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Customer satisfaction with community pharmacy services

Andrijana Milošević Georgiev[1*], Lea Neškov[1], Sonja Nikić[1], Valentina Marinković[1], Marina Odalović[1], Dušanka Krajnović[1]

[1]University of Belgrade – Faculty of Pharmacy, Department for Social Pharmacy and Pharmacy Legislation, Vojvode Stepe 450, 11221 Belgrade, Serbia

*Corresponding author: Andrijana Milošević Georgiev,
e-mail: andrijana.milosevic@pharmacy.bg.ac.rs

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Abstract

Customer satisfaction reflects the quality of pharmaceutical services and depends on various factors, such as the quality of services, pharmacists' skills and customer' demographic characteristics. Positive experiences strengthen customer trust and loyalty. Research into user satisfaction is an important tool for improving services. The aim of the work was the analysis of user satisfaction with pharmacy services in Serbia over the last twelve years. Annual reports on user satisfaction in pharmacies from 2013 to 2024 were analyzed. Based on key indicators, a report was prepared comparing satisfaction over the years, taking into account various factors and service quality. With the exception of 2020, public, private and health center pharmacies participated every year. The highest response rate was recorded in 2015. More than 60% of users visit a pharmacy more than five times a year, usually waiting less than five minutes. The highest level of satisfaction with the availability of medicines was recorded in 2021, while overall satisfaction with services peaked in 2022. User satisfaction has remained stable, indicating good availability and quality of pharmaceutical services. The results may contribute to further improvement in practice.

Key words: pharmacy, service, quality, customer, satisfaction

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Introduction

Customer satisfaction is a very important indicator of the quality of healthcare services (1). It largely depends on service providers, who should continuously strive to improve their services. Better quality leads to more satisfied users who are more likely to remain loyal, with service quality being the key factor in satisfaction (2).

Satisfaction occurs in different situations and can relate to both goods and services. The degree of satisfaction is defined by the comparison between expectations and results. If the result of the service meets the customer's expectations, the customer is satisfied (3).

Positive emotions in the customer increase their loyalty to the pharmacy. Positive feelings, satisfaction and trust play a mediating role in this relationship: satisfaction links the pharmacy's services with the customer's trust, and trust in turn strengthens loyalty. In this way, the pharmacist's service indirectly influences how loyal the customer remains to the pharmacy (2).

Customer satisfaction can be seen as “a personal assessment or evaluation of the service or product provided” (4). Customer satisfaction is one of the key indicators of the quality of pharmaceutical services. It is influenced by various factors, such as the type and quality of service, age and education of the customer, frequency of pharmacy visits, location and environment of the pharmacy, among many others. The pharmacist’s general knowledge is important, but interpersonal skills-such as kindness, respect, clear communication, and the ability to provide information-have proven to be crucial for a positive customer experience (2).

When analyzing satisfaction data, it is important to take into account the demographic characteristics of users, as expectations and needs differ according to age, education and health status. As pharmacy services are constantly evolving, the criteria for assessing satisfaction also need to be regularly updated (2). User satisfaction is becoming a key indicator in developed countries, so interest in assessing customer satisfaction is also growing in developing countries in order to analyze and improve public pharmacy services (5).

A quantitative approach provides meaningful methods for measuring customer satisfaction. The most common instruments for studies assessing customer satisfaction are standardized questionnaires (self-report, interview or telephone survey) (5). Customer satisfaction surveys are an important tool for improving services, as they help identify gaps between expectations and actual patient experience. The results of these surveys serve as guidelines for decision-makers and professionals in planning and developing strategies aimed at improving the quality of pharmaceutical healthcare (2).

Since 2005, the Institute of Public Health of Serbia “Dr Milan Jovanović Batut” and the Center for the Development of Pharmaceutical and Biochemical Practice have been systematically and continuously monitoring and studying user satisfaction with pharmacy services across the Republic of Serbia. These renowned institutions, known for their professional and scientific approach, make a significant contribution to the advancement of pharmaceutical practice and healthcare by monitoring patient experiences, needs, and expectations. Their work provides the foundation for implementing measures that improve the quality of pharmacy services and strengthen the role of pharmacists in the healthcare system.

