


## Article

# The Potential of Albanian Tourism Sector

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**Abstract:** The aim is to develop a profile of Albania's hotels based on a critical analysis of the attitude of foreign tourists visiting the country. COVID-19 negatively affected the Albanian tourism sector because 2,657,818 foreign citizens visited Albania in 2020, which is 41.49% less than in 2019. To investigate the potential of Albanian tourists, this study employs a quantitative analysis and a Regression Model. The results demonstrate that the tourist is a rational decision-maker and our findings indicate that there are differences in expectations and perceptions among respondents. These differences are not significantly correlated with the respondents' gender, but in terms of education level, the differences are significant for empathy, where the respondents with a college degree have a higher level of expectations than respondents that have higher education. Our findings highlight the practical implications of research for managers of hotels because they have to take into account that tourists are very sensitive to the level of understanding of their specific needs by hotel staff. Recently, more than before pandemic COVID-19, the relationship between expectations and perceptions of tourists visiting Albania is strongly influenced by tangible elements of the touristic package.

**Keywords:** Albania; expectations; perceptions; tourist package; gender; education level



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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is an important and rapidly growing sector within the national and international economy, boosted by the development of new tourist markets. While international competition is intensifying, the sector requires a more accurate assessment of customer expectations in order to identify any gap that may arise between them and the quality of services offered.

The aim was to develop a profile of Albania's hotels on the basis of critical analysis of the attitude of foreign tourists visiting the country, given the fact that Albania is a tourist destination with an exit to the Adriatic Sea (Central Albania to North) and also to the Ionian Sea (Central Albania to South). During Enver Hoxha's communist regime, Albania was isolated as a tourist destination. Therefore, since 1990, it has begun being an active player in the tourist market of its region. Until 2010, Albania's tourist attractions were not well known because the country was considered a tourist destination only for adventure.

In this difficult period for humanity, everyone tries to be optimistic about the post-pandemic future. It was expected that tourism would be the most affected sector of the economy, even though it is the most vulnerable sector, but also among the sectors with significant incomes for Albanians, given that in 2019 the country was visited by 6.4 million foreign tourists who spent about 2 billion Euro [1]. In the period from 2018 to 2020, people should have spent the holidays in Albania and it should have been visited by about 7 million foreign tourists, which means that Albania should have provided tourism services with a value of over 2.2 billion Euros. Realistically, according to INSTAT's statistics [1], in 2020, 2.66 million foreign nationals entered Albania, 60% less than in 2019. However, based on statistics provided by accommodation units, over 90% of tourists declared as foreigners are of Albanian origin and foreign citizenship or come from Albanian territories such as Kosovo or Northern Macedonia, which forms the so-called "patriotic tourism" in Albania.

Mainly, in 2020, 87.4% of foreign visitors who visited Albania entered through land customs points, 2.4% traveled by sea, and 10.2% traveled by plane. Given the fact that airlines also had travel restrictions, such a statistic was to be expected, but the fact that 87.4% of tourists came by land and 52% of them entered through customs points with Kosovo, clearly shows that Tourism in Albania in 2020 has been maintained mainly by patriotic tourism [1].

In order to characterize the Albanian tourism market, it should be noted that 80% of its hotels are located in coastal areas (Velipoja, Shengjin, Durrës, Kavaja, Vlora, Saranda, or Pogradec); 10% of the hotels are in Tirana and 10% are located in other areas of the country. Most accommodation facilities are family businesses rather than large professionally managed groups. Thus, the staff training affects the quality of service.

In mountains, there are very few hotels and guesthouses, because the return on investment into developing tourism in these areas is very low, even though agro-mountain tourism has become very attractive for tourists due to the pandemic of COVID-19. For example, in 2012 there were 150 guesthouses in the most frequented mountain areas of the country (Thethi, Kelmendi, and Valbona in northern Albania, Dardha and Voskopoja in the southeast) and at the beginning of 2016, their number had increased by 13 units reaching 163 guesthouses [2].

However, the four great fortresses and cultural sites protected by UNESCO, the natural beauty combined with one of Europe's oldest and most interesting histories makes Albania an attraction for foreign tourists. Here lives one of the oldest populations in the region—Illiri—where they speak a unique language, the Indo-European language.

Considering the tourism services market is very important for Albania's development, with customized offers in response to customer requests, we evaluated Albania's foreign tourist potential. Accordingly, we assessed the extent to which the quality of tourism services in Albania (in the central area, from cities such as Tirana—the country's capital city and Durrës—the largest port city and the largest beach area in the country) live up to the expectations of tourists.

