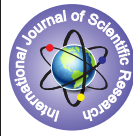


Service Quality in Municipal Sport Programs How the Implementation of an Intervention Program Shapes Participants' Loyalty



Sports Management

KEYWORDS : service quality, satisfaction, loyalty, intervention program

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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on the field of sport management and more specifically on Municipal Sport Centers, carrying out a longitudinal investigation with the implementation of an intervention program. In total, there were 1,179 participants from the Sfa (Sport for All) programs offered by two adjacent Municipalities of the Prefecture of Thessaloniki, in Northern Greece. The findings of the current study indicate that the implementation of an intervention program during a six-month period improves participants' perceptions of the dimensions of the offered service quality, and increases their satisfaction and their levels of loyalty to the Sfa programs. The present study contributes significantly to the development and improvement of the sport programs offered by the Municipal Sport Organizations in Greece, since it approaches key concepts in a particular manner and promotes the ulterior purpose of life-long exercise. Finally, the practical applications and the limitations of the study are presented and analyzed.

1. Introduction

Exercise is part and parcel of daily life for a great number of people. Body and mental health, companionship and sociability, stress relief, as well as good looks are several of the commonest reasons why people participate in sport programs. The service quality offered by different businesses is judged exclusively by their customers (Watson, Pitt & Kavan, 1998). Independent of their ongoing effort to attract new participants in their programs, managers of private and municipal sport centers have turned their attention to keeping their existing customers. According to contemporary theoretical developments and findings of empirical studies, the afore-mentioned orientation costs less compared to attracting new participants in the sport programs offered (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003; Rust & Zahorik, 1993; Kelly & Warnick, 1999). Research in the broader field of sport management so far has shown that service quality and customer satisfaction are the two linchpins through which the concept of customer loyalty may be interpreted (Clemes, Brush, & Collins, 2011; Ferrand, Robinson, Valette-Florence, 2010; Kyle, Theodorakis, Karageorgiou, & Lafazani, 2010; Theodorakis, Alexandris, Tsiggilis & Karvounis, 2013; Yoshida & James, 2010).

Moreover, research findings suggest that the relationships among quality, satisfaction and loyalty vary depending on the consumption stage, as customer needs and perceptions unfold over time (Bolton & Lemon, 1999; Dagger & Sweeny, 2007; Mittal, Kumar & Tsiros, 1999). In the field of sport management and more specifically in the sector of municipal sport centers, to our knowledge, there has been so far no longitudinal study examining whether customer perceptions of the afore-mentioned concepts alter in different moments in time. The particularity of the present study lies in the fact that between the first and second measurement of the same sample of participants there was an intervention program, the purpose of which was to improve the participants' perceptions of the quality of services provided during their participation in the sport programs and increase their loyalty. The implementation of an intervention program in marketing departments of organizations that offer services is a new field of study, since the only study found in the published literature is the one by Watson et al. (1998) in an information management consulting firm and an information service business. The authors underscored the fact that, for managers service quality is an ongoing commitment to the customers of the businesses they run—a fact which is in accordance with Bolton and Drew's research (1991). In this context, the present study attempts for the first time to find out to what extent the implementation of an intervention program is of value, even to a cum-

bersome state mechanism, like the one of municipal sport programs, by providing immediate and costless solutions for their continued operation, development, and improvement.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Research Framework

Several programs of mass sport have been developed by the local authorities in the past twenty-five years in Greece. Their general objectives were the maintenance of good health, fitness development, better use of leisure time, recreation and reduction of inactivity, which is more common in residents of urban areas (Papadimitriou & Karteroliotis, 2000). The specific targets of the local authorities' sport policy, which expand on more general development issues on a local, regional, and national level, are oriented mainly towards the improvement of the citizens' quality of life, the development of an athletic spirit, the provision of equal opportunities for every citizen to engage in activities, and the strengthening of the local and regional economy (Ganatsios & Gargalianos 2007).

There are only a scarce number of studies regarding the quality of the services provided to citizens through sport and recreational activities by the Greek local authorities. Nonetheless, the increased competition, also due to the operation of private sports and fitness centers, creates the need to investigate the factors that affect the level of loyalty of the participants in these programs. For all these reasons, the present study examines these factors through a longitudinal investigation with implementation of an intervention program—an approach which has not been applied so far.