Materials and methods

The survey of customer satisfaction in pharmacy facilities has been conducted annually since 2005. This article presents the results of the last 12 years, from 2013 to 2024. The survey was conducted in pharmacies on a single working day each year. Since 2013, pharmacies in health centers and private pharmacies (primary-level private pharmacies) have been included in the study in addition to public pharmacies (primary-level government pharmacies). All three types of pharmacies participated in the study until 2024, with the exception of 2020, when health center pharmacies did not participate.

An invitation to participate in the research was sent to all pharmacies listed in the network plan and to those that have contracts with the National Health Insurance Fund. The selection of participating pharmacies, branches and dispensing outlets was random, so that 15% of all dispensing outlets within a pharmacy facility were selected. The survey included all customers who were present in the selected pharmacies, branches, dispensaries during a given day. A standardized questionnaire was used in all pharmacies every year. The content of the questionnaire remained the same, except in 2020, 2021 and 2022, when an additional question on the COVID-19 pandemic was included.

Before the research began, those responsible at institutional level received the methodological guide “Methodology for Assessing Customer Satisfaction with Pharmacy Services” *(6)*, which describes the research process and the entry of data in Excel tables. After completing the research, the pharmacies submitted the data to the Department of Social Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Legislation (University of Belgrade – Faculty of Pharmacy). This department collected and verified the data and, together with the Center for the Development of Pharmaceutical and Biochemical Practice, prepared the report. The data analysis was carried out using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to present the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants. For parameters with normal distribution, the average values and variability were expressed as mean ± standard deviation.

In this paper, a desk research approach was applied, involving a comprehensive review and analysis of annual reports on user satisfaction in Serbian pharmacies over the last twelve years. Reports from 2013 to 2024 were analyzed, systematically collecting data on key satisfaction indicators, commonly identified problems, proposed improvement actions and changes in service perceptions over time (7 - 18). Based on the integration and comparison of all available results, a new, synthetic report was produced summarizing the key findings and recommendations, focusing on critical areas for service improvement. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of long-term trends and formed the basis for formulating strategies to improve pharmaceutical practice in primary care.

Results and discussion

Every year, public and private pharmacies as well as pharmacies in health centers participated, except in 2020, when only private and public pharmacies participated. Most pharmacies (318) participated in 2015, while the fewest pharmacies participated in 2020 (52). Table I shows the exact number of pharmacies that participated in the survey in each year.

Table I Overview of the number of pharmacies that participated in the research
Tabela I Učestalost učešća apoteka u istraživanju

Number of pharmacies	Private pharmacies	Public pharmacies	Pharmacies in health centers	Total
2013	79	36	26	141
2014	141	38	38	217
2015	247	34	37	318
2016	233	31	31	295
2017	105	19	12	136
2018	79	20	11	110
2019	98	17	6	121
2020	40	12	/	52
2021	66	10	6	82
2022	100	13	8	121
2023	116	14	8	138
2024	125	14	9	148

Figure 1 shows the response rate, i.e. the number of completed questionnaires per year. The highest number of completed questionnaires was in 2015 (21,206), while the lowest number of respondents completed the questionnaire in 2020 (4,310). However, it should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020 and the lowest number of pharmacies participated in the survey in that year.