Our research was motivated by the fact that the hospitality industry in Albania is a growing service sector. Thus, with the increase in the number of tourists and also with the COVID-19 pandemic, the weaknesses of the sector have become more visible (e.g., lack of specialized staff, deficiencies in the common application of service standards, and measures for evaluating customer satisfaction). That context led us to build a detailed picture of the hotel industry on the Albanian coast and to evaluate the impact of the quality of hotel services on customer satisfaction. In order to achieve our goal, we measured tourists' expectations of how hotel services should be delivered, we determined how tourists evaluate the hotel services they have experienced, and we assessed the gap between declared importance and calculated importance (derived through statistical methods) of the dimensions of hotel services among tourists.

The research questions start from Fond and McCabe's [3] (p. 870) observation that tourism "is most often conceived as a 'want' rather than a 'need', a luxury or a reward ... ". People need to spend their time in pleasant ways and for this reason, they find tourist destinations to satisfy their needs and expectations. Tourists have to deal with multiple offers via different communication channels, making it very difficult to identify the one tourist market segment that matches their ideals. The questions are the following: Is there any difference between tourists' expectations and perceptions of service quality in the Albanian tourist market? If so, what solutions do we have to reduce this difference in tourists' favor?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Tourist Satisfaction between Expectations and Perceptions

Gu et al. [4] analyzed the differences among groups of residents regarding their perceptions of nature-based tourism impacts in Erdaobaihe and they arrived at the conclu-

sion that factor–cluster segmentation plays an important role in residents’ perceptions of tourism satisfaction.

Tourist satisfaction has been a research topic receiving special attention even before the pandemic crisis generated by COVID-19 [5,6]. A critical analysis starts by comparing the tourists’ perceptions with their expectations, and this comparison leads to a positive or negative feeling, as Lewin (1938) [7] explained with his expectancy-disconfirmation theory, developed further by Oliver and Swan [8]. Much empirical research on tourists’ satisfaction is based on the relationship between expectations and perceptions in different countries and regions. In Europe, many studies were for popular tourist destinations such as Spain Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, and Spain [9]. In Asia, China benefits from many quantitative and qualitative studies [10,11].

Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman [12] consider that expectations are important for the assessment of customer satisfaction, but it is difficult to arrive at a consensus regarding the definition of these expectations [13] because many factors contribute to their formation: customer desires [14,15], standards of the services [16], and efficacy of the services [17]. The level of expectations depends on personal characteristics such as nationality, gender, and education level [18].

Camilleri [19] considered that the efficiency of a tourism company can be continuously improved if the customers’ expectations are seriously taken into consideration because in the end there will be a positive correlation between customers’ expectations and the perceived quality of tourism services. Later, Cardoso et al. [20] demonstrated that the difference between expectations and perceptions of tourists is due to a lack of communication between clients and hotel employees.

Given factors that trigger the desire of tourists for a new destination, it is important to make the tourist destination more attractive and to take into account demographic features. Taking into account the research of Prayag et al. [21] and of Yuan and Wu [22] we underline that the relationship between expectations and perceptions depends on the quality experiences of the tourists.

Customers have a pre-formed image of the quality of the tourism service based on their expectations. As a result, perceptions substantially contribute to the degree of tourist satisfaction levels. The complexity of perception as a process is well described by Moutinho [23] who stresses that stimuli (auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory, and/or taste) and demography, such as those factors listed above, affect perception levels. Measuring the level of perception of the quality of the tourism service is very challenging. There is a fine line separating the impact of the factors, positive or negative, and the tourist perceptions. For example, a customer at a five-star rated hotel might bring an expectation of what constitutes an acceptable wait time, and when she/he arrives at the reception to complete the check-in procedures, the wait time experienced is higher than that. This time could be perceived by the customer as time wasted, giving rise to an emotional dimension [24–26].

Differences between tourists’ expectations and perceptions of the service quality alter their behavior and generate different levels of attitudes towards the service received [27,28]. Developing countries such as Albania are perceived as providing a lower quality tourist package, out of kilter, with lower expectations in regard to the price paid for the service.

## 2.2. The Dimensions of Tourism Package

Consistent with the previous arguments, the dimensions of a tourist package are very important for customers because their level of satisfaction depends on the gap between expectations and perceptions of the service quality [29,30]. Buttle [31] considers that there is a direct relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Starting from a deeper analysis of the dimensions of service quality suggested by many scholars, the authors of [32] summarized the dimensions of service quality: reliability, access, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, communication, understanding the customer, credibility, security, tangibility. A few years later, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry [15] arrived at the conclusion that only five dimensions (reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy,

and responsiveness) are relevant to the measurement of service quality. However, the SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry [15] has received scholarly criticism due to the direct relationship between the customer decision-making process and the perceptions of the service delivered [33–36].

