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Polyakova, Olga, Mirza, Mohammed T. and Jackson, Howard

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Service quality in fitness centres: literature review and further research

Abstract

Addressing the needs of the customers and understanding their perspectives on service quality (SQ) have become essential for fitness organisations in a competitive environment. In a saturated market, fitness clubs seek methods of both retaining existing and attracting new customers. This places a significant emphasis on SQ and the identification of what customers perceive as quality.

SQ in the sport and fitness industries evolved into a credible research stream from the late 1980s. However, there is still no agreement in the literature about the key dimensions of quality in these industries. Due to the unique aspects of the sport services, there are distinct differences between sport organisations and other businesses. Recognising this distinction, a number of studies (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Martinez and Martinez, 2010) have emphasised the need for developing industry specific SQ models.

The current study aims to review the existing body of literature on SQ in the fitness industry. Future research aims to examine SQ in fitness clubs in England and to test measurement scales from previous studies for their validity. The model of Brady and Cronin (2001) is taken as a basis for the research framework and suggestions for overcoming its existing limitations are proposed.

Introduction

Addressing the needs of the customers, and understanding their perspectives on service quality (SQ) have become essential for fitness organisations in a competitive environment. Inline with global trends, the UK fitness market continues to show sluggish growth (FIA, 2011). Fitness clubs in a saturated market seek methods of both retaining existing and attracting new customers. This places a significant emphasis and focus on SQ and the identification of what customers actually perceive as quality. The study aims to review the existing body of literature on SQ in the fitness industry. Future research aims to examine SQ in fitness clubs in England and to test measurement scales from previous studies for validity.

Service quality in fitness industry

Traditionally, the disconfirmation paradigm became a basis for conceptualisations of SQ (quality is viewed as the result of comparing performance with a set standard). According to Grönroos (1984), the perceived service quality is “the outcome of an evaluation process where the customers compare their expectations with service they have received” (Grönroos, 1984, p.37). Parasuraman et al. (1988) support the same view, defining the concept of SQ as “a form of attitude related but not equivalent to satisfaction that results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions and performance.” (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p.15).

SQ in the recreational industry emerged as a recognised research stream in the late 1980s. To date, a number of studies have focused on identifying dimensions of quality in the sport, recreational and fitness industries (Chang and Chelladurai, 2003; Alexandris et al, 2004; Ko and Pastore, 2005; Lagrosen and Lagrosen, 2007; Moxham and Wiseman, 2009). The identification of “key” dimensions is important for encapsulating all the main components of SQ in the fitness industry. However, there is still no agreement in the literature as to what those dimensions are.

As service-oriented entities, fitness organisations inherited the unique service characteristics of intangibility, perishability, inseparability and heterogeneity. However, due to the actual features and activities of the sport consumer behaviour, there are significant differences between sport and other service based organisations. Studies in the area suggest that the unique sport service consumers motivations (McDougall & Levesque, 1994; Rust & Oliver, 1994; Ko and Pastore, 2004; Szabó, 2010), the human performance (as an important “core product”), high involvement of consumers in co-producing a sport service (Lovelock, 1996), social nature of the service, “excruciating” participation (habit towards the service) (Schneider and Bowen, 1995), valence, or factors out of control of the service provider (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Alexandris, 2004); evaluation of the immediate outcome of service (experience) and after-use benefits (Hu et al., 2009) all contribute towards the uniqueness of the sports based organisation.

Service quality models

Historically, SQ models originated with the Nordic (Grönroos, 1984) and American schools of thought (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). The Nordic perspective suggested two SQ dimensions - functional quality and technical quality. According to the American model, or SERVQUAL, a SQ is the difference between the expected level of service and customer perceptions of the level received (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The authors go on to propose five SQ dimensions; reliability, responsiveness, assurances, empathy and tangibility characteristics of the service experience.

Later critique of the American model led to the emergence of the SERVPERF model (Cronin and Taylor, 1992) whilst the Nordic perspective triggered the development of a three-component model (Rust and Oliver, 1994). Unlike SERVQUAL, SERVPERF is a performance only measure of SQ and excludes consumer expectations due to them being consistently high. The three-component model includes service product (similar to technical quality), service delivery (similar to functional quality) and service environment.

The next two models developed expanded the concept of SQ vertically (Dabholkar et al, 1996) and horizontally (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Vertical expansion suggested a multilevel nature of SQ; (a) higher order factor (retail SQ), (b) dimensions level, and (c) sub-dimensions level. Continual horizontal expansion conceptualized the five dimensions of the Dabholkar et al., (1996) model into three (interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality) and proposed nine sub-dimensions.

Although Brady and Cronin's (2001) model was argued to have superiority with respect to earlier models (Ko and Pastore, 2005; Martinez and Martinez, 2010), it has contradictions that have not been addressed (such as direction of influence between levels of quality). To overcome these issues, Martinez and Martinez (2010) suggested using Brady and Cronin's (2001) model alongside the identification of the factors of SQ in the context of a particular industry.

Industry specific service quality models

A number of published studies have emphasised the need for developing industry specific SQ models. Based on these models, industry-specific attributes would assist researchers in producing service-quality dimensions and scales for measuring perceived SQ in a particular industry (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Ladhari, 2008; Martinez and Martinez, 2008, 2010). Findings of the literature review highlighted several sectors of service organisations which attracted the most attention from researchers; banking (Aldlaigan and Buttle, 2002; Karatepe et al., 2005; Sureshchandar et al., 2002), hospitality (Akbaba, 2006; Getty and Getty, 2003; Wilkins et al., 2007), health care (Shemwell and Yavas, 1999; Tomes and Ng, 1995), IT and technology-based systems (Parasuraman et al., 2005; Wolfinbarger and Gilly, 2003) and travel agency sectors (Lam and Zhang, 1999; Martinez and Martinez, 2007).

