

The Relationships between Service Quality, Satisfaction, and Behavioral Intentions of Malaysian Spa Center Customers

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of service quality on satisfaction and revisit behavioral intention in a spa setting in Malaysia. It was found that Tangibles ($\beta=.310$, $p=.00$) and Empathy ($\beta=.380$, $p=.00$) had the strongest influence on customer satisfaction and behavioral intention, followed by Reliability ($\beta=.22$, $p=.00$) and Responsiveness ($\beta=.10$, $p=.00$). However, the only dimension of service quality that was not found to play a significant role in predicting customer satisfaction and behavioral intention is that of Assurance. These results will provide potential guidelines for spa managers who plan to attract customers to this highly competitive industry and enable them to formulate appropriate strategies. The study also strives to make a contribution to conceptual and policy formulation by understanding the real predictors of customer satisfaction and intention.

Keywords: SERVQUAL; behavioral intention; customer satisfaction; revisit intention; spa industry; Malaysia.

1. Introduction

The spa industry in Malaysia combines traditional methods alongside modern ones in a designer ambience that offers customers a remarkable experience. Malaysia, being a multi-cultural country, has at its disposal a huge range of traditional spa treatments handed down from generation to generation. According to a survey by Intelligent Spas, the number of spas in Malaysia has grown more than 200% since 2002. There are more than 170 spas currently operating and earning an average RM1, 000 (\$312) per day in sales (Intelligent Spas, 2011). This number is expected to reach 275 outlets, which is about 49% growth, by 2012, according to statistics compiled by Ministry of Tourism in Malaysia and Euromonitor International Country Sector Briefing (www.spamore.com). Increased leisure time, personal income, and health consciousness have also contributed to the growth of the spa industry in Malaysia. As the business environment in the spa industry becomes more competitive, managers start to pay special attention to developing effective market strategies, particularly for emerging niche markets. In particular, spas and wellness centers need to be innovative and professional in managing services (i.e., service production and the delivery process). In response to increasing dominance of services within the spa industry, both managers and researchers need to pay attention to the issues of service quality perceptions and satisfaction of customers.

A number of researchers (e.g. Kelly and Turley, 2001; Al-alak, 2010; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Mull et al; 2005) suggested that revealing customer perceptions of service experiences has always been important to the success of service organizations. From a management standpoint, managers should systematically examine current services from their customers' perspectives and redesign their service products and environment in which their services are delivered to their target customers. The provision of quality experiences is extremely important for customer satisfaction and retention (Zeithaml et al; 2006). Within the spa industry, offering premium quality, personally tailor-made, and exclusive massage and fitness services is a key contributor to customer satisfaction of spa and wellness programmes. The increasing number of publications devoted to such topics as service quality and satisfaction research is a clear testimony to the increased importance of service marketing and management (Howat et al; 1999; Kelly and Turley, 2001; Ko and Pastore, 2005; Petrick, 2004). Although a substantial amount of research on service quality, satisfaction, and repurchase intention can be found in the marketing literature, little attention has been paid to investigating the impact of service quality perceptions on satisfaction and intention in the spa industry.

To the best knowledge of the researchers, this is the first research of its kind in Malaysia that addresses this particular topic. It is vitally essential for spa managers to comprehend and measure the impact of service quality on the satisfaction of their customers and revisit intentions. The feedback obtained from such practice can be used to make strategic improvements in the service production as well as the service delivery that will impact business and ultimately increase profitability. Therefore the major purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between service quality perceptions and revisit intention in the spa industry in Malaysia. Major research questions include: (1) what influence do the five service quality dimensions have on customer satisfaction? And (2) what influence do the five service quality dimensions have on revisit intention as perceived by customers?

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Service quality defined

Service quality is a focused evaluation that reflects the customer's perception of elements of service such as interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality (Brady and Cronin, 2001). These elements are in turn evaluated based on specific service quality dimensions or domains. Lewis and Booms (1983) were among the first to define service quality as a "measure of how well the service level delivered matches the customer's expectation". In this context, service quality is thought of as an attitude of overall judgment about service superiority, although the exact nature of this attitude is still hazy. Some suggest that service quality stems from a comparison of performance perceptions with expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988), while others see it as derived from a comparison of performance with ideal standards or from perceptions of performance alone (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Service quality is also defined as the difference between technical quality (what is delivered) and functional quality (how it is delivered) and as process quality (judged during the service) and output quality (judged after the service) (Gronroos, 1983; Lehtinen, 1983).

