competitive advantage, productivity and profitability of an organization it plays an important role for the spa industry due to such factors as intense competition in the market, increasing customer expectations and requirements, changes in social structure as well as consumer trends.

1.4. Measurement of Service Quality

Measurement is the first step that leads to control and eventually to improvement. If you can't measure something, you can't understand it. If you can't understand it, you can't control it. If you can't control it, you can't improve it.

H. James Harrington

Regardless of the current service quality level, measuring the performance of service delivery by seeking customers' opinion is an integral aspect of service quality control and improvement. Service quality can be measured by means of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection, or a mixture of both. As it has been stated in the previous sub-chapter on service quality theories there have been disagreements between the Scandinavian and US school on the use of qualitative and quantitative methods in regard to measuring service quality. However, in spite of the previous disputes, it is actively encouraged to use a variety of methods to overcome the limitations of each individual method and gain as full evaluation of a service as possible (Williams & Buswell, 2003).

The leading quantitative method for measuring service quality is based on the SERVQUAL model developed by the representatives of North American School: Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1991). Gemmel et al. (2013: 316) explain that originally, these researchers listed ten determinants or dimensions of service quality: (1) reliability, (2) responsiveness, (3) competence, (4) access, (5) courtesy, (6) communication, (7) credibility, (8) security, (9) understanding/knowing the customer and (10) tangibles. The list was drawn up as a result of focus group studies with service providers and customers. Later, the researchers found a high degree of correlation between communication, courtesy, competence, credibility and security and, therefore, merged them into one dimension that they called assurance. Similarly, they found a high correlation between access and understanding, which they merged into empathy. As a result, the number of quality dimensions was decreased to five: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

Slightly modified SERVQUAL instrument was also used by a number of researchers in the context of spas (e.g., Lo et al., 2015; González et al., 2007; Snoj & Mumel, 2002;

Blesic et al., 2011; Boonyarit & Phetvaroon, 2011). These works support the idea of universality of these service quality dimensions and their applicability to the spa industry. The use of a SERVQUAL instrument to measure spa service quality reflect the researchers' agreement on the fact that the atmosphere of wellbeing in a spa is created by interconnection of different dimensions of service quality described by Parasuraman and his colleagues.

SERVQUAL measurement tool is based on the underpinning theory that customers judge service via formula that customer perceptions should equal or exceed customer expectations for them to be satisfied with the service provided (Williams & Buswell, 2003: 178). Customer perceptions are based on the actual service delivered, whilst customer expectations are formed on the basis of various factors such as word of mouth, personal needs, external communication, past experience (Zeithaml et al., 1990) and organization's image (Gummesson & Gronroos, 1987). In general, the lower the customer expectations, the higher the possibility that service quality will be better perceived and vice versa (Kandampully et al, 2001).

While being widely accepted, SERVQUAL instrument was widely criticized due to some operational and theoretical issues related to it. Operational issues are linked to the SERVQUAL's length and time required to fill it in. The original questionnaire developed by Parasuraman et al. (1991) consists of two sets of similar questions, answers to which enable a researcher to collect information on customers' expectations and perceptions. This format was found to be very tedious and caused boredom and confusion (Buttle, 1996). Answering two sets of 22 statements along with questions on demographics appears to be quite time-consuming and leads to negative emotions among respondents. Even though there is no scientific evidence in regard to spa customer attitudes toward on-site completion of the questionnaires based on SERVQUAL model, there is evidence from the tourism and leisure industry. Fieldwork by Williams (1998) at six leisure-related organizations demonstrated that people do not like giving up their 'valuable' free time to be involved in customer surveys. When Williams (1998) used SERVQUAL questionnaire in an exit survey at these facilities, respondents became anxious about 'wasting' their leisure time.

From the theoretical point of view, SERVQUAL was also criticized because it placed a great importance on customers' expectations. Buttle (1996) stated that consumers use standards other than expectations to evaluate service quality and SERVQUAL fails to measure absolute service quality expectations. Babakus and Boller (1992) claimed that the notion of expectation may vary depending on the individual involved, and some of the "ideal standards" are irrational as consumer requirements are unreasonably high, meaning that suppliers simply cannot reach the standards expected. In addition, respondents also got embarrassed at frequently choosing 7 when judging an excellent facility (Williams, 1998). The previous research based on SERVQUAL model among spa customers in Slovenia and Thailand (Boonyarit & Phetvaroon, 2011; Snoj & Mummel, 1991, 2002) showed that arithmetical means of expectations measured by 5-point Likert-type scale are above 3,81 which signifies that customers' expectations generally tend to be high. It can be especially true for the spa and wellness industry in a country like Belarus where spa services are considered more of a luxury and not an everyday need.

Cronin and Taylor (1994) were amongst the researchers that leveled maximum criticism at the SERVQUAL scale by insisting on the dropping of the expectations side of SERVQUAL analysis in favor of use of performance perceptions only. The same authors provided empirical evidence across four industries to collaborate the superiority of their "performance only" instrument over disconfirmation-based on SERVQUAL scale. They suggested that performance alone determines the satisfaction of the subjects. The SERVPERF scale is found to be superior not only as the efficient scale but also more efficient in reducing the number of items to be measured by 50 per cent (Babakus & Boller, 1992). The criticism related to theoretical and operational issues concerned with the use of the SERVQUAL instrument is not limited to the above-mentioned issued however these critical remarks played a crucial role for the author when selecting SERVPERF format for measuring spa service quality as perceived by customers as a part of the research study of this Masters Thesis.

Methods for measuring quality may involve customers, employees and external specialists and organizations. The data from customers can be collected in three distinct ways: (1) unsolicited (e.g. letters of thanks or complaint, informal comments to staff);

(2) passively solicited (customer comment cards, toll-free telephone numbers, and comment links on World Wide Web pages) or (3) actively solicited (e.g. asking customers to fill in questionnaires, attend a focus group or interview) (Williams & Buswell, 2003: 170).

Involving internal customers or employees in service quality evaluation is important as employees are the ones who can appraise internal procedures and internal service delivery that eventually impinges on the external customers. Berry (1995) noted that unlike external customers, in addition to pointing out problems, employees can also come up with solutions to rectify them. Some of the methods used for evaluation and subsequent service quality improvement involving employees include suggestion schemes, quality circles, quality improvement teams and employer reporting.

External specialists and organizations develop numerous criteria depending on the type of service organization and carry out checks using qualified specialists to measure the degree of conformance to requirements. Although there is no global regulation for the spa and wellness industry there are associations and accreditation entities that promote industry standards, codes, practices and monitor them. The examples of these systems include the European Spas Association, the European Audit Institute Wellness & SPA, Leading Spas, SpaQuality LLC, Thai Spa Association and British International Spa Association.

Quality management and control organizations develop systems and criteria for evaluation and certifying spa quality on national or international level. Different evaluation criteria are used depending on the type of facility and organizations that certifies it. Organizations providing wellness and spa services are awarded with a quality seal in case they meet criteria in the required scale. In this case, it can be seen that quality defined by these organizations is in agreement with the definition of product quality proposed by quality gurus where it is defined as ‘conformance to requirements’ (Shewhart, 1939; Crosby, 1979). In this case when quality is being evaluated, there is usually a trained specialist, or mystery shopper, who compares facility’s conformance to requirements.

In conclusion of this sub-chapter, service quality can be measured in different ways. Some of them can be based on customer surveys and be conducted internally, while other methods may involve external specialists such as mystery shoppers. Customer surveys are a highly subjective type of evaluation as they are based on individual customers' perceptions. Knowing how customers perceive service quality is important as in the literature review it is stated that quality should be considered from the customer's perspective since it is the user who is the only judge of the service. Expert evaluation of service quality is based on a number of criteria according to which service quality is being evaluated and is more objective. It is hard to undermine the importance of these practices as both customers' perceptions and expert evaluation are beneficial for an organization interested in continuous improvement of its service and upgrading service quality.

1.5. Quality Customer Service

Spas are places that people tend to have high expectations about. They embody an image of a place for people to relax, escape, decompress, and vacation. Within that spa environment, people expect a great facility, great treatments, great amenities, and a great staff offering exceptional customer service. According to Turban et al. (2002) "Customer service is a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction, that is, customers' feeling that a product or service has met their expectations" (as cited in Chen, Liu & Chang, 2013). It is known that a customer service experience can influence a customer's entire perception of an organization.

The most popular classifications divide the elements associated with customer service into the following three groups: pre-transaction, transaction, and post-transaction (as cited in Chen et al. 2013). For the spa industry, customer service involves providing services (or experiences) to customers before, during, and after purchase (Chen et al., 2013). Criteria for spas that are developed by associations and accreditation entities such as, for example, Leading Quality Assurance, are designed to evaluate quality customer service at the stage of reservation, guest's arrival and spa treatment itself.

Quality customer service is a complex multidimensional term. It is widely accepted to consider the quality customer service from the point of service quality model of Parasuraman et al.'s (1991). As it has been previously mentioned the same authors have determined five dimensions of service quality, namely tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

The tangible dimension of service quality is related to the appearance of the physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication material (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Tangible clues have a strong impact on the customer's perception of the service experience. Before even entering the service facility, consumers commonly look for clues about the firm's capabilities and quality (Gemmell et al., 2013: 147). Since services are so intangible, the physical environment is very influential in communicating an image and shaping customers' expectations. Moreover, the 'environment' in which the service is delivered becomes part of the service. The physical setting influences the customer's 'ultimate satisfaction' with the service. Ideally, the physical environment should support the needs and preferences of not only the customer but also the needs and preferences of employees (Gemmell et al., 2013: 148).

Bitner (1992: 58) was one of the first marketing specialists to discover the importance of physical setting and how it affects its behavior, degree of satisfaction, and in turn loyalty. The same author defines the servicescape as 'all objective physical factors that can be controlled by the firm to enhance (or constrain) employees' and customers' activities. The elements of the servicescape are the ambient conditions (i.e. noise, temperature, scent, lightning, color), spatial layout and process (machinery, equipment, furniture) and signs, symbols and artefacts (explicit or implicit communications) (Gemmell et al., 2013: 149). According to Bitner (1992) the customer perceives the physical factors holistically and it is the total configuration that determines the responses.

Snoj and Mumel (2002), in their study on health spas consider facilities, equipment, surrounding, location, food and beverage, medical/professional programs, entertainment, recreation, price, other guests, and employees' appearance as the tangible dimension of spa service quality. According to the research made by Lo et al. (2015)

tangibles are found to be the least significant factor in influencing spa customers' positive emotions, however the same authors state that they should not be neglected as customers are found to be more emotionally impressed by spas with a localized theme and elements. In addition, as noted by Pehlivanlu (2012) feature design complementing the spa's theme, the use of color, music, lighting, natural materials, landscapes, and architectural styles which appeal to the eye, hearing, smell, and touch, help to create a place for quiet escape and seclusion.

The importance of the "people" aspect of a service encounter is emphasized by the fact that four out of five SERVQUAL dimensions are related to staff performance. Schneider (1987) believed that the people in an environment determine the environment they are in (as cited in Gemmel et al., 2013: 150). The number, appearance and behavior of the service personnel can have an important impact on the perceived servicescape (Ezeh et al., 2007).

In the spa industry with its emphasis on the service encounter and customer-staff interactions the role of employees are hard to underestimate. Every employee plays a role in service quality of an organization. According to Dale (1994), 'the real key to the success of Total Quality Management is people' (as cited in Williams & Buswell, 2003: 191). The same author suggested that, in many services, customers value more highly the human dimension of quality than tangibles, but it remains one of the intriguing questions for any analysis of spa and wellness organizations.

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (1996), contact employees represent the organization and can directly influence customer satisfaction, they perform the role of marketers. Whether acknowledged or not, service employees perform marketing functions. They can perform these functions well, to the organization's advantage, or poorly, to the organization's detriment.

The 'reliability' dimension of service quality refers to the ability of the staff to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Employees' knowledge of the spa service, their professionalism and ability to provide accurate and clear information related to the treatments and spa facility demonstrate the reliability of the staff (Snoj &

Mumel, 2002). Spa-goers consider that the skills of the therapists and service attitudes are particularly important in affecting their spa experience (Lo et al., 2013).

Responsiveness refers to the willingness to help customers and the provision of the prompt service. Spa is a very personal service and the customers' experience is greatly influenced by the interaction with employees. Particularly for infrequent spa-goers, they may not know exactly the etiquette and process of spa treatment and they rely very much on the therapist to explain and inform them (Lo et al., 2013). Furthermore, spa services should be well-designed to anticipate the right moment to provide the right service (Lo et al., 2015). Customers should not feel neglected or wait too long (Snoj & Mumel, 2002). The service should be subtle that whenever the customer needs something, there is someone there to attend to the customer (Lo et al., 2013). McNeil and Ragins (2005) indicated that making information easy to access for spa users could also influence their emotions.

Assurance is the ability of the employees to convey trust and confidence, their knowledge and courtesy. Relaxation and enjoyment of spa experience depends a lot on how safe and secure the environment is perceived by a customer. It is important that guests feel that they are provided with privacy and they and their belongings are physically safe. According to the Leading Quality Assurance criteria for spa treatments, therapists must sanitize their hands before a treatment in a noticeable way to the guest. Cleanliness of spa facilities becomes even more of an issue due to the fact that generally spas feature water-based facilities such as whirl pools, saunas, showers and other bathing facilities that could be a possible platform for the transmission of infectious diseases (Euser, 2012). Therefore, frequent cleaning and maintenance of the facilities as well as demonstration of the maintenance of personal hygiene will provide customers with assurance on the cleanliness and safety of the spa.