The tourist is considered a rational decision-maker who follows determined steps between stated intention and final decision [37,38]. Tourists are often under the pressure of their emotions and these emotions influence the rationality of decision-making. Various researchers [39,40] have explored the causal relationship between the dimensions of the tourist package and the level of satisfaction, but they have struggled to evaluate the complexity of the decision-making process because this process implies a chain of decisions and it is influenced by personal and situational factors [41–43].

Our research moves away from a tourist-decisions-centered approach by taking into account the dimensions of the tourist package, and we try to integrate this decision-making process with other decisions.

Therefore, the following hypotheses were developed:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *There is a direct relationship between the gender of the respondents and their expectations regarding the quality of tourism services.*

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *The education level of respondents influences their expectations regarding the quality of the tourism services.*

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *There is a direct relationship between tourists' perceptions of service standards mediated by external indicators of quality and their gender.*

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** *The education level influences tourists' perceptions regarding the quality of the service.*

**Hypothesis 5 (H5).** *The stated importance that tourists associate with the dimensions of the package influences their level of satisfaction.*

### 3. Methodology Research

The number of tourists entering Albania has been steadily increasing—from 3,513,666 in 2012 to 5,117,000 in 2017; 6,406,038 in 2019 and then decreasing to 2,657,818 in 2020. Albania has a single airport, and this leads to higher tariffs/fees. As a result, the flow of people traveling to Albania by airplane is very low (1,659,594 tourists in 2019 and 657,467 tourists in 2020) [1]. However, in recent years, action has been taken to license another airport in Albania to facilitate air travel, which would be reflected in a reduction in airfares and an increase in visitors.

Although Albania is situated in proximity to the Mediterranean Sea, the lack of ports, the lack of facilities for yacht owners, and the lack of facilities for anchoring cruise ships make the maritime potential not fully exploited due to poor investment policies. That is why the number of foreign tourists who choose to travel to Albania by sea [1] is very small compared to Albania's capacity and tourism potential (842,904 tourists in 2019 and 233,538 tourists in 2020).

The research for this study involved surveying foreign guests at Albanian hotels in the three- and four-star category; hotels that are located in the largest beach area, in Durres and its surroundings. We chose this area because it is one of the most attractive tourist areas in Albania for foreign tourists. We distributed over 300 questionnaires, of which 236 were correctly completed (78.67% of the questionnaires). The data from these completed questionnaires were processed using SPSS. The questionnaire comprised two parts, informed by the variables in Hypotheses 1–5. In the first part, the questionnaire was based on the model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry [15]. In the second

part, the questionnaire was completed by removing items that did not fit into the normally distributed statistical values.

The five SERVQUAL dimensions provided the variables informing our research and for each of them, we evaluated the level of expectations, the level of perceptions, as well as the gap between expectations and perceptions, as follows: **Tangibles** (four items), **Reliability** (five items), **Responsiveness** (four items), **Assurance** (four items), and **Empathy** (five items). Respondents assessed the quality of tourism services on a Likert scale from 1 (Totally Disagree) to 5 (Totally Agree). Internal consistency estimates (Cronbach alpha coefficients) were 0.84.

### 3.1. Sample

Descriptive statistics (Table 1) can be summarized as follows.

**Table 1.** The structure of the sample.

Variable	Structure of the Sample
Age	until 30 years old—38 respondents (16.1%) 31–55 years old—120 respondents (50.8%) over 56 years old—78 respondents (33.1%)
Gender	116 male (49.2%) 120 female (50.8%)
Education level	College—72 respondents (30.5%) University—128 respondents (54.2%) Master—36 respondents (15.3%)
Reason for which the tourists visiting Albania	Holidays—226 respondents (95.8%) Others—10 respondents (4.2%)
How to book the hotel	Travel agency—38 respondents (16.1%) Online—120 respondents (50.8%) Phone—78 respondents (33.1%)
The origin country of the tourists	Poland—43 respondents (18.2%) Serbia—35 respondents (14.8%) Czech Republic—27 respondents (11.4%) Ukraine—22 respondents (9.3%) Great Britain—20 respondents (8.5%) Italy—18 respondents (7.6%) Bosnia Herzegovina—17 respondents (7.2%) Russia—16 respondents (6.8%) Germany—15 respondents (6.4%) Romania—12 respondents (5.1%) FYR Macedonia—11 respondents (4.7%)

There is a balance between female respondents (50.8%) and male respondents (49.2%), which is an advantage for the reliability of the results. The majority age group ranges between 31–55 years old (50.8%) and we start from the premise that the respondents have the experience and the maturity necessary to set their expectations and a correct image of the quality of the tourism service in Albania. Regarding their education level, the majority of respondents have higher education qualifications (university and master's level: 69.5%), facilitating the analysis of the relationship between expectations and perceptions, taking into account education level as a possible mediating variable. The majority of respondents made their hotel booking online (50.8%), which indicates that they already had an experiential picture against which to assess the expected quality level of the tourism service influencing their choice. Respondents came from different countries, which we grouped into two categories: countries from the former communist bloc (Bosnia Herzegovina, Czech Republic, FYR Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine: 77.5%), and developed capitalist countries (Germany, Great Britain, and Italy: 22.5%).



