

## HOTEL BRAND EFFECTIVENESS – THE GOOD PRACTICE OF BULGARIA. THE CASE OF KATARINO SPA HOTEL

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### Abstract

*Hotel brand effectiveness determines the level of guest satisfaction, their desire for a repeat visit (guest loyalty) and their positive word-of-mouth. It depends on the quality of hotel superstructure and services paired with the proper use of brand destination resources. For a proper evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness it is necessary that guest perception and behaviour be considered as brands exist in guests' minds. Successful brands ensure pleasure, even delight and create the emotional connection "brand-guest". Brands are difficult to evaluate because they are considered to be something intangible and the choice of a brand is rather emotional than rational.*

*This paper has the objective to analyze and evaluate the hotel brand effectiveness through a proper set of factors, i.e. criteria and indicators. The research employs a qualitative method of analysis and evaluation which entails encoding of guests' reviews uploaded in the TripAdvisor platform including the period of Covid-19. Research results have proved a higher level of brand effectiveness according to three basic criteria – guest perception, guest behaviour and brand destination.*

**Keywords:** hotel brand, brand evaluation, effectiveness, guest feedback

**JEL Codes:** Z39

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### Introduction

Hotel brand experience is associated with all prerequisites providing the main hotel service, i.e. the overnight stay, namely infrastructure and hotel superstructure, service quality, standard of customer care, staff professional level, hotel image and reputation, etc. The total guest experience and satisfaction also depend upon the destination resources where the hotel is located. The object of this research is the 4-star Katarino Spa Hotel (<https://hotelkatarino.com>) located in the region of Razlog, Bulgaria. This hotel unit has an enormous potential to develop extensively for its geographical proximity to two of the biggest national parks in Bulgaria – Rila and Pirin. Another beneficial characteristic of this region is the lush resource (40%) of mineral water in Bulgaria.

Katarino Spa Hotel is named after the unique mountain region of Katarino distinguished for the mineral springs and the remains of the Saint Katerina medieval church. The hotel alone represents a sightseeing spot attracting Bulgarian and international tourists. As a brand, Katarino is promoted to be a luxury place in the nature blended with healthy lifestyle, organic

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products and friendly staff. The brand slogan “Health is the new luxury” entirely reflects its identity.

Katarino brand financial policy entails selling at premium prices as Katarino guests generate value and prefer the hotel to another establishment offering the same range of services at lower rates. Only successful and strong brands can operate in an upmarket way. Having an upmarket brand enables hotels to distinguish their offer from the competition as well as to build customer confidence and loyalty. They have a strong brand promotion and distribution policy, as well as keep a premium price over the competitors (Lowes, Pendleton, Chadwick & Pass, 1991).

The right selection of effectiveness indicators is crucial for the precise and accurate brand evaluation. One trade mark converts into a brand when it has established loyalty with its customers. Following this trait of thought, we assume that hotel guests’ feedback can rightly outline the factors, i.e. indicators which express the level of their relevant satisfaction and desire for a repeat visit. Professional brand managers make greater efforts to achieve positive word-of-mouth through guest online feedback. Once guests have established loyalty to a certain hotel brand, it is highly probable that they will make a repeat visit, they are less susceptible to competitors’ offers and are more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth (Xiong, King, & Hu, 2014).

The subject of this study is the effectiveness of a hotel brand discussing the case of the Bulgarian Katarino Spa Hotel. The current paper has the objective to make an analysis and evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness through a proper set of codes (indicators). The research methodology entails a qualitative analysis of guests’ reviews published on the Trip Advisor website. Research results have proved a higher level of brand effectiveness according to three basic criteria – guest perception, guest behaviour and brand destination.

### **Literature review**

One of the most thorough definitions of brand belongs to Bill Baker (2012, p. 26): „a set of thoughts, feelings and expectations which form the distinguishing and irresistible message and give people the opportunity to choose more easily one product or service to another”, i.e. one hotel company to another offering the same range of services. Basically the distinguishing trait of successful brands is determined by the promises they make and keep. Successful brands add value, significance and uniqueness to a product or service. Brand’s value relies on guests’ awareness of the brand, their perception of its quality, and overall guest satisfaction (O’Neill & Mattila, 2004).

Hildreth (TPBO, 2015) gives another brand definition that is “an overall image and combination of associations existing in people’s mind”, and branding is viewed as “purposeful actions to correct and improve image”. Another concept of branding belongs to Lowes et al. (1991), where it is seen as a strategy that distinguishes a company’s offer and builds customer confidence.