Empathy is the caring and individualized attention that the employees provide to the customers. Treatments provided by professional therapists are highly personalized according to the customers' sensory inclination, body condition, and the season. Well-trained and highly skilled therapists are required to deliver these personalized services to the customers. Being sensitive to the customers' concerns and needs is also important

so that customers can whole-heartedly enjoy their spa treatments (Lo et al, 2013; Snoj & Mumel, 2002).

According to the research made by Berry et al. (1990) concerning the importance of the five service dimensions, reliability was found to be the single most important feature in judging the service quality and the core to most customers. Snoj & Mumel (2002) who compared the research in 1991 and 1999 to compare the importance of five service dimensions for health spa customers of Slovenia demonstrated some differences with the results of Berry et al. The results of the 1991 research were in agreement with the results of Berry et al. (1990) and the primary importance of reliability dimension was confirmed to the Slovenian health spa customers as well, however the 1999 research of showed a different result. The dimension 'empathy' jumped to first rank from third in the 1991 research. The research conducted by Boonyarit and Phetvaroon (2011) at Day and Hotel and Resort Spas in Thailand on importance-performance analysis revealed that service quality attributes belonging to different service dimensions are perceived as the most important. The highest importance mean scores were attributed to "Staff makes you feel safe and secure" (assurance), "Staff is well-trained" (reliability), "Staff gives prompt and accurate service" (responsiveness) and "Staff understands specific needs of customers" (empathy).

Based on the evidence from these studies it is possible to say that the degree of importance of service quality dimensions may vary depending on a target group being under investigation and it is especially true that the importance of service quality components and dimensions will vary from person to person.

To conclude, quality customer service is a complex multidimensional term. Four out of five quality dimensions are related to staff performance: their reliability, and responsiveness, empathy and ability to ensure trust and confidence. "People" aspect is the core of quality service and successful service encounter. Customer-staff interactions happen in a certain physical environment that becomes a part of the service and is said to be influential in having an impact on customer's ultimate satisfaction too. Every dimension plays its role in overall customer's judgement about the service for this reason every service dimension and its components must be taken care of.

In conclusion, due to the distinct nature of services, service quality is more difficult to evaluate than product quality. To manage quality, quality management and control bodies develop criteria and determine facilities' conformance to these requirements. In spite of the fact that the role of these organizations is hard to underestimate; in a customer-oriented organization, customers are the main judges of the quality of the service. It is the customer who evaluates service process during the whole service process and makes the final judgement of the service quality as being high, low, satisfying, exceeding or falling short of expectations. SERVQUAL model and its modifications have been used widely across different industries to measure service quality through the lens of dimensions incorporating tangible and intangible elements.

Looking back at the literature review, the key concepts and ideas on quality developed by quality gurus and their contribution to the development of service quality theory was reviewed. It was followed by the comparative analysis of central ideas and theories of representatives of the American and Scandinavian school in regard to service quality. Various factors underlying the importance of service quality to the spa and wellness industry were considered as well. The author explored different models that enable a researcher to evaluate service quality. SERVQUAL and its modifications (i.e. SERVPERF) were explored as models enabling the researcher to design customer surveys for measuring customer satisfaction and service quality. It was also mentioned that spa service quality measurement may involve expert evaluation on pre-set criteria by official bodies. The final part of the literature review dealt with presenting the key aspects of awareness building and making staff committed to quality and provided an overview of components and attributes of quality customer service.

As a result, the literature review formed a flexible basis for the empirical research on spa service quality. The second chapter of this Masters thesis will be devoted to the practical assessment of service quality components by means of customer survey and mystery shopping method, and exploring service quality related issues by means of semi-structured interview with spa managers. Explanation of the research approach, sampling method, methods for data collection and analysis will support the practical part of this Masters Thesis. The practical outcome of this work is formulation of recommendations on spa service quality improvement.

2. A RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION: ANALYZING SERVICE QUALITY IN BELARUSIAN DAY SPAS

2.1. Research Methodology, Aim & Sample

The research approach of this Masters Thesis is exploratory in the sense that it involves a literature review on service quality and an empirical application of service quality measurement tools. In order to meet the aim of this Masters Thesis that is to make proposals on spa service quality improvement the study aim should be accomplished that is to analyse and measure spa service quality in Belarusian day spas. The tasks to reach the study aim are the following:

- To measure spa service quality by means of exploring customers' perceptions using customer survey method based on SERVPERF model of service quality
- To evaluate spa treatment's degree of conformance to international requirements using mystery shopping method based on Leading Quality Assurance Standards
- To investigate service quality issues by means of semi-structured interview with spa managers.

The author uses case study methodology for the present study. It is found appropriate as by means of case study methodology the researcher can conduct contextual analysis of similar situations in several organizations. The type of case study can be classified as exploratory one. Exploratory case study is used to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2003).

In the literature on service quality it is actively encouraged to use a variety of research methods generating qualitative and quantitative data to gain as full an evaluation of service as possible (Williams & Buswell, 2003: 171). This way allows minimizing or even overcoming the limitations of each individual research method. For the benefit of this research, mixed method strategy was chosen for the data collection as it allows the researcher to gain a broader or more complete understanding of the issues being investigated (Veal, 2011: 143). In addition, as noted by Caracelli and Greene (1997: 30) the use of methods producing different types of data is justified when one method is

used for clarifying and building on the results of another. To analyze the collected data triangulation strategy was selected as it allows the researcher to analyze data in more than one way.

As it has been previously mentioned in the tasks of the research three methods, namely customer survey, semi-structured interviews and mystery shopping are being employed to meet the study aim of the thesis. These methods were chosen in accordance with their relevance to the topic and using them together in a single study enables the researcher to explore service quality from different angles including customers', managers' and mystery shopper's perspectives.

Since it is the customer who is the sole judge of the service quality, it is imperative to know customers' opinion about spa service quality. The use of questionnaires for the purpose of monitoring customers' perceptions of the existing service was advocated by Varva (1998). The use of a pre-determined set of questions allows the researcher to collect different types of data in an internally consistent and coherent for analysis form. Additionally, questionnaires are easy to distribute, economical and allow access to a large sample in a short period of time. On the contrary, questionnaires do not allow examining complex issues and opinion in depth even when open-ended questions are used.

Deciding on who is the target population for this quantitative research is an important aspect of conducting a study. Non-probability self-selective sampling was chosen for the present study. Non-probability is defined as 'sampling where it is not possible to specify that probability that any person or organization on which the survey is based will be included in the sample' (Saunders et al., 2007: 213). 'Self-selection sampling is a type of non-probability sampling technique in which individuals or organizations identify their wish to participate in the study' (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008: 98). This technique implies proposing clear inclusion and exclusion criteria for the participants of the study.

Inclusion criteria for organizations: day spas of Belarus. A day spa offers a variety of spa services, including facial and body treatments on a day-use-only basis (ISPA, 2013). Spa facilities that have no overnight accommodations, most focus on beauty and

relaxation programs, such as facial and body treatment, manicure, pedicure, and massage. A Belarusian day spa is often characterized by the presence of a beauty salon and absence of a fully-fledged water-based center.

Inclusion criteria for individuals: Belarusian customers of day spas who have undergone a spa treatment involving interaction with a spa therapist and are willing to participate in the study. Spa customers who used only spa facility (i.e. sauna, pools, and steam rooms) are excluded from the study as they are not able to answer all the questions of the questionnaire.

To gather useful and relevant information on customers' perceptions of spa service quality the self-administered questionnaire was carefully designed by the author. The author carried out detailed analysis of service quality models and previous studies that focused on measuring perceived service quality in the context of spas (Lo et al., 2015; González et al., 2007; Snoj & Mumel, 2002; Blesic et al., 2009; Boonyarit & Phetvaroon, 2011). The author selected SERVPERF model (Cronin & Taylor, 1992) based on SERVQUAL dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1991) as it was found more appropriate for the present study in terms of user-friendliness and efficiency to meet the task of the study which is to measure spa service quality by means of exploring customers' perceptions.

The original service quality attributes of the SERVPERF model had to be modified to suit the day spa setting. To customize the instrument to the specific setting of spas the author revised the works of the previous writers who focused on measuring spa service quality. It was found that although previous spa studies used the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model, some items and corresponding expressions varied depending on the context under investigation. Parasuraman et al. (1991) argued that the SERVQUAL instrument was the basic skeleton that could be supplemented with context-specific items when necessary, but caution that the new items should be similar in form to existing SERVQUAL items. For this reason the author also carefully studied the statement used in the original questionnaire. As a result of literature review the instrument for this current study finalized 23 items for the context of day spas located in Belarus that were classified in five SERVQUAL dimensions, see the table 1.

Table 1. Quality components in five dimensions.

Dimension	Service quality components
Tangibles	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Employees' appearance2. Interior design3. Price ranges4. Variety/choice of treatments5. Comfortable and relaxing atmosphere (temperature, fresh air, pleasant scent, sounds/music, light)6. Quality of communication materials7. Quality of spa products
Reliability	<ol style="list-style-type: none">8. Timeliness of services provided9. Employee's professionalism10. Provision of information on spa products11. Provision of information on spa treatments
Responsiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none">12. Employees' friendliness13. Employees' willingness to help14. Promptness and ease of reservation15. Prompt greeting
Assurance	<ol style="list-style-type: none">16. Feeling of safety and security17. Employees' knowledge to answer questions18. Employees' courtesy19. Cleanliness of the facility
Empathy	<ol style="list-style-type: none">20. Employees' capacity to give personal and individual attention21. Employees' interest in guests' state of health state22. Convenient operating hours23. Employees' commitment to the comfort of their guests

To see the table comparing the statements used in the original SERVQUAL questionnaire and the statements used for the present study see appendix 1.

There were a total of 29 questions that respondents had to answer in the questionnaire. 23 statements on spa service quality components measured perceived service quality using a five-point Likert-type of scale ranging from "1= strongly disagree" to "5=strongly agree". Additionally, the questionnaire included questions on respondents' demographic and behavioral data such as age (24), gender (25), a close-ended question on respondents' frequency of spa visits (26) and experience of using spa services abroad (27), and a Likert-scale question on the importance of factors that determine the decision to return to a spa (28). In the end, the client was provided with an opportunity to leave their comments and suggestions on spa service quality (29).

Questionnaires are known to impose the danger of low response rate. To reduce the non-response rate to the minimum Sekeran (2003) advises to convince the respondents that data would be treated with the highest confidentiality. Therefore the author formulated the introductory part to the questionnaire which included the information on the purpose of research, confidentiality issues and instructions for the respondents. Respondents were reassured that the information they provide is confidential and is used for research purposes for the benefit of spa service quality improvement.

After the questionnaire was ready, the author had to translate it into Russian and pilot it. A pre-test study involved 15 Russian speaking spa users that were accessed in person and electronically. The pilot study checked people's understanding and ability to answer questions, provided an estimate of the average time the questionnaire takes to complete and helped to work out some deficiencies of translation. As a result suggested amendments were made to the questionnaire before issuing a final version. For more clarification concerning the information and questions used in the questionnaire see appendix 2 for English version and appendix 3 for Russian one.

The second method for evaluating spa service quality used in the present study is mystery shopping method defined as 'a concealed participant observation in a public setting, using researchers to act as customers or potential customers to monitor the processes and procedures used in the delivery of a service' (Wilson, 1998: 1). The use of participant observation, where the researcher interacts with the subject or subjects being observed stems from the field of cultural anthropology. However in contrast to the original unstructured anthropological approach to observation when a researcher immerse themselves into a situation of 'discovering' reality, mystery shopping uses a structured and systematic approach of checklists and codes to gather and measure specific information about service performance in everyday conditions (Grove & Fisk, 1992). For the present study, the checklist based on the Leading Quality Assurance Criteria for the Spa Treatment provided by the Leading Hotels of the World was used, see appendix 4.

Mystery shopping method was used to complement the customer survey method for several reasons. Customer surveys allow the researcher to gather opinions about the service experience and are important for organizations since they point out the areas that

are underperforming however surveys alone do not provide information on how to improve the service delivery process. The emphasis during mystery shopping is placed on the service experience as it unfolds and provides sufficiently detailed information on the experiential nature of services to allow management to not only identify but also correct weaknesses in the delivery process. Altogether these two methods enable the researcher to collect information to determine the extent to which service quality give valuable recommendations on spa service quality improvement.

The third research method selected for the present study was semi-structured interview. Interviewing is the systematic collection of data through asking questions, then carefully listening to and recording or noting the responses concerning the research topic (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008: 107). This data collection technique provides access to a range of experiences, situations and knowledge, and provides the opportunity to explore the issues according to the research purpose. The researcher used a semi-structured interview, also known as the non-standardised or qualitative interview (Saunders et al., 2009) for the present study. Semi-structured interview is a hybrid type of interview that strikes the balance between a broad investigation through using unstructured interviews on one hand, and a very structured explanatory/descriptive approach on the other (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008: 113). As noted by Wahyuni (2012: 74) “it offers the merit of using a list of predetermined themes and questions as in a structured interview, while keeping enough flexibility to enable the interviewee to talk freely about any topic raised during the interview”.

