

Quality improvement of services in rural tourism - Comparative analysis regarding the satisfaction level of tourists accommodated in Neamț County

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ABSTRACT: Regarding the hospitality industry, it is very important that clients' wishes are recognized in order to permanently ensure the quality of the tourism services. The questionnaire, as a statistic tool, is frequently used especially at the level of important hotel chains, but it also has an applicability to small-dimensioned accommodation structures. In the current paper such a questionnaire is applied in Neamț County to "Buhalnița Chalet" (Hangu commune), "Eden Boarding House" (Agapia commune) and "Mariko Inn" Hotel (Cordun commune), representative for the three different types of tourism practiced in each area (Izvorul Muntelui Lake touristic sub-zone - ecotourism, Târgu-Neamț touristic zone - cultural-religious tourism and also Roman touristic sub-zone - transit tourism). The case study analyzes the satisfaction level of tourists who benefited from services offered by the tourist structures mentioned above, thus offering important information regarding the clients' profile (from a social, ethnic, professional and financial perspective) and also on other relevant elements necessary in the process of improving the marketing strategy practiced by those accommodation structures.

KEY WORDS: satisfaction level, tourism marketing strategy, Neamț County, Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel

1. Introduction

The rural tourism is integrated part in the field of services, the appropriate areas in which it can develop being the geographic areas with increased natural potential and where the preservation degree is high, both in terms of natural resources and of traditions and customs handed over from generation to generation and preserved thanks to the conservation spirit that regards the historic monuments. It is considered that the type of accommodation appropriate for this type of tourism is the little accommodation and food service structure offered by the locals (Tanasă, 2008).

It is recommended the existence of a legal, fiscal and social status well-framed which has the advantage of decreasing of the disloyal concurrency and of the illegal touristic activities.

The under-privileged rural areas can use tourism as an important means of local, economic development, as engine of economic increase, but this cannot be applied in any circumstances and to any rural community because the impact of the rural tourism varies a lot and it is dependent on a series of factors, as the characteristics of the working force and the seasonality. Though, the local sustenance is an important element of a successful touristic strategy. This is why the touristic strategies have to correspond to the local objectives and to sustain the personality and the traditions of the local communities (Vodă, 2009).

The rural tourism appears as alternative to the traditional tourism which offers to the rural traditional area the opportunity of preservation, and at the same time, of development, by an efficient and sustainable use of its resources. Developed at the level of traditional villages, the rural tourism presents double advantages: on one side for the areas and rural localities by solving a series of problems regarding the territory design politics, by creating jobs and by the economic revival at the communitarian level, and on the other side, it represents an alternative for solving the problem regarding the disequilibrium town – village. Thus it can be framed a social change which offers to the town population the possibility of rediscovering its origins, cultural values, relaxation and the peaceful lost or forgotten.

If before 1989 in Romania, the main type of tourism offers were the so-called “*treatment and recreation holidays*”, the current social period, both at national and international level, requires mainly tourist offers of active holidays which are pragmatically translated into offering to the tourist, along with optimum rest and relaxation conditions, of extra services which to allow the individual to carry out activities which are not accessible in his every-day, urban live. From this perspective, we consider that the strategies that are currently put into practice in Neamț County and the way they are dealt with should be revised and improved so they can meet the current European tourist standards (Tanasă, 2012).

In most of the cases the rural communities perceive the marketing activity as a challenge, meaning that such an approach of promoting the touristic offer is absolutely necessary as the tourists’ access to information regarding the local services is almost impossible without marketing. In most of the cases, the regional promotion has a higher impact as the rural areas have limited resources. The role and the goal of a marketing strategy is to be effective and to maximize the strong points of an economic structure, no matter the structural level on which it will be applicable. This will be fulfilled by centralizing the relevant information and also, most important, by accurately analyzing the data and withdrawing conclusions.

