



LOCAL INHABITANT AND SERVICE STAFF READINESS TO ASSISTIVE COOPERATION TOWARDS TOURISTS

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Abstract

Purpose. is to analyse local service staff and local inhabitant attitude towards tourists in Latvia. Local inhabitant readiness to cooperate in assisting tourists is part of competitive advantage of tourism destination that is indicated as new affinity parameter in international Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report. List of secondary data indicates current situation in local inhabitant attitude – analysing international tourist satisfaction level in Latvia we can see that 2/3 of tourists are evaluating it as good, but the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2011 (World Economic Forum) indicates attitude of population towards foreign visitors for destination Latvia only under rank 130 out of 139 countries worldwide.

Design/methodology/approach. In order to investigate local inhabitant and service staff attitude and readiness to cooperate and assist tourists qualitative research methods are used to observe responsiveness, communication, courtesy and other attributes of two investigated groups of inhabitants and tourist related service staff in Latvia.

Findings. Research results show the readiness of local inhabitant and service staffs to assist tourists – almost four out of five local inhabitants are ready to assist foreign tourists. 17% of local inhabitants have no assistive cooperation towards tourists, meaning that every fifth or sixth inhabitant just passes by indifferently when approached by foreign tourist with request for help.

Research limitations/implications. Research method is experiment that is conducted by international students as tourists that have common instructions for research organisation process. Each experiment results evaluation process is based on common value that is given by several students. Experiment is performed in tourist area where local inhabitants have better foreign language knowledge.

Practical implications. Recommendations are directed towards enterprises in tourism areas and tourism related NGOs.

Originality/value. This is the first attitude study towards tourists that is made as wide range of experiments both for local inhabitants and service staff.

1. Introduction

Is local inhabitant attitude important for tourism development in different destinations?
Rather often we can see the undervaluation of importance of local inhabitant influence on



tourism development. There is quite a big scepticism towards it both from the practitioners as well as from scientists that study tourism industry related issues. Seems to be a list of other matters of great importance that are a way more important than attitude of people that are walking nearby foreign tourists in tourism destination. From the other hand there are authors stressing local residents' support and emphasizing that it is essential to ensure long-term success in tourism destination development [1]. Aim of this article is to show the importance of both local service staff and local inhabitant positive or assistive attitude towards international tourists from the point of view of tourism destination development. The place of experiment is Riga – the most intensive tourist area in Latvia, that attracted in the year 2011 over one million foreign visitors.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Analysis

Could be local inhabitant attitude part of destination competitiveness? Development of international tourism creates competition of destinations not only on regional but on truly global worldwide bases. To this influence from tourism destination supply side additionally come changes in tourism demand side – access to information on destination and steady increasing tourist experience and knowledge has generated new approach to competition in tourism. There are various scientists and tourism organisations that study specifics of destination competitiveness – as comprehensive example is The World Travel and Tourism Council's (World Economic Forum) developed Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report [2] that contains detailed profiles for the 139 countries featured in the competitiveness study, with extensive data on global rankings covering over 70 competitiveness indicators.

The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report aims to measure the factors and policies that make it attractive to develop worldwide tourism destinations. It is based on three broad categories of variables that facilitate or drive tourism competitiveness – tourism regulatory framework, tourism business environment and infrastructure, as well as human, cultural, and natural resources.

