A 7P Comparison between Restaurant Managers' and Customers' Post-COVID-19 Quality Expectations

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This study examines restaurant management and customer quality expectations (expected performances) in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. The purpose of this study is to investigate which marketing-quality (7P) dimensions best explain the construct of restaurant quality expectations after the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and to determine whether differences exist between restaurant managers' and customers' quality expectations. An online survey was delivered via emails (managers) and social media (customers) in the Republic of Slovenia. A total of 422 valid online questionnaires were obtained from customers, and 89 completed questionnaires were gathered from managers. The 42-item questionnaire was based on the principles of the marketing mix. Results of exploratory factor analysis indicate that six marketing dimensions best explain restaurant quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period (in order of importance): Physical evidence, Product, Promotion, Processes, Placement, and Price. Results also reveal a significant gap in quality expectations since price is the only dimension where no differences were found between restaurant managers' and customers' quality expectations. This research contributes to the literature by explaining the importance of the different 7P quality indicators for assuring restaurant quality in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. By applying a 7P research methodology, we have also facilitated a benchmarking process for the international restaurant industry.

Keywords: COVID-19, managers, customers, restaurant, quality, marketing

Introduction

In service industries, the quality of services offered constitutes one of the most critical elements for a competitive advantage of service firms in the global marketplace and significantly influences service firms' operational profitability (Kukanja & Planinc, 2018). Timely and accurate measurement of customers' expectations is crucial for improving service quality, creating a competitive advantage, and the effective allocation of production resources (Samanci et al., 2021). Similarly, in the restaurant industry, where there is intense competition among restaurant providers, restaurant firms should focus on analysing customers' expectations to improve the quality of their offerings and maintain customer satisfaction. Although service quality is measured from the customers' mainly subjective perspective, restaurant managers are expected to understand their customers' needs and expectations in order to provide high-quality offerings (Parasuraman et al., 1985) and maintain competitive and profitable business operations (Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, a holistic conceptualisation of restaurant service quality should consider both the customers' (external) and managers' (the inner) quality perspectives.

Studies on restaurant service quality that evaluate customers' quality expectations and perceptions are frequently reported in the literature. Nevertheless, significantly fewer studies have analysed both customers' and managers' quality perceptions (Dedeoğlu & Demirer, 2015; Kukanja, 2017), and only a few studies have focused solely on the managerial perspective (Kukanja et al., 2020). However, with the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2), which causes the new COVID-19 disease, the global restaurant industry has suffered its heaviest blow ever in modern human history (Brizek et al., 2021), causing a 'new reality.' Accordingly, many researchers have focused on investigating the various aspects of restaurant customers' buying behaviour changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main topics referred to the analysis of risk perceptions (Yost & Cheng, 2021), social distancing (Wang et al., 2021), the safety of food packaging (Byrd et al., 2021), and many others (relevant state-of-the-art research findings are presented in Table 1). To the best of our knowledge, no study has analysed restaurant managers' quality expectations during the pandemic. In this context, neither has any study' identified potential differences between restaurant managers' and customers' quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period.

In the spring of 2021, the governments of the European (EU) member states have cautiously started to loosen the rigorous anti-COVID-19 measures. Due to the widespread vaccination of the population, the implementation of the EU digital COVID-19 travel certificate, and the gradual reopening of restaurant facilities, this study aims to reveal how to improve restaurant service quality in the ongoing post-COVID-19 pandemic period. It does this by simultaneously comparing the quality expectations of both restaurant managers and customers.

In this study, we implemented a marketing-based research concept. Using the theoretical principles of Kotler's marketing mix, we also aim to identify the most critical marketing quality dimensions in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period.

By understanding the importance of the different marketing-quality dimensions and the potential differences between managers' and customers' quality expectations (expected performance), the long-term negative impacts of the pandemic on restaurant firms can also be minimised if proper recovery strategies are applied in time. Therefore, identifying potential differences between managers' and customers' quality expectations might also help strengthen restaurants' resilience strategies in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period (Yost & Cheng, 2021). Based on research results, restaurant firms should rethink and optimise their marketing-mix strategies and improve the quality of their offerings. Additionally, we believe that this study will also remain significant for future research since, according to Zhong et al. (2021), this is most probably not the last pandemic humanity will face in the forthcoming years.

This paper is based on a mixed methodological approach. After the literature review, primary data were collected using an online questionnaire. The design of the questionnaires was based on the study of Kukanja et al. (2017). An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to investigate the expected quality structure, and the Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to analyse the differences in quality expectations between managers and customers.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: the following sections discuss a literature review, the methodology and the presentation of research results. The paper concludes by presenting practical implications for the restaurant industry and indicating future research directions.

Literature Review
Restaurant Quality

Based on its customer-oriented concept of subjectivity, service quality is most often defined as the ability of a service to fulfil or surpass the gap (the difference) between customers' quality expectations and perceptions (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In the restaurant sector, service quality is critical because it results in the difference between customers' expectations and perceptions of quality. Customers have a high-quality experience when the perceptions exceed the expectations. Consequently, customer expectations and satisfaction and the concept of quality management have been im-

portant topics in the hospitality literature. Customers' choices to dine at restaurants and the research in this area were usually rooted in understanding the critical quality dimensions that motivate customer buying behaviour (Yost & Cheng, 2021).