1.1. Touristic zones and sub-zones in Neamț County

According to a study elaborated at the level of year 2011, Neamț county area can be divided from the point of view of a general touristic assessment (natural and anthropic potential, technical and urbanistic infrastructure and specific touristic infrastructure) in several touristic zones and sub-zones. The generally-recognized tourist areas which are mature from the tourist infrastructure perspective are *Ceahlău–Bicaz*, *Târgu–Neamț*, *Cheile Bicazului – Hășmaș* and *Piatra – Neamț*, and the tourist sub-zones, mainly developing after 2000, are *Lacul Izvorul Muntelui*, *Valea Tarcăului*, *Valea Muntelui* and *Roman*. The tourist areas mainly develop around the national parks Ceahlău and Cheile Bicazului – Hășmaș, and Vânători-Neamț National Park, but also around Piatra-Neamț municipality, being recognized both nationally and internationally. In most of the situations, the sub-zones are complementary to the above-mentioned tourist areas, being mainly appreciated at local and zone level. They attract numerous tourists from the main cities of the North-East Developing Area – Iași and Bacău. This new tourist zoning may

represent a very useful element in carrying on a midterm development strategy for Neamț County in the period to come. This zoning process can generate information for a closer acknowledge of the tourist attraction elements that can be concretely used by local administrations or by tourist business entrepreneurs (Tanasă, 2011).

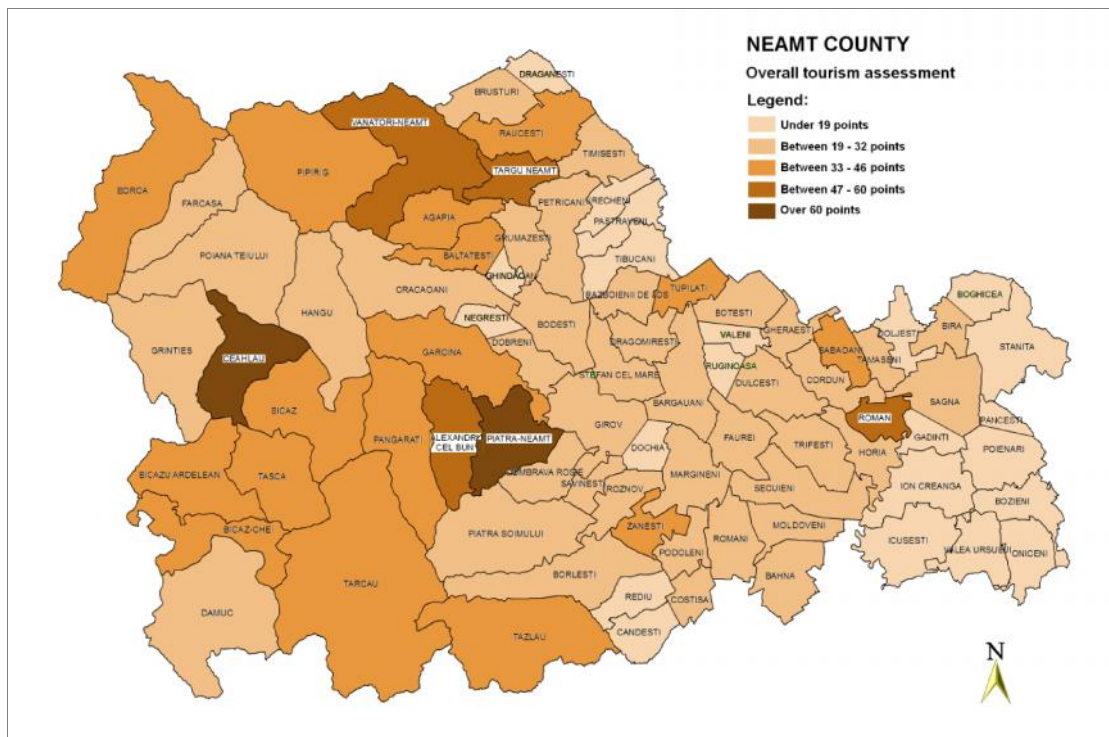


Figure 1. Overall assessment of Neamț County's turistic (Tanasă, 2011).

