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CONCEPTUALIZATION OF METHODS DESIGNED TO EVALUATION SERVICE QUALITY IN SPORT

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SUMMARY

This article represents conceptualizations of several methods designed for evaluating service quality in sport with reference to literature which was used as a source. The attention was exclusively focused on methods where customers on the basis of their own subjective opinion evaluate the service quality. The subject of evaluation was to define theoretical concepts of services whose quality is measured; also called the behavioral domain. The methods SERVQUAL and Brady's model including a specific proposal for conceptualization of this method for fitness area were introduced in detail, including graphic illustration of conceptualization.

Key words: review, behavioral domain, Brady's model, SERVQUAL model

INTRODUCTION

Generally, sport is considered the most popular leisure activity. The growth in inquiry for sport services is leading to development of economic activities such as building new sport stadiums, sport centers or luxurious clubs which have modern sport equipment (Standeven & DeKnop, 1999). Since the beginning of the 20th century sport has been used to achieve economic and social development because of various sport organizations creation and provision of various sport services in local communities (Chalip, 2004).

The overall growth in service quality forces the sport organizations to be more concerned with sport marketing and promotion. The quality of services provided is therefore considered crucial. High and unique quality is a way to gain customers and their loyalty for a long time. The below mentioned models designed for service quality evaluation are suitable for institutions which deal with organization in sport at any level.

Professional literature suggests a range of concepts and approaches to service quality evaluation.

Therefore there exists a consensus on that fact that the important aspect in evaluating or improving service quality is defining the core of quality or its dimensions (Chelladurai

& Chang, 2000; Brady & Cronin, 2001; Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). However, in search for the best possible conceptualization and operationalization of service quality no required consensus has been achieved. If we have a look into literature that reflects this lack of consensus, first of all we must focus on a definition and a characteristic of service.

The term service comes from business literature. Many authors offer various definition of service. For example, Ramaswamy (1996) explains service as “the business transactions that take place between a donor (service provider) and receiver (customer) in order to produce an outcome that satisfies the customer” (p. 3). Zeithaml and Bitner (1996) define service simply as “deeds, processes, and performances” (p. 5). Grönroos (1990) describes service in the following way: A service is an activity or series of activities of more or less intangible nature that normally, but not necessarily, take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and /or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems (p. 27). This, from our point of view, as the most accurate definition would be possible to complement with a statement that in case of sport and free time activities it does not always have to refer to solving customer problems. A motive for using sport services can be “ordinary” pleasure from motion or competition.

Generally, there does not exist any consensus regarding service characteristic among scientists. Yong (2000) writes that scientific conceptualization is divided into two groups of researchers. In the first group there are scientists who look at the concept from the point of view of service itself. They pay attention to incongruence between marketing strategies for services and products in terms of division to services (intangibles) and products (tangibles). They think that dividing marketing strategies is required for these two concepts. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), as well as Zeithaml and Bitner (1996), identify the following functions of services which differ them from products: service is intangible, heterogeneous, simultaneous in production and consumption, and perishable. Pointing at unique features of services helps understanding and creating concepts in various areas of services.

PURPOSE

This work serves as a summary of professional literature focused on conceptualization of methods for service quality evaluation in sport. The work particularly brings theoretical knowledge of perceiving quality in the area of providing sport services by profitable organizations such as sport centers, fitness centers etc. It presents traditional and new concepts of service quality and specific models of methods used by specialists to evaluate service quality and customer satisfaction in the area of sport. The attention was exclusively focused on methods where service quality is evaluated by customers themselves, for example based on their subjective opinion. The enumeration of methods, in relation to their high amount, is not complete and there are stated only standardized methods which are mentioned in professional literature the most frequently.

The subject of evaluation was to specify the characteristics of services, as the authors define these methods. In connection with the conceptualization method the theoretical concepts whose are measured. This is also called the behavioral domain.

The methods SERVQUAL and Brady's model are introduced in detail, including graphical illustration of conceptualization and also with a specific proposal for conceptualization of this method for fitness area.