The author has designed the interview questions for spa managers to gain deeper understanding of service quality issues from managerial perspective focusing on the following themes: the role of quality guest service within spa industry; the way service quality is defined in an organization; if and to which aspects of service quality the guests are especially demanding; if customers’ feedback is collected regularly and in which way; the key to quality customer service in a spa; how a spa provides and maintains quality customer service; the role of consistency in service delivery; service quality areas that need improvement and how they are defined. For more detailed information on the questions used in an interview see appendix 5 for an English version and appendix 6 for a Russian one.

2.2. Data Collection

Saunders et al. (2007) identify that gaining access to the target sample of the research is a problematic process. The author contacted spa managers of day spas of Belarus by means of personal face-to-face contact, phone and web-based communication channels. The author clearly explained the purpose, duration and type of access required. Furthermore, possible benefits to the organization were highlighted by explaining how the findings could be used to not simply identify but also improve the underperforming areas. Since organizations do not favor the possibility of their customers being approached by a person who is not a part of an organization, the author explained that questionnaires can be distributed by front-desk personnel when the client finishes their appointment and is checking out.

Taking this into account the danger of low response rate the author also suggested to managers the use of incentives for their customers to complete the survey. Incentives could be a discount on an additional service of their choosing or one established by the spa, or take away gift from the spa. However none of the spas was ready to offer such incentives but participated in the research without offering additional benefits to the clients. It was agreed that only those customers who are willing to participate would fill in the survey.

As a result of negotiations with spa managers of Belarusian day spas, three spas agreed to participate in the research. The names of the spas will not be revealed for the ethical considerations. Ensuring anonymity of the participating organizations pseudonyms are provided such as Spa A, Spa B and Spa C. Any details that might betray the participants' real identity are concealed.

The data collection in the form of a cross-sectional study or a snapshot (Saunders et al., 2007) of the spa customers lasted for almost one month during the period from March 23 to April 20, 2015. The self-administered questionnaire was distributed in the spas for the duration of two weeks by the receptionists of these facilities. To ensure the sample was homogeneous, the spas and respondents participating in the research met the inclusion criteria outlined in the previous chapter.

To collect the data staff of the spas invited customers to participate in the survey after they had completed their spa treatments (when guests were resting in the relaxation area or waiting to check out at the reception desk). When the customers agreed to participate, staff provided the self-administered survey. The survey was conducted on-site, as close as possible to the completion of the spa treatments to facilitate respondents' recollection of actual emotions experienced and their perception of the spa's service quality.

At the end of the survey period the author received a total of 164 questionnaires. The questionnaires were carefully examined for completeness. 14 questionnaires were excluded due to incompleteness. Therefore the total number of usable questionnaires was 150 (91%). In spite of the fact that incentives were not used by any of the participating spas, the percentage of usable questionnaires is rather high. Factors such as anonymity and the goodwill of the research may have influenced the respondents' bias and contributed to the increase in response rate. The information on the exact dates of the survey period and a number of usable questionnaires collected from each spa can be seen in the table below.

Table 2. Customer survey data collection.

Participating organization	Survey period	Number of responses
Spa A	March 23 - April 6, 2015	38
Spa B	April 1-15, 2015	60
Spa C	April 5-20, 2015	52
Total		150

The mystery shopping data was collected by the author with the aim to evaluate the quality of the services offered by day spas of Belarus. The spas used for mystery shopping method are the same organizations (Spa A, B, C) used for data collection by means of customer survey method. The mystery shopper behaved like a usual spa customer and after each visit filled a report consisting of 44 checklist items, see appendix 4. Out of 44 components under investigation, 33 can be regarded objective measurements as they are aimed at verifying whether an activity did or did not happen (i.e. the guest was given a choice of oil/scent, the service provider introduced himself/herself). The remaining 11 components are measurements related to employee-behavioral standards (i.e. the appearance of the staff, employees' speech, confidence, listening skills) and are more subjective. To maximize the objectivity of mystery

shopping objective measurement items were used in data analysis and drawing conclusions on organizations' success in meeting the Leading Quality Assurance criteria. However, for the benefit of this work, all the checklist items were considered when formulating suggestions on spa service quality improvement that can be used by organizations in the sector.

Additionally, as a part of the mystery shopper's evaluation, the author had to state the primary emotion experience during the visits. It is suggested that the type of emotional experience depends on the extent to which the requirements are met. For more clarification see appendix 4.

The relationship between emotions and perceived service quality were confirmed by the research made by a number of researchers including (Lo et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2009). Emotional experience as a part of the mystery shopper's evaluation is rated on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 means extremely dissatisfied and 5 – extremely satisfied. Exceptional emotional experience and extreme satisfaction are associated with the feelings of being pampered, feeling special and indulged, and being completely engaged in the experience. Extremely dissatisfactory emotional experience is associated with the feeling of being ignored, stressed and frustrated.

Mystery shopper visits were conducted in the end of March in two different cities of Belarus and the sub-chapter 2.4. presents data analysis based on mystery shopping method. Interviews with the spa managers were conducted upon completion of the survey period by e-mail in case of Spa A and Spa B and on Skype in case of Spa C. The results of interviews are presented in the sub-chapter 2.5.

2.3. Data Analysis Based on Customer Survey Method

Descriptive and statistical analysis and reliability tests were conducted to analyze the respondents' profile, to explore customers' perceptions of service quality dimensions and its components as well as the reliability of the measurement scales, respectively.

Reliability is the degree to which data collection (tools and techniques) produces consistent results when the unit being measured has not changed. There are numerous synonyms to describe reliability such as ‘dependable’, ‘consistent’, ‘stable’, ‘trustworthy’ and ‘predictable’. The Cronbach’s alpha is a measure of the internal consistency of a set of items comprising a scale and can be used for questionnaire using a Likert scale. Its maximum value is 1, and usually its minimum is 0, although it can be negative. The closer the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is to 1.0, the greater the internal consistency of the items in the scale will be. The Cronbach’s alpha values of the five factors ranged from 0.785 to 0.890 and all were considered acceptable (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). The table below presents the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for perception dimensions of the survey instrument.

Table 3. Reliability statistics for quality dimensions.

Dimension	Cronbach’s alpha	No. of items
Tangibles	0.842	7
Reliability	0.878	4
Responsiveness	0.785	4
Assurance	0.890	4
Empathy	0.850	4
Overall	0.941	23

Demographic and spa experience profile of the respondents is described as follows. Out of a total 150 respondents, the number of female respondents is more than their male counterpart with respective percentage 65.33% (98) and 34.67% (52). The obvious reason for female respondents out-numbering their male counterpart is due to the fact that there are more female spa customers in Belarus and it is a difficult task to get as many male respondents as female ones in organizations providing spa services in Belarus. These results were not a choice of the author; however they are in agreement with Euromonitor International report (2013) on consumer lifestyles in Belarus where it is stated that women are prevailing users of spas and beauty salons.

The number of respondents between the age category of 30-39 is more than any other age groups in the sample. Second is the age group of 40-49, followed by 20-29 and 50-59 with just a few only female respondents who are 60 and above years old. This may be due to the fact that the regular spa salon goers are often middle-aged females with

higher disposable incomes (Euromonitor, 2013). Below is a bar chart of age category, number of gender and total respondents.

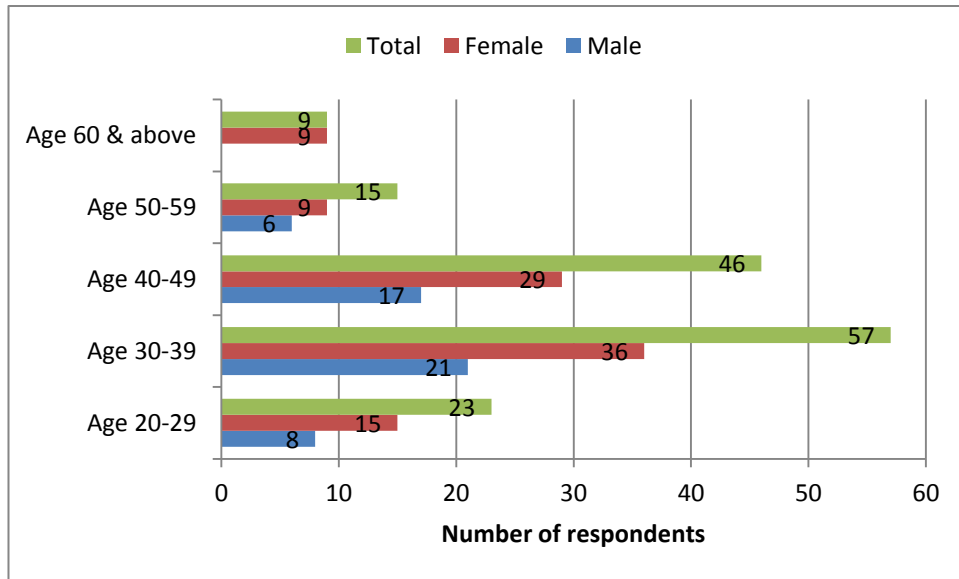


Figure 1. The bar chart of age category and number of respondents (n=150).

Most of the respondents of the questionnaire have not used spa treatments abroad. Only 34 respondents, which represent 22.67%, claimed to have used spa services abroad. This fact can be connected with various socio-economic factors such as financial constraints and/or limited knowledge base on wellness and spa services.

Factors that determine a decision to return to a spa vary from one person to another as responses to this question during the survey proved. Concerning the question on factors that determines the decisions to return to a spa, the respondents were asked to rate the importance of multiple choice responses of “location, quality of service, price, services and facilities offered” on a four-point Likert scale where 4 is the most important factor and 1 is the least important factor. Both male and female respondents agree on service quality being the most important factor (mean=3.65) and location being the least significant factor (mean=1.37) when making a decision to return to a spa. The importance of service quality is followed by services/facilities (mean=3.1) offered and price (mean=2.8) for female respondents and by price (mean=3.4) and services/facilities (mean=2.5) offered for male respondents. Below is the bar chart of male and female for each choice answer to the above-stated question.

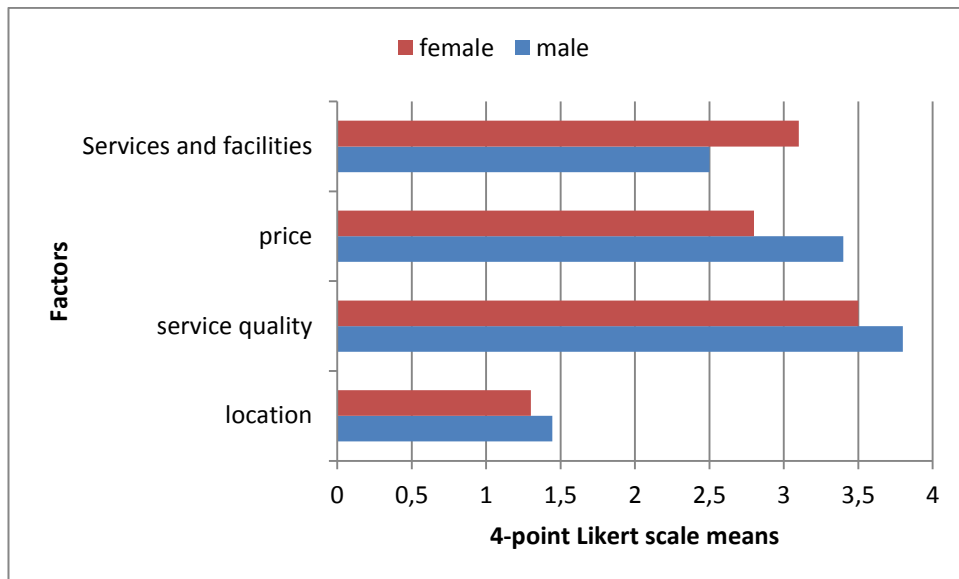


Figure 2. Factors influencing the decision to return to a spa (4 - the most important factor and 1 - the least important factor).

Concerning respondents' frequency of spa visits, multiple choice responses of "rarely, often, sometimes" were given. The majority of women say they use spa services sometimes whilst the majority of men use them rarely with 55.1% (54) and 57.69% (30) respectively. 32.68% (17) of male respondents say that they visit spa sometimes and only 9.62% (5) of males claim to be frequent spa service users. In regard to female respondents the number of frequent spa users is higher than among men and it is 26.53% (26) and the least number of female respondents say the visit spa rarely which is 18.37% (18). Below is the bar chart of male and female responses in regard to their spa behavior.

