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## Customer's expectation, perception and satisfaction with service quality of a fitness center in Malaysia

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### Abstract

This study examined customer's expectation, perception and satisfaction with service quality of a fitness centre in Malaysia. The study also investigated whether there are differences in satisfaction with service quality based on gender and ethnicity of fitness centre customers. Data were collected using questionnaires distributed to all members of one fitness centre (N =248). The results showed demographic variables not important in evaluating service quality. On the other hand, empathy and assurance were found to be the two most important dimensions for customer's satisfaction with fitness centers in Malaysia. However, all dimensions of service quality were discovered to have negative means indicating customers are dissatisfied with all aspects of service quality at the fitness centre. The results were discussed based on the gap model. Implications of the study for fitness centers were also provided in the paper.

**Keywords:** Fitness centers, gap model, SERVQUAL, service quality

### 1. Introduction

The concept of service quality is becoming very important for a fitness center because it has been shown to be related with cost efficiency<sup>[1]</sup> and the financial well-being of an organization<sup>[2]</sup>. Service quality is also important in terms of gaining customer trust and satisfaction<sup>[3, 4]</sup> which in turn leads to repeat purchase<sup>[5]</sup>. Service quality is about ensuring customers achieving their needs and desires<sup>[6, 7, 8]</sup>. One strategy that has often been used to retain customers in a fitness center is providing excellent service quality<sup>[8]</sup>. Service quality<sup>[6]</sup> is about ensuring customers achieve their needs and desires and one factor that has been found to be related to quality improvement in sports research is the concept of customer expectations<sup>[3]</sup>. The literature suggests service quality is important because it comes before service satisfaction<sup>[9, 10]</sup>. Satisfaction is defined<sup>[11]</sup> as comparing expectations before a purchase is made to actual service performance. Based on this definition, satisfaction is the results of a service perceived performance being higher than the standards, but dissatisfaction occurs when service performance is lower than expectation. The most popular instrument to measure service quality was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry<sup>[7]</sup> and originally known as SERVQUAL. Later known as RATER, the instrument is a scale of perceived quality that focuses on a customer's intention or judgment about the quality of a service and has been applied in various service industries, including tourism and hospitality and used for benchmarking purpose<sup>[12]</sup>. SERVQUAL<sup>[6]</sup> is based on the gap model which focuses on customer needs, past experiences and word of mouth communications. It consists of five dimensions; (1) Tangible, (2) Reliability, (3) Responsiveness (4) Assurance and (5) Empathy. Tangibles are related with equipment and materials as well staff of a facility while the second dimension reliability is concern with the ability of a service provider to provide service on time and according to the satisfaction of customers. Responsiveness is the ability to solve customers complaints and problems quickly while assurance is the knowledge and courtesy of employees how they can inspire trust and confidence. The last dimension is empathy, which is related how a service provider cares about the customer and provide attention needed by customers.

Some authors have identified demography to be related to service quality. For example, gender differences can be related to different customer needs and wants. Female customers give more attention to physical appearances, cleanliness and physical representations.

Customers from the different ethnic group have different expectations of service quality because of different needs and wants based on differences in beliefs and culture [13, 14]. Additionally, age can be one of the factors that can affect the satisfaction in service quality. With regard to the fitness centre, Yu et al., [15] suggest diversifying activities and marketing campaigns aim at people of different ages to understand the factors. This can result in positive customer's consumption behavior because by recognizing the customer needs and wants, they will realise the importance and benefits of keeping fit and healthy.

In Malaysia, the health and fitness industry has witnessed tremendous growth in interest and participation [16]. Studies have shown that Malaysian sport and event organizers are paying more attention to service quality and customer satisfaction [17, 18, 19] because service quality and customer satisfaction have been recognised as a prerequisite for the success of any industry [7]. However, currently no studies have been done in Malaysia on customer expectations and satisfaction with service quality in the fitness industry. It is important for fitness centre managers in Malaysia to identify differences in satisfaction of their customers based on demographic profile such as age, ethnicity, income, gender and months of involvement as customers of the fitness centre so that fitness centre managers can influence expectations and satisfaction with service quality. To date, no research has been undertaken in Malaysia using the SERVQUAL on customer's expectation, perception and satisfaction of service quality of a fitness centre. Studying expectations, perceptions and differences in satisfaction of service quality of fitness centre members in Malaysia based on demographic variables are the purposes of this study. The following were the research questions for the study:

1. What is the expectation of service quality among fitness centre customers?
2. What is the perception of service quality among fitness centre customers?
3. What is the satisfaction of service quality among fitness centre customers?
4. Are there differences in satisfaction with service quality based on gender and ethnicity fitness centre customers?
5. What is the relationship between age and months of involvement with the satisfaction of service quality among fitness centre customers?

