

Understanding Tourist Experience in Mountain Hotel Accommodation: A Qualitative Assessment of Online Reviews

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Abstract: This study examines tourist experiences in mountain hotels within Uludağ, Türkiye's premier winter tourism destination, by conducting a qualitative analysis of online reviews on TripAdvisor. In winter tourism, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) plays a pivotal role, as guest reviews directly impact booking decisions and overall destination appeal. Findings from this study reveal that food quality, room comfort, and staff interactions are crucial determinants of guest satisfaction, while dissatisfaction often arises from limited menu variety, room cleanliness, and issues in common areas. Unique elements of Uludağ's environment, such as scenic landscapes and winter sports, significantly enhance guest experiences, underscoring the importance of integrating cultural assets into the hospitality offerings. The study highlights the potential of eWOM as a feedback mechanism for mountain hotels to address weaknesses, improve service quality, and better align with customer expectations. These insights suggest that addressing critical areas for improvement and leveraging Uludağ's unique local features could enhance its competitiveness in the winter tourism market, fostering both customer loyalty and regional development.

Keywords: Electronic word-of mouth, Winter tourism, Mountain hotel accommodation, Online review, TripAdvisor

1. Introduction

In recent years, digitalization has greatly enhanced the influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Platforms featuring user-generated content have gained significant importance. For instance, a recent survey conducted by Opinion Research Corporation revealed that more than 60% of participants reviewed online ratings, blogs, and customer feedback prior to making a purchase and over 80% of those who consulted this information indicated that it had some impact on their buying decisions (O'Connor, 2010).

In hospitality and tourism, eWOM plays a prominent role in influencing the purchase intentions of customers because some aspects of products are intangible before consumption (Chen & Law, 2016). Tourism and hospitality practitioners also entirely use eWOM to understand their company's current position and to analyse its competitive advantages (Lei and Law, 2015). Online reviews, considered a form of eWOM (Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015), influence customer's booking decisions, loyalty, recommendation intentions, and ultimately affect the performance of service providers (Taecharungroj & Mathayomchan, 2019). Thus, online reviews are an important resource that can benefit a destination by increasing its competitive advantage (Simeon et al., 2017). Although many studies have analysed online reviews in different contexts, there is still a lack of research investigating online reviews for winter tourism accommodation and mountain hotels. Like other resorts, mountain hotels are facing many challenges, such as climate change, insufficient snow, short seasons, and high competition from other destinations. In order to be competitive under these difficult conditions, the quality of customer experience provided by hotels becomes even more important. Studies show that hotels with higher levels of service tend to be open longer throughout the year (Parrilla et al, 2007). Improving service quality by understanding customers and satisfying customer needs leads to an increase in perceived customer value and reputation.

Based on the above explanations, using the online reviews, this study aims to explore tourist's accommodation experience in Mountain Hotels of Uludağ in order to understand their needs, expectations, and satisfaction mechanisms.

Uludağ, an ancient volcanic mountain located near Bursa, Türkiye, is one of the most attractive winter tourism destinations with an impressive peak reaching 2,543 metres. The area boasts over 20 ski slopes and several dedicated ski hotels that provide accommodations. Beyond skiing, visitors can enjoy snowboarding, snowshoeing, winter trekking, and even sledding. Easily accessible from Bursa and Istanbul, Uludağ's ski season typically spans from December to March. Tourists visit majorly from Türkiye, Russia, the Middle East, and Europe. Despite its appeal, Uludağ ski resorts face several issues like environmental impact, overdevelopment, and limited modern facilities in certain areas, poor technology and lack of car making machines. Uludağ's main rivals include Erciyes, Palandöken, and European ski resorts, which offer similar experiences with advanced infrastructure. Analysing TripAdvisor reviews of mountain hotels in Uludağ may support strengthening the

region's competitive advantage due to well understood customer needs and provide insight to hotels about their strengths and potential improvements.

