

COMPARISON OF THE EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS REGARDING THE SERVICES PROVIDED FOR CHILDREN IN SPORTS FACILITIES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to reveal the expectations and perceptions of parents about the services offered to children who benefit from sports facilities. A total of 824 participants consisting of the parents of children receiving sports school services from 13 sports facilities were included in the study sample. The Service Quality Assessment Scale was used as the data collection tool. The Kolmogorov Smirnov test was applied to examine the normality of the data. As the data were normally distributed, Mann-Whitney U test was used for independent comparisons and Wilcoxon test was used to determine the difference between two dependent variables. In conclusion, no significant difference was observed between the expected and perceived service quality scores based on the gender of the parents. Although no significant difference was found between the quality of the service received from some facilities and the expectation scores, significance at 0.5 level was detected between the quality of the services received from some facilities and the expectation scores in the sub-dimensions of staff, changing rooms, programme, and facility characteristics.

Keywords: Customer for sport; Customer satisfaction in sport; Service quality in sport; Sport venues.

INTRODUCTION

A service is an activity that delivers and prepares demand-need satisfaction when the service is marketed to end-users or institutions without being dependent on the product or service's sale (Masuch, 2012). In other words, a service is a product that has a financial consequence and is offered to the public by businesses. The quality of the service provided determines the price, satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Discussions about the concept of quality and product have been emphasised as "perfection" by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers (Seyran, 2004). Hence, quality is a value that should be carefully emphasised by the management of enterprises to maintain their existence. In other words, the concept of quality is the principal element of the management conception (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000).

However, service quality is a subjective concept. Knowing what customers think about service quality is the foundation of effective management. Some researchers express service quality as comparing performance perception with expectations, whereas others consider it to be comparing performance following the ideal standards or perceptions directed for the performance (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman *et al.* 1988; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993)

Perceived service quality is the benefit from what the consumer pays for goods or a service after considering all perspectives, whether subjective or objective, qualitative or quantitative (Zeithaml & Parasuraman, 2004).

The American Marketing Association has highlighted that service and quality concepts are valid for many categories such as health, finance, accommodation, travel and education (AMA, 2020). From this point of view, sports organisations, which constitute a branch of the service sector, should provide high service quality to their customers by prioritising the quality of physical characteristics, human resources and programmes they produce (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). Sports services can be expressed broadly and comprehensively as an abstract and diverse set of activities that can reflect people's expectations of sports and the characteristics of sports services, and provide benefits such as having fun, getting away from stress, being healthy, looking good, socialising and competing, by fulfilling people's expectations about sports (Pott *et al.*, 2023). The quality of the service offered in sports facilities is immensely important in terms of "total quality management", to understand the wishes of the customer; in other words, to evaluate intangible service elements such as facilities and materials with physical assets and intangible service elements such as interest and relevance with customers in a competent manner (Lemak & Reed, 2000). It is essential to understand what does and does not satisfy the customer, to maintain the success of service enterprises (Ryu & Han, 2010; Angelova & Zekiri, 2011). Customer satisfaction can be described as the satisfaction of the customer in terms of purchasing the service offered (Panigrahi *et al.*, 2018). Since "sports" is a service sector element, knowing the satisfaction levels of customers/users in sports services are essential in determining the service's quality.

STUDY PURPOSE

This study is important in terms of determining the perception level of sports service quality, as well as for raising awareness of the perception of supply-demand harmony. This work is also crucial in forming a feedback chain according to sports services offered by the government, in contributing to meeting demand more effectively and in helping the system to convert into a self-testable supply-demand circle. The main problem for investigation in this study was formed into the question "Is there a difference between parents' expectations and perception levels regarding sports services offered to children?". Further, the data and results of this research make a meaningful contribution to the relevant institutions. Within this context, this work is expected to contribute productively to the field of sports management.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted to ascertain and compare parents' expectations and perception levels about sports services offered to children, and was designed using a general survey model. The sample groups was parents (466 female and 358 male) of 824 children between 5 and 12 years old who participated in the school sport activities organised at 13 sports venues. A criterion sampling method was used to constitute the sampling group. Within the scope of the research, data were collected at the Mediterranean Games Sports Facilities in Mersin in 2022. Gathering information from the parents of children who use sports services, rather than from the children themselves, can be considered a niche method in the study.

