

# Perception of Fairness of Interaction in Handling Complaints of Users of Travel Agency Services: Evidence from Serbia and Croatia

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## Abstract

Service-dominant logic observes the user as a co-creator of value in the process of providing services. In the case of a complaint, as a result of dissatisfaction, the user and the travel agency become a co-creator of the value of service recovery. The perception of interactionist fairness is one of the determinants of a user's complaint behaviour. Interactionist fairness is seen in the extent to which users consider to be treated fairly in terms of their interaction with a travel agency employee during the service recovery process. The research presented in this paper is based on determining the differences in perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints of users of travel agency services in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics. The survey was conducted on a sample that included 297 respondents from the territory of Serbia and Croatia. The proposed hypotheses were tested using the Mann – Whitney U test and the Kruskal–Wallis test. The purpose of this paper is to point out to travel agencies the importance of users' reactions to unsatisfactory service as a kind of reflection of cooperation in service recovery.

**Keywords:** user, travel agency, complaint behaviour, perception, socio-demographic characteristics

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## Introduction

The user gains experience by using the service and develops a perception of its performance that affects satisfaction and overall assessment of the spending experience (Jaakkola et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2016). In case of an unsatisfactory experience, a complaint may arise as a response from the user. Submitting a complaint develops interaction between customers and employees on the first line of service. The perception of interactionist justice in this paper is viewed as one of the determinants of appellate behaviour. Carlson et al. (2016) and Söderlund et al. (2017) define the perceived value as an overall assessment, an individual's compromise between benefit and sacrifice. Factors that influence forming of user perception are numerous and range from general to special. Choi et al. (2014) argue that individuals' justice perception of service recovery attempts affects their emotional response such as disappointment, happiness, and pleasure, affecting attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty. Following the set goal, the subject of the research is the influence that socio-demographic characteristics of the service users of travel agencies have on their perception of fairness of interaction when handling complaints.

In the case of a complaint, the interaction between employees and users is contextualized. The context shapes the interaction itself and how the employee accesses user resources (Plé, 2016; Tao et al., 2016). The quality of interaction is determined by interpersonal relationships that take place during the process of recovery service. After sending a complaint and responding to it, the user forms an impression. The theory of justice is useful in explaining the formation of impressions after the service recovery process and results (Maxham III et al., 2003). Accordingly, a three-dimensional approach to justice (distributive, procedural, and interactionist justice) is distinguished (McCullough et al., 2000; Mattila, 2001; Maxham III, 2001; Maxham III et al., 2002; 2003; Karatepe, 2006; Gyung et al., 2010).

Interactionist justice includes how information is exchanged and the results are communicated. According to Mattila (2001), interactionist justice is the correctness of perceiving the user's treatment. According to Maxham III et al. (2002), interactionist justice is viewed to the extent in which those users feel treated fairly in terms of their interaction with the first line of service during the recovery process (includes elements of kindness, honesty, interest in justice, and how the complainants view upon the effort). Interactionist justice deals with interpersonal relationships when making procedures and the outcome of delivery. Based on a review of papers in this field (Homburg et al., 2010; Phau et al., 2008; Baron et al., 2005), it can be seen that there is no consensus regarding the interpretation of the influence of socio-demographic characteristics on the perception of interactionist justice. This paper aims to identify the differences in perception of interactionist justice depending on the different socio-demographic characteristics of users.

## Methodology

The paper presents a part of the research that examines differences in the perception of fairness of interaction when responding to complaints depending on users' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, level of education, monthly income, place of residence, number of family members). The research was conducted from January to April 2018 on a suitable sample that included 297 respondents of different gender, ages, and levels of education in the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia.

For this paper, a section of the questionnaire related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and a section related to the perception of fairness of interaction during the service recovery process was used.

The structure of the sample was dominated by female respondents (70%); the largest share of the sample consisted of respondents under 27 years of age (35%), while the number of respondents from 58 to 67 years was the smallest (8.75%). Half of the respondents had a college or university degree (50.50%). The largest number of respondents (29.63%) had a monthly income of over 600 EUR. 87.54% of respondents lived in the city, while 62.62% of the total sample lived with one or two family members.

A review of the literature and research objectives leads to the following hypotheses:

- H1: There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints between tourist service users of different socio-demographic characteristics.