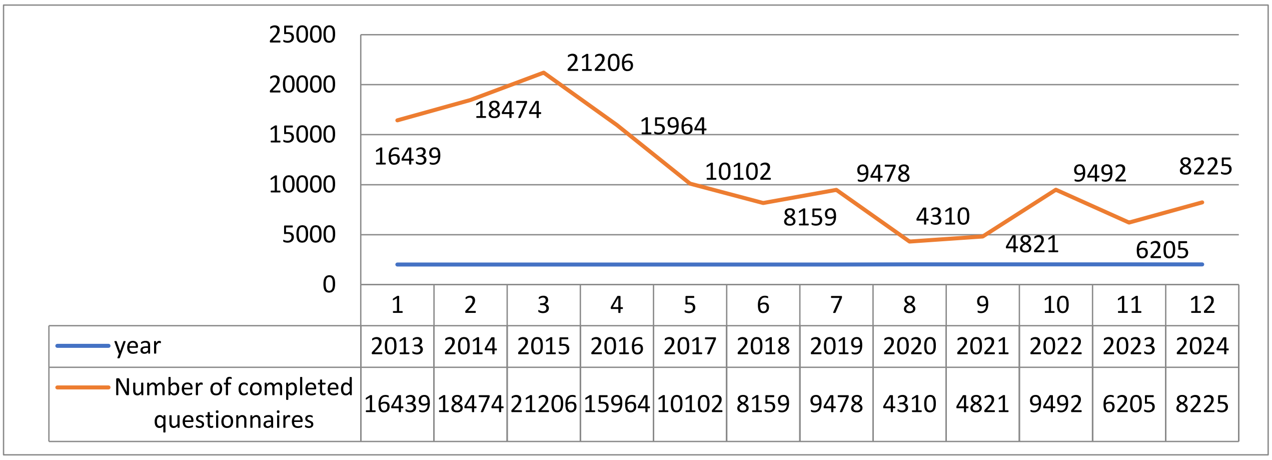

Figure 1. **Response rate by year**
Slika 1. **Broj popunjenih upitnika po godinama**

Respondents were asked how many times they had visited a pharmacy in the last 12 months, with the following response options: ‘5 or more times’, ‘3 to 5 times’ and ‘up to 2 times’. The table shows the results by year, i.e. the percentage of respondents who answered that they visited a pharmacy more than five times a year. Since 2013, the proportion of respondents who visited a pharmacy five or more times was highest in 2020, which was to be expected given the epidemiological situation at the time.

Table II Percentage of respondents who visit the pharmacy ‘5 or more times’

Tabela II Procenat ispitanika koji posećuju apoteku „5 ili više puta”

Year	'5 or more times'
2013	72,53%
2014	69,2%
2015	70.4%
2016	68%
2017	68,9%
2018	68,1%
2019	73,3%
2020	76,10%
2021	69,6%
2022	69,1%
2023	68,1%
2024	69,2%

It was also investigated how much time respondents spent in the pharmacy queue. The response options were ‘less than 5 minutes’, ‘5 to 10 minutes’, ‘10 to 20 minutes’ and ‘more than 20 minutes’. Table III shows the percentage of respondents who answered that they waited less than 5 minutes and this was the most common response in each year, with approximate results. Table IV shows the results by type of pharmacy for respondents who wait more than 20 minutes to identify where respondents wait the longest. It can be seen that respondents using pharmacies in health centers waited the longest in percentage terms until 2018, while in later years the percentage increased and became higher for users of private and public pharmacies. In fact, this percentage even became equal for these two types of pharmacies in 2019.

Table III Percentage of respondents who waited less than 5 minutes at the pharmacy
Tabela III Procenat ispitanika koji su čekali manje od 5 minuta u apoteci

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	%											
Less than 5 min	67.9	70.7	71.7	76.1	79.9	77.1	79.3	72.7	72.8	71.9	72.7	75.5

Table IV Percentage of respondents by type of pharmacy who wait the longest in line at the pharmacy
Tabela IV Procenat ispitanika po vrsti apoteke koji najduže čekaju u redu u apoteci

Year	More than 20 minutes	Type of pharmacy
	%	
2013	1.4	Pharmacies in health centers
2014	1.8	Pharmacies in health centers
2015	0.9	Public pharmacy
2016	1.5	Pharmacies in health centers
2017	0.6	Pharmacies in health centers
2018	0.5	Pharmacies in health centers
2019	0.3	Private and Public pharmacy
2020	1.1	Public pharmacy
2021	1.1	Pharmacies in health centers
2022	0.5	Private pharmacy
2023	0.9	Private pharmacy
2024	0.4	Pharmacies in health centers

