



EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED SERVICE QUALITY AND SPORT INVOLVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test the relationship between sport service quality and sport involvement. The data were collected from 500 individuals, users of sport facilities, in the city of Thessaloniki, Greece. Items from the SERVQUAL model were used to measure sport service quality. The three-dimensional model of leisure involvement was used to measure sport involvement (Centrality, Attraction and Self-expression). The results of the study revealed statistically significant correlations between service quality and two of the three dimensions of sport involvement: centrality and self-expression, supporting the important role of service quality in developing sport policy. These results propose that policy makers should invest on building service quality in sport services and facilities, since this will increase sport participation levels and help citizens adopt a more active life-style.

KEYWORDS : Service quality, Sport involvement, Recreational sports

INTRODUCTION

Quality of service is an important concept in sports management.

A positive assessment of the quality of recreational sports services is accompanied by positive consumer attitudes, such as commitment, psychological commitment and consumer involvement (Alexandris, Douka & Balaska, 2012; Howat, Crilley & McGrath, 2010; Theodorakis & Alexandris, 2010).

Perceived Quality

Perceived quality is defined as an overall assessment or attitude towards the superiority of a service. The quality of services is difficult to measure because it's based by a large percentage to a subjective assessment based on the experience of using the service (Ziethaml & Bitner, 2003). In the case of sports services, the term "perceived quality" is always being used, as the subjective element of the assessments is strong, and the assessments are based on the perceptions of the customers (Ziethaml & Bitner, 2003). This can be easily understood if we consider some examples of sports services. It is difficult to define objectively what a good aerobics program is, as each participant has a different expectation and evaluates the service according to their personal expectations.

There are various models that have been written in the literature review to measure the quality of sports services. The most common models in literature review is SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) and the model of Brady and Cronin (2001).

The SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) proposes the measure of the quality of service with the following five factors:

- Reliability: The degree to which promises are being kept by the management.
- Trust: The degree to which the staff inspire confidence with their knowledge.
- Responsiveness: The degree to which the staff directly solves customer problems.
- Empathy: The degree to which the staff knows the needs of the customers and their particularities.
- Tangible element: The material such as facilities, natural environment, etc.

In the field of sports services in Greece SERVQUAL was modified by Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsozbatzoudis, Grouios, (2004a). The final model proposes the measurement of the quality with the following five factors:

1. Staff: This factor includes information related to staff characteristics and how they interact with customers.
2. Reliability: Defined as the degree to which management keeps its promises.
3. Tangible element: This includes elements that are related to the material environment of the organization.
4. Responsiveness: Defined as the degree to which staff and management are willing to solve customer problems promptly.
5. Outcomes: It is a very important factor which isn't included in the original SERVQUAL model.

Positive evaluation of the quality of recreational services is followed by positive consumer attitudes, such as commitment, psychological commitment, and consumer involvement (Alexandris, Douka & Balaska, 2012; Howat, Crilley & McGrath, 2010; Theodorakis & Alexandris, 2010). A recent study by Alexandris, Funk, Pritchard, (2011) suggested that the service quality contributes to the development of consumer engagement in participants in recreational programs. The relationship between service quality and engagement can be explained by the theoretical analysis of the three dimensions of involvement.

Hypothesis 1

H1: There are statistically significant differences between participants and non-participants in service quality scores.

Hypothesis 2

H2: Perceived quality of sports services is positively related to the involvement in recreational sports activities.

Methodology

The sample of the research was five hundred (N=500) adults, residents of the city of Thessaloniki. The data were collected with on-site surveys. The measuring instrument of service quality was adopted by Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsozbatzoudis και Grouios, (2004a), while the leisure involvement scale (Kyle et al., 2004) was used. A seven-point Likert scale was used from "I totally disagree" to "I totally agree" were used.

RESULTS

Descriptive characteristics of the scale of perceived quality sports services

The first table (Table 1) presents the one-dimensional scale of perceived quality sports services, the mean score, the standard deviation, the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach α).

Table 1. Mean scores, standard deviation, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach α) of Perceived quality of sports services (minimum value = 1, maximum value = 7).

| Variable | Mean | SD | alpha | Items |
|--------------------------------------|------|-----|-------|-------|
| Perceived quality of sports services | 4,8 | 4,1 | .91 | 8 |

For the concept of perceived quality of sports services, in terms of internal consistency reliability, the alpha score was acceptable .91 (Churchill, 1979; De Vellis, 2003; Hinkin, 1988). The mean score was 4.8 (AVG=4.8).

Hypothesis 1

H1: There are statistically significant differences between perceived quality of sports services and sport participation. In order to investigate the differences between participants and non-participants in recreational sports in terms of how they perceive the quality of sports services, an independent sample t-test between was used. Statistically significant difference were found ($p < .01$) (Mean = 5.3 and Mean = 4.1) (Table 2).

Table 2. Differences in "perceived quality of sports services" between "participants and non-participants" in recreational sports

| | Participants | Non-Participants | Items |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|------------------|-------|
| Perceived quality of sports services | 5,3 | 4,1 | 8 |

** $p < .01$

Hypothesis 2

H2: The perceived quality of sports services is related positively with the involvement in recreational sports.

The results from the analysis (Pearson Correlations) between perceived quality of sports services and sport involvement revealed a statistically significant correlation between perceived quality of sports services and the two sub-scales of engagement: Centrality ($r = .40, p < .001$) and self-expression ($r = .45, p < .001$) (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation analysis between the perceived quality of sports services and the involvement in recreation sports

| Sub-scales of involvement | Perceived quality of sports services |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Attraction | ns |
| Centrality | .40** |
| Self-expression | .45** |

* $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed a statistically significant correlation between perceived quality of sports services and the two sub-scales of involvement: Centrality and Self-expression, confirming our second hypothesis.

According to the above findings, individuals who are satisfied with the quality of services during sport participation are more likely to increase the degree of centrality and self-expression through the activity. In other words, exercise would increasingly have a more important role in the life of an individual.

The above results confirm previous research. In a study by Alexandris, et al., (2011) it was suggested that the quality of services contributes to the development of consumer involvement to participants in recreational sports programs. The relationship between service quality and involvement can be explained by the theoretical analysis of the involvements' three dimensions. Thus, when spectators are satisfied with the

quality of the services provided, their "attraction" towards the activity increases, while they take pleasure and have fun from this participation (Ko, Kim, Kim, Lee, 2010; McGinnis & Gentry 2008; McIntyre & Pigram, 1992). The quality of the services provided can also affect the "self-expression" of the participants since the activity has a symbolic meaning for the individual, who through this participation experiences the confirmation and completion of his image to his social environment (Alexandris, Kouthouris, Funk & Chatzigianni, 2008; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Lastly, the quality of services also affects "centrality", since it refers to the role which the activity embodies in the life of the individual and particularly in the awareness of the importance of this activity for the individual in relation to the social environment (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004).

These results confirm the importance of the quality of services in recreational sports. The development of the engagement is required in all exercise programs. Therefore, investing in quality is a key strategy in sports management.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The sample of the research was selected by city of Thessaloniki and the sampling method was convenient. Moreover, the results cannot be representative of the Greek population due to the sample size used. However, they reveal some considered trends.

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