Measuring Perceptions of Frequent Users toward Service Quality in the Fitness Industry

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Marketing - Other (Physical Activity)  
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Recent academic literature on service quality (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Ko and Pastore, 2004; Lam et al., 2005; Ladhari, 2008; Martinez and Martinez, 2010) emphasised that tools for measuring customer perceptions need to be adequate to the specific contexts of the fitness industry (e.g. participatory nature of service, individual and group exercisers). The scales contextualised for the fitness industry allow for the capture of more accurate and sophisticated data and, hence, produce industry-specific attributes and relevant service-quality dimensions. The review of service quality models showed that there is a range of approaches to investigating and measuring service quality in the sports and fitness industry. The model by Brady and Cronin (2001) has been utilised in several studies of service quality in fitness activity (e.g. Alexandris et al., 2004; Ko and Pastore, 2005). Despite recommendation for identifying the quality dimensions for a particular industry and using Brady and Cronin’s (2001) model (Martinez and Martinez, 2010), to date there has been a shortage in fitness industry-specific models applied to measuring service quality perceptions in the fitness industry.

On the other hand, industry trends showed that multipurpose facilities providing a broad range of services are facing greater competition from fitness facilities which are highly specialised in one type of fitness activity. This draws away a significant number of members from multipurpose facilities (Algar, 2015) and creates a challenge in better understanding their customers to ensure higher retention rates. According to a survey by Mintel (2015), exercising in the gym and taking part in fitness classes takes second place (after swimming) amongst the most popular types of activities reported by customers in UK public leisure centres. The growing popularity of these two fitness contexts have been acknowledged by previous studies which measured customers' perceptions of quality in public sports centres and fitness clubs (Ko and Pastore, 2005; Lam et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2009; Yildiz, 2011). Yet, no differentiation was made between users of various fitness activities (e.g. fitness suites and fitness classes), and the service context in a sports facility was considered as one multipurpose fitness offering.

The participatory nature of fitness services, the role of fitness instructors, and the modes of exercising (e.g. sole workout) require more precise ways of measuring users' perceptions about service quality in multipurpose sport facilities. This study explores the perceptions of frequent users towards service quality in public sports centres in Northern England. In light of the increasing competition for members between highly specialised fitness facilities and multipurpose facilities with a broad range of services, the main focus of the paper is placed on the users of fitness suites in the sports centres. In order to address the gap in the previous literature in terms of measuring service quality in the separate fitness contexts, the adapted model by Ko and Pastore (2005) was applied within the quantitative mono-method research design of this study. To ensure that the instrument is relevant and appropriate for use in the business operating environment, a pilot study and a series of consultation with practitioners took place, as a part of the model's development. The final model included three dimensions and their subsequent sub-dimensions of Physical environment (Ambience, Equipment), Interaction Quality (Client Employee Interaction, Inter-Client Interaction), and Outcome Quality (Physical Benefits, Valence, Sociability). Those dimensions were described by 17 attributes in total.

To measure and analyse quality perceptions of frequent users, data was collected via an online survey from a random sample of customers in fourteen public sports centres managed by Kirklees Active Leisure (KAL) Trust, based in the North of England. The target population of the study included member customers who reported that they attended a fitness suite in a sports centre at least once a week. Frequency of attendance was defined by Ferrand et al. (2010) as "the average number of visits a customer makes to the (fitness) club each week" (p.90). In the context of this study regularity, or frequency, was defined in terms of a self-reported number of visits to fitness suites per week. The purpose of the survey was to capture customers' evaluations of service quality, by inviting them to score the importance and performance of service quality attributes. The survey received 349 responses from frequent users of...
fitness suites. The data was analysed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS); this included importance-performance analysis, quantitative comparison of scores and explanation of variance in satisfaction scores.

The findings of the study revealed the exceptional importance and a significant role of the physical environment quality in explaining overall satisfaction with fitness suites. Ambience and equipment were found to have the strongest relationship with overall satisfaction. Importance-performance analysis demonstrated that despite the attribute performance of fitness staff being knowledgeable and professional being relatively good, a gap between performance and importance of this attribute was in the top five largest gaps. It provides a clear sign that due to the importance of this attribute for the customers', the minor shortfalls have a significant impact on the users and on their overall experience. The users of fitness suites were found not to favour the opportunities to socialise. This is due to the fact that users of fitness suites seek to secure their 'temporarily owned' space in gym during their workout (Motschiedler, 2015) rather than look for shared experiences. According to Stebbins (2007), more regular users of facilities engage in serious leisure (as opposed to casual leisure); they are more motivated and more satisfied with the benefits of their participation and do not require opportunities to socialise. Finally, the study provided indications that those customers who frequently take part in classes (in addition to the frequent use of the fitness suite) perceived their physical and mental benefits from a gym workout to be better than those who only used the fitness suite. As individuals participate frequently in both settings, they generally become more experienced and competent users of a sports facility. This happens through them acquiring experience of a wider range of service encounters which allows for the formation of multiple points of comparison. In this transition, evolving changes in customers' competence, control and their personal contribution to the quality of service (Polyakova and Mirza 2016) need to be considered and evaluated.

This research addresses a gap in measuring perceptions across users of fitness suites as a distinct group of customers. Overall, this paper extends existing body of knowledge by providing classification of areas related to perceived service quality in the fitness services and utilises an industry-specific model for measuring service quality perceptions of customers in the fitness industry.