2. Winter Tourism and Mountain Hotel Accommodation

A winter tourism destination can be defined as a geographical, economic and social unit consisting of all those of firms, organisations, activities, areas and installations which are intended to serve the specific needs of winter sports tourists. Destinations can be seen as the tourist product that in certain markets competes with other products (Bieger, 1998). Two major exogenous forces nowadays impact the winter tourism destinations: climate change and growing competition. (Bausch & Gartner, 2020). For Uludağ, climate change is a bigger threat than for destinations that are using technology and snow making machines. An increasing lack of snow availability combined with lack of artificial snow production facilities, leading to earlier end of the winter use period, appears to be a big challenge. A major additional endogenous force is the emergence of new competitors. Over the past decade, new competitors with appealing travel products have entered the market, such as cruises to warm destinations, shopping in Europe and the options for short city trips have also expanded, thanks to low-cost airlines. In addition to vacation choices, consumer preferences in outdoor activities have shifted; many now enjoy these activities year-round, supported by advanced outdoor gear that mitigates weather effects. As a result, many destinations offer early spring packages tailored to bikers, hikers, and runners, providing winter travellers with alternatives beyond skiing (Bausch & Gartner, 2020; Steiger, 2011).

While a winter tourism destination includes core and support activities, the competitiveness of the destination is largely determined by the core service provider: hotels. Since, mountain hotels are transferring created value to customers, they majorly drive the competitiveness of a winter sport destination. (Flagestad and Hope, 2001). However due to the discussed seasonality issues, like other destinations, mountain hotels in Uludağ need tailored marketing, resource management, and service strategies to sustain year-round viability. Studies indicate that hotels providing higher levels of service often maintain longer operational periods throughout the year (Parrilla et al., 2007). For mountain hotels it is a necessity of focusing on enhancing customer experience through a deep understanding of customer expectations and proactively meeting their needs, hotels can significantly increase perceived customer value and build a positive reputation.

However, Mountain hotel accommodation caters to specific traveller expectations, blending convenience, luxury, and an immersive experience with the natural environment. Some studies investigate consumer motivations, showing that winter tourists prioritise activities like skiing, snowboarding, and sightseeing. However, Bausch & Gartner (2020) research identified diverse European Alps customer segments beyond traditional winter sports enthusiasts and suggested that European Alps need new adapted products and activities to different customer segments who are not prioritising winter sports. Gilbert and Hudson (2000) also highlight that winter tourists seek authenticity and connection with nature, driving the growth of eco-friendly practices in mountain hotels.

As seen in literature, the expectations of tourists from a winter tourism destination will vary according to time, context, and culture. Therefore, the value and customer experience offered by both the destination and the mountain hotels, which largely shape the destination, need to be aligned with the context through feedback gathered from customers. From this perspective, it is essential for hotels operating in the Uludağ region, a major winter tourism centre in Türkiye and Europe, to understand customer experience and enhance their products and services based on customer feedback to strengthen the destination's competitiveness. Like other industries, eWOM seems a useful way for Uludağ mountain hotels to proactively improve the guest experience, increase customer satisfaction, and foster brand loyalty.

3. Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM), Online Reviews and Hotel Industry

Word of mouth (WOM) is a form of personal influence that guides consumers toward or away from specific products, brands, or services based on the information and opinions shared by other consumers (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 2004). Online reviews are one of the effective forms of WOM (word of mouth). For example, TripAdvisor serves as a popular platform for travellers to access travel information through peer reviews. Studies show that most tourists engage in online communication both during trip planning and while on vacation (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Chen & Law, 2016).

The intangible nature of tourism and hospitality products and services increases the perceived uncertainty in the consumer's decision-making process and fosters the consumer's fundamental need for reliable information in their choice decision (Liu & Park, 2015). With the rise of social media platforms that enable the sharing of

travel experiences, online consumer reviews have become increasingly significant for the tourism and hospitality sector. A report by Mintel (2016) highlighted that consumer review websites are now the second most commonly used information source after search engines (such as Google) when travellers are researching a trip (Litvin & Dowling, 2016).

Racherla, Connolly, and Christodoulidou (2013) found that a hotel's overall rating had a weaker connection to the ratings of individual attributes. This suggests that the aggregate numerical rating may not accurately reflect customers' service quality perceptions and satisfaction, as it oversimplifies their nuanced views on different aspects of the hotel experience. This may also explain Ong's (2012) finding that customers prefer to rely on written reviews over simple numerical ratings for a more comprehensive understanding of service quality. Thus service providers have started using online consumer reviews, or eWOM, as marketing tools by encouraging customers to share their personal experiences with others.