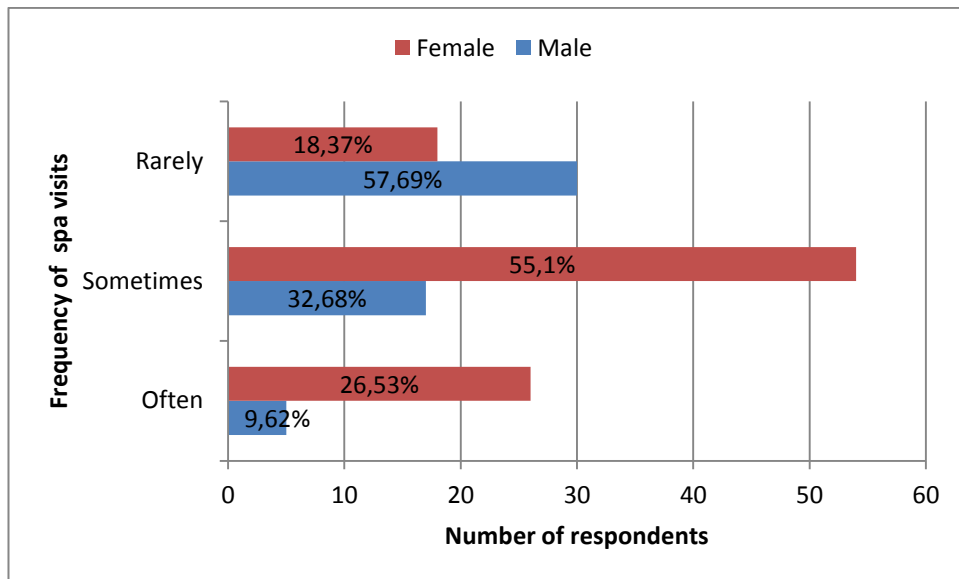


Figure 3. Respondents' frequency of spa visits (n=150).

The reason for a relatively small total number of frequent spa users 36.15% (31) can be connected with the fact that spa culture is just emerging in Belarus and is seen as more of a luxury than necessity. In addition prices at existing spas for regular use can be affordable only to a limited number of consumers.

In this study the 5-point Likert scale was used in questions on customer perceptions of spa service quality. The scale range from 1 to 5 where 1 represents the lowest perceived level of quality and 5 represents the highest. The table below shows how the score ranges are distributed.

Table 4. Translation level of perceived service quality.

No	Score	Mean	Level of perceived quality
1.	1.00-1.80	Mean	Lowest
2.	1.81-2.61	Mean	Low
3.	2.62-3.41	Mean	Average
4.	3.42 –4.21	Mean	Good
5.	4.22 –5.00	Mean	Very good

In the assessment of the overall perceived spa service quality in three spas, the mean value is 3.88 which in translation corresponds to a good level of perceived quality. The

results in the table below reveal mean values of all components of spa service quality as perceived by spa customers. Arithmetical means of perception vary from 3.33 to 4.40. Standard deviation value is above 1 in 3 questions, while in other questions these values are between 0.52 to 0.88. The table below presents a clear view over the highest and lowest means of spa service quality components as perceived by spa customers; the mean values of quality components are presented in descending order.

Table 5. Mean values of spa service quality components in the descending order.

Components	Mean	SD	Level
1. Cleanliness of the facility	4.40	0.52	Very good
2. Employees' appearance	4.35	0.62	Very good
3. Convenient operating hours	4.32	0.67	Very good
4. Employees' professionalism	4.25	0.74	Very good
5. Employees' courtesy	4.23	0.74	Very good
6. Interior design	4.21	0.67	Good
7. Comfortable and relaxing atmosphere	4.12	0.80	Good
8. Employees' willingness to help	4.02	0.69	Good
9. Quality of spa products	4.01	0.68	Good
10. Employees' friendliness	3.96	0.84	Good
11. Promptness and ease of reservation	3.95	0.78	Good
12. Quality of communication materials	3.90	0.73	Good
13. Prompt greeting	3.86	1.01	Good
14. Provision of information on spa treatments	3.76	0.88	Good
15. Timeliness of services provided	3.75	0.80	Good
16. Employees' knowledge to answer questions	3.74	0.69	Good
17. Provision of information on spa products	3.70	0.85	Good
18. A variety/ choice of treatments	3.60	1.02	Good
19. Feeling of safety and security	3.58	0.83	Good
20. Employees' interest in guests' state of health (contraindications)	3.52	0.84	Good
21. Employees' capacity to give personal and individual attention	3.47	0.79	Good
22. Employees' commitment to comfort of their guests	3.41	0.56	Average
23. Price ranges	3.33	1.08	Average
Total performance mean	3.88		

The most highly ranked quality components are “cleanliness of the facility”, “employees' appearance” and “convenient operating hours”. Relatively high scores were given to “employees' professionalism” and “employees' courtesy”. The least highly ranked quality components are “price ranges”, “employees' commitment to comfort of their guests” and “employees' capacity to give personal and individual attention”. Relatively low scores were given to “employees' interest in the presence of contraindications” and “feeling of safety and security”.

In the table below, the service quality components are aggregated in dimensions. The dimension “assurance” which is defined as knowledge, courtesy and trustworthiness of the personnel ranked first in the perceived service quality, while the lowest rank was given to “empathy” which deals with understanding customers and expressed through caring and individualized attention to customers.

Table 6. Ranks of service quality components according to the dimensions.

Dimension	Components	Mean
Assurance	Feeling of safety and security	3.58
	Employees’ knowledge to answer questions	3.74
	Employees’ courtesy	4.23
	Cleanliness of the facility	4.40
<i>Total</i>	<i>Rank 1</i>	<i>3,99</i>
Tangibles	Employees’ appearance	4.35
	Interior design	4.21
	Price ranges	3.33
	A variety/choice of treatments	3.60
	Comfortable and relaxing atmosphere	4.12
	Quality of communication materials	3.90
	Quality of spa products	4.01
<i>Total</i>	<i>Rank 2</i>	<i>3,96</i>
Responsiveness	Employees’ friendliness	3.97
	Employees’ willingness to help	4.02
	Promptness and ease of reservation	3.95
	Prompt greeting	3.88
<i>Total</i>	<i>Rank 3</i>	<i>3,93</i>
Reliability	Timeliness of services provided	4.02
	Employee’s professionalism	4.01
	Provision of information on spa products	3.96
	Provision of information on spa treatments	3.56
<i>Total</i>	<i>Rank 4</i>	<i>3,80</i>
Empathy	Employees’ capacity to give personal and individual attention	3.47
	Employees’ interest in guests’ state of health state (contraindications)	3.52
	Convenient operating hours	4.32
	Employees’ commitment to the comfort of their guests	3.41
<i>Total</i>	<i>Rank 5</i>	<i>3,68</i>

Within every dimension regardless of its ranking there are service quality components that are perceived lower than others. In the dimension of “assurance” customer give relatively low scores to staff’s ability to make them feel safe and secure (3.58). The feeling of safety and security comes from a combination of various factors. Staff must

be able to take control of the situation and make guest feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible.

In the dimension of “tangibles” customers perceive prices for spa services as not be very reasonable (3.33). This can also signify high price sensitivity of spa customers in Belarus. A variety and choice of treatments (3.60) is not highly satisfying for all the customers as well. Analysis of spa menus showed that not every spa offers services tailored specifically for men/women, pregnant women, people of different age groups. Spa menus lack diversification of treatments that may be connected with the lack of marketing research on spa customer profiles in Belarus based on their needs, preferences and expectations.

In the dimension of responsiveness defined as “willingness to help customers and provide prompt service” quality component “prompt greeting” is ranked lower than others in the group. According to the Leading Quality Assurance criteria for spa treatment greeting of customers should be very prompt, more precisely within 30 seconds upon entering the spa.

In the dimension of reliability defined as “ability to perform promised service dependably and accurately” the lowest score was received for “provision of information on spa treatments” (3.56). Information on services provided must be clearly communicated to the customers. According to the Leading Assurance criteria for spa treatment at the stage of reservation the employee must clarify the exact treatment required, its type, duration, the desired effect. In a country where the spa industry is in its infancy people might not be very familiar with the nature of spa treatments it is important that reception employees provide accurate and clear information on the services provided and give recommendations considering the needs of every particular guest.

In the dimension of empathy several quality components received relatively low scores in comparison to others. These quality components are “employees’ commitment to the comfort of their guests” and “employees’ capacity to give personal and individual attention”. To make a guest feel comfortable and special requires a variety of actions

from the personnel of the spa from the point when reservation is being made till the time the guest leaves the facility.

Customer surveys allowed the researcher to gather opinions about the service experience and are important for organizations since they point out the areas that are underperforming. The data received from questionnaire analysis showed that in spite of the fact that generally service quality corresponds to a good level of perceived quality there are a number of quality components that require improvements. To make best use of the questionnaires this information was used in a combination with mystery checks as the emphasis during mystery shopping is placed on the service experience as it unfolds and provides sufficiently detailed information to allow management to not only identify but also correct weaknesses in the delivery process. Altogether these two methods enable the researcher to give valuable recommendations on spa service quality improvement.

2.4. Data Analysis Based on Mystery Shopping Method

During the mystery guest visits various inconsistencies with the Leading Quality Assurance standards for spa treatments were identified at the stage of reservation and spa treatment in connection with employee-behavioral standards. It is beyond the scope of this work to provide detailed reports on mystery shopper visits, for this reason the author will focus on the underperforming areas of spa customer service that were identified in the course of investigation. Pointing out the inconsistencies with Leading Quality Assurance standards for spa treatments is valuable as it allows formulating constructive recommendations for spa service quality improvement in regard to internationally accepted service standards.

At the reservation stage responsiveness of the employees expressed in the promptness of greeting was below the standard in one out of three Spas. It was noted that in Spa B and C the mystery shopper was greeted almost immediately within 30 seconds upon entering the spa while in Spa A the author had to wait almost 5 minutes to be greeted since the receptionist was not there when the researcher (author) entered the spa. Since

the guest came to the Spa to make a reservation the presence of a designated reception employee and prompt greeting is crucially important as it makes an impact on the first impression of the facility and its personnel. Long waiting time can discourage a guest to make a reservation in the Spa and result in the loss of a client and profit directly related to it.

The display of empathy at the reservation stage in the Spas was limited as a choice of male/female therapist was not available. Choosing gender is a controversial topic in the literature on spa service quality however it is stated that 'it can optimize client comfort and thus encourage repeat business' (Cutler, 2013).

Assurance expressed through personnel' knowledge of spa treatments, products and facility was limited in the case of Spa B. To see if the reception employees were knowledgeable about the spa treatments the author asked to clarify the difference between the treatments from the spa menu in terms of how they are performed their effect and contraindications. In Spa B the reception employee's explanation lacked clarity and was rather focusing on the different technical characteristics of a service such as length and price which was not in the guest's interest and could be seen easily without explanation from the spa menu.

At the reservation stage the employees of all three Spas obtained the guest's name and contact phone number however the reservation details (Name, date, time and type of treatment) were not confirmed. Confirming details of booking is an important aspect of assurance. Confirmation should be made in order to make the guest feel certain about the correct records of booking details. It should also be pointed out that spa etiquette and cancellation policy were not introduced upon making the booking in none of the Spas.

At the stage of the guest's arrival a designated receptionist of Spa A was not present which may have a negative impact on perception of an organization as reliable and caused the delay in greeting undermining the perception of company's responsiveness. Spa A also took some time to find the guest's appointment details in her records. These facts can make the guest feel unwelcome and not appreciated enough and have a negative impact on repeat visits.

At the stage of treatment reliability of services was not excellent in the case of Spa B since it was not timely in providing the service. The therapist was not available for a guest's treatment as per booking time. The guest had to wait for 15 minutes until the spa therapist finished the treatment with the previous client and empathy in the form of apology for the delay was not offered. Spa A and Spa C were reliable in terms of timely service delivery.

In Spa A and Spa B the guest was not assured as the spa therapist greeted the guest but did not introduce herself. In Spa C the therapist greeted and introduced herself and it made the guest feel comfortable and secure as she knew how to address to the therapist in case of questions or special requests.

Empathy was not displayed through inquiring information about the guest's health and a health questionnaire was not presented by any of the Spas. However empathic attitude was displayed by Spa B and Spa C when asking the guest about the areas requiring special attention. The treatment was not personalized enough in the Spas as none of them gave a choice of scent to be used during the treatment. Lack of personalization and care was also noticed in the fact that none of the service providers asked if the music and room ambience was suitable and comfortable for the guest. Even though the room temperature and music was comfortable for the guest in all the three Spas inquiry about the guest's comfort could make the guest feel special and taken care of and add value to the guest's experience. Employees' commitment to the comfort of their guests was conveyed by Spa B and Spa C when the guest was offered a relaxing post-treatment stay with tea in a relaxation room. However in Spa A the guest was not offered any beverage at the post-treatment stage.

The massage therapists of all three spas were found reliable, confident and professional in delivering the treatment (massage). In the case of Spa B the massage pressure was too light for the guest but the therapist did not make sure if it was comfortable for the guest, which made the guest speak for herself.

A tangible aspect of the service quality was below international standards during the massage in Spa A. The treatment was free from interruption but not completely free

from outside noise. The guest could hear voices from outside of the treatment room which interfered with relaxing and comfortable spa ambience.

The importance of soliciting customers' feedback is strongly emphasized in the literature on service quality (Williams & Buswell, 2003). It is a way to let a guest feel important and cared for. Guest's feedback on the treatment was not solicited in the case of Spa B. In both Spa A and Spa C feedback was actively solicited by asking questions on how the guest felt and if she was satisfied. To summarize the spas' success in meeting objective Leading Quality Assurance criteria and the emotional experience of the mystery shopper stemming from it, see the table below.

Table 7. Results of mystery shopping analysis.

	Spa A	Spa B	Spa C
% of criteria met	60,60%	57,57%	78,79%
Primary emotion	Engaged; minimal emotional experience Respected, Understood, Content	Engaged; minimal emotional experience Respected, Understood, Content	Positively engaged; positive emotional experience Delighted, Appreciated, Individual
Grade (max 5)	3	3	4

Concerning the employee-behavioral standards the inconsistencies were related to the use of the guest's name and engagement in polite conversation in Spa A and Spa B. The guest was not made to feel special and appreciated, when she was not included in polite light conversation with the therapist and the name of the guest was not used in further engagement with any of the employees of the spa. In addition in Spa A the employee got involved in conversation with other staff members and made the guest wait to check out and pay the bill. At the same Spa the guest was not offered a sincere farewell by the reception employee as it got busy with other customers.