### 3.2. The Regression Model

**Null Hypothesis (H0).** There is no direct relationship between the five variables of tourism service and the dependent variable related to the level of customer satisfaction. The null hypothesis was tested using a regression model, to elucidate the dimensions of touristic services in the framework of the relationship between expectations and predictions. The regression model designed in the initial stage of the research consists of the five dimensions proposed as a basis to define the level of satisfaction among tourists visiting Albania (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Coefficient of Multiple Regressions.

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Estimate (Standard Error)
1	0.993 a	0.985	0.985	0.2250

<sup>a</sup> Coefficients-Predictors: (Constant); T = *Tangibles*, R = *Reliability*, Re = *Responsiveness*, A = *Assurance*, E = *Empathy*.

The R-value is 0.993, giving the statistical confidence to continue the analysis. The R<sup>2</sup> value is 0.985 meaning that 98.5% of the variation in the satisfaction of tourists in Albania is explained by the five dimensions (*Tangibles*, *Reliability*, *Responsiveness*, *Assurance*, and *Empathy*) applied to describe how the hotel service is provided. Based on these findings, the model is valid and robust, and we can continue to analyze the impact of the five dimensions on tourists' level of satisfaction.

In the next stage, we conducted an ANOVA test. This did not indicate any significant difference between the five dimensions of the model ( $F = 3035.095$ ;  $df = 5$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). The results show that the F-Statistic exceeds the upper bound of the critical value band and the  $p$ -value is found to be smaller than 0.001. Thus, it rejects the null hypothesis that suggests there is no relationship between the dimensions and tourists' level of satisfaction.

The individual regression statistics show that all five variables, at  $p < 0.05$ , are significant for tourist respondent satisfaction levels. The variance inflation test (VIF) was run for the model and for all five dimensions, VIFs ranged from 1.046 to 1.559. The highest VIF is for *Responsiveness* (1.559) and is lower than the cut-off point of 10 and thus there is no risk of collinearity [44].

As we can see from the analysis of Table 3, the variable *Responsiveness* has the greatest impact on the satisfaction of respondents ( $\beta = 0.390$ ,  $\text{sig} < 0.05$ ) because the tourists are influenced by the way and the promptness with which hotel employees offer services and information. *Reliability* ( $\beta = 0.358$ ,  $\text{sig} < 0.05$ ) shows that the quality of hotel services is important for tourists visiting Albania. Tourists are influenced by tangible elements of the tourist package, such as the hotel's exterior and/or interior appearance, and by the way in which the staff present themselves (*Tangibles*— $\beta = 0.335$ ,  $\text{sig} < 0.05$ ). The last satisfaction dimension, *Assurance* ( $\beta = 0.341$ ,  $\text{sig} < 0.05$ ), shows that tourists are sensitive to their confidence in the hotel staff, as well as the level of hotel staff knowledge regarding the quality of tourism services. *Empathy* ( $\beta = 0.224$ ,  $\text{sig} < 0.05$ ) has a lower level of influence on satisfaction even if tourist expectations are that hotel staff better understand their specific needs. These considerations suggest that the regression model is robust.

**Table 3.** Test of Significance of Individual Regressions <sup>a</sup>.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients SE	Standardized Coefficients B	T B	Significance (Sig) SE	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	0.189	0.031	-	6.186	0.000	-	-
Tangibles	0.191	0.005	0.335	40.717	0.000	0.956	1.046
Reliability	0.208	0.006	0.358	37.161	0.000	0.700	1.429
1 Responsiveness	0.213	0.005	0.390	38.811	0.000	0.642	1.559
Assurance	0.190	0.005	0.341	38.607	0.000	0.833	1.201
Empathy	0.145	0.006	0.224	24.291	0.000	0.762	1.312

<sup>a</sup> Dependent Variable: Satisfaction.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

We evaluated the differences between perceptions and expectations of tourists visiting Albania (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics of the differences between perceptions and expectations of the quality of the tourism service.

Dimension	Expectations Mean	Perceptions Mean	Differences between Perceptions and Expectations
Tangibles	4.4070	3.5932	−0.8138
Reliability	4.4814	3.7254	−0.7560
Responsiveness	4.4597	3.6695	−0.7902
Assurance	4.6483	3.9364	−0.7119
Empathy	4.4220	3.6942	−0.7278
Services Quality	4.4837	3.7237	−0.7599

The greatest difference between the expectations and perceptions of the respondents regarding the quality of the tourism service is with respect to *Tangibles* where there is a negative difference of 0.8138, which highlights the fact that tourists' expectations were much higher for the appearance of the physical environment or other material factors. The negative differences were registered to the other four dimensions leading to the conclusion that tourist expectations were higher than their perceptions (0.7599).