Positive product reviews are free advertising for companies and increase business potential; however, undesirable comments can severely destroy the image and reputation of a company. While many studies, including Xie et al. (2011), find negative eWOM more influential on booking intentions, Ong (2012) found that customers often weigh both positive and negative reviews equally (Chen & Law, 2016). Therefore, it is important to consider both negative and positive customer reviews for practitioners and also researchers.

In Tourism and Hospitality, the two areas where eWOM is most studied were travel and hotels. However, these studies mostly attempted to explore: (1) what eWOM is and what is the nature and characteristics of eWOM (Litvin et al., 2008; Black and Kelley, 2009; Cox et al., 2009 ; Ong, 2012). (2) What is the antecedence of eWOM ? (O'Connor, 2010; Browning et al., 2013; Kang and Schuett, 2013; Boo and Kim, 2013; Liu et al., 2013; Pöyry et al., 2013) and (3) What is the impact of eWOM ? (Huang et al.,2010; Zhang et al., 2010; Gil-Or, 2010; Callarisa et al., 2012; Ögüt and Taş, 2012; Hudson and Thal, 2013).

In literature there is a strong evidence about the positive effects of eWOM on predicting hotel performance (Ögüt & Onur Taş, 2012; Ye et al., 2011), customer ratings boost hotel performance and even affect hotel room prices (Nieto, Hernandez-Maestro, & Muñoz Gallego, 2014). However, several studies have found that the influence is context dependent (Yang et al., 2018; Lu, Ye, & Law, 2014) and vary across different research time, geographic setting and hotel class (Blal & Sturman, 2014). Therefore, it is difficult to generalise the outcomes related to eWOM and hotels (Floyd et al., 2014). Even when studies focus on similar empirical contexts, there are conflicting findings about eWOM and outputs (Yang et al., 2018). Thus also there are some studies searching for customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction aspects in hotel context (O'Connor, 2010), searching these aspects for winter tourism and mountain hotels will also provide valuable information for practitioners and academics. This study is not interested in exploring who posted the online reviews, or what the effect of online reviews is on customer behaviour. But this study is concerned with the in-depth content of reviews themselves and what tips they can give to hotel managers to improve their quality, reputation and customer satisfaction. Above all, what these reviews can tell to all stakeholders involved in Uludağ destination to overcome current challenges.

4. Methodology

Since qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals, providing rich and contextual insights into their perspectives (Creswell, 2013), this study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore tourist's accommodation experiences in Mountain Hotels of Uludağ in order to understand their needs, expectations, and satisfaction mechanisms.

We collected the qualitative data from TripAdvisor.com, the largest online network of travel consumers. "Founded in 2000, TripAdvisor offers a platform where users from around the world can share or read about personal travel experiences. According to its website, it claims to be the largest travel site globally, boasting more than 100 million genuine reviews, opinions, and photos related to hotels, restaurants, and tourist sites."

Our research data set consists of the positive and negative trip advisor reviews written by guests who have experienced one of the 12 selected mountain hotels in Uludağ winter tourism destination from January 2023 to August 2024. The number of sufficient reviews available on trip advisors was decisive in the selection of hotels in the destination. This is because some hotels have very few or no reviews. Although in literature there is evidence that the 5 most recent reviews are enough to have a general idea (O'Connor, 2020; Gretzel et al., 2007), we have collected all reviews on trip advisor web sites written for each hotel (769 in total) in depth.

A significant challenge faced by social networking sites, including TripAdvisor, is the fake reviews. There are suspicions that some reviews may be posted by hotels to undermine their competitors' ratings or by the hotels

themselves to boost their scores and push down negative feedback (O'Connor, 2010). Typically, genuine reviewers leave comments only once. In our dataset, if a user writes multiple reviews—whether positive or negative—for the same hotel, we classify these as suspicious and exclude them from our analysis.

In total, 769 online reviews gathered from 12 hotels were analysed by MAXQDA. The frequency of certain words was first analysed through content analysis. Then, through a thematic analysis, the data were systematically organised and coded to identify key themes and patterns. Themes emerged from review text, allowing insights into guest satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding their accommodation experience. The analysis followed three steps: (1) Initial codes were created and codes assigned to each paragraph (2) Codes were grouped into broader themes and sub-themes based on their relevance and similarities (3) Finally, the themes were analysed and interpreted to uncover deeper insights, exploring connections and patterns within the data to present a comprehensive understanding of guests experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, two coders followed the procedure suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Discussing and evaluating reviews with fellow researchers in the data analysis process, minimise bias and enhance the reliability of the findings (Haynes, 2012). A summary of the findings is presented below.