Data on the personal information of the parents such as age, gender, marital status, educational status, and membership duration and frequency of use of sport facilities were collected. In addition, the Service Quality Assessment Scale by Lam was used (Lam, 2000; Lam *et al.*, 2005), for which Gürbüz *et al.* (2005) have carried out a validity and reliability study. The questionnaire form used was a 7-point Likert-type scale corresponding to the following judgements: 1 – less important, and 7 – very important. This scale, which comprises 40 items measuring the level of expectation and perception of the services received from sports facilities, consists of five sub-dimensions: “personnel” (9 items), “Programme” (7 items), “Dressing Rooms” (5 items), “Facility” (13 items), and “Child Care” (6 items). The fifth sub-dimension of the scale was excluded for the sports facilities that do not have a childcare department, and the study scale was designed in four dimensions for these facilities (Gürbüz *et al.*, 2005). Parents were asked to answer the questions “by taking into account their children's use of sports facilities and their expectations and perceptions about the services their children receive”.

Statistical analysis

The collected data were uploaded, and the necessary statistical analyses were conducted. First, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was applied, and it was determined that the data were not normally distributed (skewness=0.085; kurtosis=0.170). Because the distribution was not normal, the arithmetic means ($\bar{X}$), and frequency (f) were used to analyse the data, in addition to the Mann Whitney-U test for independent comparisons and the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to observe the difference between two dependent variables. The busiest days and hours in the work schedule of the sports facilities were preferred for data collection.

Ethical considerations

The questionnaire and methodology for this study were approved by the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Mersin University (Ethics Clearance Number: 2021/019-021).

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the average score for the Personnel–expected sub-dimension was $\bar{X}=58.11$, while the average score for the Personnel–perceived sub-dimension was $\bar{X}=56.27$. The average score for Programme–expected sub-dimension was $\bar{X}=43.83$, and for Programme–perceived was $\bar{X}=42.51$. Average score for Dressing Room–expected sub-dimension was $\bar{X}=32.07$, and average Dressing Room–perceived score was $\bar{X}=30.59$. Finally, the average score for the Facility–expected sub-dimension was $\bar{X}=81.70$, and the average score for Facility–perceived was $\bar{X}=78.15$.

Table 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE SCORES (N=824)

Sub-dimensions	Min.	Max.	$\bar{X}$	SD
Personnel–expected	21.00	63.00	58.11	6.37
Personnel–perceived	15.00	63.00	56.27	7.61
Programme–expected	18.00	49.00	43.83	5.58
Programme–perceived	7.0	49.00	42.51	6.64
Dressing Room–expected	5.00	35.00	32.07	4.33
Dressing Room–perceived	7.0	35.00	30.59	5.53
Facility–expected	21.00	91.00	81.70	10.80
Facility–perceived	13.00	91.00	78.15	14.35

The expected–perceived scores for Personnel, Programme, Dressing Room, and Facility service quality sub-dimensions were statistically significant, based on the positive ranking of the Wilcoxon Test ($p < 0.01$), shown in Table 2.