Our findings prove that all five dimensions registered a negative difference between the expectations of the tourists and their perception of the quality of the hotel services. Therefore, the clients were not satisfied, and their perceptions were not in line with their expectations.

Expectations and perceptions of tourists visiting Albania were then evaluated controlling for both gender (Table 5) and education level (Table 6).

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics of tourists' expectations, by gender.

Dimension	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
Tangibles	Male	4.4267	0.37010	0.03436
	Female	4.4542	0.37933	0.03463
Reliability	Male	4.5310	0.32635	0.03030
	Female	4.4333	0.20471	0.01869
Responsiveness	Male	4.4569	0.34934	0.03244
	Female	4.4625	0.24608	0.02246
Assurance	Male	4.6767	0.19786	0.01837
	Female	4.6208	0.20748	0.01894
Empathy	Male	4.4034	0.22221	0.02063
	Female	4.4400	0.25615	0.02338

The mean of the respondents' expectations, by gender, reveals that females and males have the same expectations regarding each of the components of the tourism service.

To validate the hypotheses regarding tourist expectations related to tourism service quality we applied the Levene test for equality of variances [45] and the *t*-test for equality of means.

The results indicated that for *Reliability*,  $F = 30.066$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.007$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ), and for *Assurance*,  $F = 0.883$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.035$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ), there are significant differences between female and male respondents in terms of expectations regarding the two dimensions of the tourism service. For the other three dimensions, *Tangibles*:  $F = 1.751$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.574$  ( $\text{sig} > 0.05$ ); *Responsiveness*:  $F = 14.077$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.887$  ( $\text{sig} > 0.05$ ); and *Empathy*:  $F = 0.082$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.242$  ( $\text{sig} > 0.05$ ), there are no significant differences between females and males in terms of expectations regarding these dimensions of the tourism service.

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics of tourists' expectations, by education level.

Dimension	Education Level	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
Tangibles	College	72	4.5208	0.28689	0.03381
	University	128	4.4219	0.41354	0.03655
	Master	36	4.3472	0.35995	0.05999
Reliability	College	72	4.6167	0.30902	0.03642
	University	128	4.3969	0.22863	0.02021
	Master	36	4.5111	0.24585	0.04098
Responsiveness	College	72	4.4236	0.34508	0.04067
	University	128	4.5039	0.26057	0.02303
	Master	36	4.3750	0.31904	0.05317
Assurance	College	72	4.7917	0.16251	0.01915
	University	128	4.5742	0.16410	0.01450
	Master	36	4.6250	0.25704	0.04284
Empathy	College	72	4.4500	0.27011	0.03183
	University	128	4.4344	0.23425	0.02070
	Master	36	4.3222	0.16752	0.02792

Female respondents have higher expectations for the following four dimensions: *Tangibles*, *Responsiveness*, *Assurance*, and *Empathy*, while male respondents have higher expectations regarding the *Reliability* of service quality.

As a result, Hypothesis 1 is partially validated.

Our research continued with the analysis of how the level of education influences tourists' expectations regarding the quality of tourism services (Table 6).

The results for four of the dimensions are the following: *Reliability*:  $F = 16.976$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.000$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ); *Responsiveness*:  $F = 3.399$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.035$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ); *Assurance*:  $F = 33.720$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.000$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ); and *Empathy*:  $F = 3.855$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.023$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ). There are significant differences between females and males in terms of expectations regarding two dimensions of the tourism service. For *Tangibles*,  $F = 2.985$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.053$  ( $\text{sig} > 0.05$ ), there are no significant differences between females and males in terms of expectations regarding these dimensions of the tourism service.

Taking into account that there were no significant differences for one dimension (*Tangibles*), for the other four dimensions (*Reliability*, *Responsiveness*, *Assurance*, and *Empathy*) we continued with multiple comparisons of tourists' expectations, by education level (Table 7). Our results indicate that for four dimensions there are significant differences ( $\text{sig} > 0.05$ ) between the respondents as follows:

*Reliability*—there is a positive difference between respondents with a master's qualification (they are more demanding in terms of the hotel staff's ability to perform services accurately) and respondents with university degrees (0.11424;  $\text{sig} = 0.052$ ).

*Responsiveness*—there is a negative difference between respondents with a master's (they are less demanding in terms of the speed with which hotel staff respond to customer needs), respondents with a university degree ( $-0.12891$ ;  $\text{sig} = 0.058$ ), and respondents with a college degree ( $-0.04861$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.703$ ).