2. Methods

The identification of the satisfaction level of the tourists accommodated in the analyzed units was made by questioning in approximately equal rates a number of 148 tourists (Mariko Inn Hotel - 50 questionnaires, Buhalnița Chalet - 48 questionnaires and Eden Boarding House - 50 questionnaires) which used the services of the above mentioned accommodation structures and considered representative for Neamț county and for the three types of tourism mainly available in this county (transit tourism, rural tourism - especially the ecotourism, respectively the religious and cultural tourism). The accommodation structures are located in different zones/sub-zones: Târgu-Neamț touristic zones, respectively the touristic subzones Lacul Izvorul Muntelui and Roman. In order to collect information, the questionnaire was used, as means of scientific research, the data being centralized and processed by using SPSS 16.0 and Microsoft Office Excel. The questionnaires were applied to the representative sample during June-August 2011.

By using them, there have been collected information regarding: the target group's profile (from a social, ethnical, professional and financial perspective), the analyze of the clients' satisfaction level regarding the standard and extra-services quality, the identification of the extent in which

the services offered to the tourist correspond to the type of tourism that the accommodation complex practices. There have also been analyzed the importance that the tourists offer to different elements specific to the touristic activities and the satisfaction regarding their quality level, and also the identification of the strategic elements that can assure the ulterior improvement of the services offered by the analyzed touristic accommodation units. This has been made by having as background the literature in the field and corroborated with the tourists' suggestions mentioned as requested by the questionnaire. Therewith, there have been withdrawn information regarding the access to the technical infrastructure and the general services offer (accommodation, food and entertainment), elements that succeed to create the specific rural atmosphere. Also, the questionnaire has been interested in gaining aspects about the information sources and the promoting means which drew the tourists' attention.

3. Results

The hypothesis of this study is that the three analyzed accommodation structures can improve their marketing strategies that they currently put into practice by becoming aware of the beneficiaries' explicit needs which can be pragmatically translated both through improving the quality of the existing services, and also by diversifying their offer according to the practiced tourism type. Another element that the author wishes to emphasize is that of the feed-back importance permanently offered by the clients, the goal being that of improving the endowments and services quality which will consequently generate both clients' satisfaction and the increase of the business profitability.

A case study has been carried out which has identified the way three accommodation structures in Neamț County, representative to the three types of tourism practiced in the area, answer to the tourists' needs. Thus, according to the expectations, the respondents accommodated at Buhalnița Chalet manifested increased interest to rest/treatment and trips in nature, specific to ecotourism, while the ones accommodated at Eden Boarding House were interested in visiting the monasteries in the area (specific to cultural-religious tourism). The clients accommodated at Mariko Inn Hotel were especially interest in touristic transit, in business/conferences meetings, but also in festive or sportive events.

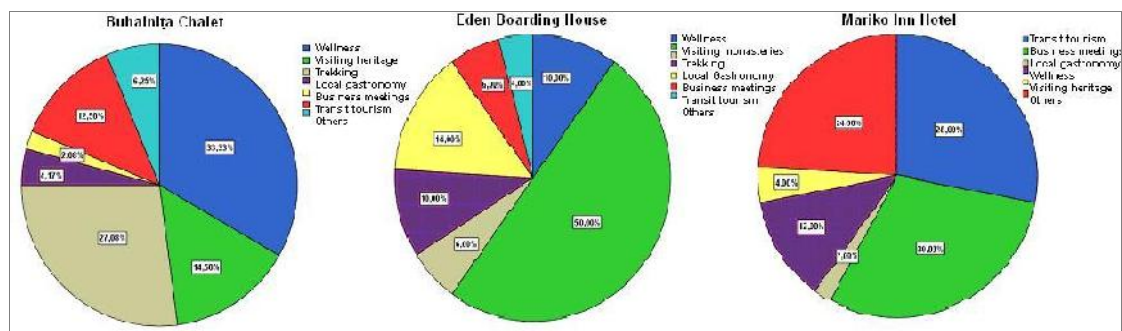


Figure 2. The comparative analysis regarding the main goal of visiting Neamț area (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

For supplementing the incomes of Mariko Inn Hotel, there can be implemented a strategy of encouraging the consumption of touristic services, by adopting a series of promoting politics, of diversification of the extra services and even the tariff discounts during the extra-season.

Comparing with the other similar offers in the area, for all the analyzed accommodation units, there can be generally notices a good and very good quality - price balance. Though, the cumulated average of low and average balance (Buhalnița - 17%, Eden - 10%, Mariko Inn - 12%) reveals the fact that there is place for improvement.