In addition to the main one, six auxiliary hypotheses are set:

- H1.1: There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints between tourist service users of different gender
- H1.2: There is a statistically significant difference between tourist service users of different ages in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints
- H1.3: There is a statistically significant difference between tourist services users of different levels of education in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints
- H1.4: There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints between tourist service users with different amounts of monthly income
- H1.5: There is a statistically significant difference between tourist service users of different places of residence in the perception of the fairness of the interaction in handling complaints
- H1.6: There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints between tourist service users with different numbers of family members

The data were processed statistically in the software SPSS version 21. Mann – Whitney U test and Kruskal–Wallis were used for testing the proposed hypotheses.

## Results

### *Relationship of perceptions of fairness and gender*

Table 1 shows testing of the H1.1 hypothesis and determining statistically significant differences in the perception of the fairness of interaction in handling complaints concerning the gender of tourist services users.

The Man-Whitney U test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints of men (Md = 3.33, n = 59) and women (Md = 3.33, n = 99) in the Republic of Serbia,  $U = 2751.5$ ,  $Z = -0.614$ ,  $p = 0.539$ ,  $r = 0.05$  (small effect). Men and women in the Republic of Serbia equally perceived the fairness of interaction in handling complaints.

The Man-Whitney U test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints of men (Md = 4.00, n = 31) and women (Md = 3.83, n = 108) in the Republic of Croatia,  $U = 1580.0$ ,  $Z = -0.498$ ,

$p = 0.618$ ,  $r = 0.04$  (small effect). Men and women in the Republic of Croatia equally perceived the fairness of interaction in handling complaints.

Table 1

Mean Rank and Median of perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints in Serbia and Croatia across gender

Gender	N	Mean Rank	Median
<b>Perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints – Republic of Serbia</b>			
Male	59	82.36	3.33
Female	99	77.79	3.33
Total	158		
<b>Perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints – Republic of Croatia</b>			
Male	31	66.97	4.00
Female	108	70.87	3.83
Total	139		

Source: the authors' calculation

Since the Man-Whitney U test in the entire sample (the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia) did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the respondents' gender, the H1.1 hypothesis is rejected. Thus, there is no difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints between service users of a different gender.

### *Relationship of perceptions of fairness and age*

Table 2 shows testing of the H1.2 hypothesis and determining statistically significant differences in perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints concerning an elderly user of tourist services.

The Kruskal-Wallis test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the age of respondents in the Republic of Serbia (Gp1,  $n = 88$ : 18-27 years, Gp2,  $n = 38$ : 28-37 years, Gp3,  $n = 18$ : 38-47 years, Gp4,  $n = 12$ : 48-57 years, Gp5,  $n = 2$ : 58-67 years),  $c(4, n = 158) = 1.451$ ,  $p = 0.835$ . Respondents of different ages in the Republic of Serbia equally perceived the fairness of interaction in handling complaints.

Table 2

Kruskal Wallis tests - the perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints in Serbia and Croatia across age

Country	Perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints and age	
Republic of Serbia	Chi-Square	1.451
	df	4
	Asymp. Sig.	0.835
Republic of Croatia	Chi-Square	11.221
	df	5
	Asymp. Sig.	0.047*

Note: \* statistically significant at 5%; Kruskal Wallis Test; Grouping Variable: Age of respondents

Source: the authors' calculation

The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a statistically significant difference in perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the age of respondents in the Republic of Croatia (Gp1,  $n = 16$ : 18-27 years, Gp2,  $n = 16$ : 28-37 years, Gp3,  $n =$

11: 38-47 years, Gp4, n = 24: 48-57 years, Gp5, n = 24: 58-67 years and Gp6, n = 48: 68 and older),  $c2(5, n = 139) = 11.221, p = 0.047$ . Respondents of different ages in the Republic of Croatia perceived the fairness of interaction in handling complaints differently; respondents between 58 and 67 years of age had the highest perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints, while respondents between 48 and 57 years of age had the lowest perception of fairness in handling complaints.

Bearing in mind that the Kruskal-Wallis test in the Republic of Serbia did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints. In contrast, in the Republic of Croatia, it did, the H1.2 hypothesis is partially accepted.

### *Relationship of perceptions of fairness and education*

Table 3 shows testing the H1.3 hypothesis and determines a statistically significant difference in the perception of the fairness of the interaction in handling complaints concerning the level of education of tourist service users.

