

# **Evaluation of Service Quality in Sports and Recreations Programmes at Hotels and Resorts in the Northern Peninsular Malaysia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Many issues and challenges are faced by the managers and professionals in sports and recreations today. However, the issues and challenges in managing sports and recreations programmes particularly in hotels and resorts are more focused on service quality provided by the organizations. This study aims to assess customers' perceptions of service quality in sports and recreations programmes and to determine the differences based on gender and nationality in terms of their perceptions of service quality provided by hotels and resorts located in coastal areas of the northern Peninsular Malaysia. A total of 450 customers who participated in the survey were asked to respond to a series of the adapted SERVQUAL items. Results from this study revealed that the customers' perceptions of the overall service and facilities in sports and recreations programmes provided by the hotels and resorts were satisfactory. It was also indicated that there was no significance difference between male and female customers' perceptions of service quality in sports and recreations programmes. Conversely, the results revealed that there was a significance difference between local and foreign customers' perceptions of sports and recreations services provided. These findings had implications on sports and recreations programmes in order to design effective management and marketing strategies at hotels and resorts.

**Key Words:** recreations and sports programmes, service quality, customer's perceptions, tourism industry

## Introduction

Customers' satisfaction and service quality are closely related and crucial to the organization managers and marketers to design effective management and marketing strategies. A considerable body of research in the broader marketing literature has focused on the nature of satisfaction and its relationship to service quality and the future intentions of customers (Brady & Robertson, 2001; Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore, 2002; Kang, Okamoto & Donovan, 2004). However, there has been limited research in this field specific to sports and recreations contexts in Malaysia. A clearer understanding of how to produce satisfied customers in a sports or recreations context will help managers to better predict the return of customers. Several studies support the notion that satisfaction is a consequence of service quality (Brady & Robertson, 2001; MacDougall & Levesque, 2000; Zeithaml, 1988) and this appear consistent across service context (Murray & Howat, 2002). As such the organizations and firms quite often use customer satisfaction and perceived service quality as a measure of product or service performance (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993) as well as a marketing strategy for the service industries (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).

In the sport and leisure literature, service quality has been conceptualized in different ways. Thus, differences exist relative to how perceptions of service quality are measured (Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). For example, since its introduction, SERVQUAL (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1988) has been utilized by many researchers either directly or modified it to tailor it more specifically to the services of the fitness and recreational sport industry (e.g., Crompton, MacKay, & Fesenmaier, 1991; Howat, Absher, Crilley & Milne, 1996; Wright, Durray, & Goodale, 1992). In addition, several researchers have

attempted to develop sound factor structures of service quality for different segments of the sport industry (Howat et.al, 1996; Kim & Kim, 1995). However, empirical examinations of the sport, fitness, and leisure literature offer little to support commonly agreed upon dimensions of service quality to date.

According to Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991), in the context of sports and recreations programmes, the targets of quality evaluation include (a) the core service, (b) the physical context including the facilities and equipment in which service is provided, and (c) the interpersonal interaction in the performance of the service. In fact, a unique dimension identified by Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) refers to the quality of client participation in the production of the service. As client participation is fundamental to the production of most service in sport and recreation, and clients' perceptions of the quality of their own involvement is critical for continued participation in that activity. Perhaps, the increasing interest in service quality has motivated many scholars to research the topic. However, in the field of sport and recreation management, many related studies are conducted at the activities or programmes, but very few studies have been published regarding service quality (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Yong & Pastore, 2004). The few research studies in this regard have focused on identifying dimensions of quality specific services (e.g. fitness service, leisure service, recreation service). For example, Chelladurai, Scott, and Haywood-Farmer (1987) identified five dimensions of fitness services as measured by their Scale of Attributes of Fitness Services (SAFS). These dimension are primary-professional, primary-consumer, primary-facilitating goods, and secondary goods and services. The first dimensions reflect the core service while the rest reflect the context which encompasses

the quality of the facilities, their location, the equipment and tools used in the production of the service as well as the amenities provided to the clients (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000).