Accordingly, there were several theoretical attempts to capture and empirically validate the critical components of service quality. One of the most widely used concepts is the Gap model of service quality by Parasuraman et al. (1985). This generic model presents the theoretical basis for the implementation of service quality management in service industries. Moreover, it provides a scale for the empirical measurement of service quality based on a 29-item SERVQUAL instrument composed of five RATER (Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, and Responsiveness) quality dimensions.

Many scholars modified the generic instrument to meet the specifics of the different service sectors. For example, Stevens et al. (1995) modified the SERVQUAL instrument to meet the specifics of the restaurant industry and introduced the DINESERV scale, Raajpoot (2002) introduced TANGSERV, a scale measuring tangible quality elements, and Chen et al. (2015) developed GRSERV – a tool for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality in green restaurants. In addition, there were also alternative attempts to validate service quality empirically. For example, Bufquin et al. (2017) introduced the dinEX instrument, which focuses on social dimensions of connectedness and homophily, while Kukanja et al. (2017) introduced a marketing-oriented service quality model that captures the characteristics of restaurant service quality based on marketing-mix quality indicators.

The generic SERVQUAL model applies a two-step (the gap) approach for measuring service quality. In contrast, all other models (e.g. SERVPERF, TANGSERV, DINESERV.per) are one-dimensional and focus solely on the service performance evaluation after the service encounter. Although they do not provide a numerical evaluation of differences between guests' quality expectations and perceptions, they have proved to be reliable service quality indicators since guests evaluate service quality based on their quality expectations (Kukanja et al., 2017).

Restaurant Customers' Quality Expectations (pre-COVID-19 Research)

The pre-COVID-19 research projects focused on measuring the perceived service quality, which, from our research perspective, disables the empirical analysis and a direct comparison of customers' quality expectations. Nevertheless, previous research results stressed the importance of different quality dimensions that define a satisfactory dining experience. Several studies (Gupta et al., 2007; Vanniarajan & Gurunathan, 2009) reported that food (*Product*) is the crucial quality dimension affecting guests' quality perceptions. In contrast, a large volume of studies (Mosavi & Ghaedi, 2012; Voon, 2012) described the role of *People* as the most critical restaurant quality dimension. The importance of the tangible (visible) quality attributes (*Physical evidence*) was also highlighted by many researchers (Cheng et al., 2012; Ryu & Han, 2011). In their study, Kukanja et al. (2017) found that restaurant customers primarily evaluate restaurant service quality based on three marketing dimensions (in order of importance): *People, Placement,* and *Product and Physical evidence.*

In this view, it is essential to note that research results might change according to the different methodologies (e.g. RATER, 7P) applied to the different studies. Moreover, customers with different cultural backgrounds have different quality expectations, which might also influence their quality perceptions from restaurant providers (Cha et al., 2019).

Restaurant Managers' Perceptions of Customers' Expectations of Quality (Pre-COVID-19 Research)

Managers' realistic perceptions of guests' quality expectations present the first step in the five-step model of service quality by Parasuraman et al. (1985). Moreover, restaurant managers must identify customers' quality expectations, as purchasing decisions are mainly driven by customer expectations of restaurant providers (Kim et al., 2021). Despite its importance for delivering restaurant service quality, managers' perceptions of customers' quality expectations have rarely been analysed in pre-COVID studies. According to Kukanja (2017), academics have simply not considered managers' perceptions of customers' quality expectations as a prerequisite for providing high-quality

services. Briggs et al. (2007) reported that hotel managers frequently misunderstand what level of service guests expect.

In their study, Dedeoğlu and Demirer (2015) analysed perceptions of service quality among the different groups of stakeholders (guests, managers, and staff). Their findings showed a discrepancy in perceptions of quality as employees and managers perceived service performance to be at a high level. In contrast, guests perceived it to be at a low level. Similarly, Kukanja (2017) analysed differences between restaurant customers and managers and found statistically significant differences in quality perceptions between both groups of respondents. Research results also revealed that the most critical marketing quality dimension for both groups of respondents was by far *People*. Other marketing quality dimensions were significantly less, or even not crucial, for ensuring restaurant quality.

In their research, Kukanja and Planinc (2018) assessed the influence of restaurant managers' quality perceptions on restaurant firms' profitability. According to managers' perspectives, research results revealed that only two quality dimensions are essential for ensuring overall restaurant quality – empathy and assurance, and tangibles. Regarding determining restaurant firms' financial success, the results show that the quality dimensions mentioned above have no impact on restaurants' operational profitability.

Restaurant Customers' Buying Behaviour during COVID-19 (2020–2021 Research Findings)

As stated above, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have analysed customers' and managers' quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. Nevertheless, several authors examined the influence of the pandemic on restaurant customers' buying behaviour during COVID-19 (we found no studies for restaurant managers).