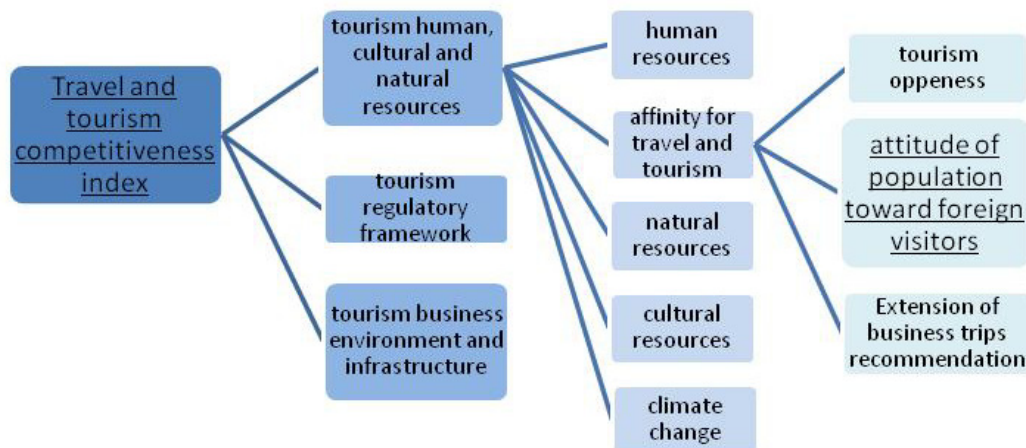


Figure 1. Travel and tourism competitiveness index variables



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Each of these elements is composed in turn by a number of aspects of tourism competitiveness. One of the aspects under tourism human, cultural and natural resources is affinity for travel and tourism, that is influenced by attitude of population toward foreign visitors, and that measures the extent to which a country and society are open to tourism and foreign visitors. It is clear that the general openness of the population to travel and to foreign visitors has an important impact on tourism destination competitiveness.

This way competitiveness measurement shows importance of local inhabitant attitude as part of influence on tourist experience and thus on destination competitiveness.

Table 1

Travel and tourism competitiveness index affinity variable

| 12th pillar of travel and tourism competitiveness – Affinity for Travel & Tourism | Rank of Latvia as tourism destination out of 139 countries |
|---|---|
| Tourism openness | 54 |
| Attitude of population toward foreign visitors | 130 |
| Extension of business trips recommended | 111 |

Above table shows the evaluation of competitiveness of Latvia as tourism destination from the point of view of affinity that is subanalysed by tourism openness, local people attitude and extension of business trips recommended. The lowest evaluation from tourism experts for Latvia is for local inhabitant attitude towards foreign tourists – rank 130 out of 139 destinations analysed. In competitiveness index affinity for travel and tourism pillars, in emerging economies rank among the top five positions worldwide – 1st Lebanon, 2nd Barbados, 3rd Albania, 4th Mauritius, 5th Cape Verde [3]. This evaluation is based on opinions of local tourism experts – but are there any other methods of attitude evaluation that can be useful for more detailed analyses and improvements for current situation in destination?

What is attitude and how it can be evaluated or measured? Description of attitudes from the point of view of human behaviour has been developed many decades ago. For example, Allport, as a classic early attitude researcher, defines attitude as a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related. [4] This very basic interpretation of attitude shows the need to analyse peoples responses to different situations related to researched subject. Over last two decades new implicit measures of attitudes have been developed that promises to access attitudes that respondents may not be willing to report directly or may not even be aware of them [5]. Qualitative research is generally used in circumstances where it is necessary to add understanding to quantitative results, to obtain overall background in a product or service category, or to provide in depth exploration of attitudes and opinions in relation to a category [6]. The method for more detailed and indirect attitude measurement is qualitative research – experiments and observations.

Attitudes are organised through experience and they are presumably formed through learning from a variety of experiences and influences. Our attitudes are shaped by the attitudes passed on by our culture and agents of socialization. Attitudes exert a dynamic



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influence on a person's response to objects, people, and situations, attitudes are directly related to our actions or behaviour. The attitudes we hold predispose us to act in positive or negative ways toward the objects of those attitudes. Most of attitudes can also be studied by measuring participants' physiological responses when answering questions about their attitudes, but the focus is not so much on the verbal reply as on the accompanying physiological arousal. Attitude researchers point out that any production of emotion by attitudes must be reflected in responses by the sympathetic nervous system, the body to respond to researched situations. For example, the facial muscles, particularly those around the eyes and mouth, appear to react quickly to emotional stimuli. The researcher would know there was a physiological response but could not be entirely sure of its cause. [7] Thus Bordens and Horowitz show the need for observation not only for verbal response, but also facial mimic reactions.