Table 2. WILCOXON TEST FINDINGS REGARDING THE COMPARISON OF EXPECTED-PERCEIVED SCORES IN TERMS OF SUB-DIMENSIONS

Sub-dimension expected–perceived		n	$\bar{x}_{\text{rank}}$	Σ_{rank}	Z	p
Personnel	Negative rank	361 ^a	316.68	114320.0	-6.74 ^b	0.000**
	Positive rank	227 ^b	259.23	58846.0		
	Equal	236 ^c				
	Total	824				
Programme	Negative Rank	350 ^d	312.93	109524.0	-5.58 ^e	0.000**
	Positive rank	238 ^e	267.40	63642.0		
	Equal	236 ^f				
	Total	824				
Dressing room	Negative rank	352 ^g	292.82	103073.5	-7.25 ^h	0.000**
	Positive rank	199 ^h	246.24	49002.5		
	Equal	273 ⁱ				
	Total	824				
Facility	Negative rank	374 ^j	338.67	126662.5	-5.97 ^k	0.000**
	Positive rank	256 ^k	281.65	72102.5		
	Equal	194 ^l				
	Total	824				

** $p < 0.01$

^a Personnel perceived < Personnel expected

^b Personnel perceived > Personnel expected

^c Personnel perceived = Personnel expected

^d Programme perceived < Programme expected

^e Programme perceived > Programme expected

^f Program perceived = Programme expected

^g Dressing room perceived < Dressing room expected

^h Dressing room perceived > Dressing room expected

ⁱ Dressing room perceived = Dressing room expected

^j Facility perceived < Facility expected

^k Facility perceived > Facility expected

^l Facility perceived = Facility expected

We reviewed the service quality expected and perceived by the parents for 13 different sports facilities, regarding the general condition, personnel, dressing room, and programme of the facilities. Although significant differences were determined between expected and perceived service quality based on the general evaluation results (Table 3), no significant differences were discovered between parents' expectations and perceived service quality according to the results of Wilcoxon tests performed for each sports facility.

Table 3. MANN-WHITNEY U TEST RESULTS FOR SUB-DIMENSION SCORES ACCORDING TO PARENT GENDER (N=824)

Score	Gender (F, n=466; M, n=358)	$\bar{x}_{rank}$	Σ_{rank}	U	Z	p
Personnel	Female	414.17	193003.0	82636.0	-0.23	0.82
	Male	410.33	146897.0			
Programme	Female	406.30	189336.0	80525.0	-0.86	0.39
	Male	420.57	150564.0			
Dressing Room	Female	412.02	192000.0	83189.0	-0.07	0.95
	Male	413.13	147900.0			
Facility	Female	401.98	187323.0	78512.0	-1.46	0.16
	Male	426.19	152577.0			

Table 3 indicates no significant difference between the expected–perceived service quality scores for personnel, programme, dressing room, and facility sub-dimensions, according to the results of Mann–Whitney U test performed by gender ($p>0.05$).

DISCUSSION

Both customer expectations and perceived service quality regarding use of the sports facilities in this study were above the average value for the sub-dimensions of the scale. The scale scores of the sample group were above average.. That the perceived service quality levels are above average can be interpreted positively by the facility management, but it should not be overlooked that the customer expectation levels were also relatively high. In this respect, it will not be sufficient to provide an average service level in the sports facilities. Maximum service levels should be the target for every service provided, as the expectations of customers are increasing continuously. However, having an idea about the expectation levels of the customers here facilitates the detection of deficiencies or errors in the sports facility. In this study, we ascertained that their expectations were higher than their perceptions.

We observed a difference in favour of the expected between the expected–perceived service quality scores for each sub-dimension. In other words, it was determined that the expectations of the sample group about sports facilities were higher than their perceptions, or that the services offered at the facility were below the expectations of the customers. Based on this result, the services offered at sports facilities should focus more on the customer, and the necessary measures should be taken to achieve this. Similar results were found in the study conducted by Yıldız and Tüfekçi on customers using private sports centres (Yıldız & Tüfekçi, 2010).