During the pandemic, restaurant customers changed their buying behaviour. According to Eftimov et al. (2020), customers started to prepare food at home, reduced their shopping frequency, searched for alternative food supplies, and stockpiled food. Yost and Cheng (2021) state that COVID-19 has left an ineffaceable mark on customers' buying behaviour by creating a 'new normal' among customers' spending ability, movement patterns, and eating habits. In contrast, according to Pantano et al. (2021), the pandemic should not necessarily have a long-term impact on restaurant customers' buying behaviour. Our literature review found relatively few studies that analysed customers' buying behaviour during the pandemic from the various (partial) perspectives. Accordingly, Table 1 presents the relevant research findings.

As can be seen from the studies presented above, there is no consensus about changes in customer behaviour during the pandemic from the quality management perspective. Various methodological approaches have been adopted in different online studies. Moreover, no study applied a 'traditional' (e.g. Servqual), holistic, or a marketing-based approach to analysing potential changes in customer quality expectations during the pandemic. Most studies stressed the importance of risk perceptions, imposed safety measures, and motivations to dine out. Suppose changes in customer buying behaviour will have a long-term (a post-pandemic) effect on their quality expectations and demand. In that case, restaurant managers will have to readjust their perceptions of guests' expectations and adapt restaurant quality and marketing-mix strategies to provide satisfactory quality offerings (Madeira et al., 2020).

Specifically, from the futuristic and marketing-mix perspectives, this study has two objectives. First, to investigate which marketing-quality dimensions will best explain quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. Secondly, to explore if statistically significant differences exist between restaurant managers' and customers' quality expectations. Based on the above-presented research findings, we pose our research questions (RQS) as follows:

RQ1 *Which marketing-quality dimensions best explain restaurant quality in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period according to restaurant managers' and customers' quality expectations?*

RQ2 *Are there are statistically significant differences between restaurant managers' and customers' quality expectations concerning the post-COVID-19 pandemic period?*

Table 1   Restaurant Quality Studies during COVID-19 (2020–2021)

Authors	Main theme	Location, sample size, and data collection	Major findings
Brewer and Sebby (2021)	Effect of online restaurant menus on consumers' purchase intentions	USA; $n = 420$ (online)	Menu's visual appeal and informativeness play a decisive role in consumer purchase intentions.
Byrd et al. (2021)	Risk perceptions about food and its packaging	USA; $n = 958$ (online)	Consumers are less concerned about contracting COVID-19 from food *in general* than restaurant food and its packaging.
Dedeoğlu and Boğan (2021)	Motivations to visit upscale restaurants	Turkey; $n = 681$ (online)	Socialisation and affect regulation have a significant positive effect on visit intention to upscale restaurants.
Dsouza and Sharma (2021)	Analysis of food delivery portals	Maharashtra (India); $n = 201$ (online)	Food quality plays a vital role in customer satisfaction, indirectly influencing their loyalty towards the restaurant provider. Implemented safety measures help to retain the customer base.
Foroudi et al. (2021)	Risk perceptions and adaptive belief	UK; $n = 521$ (online)	Guests' self-protective behaviour and adoptive belief positively influence their trust in restaurant providers.
Hakim et al. (2021)	Perceived risk and intentions to visit restaurants	Brazil; $n = 546$ (online)	Perceived safety and brand image are the primary factors affecting consumers' intention to (re)visit a restaurant.
Kim et al. (2021)	Clean safety food message framing	Korea; $n = 1$ (restaurant sales data and 366 responses from diners)	Clean safety food message framing affects customers' purchasing behaviour.
Luo and Xu (2021)	Online restaurant reviews	USA; $n = 112.412$ (restaurant online reviews)	The four most frequently mentioned restaurant features are service, food, place, and experience.
Min et al. (2021)	Perceived vulnerability, consumer co-creation behaviour, and repatronage intention	USA; $n = 345$ (Qualtrics web-based survey)	Perceived vulnerability to COVID-19 leverages customers' repatronage intention, which is affected by service fairness, trust, and co-creation behaviour in the restaurant industry.

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Research Method

Research Process and Instrument Design

A qualitative research study was conducted in the first section to discover relevant past studies focusing on customers' and managers' quality expectations. From February to June 2021, studies on the aforementioned topic were obtained from significant scholarly tourism and hospitality research databases.

