

Dimensions of Sports and Recreational Service Quality Influencing Fitness Centre's Member Satisfaction

Nooraini Mohamad Sheriff^{1*}, Siti Zaleha Sahak², Fatin Nur Farisha Mohd Razali³, Nellisa Nursyafira Mohd Fadzli⁴ and Nor Norita Japri⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5}Arshad Ayub Graduate Business School, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Authors' Email Address: ¹nooraini@uitm.edu.my, ²siitiza344@uitm.edu.my, ³farisharaz@gmail.com, ⁴nursyafadzli@gmail.com, ⁵ritajapri@gmail.com

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*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Fitness centres in Malaysia remain intensely competitive despite of the industry's continuous growth. Many depend on recurring revenue streams to secure their market position. This has made, satisfaction of customers a prime importance to ensure their survival in the industry through the delivery of excellent service quality. Basing on this premise, four dimensions of Scale for Service Quality in Recreational Sport (SSQRS) influencing the satisfaction of fitness centre customers was examined. From a total of 113 questionnaires distributed to customers of a gym, all were returned with valid responses for analysis. Findings from the study affirmed that SSQRS dimensions were significantly related to customer satisfaction. Specifically, the outcome dimension demonstrated the greatest impact on satisfaction among customers of a fitness centre followed by physical environment quality and interaction quality. Thus, suggesting there is a need for fitness centres to continuously improve their physical environment quality and outcome quality through personalize workout routines, optimization of space with value-added service, and offer workout streaming to deliver satisfaction, long term revenue and continuous growth.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Interaction Quality, Outcome Quality, Program Quality, Scale for Service Quality in Recreational Sport (SSQRS)

INTRODUCTION

The culture of fitness is making a strong emergence and flourishing worldwide (Ulseth & Seippel, 2011). Asians are no exception to this new trend. Over the past decades there has been a growing number of Asians enveloped in a new mindset of caring for their health by patronizing fitness centres. This has been made possible by their increased earnings over time, improved knowledge on the importance of a healthy life and a strong urge to emulate the Western lifestyle that promotes the importance of sports especially fitness. Malaysians too are evolving parallel to this new trend. According to a survey on gym memberships conducted by Rakuten Insight prior to the COVID-19

pandemic, around 49 percent of respondents in Malaysia patronizes a gym several times a week while 25 percent have a gym or fitness studio membership (Hirschmann, 2021).

Before Covid-19 storming Malaysia, there was a growing number of fitness centres as well as gym membership which reflected a rapid growth of the nation's fitness industry. According to the International Health, Racquet & Sports club Association (IHRSA) the Malaysian fitness market has been growing at a healthy rate of 9.5% a year since 2014 (Subramaniam, 2019). In 2019, 2.5 million people used the services of fitness centres in Malaysia and this figure is forecasted to grow in future (Statista, 2019). Valued at approximately US\$35m in the first quarter of 2019, Malaysia expects to gain 9.3% growth in the fitness industry amounting to US\$50m by 2023 (Walsh, 2018).

However, the onset of Covid-19 pandemic nationwide has impacted fitness studios and gyms in Malaysia through the need for social distancing, mandating of tight standard operating procedures (SOP's) and movement restrictions. On a brighter and promising note, the nation's initiative to transcend into the endemic phase by year end 2021 would serve as a catalyst to normalize business activities including those of fitness centres (BERNAMA, 2021). As the health and fitness industry lifecycle in Malaysia is somewhat in their early stage, this would again see foreign brands and local fitness centres making a comeback and competing alongside each other.

Fitness centres just like any business are obliged to deliver and sustain high levels of satisfaction among customers. Customer satisfaction is one avenue available to differentiate a fitness centre over existing competitors (Ko & Pastore, 2007). This is necessary in view of the increased competition denoted by the growing number of fitness centres in the Malaysian market. Incidentally high satisfaction towards fitness centres can increase the demand towards the centre while low satisfaction levels may diminish demand towards the centres. Ultimately the success and profitability of fitness centres are directly linked to customer satisfaction. Thus, it is crucial for such centres to continuously analyse the changing demands and expectations of their customers and adjust their services to meet newly emerging demands and deliver customers satisfaction to grow their customer base (Khuluq et al., 2016).

