TOURIST SATISFACTION AND ITS SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC ANTECEDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE TURDA SALT MINE IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. – Tourist Satisfaction and Its Socio-demographic Antecedents: A Case Study of the Turda Salt Mine in Romania. Customer satisfaction is a cornerstone of tourism, with extensive literature confirming its direct link to loyalty through repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth. Despite this established importance, a notable research gap exists concerning visitor satisfaction within industrial tourism, particularly at salt mine attractions. Furthermore, the influence of sociodemographic factors on these satisfaction levels remains underexplored. This study aims to address this dual gap by evaluating tourist satisfaction at a historic salt mine and determining if significant differences exist across various socio-demographic groups. Using the Turda Salt Mine in Romania as a case study, this research employed a self-administered questionnaire for data collection. The data were analyzed using SPSS (v26), beginning with descriptive statistics to profile the sample and initial responses. To refine the satisfaction measurement, the 18 experience statements were subjected to Principal Component Analysis (PCA), reducing them into core dimensions. These dimensions were then analyzed using t-tests and ANOVA to identify statistically significant differences across socio-demographic groups. The findings indicate that visitors reported high overall satisfaction, demonstrating a strong likelihood to return and recommend the attraction. While feedback on specific attributes was generally positive, neutral ratings for several items revealed tangible opportunities for enhancement. The analysis also confirmed several statistically significant differences in satisfaction

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based on socio-demographic characteristics, although their overall influence was less pronounced than anticipated. The paper concludes by discussing the implications, practical applications, and limitations of the study.

Keywords: *visitor satisfaction, salt mines, Turda Salt Mine, Romania, socio-demographic variables.*

INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction is a cornerstone of tourism research (Altunel & Erkurt, 2015; Egresi, 2017). For destination management organizations (DMOs), accurately measuring and understanding tourist satisfaction is paramount. As Yu and Goulden (2006) argued, this understanding is essential not only for improving a destination's products and services but also for marketing it effectively to target audiences. This process directly informs service improvements and strategic planning (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Sirakaya et al., 2004; Truong et al., 2018), with the primary goal of maximizing visitor satisfaction and minimizing dissatisfaction in order to foster loyalty (Egresi & Lungu, 2015; Egresi et al., 2020; Maunier & Camelis, 2013; Yuksel et al., 2010).

Extensive literature confirms that high satisfaction leads to customer loyalty, which manifests through revisits and positive recommendations; conversely, dissatisfied tourists can significantly damage a destination's reputation (Altunel & Erkurt, 2015; Anderson et al., 1994; Bayih & Singh, 2020; Chen & Chen, 2010; Egresi & Prakash, 2019; Fuchs & Weiermair, 2003; Huete-Alcocer et al., 2019; Kozak, 2003; Lee, 2015; Lee et al., 2011; Maunier & Camelis, 2013; Oppermann, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). This is particularly critical as research shows that dissatisfied tourists—especially those unhappy with a core attraction—are more likely to share negative reviews than satisfied tourists are to share positive ones (Lee, 2015). It is also important to note that satisfaction does not always guarantee a return visit to the same site; however, a positive experience can reinforce a tourist's habit of visiting similar types of attractions, such as salt mines or industrial sites in general (Lee, 2015).

Despite its recognized importance, current assessment methods often rely on generic destination attributes, failing to capture the unique qualities of specific tourism sectors, such as industrial tourism. This gap highlights the necessity of defining sector-specific attributes that establish a baseline for tourist satisfaction (Lee, 2015). Furthermore, the influence of sociodemographic characteristics on satisfaction remains an under-explored area in the literature (Huete-Alcocer et al., 2019).

This study has a dual purpose: to evaluate tourist satisfaction with specific attributes and the overall experience at a historic salt mine, and to determine if satisfaction levels differ significantly across socio-demographic groups. It employs the Turda Salt Mine as a case study. Located in Northern Transylvania, the mine has a history of salt extraction spanning two millennia, from the Roman era until its closure in 1932. After serving various non-touristic purposes[3], it opened to the public in 1992 but saw limited interest[4]. A pivotal €6 million modernization project funded by the European Union[5] culminated in a 2010 reopening[6]. This investment triggered a dramatic surge in visitors, culminating in almost 690,000 in 2024,[7] 20% increase from the previous year. Romania is home to several such salt mines which have been modernized since 1990 to accommodate tourists (Kimic et al., 2019). These sites attract domestic and international visitors seeking halotherapy in their specific microclimates, as well as their cultural and recreational facilities (Chiricheş & Egresi, 2024; Sandu et al., 2009; Stănciulescu & Molnar, 2016). It is, thus, important to understand how visitors have perceived their experience in the mine.