2.2. Service Quality, Satisfaction and Loyalty

Researchers in the service sector have been studying the conceptual as well as the operational issues regarding service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty for over thirty years. As far as service quality is concerned, most researchers in the field seem to agree with the view that quality refers to a comparison of a service that makes the consumer in some form of perfection (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Grönroos, 1982; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). Total satisfaction refers to cognitive and emotional influences and is described as the customers' total experience with a specific service (Li & Petrick, 2010; Oliver, 1993, 1997), while service quality is primarily based on cognitive structure (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994). Loyalty reflects not only consumers' attitudes, but also their behaviors towards a company's product or service (Park, 1996). In the field of sport, loyalty is defined as a customer's positive attitude towards a sport and fitness

center, with regard to its structure and services, but also as the manifestation of positive repurchase behavior—membership renewal, that is.

2.3. Brief Overview of Theoretical Models and Models for the Measurement of Service Quality

Various theoretical models have been developed by researchers for the concept of service quality. Nevertheless, the most popular of them have been proposed by Grönroos (1984) with three dimensions (technical quality, functional quality, and image), and Parasuraman et al., (1988) with five dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles); these models have also been used as theoretical frameworks for successive researchers. More recently, Brady and Cronin (2001), proposed a hierarchical model of service quality, which consisted of three primary dimensions (interaction quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality) with three sub dimensions each (respectively: attitude – behavior – expertise, ambient conditions – design – social factors, waiting time – tangibles – valence). In the fields of sport and recreation there are several models for the measurement of service quality, based on the afore-mentioned theoretical approaches in the published literature (Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsozbatzoudis & Grouios, 2004; Chang & Chelladurai, 2003; Kim & Kim, 1995; Ko & Pastore, 2005; McDonald, Sutton & Milne, 1995).

2.4. Research Hypotheses

The present study was conducted among participants in the municipal sport programs in 2011-2012. The international financial crisis which started in the USA in 2008 and subsequently expanded all over Europe started affecting substantially Greece in the beginning of 2010, especially with the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding. The sport sector was inevitably affected, as many private sport and fitness centers were unable to cover even their operating expenses. Those interested in being involved in sport activities turned their attention to local sport programs offered by municipalities, due to their lower cost; municipalities were therefore confronted with covering the needs that had emerged. The general objective of the present study was to find out whether the participants' perceptions of the service quality received from the municipal sport programs but also the satisfaction they feel and the loyalty they manifest change over time, especially after the implementation of an intervention program. According to Watson et al. research findings (1998), after a year that the intervention program had been implemented, the service quality the company offered its customers was improved; an outcome that is also expected in our research. More specifically, the research hypothesis developed in the current study was the following:

H1: Participants' perceptions of three specific service quality dimensions, their satisfaction and their future behavioral intentions, are statistically significantly different after the implementation of a six-month intervention program.

In order to find out whether the implementation of an intervention program is indeed of value, we conducted a second case study at the same time with the first one, using the same measuring instruments on the participants in the same sport programs of an adjacent municipality, during the same time period. The difference was that in the second case the intervention program was not implemented. In Watson et al. study (1998), customers' perceptions of service quality, without the continuation of the intervention program during the last measurement, returned to the levels of the first measurement. The authors stressed the fact that managers' attention to service quality should be an ongoing commitment for themselves and the company they represent. The research hypothesis of the current study was formulated as follows:

H2: Participants' perceptions of three specific service quality dimensions, their satisfaction and their future behavioral intentions, are not statistically significantly different after a six-month participation period without the implementation of an intervention program.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Procedure

Data for the present study were obtained in November 2011 for the first measurement and in June 2012 (six months later) for the second, from participants of two adjacent municipal sports programs in Northern Greece. The sample consisted of 352 participants who were practitioner's only programs in the halls (e.g. yoga, pilates, aerobic, tae-bo), weight-lifting and ergometric machines (running machine, bike, step, elliptical machine). The researcher intercepted respondents inside the sport and fitness centers, during mornings, afternoons and evenings only during weekdays, as the weekends these centers were closed. Respondents completed their questionnaires before the start of their program and without training intensity. Prerequisite for completing the questionnaires were the participants had to complete at least twelve visits to sports fitness facilities. After pairing of the questionnaires was found that from 861 questionnaires only the 269 were the same for both measurements for the experimental group and from 318 only the 83 for the control group. All statistical analysis was performed using the statistical program IBM SPSS Statistics 19.