How can we evaluate attitude of local staff and inhabitants towards tourists as bases of measurement methodology? As stated before attitude can be evaluated as observation of verbal and non-verbal responses and reactions. The only question is – what kind of reactions of local inhabitants we need to evaluate. Author suggestion is to evaluate attitude using elements of quality measurement. The best-known instrument for measuring consumers' opinions of service quality is the Servqual instrument [8]. In classic quality analyses Servqual model as researched groups of elements are ten dimensions – tangible factors and intangible factors, like reliability, responsiveness, communication, security, competence, courtesy, credibility, understanding, access [9], that later were decreased to five dimensions [10]. Therefore the combination of the dimensions from different aspects of measuring service quality could increase the understanding of the quality construct for particular industry [11] thus for the evaluation of attitude we can use several qualitative dimensions:

- *Access* – Accessibility of the service provider [12]
- *Communication* – willingness to stop for a while and contribute some time for communication with foreign tourist and assistance,
- *Responsiveness* is the willingness to help participants and provide prompt attention [13], it can be seen as readiness of local inhabitants to respond to tourist questions and requests, offering personal attention and showing sincere interest,
- *Mutual understanding* – efforts by the service provider to know and understand the customer [14] that incorporates the foreign language knowledge on a level of basic communication in order to understand what tourist is asking and to respond in the way that tourist can understand the answer.
- *Competence* is capability of staff members in executing the service or tourist request [15], it comprises basic knowledge of information about their country, tourist attractions and services,
- *Credibility* can be described by trustworthiness and honesty [16], it means the reliability of services and information, answers to questions, indications, directions that are pointed to tourist,
- *Verbal and non-verbal courtesy or empathy* means understanding of specific needs, cultivation of friendly relationship [17]. Verbal and non-verbal courtesy of the response includes polite answer and smiling or positive mimic during the process of communication.



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3. Methodology

Experiment was conducted with help of 55 foreign students from Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Korea, Turkey, Switzerland, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Russia, Uzbekistan and other countries. Different students were participating in two directions of experiment – first direction was towards tourism related service staff service quality and attitude evaluation, the second direction was to evaluate local inhabitant attitude.

Task of students was to look like typical tourists – with the map and other typical tourist gadgets. By evaluating the service staff they needed to go to local tourism related establishments and ask there questions related to their business as quality dimension measurement as well as non-business related tourism question as attitude evaluation measurement. For second research direction students needed to approach every 5th inhabitant and ask the question about the location of popular tourist attractions – Freedom Monument, Dome Cathedral, Train station, closest toilets, etc. Communication language was English. Experiment was conducted during the period from November 2011 till March 2012.

Foreign students as tourists had to evaluate local inhabitant verbal and non-verbal communication expressions using criteria that is summarised in following table.

Table 2

Attributes/dimensions of attitude evaluation

| Local inhabitant attitude evaluation | Willingness to assist (communication) | Personal attention, sincere interest (responsiveness) | Understanding the questions in English (understanding) | Clear answer to the questions in English (understanding, competence) | Correctness of answer (competence, credibility) | Politeness of answer (verbal courtesy) | Smiling during communication (non-verbal courtesy) |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|--|---|--|--|
| | Evaluation scale from 0 to 5 for each dimension | | | | | | |
| | 0 means no indication of attitude dimension | | | | | | |
| | 5 means excellent level of attitude dimension | | | | | | |

As in all experiments the evaluation is influenced by perception of the person observing. To minimise this personal perception influence, students had common instructions as well as they were conducting research in groups of 2 to 3 students. The most difficult evaluation is for non-verbal courtesy dimension and it is still partly subjective criteria. There can be used more precise techniques to measure smile with quantitative tools in facial mimic changes with video recording. For this specific experiment we used just evaluation from 0 with no changes in facial mimic, to 5 meaning smiling person.

4. Research Results

What is the attitude of local service staff towards foreign tourists? Tourism industry is very fragmentary and consists of many different sectors – main of them are accommodations, tourism transportation, tourism distribution or intermediates, attraction and destination organisation sector. Additionally to all these direct tourism sectors is a list of different business



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that are part of indirect tourism sector, that is used both by local inhabitants as well as foreign tourists. The purpose of this study is to analyse tourism related enterprises that are part of foreign tourism experience but are used by both segments of customers.