In conclusion of the mystery shopper analysis, it focused on the service quality components that did not meet the criteria set by Leading Hotels of the World for the spa treatment. The author did not analyze employee's behavior and characteristics of the facility (i.e. treatment free from outside noise) that met the standards. This was done for the benefit of this Masters Thesis in order to meet the aim which is to make proposals on spa service quality improvement. According to the results of mystery shopping the

day spas meet the objective international criteria for the spa treatment in the extent from 58 to 79 per cent. Most of the inconsistencies were related to the dimension of 'empathy' and followed by the inconsistencies in the dimension of 'assurance'. Deviations in the other dimensions such as 'reliability', 'responsiveness' and 'tangibles' were present to a lesser extent. Overall most of the deviations from the Leading Quality Assurance standard can be easily eliminated by applying small consistent changes to the behaviors of the employees of the spa. It should be understood that the standards are set to secure the unforgettable experience for the guest and not for some other administrative reason and the behavioural protocol should be followed unprecedentedly with every guest.

2.5. Data Analysis Based on Interviews with Spa Managers

In the present study the spa managers of the participating organizations were interviewed. All of the interviewees agreed to discuss issues related to delivering quality customer service. The aim of the interviews was to find out the organizations' practices that may have an influence on the service quality. To simplify the data analysis process, the interviewees were coded. For the manager of Spa A the code M1 is used, for the manager of Spa B -M2, for the manager of Spa C - M3. To ensure the conciseness of this research only the most significant findings are included. Quotations are used to more precisely illustrate the ideas and opinions of the interviewees.

The first question was about the importance of quality guest service within spa industry today. The great importance of service quality was supported by all the spa managers interviewed. For example, it was brought out that '*It is paramount absolutely central and underdeveloped area of competitive advantage*' by M1.

The second question asked spa managers define quality guest service in a spa. M3 conveyed the idea by the following words "Quality service is care and attention to every guest, the knowledge of their needs and habits". This definition shows that organization places an emphasis on the dimension of 'empathy' in customer-client interactions and this was confirmed by the results of mystery checks as Spa C. M2 emphasized the

experiential nature of quality guest service and defined it in terms of standards that must be observed by the personnel from the point of guest's arrival till the stage when a guest is left to relax after the treatment. M2's definition of service quality is close to the Shewhart's definition (1931) of 'conformance to requirements'.

The next question asked managers if they consider modern spa customers demanding to service quality and to which areas the highest demands are addressed. M3 stated that *'clients are knowledgeable and experienced and demand a luxury service in a combination with high quality products'*. M1 and M2 pointed that some guests are especially demanding and hard to please while others can be easy to make happy. M1 and M2 touched upon a very important topic concerned with variability of customers' perceptions.

Question four requested managers' to answer if customers' feedback is collected on a regular basis and in which way. M1 and M2 mentioned the use of passively solicited feedback (i.e. guest book, web-site feedback form). Collection of actively solicited feedback was mentioned only by M3. Actively solicited feedback is an important aspect of ensuring service quality as it allows gaining information about a range of clients' experiences and opinions which if properly managed can lead to identification of weak areas that require improvement. Additionally, actively solicited feedback makes a guest feel important and gives a feeling that their opinion matters.

Concerning the key to quality customer service all the managers agreed that the employees are central and most important asset of the company focusing on quality customer service. M3 pointed that the key is *'the desire of the personnel to be the best in service provision'*. This fact is in agreement with the literature on service quality where it is stated that four out five quality dimensions are related to people's skills, attitude and training.

In regard to how the organizations maintain certain level of quality, education and training was noted to be the most important aspect however M1 and M2 admitted that trainings are not regular as generally staff is considered qualified enough. M3 mentioned *'continuous improvement'* and argued that only regular involvement of the staff in training opportunities can ensure high standards of service quality.

The next question's aim was to seek managers' opinion in regard to the importance of consistency of service delivery. The role of standards was acknowledged by all the managers. M2 pointed out that the role of standards is hard to undermine however it was pointed that 'standards should always be updated in accordance with the needs of a spa and its clients'. M3 added that in spite of the fact that there can be a common standard for all the therapists each of them delivers the treatment in its own particular way and standards cannot include all the behavioral expressions of an employee. M3 remarked that employees must feel they can step aside from the standards if they feel this can make a guest feel more comfortable with the service. This idea is closely linked to the idea of empowering employees that is an important aspect of managing service quality.

In regard to the question on how decisions that certain area of service quality need improvement are being made, all the managers pointed to the great importance of customers' opinion. M2 mentioned that decisions are made on the basis of negative feedback received from customers which results in making according changes to the service standards. The role of employees in the decision making process was not acknowledged.

The final question aimed to know managers' opinion on the service areas that need improvement. The need to develop employees' communication skills to be more effective in interaction with customers was one of the common areas noted by all the managers.

To sum up the results of the interviews, it was found out that Spa C employs some of quality management techniques to promote service quality that are not used by other spas. Leadership, actively soliciting customers' feedback, commitment to staff education and training, empowering employees and looking at quality from customer-focused approach are just some positive aspects that were mentioned by M3 in the pursuit of delivering service quality. Mystery shopper check and customer survey results signified higher performance means of Spa C that may be linked to the results of service quality management practices taking place in the organization.

Spa A and Spa B signified lower results based the previous two methods and the interview with spa managers showed that some of the service quality management techniques remain underemployed. Empowerment of the employees is not mentioned; passively solicited customers' feedback and only occasional participation in trainings are the factors that may constrain the service quality improvement process.

Additionally, quality writers point the great importance of involving employees in the decision-making process regarding the service areas that need improvement. Staff's opinion is seen as important because employees are often able not to just point out the problems but also find ways how to resolve them. However, all the organizations pointed out that customers' voice is being listened to when making the changes and employees remain uninvolved.

3. RESULTS DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In this Chapter the author of this Thesis will conclude the research section with a brief discussion correlating the significance of the author's research findings to the theoretical review as supported by a contribution of recommendations.

Recommendations constitute an important part of this Chapter as making proposals on spa service quality improvement is the aim of this Masters Thesis. Suggestions are given with the aim to improve the underperforming areas, eliminate the inconsistencies identified as a result of customer survey and mystery shopper's visits. The suggestions if applied properly are aimed at improving customers' perceptions of service quality dimensions and upgrading spa service quality in general.

The findings of the study show that customers' perceptions of spas' service quality in Belarus correspond to a good level of perceived service quality with the mean value of 3.87 based on a 5-point Likert scale. Based on Cronin & Taylor (1994) vision of service quality as an antecedent of customer satisfaction, it is possible to say that spa customers' perception of spa service quality does not exceed customers' expectations. Since 'perceived service quality is the extent to which an organization successfully serves the purpose of customers by fulfilling their needs, wants, desires' Zeithaml et al. (1990) it is possible to say that customers' 'needs, wants and desired' are not yet fully met and are unlikely to be exceeded. Based on the mystery shopping method, objective criteria for the spa treatment were met to between 58% and 79%. Even though in general the results are satisfactory, there is space for improvement. To present result discussion and recommendations in a logical way the author will begin with the least highly ranked quality dimension to the most highly ranked that is from 'empathy' to 'assurance'. Links with the results of the mystery shopping will be drawn in the course of discussion.

Empathy, in this study, defined as the caring and individualized attention that the employees provide to the customers, is ranked the lowest according to the results of the survey. Snoj and Mumel (2002) in the study among Slovenian health spa customers determined 'empathy' as being most important in having an impact on the overall perception of service quality. Empathy in the customer survey included such

components as ‘employees’ commitment to the comfort of their guests’, ‘capacity to give personal and individual attention’, ‘employees’ interest in guests’ state of health state (contraindications)’, and ‘convenient operating hours’. Most customers gave high score to the component ‘convenient operating hours’ (4.32). Participating spas work from 9 am till 8-9 pm every day and customers appear to be satisfied with this schedule. Other components of ‘empathy’ were ranked significantly lower and underperformance in the remaining components was also confirmed by the results of mystery shopping.

To improve the perception of ‘empathy’ the author gives the following suggestions in regard to each stage of the customer-staff interactions.

At the reservation stage service personnel should:

- ask questions on guests’ preferences, understand the purpose of their visit and clarify the exact treatment required (i.e. type, duration);
- if possible offer a choice of a male or female therapist;
- inquire about guest’s medical condition / ask a client to fill in a health questionnaire.

Upon a guest’s arrival the service personnel should:

- escort a guest to the changing or treatment room;
- explain the layout of the facilities (for the first time visitors);

At the treatment stage a therapist should:

- inquire about the areas that need special attention;
- inquire about the medical condition (if not inquired at the reservation stage);
- offer a choice of oil/scent to be used during the treatment;
- inquire if the guest is comfortable, if the room temperature is acceptable, and if the music played is suitable;
- make sure the guest is comfortable with the pressure and intensity of massage strokes.

During a guest’s visit:

- the use of guest's name naturally and discreetly would only add extra value to the guest's experience;
- while escorting a guest to the treatment rooms, they should be engaged in light polite conversation (e.g. about their previous experience of visiting spas, expectations and needs from the treatment);
- employee should actively listen and maintain eye contact, giving the guest their undivided attention.

At the post-treatment stage the service personnel should:

- offer a relaxing stay with a beverage;
- ascertain guest's satisfaction / request feedback.

According to the research made by Berry et al. (1990) concerning the importance of the five service dimensions, reliability, defined as ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately, was found to be the most important feature in judging the service quality. In the present study it was the second lowest ranked dimension. Mystery shopper's checks also identified a few inconsistencies concerned with reliability mainly concerned with service timeliness. To improve the perception of service provider's reliability the following recommendations can be made:

- make sure that a designated receptionist is present upon guest's arrival;
- treatment should begin and end on time and last for the full duration (timeliness);
- commitment to education and training of the spa staff;
- service must reflect what is being advertised.

Professionalism of employees is an integral part of organization's reliability. According to the rank of 'employees' professionalism' it can be said that Belarusian spa customers are generally satisfied with the professional skills of the personnel in the spa. The mystery checks results in regard to 'employees' professionalism' are in agreement with results of the survey. The spa managers of the participating organizations emphasized the careful selection process of their employees and stated that a considerable percentage of the employees are qualified medical specialists that may contribute to the high score attributed to 'professionalism'.

The third ranked quality dimension of ‘responsiveness’ is defined as willingness to help customers and provide prompt service and includes such components as ‘employees’ friendliness’, ‘willingness to help’, ‘promptness and ease of reservation’, and ‘prompt greeting’. Mystery shopper’s checks also identified a few inconsistencies concerned with responsiveness mainly concerned with promptness of service (greeting and reservation) and also emotional expressions of the staff such as sincere farewell. The following recommendations can be made to improve the perceptions of responsiveness:

- service promptness (i.e. prompt greeting, promptness and ease of reservation, prompt answering to guests’ requests)
- warm welcome;
- sincere farewell at the end of the interaction;
- display of friendliness, warm and open attitude throughout the whole visit.

Mattassi (2011) develops the idea of employees’ friendliness by arguing that ‘if spa staff members emit inviting, relaxed, and positive vibes, guests will match these emotions and maximize their spa experiences’. On the contrary ‘when staff members appear stressed or behave in a transactional way, the guest experience is negatively affected’. It is hard to disagree with this point of view as it communicates an idea of staff being the marketers of an organization.

The second ranked quality dimension of ‘tangibles’ is defined as physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel and includes such components as ‘employees’ appearance’, ‘interior design’, ‘price ranges’, ‘variety/choice of treatments’, ‘comfortable and relaxing atmosphere’, ‘quality of communication materials’ and ‘quality of spa products’. The Leading Quality Assurance is focused mainly on the ‘people’ aspect of service delivery, so only a few criteria are used to evaluate the “‘tangible’ dimension. The condition and appropriateness of slippers and bathrobes is being evaluated, as well as such ambient conditions as noise-free treatment room.

‘Price ranges’ in the present study received the lowest score (3.33) of all quality components corresponding to average level of perceived quality. There was no question on the annual or monthly income of the respondents among demographic questions of the survey so no correlations among perceptions of price and income can be determined.

However this issue could be addressed in further research. At the moment based on the results it can be noted that spa users display price sensitivity which may correlate with the results of the question on a relatively small number of frequent spa users. However, it should not be stated that price is the only reason for a small number (36%) of frequent visitors to the spa facility among the respondents. To improve the perception of ‘price’ the following suggestions can be made:

- explaining the beneficial properties of products that are used and the benefits the treatment offers;
- giving individualized and personalized attention to their guests (‘empathy’).

Physical environment and all the tangible elements that it consists of are very important in communicating an organization’s image and shaping customers’ expectations due to the highly intangible nature of services (Gemmell et al., 2013). Bitner (1992) notes that servicescape comprised of ambient conditions, special layout and signs is perceived holistically hence it can be said that every element of servicescape should be taken care of as it may have an impact on the overall judgement of the service quality.