Ghobadian et al. (1994) argued that quality in a service business is a measure of the extent to which the service delivered meets the customers' expectations. The nature of most services is such that the customer is present in the delivery process, which means that the perception of quality is influenced not only by the service outcome but also by the service process. The perceived quality lies among a continuum. Unacceptable quality lies at the end of this continuum, whereas ideal quality lies at the other end (Al-alak, 2009). From the above-mentioned review, it seems that service quality is a multi-dimensional concept that means different things to different people. Moreover, defining quality is a difficult task owing to its generic nature. Even though standards for the definition of quality may be set, these standards vary from phenomenon to phenomenon, culture to culture, and across time (Jayasundara et al., 2009).

2.2 Customer satisfaction defined

Satisfaction refers to the buyer's state of being adequately rewarded in a buying situation for the sacrifice he or she has made (Al-alak, 2009). Adequacy of a satisfaction is a result of matching actual past purchase and consumption experience with the expected reward from the brand in terms of its anticipated potential to satisfy the customer's motives (Loudon et al., 1993). Oliver (1997) defined satisfaction as the customer's fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) translated Oliver's definition of satisfaction to mean that satisfaction is the customer's evaluation of a product or service in terms of whether that product or service has met their needs and expectations. The customer satisfaction literature shows that expectation is the most direct determinant of satisfaction, followed by perceived performance (Kim, 2005).

The value percept theory regards satisfaction as an emotional response triggered by a cognitive evaluative process (Parker and Mathews, 2001). Nevertheless, Swan and Combs (1976) were among the first to point out that satisfaction is associated with performance fulfilling expectations, while dissatisfaction occurs when performance falls below expectations. It is apparent, therefore, that customer satisfaction is an abstract and rather ambiguous concept. Manifestations of satisfaction vary from one person to another and from one product to another (Munteanu et al., 2010). The state of the so-called 'satisfaction' depends on a number of psychological and physical variables, and correlates with certain behaviours. Among the psychological variables, personal beliefs, attitudes and evaluations may affect customer satisfaction (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980).

2.3 Repurchase intention, service quality, and customer satisfaction

Marketing literature is rich with studies that have empirically investigated relationships between service quality and other variables such as customer satisfaction, customer purchase intention, and customer value (Cho, Lee, and Chon, 2004; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Kotler, 2003; Murray & Howat, 2002; Patterson and Spreng, 1997; Theodorakis et al., 2001; Tian-Cole, Crompton, and Willson, 2002; Zeithaml and Binter, 1996; Zeithaml et al., 2006). It is now widely acknowledged that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann, 1994; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 2006). Satisfaction is seen as a reliable predictor of repurchase intentions (Bitner, 1990; Cho et al., 2004; Cronin et al., 2000; Patterson and Spreng, 1997; Tian-Cole et al., 2002; Yoo et al., 2003). Consumers who are more satisfied complain less and are more likely to repurchase. In contrast, dissatisfied customers tend to be less committed and certainly disloyal to the service and its provider (Cho et al., 2004; Cronin et al., 2000; Kelly and Turley, 2001; Tian-Cole et al., 2002).

Also, loyal customers or those who enjoy positive experiences with the service are more likely to become a stable base of satisfied customers (Kim and Lough, 2007; Tsitskarie et al., 2006). It is because they tend to have better social interactions with service providers. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that the enrichment of service production and delivery can create customer satisfaction which in turn leads to customer revisit intention (Al-alak, 2010). Indeed, it has been shown that both customer satisfaction and service quality perceptions positively impact the purchase intentions of a customer (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Cronin et al., 2000; Patterson and Spreng, 1997; Rust and Oliver, 1994; Tian-Cole et al., 2002). Interestingly Cronin and Taylor (1992) suggested that customer satisfaction was found to have a stronger and more consistent effect on purchase intentions than service quality.