The presence of a relationship between customer satisfaction and services provided by an organization has been postulated by past studies (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015; Novokreshchenova et al., 2016). In fact, the key to surviving in any market is to focus on delivering service quality to customers (Cristea & Mocuta, 2018). Service quality has been acknowledged as an essential component to gain competitive advantage for a business which in turn can impact their bottom-line financial performance and profitability (Wilson et al., 2016).

The long standing SERVQUAL model has been widely used in measuring service quality and comprised of 5 dimensions namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Dabholkar et al., 1996; Parasuraman et al., 1988). However, in the context of health and fitness industry, the SERVQUAL model has been adopted and adapted and has evolved into several models such as tri-component of service quality model (Rust & Oliver, 1993), four-factor service quality expectations scale (Lam et al., 2005; Papadimitriou & Karaterliotis, 2000), and three-factor model of service quality (Brady & Cronin Jr, 2001). Alexandris et al. (2004) conceptualized their service quality study based on Brady and Cronin Jr's (2001) service quality model, comprising of three dimensions namely physical environment quality, outcome quality, and interaction quality. Consequently, Ko and Pastore (2005) incorporated the missing element in Brady and Cronin Jr's work (2001) which is the program dimension as proposed by Kim and Kim (1995), Howat et al. (1996) and Papadimitriou and Karaterliotis (2000) and developed a more specific service quality model for recreational sports called the Scale of Service Quality in Recreational Sport (SSQRS), which has formed the foundation for this study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Customer Satisfaction

The main goal for fitness centres is to create committed and loyal customers through customer satisfaction (Brady et al., 2001; Gonçalves et al., 2014). Customer satisfaction entails a product or service that provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment (Oliver, 1977) or outcome against one's expectations (Kotler, 1999). Furthermore, customer satisfaction relates to a pleased feeling and happiness resulting from an actual experience of consuming a service and is perceived as a right decision made (Oliver, 1977). This state of feeling constitutes 5 elements namely pleasure, happiness, right decision, good experience, and overall satisfaction which has formed the basis of this study.

The key objective of delivering and managing service quality is to increase customer satisfaction which reinforces customers' intention of using the service (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Dhurup & Mokoena, 2017). Achmad et al. (2021) affirmed that service quality has a direct effect on customer satisfaction. Eirini et al. (2020) in their study affirmed four dimensional factors of SERVQUAL namely empathy, reliability, assurance and tangibles as strong predictors of service quality in the context of Greek fitness centres. Consequently, companies can expect higher profitability in return from customers being satisfied with the provided service quality (Teik, 2015). However, this study has adopted four SSQRS dimensions of service quality for a fitness centre affecting customer satisfaction, as conceptualized by Ko and Pastore (2007). The aforesaid dimensions include physical environment quality, program quality, outcome quality, and interaction quality and are further discussed in the following sections.

Scale of Service Quality in Recreational Sport (SSQRS) Dimensions

The Scale of Service Quality in Recreational Sports (SSQRS) model was developed to assess users perception of service quality and satisfaction towards recreational sport programs as well as spare time activities (Ko & Pastore, 2007). The instrument comprised of items representing four dimensions of service quality assessment notably program quality, physical environment, interaction quality and outcome quality basing on the conceptual framework for recreational sports posited by Ko and Pastore (2004, 2005, 2007). The SSQRS model has revealed customer's experience at different levels and various dimensions of service that is ultimately capable of assisting manager's to improve the programs they offer and retain current customers (Ko & Pastore, 2007). In addition, Brady and Cronin Jr (2001) in their study uncovered that the SSQRS model statistically fills the gaps in service quality conceptualization for recreational sports.