## 2. Material & methods

This descriptive study used a questionnaire to collect data from members of one fitness centre in Negeri Sembilan. Data were collected from all paid members (n=248) based on membership information provided by the fitness center. Subjects were asked about demographic information such as gender, age, ethnic, income, and months of involvement. Subjects were mostly males (n=149, 60.1 %), age ranging from 18 to 55 years old with a mean age of 32.5 years old. In terms of ethnicity, majority were Chinese (n=85, 34.3%), followed by Malays (n=71, 28.6%) and Indians (n=25, 10.1%). The majority of the subjects were in the RM3000 to RM5000 monthly income category (n = 150, 60.5 %).

The SERVQUAL scale [7] was used in this study to measure perceived service quality and expected service quality. Each subscale contained 22 items and both of the subscales measured the five dimensions of tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, empathy and assurance. Fitness centre members completed the questionnaire on expectations and perceptions of actual performance simultaneously after the customers finish their work-out session.

## 3. Results

customer's expectations are what the customers believed a service provider should offer to meet their wants and desires. In this study, the results (Table 1) indicate that customers have the highest expectation on empathy dimension (M = 34.044, SD = 1.803), followed by reliability (M = 33.794, SD = 1.856), assurance (M = 27.266, SD = 1.423) responsive (M = 27.250, SD = 1.395) and the least expectation on tangible segmentation of service quality (M = 27.044, 1.452). A high expectation on empathy means customers regard as most important a caring, individualized attention provided to them by the service provider while tangible aspects such as employees appearance, uniforms, equipment, and work areas on-site were found to be least important to customers.

**Table 1:** The expectation of service quality among fitness centre customers.

	Mean	SD
Empathy	34.044	1.803
Reliability	33.794	1.856
Assurance	27.266	1.423
Responsive	27.250	1.395
Tangible	27.044	1.452

Research question two examined the perception of actual service performance of the fitness centre regarding tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. In terms of dimensions, customer's perception of actual service performance are highest in terms of reliability dimension (M = 28.117, SD = 3.381), followed by empathy (M = 24.315, SD = 3.627), tangible (M = 23.407, SD = 2.429), responsive (M = 23.335, SD = 2.673) and assurance (M = 20.012, SD = 2.999). Customers perceived the actual performance of the fitness centre as highest for the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. On the other hand, customer's assessment of the actual performance of the fitness centre as lowest for assurance dimensions such as communicating their expertise and competencies, providing knowledge and their ability to convey trust and confidence.

**Table 2:** The perception of service quality of fitness centre members.

	Mean	SD
Reliability	28.117	3.381
Empathy	24.315	3.627
Tangible	23.407	2.429
Responsive	23.335	2.673
Assurance	20.012	2.999

Research question three examines satisfaction which is the gap between expected service and experienced service. Satisfaction is also defined as the emotional state of mind reflecting the outcome of an experience [20]. In this study, satisfaction is determined by subtracting the value of perception of actual service performance from the expectation of service. The result (Table 3) shows all dimensions of service quality have negative means meaning that customers are dissatisfied with all aspects of service quality at the fitness centre. Customers are dissatisfied most with the empathy dimension (M = -9.730, SD = 3.845), followed by assurance (M = -7.254, SD = 3.121), reliability (M = -5.677, SD = 3.416), responsiveness (M = -4.915, SD = 2.712) and tangible (M = -3.637, 2.477). The results suggest fitness centre customers feel the employees do not care about them during delivery of service, and this hurts customer's satisfaction the most with service quality.

**Table 3:** The satisfaction of service quality of fitness centre members.

	Mean	SD
Empathy	-9.730	3.845
Assurance	-7.254	3.121
Reliability	-5.677	3.416
Responsive	-4.915	2.712
Tangible	-3.637	2.477

An independent sample t-test (Table 4) was conducted to examine differences in satisfaction of service quality based on the gender of customers. The results are not significant meaning no significant differences were found between male and female customers about satisfaction with tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy aspects of service quality.