In addition, based on literature review and focus group results, Kim and Kim (1995) generated 45 items to assess service quality in sport in South Korea. They measure the desirability of the items as well as the delivery of the service indicated by the items (i.e., perceived performance). They derived an 11-factor 33 item measured titled Quality Excellence of Sport Centres (QUESC). The 11 dimensions were labeled ambience, employee attitude, reliability, information, programming, personal consideration, privileges, price, ease of mind, stimulation, and convenience. In other related studies, Yi (2001) develops Korean Standard-Service Quality Index (KS-SQI) measurement, which balances the process dimensions and the outcome dimensions of service quality. Yi indicates that customer awareness of service quality is composed of process quality dimensions and outcomes quality dimensions. He divided each of these categories into four dimensions. Process quality was divided into accessibility, physical aspects, credibility, and receptiveness. Outcome quality was divided into creativeness, primary needs fulfillment, unexpected benefits, and contact performance.

On the other hand, Howat, Absher, Crilley, and Milne (1996) developed the Centre for Environmental and Recreation Management-Customer Service Quality (CERM-CSQ) Scale to measure four dimensions of service in sport and leisure centres. These dimensions are: (a) core service, including programme information, range of activities, facilities comfort, value for money, and quality equipment; (b) staff quality, including staff responsiveness, staff knowledge, and officials; (c) general facility, including safe parking, and facility cleanliness; (d) secondary

service, including food and drink, and child minding. However, in an earlier research Chelladurai (1992) classifies sport services into two broader sets: (a) participant services, and (b) spectator services. According to him, an understanding of the sport services and their classification would facilitate the discussion of quality in those services.

Meanwhile, McDonald, Sutton, and Milne (1995) and Shilbury (1994) have also discussed service quality in professional sport. In fact, McDonald et al (1995) developed the TEAMQUAL scale consisting of 39-items to measure five dimensions of service quality in professional team sports. These five dimensions are patterned after those identified in SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994). As such, the dimensions are based on the idea that quality judgement is based on the gap between customer expectations and customer perceptions. With the introduction of SERVQUAL, the scale has been widely used in various service industries (Yong & Pastore, 2004). While, Cornin and Taylor (1992) acknowledge that the 22 SERVQUAL measurement items are appropriate, but argue that a model measuring perceptions of service delivery results is more appropriate than the gap's model, which relies on a difference between expectation and experience. Thus, using the same items as SERVQUAL but referring only to the effect, service quality, they proposed service perception (SERVPERP).

Furthermore, due to the difficulty in understanding consumer expectations (with there being no clear set of expectations for each service setting), it is often argued that 'perceptions only' as a measure of satisfaction (one that excludes expectations) is more useful (Allen, O'Toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2008). In addition, according to Lewis and Booms (1983), perceived service quality represents a more firm positive or negative attitude towards various

service related attributes. Therefore, from the practitioners' point of view, the explication of perceived service quality construct might appeal for more research interest because it can be proven to be a useful management tool (Papadimitriou & Kostantinos, 2000). Service quality is obviously very important for the long-term profitability of any organization (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Knowledge gained from such behavioral research will eventually help practitioners as well as researchers. It is vital to organizations' marketers and managers to know what motivate customers to participate in sports and recreations programmes as well as to fulfill their needs and wants.

### **Sports and recreations programmes in tourism industry**

Sports and recreations programmes as part of business in tourism and hospitality is big, profitable, and growing, with most of the clients are sports' enthusiast. Hotels and travel agents are always on the lookout for new markets as a way of broadening their business. Furthermore, fitness and health conscious among the tourists who travel as part of their leisure or business have made a significant impact on all forms of travel and entertainment. People do not simply sit around on the beach on holiday any more, but increasingly engage in a wide range of recreational and sporting activities. This interest in recreation and sport has also been fuelled by the increasing emphasis of individuals on their health, well being and weight control, a movement which continues to grow in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Thus, recreational sport activities are acknowledged as an important and potentially health-enhancing activity for which tourism can be the catalyst (Glyptis, 1991), and hence, health care and providing services for physical activities have become an important part of the tourism industry. Thus, the effective and efficient management of the sports and recreations programmes in the

service sector (e.g. hotels and resorts) is crucial so that both the consumers and the organization can prosper in the long term to bring positive benefits to all.