RESULTS

There does not exist any universal definition for the term "service quality". The current approach of marketing specialists can be expressed by their consensus on the fact that the one who should decide if a service is or is not first-rate should always be the customer for whom the service is provided (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Carrillat, Jaramillo & Mulki, 2009; Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Jemmasi, Strong, & Taylor, 2011; Kotler & Keller, 2006; Ladhari, 2008; Martinez & Martinez, 2010). Therefore, service quality is often defined as customer perception of service perfection, where according to most authors this perception of perfection depends on previous customer experience with a particular service. Based on this experience a customer creates new expectations with which they are willing to use a service offered again or for the very first time (Chang, Chen, & Hsu, 2002; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988; Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008; Theodorakis, 2008; Yong, 2000).

This is also the reason why service quality in current literature is mostly defined as "the difference between what is expected from each of the service dimensions and what a consumer perceives he or she receives from them" (MacKay & Crompton, 1988, p. 46).

It is quality in various dimensions of a service that creates "a set of tangible (goods-content) and intangible (service-content) attributes the customer recognizes, pays for, uses or experiences" (Collier, 1994, p. 63).

There are several characteristics of quality dimensions. For example Grönroos (1984) presents a model distinguishing two dimensions which are technical and functional quality. McDougall and Levesque (1994) later on added to the Grönroos' model a third dimension, physical environment, in which they suggest their three-dimensional model of service quality. This model consists of service result, service process and physical environment. Lehtinen & Lehtinen (1983) speak of process quality and outcome quality, i.e. final quality. Rust and Oliver (1984) suggest three-dimensional model including service/product, delivery and environment. Lehtinen & Lehtinen (1991) later on suggested a model with three dimensions which are physical quality, interactive quality and corporate quality. Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (1996) consider their three dimensions physical aspect, reliability and personal interactions.

Two ways of thinking regarding the conceptualization and operationalization of service quality were combined by Brady (1997). He developed a multidimensional and hierarchical model of customer perceived service quality, so that he combined the model by Dabholkar, Thorpe, and Rentz (1996) and the three-factor model by McDougall and Levesque (1994). Brady's model contains three dimensions (constructs) – interaction quality, outcome quality, and physical environment quality. Each dimension consists of three sub-constructs. Interaction quality includes attitude, behavior and expertise sub-dimensions. Outcome quality includes waiting time, tangibles and valence. And finally, physical environment quality consists of ambient conditions, design, and social factors in the way figure 1 implies.

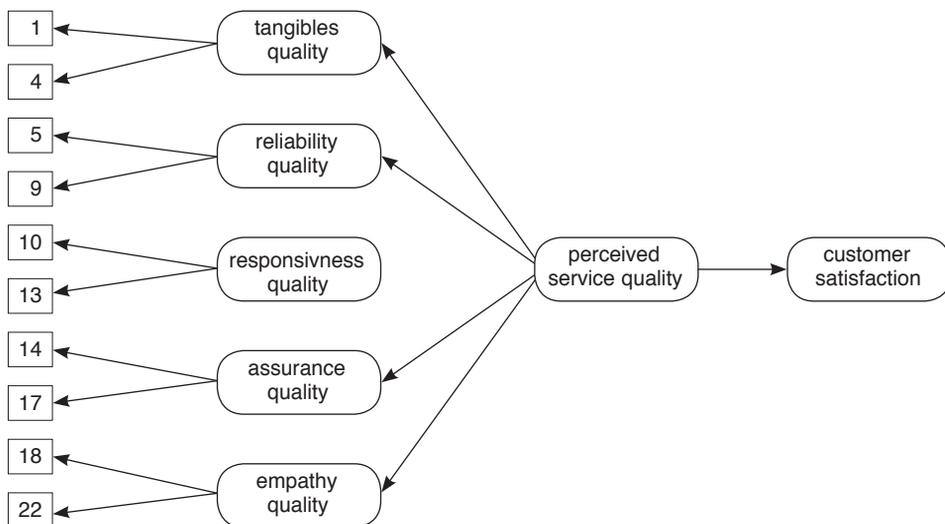


Figure 1. Conceptualization of the SERVQUAL method

Probably the most-known and most used model to identify service quality is the SERVQUAL model. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) understand quality as a degree and direction of discrepancy between customer expectation and their perception of a service provided. Potential customer dissatisfaction then, according to these authors, comes from imperfections that appeared during service provision process itself. These imperfections (negative gaps) were described by them in a service quality model known as five – GAP model of service quality. This model presents 5 discrepancies (gaps) in service provision process.