3. Methodology

3.1. Population, sampling and instrument

Based on previous studies by Cronin and Taylor (1994), Parasuraman et al. (1985 and 1988), Chang and Lee (2004), Al-alak (2010) and others, twenty items representing the most widely acknowledged and empirically tested five dimensions of service quality (i.e. Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy) were used to measure the level of service quality. We also adapted and used Chang and Lee's (2004) customer satisfaction and membership renewal intention questionnaire. The population of the study is made up of all customers who make use of spa and wellness centres in West Malaysia. A convenient sample of 1200 respondents was selected to obtain the required primary data. The study's instrument was a self-administered questionnaire that was developed and employed to achieve the objectives of the current study. To improve the structure design and content of the study's instrument, a pilot study was carried out. The questionnaire was revised in the light of comments received from 30 sport experts and spa managers selected for this purpose. This practice was carried out in order to ensure content relevance and content representativeness as recommended by Chatterji (2003). The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section 1 covered questions on respondent's profile, and Section 2 focused on the 5 variables that are believed to impact customer satisfaction and revisit intention (i.e. dimensions of service quality).

Respondents were asked to rank their level of agreement based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from '1' (strongly disagree) to '5' (strongly agree). The response rate was 90.8%. The process of distributing the questionnaire was drop-off approach (Aaker et al., 2004). On the basis of the logic of this method, the researchers hand-delivered the questionnaire to clients who categorically stated that they had experience with spa service, after explaining to them the purpose of the study, the required procedures to fill out the questionnaire and answering any question with regard to any of the questionnaire's statements. To check for the possible presence of non-response bias, a comparison was made between early respondents (interviewed during the weekday) and late respondents (interviewed during the weekend) using independent sample t-tests on the constructs of interest for the study. No differences were found, suggesting that non-response bias for these spa goers was not a matter to worry about. Respondents were drawn from 81 conveniently selected spa centers of a total of 234 centers located in Kuala Lumpur.

3.2 Data analysis

To identify the influence of service quality on satisfaction and revisit intention at spa and wellness centers in Kuala Lumpur, this study employed descriptive statistics and factor analysis.

Exploratory factor analysis was carried out to establish validity of the measurement scale, whereas multiple regression analyses were used to investigate the influence of the five dimensions of service quality (i.e. Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy) on satisfaction and revisit intention. The data obtained from the survey were analyzed using SPSS (Version 18). The period of distributing the questionnaire lasted from 1 December 2010 until early February 2011.

4. Analysis of results

Fifty nine per cent of respondents were male while forty one percent of the respondents were female. The age of the respondents ranged from 26–67 years. Additionally, sixty eight percent of respondent indicated that they have been with their current spa center for more than three years, whereas thirty nine percent of respondents said that they have membership in more than one spa center. Nearly eighty percent of the respondents have a bachelor's degree or higher education level. Almost seventy one percent of respondents have an income exceeding RM 6000(\$ 2000) per month. Reliability was assessed by measuring Cornbrash's Alpha, whose coefficient for the 5 service quality domains were more than 0.84, indicating a good-level internal consistency of the obtained factors (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al; 1992). The reliability coefficients for each of the five dimensions of the service quality scale were .85 (Tangibles), .85 (Reliability), .88 (Responsiveness), .87 (Assurance), and .86 (Empathy). Additionally, the alpha coefficients for the five-item satisfaction scale and four-item intention scale were .89 and .87 respectively. Besides, as coefficient values are quite sensitive to the number of items in the scale, especially when scale have fewer than 10 items (as in the case of the current study), it is common to find quite low coefficient alpha (e.g., 0.5) (Pallant, 2007).

To ensure that this does not apply to our measurement, Briggs and Cheek (1986) recommended that an inter-item correlation within the range (0.2–0.5) would suggest quite a strong relationship among the items. In the current study, the inter-item correlation was within this range, suggesting a very strong relationship among the items for each domain. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for service quality dimensions was carried out to determine whether to proceed with the regression analysis. Table 1 shows the main results of EFA. Eigenvalues for each dimension besides explanatory power and factor loading values indicate that it is quite appropriate to proceed with the regression analysis that examined the relationship between service quality and satisfaction variables.

Insert table 1 about here

The results of the impact of the service quality dimensions on spa goers' satisfaction are shown in table 2. It is evident that service quality factors significantly influenced customer satisfaction. The five dimensions of service quality collectively explained a total of 58 per cent variance on customer satisfaction ($R^2=.58$). Furthermore, regression coefficients indicated that Empathy factor ($\beta=.380$, $p=.00$) and Tangibles ($\beta=.310$, $p=.00$) had the most significant impact on overall customer satisfaction, followed by Reliability ($\beta=.22$, $p=.00$) and Responsiveness ($\beta=.10$, $p=.00$).