In the twenty-first century, the fitness-and health-conscious baby boomers whose travel as part of their business have made a significant impact on all forms of travel and entertainment. Airlines, car rental, and other travel services are yielding to the demands of the health fitness-conscious consumer. No smoking venues are now the mode. Vendors no longer consider heart healthy food menus novel and bothersome. Hotels designed to market the business travel are expanding to provide fitness facilities (Grantham, Patton, York, & Winick, 1998). Historically, the four or five stars hotels provided only a pool to accommodate family recreation needs. Now, hotels with fully equipped exercise facilities are becoming commonplace. The upscale hotels with an affluent guest market and convention trade are frequently developed full-scale spa services to supplement their fitness facilities. Some are even attempting to become destination resorts where they provide golf, tennis, and spa services. Hotels without direct access to such services as golf and tennis frequently develop joint ventures with clubs where guests may use their golf and tennis facilities on a preferred or reduced-cost basis. Most hotel-based facilities combine a membership programme comprised of local residents and nearby business professionals to complement the hotel resort clientele. In short, the traveling publics are expecting no compromise to their lifestyle when away from home on business or for pleasure. This trend will probably continue for the foreseeable future.

However, there are many issues and challenges face the managers and professionals in sport and recreation today. The issues and challenges in managing sports and recreations

particularly in hotels and resorts are more focused on service quality provided by the organizations. In managing sport and recreation programmes in hotels and resorts, service quality should be defined by the customer's overall impression of the service performance, service delivery systems, and overall consumption experiences (Yong & Pastore, 2004). Service quality is recognized as one of the most important areas in the field of service management and marketing. As related in the literature indicates providing quality service is not only the most important factor for customer satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994; Gronroos, 1990), but it is also the principal criterion that measures the competitiveness of a service organization (Lengnick-Hall, 1996). Thus, managers are now focusing on the process of service production and consumption as it governs consumer behavior in the service industry where services are produced and consumed simultaneously. In other words, the success of managing sports and recreations programmes may depend on the degree to which the hotels and resorts can satisfy their customers with quality services.

Nevertheless, the challenge for sports and recreations programmers in tourism industry is to provide leisure experiences that improve the quality of life of their sports and recreations consumers, and contribute to the development of their emotional, physical, social, and cognitive lives. At the same time, the sports and recreations programmers need to be aware of special societal needs related to race and ethnicity, sex and gender roles, disability, age, and related factors, with emphasis on recreation's important role as a health-related form of experience and social service (Cordes & Ibrahim, 2003; Torkildsen, 2000). In the context of this study, sports and recreations programmes refer to the full range of organized and structured leisure experiences offer by hotels and resorts, as well as the unstructured or unsupervised used of play



areas, sports facilities, and other indoor or outdoor recreation settings. It may refer to activities carried on throughout the year, during a specific season, for a limited term, or on a single occasion. This study is aimed to examine customers' perceptions of service quality in sports and recreations programmes at hotels and resorts in coastal areas of the northern Peninsular Malaysia.

### **Objectives of the Study**

Specifically, the study was designed:

- To develop demographic profile of customers who participate in the sports and recreations activities organized by the hotels and resorts management.
- To assess on customers' perceptions of service quality in the sports and recreations programmes.
- To determine the differences between customers' perceptions of service quality in sports and recreations programmes in terms of their gender and nationality.

### **Method**

A quantitative approach by using self-completion questionnaire of customer's perceptions was carried out at the selected hotels and resorts located at coastal areas of the northern Peninsular Malaysia.