*Assurance*—there is a positive difference between respondents with a master's (they are more demanding in terms of knowledge and courtesy of the hotel staff to perform personalized customer services) and respondents with a university degree (0.05078;  $\text{sig} = 0.298$ ).

*Empathy*—there is a positive difference between respondents with a college degree (they are more demanding in terms of the ability of the hotel staff to perform personalized services and pay individual attention to customer needs) and respondents with a university degree (0.01562;  $\text{sig} = 0.896$ ).

As a result, Hypothesis 2 is partially validated.



**Table 7.** Multiple comparisons of tourists' expectations, by education level.

Dimension	Education Level (I)	Education Level (J)	Means Difference of Education Level (I–J)	Standard Error	Sig
Reliability	College	University	0.21979 *	0.03804	0.000
	-	Master	0.10556	0.05271	0.114
	University	College	−0.21979 *	0.03804	0.000
	-	Master	−0.11424	0.04871	0.052
	Master	College	−0.10556	0.05271	0.114
Responsiveness	-	University	0.11424	0.04871	0.052
	College	University	−0.08030	0.04385	0.162
	-	Master	0.04861	0.06075	0.703
	University	College	0.08030	0.04385	0.162
	-	Master	0.12891	0.05615	0.058
Assurance	Master	College	−0.04861	0.06075	0.703
	-	University	−0.12891	0.05615	0.058
	College	University	0.21745 *	0.02662	0.000
	-	Master	0.016667 *	0.03688	0.000
	University	College	−0.21745 *	0.02662	0.000
Empathy	-	Master	−0.05078	0.03409	0.298
	Master	College	−0.16667 *	0.03688	0.000
	-	University	0.05078	0.03409	0.298
	College	University	0.01562	0.03497	0.896
	-	Master	0.12778 *	0.04846	0.024
Empathy	University	College	−0.01562	0.03497	0.896
	-	Master	0.11215 *	0.04479	0.034
	Master	College	−0.12778 *	0.04846	0.024
	-	University	−0.11215 *	0.04479	0.034

\* The difference is significant at a confidence level of 95%.

Our findings indicate that there are differences in expectations among respondents and the differences are not significantly correlated with the respondents' gender. For example, women's expectations are slightly higher than those of men's are in four of the five dimensions, but in terms of education level, the differences are significant for *Empathy* where the respondents with a college degree have a higher level of expectations than respondents with higher education [46].

The analysis of Table 8 shows that the mean of respondents' perceptions, by gender, reveals that there are no significant differences for any of the five dimensions that describe the tourist package; both females and males have the same perceptions regarding each of the components of the tourism service. To validate the hypotheses regarding the tourist perceptions related to tourism service quality, we used Levene's test for equality of variances and the *t*-test for equality of means.

We continued to evaluate the perceptions of respondents (by gender—Table 8 and by education level—Table 9) to compare them with the differences recorded for the expectations.

**Table 8.** Descriptive statistics of tourists' perceptions, by gender.

Dimension	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
Tangibles	Male	3.6638	0.31468	0.02922
	Female	3.5250	0.30985	0.02829
Reliability	Male	3.7138	0.33177	0.03080
	Female	3.7367	0.29447	0.02688
Responsiveness	Male	3.6767	0.33946	0.03152
	Female	3.6625	0.32996	0.03012
Assurance	Male	3.8448	0.36364	0.03376
	Female	4.0250	0.25806	0.02356
Empathy	Male	3.6724	0.30690	0.02850
	Female	3.6267	0.25263	0.02306

**Table 9.** Descriptive Statistics of tourists' perceptions, by education level.

Dimension	Education Level	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
Tangibles	College	72	3.6667	0.25175	0.02967
	University	128	3.5508	0.36365	0.03214
	Master	36	3.5972	0.24111	0.04019
Reliability	College	72	3.6556	0.33098	0.03901
	University	128	3.7094	0.29893	0.02642
	Master	36	3.9222	0.24508	0.04085
Responsiveness	College	72	3.6667	0.27193	0.03205
	University	128	3.6094	0.34331	0.03034
	Master	36	3.8889	0.32974	0.05496
Assurance	College	72	3.8194	0.25599	0.03017
	University	128	3.9570	0.36196	0.03199
	Master	36	4.0972	0.22581	0.03764
Empathy	College	72	3.8222	0.23630	0.02785
	University	128	3.5250	0.27148	0.02400
	Master	36	3.7444	0.14822	0.02470

The results indicated that for *Tangibles*,  $F = 0.077$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.001$ , and for *Assurance*,  $F = 13.728$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.000$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ), there are significant differences between females and males in terms of perceptions regarding the two dimensions of the tourism service.