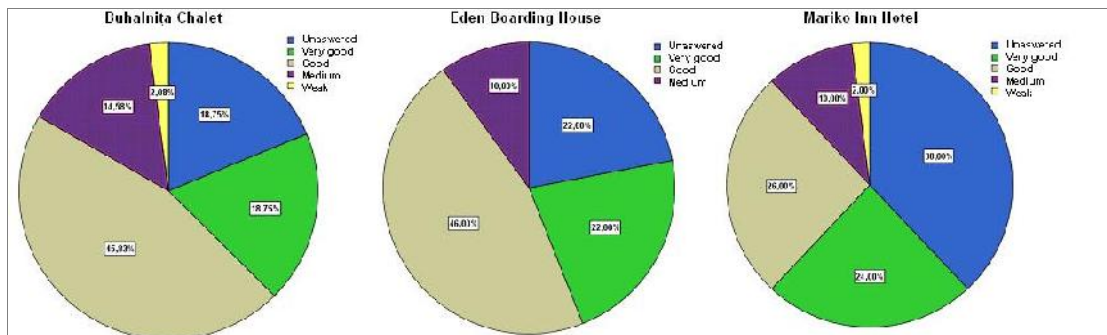


Figure 3. The comparative analysis regarding the price rate in the comparison with the concurrence in the area (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

By analyzing the data, it is emphasized that the above mentioned touristic units promote their services especially in Moldavia region, in the future being necessary the promotion in other region which have specific potential: Muntenia and Dobrogea (especially during the summer period - Buhalnița, Eden) and only Muntenia (especially, Bucharest, for business tourism - Mariko Inn).

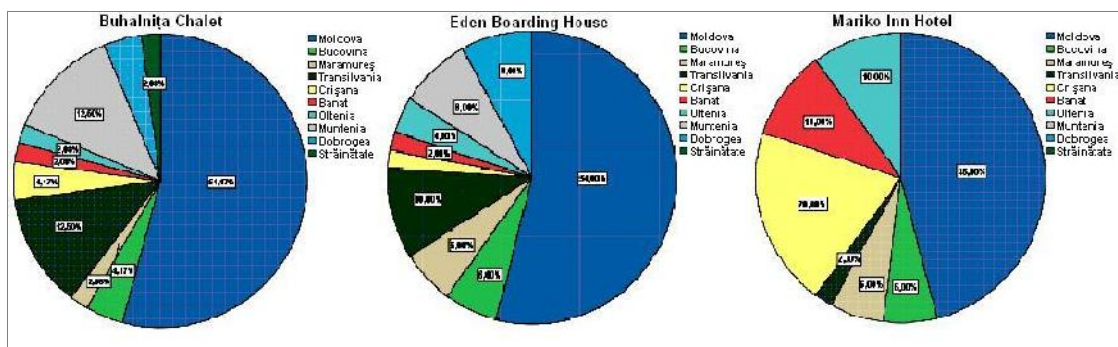


Figure 4. The comparative analysis regarding the tourists' place of origin (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

As for the reason of the visit, the respondents accommodated at Buhalnița Chalet manifested an increased interest for rest/treatment and trips in nature, specific to ecotourism, while the ones accommodated at Eden Boarding House were interested in visiting the monasteries in the area (specific to cultural-religious tourism). The clients accommodated at Mariko Inn Hotel were especially interest in touristic transit, in business/conferences meetings, but also in festive or sportive events.

In all three cases, it can be said that the interviewed clients considered the "bouche-a-bouche" (made by acquaintances) publicity as being the most efficient promotion type, reason why, in the future it is advisable a reorganization/development of the site architecture and also a more efficient distribution of leaflets and brochures.