### **Sample**

A total of 450 customers from four and five stars hotels and resorts were participated in the survey. A convenient sampling method was applied to select sample from 10 randomly selected

four and five stars hotels and resorts located on the islands of Langkawi, Penang and Pangkor. Convenience sampling refers to the collection of information from members of the population who are conveniently available to provide it. It is the best way of getting some basic information quickly and efficiently (Sekaran, 2003).

### **Instrumentation and Procedures**

The questionnaire was developed as a respondent-completed survey consisting of two sections. In the first section, the questionnaire was designed to gather respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, level of education, occupational status, income level, marital status, ethnic group and residence).

In the second section, the measurement items has been adapted from SERVQUAL (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1988, 1990) and utilized to measure customer's perceptions of service quality in sports and recreations programmes. SERVQUAL is an empirically-derived method that is widely used by a service-based organization to improve the service industry by understanding the target customers' perceived services needs and measuring their perceptions of service quality for the services offered (Murray & Howat, 2002). In this study, the survey instrument took the form of a direct disconfirmation 22-item self-completion questionnaire. For each item, respondents were asked to rate their perceptions on service quality pertaining to sports and recreations programme on a four point scales, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). Scale items were grouped according to five key dimensions SERVQUAL including: assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness and tangible elements of the customers' experience. The following dimensions are operationally defined as follows:

1. Tangibles – appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials.
2. Reliability – ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
3. Responsiveness – willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
4. Assurance – knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
5. Empathy – the caring, individualized attention the organization provides its customers.

(Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990)

The psychometric properties of the scales have been tested and the results have demonstrated good internal consistency and construct reliability. The results showed that the alpha coefficients for all five dimensions ranged from 0.83 to 0.87, well above the minimum value of 0.6 as an indication of reliability (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). This is consistent with Greenwell, Fink and Pastore (2002), Parasuraman et al., (1988) and Yong and Pastore (2004) who also measure service quality by utilizing the SERVQUAL items.

A total of 450 respondents who participated in the survey were asked to respond to the questionnaire provided. Permission to collect data with customers was received from selected hotels and resorts administrators. Questionnaires were administered by three trained enumerators for the purpose of data collection. Respondents who agree to participate were asked to fill out the questionnaire and return it to the enumerators. Respondents were informed concerning the

purpose of the study and general instructions were provided, help was offered when needed, and responses were anonymous.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Demographic profile of respondents**

Completed questionnaire from 447 respondents were included in the analysis. As shown in Table 1, the demographic profile of respondents was comprised of 50.9% (224) males and 49.1% (216) were females with 61% (271) were married and 39% (173) were single. The age range of the sample was 18 - >65 years old with the majority of them were 26-35 years old 36.3% (162), 18-25 years old 25.1% (112), and 46-55 years old 20.2% (90). With respect to their occupation, 39.9% (177) worked in the management and professional fields, followed by 17.6% (78) were self-employed, and 17.3% (77) of the respondents were still studying. Of the total respondents, 68.2% (304) were local Malaysians and 31.8% (142) were foreigners. In terms of education level, the majority of the respondents had obtained their bachelor degree 42% (183) and 30% (131) with diploma or certificate level. With respect to ethnicity, the majority of the respondents were Malays 37% (37.5) while there were 23.6% (105) Chinese, 10.8% (48) India, and 28.1% (125) from other racial groups.