As a result, for the other three dimensions we have the following results: *Reliability*:  $F = 2.706$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.576$  ( $\text{sig} > 0.05$ ); *Responsiveness*:  $F = 0.692$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.745$  ( $\text{sig} > 0.05$ ); and *Empathy*:  $F = 7.595$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.213$  ( $\text{sig} > 0.05$ ). There are no significant differences between females and males in terms of perceptions regarding these dimensions of the tourism service. Female respondents have higher perceptions for the following two dimensions: *Reliability*, and *Assurance*, while male respondents have higher expectations with regard to *Tangibles*, *Responsiveness*, and *Empathy* of service quality.

As a result, Hypothesis 3 is partially validated.

We continued the analysis of the perceptions of respondents by education level (Tables 9 and 10).

The results for all the dimensions are the following: *Tangibles*:  $F = 3.094$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.047$ ; *Reliability*:  $F = 9.761$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.000$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ); *Responsiveness*:  $F = 10.649$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.000$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ); *Assurance*:  $F = 9.948$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.000$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ); and *Empathy*:  $F = 36.839$ ,  $\text{sig} = 0.000$  ( $\text{sig} \leq 0.05$ ). There are significant differences between females and males in terms of perceptions regarding the two dimensions of the tourism service.

Taking into account that there were significant differences across all dimensions, we continued with multiple comparisons of tourists' expectations by education level (Table 10).

Our findings indicated that for all dimensions there are significant differences ( $\text{sig} > 0.05$ ) between the respondents as follows.

*Tangibles*—there is a positive difference between respondents with a college degree and respondents with a university degree (0.06944;  $\text{sig} = 0.538$ ) and between respondents with master's degrees and respondents with a university degree (0.04644;  $\text{sig} = 0.717$ ). The respondents with a college degree and the respondents with a master's degree are more demanding in terms of the physical appearance of the services and of the environment than respondents with a university degree.

*Reliability*—there is a positive difference between respondents with a university degree (they are more demanding in terms of the hotel staff's ability to perform services accurately) and respondents with a college degree (0.05382;  $\text{sig} = 0.448$ ).

*Responsiveness*—there is a positive difference between respondents with a college degree (they are more demanding in terms of the speed with which the hotel staff respond to customer needs) and respondents with a university degree (0.05729;  $\text{sig} = 0.448$ ).

**Table 10.** Multiple comparisons of tourists' perceptions, by education level.

Dimension	Education Level (I)	Education Level (J)	Means Difference of Education Level (I–J)	Standard Error	Sig
Tangibles	College	University	0.11589 *	0.04661	0.036
	-	Master	0.06944	0.06459	0.530
	University	College	−0.11589 *	0.04661	0.036
	-	Master	−0.04644	0.05970	0.717
	Master	College	−0.06944	0.06459	0.530
Reliability	-	University	0.04644	0.05970	0.717
	College	University	−0.05382	0.04447	0.448
	-	Master	−0.26667 *	0.06161	0.000
	University	College	0.05382	0.04447	0.448
	-	Master	−0.21285 *	0.05694	0.001
Responsiveness	Master	College	0.26667 *	0.06161	0.000
	-	University	0.21285 *	0.05694	0.001
	College	University	0.05729	0.04730	0.448
	-	Master	−0.22222 *	0.06555	0.002
	University	College	−0.05729	0.04730	0.448
Assurance	-	Master	−0.27951 *	0.06058	0.000
	Master	College	0.22222 *	0.06555	0.002
	-	University	0.27951 *	0.06058	0.000
	College	University	−0.13759 *	0.04636	0.009
	-	Master	−0.27778 *	0.06424	0.000
Empathy	University	College	0.13759 *	0.04636	0.009
	-	Master	−0.14019 *	0.05937	0.050
	Master	College	0.27778 *	0.06424	0.000
	-	University	0.14019 *	0.05937	0.050
	College	University	0.29722 *	0.03623	0.000
Empathy	-	Master	0.07778	0.05020	0.270
	University	College	−0.29722 *	0.03623	0.000
	-	Master	−0.21944 *	0.04640	0.000
	Master	College	−0.07778	0.05020	0.270
	-	University	0.21944 *	0.04640	0.000

\* The difference is significant at a confidence level of 95%.

*Assurance*—there is a positive difference between respondents with a master's (they are more demanding in terms of knowledge and courtesy of the hotel staff to perform personalized customer services) and respondents with a university degree (0.14019; sig = 0.050).

*Empathy*—there is a positive difference between respondents with a college degree (they are more demanding in terms of the ability of the hotel staff to perform personalized services and pay individual attention to customer needs) and respondents with a master's (0.07778; sig = 0.270).

As a result, Hypothesis 4 is not validated.

The set of dimensions defining the way a tourism service is provided was included in the multivariate analysis in order to achieve a sequencing of the aspects leading to a competitive advantage. Respondents stated that the *Empathy* dimension has a similar importance to other dimensions, but by applying the regression model, this dimension lost importance because respondents tended to overestimate the importance of *Empathy* in influencing the level of satisfaction. On the other hand, *Responsiveness* has the greatest influence on respondents' satisfaction, with higher importance than stated by tourists (Table 11).