Table 3

Tourism related establishments included in experiment (N=79) divided by business

| Type of tourism related establishment observed | Number of establishments | Share of establishments (%) |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Cafes | 15 | 19.0 |
| Retail shop | 19 | 21.1 |
| Financial establishments | 7 | 8.9 |
| Museums | 13 | 16.5 |
| Souvenir shops | 10 | 12.7 |
| Kiosks | 9 | 11.4 |
| Art galleries | 6 | 7.6 |
| Total | 79 | 100.0 |

Table 4

Study results on local service staff assistive cooperation towards foreign tourists evaluation of each type of establishment (N=79), evaluation scale from lowest 0 to highest 5

| | If there is any employee (accessibility) | Willingness to assist (communication) | Personal attention, sincere interest (responsiveness) | Understanding the questions in English (understanding) | Clear answer to the questions in English (understanding, competence) | Correctness of answer for business related question (competence, credibility) | Correctness of answer for non-business related question (competence, credibility) | Politeness of answer (verbal courtesy) | Smiling during communication (non-verbal courtesy) |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|---|--|--|---|---|--|--|
| Average for all service establishments | 3.8 | 3.5 | 3.3 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 3.6 | 3.1 | 3.2 | 3.0 |
| Average for cafes | 4.4 | 4.3 | 3.7 | 4.5 | 4.4 | 3.8 | 3.2 | 3.6 | 2.5 |
| Average for retail shops | 3.2 | 3.3 | 3.1 | 3.2 | 3.1 | 3.4 | 2.9 | 3.1 | 3.0 |
| Average for financial establishments | 4.4 | 3.6 | 3.1 | 3.1 | 3.0 | 3.1 | 3.7 | 3.4 | 3.7 |
| Average for museums | 3.2 | 2.9 | 3.2 | 2.8 | 2.5 | 2.3 | 2.5 | 2.6 | 3.0 |
| Average for souvenir shops | 4.9 | 3.4 | 3.2 | 3.7 | 4.3 | 4.7 | 4.1 | 3.6 | 3.2 |
| Average for kiosks | 4.0 | 3.6 | 3.1 | 2.9 | 2.8 | 5.0 | 2.4 | 3.1 | 2.9 |
| Average for galleries | 3.1 | 3.6 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 3.3 | 3.3 | 3.5 | 3.3 | 3.7 |



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All types of establishments were situated in centre of Riga. The highest evaluation was for the accessibility of the staff in the establishments after the entrance of the tourist; still in big part of the retail shops and art galleries sales-man were not present in main hall.

The lowest evaluation was for the non-verbal courtesy – smiling.

Foreign students were surprised that they were not approached by the service staff and even in some of the experiments they waited for 20 or 30 minutes and shop-assistants still were just talking with each other and not asking the magic phrase “how can I help you”.

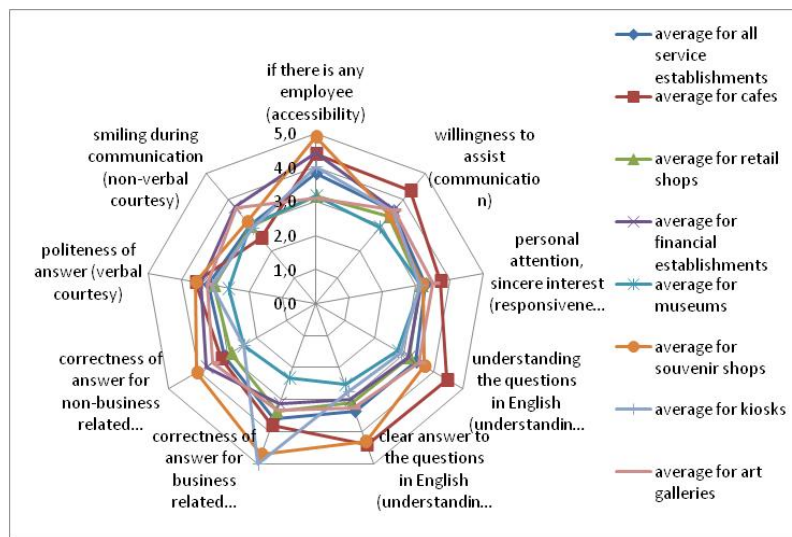


Figure 2. Study results on local service staff assistive cooperation towards foreign tourists evaluation of each type of establishments and each attitude dimension (N=79), evaluation scale from lowest 0 to highest 5.