The paper proceeds with a literature review, followed by an outline of the methodological approach. The subsequent sections present the empirical findings and a discussion that interprets these results, delving into their implications, practical applications, and the study's limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer satisfaction in tourism is predominantly understood through a "confirmation-disconfirmation" paradigm, where tourists compare their pre-travel expectations against their actual experiences. When performance meets or exceeds expectations, satisfaction results; when it falls short, dissatisfaction occurs (Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman et al., 1985 – see also Baker & Crompton, 2000; Chadee & Mattsson, 1996; Fuchs & Weiermair, 2003; Lee et al., 2011; Maunier & Camelis, 2013; Yeh et al., 2019; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). However, a significant scholarly debate exists. The Scandinavian school of thought argues for a "performance-only" measurement, though this approach makes it difficult to discern if high satisfaction stems from excellent service or low initial expectations (Fuchs & Weiermair, 2003).

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[3] https://www.welcometoromania.eu/Turda/Turda_Salina_Turda_e.htm
[4] https://gazetadecluj.ro/salina-turda-spectacol-pe-bani-europeni/
[5] https://www.mediafax.ro/economic/nou-record-de-turisti-la-salina-turda-anul-trecut-numarul-s-a-apropiat-de-populatia-clujului-17811797
[6] https://www.europafm.ro/cum-ii-cucereste-salina-turda-pe-vizitatori-galerie-foto/
[7] https://ebsradio.ro/stiri/record-aproape-690-000-de-turisti-au-vizitat-anul-trecut-salina-turda/

While some debate exists regarding the distinction between satisfaction and service quality (Cho, 1998), a predominant view positions perceived service quality as an antecedent to satisfaction (Lee et al., 2011; Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). Furthermore, tourist motivation is a key factor that enhances perceived quality, as greater personal and emotional investment in a trip leads to more positive evaluations of its attributes (Alegre & Garau, 2010; Lee et al., 2011).

The measurement of tourist satisfaction generally follows two primary approaches: one that assesses a holistic, general attitude towards the experience, and another that evaluates multiple specific dimensions (Chi & Qu, 2009; Fuchs & Weiermair, 2003; Kozak, 2003). The former defines satisfaction as an overall post-visit evaluation (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Huete-Alcocer et al., 2019; Yeh et al., 2019), while the latter conceptualizes it as an aggregate formed from perceptions of individual destination attributes (Alegre & Garau, 2010; Biswas et al., 2021; Maunier & Camelis, 2013). Fundamentally, when these attributes successfully meet tourist needs, they culminate in a positive overall experience (Bayih & Singh, 2020).

A common methodological approach involves measuring satisfaction by having tourists evaluate a customized pool of destination attributes on a rating scale (Dmitrovic et al., 2009). As there is no universally standardized set of attributes, researchers typically develop context-specific dimensions. This is exemplified by the evolution of frameworks such as Cooper et al.'s (1993) foundational "4 A's" (Attractions, Accessibility, Amenities, Available Packages), which was later expanded by Buhalis (2000) to include Activities and Ancillary services. Further demonstrating this customization, Lee's (2015) study on industrial tourism defined seven distinct dimensions, including lodging and dining facilities, internal and external accessibility, and the provision of safety and information services.

Tourist satisfaction is often complex and multifaceted; individuals can simultaneously hold both positive and negative perceptions of different attributes within a single destination (Lee, 2015). Positive attributes create a favorable impression, while negative ones generate an unfavorable view (Alegre & Garau, 2010). Despite this duality, a significant methodological bias exists in the literature, with many studies disproportionately focusing on positive attributes (Oh, 2001) and systematically neglecting negative aspects such as crowding, congestion, and over-commercialization (Alegre & Garau, 2010).

Furthermore, research indicates that attribute-level satisfactions do not contribute equally to overall satisfaction; certain destination features exert a stronger influence than others (Chi & Qu, 2009; Kozak, 2003; Lee, 2015; Varela Mallou et al., 2006). Beyond specific attributes, overall satisfaction is also shaped by interpersonal factors and tourists' perceptions of service accessibility (Huete-Alcocer et al., 2019).