Table 3

Kruskal Wallis tests - the perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints in Serbia and Croatia across education

Country	Perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints and education level	
Republic of Serbia	Chi-Square	2.915
	df	3
	Asymp. Sig.	0.405
Republic of Croatia	Chi-Square	0.422
	df	2
	Asymp. Sig.	0.810

Note: Kruskal Wallis Test; Grouping Variable: The level of education of the respondents

Source: the authors' calculation

The Kruskal-Wallis test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the level of education of respondents in the Republic of Serbia (Gp1, n = 1: primary school or less, Gp2, n = 51: high school, Gp3, n = 65: college or university, Gp4, n = 41: master's or doctorate),  $c2(3, n = 158) = 2.915, p = 0.405$ . Respondents with different levels of education in the Republic of Serbia equally perceived the fairness of interaction in handling complaints.

The Kruskal-Wallis test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the level of education of respondents in the Republic of Croatia (Gp1, n = 25: high school, Gp2, n = 85: college or university, Gp3, n = 29: master's or doctorate),  $c2(2, n = 139) = 0.422, p = 0.810$ . Respondents with different levels of education in the Republic of Croatia equally perceived the fairness of interaction in handling complaints.

Bearing in mind that the Kruskal-Wallis test in the entire sample (the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia) did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the level of education of the respondents, the H1.3 hypothesis is rejected.

*Relationship of perceptions of fairness and income*

Table 4 shows testing of the H1.4 hypothesis and determining a statistically significant difference in the perception of the fairness of interaction in handling complaints concerning tourist service users' monthly income.

Table 4

Kruskal Wallis tests - perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints in Serbia and Croatia across income

Country	Perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints and income level	
Republic of Serbia	Chi-Square	6.546
	df	5
	Asymp. Sig.	0.257
Republic of Croatia	Chi-Square	15.103
	df	5
	Asymp. Sig.	0.010*

Note: \* statistically significant at 5%; Kruskal Wallis Test; Grouping Variable: The amount of respondents' monthly income

Source: the authors' calculation

The Kruskal-Wallis test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the amount of respondents' monthly income in the Republic of Serbia (Gp1, n = 45: up to 200 EUR, Gp2, n = 22: 200-300 EUR, Gp3, n = 33: 300-400 EUR, Gp4, n = 16: 400-500 EUR, Gp5, n = 22: 500-600 EUR, Gp6, n = 20: over 600 EUR),  $c2(5, n = 158) = 6.546, p = 0.257$ . Respondents with different monthly income amounts in the Republic of Serbia equally perceived the fairness of interaction in resolving complaints.

The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the amount of respondents' monthly income in the Republic of Croatia (Gp1, n = 4: up to 200 EUR, Gp2, n = 8: 200-300 EUR, Gp3, n = 17: 300-400 EUR, Gp4, n = 16: 400-500 EUR, Gp5, n = 26: 500-600 EUR, Gp6, n = 68: over 600 EUR),  $c2(5, n = 139) = 15.103, p = 0.010$ . Respondents with different monthly income amounts in the Republic of Croatia perceived the fairness of interaction in handling complaints differently, i.e., respondents who earned up to 200 EUR of monthly income had the highest perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints. In contrast, respondents who earned 400-500 EUR of monthly income had the lowest perception of fairness in handling complaints.

Bearing in mind that the Kruskal-Wallis test in the Republic of Serbia did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the amount of respondents' monthly income. In contrast, in the Republic of Croatia, it did reveal a statistically significant difference. The H1.4 hypothesis can be partially accepted.

*Relationship of perceptions of fairness and rural vs. urban areas*

Table 5 shows testing of the H1.5 hypothesis and determining a statistically significant difference in the perception of the fairness of interaction in handling complaints concerning the place of residence of tourist service users.

The Mann-Whitney's U test revealed a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints by respondents from

urban (Md = 3.33, n = 136) and rural areas (Md = 4.17, n = 22) in the Republic of Serbia,  $U = 1089.0$ ,  $Z = -2.066$ ,  $p = 0.039$ ,  $r = 0.16$  (small effect). In the Republic of Serbia, respondents from rural areas perceived fairness in handling complaints more than respondents from urban areas.