According to Cai and Hobson (2004, p. 199), a hotel brand is “broader than the actual product benefits and features”. A hotel brand involves a relationship with its guests. This relationship is built after guests have become aware of the brand, have used hotel amenities, and have given feedback on their experience (O’Neill & Mattila, 2010).

A memorable brand experience can guarantee a sustainable competitive advantage because it is unique and incomparable. Hotel superstructure and amenities can be copied and imitated but the emotion and experience of hotel guests belong predominantly to the brand essence (Khan & Rahman, 2017). Unlike the positioning, which addresses the consumer’s consciousness, the emotionalizing influences the subconsciousness, the emotional aspect (Ries & Trout, 2001).

If the hotel has managed to ensure an unforgettable experience thanks to all the amenities offered, its guests will take this nice memory home and consequently they will choose this brand again (guest loyalty), will recognize it easily among the other brands selling analogous services. The enhancement and recognition of hotel branding is based on the concept that hotel brands generate value for both guests and hotel companies, primarily for the brand loyalty they favour (O'Neill & Xiao, 2006).

Hotel brand equity is also developed by hotel guest experiences (Xu & Chan, 2010). Hotels should provide positive and unique experiences to their guests so that the brand is projected in their mind (Cai & Hobson, 2004) as a long lasting memory.

Effective brands connect directly with the consumers' hearts because emotions are the drivers of human decisions and they explain the realization of these decisions. In the core of every holiday lies the experience and the emotions it ensures. Effective hotel brands manage to raise customer awareness, attract guests, cater to guests' needs and wishes and consequently achieve and enhance guest satisfaction. Guest satisfaction leads to repeat visit, positive word-of-mouth, guest loyalty and greater revenue. Guest satisfaction has appeared to be a measure of operational success for hotel branding (O'Neill & Mattila, 2004). Satisfied guests are inclined to buy more, they are less price conscious, i.e. they are ready to buy at premium prices and spread positive word-of-mouth, thus generating a positive financial result (Anderson & Mittal, 2000).

Effective brands have values that coincide with customer values and thus satisfy customer wishes, cravings and dreams. Forgacs (2003) suggests that branded hotels perform better than non-branded ones. Branded hotels have a strong brand platform and thus, sound performance.

Hotel branding is focused on the idea that brands generate value for both guests and establishments and develop brand loyalty (O'Neill & Xiao, 2006). Hotel establishments have discovered that brand identification and differentiation could be achieved through proper brand development (Prasad & Dev, 2000). Brand development should be timely evaluated to ensure maintaining of good quality and competitiveness. Baker (2007) sees evaluation as a continuous process complying to the manner in which brands evolve.

Brand performance evaluation is discussed by another researcher, Zenker, who suggests two different approaches - customer-centric and brand-centric (Zenker, 2011). The customer-centric approach is based on knowledge of brand management and consumer behaviour integrating the concepts of customer equity (Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004) and customer satisfaction. The brand-centric approach relates to Keller's brand equity as a brand value driver (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991 cited by Longwell, 1994).

Some of the factors that influence hotel guests' satisfaction and can be easily evaluated relate to room cleanliness, hotel maintenance, hotel facilities, employee professional competence, and more. Hotel guests' feedback (incl. online reviews) provide ample information of these factors and can serve as a qualitative evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness.

The significance of branding has been widely acknowledged by both researchers and practitioners. However, hotel branding in particular has received comparatively less research attention (Kayaman & Arasli, 2007; So & King, 2010) and the topic has grounds for extensive future research to enrich the scientific literature in this field.

## **Methodology**

The research has the objective to make an analysis and evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness through a proper set of criteria and indicators. In the scientific literature little

attention has been paid to this issue - hence, there is no uniform system of hotel brand effectiveness evaluation.

Since effective brands are those which generate value for their guests, guests appear to be the most important agent and their satisfaction and feedback determines business success and effectiveness. The major question is: What are the most significant factors for building a positive brand image leading to pleasant consumer associations and satisfaction?