- GAP 1 expresses a difference between customer expectation and what the leadership of a company thinks the customer expects.
- GAP 2 occurs as disagreement with characteristic of services made by a company and customer expectations as the organization leadership presents it to their employees.
- GAP 3 occurs when systems of service delivery (personnel, technologies and processes) do not meet the standards guaranteed to customers.
- GAP 4 occurs when a company via other media proclaims a different level of services than they actually provide, i.e. do not fulfill promises from the commercial.
- GAP 5 is a result of all previous gaps; sizes of gaps 1–4 are counted as a final result of what customers expect and what a company offers.

This methodological approach of service quality evaluation conceptualizes service quality perception as a difference between expected service quality and really provided service. And it is the customer who subjectively evaluates their expectations and perception of individual services. These were, by the authors mentioned above, expressed first by ten, later on based on other researches by five dimensions – tangibles, reliability,

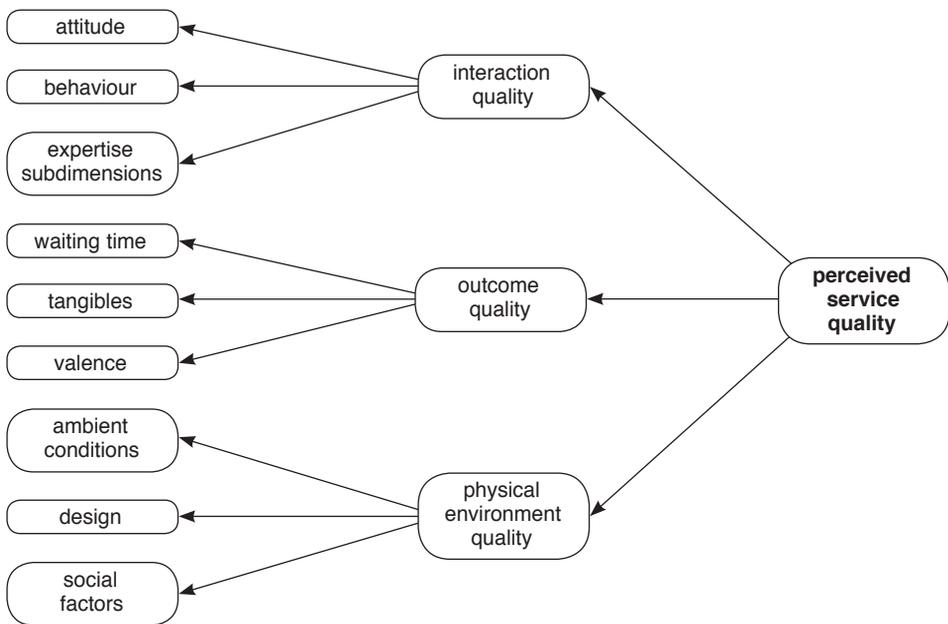


Figure 2. Conceptualization of Brady's model service quality

responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. With the usage of these dimensions Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) developed the first effort to operationalize a service quality concept. They developed a tool for service quality evaluation which empirically depended on the difference between the amount of points of expectations (customer claims) and customer perceived service. The size of gap then defined the rate of customer satisfaction with individual service attributes. The evaluating tool consisted of 22 indicators (questionnaire items) with a seven-grade Likert scale) where customers expressed rate of their agreement with a statement offered – see figure 2.