In the next section of the study, quality expectations were examined using a modified version of a marketing-based questionnaire for measuring restaurant quality (Kukanja et al., 2017). There are 35 marketing-quality indicators in the original questionnaire. Seven indicators were added to the original version of the questionnaire (one to each marketing dimension) to address the specifics of the present crisis. The following items were included: availability of sanitisers (Zhang et al., 2021); employment of local staff (Wang et al., 2021); use of local ingredients (Pressman et al., 2020); possibility of using information technologies

Table 1   Continued from the previous page

Authors	Main theme	Location, sample size, and data collection	Major findings
Pantano et al. (2021)	Consumer behaviour	UK, Spain, and Italy; $n = 15.000$ (analysis of tweets)	Consumer behaviour is driven by the need of escaping from home by having a good meal (UK), drink alcohol (Spain), and travel (Italy).
Sung and King (2021)	Preventive behaviour and media exposure	Taiwan; $n = 366$ participants (online)	Guests' risk perceptions and fear are positively influenced by social media coverage.
Tuzovic et al. (2021)	Wellbeing perceptions	Germany; $n = 15$ interviews (online)	Collective wellbeing comprises three domains: governmental procedures, restaurants' offerings, and guests' perceptions.
Wang et al. (2021)	Crowdedness and in-restaurant safety measures	USA and Australia; $n = 593$ USA and 591 Australia (online experiment)	USA customers are more sensitive to crowdedness, whereas Australians are more sensitive to other safety protocols.
Wei et al. (2021)	Dine out intentions	USA; $n = 296$ (online)	Dining involvement positively affects customers' decision to dine out, and country of origin moderates the relationship between the perceived importance of preventive measures and brand trust.
Yang et al. (2020)	Effects of the pandemic on stay-at-home orders	USA; $n = 1.882$ counties (panel data)	An increase of 1% in COVID-19 cases led to a 0.0556% decrease in daily restaurant demand.
Yost and Cheng (2021)	Risk perceptions and motivation to dine out	Literature review (conceptual study)	Restaurants that accumulated more customer trust by fostering transparency are most likely to recover from the crisis quickly.
Zhong et al. (2021)	Dining out behaviour	Korea and China; $n = 508$ participants (social media in China and offline in Korea)	Subjective norms, perceived physical and psychological risks, enjoyment, and precautionary restaurant measures are vital factors affecting guests' dining out behaviour.

(IT) (Brewer & Sebby, 2021); information about safety protocols (Tuzovic et al., 2021); food delivery or take away (Yang et al., 2020); and the possibility of using alternative means of payment (Grobys, 2021). As a result, the participants' expected performance scores for 42 restaurant marketing-quality indicators were determined (see Table 3).

As the virus presents an ongoing threat, the expected quality performance has been preferred instead of the perceived (actual) one. This study's methodological (expected performance) concept is based on a recent study by Samanci et al. (2021), who analysed managers' and passengers' post-COVID-19 quality expectations in the airline sector.

The second section of the survey included questions about respondents' demographic characteristics (age, education, gender, and income) and their buying behaviour (frequency of restaurant visits and average spending per person – ASP). A pilot study with 47 participants (forty customers and seven managers) confirmed that the instructions and research instrument were understandable and that the survey time was adequate.

The anti-COVID-19 measures implemented by the government of Slovenia were focused on assisting restaurant providers (e.g. deferral of payment of taxes, favourable national loans, covering employees' wages) and did not directly impact restaurant customers'

buying behaviour. Namely, tourist vouchers issued to Slovenian residents in 2020 could only be spent on accommodation. Accordingly, no variables related to the influence of governmental support on restaurant customers' buying behaviour were included in the questionnaire.

Data Gathering and Research Method

An online survey was delivered via emails (managers) and social media and web links (customers) to avoid physical contact, as previously done by many researchers (see Table 1). The focus of the research was on sit-down restaurants which offer table service. Take-away and self-service facilities were excluded from research since, from the 7p perspective, these facilities provide a limited marketing-quality experience. Due to the nature of their business, the importance of some quality indicators might be limited (e.g. professionalism and recommendations from service staff). In the official business register (https://www.ajpes.si/fipo), there were 8,410 businesses registered as restaurants (NACE code 156).

After a pre-screening process, we excluded from the sample all facilities that might not operate as sit-down restaurants. Moreover, not all restaurant firms had publicly available emails. Therefore, to gather data from restaurant managers, invitations to voluntarily participate in the study were emailed to 500 randomly chosen restaurant firms with published email addresses in the business register.

Using a snowball sampling method via social media and web links, we collected data from restaurant customers. The target population were domestic customers who dined at sit-down restaurant facilities just before the lockdown in March 2020, as Samanci et al. (2021) had previously done.

In the participation-invitation letter, the research goal and instructions for both groups of respondents were thoroughly presented to minimise any potential bias in the data gathering process. As stated above, we performed a pilot study to assure maximum comprehensibility of all research items. Respondents were asked to indicate their restaurant marketing-quality expectations (expected performance) in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period on a five-point ordinal-type Likert scale ranging from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important). The survey captured data from March to mid-May 2021, when on-site dining with indoor seating was prohibited. We collected 89 completed questionnaires from restaurant managers (response rate was 17.4%) and 422 completed questionnaires from customers. Participation in the survey was voluntary, anonymous, and no monetary incentives were given.

Information about respondents' characteristics was presented using descriptive statistical analysis. EFA was performed to extrapolate quality factors, and a Mann Whitney-U test was applied to investigate differences between customers' and managers' quality expectations. All data were analysed using SPSS (version 26) software.