3.2. Measures

The instrument included demographic information and multiple-item measures of the three constructs. All measures used in previous studies and modified to reflect the study context. More specifically, a multidimensional – multilevel conceptualization of service quality was adopted as presented by Brady and Cronin (2001) and implemented by Alexandris et al., (2004a) in the context of private health clubs. In the present study, the three dimensions consisted of four items each: physical environment quality (i.e. "The facilities are clean"), interaction quality (i.e. "Employees help members feel comfortable"), and outcome quality (i.e. "programs helped members to improve their health"). A 9-point Likert – type scale, ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 9 (very strongly agree), was used for each attribute of service quality (12 items). Satisfaction was measured using 3 items based on Cronin, Brady and Hult (2000) and Oliver (1997) (i.e. "I am satisfied with my decision to become a member of this health and fitness centre"). Using a 9-point Likert –type scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 9 (extremely likely), participants were asked to answer three items related to their behavioral intentions (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996) and represented the component of attitude.

3.3. Intervention Program

Hays and Hill (2006) supported that through a bad service a firm can learn a lot and improve the quality of services. In the present study the results of the first measurement, guided the researcher in selecting appropriate steps in order to achieve improvement in quality of services offered in specific centers and maintain their customer base. Specifically the five steps followed presented in detail in table 1 below.

Table 1. The five steps of the intervention program

Steps	Actions
Step 1	Display results to the staff (total 38 persons) from the first measurement, identification of points of attention and improvement for employees and management.
Step 2	Interventions in facilities (i.e. correct placement of fitness machines and numbering, hanging brochures on boards with nutrition, stretching, recovery and hygienic issues) and integrating functional needs of the building
Step 3	Contract with new gym instructors, adding new programs and different hours of exercise
Step 4	Biweekly sending informative email to staff with exercise and nutrition issues, giving a feedback (total sent eight).
Step 5	Organization of three seminars for the staff and trainees of the fitness center with expert speakers (Zumba, Nutrition and Exercise, First Aid)

4. Results

For the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the experimental group and the control group the descriptive analysis of frequencies was used. The results showed that between the two groups there were no particular differences in demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. It should also be noted that the two adjacent municipalities offer comparable services and amenities, such facilities with a common start time point and end of their programs (mid September to June). All correlation coefficients indicate the significance of the coefficient at $\alpha=.01$ for both groups and both measurements. The results showed good internal consistency reliabilities for each variable (Cronbach's α coefficients, ranged from .82 to .92) for both measurements of the two groups.

To evaluate the dimensions of service quality, satisfaction and behavioral intentions of participants before and after the implementation of the intervention program, T-test statistical analysis for dependent paired samples was used as shown in the tables 2 and 3 below for both groups. The Pearson correlation coefficient for the two measurements in the experimental and control groups was found to be statistically significant in all variables examined. When checking the difference between the two measurements for the experimental group, statistically significant differences were found, as the probability of two-sided test was for variables physical environment quality, interaction quality and outcome quality Sig(2-tailed)<.001 and for variables satisfaction and behavioral intentions Sig(2-tailed)<.005. For the control group found no statistically significant differences. Therefore, we can claim that participants perceptions for service quality offered, satisfaction and behavioral intentions after implementation of the intervention program, changed.