Tourist satisfaction is also influenced by socio-demographic characteristics and cultural background (Fuchs & Weiermair, 2003; Huete-Alcocer et al., 2019; Perović et al., 2012; Shahrivar, 2012). Research indicates that individual-level variables such as gender, age, income, and employment status can shape the perception of a destination (Huete-Alcocer et al., 2019).

The impact of specific demographics, however, shows nuanced patterns. Regarding gender, while some studies contest its influence (Baloglu, 2000), others have found significant differences (Huh, 2002), with females generally reporting higher satisfaction than males (Martin et al., 2019). Age is another significant factor, with older tourists, particularly those between 56 and 65 years old, demonstrating higher satisfaction levels than their younger counterparts (Assaker et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2019). Furthermore, income level could also influence satisfaction (Beerli & Martin, 2004), with more affluent tourists reporting higher levels of satisfaction with a destination (Perović et al., 2012).

Beyond individual demographics, a number of studies highlight that cultural differences in attitudes and behavior profoundly influence expectations and perceptions (Chadee & Mattsson, 1996; Fuchs & Weiermair, 2003; Jia, 2020; Martin et al., 2019). Consequently, what is measured in satisfaction surveys may not be a purely objective evaluation of destination performance. Instead, it is often a mixture of individual experiences and deeply ingrained, country-of-origin-specific values and attitudes (Fuchs & Weiermair, 2003; Weiermair & Fuchs, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

The primary data collection instrument for this study was a self-administered questionnaire. The initial dissemination strategy involved distributing the questionnaire on-site to visitors exiting the Turda Salt Mine in April 2023, which resulted in 89 usable responses. Due to the low initial response rate, a second phase of online distribution was implemented via social media platforms, yielding a further 78 responses. The total sample size was therefore 167.

The questionnaire was structured into four distinct parts. Part one gathered data on travel behavior, including past visitation history, frequency, trip duration, travel party composition, and per-visit expenditure. Part two contained nine statements designed to evaluate visitation motives. The findings from these two sections have been published previously (Chiricheş & Egresi, 2024). Part three quantified participant satisfaction with their mine experience through a series of statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale. This is the main focus of the present study. The concluding section recorded socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

Data processing

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. The analysis began with descriptive statistics—including frequencies, percentages, median, and interquartile range (IQR)—to delineate the socio-demographic composition of the sample and to evaluate initial responses to the experience statements. To refine the satisfaction measurement, the 18 statements were subjected to Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to reduce them into a smaller set of dimensions. These resulting satisfaction dimensions were then analyzed using independent samples t-tests and ANOVA to identify statistically significant differences across various socio-demographic groups.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-demographic characteristics of our respondents

The sample consisted primarily of women under 40, who had less than a higher education and resided in Romania (outside Cluj County) (table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Socio-demographic characteristic	Frequency	% from total	Socio-demographic characteristic	Frequency	% from total
Gender (n=166)			*Education* (n=167)		
Male	69	41,6	Less than university degree	94	56.3
Female	97	58,4	University degree and higher	73	43.7
Age group (n=167)			*Residence* (n= 167)		
18 – 39 years	114	68.2	Cluj County	26	15.6
40+ years	53	31.8	Romania (excl. Cluj)	112	67.1
			Abroad	29	17.4

Source: the authors

Visitors' satisfaction with their experience

Most respondents agreed that the atmosphere in the salt mine was pleasant (median= 5). They were also satisfied with the signage, availability of parking, ease of entering, descending and moving around the mine and with the

opportunities to play different sports or engage in various leisure activities (median for each= 4). None of the attributes were evaluated negatively; however, visitors were neutral (median= 3) when asked about crowdedness, entrance fees, fees for various activities inside the mine, availability of cultural and religious activities, adequacy of food services and organization of the medical treatment area (table 2). Overall, the visitors were satisfied with their experience, planned to return in the future and to recommend the salt mine to others (all medians= 5) (table 3).

Table 2. Visitors' satisfaction with their experience

After visiting the salt mine, my assessment is the following:	Totally disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally agree (%)	Median	IQR
The signage in the mine is adequate (n=167)	2.4	6.0	24.0	31.7	35.9	4.00	2.00
There is plenty of parking for visitors (n=166)	6.0	7.2	25.9	29.5	31.3	4.00	2.00
Entering, descending underground and moving around in the salt mine are not too difficult (n=165)	4.8	13.9	22.4	33.9	24.8	4.00	2.00
The salt mine is not too crowded with visitors (n=165)	10.3	17.0	29.7	24.8	18.2	3.00	2.00
Entrance fees are reasonable (n=164)	6.7	19.5	31.1	22.6	20.1	3.00	2.00
Fees for participating in the various activities organized within the salt mine are reasonable (n=164)	9.8	15.9	41.5	20.7	12.2	3.00	1.00
Visitors can play various sports while in the salt mine (n=165)	2.4	10.9	35.2	27.9	23.6	4.00	1.00
Visitors can engage in various leisure activities (n=167)	2.4	10.2	32.3	30.5	24.6	4.00	2.00