DISCUSSION

Concept of services has been studied over decades, but yet the scientists have not come to any consensus in conceptualization and operationalization of service quality model. It happened partly due to no existence of a universal definition or a quality model, partly because authors focused on various and different aspects of service quality.

The first effort to conceptualize service quality was the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988). So far this model has been a popular researchers' tool in evaluating service quality in various areas including sport. The SERVQUAL method has been tested many times in various environments of sport industry (Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Howat, Absher & Milne, 1996; Howat, Murray, & Crilley, 1999; Javadein, Khanlari & Estiri, 2008; Kouthouris & Alexandris, 2005; Robinson, 2006; Tsitskari, Tsiotras, & Tsiotras, 2006; Wright, Duray, & Goodale, 1992).

Oliver (1997) is one of the SERVQUAL model critics. He points at a problem with distinguishing service quality and customer satisfaction. While quality perception, according to him, can more originate in external mediation than in experience itself, customers must experience satisfaction themselves. Apart from that the opinion of quality standard is based on ideals or abilities to perceive, whereas the opinion on satisfaction includes customer demands, their needs and also expectation. Furthermore, while the opinion on quality is more or less a cognitive matter, satisfaction is rather an emotional matter (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994; Oliver, 1994). Service quality is influenced by several few variables (for example outer factors such as price, reputation, various communication sources); satisfaction, in contrast with it, is in terms of cognitive and emotional processes very sensitive (for example fairness, appreciation and emotions). Quality is most importantly of long-term character, whereas satisfaction rather short-term.

Yong (2000) adds to that fact that service quality should not be defined via hypothesis which compares quality expectation and perception. The reason is also that service quality does not necessarily have to mean customer satisfaction and consumption. This hypothesis according to Yong does not fully clarify service quality. He also refers to the fact that services are in various branches different, service quality of each sector is perceived by the consumers differently and service quality is multidimensional and multilateral. In the end Yong (2000) says that service quality must be clearly distinguished from customer satisfaction.

From the facts mentioned above it would be possible to understand that conception and evaluation of service quality are from the point of view of various authors very different. However, the models very often overlap and use similar indicators to define individual dimensions of service quality. Mostly similar questionnaire questions intended for customers in various branches of services are formed. And the final point is always made by customers, who “decide” whether the organization is of a sufficient quality or not.

However, many authors supported Brady’s model (Brady 1997) to evaluate service quality in sport, who created multidimensional model of service quality perception by combining earlier ideas of other authors.

Brady’s approach is considered better explaining human perception than previous conceptualization models by Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz or McDougall & Levesque. Furthermore, empiric testing showed that this model is sufficiently valid and reliable.

In the area of sport services Brady’s model was then developed by Yong (2000). He suggests that quality perception should be composed not of three but of four dimensions. To the above mentioned dimensions he suggests adding program quality: the range of activity programs, operating time and secondary services. Yong tested his model with a two-step approach of structural equation modeling, and he supported multidimensional conceptualization of service-quality perception.

The reason also is that dimensions can be applied globally and therefore they do not focus on specific elements which are always necessary to be considered while evaluating quality in a specific area.

It is obvious that while evaluating services provided by for example a tennis center, an important aspect for a customer will be the court quality where they play tennis, while for a fitness center customer this aspect will be quite irrelevant. This situation can be easily solved. It is more difficult to adapt the chosen model to various customers of one