This paper entails an analysis and evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness, Bulgarian Katarino 4-star hotel and spa in particular as it is recognized as having a good practice in the field of successful brand development. Due to the lack of a uniform system of brand evaluation indicators in the scientific literature the authors have employed a mixed approach to create such a system. To that end hotel guests' feedback has been analyzed and hence, the factors determining guest experience and satisfaction have been identified. These factors (indicators) have been integrated in one part of the system of criteria and indicators developed by Davis and Dunn (2002). Davis and Dunn's system is applied to evaluate brand effectiveness at a macro level, i.e. tourist destination, and part of it is not relevant and applicable to evaluate brand effectiveness at a micro level, i.e. hotel establishment, which is the subject of this research. The first two criteria of evaluation – guest perception and guest behaviour, belong to Davis and Dunn's system, whereas the third evaluation criterion – brand destination, has been added to the system of evaluation for authors' firm conviction that total guest experience and brand satisfaction also depend upon the destination resources where the hotel is located. The main contribution of this research is that an open system of brand effectiveness indicators has been developed, which is subject to future alteration and extension.

In order to identify the factors that are significant for the unforgettable experience and satisfaction of hotel guests, a qualitative method has been employed in the research. It is the method of thematic analysis of guests' opinion shared on the website of Trip Advisor. Thematic analysis is “a method of identification, analysis and description of cases (themes) within data content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When an optimal number of themes has been reached resulting from content encoding, there is the so-called “theoretical saturation”. A specialized software NVIVO12 has been used to process the data. The individual themes (codes or factors) are derived from a database, i.e. reviews of past hotel guests.

There are two main approaches to qualitative data encoding (Terziyska & Damyanova, 2020): 1. Codes (themes) are preliminary assigned by previous research; and 2. Themes are entirely derived from data. In the current research a mixed approach has been intentionally applied to enrich the existing evaluation system of Davis and Dunn and make it applicable at a micro level. The thematic analysis algorithm passes through several stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006): reading hotels guests' reviews, creating codes (themes) related to the main research goal, theme (factor) analysis and identification of the end system of criteria and indicators, finalization of encoding through NVIVO12 software.

For research purposes all the reviews of Katarino past guests published on the Trip Advisor website have been analyzed. The analysis and evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness are based on data uploaded in the period 2016-2021. Reviews have been made by both Bulgarian and international tourists. The range of international guests is various, including people from South Africa, the UK, North Macedonia, Indonesia, the UAE, the USA, Greece, and the Netherlands.

The research results have outlined the strong and some weaker sides of the brand and give grounds for future brand recognition and image enhancement.

## Results

The foundations of the analysis and evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness are the associations of consumers with the brand after consumers have established contact with it. In order for a hotel brand to be effective, it should have a positive image among the consumers of hotel services, who are its best ambassadors on the market. What remains permanent in the mind of the consumer is precisely the effect of the brand, its impact on them, the created meaning and value (Angelova, 2020).

In the present study, most of the hotel brand effectiveness indicators belong to the criterion of perception or the associations that the brand evokes in consumers' minds. The second smaller group of indicators refer to consumer behavior after their contact with the brand, i.e. what is their attitude as a result of the preliminary acquaintance and the subsequent experience with the brand. It is imperative that an assessment of the destination where the hotel is located be made as it is not an isolated unit but part of the regional superstructure of Razlog. Tourist choice highly depends on the image of the tourist destination - this is especially true for the high winter season. This assessment is made by the third group of indicators included in the research describing the criterion of brand destination.

The overall evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness is made on the basis of satisfaction, identifying the brand strengths satisfying its guests and also, the brand weaknesses on which management should actively focus there efforts to further increase the effectiveness of Katarino SPA Hotel.

**Table 1.** Criteria and indicators of hotel brand evaluation

PERCEPTION	BEHAVIOR	BRAND DESTINATION
<b>Room Comfort</b> <b>Food</b> <b>Staff (Service)</b> Additional Services <b>Spa center (incl. pools)</b> <b>Hotel Ambience</b> <b>Value-for-Money</b> Management Organic products Competitiveness Covid Safety Hygiene	<b>Loyalty</b> <b>Word-of-Mouth</b>	<b>Climate</b> <b>Location</b> <b>Mineral Water</b>

**Source:** Authors' work

Based on pre-set indicators used by Davis and Dunn (2002) to assess brand effectiveness and identify indicators in guests' reviews about the Katarino hotel brand, a system of criteria and indicators has been developed that is open and subject to extension as a result of future research in this area.

The set of indicators has extended with another 6, which are essential factors for guest satisfaction - additional services offered in the hotel, hotel management, policy of organic products, hotel competitiveness, Covid Safety and hygiene, related to the criterion of perception.

The study period is relatively short. This fact is due to the change of ownership and purchase of the hotel in 2016 by Hydroenergy Company JSC. For the period 2016-2021, most Katarino guests reviews were written in 2019. The least evaluations are in 2016 and 2017, and this is a natural phenomenon as the hotel started to receive feedback from hotel guests on the

Trip Advisor website at the end of 2016. In 2017 the complete renovation of the hotel began by the initiative of its new owner - practically the hotel ceased operating until the end of the renovation activities in 2018.