Research Results

Descriptive Statistics

Findings show that the sample was predominantly (52%) composed of female managers, respondents were on average forty-four years of age, the largest proportion of managers had completed secondary education (40%), and that almost half of the managers (47%) also own the restaurant they manage. According to managers, most guests (32%) will spend between €11–20, followed by those (24.5%) spending between €6–10, and only 11.5% will spend more than €50 when visiting a restaurant in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. Most managers (52.5%) also believe that customers will visit restaurants with the same frequency as before the pandemic and that their quality expectations will not significantly change due to the pandemic (48%).

In terms of customers, results indicate that respondents were, on average, thirty years of age, the sample was predominantly composed of females (64.2%), and that the largest group of respondents had completed secondary education (45%). Results indicating customers' buying behaviour in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period show that the largest group of respondents (36%) is planning an ASP of €11–20, 26.1% of them indicated an ASP of €6–10, and 2.4% of them were planning to spend over €50 when visiting a restaurant in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. The

Table 2   Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Managers	Customers
Years of age (average)	43.7	30.2
Gender (predominant)	Female (52%)	Female (64.2%)
Education (majority)	Secondary education	Secondary education
Expectations about customers' buying behaviour in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period	ASP: <€5 (11.5%), €6–10 (24.4%), €11–20 (32.1%), €21–50 (20.5%), >€50 (11.5%). *Dining out frequency:* significantly less than before the pandemic (5%), less than before the pandemic (30%), the same as before the pandemic (52.5%), more than before the pandemic (8.8%), significantly more than before the pandemic (3.8%).	ASP: <€5 (20.9%), €6–10 (26.1%), €11–20 (36%), €21–50 (14.4%), >€50 (2.6%). *Dining out frequency:* few times per year (22.3%), few times per month (36.5%), few times per week (18.7%), daily (6.2%), not planning to dine out in the first months after the pandemic (16.3%).

Table 3   Quality Expectations: Descriptive Statistics

7P	Indicators		Managers		Customers	
			M	SD	M	SD
P I – Product	1	Selection of dishes	4.16	0.94	4.09	0.91
	2	Size of portions	3.75	0.88	3.80	0.88
	3	Food taste	4.62	0.86	4.51	0.85
	4	Food appearance	4.35	0.85	3.77	0.86
	5	Food safety perception	4.45	0.93	4.42	0.86
	6	Use of local ingredients	3.93	1.01	3.65	1.03
		Average	4.21	0.77	4.04	0.59
P II – Physical evidence	1	Restaurant cleanliness	4.79	0.84	4.60	0.81
	2	Presentable service staff	4.70	0.87	4.29	0.85
	3	Sense of comfort	4.64	0.81	4.27	0.82
	4	Sense of security	4.67	0.91	4.20	0.90
	5	Restaurant design according to food offerings	4.56	0.86	4.03	0.89
	6	Availability of sanitisers	4.48	1.27	4.09	1.06
		Average	4.64	0.62	4.25	0.68

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largest group of respondents is planning to dine out a few times per month (36.5%), followed by those who plan to visit a restaurant a few times per week (18.7%), while 16.3% of respondents indicated that they do not plan to dine out in the first months after the pandemic. Interestingly, 89% of respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has not significantly influenced their restaurant quality expectations.

Characteristics of respondents (demographic pro-file and perceptions of customers' buying behaviour in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period) are summarized in Table 2.

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that all marketing-quality indicators were evaluated relatively highly for both groups of respondents. The average mean values (M) are 4.05 for managers and 3.83 for customers. The highest-rated dimension for both groups was *Physical evidence* (M = 4.64 and M = 4.25, re-

Table 3   Continued from the previous page

7P		Indicators	Managers		Customers	
			M	SD	M	SD
P III – People	1	Sufficient number of service staff	4.24	0.74	4.02	0.79
	2	Imp. of the presence of the rest. manager for quality offerings	4.00	1.01	3.15	1.07
	3	Distracting presence of other customers	4.08	1.02	3.53	1.05
	4	Hospitable service staff	4.71	0.81	4.40	0.78
	5	Professionally competent service staff	4.45	0.85	3.93	0.89
	6	Employment of local staff	3.65	1.09	3.32	1.15
		Average	4.19	0.61	3.72	0.64
P IV – Processes	1	Appropriate answers from service staff	4.44	0.73	4.13	0.74
	2	Helpfulness of service staff	4.46	0.76	4.09	0.77
	3	Responsiveness of service staff	4.49	0.74	4.34	0.71
	4	Restaurant opening hours	3.88	0.82	3.95	0.85
	5	Service waiting time	4.25	0.79	4.19	0.78
	6	Possibility of using IT	3.58	1.07	3.29	1.16
		Average	4.18	0.69	4.00	0.57
P V – Promotion	1	Visible marketing signs	3.80	0.97	3.35	1.02
	2	Compliments and signs of special attention	3.96	0.88	3.40	0.91
	3	Recommendations from service staff	4.24	0.86	3.64	0.85
	4	Special offers and sales campaigns	2.88	0.97	3.43	1.02
	5	Advertising activities in media	3.23	1.02	3.00	1.16
	6	Information on safety protocols	3.90	1.03	3.53	1.07
		Average	3.68	0.64	3.39	0.70
P VI – Placement	1	Accessible entrance	4.13	0.75	3.98	0.76
	2	Accessible parking area	4.12	0.88	4.08	0.87
	3	Neat surroundings	4.15	0.83	3.62	0.83
	4	The restaurant is worth the distance travelled	4.24	0.85	3.81	0.88
	5	The restaurant enhances indirect distribution	2.30	1.08	2.75	1.13
	6	Possibility of food delivery and takeaway	3.23	1.06	3.81	1.08
		Average	3.69	0.59	3.67	0.61