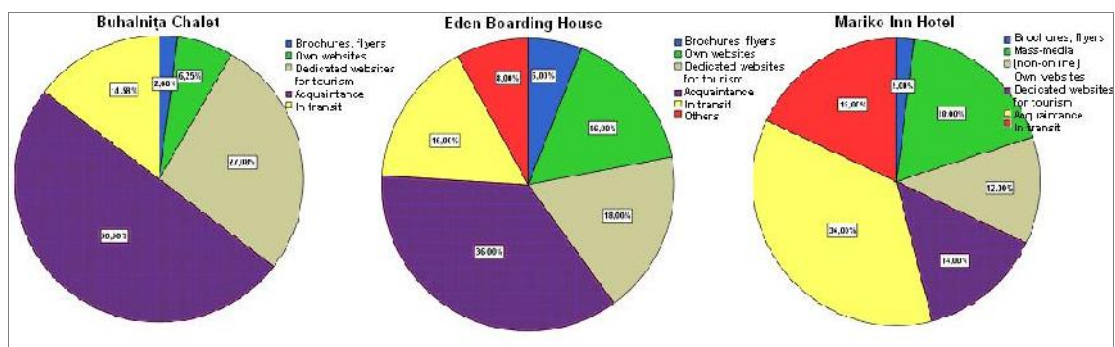


Figure 5. The comparative analysis regarding the promotion efficiency (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

If for Buhalnița Chalet, the accessibility is considered the weak point, the most respondents referring to DN15 road which needs major reconstruction works from the side of county public authorities and also to the secondary access road (to the parking lot), in the case of Mariko Inn Hotel and Eden Boarding House the access is one of the main advantages.

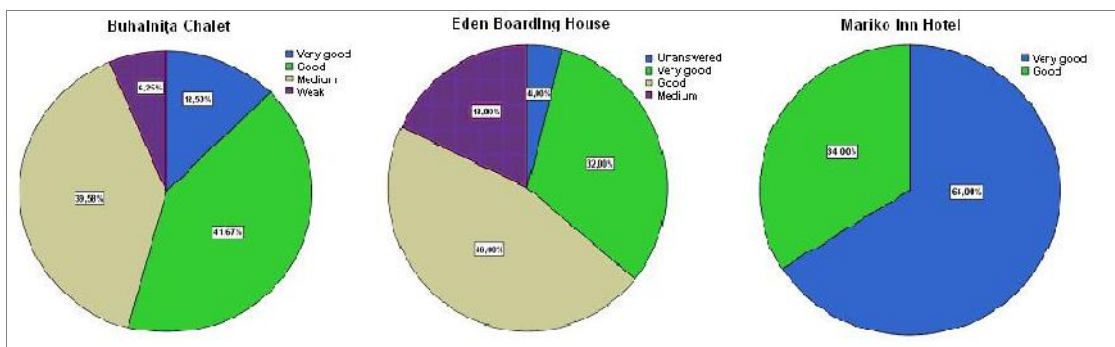


Figure 6. The comparative analysis regarding the access in the area (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

All three accommodation structures succeed in creating a specific rural atmosphere by means of different elements. Thus, for the chalet, the atmosphere is created both by the building’s architecture, furniture and interior design but also by the specific gastronomy. At Eden Boarding House, the gastronomy, music and furniture remind of the Romanian rural area. Therewith, the architecture and the traditional gastronomy from Mariko Inn Hotel make one think of the long ago Moldavian inns.

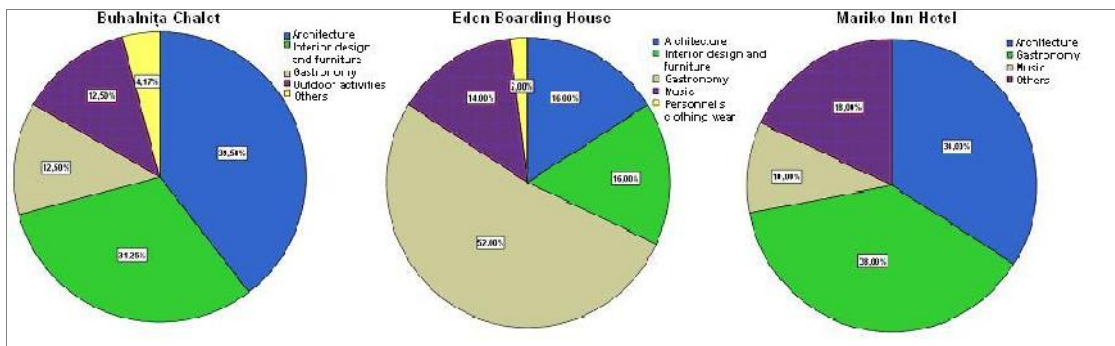


Figure 7. The comparative analysis regarding the setting up of a specific rural atmosphere (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