Table 2. T-test to dependent paired samples for the experimental group (n=269)

Paired Samples Test Experimental group	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
PEQ1 – 2	-4.081	268	.000
INTER1 – 2	-6.770	268	.000
OUTCOME1 – 2	-10.553	268	.000
SAT1 – 2	-3.027	268	.003
BINT1 – 2	-3.423	268	.001

Table 3. T-test to dependent paired samples for the control group (n=83)

Paired Samples Test Control group	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
PEQ1 – 2	.903	82	.369
INTER1- 2	-1.238	82	.219
OUTCOME1- 2	-.198	82	.844
SAT1 – 2	-.751	82	.455
BINT1 – 2	-.301	82	.764

To study specifically the degree of difference in participant's perceptions in the experimental group for each variable separately between first and second measurements, we applied analysis of variances of repeated measures. Specifically, the effect sizes ranged from .036 (Partial eta squared of satisfaction) and classified as medium and up to .283 (Partial eta squared of outcome) as large (according to the criteria of SPSS algorithms Cohen's book: .01-.03 ~ small, .06-.09 ~ medium, .14 and over ~ large).

5. Discussion

Companies make sure they allocate considerable sums of money in their annual budget in order to achieve high rates of customer loyalty (Watson et al., 1998). The purpose of the present study was to fill the gap in the literature and to find out to what extent the implementation of an intervention program is of value, even to a cumbersome state mechanism, like the one of municipal

sport programs, by providing immediate and costless solutions for its development, improvement, and retention. More specifically, this study investigated whether and how the participants' perceptions of three primary service quality attributes altered, but also how their satisfaction and loyalty altered, after the six-month period during which the intervention program was implemented. The findings of the research indicate that the implementation of a six-month intervention program improved the perceptions of the participants in the Sport for All programs offered by the municipalities, with regard to the quality of the service provided. This is in accordance with the findings of Watson et al. (1998), confirming the first research hypothesis of the current study. Moreover, the implementation of an intervention program increases the participants' satisfaction and their intention to continue participating in these programs in the future. In conclusion, although the time period that elapsed between the two measurements of the present study is considered by the afore-mentioned authors' short for eventual changes to become obvious, the implementation of the six-month intervention program seemed nevertheless substantial.

Furthermore, the implementation of the intervention program seemed to be of value, as its non-implementation during the same six-month period, in a respective adjacent Municipality with similar services and facilities, showed no change between the two measurements with regard to the participants' perceptions of the variables in question. This conclusion confirms the second research hypothesis of the present study, but also the view held by Watson et al. (1998). that, "for managers service quality should be an ongoing commitment to the customers of the businesses they run".

To conclude, the present study makes a considerable contribution to the current literature in regard to three points. First of all it provides an example as to what municipal sport centers can do in order to improve the level of service quality offered to citizens: through a series of simple low-cost actions, solely through effective management and mostly through good will and co-operation. Secondly, the present study is the first longitudinal study with the implementation of an intervention program in the field of sport services, offering thus important knowledge and information to the managers of the municipal sport programs in Greece. Thirdly, this study reinforces the view that service quality should be an ongoing commitment also for the management of municipal sport organizations, regardless of potential changes in political leadership in public administration.

6. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations regarding this research are worth discussing so that suggestions and opportunities for future research may emerge. First of all, data was collected from two big municipal sport centers in Thessaloniki—the second largest city of Greece—which means that results are indicative and thus generalizations should be made with care. Moreover, one should not dismiss the fact that the present research was conducted a year after the implementation of the Callicrates reform program, in a period of intense political and economic changes. Actions which required expenditures were hard to materialize, but also took a long time to approve due to bureaucracy.

Studies in different fields have implemented intervention programs for longer periods of time (Watson et al., 1998); it is suggested that this be also done in the field researched by the present study. Furthermore, it is suggested that future researchers investigate how participants' perceptions of the afore-mentioned concepts vary, using nonetheless samples from different sport sectors, but also from different countries.

The present study, however, did not examine the dynamics among service quality attributes, satisfaction and loyalty in different consumption stages, but rather focused on the comparison of the means of participants' perceptions of the afore-mentioned concepts before and after the implementation of the intervention program. Researchers in sport management should henceforth focus on the effect of time on the relationships unfold between all the antecedents of customers' loyalty.

This guideline will certainly clarify issues discussed by researchers in the past on the above factors and may lead them to more specialized approaches to customer loyalty.

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