The number of reviews in 2020 and 2021 is also limited by the global decline in tourism caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 1.** Number of Katarino guest reviews in Trip Advisor for the period 2016-2021

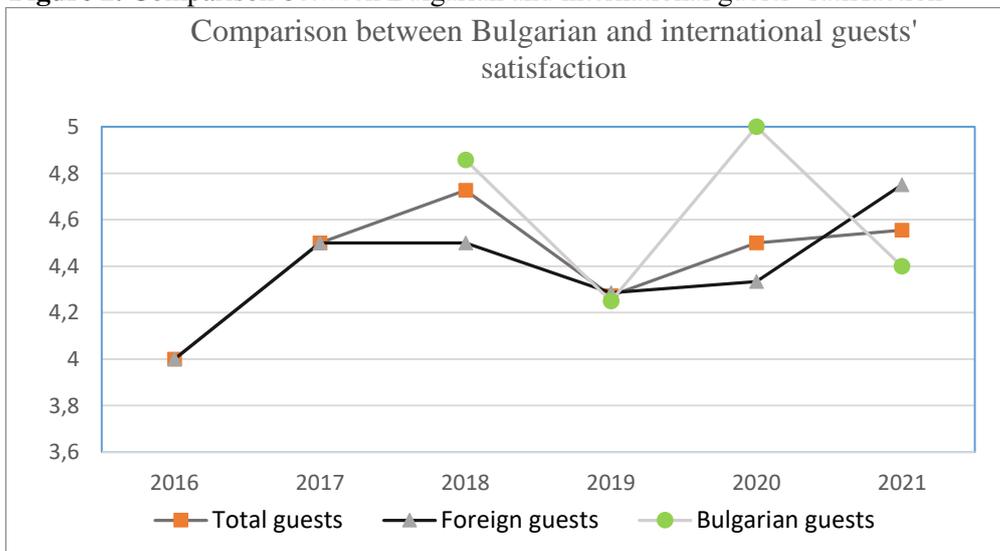


Source: Trip Advisor

Hotel rating in the Trip Advisor platform is measured by a 5-point scale, where the lowest quantitative value is 1, having the verbal meaning of "terrible" and the highest value is 5 - "excellent". The indicators used by the platform are four - location, cleanliness, service and value. These indicators also participate in a richer system applied by the authors to assess hotel brand effectiveness through the prism of guest satisfaction. Here we should clarify that the evaluation we make is qualitative rather than quantitative, as the aim is to enlarge the system of criteria and indicators for analysis and evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness.

The Trip Advisor rating does not represent a very precise and elaborate evaluation of hotel brand with all its manifestations. The rating rather provides information about the level of guest satisfaction and traces this over the years.

**Figure 2.** Comparison between Bulgarian and international guests' satisfaction



Source: Trip Advisor

Figure 2 clearly shows that the evaluation of the guests is the lowest in 2016 as the reviews are entirely made by international tourists. At this time, the hotel had operated for more than 10 years under the management of various companies, the last of which was renting it. Negative guest reviews are mainly related to the pools and Spa. For the period 2017-2021, the average rating of hotel guests at the 5-point rating scale in Trip Advisor is excellent - 4.51. Hotel guests appreciate the efforts of the management for maintaining good hygiene and room comfort, as well as the set high standards of service. Two of the evaluated indicators remove Katarino SPA Hotel from the overall rating 5 - these are **Location** and **Value-for-money**. The hotel would hardly be able to achieve a higher value in the first indicator, as a sufficient number of guests consider its distance from the ski slopes of Bansko. As for the indicator of **Value-for-money**, the management has two options - to revise its pricing policy or to add ancillary services to the offered package.

In the evaluation period the reviews written by international tourists prevail - 59%, the Bulgarian tourists account for 41%. The high prices and the quality of services make the hotel more affordable for international guests. Despite the serious decline in international travels in 2020 and 2021 due to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, the trend for more reviews of international guests remains. It's obvious from fig. 2 that with the serious decline in visits made by international tourists, the total number of reviews decreases more than 2 times.