The comparative analysis of the declared contribution and the calculated contribution of each dimension suggests that, with the exception of *Empathy* ( $\beta = 0.22$ ), respondents objectively assessed their expectations regarding the quality of the tourism service.

Although the emotional elements captured in the *Empathy* dimension were mentioned as being important, the level of satisfaction is, in fact, determined by the rational elements of *Responsiveness* ( $\beta = 0.39$ ), *Reliability* ( $\beta = 0.36$ ), *Assurance* ( $\beta = 0.34$ ), and *Tangibles* ( $\beta = 0.34$ ).

**Table 11.** The difference between declared and calculated importance score.

Dimension	Declared Importance Score		Calculated Importance Score		Contribution Difference (%)
	Mean	Contribution (%)	B	Contribution (%)	
Tangibles	4.44	19.8%	0.34	20.3%	+0.5%
Reliability	4.48	20.0%	0.36	21.7%	+1.8%
Responsiveness	4.46	19.9%	0.39	23.7%	+3.8%
Assurance	4.65	20.7%	0.34	20.7%	0.0%
Empathy	4.42	19.7%	0.22	13.6%	−6.1%

We reached the conclusion that there are generally no significant differences between the respondents controlling for gender and education level, but there are significant differences between the declared importance and the calculated importance that respondents associate with the size of the package for the level of satisfaction [47].

As a result, Hypothesis 5 is validated.

Roman et al. [48] underlined the importance of cluster analysis for tourism based on factors such as spatial diversity of tourism. Albania is a country where the studies on tourist satisfaction are at a statistical level and less at the quantitative and/or qualitative levels. Albania has high touristic potential from the natural factors point of view, but this potential is diminished due to forms of spatial organization.

Our findings are also consistent with the findings of Jönsson and Devonish [49], Hammad, Ahmad, and Papastathopoulos [50] and demonstrate that the difference between female and male respondents exists in expectations and in perceptions of service quality.

Females have higher expectations regarding *Tangibles*, *Responsiveness*, *Assurance*, and *Empathy*, while male respondents have higher expectations regarding the *Reliability* of service quality. Education level influences the expectations of tourists, exemplified by the fact that respondents with a master's qualification are more demanding in terms of *Reliability* and *Assurance*; the respondents with a college degree are more demanding in terms of *Responsiveness* and *Empathy*.

Females have higher perceptions of *Reliability* and *Assurance* of service quality, while males have higher expectations with regard to *Tangibles*, *Responsiveness*, and *Empathy* in the service quality.

The results demonstrate that the tourist is first a rational decision-maker and our findings are consistent with the findings of Gnoth [18] and Goossens [51] who analyzed the sensitive line between the rational and affective nature of tourists' decision-making process. As Gnoth [18] points out, in tourism decisions, there are many situations when the affective nature of tourists is crucial for the choice of destination.

## 5. Conclusions

The number of tourists visiting Albania is growing year by year, with an average annual growth of almost 15% and the semester with the most tourists arriving in Albania is the third semester of the year, which also corresponds to the summer vacation period.

We arrived at the conclusion that rational dimensions have a decisive influence on the satisfaction of tourists visiting Albania; the emotional dimension (*Empathy*) is losing importance, but it has to be taken into account by hotel managers because they have to have well-trained staff to give customer attention 24/7/365 and to understand the specific needs of their customers. *Responsiveness* most influences the level of satisfaction of tourists and therefore managers would be advised to ensure that they have qualified staff to provide services and information to tourists in a timely manner.

Sustainable tourism research is an important topic in the sustainability domain and elements such as communication, methodological rigor, and integrity contribute to the practical approach to the tourism sector in crisis [52]. The social benefits of the research will be more visible if the researchers build a bridge between literature and practice. Therefore, our research fills the gaps concerning the practical research on the Albanian tourism

sector taking into consideration the relationship between the expectations and perceptions of tourists.

The practical applicability of our research consists of providing managers with information on the expectations of tourists [53]. Therefore, the managers can act to reduce the weaknesses, improve the quality of tourism services, and train the staff to inspire more confidence among tourists and provide them knowledge about the opportunities that the hotel and region can offer them for a pleasant stay [54–56].

A limitation of our research is that we analyzed the expectations—perceptions relationship of the clients at three- and four-star hotels and we neglected the other hotel categories from the region. Additionally, the survey was conducted in English and for some respondents, English is a second language and this limitation may affect their understanding of the questions.

Future research should focus on the relationship between tourism and national economic, political, and social aspects [57], taking into account the high degree of economic and political uncertainties after the pandemic COVID-19 [58,59].

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