To date, the application of SSQRS model of service quality has generated an array of differing findings. Ko and Pastore (2007) in their study revealed that program quality was the major factor affecting customer satisfaction meanwhile Serra et al. (2016) uncovered the interaction and outcome quality dimensions were pertinent to deliver customer satisfaction. Additionally, Dhurup and Mokoena (2017) in their study discovered that interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality were significant predictors of customer satisfaction. Hence, this study has applied the SSQRS dimensions in the context of a fitness centre to determine the extent they contribute towards customer satisfaction and to reaffirm findings of earlier studies.

Physical Environment Quality (PEQ)

Physical environment quality entails the built environment in which service delivery occurs (Bitner, 1992). Ko and Pastore (2007) postulated the physical environment quality as the surrounding elements of a service centre that carves customers perception of value and quality for the service

rendered. As most services are produced and consumed simultaneously, customers will experience the total service within a physical facility. In their study Ko and Pastore (2007) too has uncovered that customer satisfaction towards fitness centres is positively influenced by the physical environment quality.

According to Soleymani et al. (2012) physical environment includes the dominant mood, design of the facility and equipment's that are available and offered by service providers to all members. On a more specific note physical environment quality can be measured through the inclusion of 3 dimensions firstly, ambient condition that is the non-visual aspect of service environment such as ambience, temperature, lighting, noise, music, and scent, secondly facility design which is the service facility's layout focussing on functional and aesthetic nature of the facility and lastly equipment's' that encompasses devices used to enhance the sport experience such as shower, sauna and steam room, towels, lockers, drinks area and other amenities (Ko & Pastore, 2007). Consequently, this study incorporated 5 elements to measure the fitness centre's physical environment quality, namely well-maintained ambience, facility layout that served member's needs, convenient facility layout, up-to-date equipment and equipment's are in a good usable condition.

Numerous literatures have discovered the importance of physical environment quality in delivering customer satisfaction towards fitness centre's (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Dhurup & Mokoena, 2017; Serra et al., 2016). In fact, when members perform the evaluation of programs offered by fitness centres, physical environment and facilities tend to be the central focus for their evaluation of the tangible physical surroundings of the fitness centre (Ko & Pastore, 2005; Westerbeek & Shilbury, 2003). As such, it is vital for fitness centres to maintain high quality facilities since poor physical environment quality will reduce member satisfaction which may in turn result in low member participation and low retention rate (Kim et al., 2016).

Interaction Quality (IQ)

Serra et al. (2016) defined interaction quality as a subjective perception of how service is delivered during the service encounter. Specifically, the interaction quality encompasses the attitude, behaviour and expertise of service personnel and other clients who are being served (Ko & Pastore, 2007). Kyle et al. (2010) added that interaction quality addresses the nature of interaction between clients and business employees. In a nutshell, interaction quality entails the process in which service is delivered to clients and how they analyse this interactive process.

Interaction quality often relates to the engagement of people within a service centre which in turn may pull more people to participate in the service centre's programs (Ko & Pastore, 2007). Interaction quality comprises of two components namely client-employee interaction and inter-client interaction. Client-employee interaction refers to the interaction between customers and service personnel once the customer steps into the service facility. While interaction between the clients and the other clients represent the inter-client interaction. Ko and Pastore (2007) posited that clients will only experience high satisfaction when both client-employee and inter-client interaction manifests in an appropriate manner. Basing on this premise this study used 5 items namely friendly employees, knowledgeable employees, employees are ready to help, other clients have an impact on service perception and other clients leave a good impression, in measuring the interaction quality of the fitness centre.

Service organizations must pay innate attention to the quality of interaction between clients and service personnel involved in the delivery of services as it often affects clients' satisfaction level (Echeverri & Salomonson, 2017; Natalisa & Subroto, 2003). According to Teik (2015), fitness centres are not an exception since outcomes of the entire fitness centre's image whether good or bad is often influenced by the satisfaction level of clients after evaluating the interaction quality. Additionally, Wu et al. (2015) discovered that interaction quality is critical in driving client's satisfaction as the service

competencies among frontline employees' positively impact clients' perception of service quality. Therefore, to encourage clients to participate in workout programs, fitness centres should internalize key elements of interaction quality in delivering improved service quality.