**Table 2.** Code (evaluation indicator) distribution by category - "satisfier" and "dissatisfier"

Category	Code	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Satisfier	Room Comfort	40	8.70%	32	59.30%
Satisfier	Food	50	10.80%	38	70.40%
Satisfier	Staff	62	13.40%	37	68.50%
Satisfier	Additional Services	23	5.00%	18	33.30%
Satisfier	Spa Center (Incl. Pools)	43	9.30%	34	63.00%
Satisfier	Climate	28	6.10%	22	40.70%
Satisfier	Customer Loyalty	19	4.10%	15	27.80%
Satisfier	Hotel Ambience	50	10.80%	35	64.80%
Satisfier	Good Value-For-Money	10	2.20%	8	14.80%
Satisfier	Management	5	1.10%	4	7.40%
Satisfier	Positive Word-Of-Mouth	22	4.80%	19	35.20%
Satisfier	Facilities	24	5.20%	20	37.00%
Satisfier	Location	14	3.00%	11	20.40%
Satisfier	Organic Products	1	0.20%	1	1.90%
Satisfier	Mineral Water	4	0.90%	4	7.40%
Satisfier	Competitiveness	10	2.20%	8	14.80%
Dissatisfier	Pools	4	0.90%	3	5.60%
Dissatisfier	Equipment	11	2.40%	9	16.70%
Dissatisfier	Covid Safety	2	0.40%	1	1.90%
Dissatisfier	Poor Value-For-Money	9	1.90%	7	13.00%
Dissatisfier	Inefficient Staff	4	0.90%	4	7.40%
Dissatisfier	Lack Of Mineral Water	1	0.20%	1	1.90%
Dissatisfier	Hygiene	3	0.60%	3	5.60%
Dissatisfier	Poor Food	11	2.40%	8	14.80%

Dissatisfier	Room Comfort (Cleanliness, Size, Equipment)	2	0.40%	2	3.70%
Dissatisfier	No Repeat Visit	2	0.40%	2	3.70%
Dissatisfier	Negative Word-Of-Mouth	3	0.60%	3	5.60%
Dissatisfier	Distance From Ski Runs (Location)	3	0.60%	3	5.60%
Dissatisfier	Spa Area Age Restrictions	2	0.40%	2	3.70%

**Source:** Authors' work

As a result of processing the collected data from all hotel guest reviews, the strengths and weaknesses of the brand are revealed and the problem areas in terms of its effectiveness are clearly outlined.

As it has already become clear, the evaluation of hotel brand effectiveness is made through the prism of Katarino SPA Hotel guest satisfaction. Therefore, both research and analysis include the two opposite categories - "satisfier" and "dissatisfier". It is noteworthy that half of the indicators, i.e. nine, are present with their opposite connotations in both categories. These are the indicators of room comfort, food, staff, spa center, facilities, value-for-money, mineral water, word-of-mouth, and loyalty.

The indicators that have become the most widespread among the guest reviews referring to the hotel establishment - with a frequency of distribution over 27, we identify as most important for hotel guests on which the brand presentation, its effectiveness and hotel image primarily depend. They are clearly presented in the following table.

**Table 3.** Frequency of code distribution among guests' reviews of Katarino SPA Hotel

N <sup>o</sup> (position)	Code (indicator)	Distribution frequency
1	STAFF	66
2	FOOD	61
3	HOTEL AMBIENCE	50
4	SPA CENTER (incl. pools)	49
5	ROOM COMFORT	42
6	FACILITIES	35
7	CLIMATE	28
8	WORD-OF-MOUTH	25
9	ADDITIONAL SERVICES	23
10	CUSTOMER LOYALTY	21
11	VALUE-FOR-MONEY	19
12	LOCATION	17
13	COMPETITIVENESS	10
14	MANAGEMENT	5
	MINERAL WATER	5
15	HYGIENE	3

16	COVID SAFETY	2
17	ORGANIC PRODUCTS	1

Source: Authors' work

The first six indicators in Table 3 are the most widespread among the reviews of tourists and are of paramount importance for their hotel experience. If they are compared with the universally used indicators for assessing guests' stay in the Trip Advisor platform, an overlap is found in only two of the indicators, with intersections of cleanliness and service indicators. The rating system of Trip Advisor can be enriched with 4 more indicators - Food, Hotel Ambience, Spa Center, and Hotel facilities, which are extremely important for the overall image and guests' stay memory. Thus, the evaluation of Trip Advisor would become even more precise, complete and useful for potential hotel guests on the one hand, and would increase brand effectiveness through informed solutions on the other.