We found no significant difference was found in terms of expected–perceived service quality scores in the staff, programme, dressing room, and facility general characteristics sub-dimensions of the scale, according to parental gender ($p>0.05$). Confirming the study results, we found that the parental gender was not a factor in light of expected and perceived quality variables related to sports facilities such as dressing room, facility, programme, and personnel. Similarly, in Eser's (2015) study examining the users' satisfaction levels at Pamukkale University Sports Center, no difference was detected according to gender (Eser, 2015). In the

study of Kim and Kim (1995), service quality did not show any difference in terms of gender (Kim & Kim, 1995). However, as stated in Greenwell *et al.* (2004), female customers who received services from private sports facilities had different perceptions of the physical environment and quality of employees to male customers (Greenwell & Pastore, 2004). Similarly, in the results of the study by Kurtoğlu (2006) to measure the quality of sports services provided by municipalities, there were significant differences between male and female participants, with the opinions of women more positive (Kurtoğlu, 2006). In the study conducted by Theodorakis *et al.* (2004) to measure customer satisfaction in sports clubs in Portugal and compare them with demographic factors, a statistical difference was observed in terms of services and facilities according to gender (Theodorakis *et al.*, 2004). In other words, these studies ascertained that women were less satisfied with facilities and services than men. Varying results can be expected as different facilities and businesses were evaluated. There was a significant difference between the results of the studies in the literature and the customers' expectations and perceptions regarding the service they received based on gender in our study, as in the literature they evaluated the services they received themselves. However, in this study, it may be considered normal that parents who declare their expectations and perceptions of the services that their children receive, may have similar expectations for their children. In other words, a parent demands similar or the same services for their child, regardless of their gender. In this respect, the mother or father's demands on behalf of their children will be similar.

Thus we found no difference by gender between the expected and perceived dimensions of the service quality provided in the sports facilities, and parental gender was not a distinctive component in assessing service quality. Parents who evaluate the quality of services offered to children are focused on their children, so gender is not an issue. We found a significant difference between the service quality obtained from Venue-7 and the service received from other facilities, with parents more satisfied with Venue-7. Although all facilities included in the study were public facilities and had equal minimum opportunities to create services, the satisfaction levels of users increased depending on the capabilities of the facility manager. Simultaneously, when the perception levels of the service quality received from Venue-T, Venue-B, Venue-N, and Venue-S were considered, it can be assumed that the expectations were fulfilled to a minimum level. Within the scope of the services received from Venue-5, Venue-F, and Venue-O, it was recognised that the parents were not happy with the personnel, dressing room, and general characteristics of the facility. When the users' dissatisfaction was evaluated, we concluded there were administrative problems in these facilities. Within the scope of the services received from Venue-C and Venue-B, it could be assumed that the parents were not satisfied with the personnel, the programmes applied, the dressing room, and the general characteristics of the facility. Within the scope of the services received from Venue-E, it was remarked that they were not happy with the programme applied at Venue-1, and with the programme applied at Venue-M in terms of personnel and dressing room.

CONCLUSION

It can be stated that for these facilities, services should be improved for user satisfaction. Public sports enterprises should take note of customer-oriented studies and implement practices that increase the loyalty of users (customer loyalty). Of course, this can only be realised by human resources with good managerial skills. Based on the fact that individuals with good managerial skills have strong problem-solving capacities, it can be tested whether these individuals can

also be successful in creating customer-oriented and satisfying jobs. Consequently, it is significant to customer satisfaction and loyalty that facility managers have adequate resources and experience in providing sports services. In this way, positive images can be promoted about public sports facilities, with promising approaches to the target audience. As public sports businesses carry out supply and demand studies on users, measure their opinions, and collect customer satisfaction-oriented feedback, service quality will be increased. Thus, preference and customer loyalty towards these sports venues will increase, compared to the private sector. The use of sports services is crucial and depends on the quality of the presentation. In this respect, by increasing the quality of sports services, they will be used more and contribute to the growth of healthy generations.

In terms of the social constructionist theory in sociology, it is important for children to acquire the habit of participating in sports, to develop healthy generations through sports. These good habits require continuity and stability. To achieve this, the concepts of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty towards sports facilities are important. Customer satisfaction with sports facilities will indirectly contribute positively to community building.

Conflict of interest

The authors reported no conflict of interest.

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