The study also examined user satisfaction with the spatial organization of the pharmacy (size of the waiting area, number of workstations at the prescription counter for working with users and the availability of space for confidential discussions) and with the location of the pharmacy. Table V shows the annual results for respondents who were very satisfied with the information provided to them. Respondents were most satisfied with the location of the pharmacy in 2014, 2015 and 2016, where the percentage was very similar (98.3% and 98.2%), while in 2020 the number of very satisfied respondents was lowest (67.7%). Regarding the size of the pharmacy waiting area, the highest percentage of respondents were very satisfied in 2013 (95.33%), while satisfaction with the number of workstations at the prescription counter decreased from 2017 with the lowest in 2020 (65.7%). Regarding the organization of space to ensure privacy/confidential conversations, there is no significant percentage difference in very satisfied users, except in 2020, when this percentage dropped drastically (62.6%).

Table V Percentage of the respondents who were very satisfied with the information provided to them

Tabela V Procenat ispitanika koji su bili veoma zadovoljni informacijama koje su im pružene

Year	Pharmacy location	Size of the waiting area in the pharmacy	Number of workstations at the prescription counter	Organization of space in the pharmacy to ensure privacy/confidential conversation
	%			
2013	91.0	95.3	83.4	70.5
2014	98.3	84.3	83.0	72.0
2015	98.3	83.5	83.2	72.4
2016	98.2	85.7	85.4	75.0
2017	89.8	88.8	86.2	77.7
2018	90.7	85.6	85.5	74.3
2019	88.6	84.9	86.9	74.7
2020	67.7	65.7	65.7	62.6
2021	78.9	73.7	74.8	73.5
2022	79.7	75.9	73.3	71.1
2023	79.4	73.5	73.5	71.6
2024	79.0	75.2	76.3	71.5

Percentage of user responses regarding satisfaction with pharmacy supply for the period 2013 — 2024 is shown in Table VI. For 2020, satisfaction is displayed through state-owned and private pharmacies, as pharmacies in health centers were not included.

Table VI Results of user satisfaction survey in pharmacies - Service elements: Supply during the period 2013–2024

Tabela VI Rezultati ankete o zadovoljstvu korisnika u apotekama - Elementi usluge: Snabdevanje u periodu 2013–2024

Pharmacy supplies						
Year	**Very Dissatisfied**	**Dissatisfied**	**Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied**	**Satisfied**	**Very satisfied**	**Incorrect Input/without An answer**
2013	1.8	1.3	7.7	46.1	42.2	- / 0.9
2014	1.5	1.0	6.3	45.2	45.4	- / 0.8
2015	1.4	0.8	6.3	43.1	47.8	- / 0.7
2016	2.8	2.4	6.9	39.1	48.9	-
2017	1.2	0.6	3.9	37.6	56.3	- / 0.4
2018	1.6	0.7	5.7	43.7	48.3	-
2019	1.5	1.0	4.8	41.8	50.9	-
2020	0.4	0.2	2.7	28.1	68.6	- / 0.5
2021	0.2	0.1	1.3	15.9	82.5	-
2022	0.2	0.3	1.3	18.4	79.8	-
2023	0.7	0.9	3.0	17.2	78.2	-
2024	0.7	1.0	2.6	15.4	80.3	

It can be seen that users were most satisfied in 2021 (82.5%), but this percentage is not significantly lower in 2024 (80.3%), while the lowest percentage was in 2013 (42.2%). Table VII also shows user satisfaction by pharmacy type and the average score. Since 2013, users of private pharmacies were the most satisfied each year, while users of pharmacies in health centers were generally the least satisfied. However, since 2020, there has been a decline in satisfaction with the care provided in state pharmacies. Users gave the highest average score for care in 2021 with 4.8.