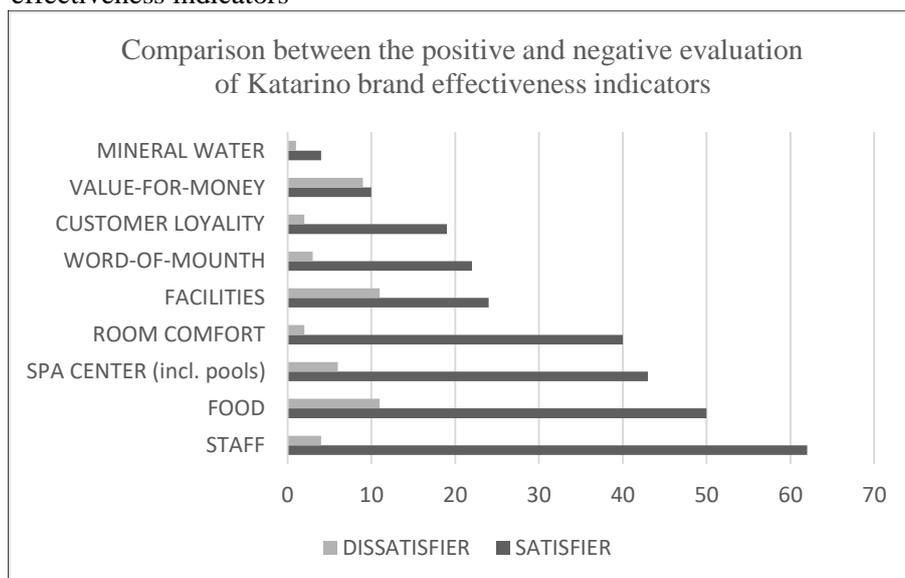
**Table 4.** Comparison between research indicators and Trip Advisor indicators

Research Indicators	Trip Advisor Indicators
Staff (service)	Location
Food	Cleanliness
Hotel ambience	Service
Spa center (incl. pools)	Value-for-money
Room comfort (cleanliness, size, equipment)	
Facilities	

Source: Authors' work

As noted earlier, nine of the indicators have opposite connotations in both categories - satisfier and dissatisfier. These are the indicators: Staff, Food, Spa center, Room comfort, Facilities, Loyalty, Word-of-mouth, Value-for-money, and Mineral water.

**Figure 3.** Comparison between the positive and negative evaluation of Katarino brand effectiveness indicators



Source: Authors' work

The consumers of Katarino SPA Hotel services rank the indicator of **Staff** at the first position. It is mentioned 66 times in the guest reviews. In this case, guests' positive assessment significantly prevails, in 69% of the processed reviews they have explicitly expressed their satisfaction with the service of hotel staff, the ability to communicate in different foreign languages, etc. In only 7% of the reviews, the users define the service as unsatisfactory. The hotel staff has gone through a serious training mastering competencies in the field of hospitality and guest care. Positive reviews are expressed about employees from various hotel departments - spa, front desk, restaurant, etc.

The code frequency of **Food** is 61, which testifies to the great importance of this service for the guest stay. It is no coincidence that the indicator remains in the second place in terms of comments. There are 50 positive evaluations of this indicator, which are found in 70% of the guest reviews on the Katarino SPA Hotel website. It is interesting that the number of disappointed guests with the food served in the hotel restaurant is not small - 15% of the reviews include guests' dissatisfaction with the food. Recently, the trend has been to make these negative comments relevant. It is obvious that hotel owners have been working hard trying to offer home-made and organic food and drinks from their own farms – cheese, milk, meat, beer and wine, using their own original recipes, which is exceptionally well received by the hotel guests. It is desirable for the hotel management to make the most of this competitive advantage when positioning the hotel. There are few high-category sites in the region of Bansko and Razlog, which can boast of offering and serving products of own production.

**SPA** is the next indicator of paramount importance for the hotel brand positive image and guest satisfaction. The indicator has a prevalence of 49, with 63% of guests sharing their satisfaction with the hotel spa. Less than 6% of the hotel guests, however, do not agree with this opinion and their criticism is focused not so much on the quality of the spa facilities, but on the age restrictions for using the spa area - persons under 14 years of age are not allowed to use certain heat radiating equipment. These restrictions should be a hotel good practice, as they are related to the safety and health of younger guests. Negative ratings are given before the complete renovation of the hotel and spa. The renovation, the modern facilities into operation, the high level of hygiene are marked as positive changes by the guests.