Few comments for each of surveyed establishments – there were no correlations between sold good quality level and knowledge of foreign language in retail shops, the best foreign language skills are in international chain shops. Cafes and other food and beverage establishment staff are very helpful and with good language skills, but the information that is given is incomplete and sometimes misleading. Banks and currency exchange offices staff was very helpful and in case of shortage of knowledge of foreign language were trying to use a mix of different languages – English, Russian, and German. In souvenir shops was surprisingly low personal interest in approaching the customers but all the inquiries asked were clear to personnel and they were able to explain necessary matters. In kiosk sector there was very different situation for 2 main kiosk operators both for language skills and courtesy. Generally the lowest average staff attitude evaluation was in museums because of poor language skills, low willingness to assist and lack of courtesy. The most assistive was staff of souvenir shops and cafes.

What is perception of local inhabitants from the point of view of foreign tourists? Before the evaluation of each attitude dimension, the overall results show that 17% of local inhabitants when approached and asked by foreign tourists do not communicate and continue to walk further with no communication nor assistance. So it means that every fifth or sixth inhabitant just passes by indifferently.



Table 5

Study results on local inhabitant assistive cooperation towards foreign tourists (N=328)

| Assistive cooperation/ attitude | No. | Percent |
|---------------------------------|-----|---------|
| No assistive cooperation | 59 | 17.00% |
| Assistive cooperation | 279 | 83.00% |

17% percent is not a highly negative indication of local inhabitants that did not want to assist or help to the foreign students, but this kind of negative incident has influence on tourist common travel experience and willingness to return.

Next part of experiment that needs to be analysed are particular aspects of communication that reflect local inhabitant readiness for assistive cooperation with foreign tourists.

Foreign students especially from south of EU where astonished by the level of English language knowledge of local inhabitants. Their evaluation of home country English language knowledge was much lower. The next over average results was related to verbal courtesy that means the politeness of local inhabitants. Foreign students described that part of local inhabitants were ready to give personal attention and showed sincere interest, but part of inhabitants showed a formal politeness. The lowest average attitude indication was for non-verbal courtesy that in this experiment was evaluated by smiling.

Table 6

Study results on local inhabitant assistive cooperation towards foreign tourists evaluation of each attitude dimension (N=328), evaluation scale from lowest 0 to highest 5

| Local inhabitant attitude evaluation (overall, by gender) | Willingness to assist (communication) | Personal attention, sincere interest (responsiveness) | Understanding the questions in English (understanding) | Clear answer to the questions in English (understanding, competence) | Correctness of answer (competence, credibility) | Politeness of answer (verbal courtesy) | Smiling during communication (non-verbal courtesy) |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|--|--|---|--|--|
| Overall average, N=328 | 3.15 | 2.98 | 3.15 | 2.79 | 2.92 | 3.09 | 2.61 |
| Median, N=328 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| Mode, N=328 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 0 |
| Average male, N(m)=153 | 2.94 | 2.83 | 3.23 | 2.83 | 2.8 | 2.87 | 2.25 |
| Average female, N(f)=175 | 3.3 | 3.11 | 3.09 | 2.76 | 3.02 | 3.29 | 2.92 |

Splitting the research results by gender, we can conclude that female average results were higher than for men for most of dimension except English language skills where average results for men was higher. The biggest difference was for non-verbal courtesy since male inhabitants do not smile as much as female.



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Foreign students evaluated the non-verbal courtesy with lowest values and indicated it as the biggest problem. They realised how depressed and despondent are local inhabitants even when talking to other people. Missing of positive non-verbal courtesy creates corresponding destinations image – country with unhappy local inhabitants that would not stimulate tourists to come to this country again or to recommend it to other potential foreign tourists.

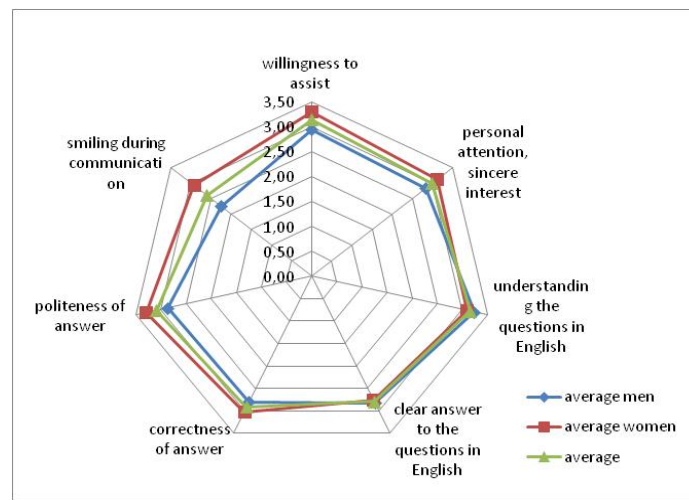


Figure 3. Study results on male and female inhabitants' assistive cooperation towards foreign tourists (N=328), evaluation scale from lowest 0 to highest 5.