Insert table 2 about here

The results of the impact of the five service quality dimensions on revisit intention are illustrated in table 3. About 41 per cent of overall revisit intention was explained by the five dimensions, $R^2=.41$, $p<.05$. Among these five dimensions, Empathy had the strongest and most significant impact on overall revisit intention ($\beta=.40$, $p=.00$), followed by Tangibles ($\beta=.21$, $p=.00$), and Responsiveness ($\beta=.18$, $p=.00$).

Insert table 3 about here

5. Conclusions and implications

This study demonstrated that the service quality dimensions that most influence overall customer satisfaction and revisit intention in the spa industry in Malaysia are those of empathy and tangibles. Besides, the only dimension that was not found to play a significant role in predicting customer satisfaction and behavioural repurchase intention is that of assurance. This finding is consistent with the current literature that emphasized the quality of interaction where employee's knowledge, attitude and behavior are highlighted (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Ko & Pastore, 2005; Zeithaml et al., 2006). For example, prior research in the marketing literature suggested that reliability has been the most important determinant of customer satisfaction and repurchase intention (Murray & Howat, 2002; Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Theodorakis et al., 2001; Lee-H et al; 2011).

Empathy is defined in the SERVQUAL literature as provision of care and individualized attention that is displayed to each customer (Al-alak, 2009), while tangibles refer to the physical environment of the service [i.e. appearance of facilities, equipment, and written materials (Zeithaml et al; 2006)]. It is quite evident that spa goers attach more importance to the physical and human aspects of the spa and wellness service than the dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, and assurance. This is to be expected in an industry where customers seek comfortable, clean, and readily accessible facilities and equipment, on top of a blend of skills, professionalism and the finest human touches. It is also interesting to note that the dimension of empathy was identified to be the most significant predictor of revisit intentions among spa goers in Malaysia. Indeed, the strength of the satisfaction–repurchase intention relationship can vary by type of product purchased (Al-alak and Alnawas, 2010), nature of the relationship between supplier and customer (Ko & Pastore, 2005), and supply chain strategies (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Some have found that the satisfaction–repurchase intention relationship evolves over time (Mittal et al., 1999). While these studies have generally found a significant relationship between satisfaction and repurchase intentions, a good deal of variation in this relationship remains unexplained (Lee et al; 2010). Previous studies on the relationship between employees' attitudes and repurchase intention in service industry (e.g. Al-alak, 2009; Al-alak and Alnawas, 2010; Cronin and Taylor, 1992, 1994) show that the human variable was by far the most important in the case of services directed toward the mind and body of customers.

Accordingly, enhancing and developing service providers' skills and competencies in such areas as: ways and means of delivering the service professionally, handling complaints, effective service encounters (the process in which a customer directly interacts with a service over a period of time which mainly refers to the interaction between a customer and a service delivery system), customer relationship management, employee positive attitude building, etc. will contribute to the improvement of the quality of services and this in turn will have a positive impact on customer satisfaction and revisit intention. Profitability will also be affected as higher levels of retention, repurchase intention and customer satisfaction lead to higher future revenues ((Rust and Zahorik, 1993; Rust et al., 1995) and reduced costs of operations (Reichheld and Teal, 1996; Srivastava et al., 1998). Therefore, service managers in the spa industry are recommended to devise operations and marketing strategies that focus on the service quality dimensions which can enhance customer satisfaction and, in turn, foster positive behavioral intentions. For example, as spa customers were found to be influenced by the physical surroundings and equipment, every care should be taken by the management to ensure continuous improvement in this physical evidence (including the appearance of service providers). The service setting can affect customers' perceptions of service quality in several ways.