As for the promotion politics put into practice by the three accommodation units, there have been identified numerous information/promotion instruments, the classical ones remaining also the most efficient. As a matter of fact, the classical instruments, as the signaling means, the internet, the informative materials, mass-media publicity, extra-season price discounts and promotional tariffs are used by each of the structures in different proportions. But there are also specific promotion means such as: sports events (Mariko Inn), philanthropic actions - Mariko scholarships, presents offered to the tourists (Eden, Buhalnița) or the promotional touristic offers (Eden, Buhalnița).

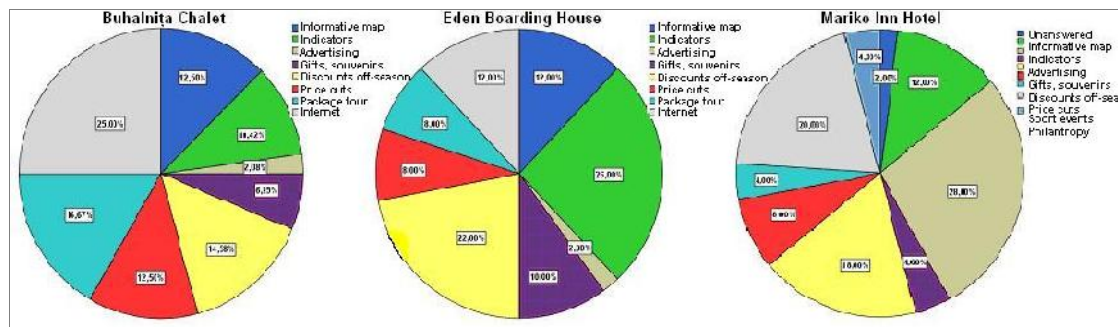


Figure 8. The comparative analysis regarding the use of information/promotion instruments (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

As regards the satisfaction level measured at question 15, there can be identified different problems for each of the analyzed structures. Thus, for Buhalnița chalet, the rethinking of the parking lot is necessary and also the hiring of qualified gastronomy staff. For Eden Boarding House, the improvement of the existing furniture and endowments is necessary, and also a more careful thinking of the extra services. In case of Mariko Inn Hotel, the finalizing of the extension works is advisable to take place as soon as possible and also the change of the interior decorations.

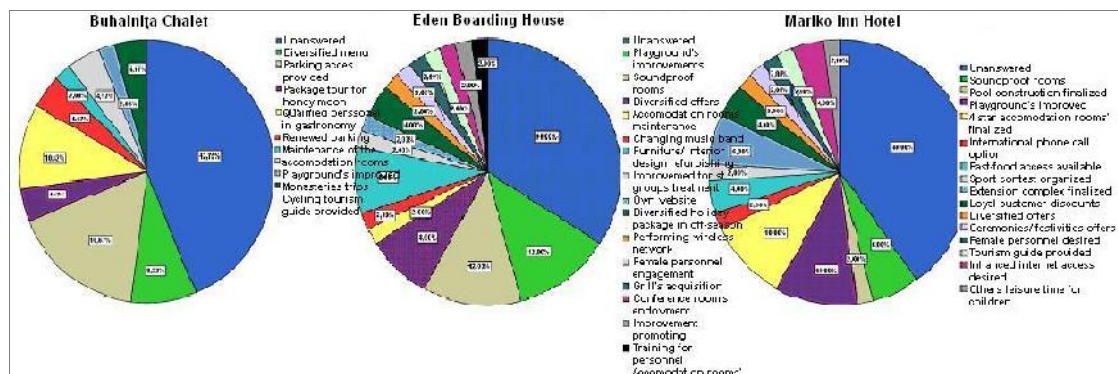


Figure 9. The comparative analysis regarding the problems identified by the tourists (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

Altogether, especially in case of Mariko Inn Hotel, the restaurant's services are both used by the internal tourists that use the accommodation services but also by the persons that travel across the area or by local inhabitants with average and over-average incomes, thus contributing to the increase of the business turn-over.