5. Findings

The characteristics of the 12 hotels from which the trip advisor data for this study were obtained are given in Table 1 below. Hotels included in the study are most highly rated with four-star and five-star hotels. The Average TripAdvisor rating of hotels are between minimum score of 3.5 and maximum score of 5, not always show positive relation with the hotel's star rating as seen in figure.1.

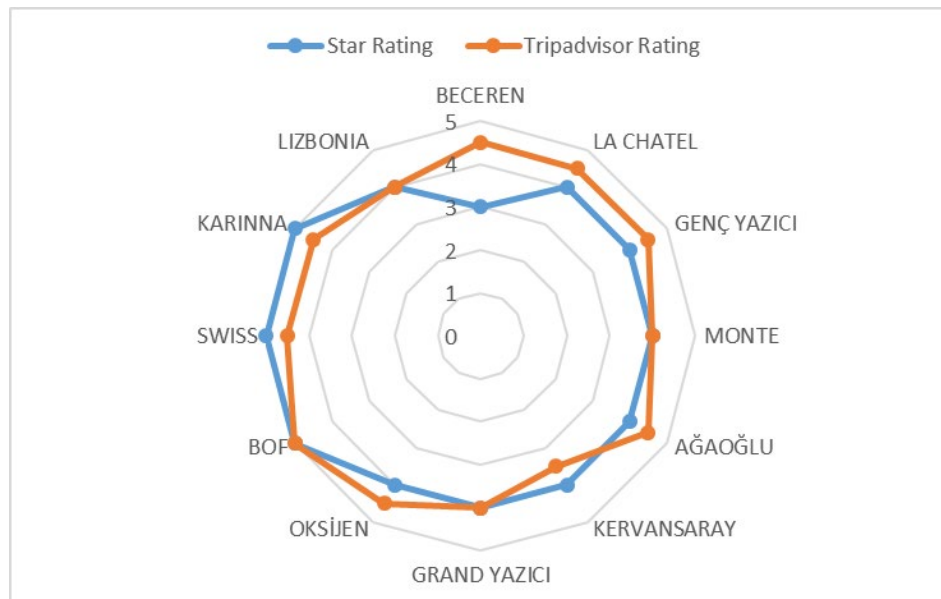


Figure 1: Hotel's Star Ratings and Trip Advisor Ratings

As seen in Table 1, the hotel's room capacity ranged from 20 to 235. A total of 769 reviews were obtained by filtering 2023 and 2024 reviews from 4832 reviews in total. The reviews collected from each hotel ranged from 5 to 308. 1877 codes were created as a result of the assessment of reviews.

Table 1: Hotel Characteristics

Hotels		Average Trip Advisor Rating	Star Rating	Number of Room	Zone	Numberof Reviews
BECEREN		4,5	3	-	1.Zone	17
LA CHATEL YAZICI		4,5	4	20	1.Zone	5
GENÇ YAZICI		4,5	4	47	1.Zone	127

MONTEBAIA ULUDAĞ		4	4	164	2.Zone	27
AĞAOĞLUMY MOUNTAIN ULUDAĞ		4,5	4	197	2.Zone	6
KERVANSARAY		3,5	4	??	1.Zone	13
GRAND YAZICI		4	4	235	1.Zone	12
OKSİJENZONE HOTEL		4,5	4		1.Zone	308
BOFHOTELS ULUDAĞ SKI & LUXURY RESORT		5	5	167	2.Zone	122
SWISSHOTEL ULUDAG		4,5	5	-	Kirazlı	16
KARINNA HOTEL		4,5	5	-	2.Zone	96
LIZBONIA HOTEL		4	4	60	1.Zone	20
TOTAL						769

The word frequency analysis (refer to Table 2) reveals the top 40 topics frequently mentioned in guest reviews. In the mountain hotel setting, food stands out as particularly significant, ranking as the fourth most frequently cited word across all reviews. Excluding verbs and pronouns, other commonly mentioned topics include staff, skiing, room, location, friendliness, and cleanliness, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency of Words in Reviews