After visiting the salt mine, my assessment is the following:	Totally disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally agree (%)	Median	IQR
There are numerous cultural and religious activities visitors can participate in while in the salt mine (n=164)	8.5	27.4	37.2	16.5	10.4	3.00	2.00
The treatment area is well organized and the salt therapy programs are effective (n=157)	5.7	9.6	45.9	23.6	15.3	3.00	1.00
Food services were adequate (n=160)	8.1	10.6	31.3	27.5	22.5	3.00	1.00
The guide was very professional (n=148)	4.7	4.7	33.8	27.0	29.7	4.00	2.00
The staff was kind (n=160)	1.3	3.1	16.9	41.9	36.9	4.00	1.00
The atmosphere in the salt mine is pleasant (n=162)	0.6	1.9	12.3	34.6	50.6	5.00	1.00

Source: the authors

Table 3. Overall satisfaction with the experience

Visitors' satisfaction	Totally disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally agree (%)	Median	IQR
I was impressed by the beauty of the salt mine (n=165)	0	0.6	9.7	20.0	69.7	5.00	1.00
The entire experience was unique (n=166)	0	1.8	15.7	28.9	53.6	5.00	1.00
I plan to return in the future (n=164)	2.4	2.4	18.9	22.0	54.3	5.00	1.00
I will recommend the salt mine to others (n=167)	0	0	10.8	27.5	61.7	5.00	1.00

Source: the authors

In the next phase, a principal component analysis (PCA) was run on 18-item questionnaire that measured visitor's satisfaction with their experience in the Turda salt mine. The suitability of the PCA was assessed prior to analysis. Inspection of the correlation matrix showed that all variables had at least one correlation coefficient greater than 0.3. The overall Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.771 which is "middling" according to Kaiser (1974). Also, all individual KMO measures were greater than 0.5 (with the majority being greater than 0.7). Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant (p=.000), indicating that the data was factorizable. PCA revealed six components that has eigenvalues greater than one. Together these explain 69.170% of the variance. Visual inspection of the scree plot indicated that six components should be retained (Cattell, 1966). A Varimax orthogonal rotation was employed to aid interpretability.

Table 4. Results of the Principal Component Analysis

Factors and items	Factor loading						Comm-	Vari-ance expl. (%)
Factor 1: Overall satisfaction (α)	**F1**	**F2**	**F3**	**F4**	**F5**	**F6**		30.77
I will recommend the salt mine to others	.813						.789	
I was impressed by the beauty of the salt mine	.762						.702	
The entire experience was unique	.756						.681	
The atmosphere in the salt mine is pleasant	.721						.681	
I plan to return in the future	.679						.580	
Factor 2: Satisfaction with the staff								9.63
The guide was very professional		.762					.640	
Food services were adequate		.723					.649	
The treatment area is well organized and the salt therapy programs are effective		.680					.552	
The staff was kind		.588					.568	
Factor 3: Satisfaction with the activities								8.90
Visitors can engage in various leisure activities			.814				.764	

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Factors and items	Factor loading						Comm-	Vari-ance expl. (%)
Visitors can play various sports while in the salt mine			.835				.749	
There are numerous cultural and religious activities visitors can participate in while in the salt mine			.431				.488	
Factor 4: Satisfaction with prices								8.18
Fees for participating in the various activities organized within the salt mine are reasonable				.880			.848	
Entrance fees are reasonable				.853			.815	
Factor 5: Satisfaction with accessibility								6.02
The salt mine is not too crowded with visitors					.814		.787	
Entering, descending underground and moving around in the salt mine are not too difficult					.694		.627	
Factor 6: Satisfaction with signage & parking								5.67
The signage in the mine is adequate						.705	.752	
There is plenty of parking for visitors						.823	.780	
Total variance explained								69.17
KMO measure of sampling adequacy = .771								
Bartlett's test of sphericity: 920.36								
Significance: .000								

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization

Source: the authors

Differences in satisfaction between groups based on socio-demographic characteristics

Further, our analysis revealed several statistically significant differences in satisfaction based on socio-demographic characteristics.