Service quality models in fitness industry

The body of literature regarding SQ in fitness centres can be divided into two areas: 1) developing a scale for the measurement of SQ and 2) evaluation of SQ itself. In the first area, Chelladurai et al., (1987) became a pioneer and proposed the first scale for measuring SQ in fitness centres - Scale of Attributes of Fitness Services (SAFS). The scale included five dimensions: professional, consumer, peripheral, facilitating goods, and goods and services. The 1990's saw further critique focused on the SERVQUAL instrument (it generally started to be considered inadequate for specific industries). As a result, Kim and Kim (1995) developed the QUESC (Quality Excellence of Sports Centres) instrument. Eleven factors were included; employee attitude, employee reliability, programs offered, ambience, information available, personal considerations, price, privilege, ease of mind, stimulation and convenience. The stability of a single item factors (price, privilege and stimulation) was questioned by Lam et al., (2005). In their study Papadimitriou and Karteroliotis (2000) used the QUESC on Greek fitness clubs and their findings did not support the factor structure of the QUESC instrument. Instead, the authors suggested following four dimensions - instructor quality, facility attraction and operation, program availability and delivery, and other services.

Following the critique of the SERVQUAL model, Chang and Chelladurai (2003) developed a Scale of Quality in Fitness Centres (SQFS) in which they advocated a three-stage view (or systems view) of the dimensions of fitness services. Thus, nine dimensions of SQ were proposed: three in the input stage (Service Climate, Management Commitment to Service Quality, and Programmes); five in the throughput stage (Task Interactions with Employees, Interpersonal Interactions with Employees, Contact with Physical Environment, Contact with Other Clients, and Service Failures and Recovery); and one in the output stage (Service Quality). One of the weaknesses of the SQFC is that fitness specialists and managers were used for the identification of SQ attributes as opposed to fitness club members (Yildiz, 2011). Lam et al., (2005) combined components of previous models to produce the Service Quality Assessment Scale (SQAS) model. It included six dimensions (personnel, program,

locker room, physical facility, workout facility, and child care) and 31 items. Although the study proved that the scale can be employed for the evaluation of SQ in fitness centres, its authors recommended testing the SQAS with different sample populations.

Brady and Cronin's (2001) model acted as the basis for studies by Alexandris et al., (2004) and Ko and Pastore (2005). Alexandris et al., (2004) argued that Brady and Cronin's model is applicable for health and fitness industry. However, authors noted the model should be tested with larger samples and with different sport service organisations. Ko and Pastore (2005) utilized several aspects of Brady and Cronin's (2001) and Dabholkar et al.'s (1996) works within the context of recreational sport. Four generic dimensions (program quality, interaction quality, outcome quality, and physical environment quality) and eleven sub-dimensions were proposed. The study identified that the proposed hierarchical framework is appropriate to apply to various sport organizations within the recreational sport industry.

Research in the second area – the evaluation of SQ in fitness centres - seems to be more limited. Afthinos et al., (2005) applied the QUESC model in Greek fitness centres in their research aimed at the identification of the most important aspects of service delivery from the perspective of users, but they do not critique the instrument. Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2007) and Moxham and Wiseman (2009) used case-studies (15 and 1 respectively) to explore SQ, an approach which led to limitations of generalisability. The most recent work of Yildiz (2011) used importance-performance analysis (IPA) and proposed the use of the SQS-FC (Service Quality Scale for Fitness Centres) scale for fitness centres. Although the study adds valuable contribution (use of IPA), its reliability and validity can be questioned (it uses a sample from a single private fitness club, has some contradictions with previous research in the scale, and it does not measure overall SQ and valence).

Further research

Following critiques and recommendations from a body of research, (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Ko and Pastore, 2005; Martinez and Martinez, 2010; Yildiz, 2011), this research aims to undertake further attempts to identify SQ dimensions in the health and fitness industry in England. The model of Brady and Cronin (2001) is used as a basis for the research framework. Although the model received some critique, it is recommended as “an excellent basis for proposing the attributes of SQ that can be measured” (Martinez and Martinez, 2010, p.110). To overcome the limitations of Brady and Cronin's model, the following recommendations are suggested by the authors in the framework of future study:

- 1) Enrichment and improved industry specificity of the model through the inclusion of specific SQ dimensions and items. (Ko and Pastore, 2005; Martinez and Martinez, 2010).
- 2) Unique consideration of valence as “its definition is not concordant with the other attributes” (Martinez and Martinez, 2010, p.112).
- 3) Inclusion of a measure of overall SQ (Martinez and Martinez, 2010).
- 4) Employment of IPA - a “useful screening tool” (Rial et al., 2008, p.180) with growing potential applied as a non-traditional alternative for assessing perceived SQ (Martinez and Martinez, 2010; Yildiz, 2011).

All of the above four points will be incorporated in the future study to ensure critique of Brady and Cronin model is addressed. Data collection from fitness centres located in regions of England will include semi-structured interviews with centre managers and customer questionnaires. Both the private and public sectors will be embraced. Quota sampling will be used to consider the type of sector, size of the facility and number of members in the fitness clubs. The research will comprise of two stages: the first stage will be qualitative and will aim to identify the factors determining the SQ perceptions of fitness club customers; the second stage will be quantitative and will include data collection from customers of fitness clubs in order to measure perceived SQ across the fitness industry and explore relationships between factors of SQ.

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