Word	Freq.	Word	Freq.	Word	Freq.	Word	Freq.
1.Hotel	4317	11. Accommodation	635	21. Family	339	31.Sahlep (traditional drink)	167
2.Valuable	1932	12. Holiday	632	22. Experience	264	32. Happiness	166
3.Thanks	1709	13. Guests	616	23. Children	255	33. Manager	158
4.Food	1219	14. Clean	611	24. Helpful	237	34. People	156
5.Staff	1185	15. Location	530	25. Quality	235	35. Coffee	141
6.Satisfy	1068	16. Services	526	26. Breakfast	226	36. Comfortable	136
7.Skiing	983	17. Motivation	526	27. Restaurant	215	37. Massage	136
8.Room	878	18. Advice	488	28. Slope	210	38.Snow	127
9. Friendly	738	19. Spa	453	29. Tea	176	39.Welcome	127
10. Uludağ	640	20. Delicious	396	30. Time	168	40.Equipment	117

The process of thematic analysis of guest reviews revealed several main themes that include their dissatisfaction on Food, Common Areas, Room, Staff, Price, Customer Relation, SPA, Skiing, Location. Table 3 shows all derived themes and frequencies. As can be seen below, 85.7 % (1630) of the Trip advisor reviews are positive and 14.3 % (247) are negative.

Table 3: Most Common Themes by Trip Advisor Positive and Negative Reviews

Negative Reviews (% 14.3)			Positive Reviews(% 85.7)		
Themes	Frequency (Not Satisfied)	Percentage (Not Satisfied)	Themes	Frequency Satisfied)	Percentage (Satisfied)
Food	61	%24.7	Staff	398	%24.42
Common Areas (Lobby/Café,Teras)	53	%21.8	Food	307	%18.83
Rooms	46	%18.6	Cleaning	169	%10.37
Staff	35	%14.1	Entertainment	124	%7.61

Negative Reviews (% 14.3)			Positive Reviews(% 85.7)		
Themes	Frequency (Not Satisfied)	Percentage (Not Satisfied)	Themes	Frequency Satisfied)	Percentage (Satisfied)
Price	19	%7.6	Family Hotel	103	%6.32
Customer Relation	17	%6.8	Location	99	%6.07
SPA	12	%4.8	Comfort	96	%5.89
Skiing	2	%0.8	Landscape	83	%5.09
Location	1	%0.4	Skiing	59	%3.62
Total	246	100	Rooms	50	%3.07
			SPA	35	%2.15
			Heating	25	%1.53
			Common Areas(Lobby, Café,teras)	22	%1.35
			Price	18	%1.10
			Customer Relation	19	%1.20
			Animal Friendly	6	%0.37
			New Hotel	6	%0.37
			Traditional	5	%0.31
			Alcohol Free	4	%0.25
			4 Season	2	%0.12
			TOPLAM	1630	100

The issues that customers are satisfied with are grouped under the similar headings of Staff, Food, Skiing, Room, SPA, Common Areas, Price, Customer Relation. Table 3 also mentioned that customers are also satisfied in terms of Cleaning, Entertainment, Family Hotel, Comfort, Landscape.

To understand negative feedback in more detail, the following hierarchical code chart summarises the 3 main themes of trip advisor reviews with negative content and the most repeated comments under the sub themes. As seen in figure 2, the most repeated negative comments about food were inadequate beverages, little variety of food and poor quality of foods. Cleaning problems, disturbing noise and poor ski slope were mentioned in the reviews under the heading of common areas as the second most important issue. Poor cleaning, old/neglected rooms, heating/cooling problems were mostly mentioned in the reviews regarding rooms.