spectively), with restaurant cleanliness as its highest-rated quality indicator. The lowest rated expectations for managers were related to the dimension *Price* (M = 3.65), with alternative payment as its lowest-rated indicator. For customers, the lowest-rated indicator was *Promotion* (M = 3.39), with advertising activities in media as its lowest-rated quality indicator. The mean

difference (MD) between managers and customers is MD = 0.22, indicating that managers have higher quality expectations than customers. The dispersion of the data is presented by the values of standard deviations (SD). Relatively high values of SD show that the data is widely spread around the mean values.

Results presented in Table 3 provided preliminary

Table 3   Continued from the previous page

7P		Indicators	Managers		Customers	
			M	SD	M	SD
P VII – Price	1	Understandability of prices	4.16	0.77	4.17	0.77
	2	Accurate bill	4.37	0.92	4.15	0.94
	3	Value for money	4.48	0.71	4.33	0.72
	4	Price competitiveness	3.73	0.87	3.79	0.90
	5	Possibility of surcharges for extra security of services	2.85	1.16	2.89	1.26
	6	Use of alternative means of payments (e.g. Bitcoins)	2.23	1.11	2.37	1.23
		Average	3.65	0.62	3.62	0.59

information regarding the differences in quality expectations between both groups of respondents. To get a deeper understanding of the factor structure of quality expectations and to identify marketing-quality dimensions that best explain managers' and customers' quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, in the next step, EFA was performed.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)
The decision to use EFA was based on the fact that the generic instrument has not been extensively used before and that additional research items were introduced. Moreover, we tested the instrument in a specific (crisis) situation. Since the same research instrument was used to collect data from both samples, we decided to perform one EFA.

The implied research factor model seeks the fewest factors that can account for the common variance of a set of indicators and attempts to understand the shared variance through a small set of latent variables that link our indicators into a common factor. Based on this presumption, we decided to use the Principal Axis Factoring Method (PAF). Another decision for using PAF is that we could not confirm a normal dataset distribution (the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used) for any of the selected indicators.

Based on the values of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of Sampling Adequacy – KMO (0.889) and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (χ^2 = 6092.494; DF = 450; p < 0.001), we estimated that all initial indicators were suitable for performing EFA. After the evalua-

tion of the adequacy of communalities ($\geq$0.50) (Hair et al., 2010), eleven indicators with too-low communalities (I.6 use of local ingredients; III.3 distracting presence of other customers, III.6 employment of local staff; IV.6 possibility of using IT; V.4 special offers and sales campaigns, V.5 advertising activities in media, V.6 information on safety protocols; VI.5 the restaurant enhances indirect distribution, VI.6 possibility of food delivery and take away; VII.5 possibility of surcharges for extra security of services, VII.6 use of alternative means of payment) were excluded from the analysis.

Accordingly, we proceeded with 31 indicators with sufficient communalities. The values of the Bartlett's Test (χ^2 = 6082.476; DF = 465; p < 0.001) and KMO (0.935) indicated satisfactory values of the dataset for inclusion in the final model. Based on a rotated factor matrix solution (Maximum Likelihood extraction method and Varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation method were applied), we have selected the final model with six factors and 22 indicators that explain 52.58% of the total variance (see Table 4). Only factors containing three or more indicators with satisfactory factor loadings ($\geq$0.50) were retained in the final model. Internal consistency was verified by calculating Cronbach's Alpha (α), which indicated a respectable level ($\alpha \geq$ 0.75) of internal consistency (Hair et al., 2010) for all extracted factor groups.

Based on the percentage of their explained variances, the most significant importance in explaining quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic

Table 4   EFA: Rotated Factor Solution

Indicators		P II	P I	P V	P IV	P VI	P VII
I.1	Selection of dishes		0.552				
I.2	Size of portions		0.504				
I.3	Food taste		0.714				
II.1	Restaurant cleanliness	0.629					
II.2	Presentable service staff	0.662					
II.3	Sense of comfort	0.661					
II.4	Sense of security	0.674					
II.5	Restaurant design according to food offerings	0.623					
II.6	Availability of sanitisers	0.516					
III.2	Importance of the presence of the manager			0.544			
IV.1	Appropriate answers from service staff				0.610		
IV.2	Helpfulness of service staff				0.621		
IV.3	Responsiveness of service staff				0.606		
IV.5	Service waiting time				0.537		
V.2	Compliments and signs of special attention			0.629			
V.3	Recommendations from service staff			0.682			
VI.1	Accessible entrance					0.641	
VI.2	Accessible parking area					0.593	
VI.3	Neat surroundings					0.501	
VII.1	Understandability of prices						0.574
VII.2	Accurate bill						0.546
VII.3	Value for money						0.697
Variance (%)		13.43	10.69	9.49	8.87	5.89	4.21

period have the following marketing-quality dimensions (in order of importance) – *Physical Evidence, Product, Promotion* (and importance of the presence of the manager), *Processes, Placement,* and *Price.* In terms of the dimension *Promotion,* one indicator (III.2 importance of the presence of the restaurant manager) was added to the two indicators belonging to the dimension *Promotion.* Accordingly, we have decided to keep the initial name of the marketing dimension.

After extrapolating quality factors that best present the marketing construct of quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, we analysed potential differences between the two independent samples (groups of respondents).

Mann-Whitney U Test

We performed a Mann-Whitney U test to investigate the differences between the two independent samples (different groups of respondents). The main reason for choosing the U test lies in the asymmetric distribution of the data. To perform the U test, we formulated the null (*Ho: Me1 = Me2*) and the alternative hypothesis (H1: Me1 = Me2) for each pair of identified variables (quality indicators). Research results revealed statistically significant differences ($p \leq 0.050$) exist between guests' and managers' expectations at six quality dimensions (see Table 5). Ho was rejected in favour of H1 for nineteen indicators (I.1 selection of dishes, I.2 size of portions, I.3 food taste, II.1 restaurant cleanli-

Table 5 U Test: Marketing-Quality Dimensions

Item	P II	P I	P V	P IV	P VI	P VII
Mann-Whitney U test	24.657.500	21.986.500	19.229.500	21.671.500	16.434.500	19.187.500
Wilcoxon W value	28.662.500	25.389.500	22.799.500	25.676.500	19.837.500	22.588.500
Significance	< 0.001	< 0.001	0.001	< 0.001	0.147	< 0.001

ness, II.2 presentable service staff, II.3 sense of comfort, II.4 sense of security, II.5 restaurant design following food offerings, II.6 availability of sanitizers, III.2 importance of the presence of restaurant manager, IV.1 appropriate answers from service staff, IV.2 helpfulness of service staff, IV.3 responsiveness of service staff, IV.5 service waiting time, V.2 compliments and signs of special attention, V.3 recommendations from service staff, VI.1 accessible entrance, VI.2 accessible parking area, and VI.3 neat surroundings) belonging to five quality dimensions (*Physical Evidence, Promotion, Processes, Product,* and *Placement*). At the same time, Ho was confirmed only for three indicators (VII.1 understandability of prices, VII.2 accurate bill, and VII.3 value for money), belonging to the marketing-quality dimension *Price.* Results indicate that no statistical differences between both groups of respondents exist only for the marketing-quality dimension *Price.* Results of the U test provided the answer to our RQ2.

Discussion

In reviewing the literature, we found no evidence of comparing restaurant managers' and customers' quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. Accordingly, the purpose of this work was to (1) identify the most relevant marketing-quality dimensions for assuring restaurant quality in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period (RQ1) and (2) investigate differences between managers' and customers' expectations for restaurant quality offerings in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period (RQ2).

 In terms of differences between managers and customers, the mean comparisons indicated that managers have higher quality expectations than customers (MD = 0.22). Interestingly, the highest-rated dimension for both groups was *Physical evidence,* with 'res-

taurant cleanliness' as the highest-rated indicator for both groups of respondents, indicating the importance of cleanliness and safety perceptions in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. The lowest rated quality indicators were 'use of alternative means of payment' for managers and 'advertising activities in the media' for restaurant customers. Both indicators also prove not crucial for explaining the overall quality structure as they were excluded from the EFA eliminations process.

 The EFA structure of quality expectations revealed that the most critical marketing-quality dimensions for defining managers' and customers' quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period consist of 22 indicators and six marketing-quality dimensions, thus answering RQ1. The two most important quality dimensions are *Physical evidence* and *Product.* Results indicate the importance of the tangible elements for assuring restaurant quality in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. Tangibles were identified as essential elements of restaurant quality in many pre-pandemic studies (e.g. Mosavi & Ghaedi, 2012; Namkung & Jang, 2007; Shapoval et al., 2018). Interestingly, the marketing-quality dimension *People* did not prove to be a common latent variable for the overall explanation of the quality construct in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. However, it was relatively highly evaluated by both groups of respondents (see Table 3).

 This finding is also unexpected since the dimension *People* proved to be essential for determining restaurant quality in all previous marketing-based quality studies (Kukanja et al., 2017) and many other RATER (Servqual)-based studies (Mosavi & Ghaedi 2012; Voon, 2012). This finding must be interpreted with caution since the quality of restaurant staff is directly associated with the quality assurance of other

intangible and many tangible (e.g. neat surroundings) elements of restaurant quality offerings.