Katarino SPA Hotel guests rank the indicator of **Room comfort** in the 5th place, and it is the main hotel service. This shows the serious achievements and merits of the new management in overcoming traditionally weak units before, such as service and nutrition, and bringing them to the forefront of the guests' ideas about Katarinio brand development. This indicator is mentioned 42 times in the guests' reviews. Again, the positive assessment of the guests significantly prevails, 59% of them have firmly expressed their satisfaction with the room in terms of cleanliness, size and equipment. Less than 4% of guests consider the room comfort unsatisfactory, and the main reason for this assessment is the small size of the premises, not their cleanliness.

**Word-of-mouth** is the next indicator that significantly builds the positive image of the hotel brand and is perhaps the most influential one. There is hardly a better and more effective advertisement than a few good words spoken sincerely by a real hotel guest. In today's world of online communication, the economy is increasingly built on the logic of information management. This information is available in the online space and communication and reaches millions of users in no time. The indicator has a prevalence of 25, and in 35% of cases guests have given warm recommendations for visiting Katarino SPA Hotel. Only 6% of the reviews express the opinion that the hotel is nothing special, and in one single comment the guests have called on potential users not to trust the services of Katarino SPA Hotel.

Many of the guests have shared their opinion on the indicator of Hotel **Facilities** - a total of 35 mentions. This time they are distributed almost equally. In 20.5% of all reviews, guests are very impressed by the variety of facilities that have been renovated or built after the

renovation of the hotel, as well as their good current condition. However, 16.7% of the reviews provide negative comments about outdated equipment, lack of air conditioning in rooms and communal areas, lack of additional showers in the spa area, etc.

Katarino SPA Hotel follows a good policy of retaining its guests and increasing their **Loyalty**. The results of the survey show that 27.8% of guests have made a repeat visit or have expressed a desire to do so. 3.7% unequivocally stated that they would not visit the hotel again. Every successful brand has a good per cent of guest loyalty because it manages to fulfill the promises given to guests and even exceed their expectations and their preconceived notions and attitude.

One of the obligatory indicators for assessing the positive image and effectiveness of the hotel brand is **Value-for-money**. This indicator is present in 19 individual cases and in 27.8% of guest reviews and is also mandatory in the evaluation system of Trip Advisor. In 14.8% of the reviews the guests consider that Katarino SPA Hotel deserves even a 5-star category due to the high quality of the services it offers and the premium prices are well-deserved. However, about 13% share the opinion that the prices in the hotel are very high. The main factor for the high percentage of dissatisfied people with the price levels comes mostly from the additional payment for drinks provided that the meal is buffet style. Again, the practice is noticeable that even about this indicator the Bulgarian guests are extremely concise in giving feedback. Only one guest from Bulgaria has expressed the opinion that the hotel prices are high.

The frequency of distribution of the indicator of **Mineral water** in the comments of tourists is scarce given that the vast majority of tourists are looking for hotels disposing of mineral water and Katarino SPA Hotel is a recognized place for spa tourism. Only 9.3% of guests have rated mineral water as a resource used in the hotel. Of these, 7.4% are satisfied with the temperature of mineral water in swimming pools, and 1.9% doubt the quality of water and efficient consumption of this resource in its pure form due to the increased use of chlorine and other substances that greatly reduce the pleasure of spa services.

Apart from this bipolar framework of indicators for assessing hotel brand effectiveness, guests have defined other indicators that are important for the perception of the brand and the associations of consumers with it. Among them the leading ones are - hotel atmosphere and environment, climate, additional services and activities (amenities) offered by the hotel, location and distance from the ski resort of Bansko, competitiveness, management, hygiene, safety, organic products and hotel social responsibility.

Here we must immediately identify the indicator of **Hotel Ambience** as a general assessment given by the guests expressing admiration for the good overall impression that Katarino Spa Hotel has made upon them. The “emotionalizing” of the brand is reflected in the subconsciousness of its consumers. This is an assessment not of individual units, activities or processes in the hotel but a delight in the overall experience that is provided during their stay. There is no bipolarity in comments like “The whole experience sheer bliss!”, “This hidden gem”, “... like in heaven”, “excellent hotel and stay”, “outstanding hotel”, “Ski fairy tale”, “Truly amazing”. It is no coincidence that this indicator is in the 3rd place, and 50 individual relevant comments were made in 35 reviews, i.e. in 64.80% of the reviews.

In addition to the good hotel atmosphere itself, guests appreciate the **climate** and the green environment. In 40.70% of the guests’ reviews positive assessments of the temperate climate are given - mild winter for this region and cool summer, the beautiful views that are revealed, the clean mountain air.