Table 5

Mean Rank and Median of perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints in Serbia and Croatia across the place of residence of tourist service users

Gender	N	Mean Rank	Median
<b>Perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints – Republic of Serbia</b>			
Urban	136	76.51	3.33
Rural	22	98.00	4.17
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>		
<b>Perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints – Republic of Croatia</b>			
Urban	124	69.13	4.00
Rural	15	77.23	4.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>		

Source: the authors' calculation

The Man-Whitney U test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints by respondents from urban (Md = 4.0, n = 124) and rural areas (Md = 4.00, n = 15) in the Republic of Croatia,  $U = 821.5$ ,  $Z = -0.771$ ,  $p = 0.441$ ,  $r = 0.07$  (small effect). Respondents from urban and rural areas in the Republic of Croatia equally perceived interaction fairness in handling complaints.

Bearing in mind that Mann-Whitney's U test in the Republic of Serbia revealed a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to respondents' place of residence. At the same time, in the Republic of Croatia, it did not; it can be concluded that the H1.5 hypothesis is partially accepted.

### *Relationship of perceptions of fairness and family size*

Table 6 shows testing of the H1.6 hypothesis and determining a statistically significant difference in perception of fairness of the interaction in handling complaints concerning the number of family members of tourist service users.

Table 6

Kruskal Wallis tests - perceptions of fairness of interaction in handling complaints in Serbia and Croatia according to the number of family members

Country	Perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints and number of family members	
Republic of Serbia	Chi-Square	5.940
	df	2
	Asymp. Sig.	0.051
Republic of Croatia	Chi-Square	1.963
	df	2
	Asymp. Sig.	0.375

Note: Kruskal Wallis Test; Grouping Variable: Number of family members

Source: the authors' calculation

The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a statistically significant difference in perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the number of respondents' family members in the Republic of Serbia (Gp1, n = 42: 1-2 members, Gp2, n = 86: 3-4 members, Gp3, n = 30: 5 and more members),  $\chi^2(2, n = 158) = 5.940$ ,  $p = 0.051$ . Respondents with different numbers of household members in the Republic of Serbia had different perceptions of the fairness of interaction in handling complaints, i.e., respondents with five or more members had the highest perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints. In comparison, respondents with two family members had the lowest perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints.

The Kruskal-Wallis test did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the number of respondents' family members in the Republic of Croatia (Gp1, n = 31: 1-2 members, Gp2, n = 100: 3-4 members, Gp3, n = 8: 5 and more members),  $\chi^2(2, n = 139) = 1.963$ ,  $p = 0.375$ . Respondents with different household members in the Republic of Croatia equally perceived interaction fairness in handling complaints.

Bearing in mind that the Kruskal-Wallis test in the Republic of Serbia revealed a statistically significant difference in the perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints according to the number of respondents' family members. At the same time, it did not in the Republic of Croatia; it can be concluded that the H1.6 hypothesis is partially accepted.

## Conclusion

By testing the auxiliary hypotheses, it was found that there were no differences in perception of fairness of the interaction in handling complaints depending on gender and level of education as socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. There was a statistically significant difference in age and monthly income in the Republic of Croatia. In contrast, in the Republic of Serbia, the difference was identified for residence and the number of family members as socio-demographic characteristics. After examining the existence of difference in perception of fairness of interaction in the handling of complaints concerning individual socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (users of tourist services) through six auxiliary hypotheses, it can be concluded that the main hypothesis H: There is a statistically significant difference in perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints between tourist service users of different socio-demographic characteristics, is partially accepted.



In the Republic of Croatia, respondents over the age of 58 had the highest perception of fairness of interaction in handling complaints, which agrees with the results of the research by Phau et al. (2008), Ngai et al. (2007), but also deviates from the results they pointed out for gender and monthly income. Regarding the monthly income in the Republic of Croatia, the users with the lowest income had the highest perception of interaction in handling complaints. In the Republic of Serbia, the users who lived in the countryside and had five or more family members had the highest perception of interaction fairness. Therefore, different cultures, years of age, amount of monthly income, place of residence, and the number of family members can form different perceptions of the fairness of interaction.

As the research results showed a difference in the perception of fairness in four out of the six auxiliary hypotheses, it can be concluded that the users' reaction to unsatisfactory service reflects their socio-demographic characteristics. The limitations of this study may serve as a basis for future research that may focus on determining the extent to which socio-demographic characteristics participate in the overall perception of interactionist justice. In addition to socio-demographic characteristics, the psychographic characteristics of users should be included. To obtain information for a specific travel agency, in addition to the method of structured examination, an in-depth interview for the users of a specific travel agency should be applied.

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