Of seven items included in the generic research model, only one indicator, 'availability of sanitisers,' proved significant for assuring restaurant quality in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. This finding additionally reconfirms the importance of safety for explaining the post-pandemic quality construct. The other included indicators proved not to be important. Therefore, we might conclude that the crisis has not influenced customers' and managers' expectations related to the employment of local staff, use of local ingredients, possibility of using IT, information about safety protocols, food delivery or take away, and the possibility of using alternative means of payment. This is an interesting finding, as, during the pandemic, managers and customers heavily relied on IT, local customers and suppliers, and the possibility of food delivery and take away (Brewer & Sebby, 2021; Pressman et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020). Overall, we might conclude that managers and customers will still prefer the 'traditional' restaurant quality indicators, such as cleanliness, food taste, helpfulness and recommendations from service staff, compliments and signs of special attention, and good value for money (see Table 4).

Based on research results, we found that statistically significant differences exist between managers' and customers' quality expectations (RQ2). Differences were found at five quality dimensions (out of six), indicating a significant gap in quality expectations between managers and customers. According to the Gap model (Parasuraman et al., 1985), differences between customer expectations and management's understanding (knowledge) of those expectations present the first gap in providing offerings of satisfactory quality. This gap is also referred to as a listening or information gap rather than a knowledge gap in a digitalised big-data world where customers have free access to social network platforms (Zhang, 2019).

The only quality dimension where no differences were found was in the dimension Price, indicating that managers and customers have the same quality expectations concerning the understandability of prices, bill accuracy, and value for money. These results are somewhat unexpected and challenging to explain, primarily due to the lack of comparable (marketing-based) research findings. For example, Kukanja (2017) reported differences between all seven marketing-quality dimensions. We might assume that the results of our study might be somehow related to the price elasticity of the restaurant industry during and after the pandemic. As an economic measure of sensitivity, price elasticity results in significant demand changes due to minor changes in price or income levels. Foroudi et al. (2021) reported that household income significantly impacted customer buying behaviour during the pandemic.

Similarly, Kim et al. (2021) found that customers seem to be more demanding during the crisis and consume food items that signal the best value for money. Based on research results (see Table 5), it seems that managers are aware of customers' price sensitiveness and will do their best to meet their customers' price-related quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. As managers are aware of customers' price-related expectations, we might assume that restaurants will not raise their selling prices to compensate for the income lost during the lockdown. These findings are also supported by the same post-pandemic values of customer ASP since most managers and customers reported expecting an ASP between €11–20.

Altogether, from the marketing-mix perspective, the central issue of this study's results are the identified differences (quality gaps) between most of the identified marketing-quality dimensions (see Table 4), which also explain the majority of variance of the post-COVID-19 pandemic quality construct.

Conclusion

This research contributes to the marketing and restaurant management literature by explaining the significance of different marketing-quality indicators and analysing differences between managers' and customers' quality expectations in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. By applying a marketing-based research concept, we have also facilitated an international benchmarking research process.

However, to provide recommendations for future research, several limitations of this study must be addressed. This study included only domestic customers. Consequently, following studies should apply an international perspective and include the various customer segments. Future research should also use a combination of research approaches. A qualitative research approach, in particular, could provide a more in-depth analysis of quality expectations. This research was conducted during a relatively short period. As this is an ongoing pandemic, future research should take a longitudinal approach to understand the impact of the pandemic on the restaurant industry. Moreover, data gathering that was traditionally performed in person (face to face) was collected online, which may have also influenced the quality of the research. From this point of view, we have obtained a relatively low number of valid questionnaires from managers, which disabled a more rigorous statistical analysis of the data. Accordingly, future studies focused on the validation of the marketing-quality scale using a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) are welcomed. Respondents were also asked to indicate their future quality expectations, which may change if the pandemic persists over a long time. Therefore, quality expectations should be monitored regularly. Another recommendation for future research refers to the creation of a nomological network. The purpose of the nomological net is to show how the identified post-COVID-19 pandemic quality construct is theoretically and empirically related to other concepts in tourism and hospitality marketing (customer satisfaction and return patronage, brand equity etc.).

In terms of applicability, our findings offer directions for revising restaurant quality management strategies and re-modifications of marketing business models. Restaurants should promote their offerings following customers' expectations to provide satisfying and enjoyable customer experiences. Managers should communicate what type of co-creation behaviour (e.g. wearing masks, maintaining physical distance) is required from customers to provide and maintain a safe restaurant atmosphere, as customers and managers have the highest expectations regarding *Physical evidence*. Managers should also correctly train their personnel (*People*) on how to provide high-quality restaurant offerings.

Finally, we recommend that managers constantly monitor customers' quality expectations and perceptions and adequately adjust their business models. The digitalisation of the business environment has created a plethora of new opportunities and challenges. The online social network platforms present a relatively easy way to collect preliminary information about customer quality expectations. From this point of view, academia and restaurant associations should also assist the industry in analysing customers' quality expectations and adjusting restaurant firms' business models proactively.

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