A high percentage of satisfaction in the reviews is also found about the indicator of **Additional services**. 33.30% of the guests are satisfied with the great variety of services offered in the hotel. Many different outdoor activities - horseback riding, motorcycling, hiking, tennis courts; indoor activities - bowling, billiards, etc. Many of the guests are really satisfied

with the new ski equipment and the convenient and regular transport to the ski slopes, which largely covers the dissatisfaction with the bigger distance of the hotel from the ski resort.

The next indicator which is positively evaluated in 20.40% of the reviews is **Location**. It seems that the distance of Katarino SPA Hotel from the main mass of hotels in the region of Razlog and Bansko creates rather positive attitude than negative. Due to the many more reviews about the convenient transport to the ski slopes, the indicator has not found a place in the bipolar scale as each of the three comments about the distance from Bansko is followed by an assessment of convenient transport to the slopes. Also in two of the comments the location of the hotel outside the territory of Bansko in a quiet area is mentioned as a positive aspect.

**Competitiveness** is the indicator that has collected 10 references in 8 reviews or in another 14.80% of the reviews. Only direct ratings as "better than others" are given here. This indicator can be easily applied to the *Hotel Ambience* described above.

When evaluating the indicator of **Management**, a small percentage of the guests - 7.4% believe that the hotel has good management. They share that the strengths in business are mainly due to the good management and the presence of direct control in the operational units. The above cannot be a definite conclusion due to the small percentage of guests who commented on the hotel management in their reviews. There are no negative comments about hotel management.

In the results analysis we have found a small number of reviews referring to bad smell and not good enough **hygiene** - barely 3 guest reviews do contain such information. There are two comments about non-compliance with Covid-19 measures in just one guest review. Apparently, the staff and management have been making serious efforts to make guests feel safe while on the territory. Strangely, few visitors have noted the ban on the use of plastic utensils in Katarino SPA Hotel.

### **Acknowledgements**

A good practice that has been introduced in the Katarino SPA Hotel brand is to respond to every review given in the TripAdvisor online system. The answer is given by the hotel manager himself (or his representative). This practice does not exist in all competitive hotel establishments in the region of Bansko. Due to the nature of the hotel product, it is impossible to offer warranty or service. One of the few ways to provide after-sales service is this - to pay attention to the guest, even after he has left and used the service sold to him, i.e. this is an additional sign of high standard of customer care. Katarino management has demonstrated a strong willingness to accept and eliminate observed and signalled irregularities by guests. The effectiveness of contact branding lies in the fact that consumers acquire a positive impression at all levels of contact with the brand.

### **Conclusions**

The hotel brand is successful when it manages to unify its values with those of its guests; when it adds value and sense of their experience; when guests are sent home with a set of positive emotions and associations; when guests are made to come again.

Katarino SPA Hotel is an example of a good and successful brand. The turmoil in its history in the period 2011-2016 failed to damage its image. On the contrary, they clearly show the new owner what the weaknesses are and have outlined the directions to overcome them. In 2018, a new stage in the development of the Katarino brand begins. Weaknesses become the main positive indicators in the comments and feedback of hotel guests, such as - service and staff in all departments, the renovation of the Spa center and the installation of a wide range of new facilities.

A huge competitive advantage is the use of products from the company farm, as well as wild fruits and spices. The forthcoming installation of an autoclave for canning shows the desire for further development in this direction. Currently, the hotel is a 4-star establishment but it has all the prerequisites for achieving a higher level, which is the recommendation of many guests in their reviews. With its opening in 2005, Hotel Katarino won the “Building of the Year” award given by the Union of Bulgarian Architects, in 2007 and 2008 it was distinguished for being the “SPA Hotel of the Year”, and in the following years it was nominated by various tourist organizations as one of the most preferred holiday hotels in Bulgaria. That was written in the hotel history before its entry in the period 2011-2016. It seems that the present hotel owner and management have the desire to surpass all these official awards and recognitions. One thing is for sure - the way the Katarino brand works has managed to take the most important award - the kindness, satisfaction and loyalty of its guests, who have become its best ambassadors on the market.

The results of the study clearly indicate some of the reasons for this achievements and identify the factors on which the brand effectiveness and guests’ satisfaction depend. The associations that this brand evokes in the minds of its guests are an indisputable testament to the level of its effectiveness. Within this study, a system of criteria and indicators for evaluating hotel brand effectiveness has been tested. This system is open and subject to extension and refinement in future research in this area.

In brief, hotel brand effectiveness depends on the perception of the brand by consumers, on their behavior after their contact with the brand and on the overall image and resources of the host destination.

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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