In the case of the spa industry the attractiveness, cleanliness and upkeep of the facility provide “visual cues” as to the quality of service provided (Harris and Ezech, 2008; Sulek et al., 1995). Characteristics such as ambient conditions, seating comfort and enough space to prevent sensations of overcrowding influence the customer's physical and psychological comfort during the service encounter (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994). A poorly designed setting may also make it more difficult for a customer to move around the service facility, may reduce service provider productivity and also increase both service time and waiting time (Hill et al., 2002). The service setting has been shown to affect subsequent customer behaviors such as loyalty intentions (Harris and Ezech, 2008; Foxall and Yani-de-Soriano, 2005; Cronin, 2003; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003; Hoffman and Turley, 2002). Accordingly, continuous enhancement of the physical environment of the spa by management will have a positive impact on customer satisfaction and revisit intention which in turn will lead to customer loyalty (Andaleeb, 1998). The satisfaction of spa goers and their revisit intentions can be improved by the quality of spa furnishing, design and beauty and serenity of the physical environment. Satisfaction will be further enhanced by providing customers with a touch of class where each individual customer is made to feel that the service is tailor-made to his/her particular needs. Management is therefore encouraged to differentiate the service on the basis of these service quality dimensions.

6. Limitations and directions for future research

The current research was conducted among spa customers in Malaysia and whether the findings from this work would be consistent with other countries' spa goers would need to be verified through further research. Thus, it will be necessary to test the study's predictions in cross-cultures studies. Furthermore, since the sample size is limited, the results can be taken only as indicative results and the findings need to be compared and confirmed with other research work with much bigger and more diversified sample size to obtain better accuracy.

The employment of a non-probability convenient sample may also limit the generalizability of our findings: while the sampling technique helped to gather necessary data from respondents, the findings from this research are limited in that the data are taken from narrow sampling frames of primary spa customers in Malaysia. Further research within a much broader sampling frame should further investigate differences related to socio-economic, demographic (especially gender) and cultural factors. Another limitation is that we only measured a limited number of variables in the current research. It is conceivable that there may be additional factors that impact satisfaction and revisit intention in the Malaysian spa industry. New constructs such as “behavioral loyalty” or so-called “spurious loyalty” which have been validated in previous studies could be considered in future research. Therefore, further research is needed to qualify this particular issue. Also, it is important to note that face-to-face self-administered questionnaires do not capture information from survey avoiders (spa goers who refuse to participate in the survey) [Keillor and Sutton, 1993] or from customers who do not visit spas (Sudman, 1980). Research shows that these individuals differ from customers who frequently visit the spa and who agree to participate in surveys (Keillor and Sutton 1993). Therefore, results cannot be generalized to such customers. Future research querying customers should consider multiple data collection methods.

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Table 1: Factor analysis for service quality dimensions.

Items	Tangibles (F1)	Reliability (F2)	Responsiveness (F3)	Assurance(F4)	Empathy (F5)
1	.562	.303	.066	.127	.073
2	.584	.238	.122	.046	.254
3	.714	.231	.199	.130	.132
4	.700	.243	.231	.022	.089
5	.189	.711	.241	.131	.213
6	.154	.737	.361	.113	.031
7	.184	.798	.107	.213	.094
8	.187	.798	.219	.063	.241
9	.243	.693	.099	.267	.176
10	.276	.048	.597	.121	.241
11	.095	.321	.526	.091	.289
12	.119	.309	.568	.208	.286
13	.198	.267	.612	.096	.266
14	.195	.218	.090	.741	.288
15	.215	.102	.220	.681	.277
16	.287	.294	.098	.697	.109
17	.157	.274	.281	.622	
18	.163	.267	.185	.272	.691
19	.197	.029	.328	.248	.603
20	.117	.251	.064	.275	.598
<i>Eigenvalue</i> 4.4323.396 3.208 2.013 1.175					
%31.01215.863 11.974 9.864 5.648					
<i>Cum %</i> 31.012 42.626 56.600 63.464 68.112					

.071

The bold values indicate the alpha level set at .05.

Table 2: Influence of the five service quality factors on Golfers’ satisfaction.

Predictors	Customer satisfaction (β)
Tangibles	.310*
Reliability	.221*
Responsiveness	.081*
Assurance	.032
Empathy	.380*
R ²	.581*

Note. β= standardized beta coefficients; Predictors include Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy; dependent variable is customer satisfaction.

* p<.05.

Table 3: The influence of the five service quality factors on revisit intention.

Predictors	Revisit intention (β)
Tangibles	.213*
Reliability	.101
Responsiveness	.184*
Assurance	.081
Empathy	.403*
R ²	.410*

Note. b = standardized beta coefficients; predictors include Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy; dependent variable is revisit intention.

* p<.05.