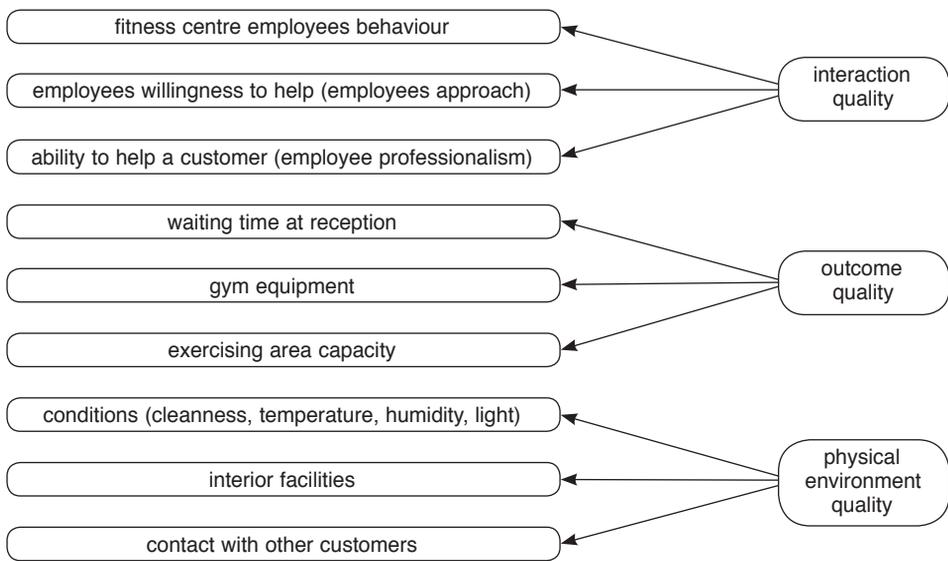


Figure 3. Example of Brady's model of conceptualization for evaluating service quality in fitness area

institution. Sport institutions unlike a lot of different service areas offer a whole range of services and it is necessary to bear it in mind while creating a specific model. For example, for a customer at a fitness gym its capacity and equipment will certainly be important. For a customer of the same sport institution who, however, is planning to attend a yoga lesson completely different criteria will be important. For example whether the lesson is not too demanding according to the customer's skills, whether others are not in his or her way, whether the instructor is able to explain and demonstrate all exercises clearly etc. These aspects will probably be completely irrelevant for customers in the so called cardio zone and their satisfaction will depend more on the space where they came to run on a simulator.

Brady's model conceptualization of evaluating service quality in a fitness center could look like the following:

CONCLUSION

Selected models to evaluate service quality in sport have been introduced above. Generally, there is a high amount of models therefore the attention was focused on those where customers decide about the quality of services provided on the basis of their own opinion. Not the qualified opinions of professionals but wishes and needs of customers are the most important aspects on which current marketing is focused, not only in sport.

The figure 3 presents an illustrative example of how the conceptualization of Brady's model looks like in the practice of sports facilities such as fitness centers. This proposal

is one of many possible forms of service quality conceptualization in sport industry. Nor in this case it can be an ideal model for evaluating service quality in service centers, much less in all sport institutions.

It is also necessary to say that there were not included any variables into those models introduced that could influence the relationship among stated variables of models. The disposable income of customers can be stated as an example of these variables. It could be supposed that those who dispose of lower income would rather search for cheaper services where they would not expect such high service quality and therefore could be relatively satisfied with the provision of “worse” services.

Both theoretical and practical usability of the models introduced depends on quantitative and qualitative research which always has to prove reliability and validity of the model for a specific sport environment. One of the initial methods to improve each of the models can be application of quantitative research including an interview and group discussions directly with customers or managers of each institutions. This way it is possible to find out that some dimensions should be added or some should be removed.

Service quality perception will probably remain a highly controversial topic even in the future, and reaching a consensus on how to conceptualize and operationalize this structure can hardly be expected.

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SOUHRN

Článek představuje konceptualizace několika metod určených k hodnocení kvality služeb ve sportu s odkazem na literaturu, ze které je čerpáno. Pozornost byla věnována výhradně metodám, kde kvalitu poskytovaných služeb posuzují zákazníci na základě svého subjektivního hodnocení. Předmětem posouzení a vzájemného komparace bylo zejména vymezení teoretických konceptů služeb, jejichž kvalita je měřena (tzv. behavioral domain). Podrobněji, včetně grafického znázornění konceptualizace, byly v práci představeny metody SERVQUAL a Bradyho model včetně konkrétního návrhu konceptualizace této metody pro prostředí fitness.

Klíčová slova: review, behavioral domain, Bradyho model, SERVQUAL model, fitness

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