Program Quality (PQ)

Program quality in the context of a fitness centre refers to customers perception of the program's excellence (Brady & Cronin Jr, 2001; Howat et al., 1996) through which they experience a good value of the services rendered (Ko & Pastore, 2007). In order to make customer's satisfied, a service provider must ensure they deliver high quality service differentiation and superior quality of service to their customers (Ko & Pastore, 2007).

In this study, program quality has been posited to include 3 dimensions namely range of program activities, operating time and information. The range of program activities incorporated 2 aspects of program offered to customers that is variety and attractiveness. Operating time on the other hand enquired whether the operating hours observed by the fitness centre is convenient to all customers and the program conducted started on-time. Meanwhile, information referred to customers' ability to obtain up-to-date information, such as updates on program, staff, schedules and competitions held (Ko & Pastore, 2007).

Consequently, the value of the programs offered to the customers should meet the customers' expectations, so that one can sustain and compete in the market. Customers expect the quality of service rendered to be high in meeting their expectation. As such, developing a creative and quality program that meets customer expectation would drive customers' satisfaction. Hence contributing to the competitive advantage of the fitness centre (DellaVigna & Malmendier, 2006; Kim & Kim, 1995; Ko & Pastore, 2005; Lam et al., 2005).

Outcome Quality (OQ)

Outcome quality entails what a customer receives at the end on the service delivery process from their interaction with the service provider (Grönroos, 1984; Ko & Pastore, 2007). Brady et al. (2001) on the other hand asserted that outcome quality delves with members' perception of the superiority of service experience received. However, in this study the definition set by Ko and Pastore (2007) was applied as it reflected the most appropriate meaning for outcome quality being the "result" of engaging in the service process. More importantly it has been reported that outcome quality is linked to members satisfaction of expected benefits derived from using sports service such as fun and entertainment (Grönroos, 1984). Ko and Pastore (2007) in their study on outcome quality incorporated the following elements: increased physical ability, increased skill, good feeling when leaving the fitness centre, a sense of belonging and made many friends through the workout programs. These measures were affirmed by (Hsieh & Hiang, 2004) who asserted that members' perception of service outcome quality is vital in performing their evaluation of the service delivery that eventually leads to member satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In the event, the service outcome does not meet members expectations, they would perceive the quality of service to be unfavourable which would lead to member dissatisfaction (Teik, 2015).

To sum, it can be concluded that program quality, physical environment quality, interaction quality and outcome quality dimensions of SSQRS has been postulated to be related to customers satisfaction in the recreational sport industry. Satisfaction can be further enhanced through a deep understanding of customers' expectation towards service quality. Disseminating up-to-date information equipped with a good variety of program, coupled with on-time delivery would not only deliver member satisfaction but also raise the fitness centre's image in the sports and recreation market. Consequently, in managing customer's satisfaction, fitness centres need to be equipped with good program and

physical environment quality, interaction quality and outcome quality as advocated by the SSQRS model.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This descriptive study ascertained the relationship between SSQRS dimensions, namely program quality, physical environment quality, interaction quality, outcome quality and customer satisfaction of a fitness centre. The unit of analysis for this study are individual customers who have registered as a member of the fitness centre and are presumably accustomed to the services offered by the centre. The total population in this study were 160 registered members, whose data were retrieved from the fitness centre's first quarter membership data for the year 2019. Given the population of 160 registered members a sample size of 113 was solicited for this study. This is based on the generalized scientific guideline for sample size decision as postulated by Sekaran and Bougie (2016). The convenience sampling technique which is a non-probability sampling technique was utilized to select respondents for this study as restricted access was obtained to solicit responses from the registered members of the fitness centre.