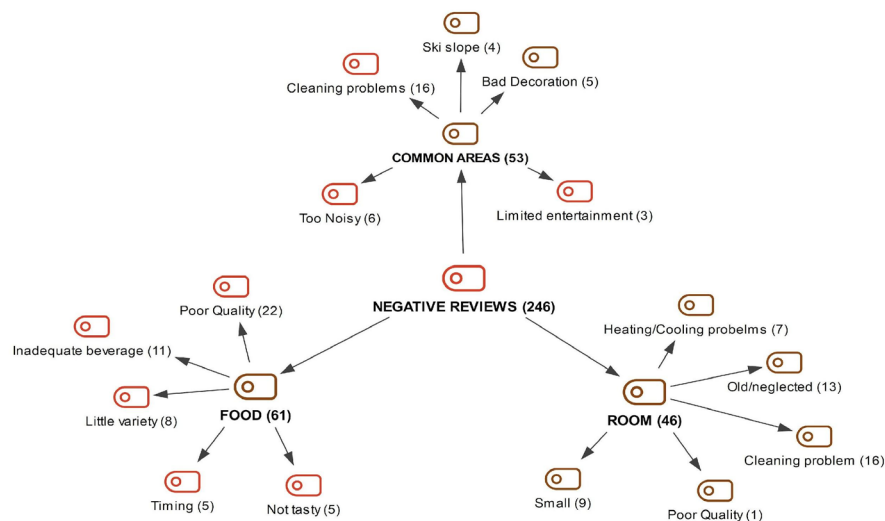


Figure 2: Hierarchical Code for Negative Customer Comments

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results from the qualitative analysis of online reviews, this study provides significant insights into the experiences of tourists staying in mountain hotels in Uludağ. First of all, when the trip advisor ratings of the hotels included in the analysis are examined, it is seen that almost all of them have a rating of 4 and above. This gives us the image of a strong destination with high customer satisfaction. In detail, the findings indicate that food, room quality, and staff interactions are primary determinants of guest satisfaction and dissatisfaction. It is noteworthy that food, room and staff had the highest frequency of both negative and positive comments. Although this may seem like a contradiction, it draws attention to an important issue that in a mountain hotel concept, the most important criteria that customers are most interested in are the food, the room and the attitude of the staff. Although the prominence of these themes aligns with previous literature on hotel experience (O'Connor, 2010) there are still context-specific differences. For example, according to word frequencies our findings revealed that food is the most repeated issue in the mountain hotel concept, whereas in the O'Connor (2010) study, food is the issue after room and staff. This is also interesting that some local foods and beverages (for example "sahlep" which is a traditional beverage with milk generally drunk in winter) repeatedly mentioned in reviews for its good taste and impressed visitors. This may give us an idea that local foods and beverages can create a competitive advantage in mountain hotels.

The positive reviews indicate that guests highly value staff attentiveness, room comfort, and quality dining experiences. The high satisfaction ratings in these areas suggest that mountain hotels in Uludağ are meeting fundamental guest expectations, contributing to positive perceptions and encouraging brand loyalty. These findings underscore the importance of focusing on human resources and training initiatives that enhance staff-customer interactions, as well as culinary quality and room maintenance to consistently meet high service standards.

However, the data also reveals notable areas of dissatisfaction, particularly concerning food variety and quality, room cleanliness, and issues in common areas such as lobby and cafe spaces. These areas of concern reflect opportunities for improvement that could strengthen the overall appeal of the region. In fact, it is thought that some of the problems related to cleanliness are related to the infrastructure problems of the region. In particular, investing in menu diversification, enhanced cleanliness protocols, and regular maintenance of shared spaces could directly address common complaints and contribute to an enriched guest experience.

The study's thematic analysis reveals that beyond core offerings, unique elements of the Uludağ mountain environment—such as the scenic landscape and winter sports facilities—still play a significant role in guest experiences, as evidenced by frequent positive mentions of skiing and views. Although there is interest in massages and spa activities, these are not priorities, but rather side activities that complement the skiing activity.

The fact that almost no environmental and sustainability issues are mentioned in customer comments attracts attention. This finding is not aligned with global trends in tourism, where authenticity and environmental sustainability are increasingly valued by travellers (Gilbert & Hudson, 2000). This situation actually draws attention to the differentiating effect of context and culture on customer expectations.

In conclusion, the findings from this study offer actionable insights for hotel managers in Uludağ and similar winter tourism destinations. By addressing areas of dissatisfaction and leveraging unique cultural aspects, mountain hotels can enhance the customer experience and foster loyalty. However, this research has some limitations. The fact that the customer reviews about the hotels are obtained only from trip advisor can be considered as a limitation that reduces the reliability of the research. More reliable analysis results can be obtained with multidimensional data to be obtained from different review platforms or social media. For future research, a quantitative analysis of guest satisfaction metrics across different accommodation types and a longitudinal study observing trends in guest expectations over time would be beneficial. Furthermore, investigating the impact of specific eco-friendly practices on guest satisfaction in mountain hotels could provide valuable insights for sustainable tourism development in the Uludağ region.

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