Regarding **overall satisfaction**, a significant difference was found based on **residence** ($F(2,132) = 5.44$, *p* = .005). Tourists residing abroad reported the lowest satisfaction (M = -0.70). Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests confirmed that their satisfaction was significantly lower than that of tourists from Romania (mean difference = -0.82, 95% CI [-1.41, -0.23], *p* = .031) and from Cluj County (mean difference = -0.77, 95% CI [-1.48, -0.06], *p* = .004). No other socio-demographic variables (sex, age, or education) were significant predictors of overall satisfaction (*p* > .05).

For **satisfaction with staff**, significant differences were associated with both **education level** and **residence**. Tourists with a university degree were more satisfied (M = 0.25) than those without one (M = -0.16; $t(133) = -2.34$, *p* = .021). A significant effect of residence was also found ($F(2,132) = 9.04$, *p* < .001). Again, tourists residing abroad were the least satisfied (M = -0.87), while those from Romania (M = 0.11) and Cluj County (M = 0.23) reported higher satisfaction. Post-hoc analyses indicated that the satisfaction of tourists from abroad was significantly lower than that of both tourists from Romania (mean difference = -0.98, 95% CI [-1.56, -0.41], *p* < .001) and from Cluj County (mean difference = -1.10, 95% CI [-1.79, -0.41], *p* = .001).

A statistically significant difference in satisfaction with activities (the 3rd dimension) was found only for age ($t(133) = 2.433$, p = .016). Younger tourists (18-39 years) reported higher satisfaction (M = 0.14) than older visitors (M = -0.31), with a mean difference of 0.45 (95% CI [0.08, 0.81]).

No statistically significant differences were observed for the other three satisfaction dimensions across any of the socio-demographic groups examined (*p* > .05).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to evaluate tourist satisfaction with specific attributes and the overall experience at a historic salt mine, and to determine if satisfaction levels differ significantly across socio-demographic groups.

Overall, visitors reported high satisfaction with their experience, indicating a strong likelihood to return and recommend the salt mine to others. At an attribute level, feedback was universally positive, with no areas receiving negative evaluations.

The results suggest that management has been successful in creating a pleasant atmosphere within the mine. Furthermore, unlike comparable sites (Lee, 2015), this mine received positive ratings for both external accessibility—such as signage and parking—and internal accessibility, including ease of movement and descent.

Visitors also appreciated the diverse opportunities for sports and leisure activities. However, neutral ratings for several attributes highlight clear opportunities for improvement. Key areas for development include:

- Expanding on-site dining options.
- Introducing more cultural and religious activities.
- Improving the organization of the medical treatment area.

To preserve the high levels of visitor satisfaction, it is recommended that management avoids significant increases to visitor capacity, which could lead to overcrowding, and maintains reasonable pricing for all activities.

Furthermore, our analysis revealed several statistically significant differences in satisfaction based on socio-demographic characteristics, although their overall influence was less pronounced than anticipated. For instance, we found that gender had no significant effect on tourist satisfaction. This finding aligns with the work of Perović et al. (2012) but contrasts with Huete-Alcocer et al. (2019), who reported that women are generally more satisfied.

However, our study diverges from both Perović et al. (2012) and Huete-Alcocer et al. (2019) in concluding that age is a source of statistically significant differences. Specifically, younger tourists expressed greater satisfaction with the mine's organized activities than older visitors. We also found that education level can act as a satisfaction discriminant, contrary to Huete-Alcocer et al. (2019), with more highly educated visitors reporting greater satisfaction with the staff.

Finally, a visitor's place of residence proved significant. International tourists reported lower overall satisfaction than domestic visitors (including those from Cluj County). Foreign visitors also had higher expectations of the staff and, consequently, reported lower satisfaction levels in this area. These findings have critical implications for destination management and marketing. To enhance the mine's appeal to an international audience, managers must develop a deeper understanding of their specific needs and expectations.

The main limitations of this study are its modest sample size and constrained data collection period. Fieldwork was conducted over a brief timeframe, which did not capture potential variations in visitor demographics across different days, seasons, or times of day. As a result, the findings may have been influenced by atypical events during the survey period, and the sample is not representative of the general salt mine visitor population.

Despite these limitations, this research holds significant value as the first known study to directly measure tourist satisfaction with a salt mine visit. These pioneering results provide encouraging foundational insights and underscore the need for future research with longitudinal designs and larger, more diverse samples.

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