The radar graph shows the significance of difference in results for both male and female inhabitants.

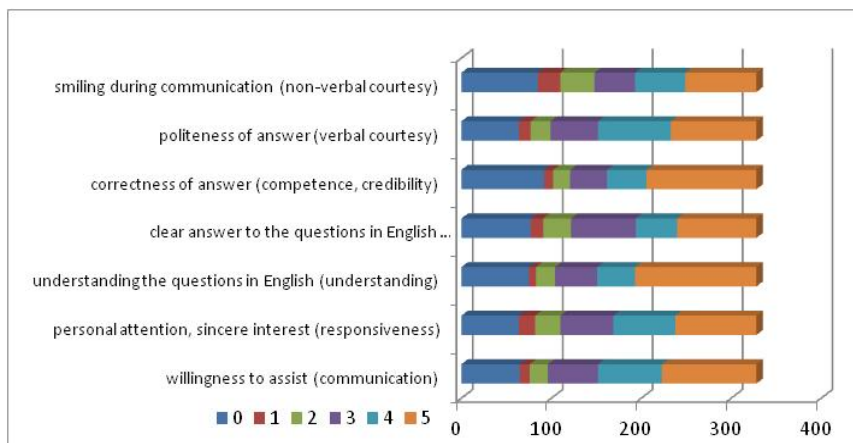


Figure 4. Study results on local inhabitant assistive cooperation towards foreign tourists evaluation of each attitude dimension (N=328) with each evaluation scale level from lowest 0 to highest 5.



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Analysing each dimension evaluation scale results – we can see dominance of the high evaluation (value 5) in all dimensions except non-verbal courtesy, that has even mode 0.

Importance of local people attitude is at least partly recognised in many countries, including UK. British customer service expert has warned residents that a change of attitude is needed and will have to happen now if the country's tourism industry is to survive [18]

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Experiment as qualitative research method is useful tool for attitude evaluation towards foreign tourist both for service staff evaluation as well as of local inhabitants.

Study of tourism related enterprises shows that the lowest average staff attitude evaluation was in museums because of poor language skills, low willingness to assist and lack of courtesy. Average level of assistive cooperation was in retail shops, banks, currency exchange offices, art galleries and kiosks. The most assistive staff is in souvenir shops and cafes.

Evaluation of local inhabitants show that almost four out of five local inhabitants are ready to assist foreign tourists. 17% of local inhabitants have no assistive cooperation towards tourists, meaning that every fifth or sixth inhabitant just passes by indifferently when approached by foreign tourist with request for help. Foreign tourists are quite impressed by the level of English language knowledge of local inhabitants. Next positive evaluation of attitude dimensions is verbal courtesy – politeness of local inhabitants. The lowest attitude indication was for non-verbal courtesy that in this experiment was evaluated by smiling. Splitting the research results by gender, we can conclude that female average results were higher than for men for most of dimensions except English language skills. The biggest rating difference was for non-verbal courtesy since male inhabitants do not smile as much as female. Foreign students evaluated the non-verbal courtesy with lowest values and indicated it as the biggest problem. They realised how depressed and despondent are local inhabitants even when talking to other people.

Lack of positive non-verbal courtesy creates corresponding destinations image – country with unhappy local inhabitants. Such destination perception would not stimulate tourists to come to this country again or to recommend it to other potential foreign tourists.

It is quite easy to give recommendation for tourism related services providers as staff education together with control system will give positive results. Introduction of Q-Latvia quality system for service sector establishments is system that helps both for manager education, staff education as well as staff control duties.

The process of changes in local inhabitant attitudes is quite slow and difficult work. Most successful instrument would be activities of professional tourism NGOs promoting the importance of tourism as export sector as well as explaining the tourist experience through social and cultural dimensions.

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