Data for this study were solicited from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained from a survey of registered members of a fitness centre. Secondary data on the other hand were sourced from books, journal articles, organisation's performance report, and website. The SSQRS dimensions were adopted as the measures of service quality specifically for the fitness industry. A five-point Likert scale was used to ascertain the relationship between physical environment quality, program quality, interaction quality, outcome quality and customer satisfaction. The questionnaire was pretested prior to full-scale data collection to ensure the language and content were appropriate, easily understood and well sequenced. The distribution and collection of questionnaires were conducted at the end of the fitness centre's weekday and weekend workout programs. The main reason for intercepting the respondents at the end of their workout program was to solicit feedback based on their consumed services at the fitness centre.

SPSS version 24 was used for data analysis. The item consistency reliability of the independent and dependent variables was measured using Cronbach's Alpha value introduced by Hair et al. (2003). Both the descriptive and inferential statistics were performed. The regression analysis was performed to ascertain the relationship between dimensions of SSQRS and customer satisfaction of a fitness centre.

Results of the demographic analysis shown in Table 1, a majority of the respondents are females (59.3%) with a bachelor degree (42.5%) and employed in the private sector (48%). Among members of the fitness centre, the largest age group are 26-35 years old (43.4%) with an average monthly income of RM3001– RM5000 (46.0%). The highest number of respondents (74.3%) have registered for the monthly program conducted by the fitness centre. In terms of membership duration 43% have been members for less than 6 months while 57% have suggested the fitness centre should install vending machines as part of the value-added service for the centre.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Attribute	Particulars	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	46	40.7
	Female	67	59.3
Age	Below 18	6	5.3
	18 – 25	24	21.2
	26 – 35	49	43.4
	36 – 45	22	19.5
	Above 45	12	10.6
Highest Education Level	Primary/ Secondary Level	16	14.2
	Diploma	20	17.7
	Bachelor	48	42.5
	Master	25	22.1
	PhD	4	3.5
Occupation	Student	17	15.0
	Self-Employed	29	25.7
	Private	54	47.8
	Government	12	10.6
	Housewife	1	0.9
Average Monthly Income Level	Less than RM1000	17	15.0
	RM1001 – RM3000	34	30.1
	RM3001 – RM5000	52	46.0
	RM5001 – RM7000	6	5.3
	More than RM7000	4	3.5
Current Program Intake	Monthly program	84	74.3
	Yearly program	7	6.2
	Private program	13	11.5
	Self-Training program	9	8.0
Membership Duration	Less than 6 months	49	43.4
	6 – 12 months	33	29.2
	More than 12 months	31	27.4
Suggested Value-Added Product/ Service	Vending Machine	64	56.6
	Massage Chair	17	15.0
	Supplement products	20	17.7
	Spa	12	10.6

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

All the 113 questionnaires distributed were returned complete and valid for analysis. The Cronbach Alpha value for all variables exceeded 0.7. The highest Cronbach's Alpha value attained was for outcome quality (0.894) while the lowest was 0.707 for program quality. Meanwhile, customer satisfaction, physical environment quality and interaction quality have secured a good Cronbach Alpha value of 0.799, 0.709 and 0.840 respectively. According to Nunnally (1978), a questionnaire would be considered to possess good internal consistency when the Cronbach Alpha value exceeds 0.7.

The overall mean and standard deviation for all variables are displayed in Table 2. According to the mean values, interaction quality had attained the highest overall mean value of 4.18. The result indicated that interaction quality was agreed to be the most important dimension of service quality rendered by a fitness centre. Outcome quality and physical environment have the second highest mean with the value of 4.09. All variables have attained overall mean values of above 4.0 which indicated that all these variables have been agreed to be important dimensions of service quality for a fitness centre.