Assurance, in this study, defined as knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. This perception mean value of this dimension is the highest however it does not correspond to the highest possible level and the results of mystery checks pointed out that service employees do not fully use the possibilities to assure their clients. In the customer survey assurance includes ‘feeling of safety and security’, ‘employees’ knowledge to answer questions’, ‘employees’ courtesy’ and ‘cleanliness of the facility’. There are a number of ways how the perceptions of assurance can be improved:

- booking details of the treatment should be confirmed upon finalizing the booking, upon arrival for the treatment and once meeting with the therapist;
- spa etiquette and cancellation policy must be introduced to a guest;
- clear and informative provision of information on spa treatments and spa products;
- overview of the course of the treatment and duration must be given;

- the therapist should introduce her-/him- self politely and state her/his name clearly;
- the therapist should disinfect their hands noticeably for the guest;
- regular maintenance of the cleanliness of the facility.

This Chapter gave suggestions based on each dimension of service quality, however it must be noted that in reality all of them are closely interconnected and underperformances in one area can be compensated by high performance in the other. For example, timeliness is an important aspect of perception of an organization as reliable. In case a service is being delayed, an apology must be offered and attending to guest's comfort by offering a beverage or reading material during waiting time must be set in. Hence the underperformance of reliability can be compensated by expressions of empathy and the failure to deliver the service on time in the end may not spoil the overall image of the service provider.

Determining the level of service quality from the customers' and mystery shopper's point of view is just one part of a challenge. It is a starting point for managers from where the most challenging part of service improvement must begin as it is necessary not to just meet but also exceed customers' expectations. Based on the research results with support of the literature review the following recommendations for the spa service quality improvement can be made:

1. Create customer-centered environment in a spa (display of empathy in all the possible ways, collecting customers' feedback, well-maintained detailed client files)

Guests visit spas to relax and a spa must create an environment where a guest feels welcome, understood, important and comfortable through the entire spa experience. Reliable, safe and prompt service is integral for making customers' satisfied. However, in the time of increasing expectations and demands these characteristics of the service might not be enough to exceed customers' expectations which are essential for establishing long-term relationship with customers. Spa customers want to feel that the service is personalized and individual, tailored to meet their specific needs and staff is devoted to their comfort.

Soliciting customers' feedback is strongly emphasized in the literature on service quality as it is considered the source of continuous improvement and customer-oriented service quality (Williams & Buswell, 2003). Ascertaining guests' satisfaction and inquiring about their opinion is an additional way to show that guests are important and a way of ensuring that customer's expectations and needs are met. Special attention should be paid to negative comments that must be recorded, monitored, analyzed and serve the basis for improvement.

Creation of customer-focus environment is facilitated by tracking and analyzing of each customer's preferences, medical condition, likes/dislikes, and complaints. Information on how and when repeat customers buy their services and products, the options they choose, lifestyle concerns can be stored in database. On the basis of this information spa is able to develop one-to-one offers and product benefits. This personalized relationship approach makes client-staff interaction more meaningful and richer and contributes to customer loyalty.

2. Value-based pricing

In the current economic climate, value is a major priority for spa guests. Price sensitivity of the spa consumers was confirmed by the result of the survey. Because spa services are a luxury expense, guests must be convinced that the price matches the quality of the service. Explaining the beneficial properties of products that are used and the benefits the treatment offers can help spas achieve this standard. Guests must be aware of what they are paying for. Additionally, perceptions of price can be improved if staff is good at giving individualized and personalized attention to their guests.

3. Consistency of service delivery: introduction/revision of service standards

It is not enough for the personnel to know what the service quality components are that are used for judging about service quality. It is not enough to either know how spa guests should feel. The personnel should know how to make it happen: how to provide personalized and individualized attention, how to make a guest feel safe and secure, how to ensure trust and confidence, how to be responsive. To clarify the service task and provide the staff with the guidance service standards must be used. As clearly defined by Berry et al. (1990:30), 'Service standards are customer expectations stated in

a way that is meaningful to employees’. The same author point out that there should not be too many service standards and managers should establish a limited set of service standards for individual employees as too many standards can limit the creativity of employees and lead to ‘by-the-book’ instead of ‘by-the-customer’ service. If well-conceived, the standards guide and energize employees, clarify the service task, convey a sense of priority and provide benchmarks against which employees can judge their own performance and managers can judge the employees’ and the organization’s performance. Standards should form a basis for training, performance measurement, appraisal and reward system.

4. Commitment to education and training and empowering of the staff

The importance of training and education was emphasized by quality writers such as Juran, Gronroos and Feigenbaum (1991) who stated that the service sector is ‘heavily dependent upon human skills, attitudes and training’. ISPA (2013) states that both managers and staff must be regularly informed about and involved into the training opportunities. As stated by quality writers it is not enough to just formulate the service standards, service standards must be communicated and reinforced in meetings and training sessions. Both the service personnel and managers must be involved into training. For service personnel it is important not to just have technical skills on how to give a professional massage, body treatment or facial. Staff must also be taught how to interact with guests, involved at training on development of communication skills, skills to anticipate guests’ needs and be intuitive and read clients’ profiles.

Due to the fact that spas are places where people require individualized and personalized attitude employees must feel flexible enough to act in a way to ensure guests’ satisfaction. Empowering employees by giving them authority to make changes to the environment the work in and involve them into decision-making process on the areas of service quality improvement can bring positive results.

Managers should use educational opportunities to learn how to be wise leaders and create an organizational culture oriented at continuous improvement. Organizational culture must create a certain way of thinking and behaving among employees when every member believes that they can all be nearly perfect, do near-perfect work all of

the time, and that they all have the potential to be creative. It is important that all the members of the organization share values, beliefs and norms and prioritize service quality in their daily activities. This thinking determines the way in which the company operates and interacts with external customers.

5. Strengthen Team work

An overall judgement of spa service quality depends on how well the whole service team works. People in service organizations depend on each other. Every employee is important: from spa attendants, technicians, reception employees till therapists and managers. For example, prompt greeting becomes more of an issue when several guests need attendance at the same time. The solution can be in a team work that is a principal factor in delivering excellent service as noted by Berry et al. (1990). While one client is being served by the reception employee, the information on the treatment or a tour about facility can be given to the other client by the other staff member.

6. Compete for talent

Careful personnel selection process must ensure that the staff selected has the attitude, ability and flexibility to fulfill the role. Hiring standards should be linked to service standards in a way so that an 'ideal candidate' profile matches with the service standards for the various positions.

The final sections of this Masters Thesis will close with the conclusion, references and appendices as well as summary in the Russian language.

CONCLUSION

The role and importance of service quality in the rapidly developing spa industry is hard to underestimate. As it is widely known service quality is an important aspect of operating a successful business especially in the spa and wellness industry where service production and consumption happens simultaneously. Technically, service quality has been traditionally linked to profitability and productivity, competitive advantage and customer loyalty. Service quality becomes more and more important in the conditions when the competition in the spa industry intensifies and consumers become more demanding and savvy about the spa experience. To be successful, however, requires commitment to service quality from the spa owner, managers and service personnel.

The lack of empirical studies on the rapidly developing spa service industry prompted the author to conduct a research on the spa industry of Belarus and day spas in particular. The author aimed at finding an answer to the research question: “To what extent day spas of Belarus meet the criteria of existing and adapted models and how service quality can be improved?” The present study is just an initial attempt to measure spa service quality and contribute to spa service quality improvement on the territory of Belarus.

To answer the research question the results were drawn from customer survey based on five service quality dimensions, mystery shopper checks based on internationally accepted quality assurance criteria and interviews with spa managers. The first research method allowed the researcher to explore customers’ perceptions and identify service quality components that need improvement. Additionally, customer surveys provided information on spa customers’ demographic and behavioral characteristics which to a certain degree fills the gap of marketing research on spa customer profiles. Mystery shopper checks broadened the understanding of service delivery deficiencies, and enabled the researcher to formulate clear recommendations on how perceptions of each service quality dimension and service quality in general can be improved.

The results presented some useful findings for spa operators in this exponentially growing market. The findings of the study show that customers’ perceptions of spas’

service quality in Belarus correspond to a good level of perceived service quality with the mean value of 3.87 based on a 5-point Likert scale. This result is not the highest possible and is unlikely to signify that service quality exceeds customer expectations. Striving for a better result is important as only meeting or better exceeding customers' expectations can lead to establishing relationship with customers and making them loyal. The most highly ranked quality components are 'cleanliness of the facility', 'employees' appearance', 'convenient operating hours', 'employees' professionalism' and 'employees' courtesy'. These components are sources of customer satisfaction and must be maintained at this level to keep up the good work. The least highly ranked quality components are 'price ranges', 'employees' commitment to the comfort of their guests', 'employees' capacity to give personal and individual attention' with 'empathy' being the most underperforming area that embodies the potential for service quality improvement.

According to the results of mystery shopping the day spas meet the objective international criteria for the spa treatment in the extent from 58 to 79 per cent. Even though in general the results are satisfactory, there is space for improvement. Most of the inconsistencies were related to the dimension of 'empathy' and followed by the inconsistencies in the dimension of 'assurance'. Deviations in the other dimensions such as 'reliability', 'responsiveness' and 'tangibles' were present to a lesser extent. Overall most of the deviations from the Leading Quality Assurance standard can be eliminated by applying small consistent changes to the behaviors of the employees of the spa.

In spite of the fact that the Leading Quality Assurance standards are not yet adopted by any of the participating day spas, adopting international standards for spa treatments and working on eliminating the weaknesses of service delivery process embodies a great potential for upgrading spa service quality in Belarus and bringing it closer to the internationally accepted standards of quality.

At present the day spa market of Belarus is of interest to mainly locals however in the future it is hoped that it becomes attractive to foreign visitors as well. The developing spa industry is seen as a promising branch that can contribute to the development of tourism in the country. Since foreign customers may be more experienced and demanding to service quality it is important that their expectations and service

requirements are met to ensure the spread of positive feedback, customer loyalty and growth in profitability.

Service quality achievement is never a destination but a continuous process. Adopting international standards of service quality alone cannot be the only solution to the problem. While they can give temporary improvement in service quality perceptions, they are more effective if employed in the system of Total Quality Management. Standards are like seeds that must be sowed in the fertile soil. This soil is the organizational culture created by the management of an organization and that involves each and every employee. Total Quality Management requires creation of an atmosphere where quality customer service is a priority for the employees and every staff member is acknowledged respected and motivated.

The aim of this Masters Thesis which is to make proposals on spa service quality improvement is achieved. The author gave recommendations in accordance with the research results. On the one hand, suggestions on how perceptions of service quality dimensions can be improved were given; on the other hand, the author considered the results of interviews and the knowledge gained from the literature review to formulate suggestions for the managers of organizations providing spa services. The managerial implications of this Masters Thesis are presented in the form of the following recommendations:

- Create customer-centered environment;
- Value-based pricing;
- Consistency of service delivery;
- Commitment to education and training and empowerment of the staff;
- Strengthening team work;
- Careful employee selection process.

When interpreting the results of the study, it is important to take its limitations into consideration. Firstly, the limitations are connected to the size and type of sample. The sample for this study was self-selective which potentially brings some bias to the results. Good level of perceived spa service quality can be connected with the characteristics of the sample itself since only those spas that were willing to participate

became the part of the research. Additionally, the research deals only with a small sample of guests in 3 day spas in Belarus. Because of its small size, the sample cannot be used to generalize to the larger spa customer population in Belarus. The fact that only those customers who were willing to participate were included in the study could also bring some deviation of results as the opinions of those who declined the invitation to complete the survey could not be reflected. Secondly, in the research only guests and management were included but not the contact personnel. Thirdly, the structure of the spa service quality components used in this study provides only a basic skeleton, which should be further adapted or supplemented to fit the characteristics or specific research needs of a particular spa or particular range of services within one spa. Therefore the generalization of the findings beyond the immediate population observed should be approached with caution and the results should not be comprehended as representing the entire day spa industry in Belarus.

The aforementioned limitations indicate the following suggestions for the future research in the area of spa service quality. The subsequent research should be broadened with the inclusion of other spas in Belarus, and even compared with similar projects conducted in other countries. Measuring service quality in spas can be seen more than a specific project but a continual process to enhance and improve services because it allows to regularly identify service areas that need improvement in the view of their users and compare service quality with other organizations in the sector in an effort to develop benchmarks and understand best practice. The contact personnel of spas should be included with the aim of exploring the factors that impact employees' behavior with regard to delivering service quality. The use of interviews with employees, can give better understanding of service quality issues in the organization from internal customers' perspective which is very valuable as people who deliver services are usually the ones who have the best ideas for solving quality-related problems. To increase the reliability of mystery shopping method similar observations must be made by different researchers and staff can be rewarded on the basis of the results which will contribute to spa service quality commitment.