**Table1: Respondents' Demographics Characteristics (N=447)**

<b>Demographics Characteristic</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Gender (N=440)</b>		
Male	224	50.9
Female	216	49.1
<b>Age (N=446)</b>		
18-25	112	25.1

26-35	162	36.3
36-45	52	11.7
46-55	90	20.2
56-65	24	5.4
>65	6	1.3
<b>Education Level (N=436)</b>		
Up to Secondary Level	77	17.7
Diploma/Certificate Level	131	30
First Degree Level	183	42
Tertiary Degree Level	45	10.3
<b>Occupation (N=444)</b>		
Student	77	17.3
Self-employed	78	17.6
Unemployed	35	7.9
Professional & Management	177	39.9
Retiree	18	4.1
Business	47	10.6
Others	12	2.7
<b>Marital Status (N=444)</b>		
Single	173	39
Married	271	61
<b>Ethnic Group (N=445)</b>		
Malay	167	37.5
Chinese	105	23.6
Indian	48	10.8
Others	125	28.1
<b>Nationality</b>		
Local Malaysian	304	68.2
Foreign (International)	142	31.8

### Perceptions of Service Quality

An examination of mean scores revealed that the customers' perceptions of the overall service quality provided by the hotels and resorts are satisfactory with a mean score of 2.97 from a maximum score of 4. Means and standard deviations for each of dimensions used in this analysis are presented in Table 2. The results for the five dimensions of service quality show similar patterns with the mean scores for tangibles ( $M = 2.99$ ), reliability ( $M = 2.96$ ), responsiveness ( $M = 2.97$ ), assurance ( $M = 2.99$ ), and empathy ( $M = 2.93$ ). These findings indicated that customers'

perceptions of the service quality in sports and recreations programmes were moderately associated with customers' satisfaction pertaining to staff competent in carrying out the activities, perform the promised service, staff appearance, caring and courtesy of staff, and facilities and equipment provided. Thus, the results of this study suggest the need for further improvement in sports and recreations programmes services provided by the management of the hotels and resorts.

**Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation Distribution of Scores of Service Quality in Sports and Recreations Programmes**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Tangible</b>	445	2.998	0.559
<b>Reliability</b>	442	2.966	0.582
<b>Responsive</b>	445	2.974	0.611
<b>Assurance</b>	444	2.989	0.620
<b>Empathy</b>	431	2.928	0.637
<b>Overall Service Quality</b>	431	2.967	0.542

The results in Table 3 indicate that there is no significant difference between male and female customers' perceptions of overall service quality in sports and recreations programmes ( $t = -0.64, p = 0.52$ ). Likewise, in a separate analysis on the five dimensions of service quality the results also indicate that there is no significant different between male and female customers' perceptions. However, based on the mean scores for each dimension the results showed that the service quality in sports and recreations programmes provided by the hotels and resorts received a better rating from the female customers. Thus, the findings of this study give a clear indication that males and females respondents are relatively emphasized on different criteria in terms of targets and standards of quality in evaluating sports and recreations services provided at the hotels and resorts.

**Table 3: Comparison of Respondents' Perceptions Scores of Service Quality in Sports and Receptions Programmes in Terms of Gender**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Tangible</b>						
<b>Male</b>	224	2.957	0.597	436	-1.16	0.247
<b>Female</b>	214	3.019	0.518			
<b>Reliability</b>						
<b>Male</b>	222	2.941	0.621	434	-0.814	0.415
<b>Female</b>	214	2.987	0.541			
<b>Responsive</b>						
<b>Male</b>	223	2.951	0.643	436	-0.783	0.434
<b>Female</b>	215	2.997	0.579			
<b>Assurance</b>						
<b>Male</b>	222	2.990	0.656	435	0.025	0.980
<b>Female</b>	215	2.988	0.594			
<b>Empathy</b>						
<b>Male</b>	222	2.926	0.685	433	-0.026	0.980
<b>Female</b>	213	2.928	0.586			
<b>Overall Service Quality</b>						
<b>Male</b>	217	2.949	0.582	423	-0.643	0.521
<b>Female</b>	208	2.982	0.497			