Table VII Satisfaction with supply by pharmacy type and average score

Tabela VII Zadovoljstvo snabdevanjem po tipu apoteke i prosečna ocena

Year	Most satisfied	Least satisfied	Average score
2013	Private pharmacy (4.79)	Pharmacies in health centers (4.52)	4.71
2014	Private pharmacy (4.48)	Pharmacies in health centers (3.97)	4.33
2015	Private pharmacy (4.52)	Pharmacies in health centers (3.93)	4.36
2016	Private pharmacy (4.49)	Pharmacies in health centers (3.73)	4.29
2017	Private pharmacy (4.58)	Pharmacies ih health centers(3.98)	4.48
2018	Private pharmacy (4.43)	Pharmacies in health centers (4.04)	4.36
2019	Private pharmacy (4.19)	Pharmacies in health centers (4.05)	4.40
2020	Private pharmacy (4.68)	Public pharmacies (4.56)	4.64
2021	Private pharmacy (4.84)	Public pharmacies (4.73)	4.80
2022	Private pharmacy (4.78)	Pharmacies in health centers (4.68)	4.77
2023	Private pharmacy (4.79)	Pharmacies in health centers (4.52) Public pharmacy (4.53)	4.71
2024	Private pharmacy (4.83)	Public pharmacy (4.20)	4.73

The relationship between customers and pharmacy employees was also analyzed through three questions: politeness in communication with users, time spent in conversation with users, and the manner of listening to users. Customers are satisfied with the elements of pharmaceutical healthcare services related to politeness during communication, adequate time dedicated to conversation, and the technique of attentive listening during communication with customers. Table VIII shows the percentage results that respondents gave in response to the statements they agreed with. In 2015, the highest percentage of respondents agreed that pharmacy employees were polite in communication and dedicated most of their time to them (99.6%), while in 2016, the highest percentage agreed that employees listened attentively to them (99.8%). For all three statements, a drastic decrease in the percentage of respondents who agreed with these statements is observed in 2020.

Table VIII Percentage of respondents who agree with the given statements

Tabela VIII Procenat ispitanika koji se slažu sa datim tvrdnjama

Year	Politeness in communication with me	The time dedicated to me	The attention with which they listen to me
	%		
2013	96.0	88.8	92.5
2014	97.2	92.6	95.6
2015	99.6	99.6	94.1
2016	99.1	99.6	99.8
2017	97.7	93.6	96.2
2018	97.8	93.8	96.4
2019	97.1	93.1	96.2
2020	78.2	75.1	77.2
2021	90.8	86.7	89.2
2022	92.0	88.5	90.0
2023	92.1	88.3	90.7
2024	94.0	90.6	92.9

At the end of each questionnaire, respondents in all years had the opportunity to rate their overall satisfaction with both the pharmacies and the staff. Table IX shows the results by year and indicates which type of pharmacy respondents were least and most satisfied with, as well as the average rating. The least satisfied respondents were predominantly found in health center pharmacies until 2017, with no such respondents from 2020 to 2023. Over the years, the most satisfied respondents were predominantly found in private pharmacies, with the highest average rating of 4.90 recorded in 2022.

Table IX Overall Satisfaction Rating

Tabela IX Ocena ukupnog zadovoljstva

Year	Least Satisfied	Most Satisfied	Average Rating
	type of pharmacy (%)		
2013	Health Centers (5.0)	Private (70.2)	4.69
2014	Health Centers (2.1)	Private (70.4)	4.55
2015	Health Centers (1.9)	Private (70.3)	4.56
2016	Health Centers (1.8)	Private (69.9)	4.57
2017	Health Centers (1.6)	Private (76.7)	4.64
2018	Health Centers (1.8)	Private (60.5)	4.57
2019	Public and Private (0.7)	Private (75.0)	4.66
2020	None	Private (88.0), Public (85.8)	4.86
2021	None	Health Centers (93.8)	4.89
2022	None	Health Centers (91.2), Private (91.1)	4.90
2023	None	Health Centers (93.3)	4.86
2024	Health Centers (82.1)	Private (91.4)	4.71

The question related to service satisfaction regarding COVID-19 was posed to respondents during the pandemic, specifically in 2020, 2021, and 2022. Table X shows the results by year and by type of pharmacy. It can be observed that the highest percentage of respondents indicated that they did not use this service during 2020, especially in private pharmacies (57.40%). However, the most satisfied users of this service were those from pharmacies within health centers in 2022 (63.9%).