Table 2: Overall Mean and Standard Deviation for SSQRS Dimension and Customer Satisfaction

SSQRS Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking (Based on mean)
Physical Environment Quality	4.09	.983	3
Program Quality	4.05	.955	4
Interaction Quality	4.18	.899	1
Outcome Quality	4.09	.863	2
Customer Satisfaction	4.16	0.876	

Based on the regression analysis result displayed in Table 3, there was a significant relationship ($p=0.000$) between program quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality, interaction quality and member satisfaction towards a fitness centre. The R^2 attained was 0.570 while the adjusted R^2 was 0.55. This implied that 55% of the variance in member satisfaction towards a fitness centre was explained by the four SSQRS dimensions. This finding is consistent with the study done by Teik (2015) where the adjusted R-square depicted 62% of the variance in customer satisfaction towards a fitness centre was explained by the four SSQRS dimensions.

Furthermore, the p-value obtained for three SSQRS dimensions were <0.05 . Specifically, the dimensions are: physical environment quality (0.000), outcome quality (0.001) and interaction quality (0.027) which were significantly and positively related with customer satisfaction of a fitness centre. The outcome quality dimension had the highest influence on member satisfaction with a beta value of 0.368, followed by physical environment quality and interaction quality with beta values of 0.292 and 0.217 respectively. These three SSQRS dimensions are consistent with the findings of Teik (2015) which indicated that physical environment quality, outcome quality, and interaction quality are positively related to member satisfaction of a fitness centre. Mokoena and Dhurup (2017) have posited that adherence, maintenance and upkeep of the SSQRS dimensions would consistently deliver high service quality which in turn drives member satisfaction towards the fitness centre.

However, the findings on program quality was not significantly related to member satisfaction. This contradiction can be explained in reference to the specialize nature of this fitness centre. Customers who visit a specialized fitness centre often look forward to participate in a specific workout program to meet their personal needs such as to lose weight, building muscles, enhance knowledge in self-defence when they signed up as a member of this fitness centre. As such any alteration to the program which contradicts with their former expectations may cause disappointment hence suppressing their satisfaction (Teik, 2015).

Table 3: Regression Test on Independent Variables and Dependent Variable

Item	Beta	(t)	Significance (p)
Physical Environment			
Quality	0.293	3.929	0.000*
Outcome Quality	0.368	3.475	0.001*
Interaction Quality	0.217	2.243	0.027*
Program Quality	-0.120	-1.893	0.061
R-square	0.570		
Adjusted R-square	0.554		
F-value	35.759		
p-value	0.000		

* $p < 0.05$

CONCLUSION

In short, outcome quality has demonstrated to have the strongest impact on member satisfaction towards a fitness centre, followed by physical environment quality and interaction quality of the SSQRS dimensions. Therefore, it would be imperative for the fitness centre to formulate their service delivery processes to heighten their outcome quality and interaction quality so as to accentuate member satisfaction. In addition, care should also be taken to strategize improvements/comfort to the physical environment quality of the fitness centre as members spend time on their workout programs in the aforesaid environment of the fitness centre.

In view of these findings, it is recommended that the fitness centre conducts personalize workout routines and specific dietary plan based on individual member's ability level and set specific goals to address their needs. The fitness centre too should consider optimizing their internal space with complementary services such as customized vending machines, healthy food kiosk and automatic teller machine to deliver convenience and a uniquely different experience to members. Consequently, the fitness centre could offer workout streaming services to further improve the interaction between trainers and members. With the institution of these value-added-services, satisfaction among members can be elevated which in turn will contribute to generate long-term revenue stream and continuous growth for the fitness centre.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Nooraini, M. and Nellisa, M. conceived and planned the survey instrument. Fatin, M., Nellisa, M. and Norita, J. carried out the survey and data preparation. Nooraini, M, Fatin, M., Nellisa, M. and Norita, J. contributed to the interpretation of the results. Nooraini, M. took the lead in writing the manuscript. Siti S. was responsible to edit and format the paper and ensure all are orderly for submission. All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis and manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

We certify that the article is the Authors' and Co-Authors' original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This research/manuscript has not been submitted for publication nor has it been published in whole or in part elsewhere. We testify to the fact that all Authors have contributed significantly to the work, validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to Jurnal Intelek.

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