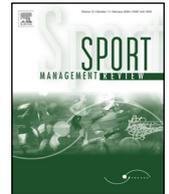




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The development of loyalty among novice and experienced customers of sport and fitness centres

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ABSTRACT

Researchers suggest that as consumption progresses, consumers' needs change. However, previous studies have shown few insights into the effect of service quality and satisfaction on customer loyalty across different consumption stages. This study examines the impact of service quality and satisfaction on customer loyalty among novice and experienced customers in the context of sports and fitness centres. Altogether, 426 customers of a public sports and fitness centre in Greece participated in the study. The results indicate that service quality consistently affects overall satisfaction across both customer groups; service quality is a major driver of loyalty only for novice customers, while overall satisfaction is a major driver of customers' future behaviours; however, its impact is significantly greater among experienced customers. These findings contribute positively to our understanding of how service quality and satisfaction are developed and influence customer retention in different consumption stages. The practical implications and limitations of this study are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

According to evidence on the physiological and psychological benefits of exercise, public and private agencies have greatly promoted the positive outcomes of systematic participation in exercise and physical activity (Vlachopoulos & Karageorgis, 2005). Today, 40,000 sports and fitness facilities in Europe attract 40 million customers (European Health & Fitness Association, 2012), while an almost equal customer base in the US generates an annual revenue of around 22 billion USD (International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, 2011). Regardless of the demand from new customers, club managers have now turned their attention to retaining existing customers, since this business sector is characterised by a tremendous drop-out rate (Buckworth & Dishman, 2002). Increased customer loyalty (such as retaining existing customers in programs and fostering positive comments for the organisation and its services) has been found to positively influence several of an agency's financial indicators including cash flow, market share, and profitability (Rust & Zahorik, 1993; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).

Accumulated research from the sport management domain has shown that service quality and customer satisfaction are key drivers of customer loyalty (Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsorbatzoudis, & Grouios, 2004a; Clemes, Brush, & Collins, 2011;

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Ferrand, Robinson, & Valette-Florence, 2010; Kyle, Theodorakis, Karageorgiou, & Lafazani, 2010; Murray & Howat, 2002; Yoshida & James, 2010). However, researchers have presented conflicting results on the impact of service quality and satisfaction on customer loyalty (Brady, Voorhes, Cronin, & Bourdeau, 2006; Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Howat, Crilley, & MacGrath, 2008; Koo, Andrew, & Kim, 2008; Lee, Kim, Ko, & Sagas, 2011; Tsuji, Bennett, & Zhang, 2007).

The vast majority of the above studies have examined the interrelationships among quality, satisfaction, and loyalty from a rather static point of view without taking into consideration that service evaluation processes change over a series of consumption episodes (Dagger & Sweeney, 2007; Jiang & Rosenbloom, 2005). A consumption episode refers to a set of services belonging to the same event and occurring in temporal proximity (Dhar & Simonson, 1999). As Falk, Hammerschmidt, and Schepers (2010) recently proposed, these relationships are not necessarily linear and static, but rather asymmetric and dynamic. In addition, the research findings suggest that the relationships among the three variables change in different consumption stages, since customer needs and evaluations change over time (Bolton & Lemon, 1999; Dagger & Sweeney, 2007; Mittal, Kumar, & Tsiros, 1999). These insights are vital for both academics and practitioners to comprehend those processes that drive customer loyalty in order to tailor the operations and services of the organisation to meeting the needs of both novice and more experienced customers. Despite research calls to examine dynamic service evaluation models (Dagger & Sweeney, 2007; Rust & Oliver, 1994), related research is still extremely limited in the sport management literature.

Against this background, the present study makes a first attempt to examine the dynamic relationships among service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in the context of sports and fitness centres. Specifically, this study investigates the interrelationships among the three aforementioned constructs across novice and experienced customer groups. By doing so, customers' overall judgements based on their cumulative experiences with the firm were used to evaluate the service exchange (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Dabholkar, Shepherd, & Thorpe, 2000; Martinez & Martinez, 2010a, 2010b; Oliver, 1997).

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty

For almost 30 years, researchers from the service sector have studied the conceptual and operational issues regarding these three concepts and their much-debated interrelationships (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Li & Petrick, 2010; Woodside, Frey, & Daly, 1989). Today, most researchers seem to agree that overall service quality is a performance-based, primarily cognitive construct, defined as “the consumer’s overall impression of the relative inferiority/superiority of the organisation and its services” (Bitner & Hubert, 1994, p. 77). Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) defined service quality as a global judgement or attitude relating to the superiority of a service.

Researchers have developed a number of models to conceptualise and measure perceptions of service quality in the context of sport and fitness. The vast majority of studies have either adopted, modified, or were based on SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1988) to measure context-specific services (Alexandris, Dimitriadis, & Kasiara, 2001; Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsobatzoudis, & Grouios, 2004b; Crompton, MacKay, & Fesenmaier, 1991; Howat, Absher, Crilley, & Milne, 1996; Kim & Kim, 1995; Lam, Zhang, & Jensen, 2005; MacKay & Crompton, 1990; Taylor, Sharland, Cronin, & Bullard, 1993). These multidimensional formative¹ models assume that overall service quality is formed by a number of context-specific dimensions (Martinez & Martinez, 2010a).

Based on Dabholkar, Thorpe, and Rentz (1996) model, Ko and Pastore (2005) proposed a hierarchical approach for measuring service quality perceptions in a fitness setting. In contrast to previous models, Ko and Pastore’s (2005) reflective model suggest that overall service quality is a higher-order factor defined by its dimensions. Combining both approaches, Brady and Cronin (2001) proposed a multilevel multidimensional model in which overall service quality is a third-order factor and could be viewed as a distinct entity different from its dimensions. Therefore, it has been shown that service quality perceptions could be assessed at different levels of abstraction. In their own words, a scholar “... interested in perceptions of service on a cumulative basis can use the global measures to determine an overall service quality evaluation” (p. 45). Dabholkar et al. (2000) proposed that marketers could use overall measures of service quality to assess overall evaluations of their service, while for diagnostic purposes they could measure service quality on the dimensional level. This framework can be traced in the work of Alexandris et al. (2004b) and Ko and Pastore (2004).

Overall satisfaction refers to having both cognitive and affective influences, and it is described as customers' cumulative experiences with a specific service (Li & Petrick, 2010; Oliver, 1993, 1997). Overall satisfaction exists on a higher level of abstraction and should be distinguished from satisfaction with a specific transaction (Oliver, 1997). Researchers have used both a single satisfaction item (Ferrand et al., 2010; Murray & Howat, 2002) and multi-item scales to capture overall satisfaction (Alexandris et al., 2004b; Bodet, 2008) in a sport and fitness setting.

Historically loyalty has been studied from a behavioural perspective focusing mainly on repeat buying (Bodet, 2008). However, more recently, researchers emphasised the inadequacy of this one-dimensional view of loyalty to fully capture the concept (Baldinger & Rubinson, 1996; Dick & Basu, 1994; Oliver, 1997). Thus, loyalty has been conceptualised as having two components (Dick & Basu, 1994): attitudinal loyalty examines the thoughts and feelings consumers express towards specific

¹ For a detailed discussion about the differences between reflective and formative service quality models, see Martinez and Martinez (2010a).

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