It is hoped that the finding of the study will encourage further development of knowledge about complex nature of spa service quality phenomenon in general, and in Belarusian day spas in particular.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Modifications Made to the Original Questionnaire by Zeithaml et al. (1990)

	Original statements	Modified version
Tangibles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. XYZ Co. has modern-looking equipment. 2. XYZ Co.'s physical facilities are visually appealing. 3. XYZ Co.'s employees are neat-appearing. 4. Materials associated with the service (such as pamphlets or statements) are visually appealing. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staff of SPA is neat and has good grooming. 2. The interior design of SPA is attractive and comfortable. 3. The prices are reasonable. 4. SPA offers a variety of treatments to meet my needs. 5. SPA has a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere (temperature, fresh air, pleasant scent, sounds/music light) 6. Brochures and price-lists are visually appealing. 7. SPA products are of high quality (natural ingredients, reliable brand)
Reliability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. When XYZ Co. promises to do something by a certain time, it does so. 6. When you have a problem, XYZ Co. shows a sincere interest in solving it. 7. XYZ Co. performs the service right the first time. 8. XYZ Co. provides its services at the time it promises to do so. 9. XYZ Co. insists on error-free records. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Treatments at the spa start and finish on time. 9. Staff of SPA is professional and provides services of good quality. 10. Staff of SPA provides necessary information on SPA products used during the treatment. 11. Staff provides adequate information on spa treatments.
Responsiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Employees in XYZ Co. tell you exactly when services will be performed. 11. Employees in XYZ Co. give you prompt service. 12. Employees in XYZ Co. are always willing to help you. 13. Employees in XYZ Co. are never too busy to respond to your request. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Staff is friendly and welcoming. 13. Staff is always willing to help you. 14. It is fast and easy to make a reservation for a treatment in the SPA. 15. Staff greets you promptly.

Appendix 1 continued.

Assurance	<p>14. The behavior of employees instils confidence in you.</p> <p>15. You feel safe in your transactions with XYZ Co.</p> <p>16. Employees in XYZ Co. are consistently courteous with you.</p> <p>17. Employees in XYZ Co. have the knowledge to answer your questions.</p>	<p>16. Staff makes you feel safe and secure.</p> <p>17. Staff is knowledgeable enough to answer my questions.</p> <p>18. Staff is polite.</p> <p>19. The area of the SPA is clean and neat.</p>
Empathy	<p>18. XYZ Co. gives you individual attention.</p> <p>19. XYZ Co. has operating hours convenient to all its customers.</p> <p>20. XYZ Co.'s has employees who give you personal attention.</p> <p>21. XYZ Co. has your best interest at heart.</p> <p>22. XYZ Co. understands your specific needs.</p>	<p>20. Staff gives personal and individual attention to every client.</p> <p>21. Staff asks information about health before the treatment.</p> <p>22. The SPA has convenient operating hours.</p> <p>23. Staff takes control of the process and makes you feel comfortable from beginning of your visit till end.</p>

Appendix 2. Questionnaire for spa customers (ENG)

Dear guest,

Thank you for choosing (*name of the spa*). It is our goal to provide you with the best possible service and your input is vital to our success. Please help us serve you and others by taking a few minutes to answer the questions below. All information is kept confidential and used strictly to improve our service. Thank you for responding.

Please, read these statements and show the extent to which you believe this spa has the feature described by the statement. If you feel that a feature is not present in this spa at all, write number “1” in the column score. If you feel it is expressed clearly in the spa, write “5”. If your feelings are less strong write one of the numbers from the middle.

There is no right or wrong answers—all we are interested in is a number that truly reflects your feelings on spa service in our spa.

1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	
Statement					Score
1.	Staff of SPA is neat and has good grooming.				
2.	The interior design of SPA is attractive and comfortable.				
3.	The prices are reasonable.				
4.	SPA offers a variety of treatments to meet my needs.				
5.	SPA has a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere (temperature, fresh air, pleasant scent, sounds/music light)				
6.	Brochures and price-lists are visually appealing.				
7.	SPA products are of high quality (natural ingredients, reliable brand)				
8.	Treatments at the spa start and finish on time.				
9.	Staff of SPA is professional and provides services of good quality.				
10.	Staff of SPA provides necessary information on SPA products used during the treatment.				
11.	Staff provides adequate information on spa treatments.				
12.	Staff is friendly and welcoming.				
13.	Staff is always willing to help you.				
14.	It is fast and easy to make a reservation for a treatment in the SPA.				
15.	Staff greets you promptly.				
16.	Staff makes you feel safe and secure.				
17.	Staff is knowledgeable enough to answer my questions.				
18.	Staff is polite.				
19.	The area of the SPA is clean and neat.				
20.	Staff gives personal and individual attention to every client.				
21.	Staff asks information about health before the treatment.				
22.	The SPA has convenient operating hours.				
23.	Staff takes control of the process and makes you feel comfortable from beginning of your visit till end.				

Appendix 2 continued.

(24) Please state your age:

- ☐ 20-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60 and above years old

(25) Your gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

(26) How often do you use spa services?

- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Sometimes

(27) Have you used spa treatments abroad?

- ☐ YES
- ☐ NO

(28) How important these factors when you decide to return to a spa? Please rate each of them on a scale from 1 to 4 (1=the least important, 4=the most important)?

- Location 1-2-3-4
- Price 1-2-3-4
- Services and facilities offered 1-2-3-4
- Quality of service 1-2-3-4

(29) Your comments/recommendation on spa service quality

Thank you for the cooperation!

Appendix 3. Questionnaire for spa customers (RUS).

Качество обслуживания в СПА салоне

Добрый день!

Спасибо за то, что Вы выбрали (название СПА)! Наша цель - предоставлять максимально высокое качество обслуживания и Ваше мнение для нас просто необходимо! Пожалуйста, уделите несколько минут на то, чтобы ответить на наши вопросы. Вся информация полностью конфиденциальна и используется исключительно для улучшения качества обслуживания.

Обращаем Ваше внимание, что в этих вопросах нет «правильных» или «неправильных» ответов. Нас интересует лишь Ваше личное мнение о качестве оказываемых услуг в нашем салоне. Пожалуйста, прочитайте утверждения и обозначьте, степень вашего согласия с утверждением по шкале от 1 до 5.

1 Полностью не согласен	2 Не согласен	3 Затрудняюсь ответить	4 Согласен	5 Полностью согласен
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Утверждение	Балл
1. Персонал СПА выглядит аккуратно и ухоженно.	
2. Интерьер СПА комфортен и привлекателен.	
3. Цены на предоставляемые услуги в СПА разумны.	
4. СПА предоставляет большое разнообразие услуг, которое способно удовлетворить мои потребности.	
5. В СПА комфортная обстановка, располагающая к отдыху и расслаблению (комфортная температура, освещение, приятный аромат, звуки/музыка)	
6. Брошюры и прайс-листы СПА приятно взять в руки.	
7. СПА-продукция салона высокого качества (натуральные ингредиенты, надежный бренд)	
8. Процедура в СПА начинается и заканчивается вовремя.	
9. Персонал СПА профессионален и предоставляет услуги надлежащего качества.	
10. Персонал СПА предоставляет необходимую информацию об используемой продукции.	
11. Персонал СПА доходчиво объясняет суть и особенности предоставляемых услуг.	
12. Персонал СПА приветлив и дружелюбен.	
13. Персонал СПА охотно готов прийти на помощь.	
14. Записаться на СПА-процедуру легко и просто.	
15. Персонал СПА поприветствовал вас сразу, как только вы зашли.	
16. Персонал дает ощущение надежности и безопасности.	

Appendix 3 continued.

17. Персонал достаточно осведомлен, чтобы ответить на любые вопросы.	
18. Персонал СПА вежлив и услужлив.	
19. В СПА чисто и аккуратно.	
20. Персонал СПА подходит индивидуально к каждому клиенту.	
21. Персонал СПА запрашивает информацию о состоянии здоровья перед началом процедуры (отсутствие противопоказаний и т.п.).	
22. Часы работы СПА удобны для меня.	
23. Персонал контролирует ситуацию и создает ощущение комфорта от начала моего пребывания в СПА до самого конца.	

(24) Пожалуйста, укажите Ваш возраст (лет)

(25) Ваш пол: М ☐ Ж ☐

- ☐ 20-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60 лет и старше

(26) Как часто вы пользуетесь СПА услугами?

- ☐ Редко
- ☐ Иногда
- ☐ Часто

(27) Вы пользовались СПА услугами в других странах?

- ☐ ДА
- ☐ НЕТ

(28) Отметьте на шкале от 1 до 4 степень важности данных факторов при принятии решения прийти в СПА снова? (1= абсолютно не важно, 4= очень важно)

- Расположение 1-2-3-4
- Стоимость услуг 1-2-3-4
- Предлагаемые услуги и удобства 1-2-3-4
- Качество обслуживания 1-2-3-4

(29) Ваши рекомендации/комментарии относительно качества обслуживания

Спасибо за Ваше участие!

Appendix 4. Leading Quality Assurance Standards for Spa Treatments

Reservation	Meet	Below	N/A
1. Was the guest greeted or acknowledged within 30 seconds upon entering the spa?			
2. Did the employee clarify the exact treatment required (i.e. type, duration)?			
3. Did the employee offer a choice of male/female therapist and was the guest's preference adhered to when the treatment was received?			
4. If asked, was the reception employee knowledgeable about the spa treatments and spa amenities?			
5. Did the employee obtain the guest's name and room/contact number and repeat details of the booking?			
6. Was a confirmation subsequently received and did it include spa etiquette and cancellation policy?			
Arrival			
7. Was there a designated receptionist present upon arrival?			
8. Did the employee confirm the guest's appointment details (type, length of treatment)?			
9. For first time visitor did the employee escort the guest to the changing room and explain the layout of the facilities?			
10. Were appropriate size bathrobes and slippers provided and were they clean and in good condition?			
11. During the arrival process was the guest made aware of how he/she should be attired for the selected treatment?			
12. Did the employee advise the guest of the sequence of events (i.e. where to go once changed)			
The treatment			
13. Was the service provider available as per the booking time and if not was an apology offered?			
14. Did service provider greet the guest and introduce herself/himself?			
15. Did service provider reconfirm the type of treatment booked?			
16. Did the service provider inquire about the medical condition or areas that require special attention prior to the treatment or provide a client health questionnaire for the guest to fill in?			
17. Was the guest given choice of oil/scent to be used during the treatment?			
18. Was privacy given during disrobing and the treatment?			
19. Was there evidence of proper sanitation procedures taking place prior to the treatment (i.e. service provider either seen washing the hands or verbally advising the guests that they have done so)			
20. Did the service provider ensure that the guest was comfortable and the room temperature was acceptable before commencing with the treatment?			
21. With a massage was a bolster or a rolled towel placed under the guest's ankle while on his/her front and under the knees while on his/her back?			
22. Was an eye pad/face towel offered when guest turned on to their back? (n/a for facials)			
23. Was the guest appropriately covered with towels or sheets?			
24. In the case of a massage did the service provider confirm that the pressure was comfortable for the guest?			
25. Was the treatment free from any interruption and outside noise?			
26. Did the service provider ask the guest if the wanted music played and if it was agreed, was it played at an appropriate level?			

Appendix 4 continued.

27. Did the treatment begin and end on time and last for the full duration?			
28. Upon completion of the treatment, did the service provider ascertain the guest's satisfaction?			
29. Was the choice of beverage offered upon completion of the treatment or available in the relaxation room?			
30. Was the guest escorted back to the lounge, changing/locker room or reception area and thanked?			
31. Did the treatment received reflect what was advertised?			
32. Was the treatment room clean and well-presented with all of the linen/towels clean and in excellent condition?			
33. Was the bill clearly itemized and correct?			
The employee-behavioral standards			
34. Were employees well-groomed and neatly presented in clean, well-fitted uniforms and if applicable wearing name badges?			
35. Was the employees' speech clear, well-placed, jargon/slang free and use of English adequate to be fully understood?			
36. Did the employees engage in natural (non-scripted), friendly and interested manner?			
37. Did the employee use the guest's name naturally and discreetly without overusing it?			
38. Did the employee display a high level of confidence and knowledge when carrying out his/her duties?			
39. Was service anticipatory/intuitive and were required adapted/adjusted to meet the guest's needs (i.e. guest should not have to request a service at any point)?			
40. Did an employee personalized the interaction in any way (i.e. engage in polite conversation) and engage the guests as individuals?			
41. Did the employee actively listen and maintain eye contact, giving the guest their undivided attention (i.e. the guest should not have to repeat themselves)?			
42. Did the employees maintain alert postures and respect the guest presence when interacting with each other?			
43. Were applicable, did the employee display self-control and empathy in challenging interactions and offer a suitable alternative/resolution?			
44. Did the employee offer a sincere farewell at the end of the interaction?			

Spa treatment-Primary Emotion

My primary emotion was _____

Emotional Experience		% of criteria met
Completely engaged; exceptional emotional experience Pampered, Special, Indulged	5	81-100%
Positively engaged; positive emotional experience Delighted, Appreciated, Individual	4	61-80%
Engaged; minimal emotional experience Respected, Understood, Content	3	41-60%
Dissatisfied with emotional engagement Disinterested, Disconnected, Disappointed	2	21-40%
Extremely dissatisfied with emotional experience Ignored, Stressed, Frustrated	1	Under 20%

Scale: 5=extremely satisfied, 1= extremely dissatisfied

Appendix 5. Interview Questions for Spa Managers (ENG)

1. What is the importance of quality guest service within spa industry today?
2. How do you define quality guest service?
3. Are customers demanding to quality? To which aspects of service quality especially?
4. Do you regularly collect feedback from customers? If yes, in what way?
5. What is the key to quality customer service in a spa?
6. What does your spa do to provide quality customer service? How do you maintain quality customer service?
7. Is consistency of service delivery an important aspect and if yes, how is it being achieved? Is service delivery process standardized?
8. How do you decide that certain areas of service quality need improvement?
9. In which areas do you think your organization must improve service quality?