Table X User satisfaction with COVID-19 related services

Tabela X Zadovoljstvo korisnika uslugama u vezi sa COVID-19

Year	Type of pharmacy	"It didn't apply to me."	Most satisfied
		%	
2020	**Private**	57.4	35.6
	Public	30.5	48.1
2021	**Private**	35.3	57.7
	Public	29.1	61.6
	Pharmacy in health centers	34.5	60.9
2022	**Private**	46.8	47.9
	Public	32.7	60.8
	Pharmacy in health centers	29.1	63.9

Conclusion

The analysis of the multi-year reports on customer satisfaction with pharmaceutical services in pharmacies in the Republic of Serbia shows a stable level of high satisfaction, with certain aspects of the services having improved significantly over time. The highest overall satisfaction was recorded in 2022, which indicates progress in the quality of service, organization of work and availability of treatments. The high frequency of visits and short waiting times at pharmacies also confirm the importance of pharmacies as easily accessible healthcare facilities.

Customers of private pharmacies are generally more satisfied with the services than customers of state pharmacies and pharmacies in health centers. This trend can be observed in almost all years analyzed in the reports, while a gradual decline in satisfaction has been observed among users of state pharmacies since 2020.

The continuous monitoring of customer perceptions is an important tool for improving pharmacy practice, as it enables the identification of areas that require further development, such as the efficiency of services, waiting times and the quality of communication with customers. The results obtained can serve as a basis for the implementation of measures to further improve the quality and accessibility of pharmaceutical services.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no potential conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

AMG, LN and SN: Conceptualization,data curation, Visualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation and Writing – original draft; MO and DK: Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing - review & editing.

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Zadovoljstvo korisnika uslugama u javnim apotekama

Andrijana Milošević Georgiev[1*], Lea Neškov[1], Sonja Nikić[1], Valentina Marinković[1], Marina Odalović[1], Dušanka Krajnović[1]

[1]Univerzitet u Beogradu – Farmaceutski fakultet, Katedra za socijalnu farmaciju i farmaceutsko zakonodavstvo, Vojvode Stepe 450, 11221 Beograd, Srbija

*Autor za korespondenciju: Andrijana Milošević Georgiev,
e-mail: andrijana.milosevic@pharmacy.bg.ac

Kratak sadržaj

Zadovoljstvo pacijenata odražava kvalitet farmaceutskih usluga i zavisi od više faktora, kao što su kvalitet usluge, veštine farmaceuta i demografske karakteristike korisnika. Pozitivna iskustva jačaju poverenje i lojalnost pacijenata. Istraživanja zadovoljstva korisnika su važan alat za unapređenje usluga. Cilj rada bila je analiza zadovoljstva korisnika apotekarskim uslugama u Srbiji tokom poslednjih dvanaest godina. Analizirani su jednogodišnji izveštaji o zadovoljstvu korisnika u apotekama u periodu od 2013. do 2024. godine. Na osnovu ključnih indikatora izrađen je izveštaj koji poredi zadovoljstvo po godinama, uzimajući u obzir različite faktore i kvalitet usluge. Osim 2020. godine, svake godine su učestvovale apoteke u državnom i privatnom vlasništvu kao i apoteke u okviru domovima zdravlja. Najveći odziv ispitanika zabeležen je 2015. godine. Više od 60% korisnika godišnje poseti apoteku više od pet puta, uz čekanje kraće od pet minuta. Najveće zadovoljstvo snabdevenošću zabeleženo je 2021. godine, a ukupnim uslugama 2022. godine. Zadovoljstvo korisnika je stabilno, što ukazuje na dostupnost i kvalitet farmaceutskih usluga. Rezultati mogu doprineti daljem unapređenju prakse.

Ključne reči: apoteka, usluga, kvalitet, pacijenti, zadovoljstvo

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