$p < 0.05$

However, on the other hand, the results as shown in Table 4 indicate that there is a significant difference between local and foreign customers' perceptions of the overall service quality of the services provided in sports and recreations programmes ( $t = -5.63, p = 0.00$ ). Likewise, the results also reveal that there is significant difference between local and foreign customers' perceptions of the five dimensions of service quality (tangible:  $t = -0.56, p = 0.00$ ; reliability:  $t = -5.16, p = 0.00$ ; responsiveness:  $t = -5.17, p = 0.00$ ; assurance:  $t = -5.28, p = 0.00$ ; empathy:  $t = -5.34, p = 0.00$ ). Based on mean scores of the data, the results showed that foreign customers perceived a better service quality towards sports and recreations programmes provided compared to local customers. Thus, the findings could imply that the foreign customers are generally more satisfied when compared to local customers in terms of sports and recreations

programmes at hotels and resorts. The findings seem to support the fact that cultural backgrounds do play an important role in influencing customers' perceptions of service quality. Meanwhile, value might be a mediator in perceptions of service quality (McDougall & Levesque, 2000). Value may be viewed as the evaluation of what is received compared to what is given in a service encounter (Zeithaml, 1988). Thus, in forming an overall perception of service, customers may use value to evaluate the service compared to alternative available to them, which, in turn, influence satisfaction judgements and future intentions of customers (Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000). Based on the findings, this study suggests that hotels and resorts managers need to develop some understanding of the needs and wants of customers and their cultural differences, as well as their perceived value in sports and recreations participations in order to ensure that the provision of services are able to satisfy their customers.

**Table 4: Comparison of respondents' perceptions scores of service quality in sport and recreation management in terms of nationality**

Dimension	N	M	SD	df	t	p
<b>Tangible</b>						
Local	303	2.892	0.566	442	-5.560	0.000
Foreign	141	3.199	0.484			
<b>Reliability</b>						
Local	301	2.871	0.589	440	-5.156	0.000
Foreign	141	3.179	0.512			
<b>Responsive</b>						
Local	303	2.875	0.642	442	-5.170	0.000
Foreign	141	3.188	0.525			
<b>Assurance</b>						
Local	302	2.887	0.639	441	-5.275	0.000
Foreign	141	3.211	0.517			
<b>Empathy</b>						
Local	300	2.821	0.655	439	-5.336	0.000
Foreign	141	3.157	0.530			
<b>Overall Service Quality</b>						
Local	294	2.869	0.551	429	-5.634	0.000
Foreign	137	3.174	0.456			

$p < 0.05$



## **Conclusion**

Understanding the customer is essential to creating successful sports and recreations programmes. Knowledge of customer behavior can assist the sports and recreations managers in successfully meeting their needs. Perhaps, the most important is the need for the organization to position itself towards service with a basic knowledge of customer behavior (Edginton, Hudson, Dieser, & Edginton, 2004). In this regard, the focus of marketing activities in the hotels and resorts should determine which facilitate individual customers or consumers perceive to be desirable.

Generally speaking, the awareness of the importance of physical activity and fitness is at an all-time high in most of the societies today and will continue to increase in future (Cordes & Ibrahim, 2003; Edginton et al., 2004). Therefore, the managers will certainly have to stay abreast of the changes. If they are to deal with them, sports and recreations managers must be knowledgeable about the field of sports and recreations, and be willing to assume leadership positions. Sports and recreations managers must understand these societal changes and plan their programmes and facilities accordingly. This will assist the organization in attracting and retaining customers.

The overall findings of the study have significant implications for leadership in recreational sports administration and management, particularly with respect in preparing effective marketing and management strategies for the improvement of the daily operation of sports and recreations programmes in hotels and resorts. However, some limitations of this study need to be considered. The study was carried out in the hotels and resorts setting and was limited

to hotels and resorts customers. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to other settings. Therefore, it is recommended that an extended programmes of research be conducted to other population. In spite of that, future research should also explore additional variables in terms of customer's satisfaction, perceived values, and future intention of participating in sports and recreations programmes organized in relation to recreational sport industry, types of recreational sport activities, and other psychological variables such as goal achievement and other related attributes.

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