Appendix 6. Interview Questions for Spa Managers (RUS)

1. Насколько, по Вашему мнению, важно качественное обслуживание клиентов в СПА индустрии и почему?
 2. Что для Вас означает качественное обслуживание в СПА салоне?
 3. Требовательны ли клиенты к обслуживанию в СПА салоне? К каким аспектам обслуживания в наибольшей степени?
 4. Запрашиваете ли вы обратную связь от клиентов на регулярной основе? Каким образом (устно, опросники, возможность оставить обратную связь на веб-сайте и т.п.)?
 5. Что, по Вашему мнению, является необходимым условием предоставления качественного обслуживания?
 6. Каким образом Вы поддерживаете определенный уровень обслуживания?
 7. Является ли постоянство* в предоставлении услуг важным аспектом управления качеством? Стандартизирован ли процесс предоставления услуг (через, например, сервисный протокол СПА-технолога, регламент проведения фирменной процедуры, стандарт сотрудника рецепции) в Вашем СПА-салоне?
- *постоянство - предоставление услуг на одном и том же уровне для всех клиентов.
8. Каким образом вы определяете, что некоторые аспекты качества обслуживания нуждаются в улучшении?
 9. В какой области, по Вашему мнению, СПА необходимо повысить уровень обслуживания? (например, профессионализм сотрудников, навыки общения с клиентом, индивидуальный подход к клиентам и т.п.)

Appendix 7. Spas' Performance in Meeting Leading Quality Assurance Standards for Spa Treatments

Reservation	Spa A		Spa B		Spa C	
1. Was the guest greeted or acknowledged within 30 seconds upon entering the spa?		✓	✓		✓	
2. Did the employee clarify the exact treatment required (i.e. type, duration)?	✓		✓		✓	
3. Did the employee offer a choice of male/female therapist and was the guest's preference adhered to when the treatment was received?		✓		✓		✓
4. If asked, was the reception employee knowledgeable about the spa treatments and spa amenities?	✓			✓	✓	
5. Did the employee obtain the guest's name and contact number and repeat details of the booking?		✓		✓		✓
6. Was a confirmation subsequently received and did it include spa etiquette and cancellation policy?		✓		✓		✓
Arrival	Spa A		Spa B		Spa C	
7. Was there a designated receptionist present upon arrival?		✓	✓		✓	
8. Did the employee confirm the guest's appointment details (type, length of treatment)?		✓	✓		✓	
9. For first time visitor did the employee escort the guest to the changing room and explain the layout of the facilities?	✓		✓		✓	
10. Were appropriate size bathrobes and slippers provided and were they clean and in good condition?	✓		✓		✓	
11. During the arrival process was the guest made aware of how he/she should be attired for the selected treatment?	✓		✓		✓	
12. Did the employee advise the guest of the sequence of events (i.e. where to go once changed)	✓		✓		✓	
The treatment	Spa A		Spa B		Spa C	
13. Was the service provider available as per the booking time and if not was an apology offered?	✓			✓	✓	
14. Did service provider greet the guest and introduce herself/himself?		✓		✓	✓	
15. Did service provider reconfirm the type of treatment booked?	✓		✓		✓	
16. Did the service provider inquire about the medical condition or areas that require special attention prior to the treatment or provide a client health questionnaire for the guest to fill in?		✓		✓		✓

Appendix 7 continued.

17. Was the guest given choice of oil/scent to be used during the treatment?		✓		✓		✓
18. Was privacy given during disrobing and the treatment?	✓		✓		✓	
19. Was there evidence of proper sanitation procedures taking place prior to the treatment (i.e. service provider either seen washing the hands or verbally advising the guests that they have done so)	✓		✓		✓	
20. Did the service provider ensure that the guest was comfortable and the room temperature was acceptable before commencing with the treatment?		✓		✓		✓
21. With a massage was a bolster or a rolled towel placed under the guest's ankle while on his/her front and under the knees while on his/her back?	✓		✓		✓	
22. Was an eye pad/face towel offered when guest turned on to their back? (n/a for facials)	✓		✓		✓	
23. Was the guest appropriately covered with towels or sheets?	✓		✓		✓	
24. In the case of a massage did the service provider confirm that the pressure was comfortable for the guest?	✓			✓	✓	
25. Was the treatment free from any interruption and outside noise?		✓	✓		✓	
26. Did the service provider ask the guest if the wanted music played and if it was agreed, was it played at an appropriate level?		✓		✓		✓
27. Did the treatment begin and end on time and last for the full duration?	✓			✓	✓	
28. Upon completion of the treatment, did the service provider ascertain the guest's satisfaction?	✓			✓	✓	
29. Was the choice of beverage offered upon completion of the treatment or available in the relaxation room?		✓	✓		✓	
30. Was the guest escorted back to the lounge, changing/locker room or reception area and thanked?	✓			✓	✓	
31. Did the treatment received reflect what was advertised?	✓		✓		✓	
32. Was the treatment room clean and well-presented with all of the linen/towels clean and in excellent condition?	✓		✓		✓	
33. Was the bill clearly itemized and correct?	✓		✓		✓	

Appendix 7 continued.

The employee-behavioral standards	Spa A		Spa B		Spa C	
34. Were employees well-groomed and neatly presented in clean, well-fitted uniforms and if applicable wearing name badges?	✓		✓		✓	
35. Was the employees' speech clear, well-placed, jargon/slang free and use of English adequate to be fully understood?	✓		✓		✓	
36. Did the employees engage in natural (non-scripted), friendly and interested manner?	✓		✓		✓	
37. Did the employee use the guest's name naturally and discreetly without overusing it?		✓		✓	✓	
38. Did the employee display a high level of confidence and knowledge when carrying out his/her duties?	✓		✓		✓	
39. Was service anticipatory/intuitive and were required adapted/adjusted to meet the guest's needs (i.e. guest should not have to request a service at any point)?	✓		✓		✓	
40. Did an employee personalized the interaction in any way (i.e. engage in polite conversation) and engage the guests as individuals?	✓		✓		✓	
41. Did the employee actively listen and maintain eye contact, giving the guest their undivided attention (i.e. the guest should not have to repeat themselves)?		✓	✓		✓	
42. Did the employees maintain alert postures and respect the guest presence when interacting with each other?	✓		✓		✓	
43. Were applicable, did the employee display self-control and empathy in challenging interactions and offer a suitable alternative/resolution?		✓	✓		✓	
44. Did the employee offer a sincere farewell at the end of the interaction?		✓	✓		✓	

РЕЗЮМЕ

«Анализ и оценка качества обслуживания в белорусских дневных СПА»

Исследование, направленное на анализ и оценку качественного обслуживания клиентов в СПА является актуальным по нескольким причинам. Во-первых, в мире бизнеса, где клиенты играют решающую роль, качественное обслуживание является необходимым условием установления прочных и долгосрочных отношений с клиентами. Обеспечение высокого уровня сервиса позволяет удерживать клиентов и формировать клиентскую базу, которая будет служить надежной опорой бизнесу. Только способность организаций удовлетворить потребности клиентов и превзойти их ожидания может обеспечить успех организации. Во-вторых, в связи с тем, что количество организаций, предлагающих СПА-услуги, увеличивается с каждым годом, качество обслуживания дает преимущество и позволяет организации быть более конкурентоспособной. В-третьих, в настоящий момент в Беларуси не существует установленной системы для оценки и удостоверения качества обслуживания в СПА. Однако так как качество обслуживания является внутренней динамичной характеристикой организации, его можно контролировать, улучшать и развивать самостоятельно на организационном уровне. Оценка качества обслуживания является первым необходимым шагом по направлению к контролю и, следовательно, повышению уровня сервиса. Оценка качества сервиса позволяет понять суть и составляющие качественного обслуживания, особенности восприятия качества обслуживания клиентом, а также позволяет определить области, нуждающиеся в улучшении и развитии.

Несмотря на особую важность качественного обслуживания в СПА индустрии, количество научных исследований в данной области ограничено. Исследования на тему качества обслуживания и его оценки проводились в таких странах как Словения, Сербия, Испания, Таиланд и Китай. В Беларуси, несмотря на то, что в крупных городах наблюдается стремительный рост количества организаций, предоставляющих СПА-услуги, исследования по данной теме ранее не проводились. Недостаток информации представляет опасность для поставщиков СПА-услуг. Известно, что восприятие клиентами качества обслуживания имеет большое влияние на последующий выбор организации и намерение обратиться туда снова за получением услуг. Если поставщик услуг недостаточно осведомлен о том, что представляет собой высокий уровень обслуживания, его составляющие и каким образом обслуживание оценивается клиентом, способность организации контролировать и управлять качеством уменьшается. Автор данной выпускной работы предпринял попытку заполнить пробел в этой области исследований в надежде содействовать улучшенному функционированию СПА-салонов.

Тема данной диссертации – «Анализ и оценка качества обслуживания в белорусских дневных СПА». Целью написания данной выпускной работы

является формулировка рекомендаций по улучшению качества обслуживания СПА-клиентов. Изучение данной темы осуществлялось на примере деятельности трех СПА-салонов, находящихся на территории Беларуси. В соответствии с поставленной целью решаются следующие задачи:

- Рассмотрение и изучение литературы по теме качества услуг, его оценки и роли качественного обслуживания клиентов в СПА индустрии.
- Оценка уровня обслуживания в СПА посредством анализа фактического уровня восприятия клиентами его компонентов, а также определение степени соответствия международным требованиям.
- Определение областей, нуждающихся в улучшении и формулировка практических рекомендаций, направленных на повышение качества обслуживания в СПА.

Для достижения поставленных целей автор использовал следующие методы исследования: анализ литературных и интернет источников, клиентский опросник, метод тайный покупатель и интервью со СПА менеджерами.

Данной исследование является первой попыткой оценить качество обслуживания СПА-клиентов на территории Республики Беларусь. Для того, что определить, то каким образом клиенты оценивают качество предоставляемых услуг в СПА, автор модифицировал опросник, предложенный авторами методики SERVQUAL (аббревиатура от «Service Quality» в переводе «качество обслуживания») Парасураман А., Зайтамл В. и Берри Л. Опросник был составлен с учетом многокомпонентной структуры качества обслуживания, и в него были включены утверждения, основанные на 5 критериях оценки, таких как материальность (tangibles), убежденность (assurance), сочувствие (empathy), отзывчивость (responsiveness) и надежность (reliability). В опросе приняло участие 150 клиентов трех дневных СПА.

Также автор произвел оценку качества обслуживания с помощью метода тайного покупателя, основанного на критериях, предложенных организацией Leading Hotels of the World (в переводе с англ. «Ведущие отели мира»). Опросник позволил исследовать то, насколько высоко или низко клиенты оценивают 23 компонента обслуживания, и позволил определить сильные и слабые стороны сервиса. Тайный покупатель служил дополнительным способом оценки и расширил понимание, как достоинств, так и недостатков в обслуживании СПА-клиентов. Более того, этот метод позволил сформулировать рекомендации о том, как восприятие различных компонентов сервиса может быть улучшено.

В результате исследования общий балл по оценкам клиентов равняется 3.87 по 5-бальной шкале. Наибольшие баллы были присвоены таким компонентам сервиса как «чистота», «внешний вид персонала», «удобные рабочие часы», «профессионализм персонала» и «вежливость». Эти компоненты являются опорой

и должны поддерживаться на должном уровне. Наименьшие баллы были присвоены компонентам «стоимость услуг», «заинтересованность персонала в обеспечении комфорта» и «способность персонала предоставить индивидуальный персональный подход к каждому клиенту». Последние два компонента относятся к проявлениям «сочувствия» по модели SERVQUAL. Эти области нуждаются в улучшении и представляют потенциал для повышения качества обслуживания.

В соответствии с результатами исследования по методу тайного покупателя, дневные СПА, соответствуют международным критериям в размере от 58 до 79%. Несмотря на то, что в целом результат удовлетворительный, остается место для улучшения. Большинство недостатков связано с компонентами, относящимися к критерию «сочувствие», что подтверждает результаты опроса. Большинство недостатков, выявленных в ходе использования этого метода, могут быть устранены путем внесения небольших постоянных изменений в поведенческий сервисный протокол персонала. Несмотря на то, что международные стандарты, по которым оценивались дневные СПА, пока не приняты ни одним из дневных СПА, принятие и контроль за соблюдением этих мер представляет потенциал для развития и улучшения качества обслуживания в СПА, а также приближения к международным стандартам качества.

Развивающаяся СПА-индустрия Беларуси является многообещающей отраслью. В настоящее время клиентами дневных СПА-салонов Беларуси являются местные жители, однако, планируется, что в будущем они станут привлекательны также среди иностранных гостей. Так как иностранные гости могут быть еще более опытны и требовательны к качеству получаемых услуг, поставщики СПА-услуг должны быть готовы удовлетворить ожидания и потребности самых взыскательных клиентов.

Достижение качества - это непрекращающийся процесс. Целью данной работы являлось формулирование рекомендаций по улучшению качества обслуживания в СПА. Автор предлагает рекомендации, которые могут использоваться как персоналом так и управленцами СПА о том, как можно содействовать улучшению восприятия каждого из компонентов обслуживания. Также в структуру работы включены рекомендации для менеджеров СПА.

В заключение автор отмечает ограничения данного исследования и дает рекомендации о том, какие последующие исследования могут быть проведены в данной области.

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