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Altogether, the interviewed tourists declare themselves satisfied and very satisfied by the accommodation services offered by the three accommodation units. Also, most of them consider the accommodation prices as being at an average level, the exception being represented by Buhalnița Chalet whose prices have been considered as being high by a third of the respondent tourists, but totally justified by the accommodation service quality. As mentioned above, there can be noticed that Mariko Inn Hotel and Eden Boarding House tend to attract also the tourists with smaller incomes, while Buhalnița Chalet creams the market, selecting only the tourists with higher incomes.

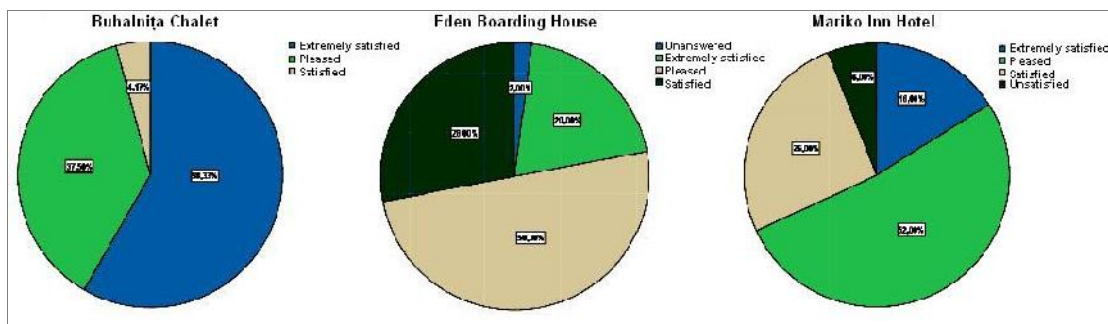


Figure 10. The comparative analysis regarding the accommodation quality (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

As regards the tariffs practiced for food services, the interviewed tourists mostly consider them as being at an average level. In the case of Eden Boarding House (20%), respectively Mariko Inn Hotel (34%), a significant part of them evaluates them as even being small. Even more, the two mentioned touristic units, through the marketing strategy that they practice, try to attract the clients (both the accommodated tourists - internal clients, and the ones that only use the food services - external clients) by practicing competitive prices for the food services. By contrast, a relatively high pro cent of tourists accommodated at Buhalnița Chalet (more than a third) consider food prices as being high, reason why it is recommendable an adjustment of the prices in accordance to the prices of the concurrency in the area.

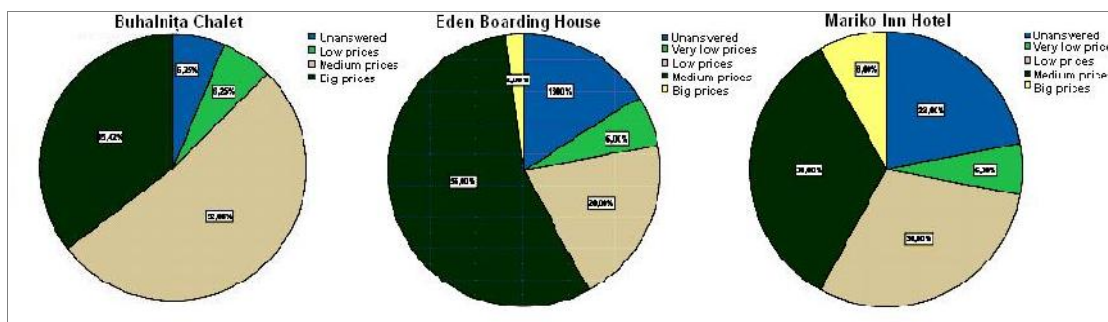


Figure 11. The comparative analysis regarding the rates for gastronomy (Buhalnița Chalet, Eden Boarding House, Mariko Inn Hotel).

5. Conclusions

The data collected by means of questioners applied to the tourists accommodated at the above mentioned tourist structures reveals that the natural potential of Neamț county is not sufficiently touristy exploited by offering to the clients extra-services which to valorize the natural and human heritage of the area.

By means of the local and central authorities' efforts, and especially thanks to the local entrepreneurs' help, the rural tourism is properly developed in Neamț County, with benefic implications in settling the rural population, in the increase of the life quality and the diversification of the income sources in the rural area.

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