**Table 4:** T-test on differences in satisfaction with service quality based on gender.

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig.
Tangible	Male	149	-3.4362	2.48052	1.571	246	.582
	Female	99	-3.9394	2.45290			
Reliability	Male	149	-5.5436	3.17823	.756	246	.068
	Female	99	-5.8788	3.75329			
Responsiveness	Male	149	-4.8389	2.51500	.543	246	.092
	Female	99	-5.0303	2.99474			
Assurance	Male	149	-7.1141	3.04367	.866	246	.429
	Female	99	-7.4646	3.23978			
Empathy	Male	149	-9.4228	3.69291	1.547	246	.151
	Female	99	-10.1919	4.03727			

\*p < .05

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in satisfaction of service quality based on the ethnicity of customers. Table 5 showed that there were no significant differences in satisfaction of service quality based on the

ethnicity of customers about satisfaction with tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy aspects of service quality.

**Table 5:** ANOVA on differences in satisfaction with service quality based on ethnicity

		SS	df	MS	F	p
Tangible	Between	14.68	3	4.896	.796	497
	Within	1500	244	6.150		
Reliability	Between	5.51	3	1.839	.156	926
	Within	2876	244	11.79		
Responsiveness	Between	30.66	3	10.23	1.39	245
	Within	1786	244	7.32		
Assurance	Between	48.79	3	16.26	1.68	171
	Within	2358	244	9.66		
Empathy	Between	121	3	40.65	2.81	040*
	Within	3528	244	14.4		

\*p < .05

Pearson correlation was performed (Table 6) to determine whether age and months of involvement have a significant relationship with satisfaction on all dimensions of service quality. For the duration of involvement, the results show a positive correlation between months of involvement and satisfaction with responsiveness dimension. It was found that

the longer customers are registered as members, the more they are satisfied with quick and prompt service provided by the fitness centre in responding on-site to questions or answering emails and returning phone calls. On the other hand, the results showed no significant relationship between age and satisfaction of service quality.

**Table 6:** Relationship between age and months of involvement with satisfaction

	Tangible	Reliability	Response	Assurance	Empathy
	r	r	r	r	r
Age	.035	-0.72	.033	-0.09	0.13
Months Involvement	.030	.046	.128*	.105	.061

\*p ≤ .05

#### 4. Discussion & Conclusion

The aim of this study is to measure expectations, perceptions and satisfaction on service quality in a fitness centre in Malaysia using SERVQUAL. Demography as a new dimension was added in this study. The personal and demographic profile of the customers indicate that majority of the service users are males with mean age of 32.5 years old and earning monthly higher than the national average. This

study did not find significant differences in the influence of some of the demographic variables such as age, gender and age in the perception of service quality of fitness center even though there was a positive correlation between months of involvement and satisfaction with responsiveness dimension. The fact that levels of satisfaction do not differ between most of the demographic variables calls for attention towards the other demographic factors that could determine the satisfaction

with fitness center services. Thus, the other factors such as such as employment status, marital status and educational level should also be investigated in future research.

In this study, empathy appears to be the most important factor regarding expectation of service but not in experienced service and this gap results in the highest dissatisfaction regarding service quality for empathy. Empathy refers to a caring, and individualized attention a fitness centre provides its customers. Even though services can be performed completely according to procedures and guidelines, there is a possibility that customers may not feel fitness center employees show enough care about them during delivery of services, and this may hurt customer's assessments of the fitness centre service quality. It is important for fitness centres in Malaysia to care about customers as much as the service and this can be done by training fitness centre employees to provide service with a smile and always making eye contact which is important towards showing empathy to customers.

The second service quality dimension that customers are very dissatisfied in this study is assurance. The findings suggest customers are not satisfied with the expertise, competencies and knowledge of fitness centre employees. Fitness centers are expected to be the experts of the service they are delivering and it is important for their employees to convey trust and confidence to their customers by raising customer's awareness of the competencies of fitness center employees. This can be done by showing qualification patches or badges on uniforms worn by employees, displaying certification and information about accreditation on walls and using certification logos on letters and publications. The important point here is that Malaysian fitness centres must communicate their expertise and competencies and be repeatedly seen by customers as highly skilled so that their confidence and assessment of service quality provided by the service provider will be higher. It was found in this study that all dimensions of service quality have negative means indicating customers are dissatisfied with all aspects of service quality at the fitness centre. Based on the gap model, this dissatisfaction is the results of customer expectations being greater than customer perceptions of actual performance. Some critics have suggested this discrepancy may not be due to actual service performance falling short of expectations but rather on biased responses associated with asking respondents to complete the two set of questionnaires of the SERVQUAL (expectations and perceptions) at a single sitting. Bouman and van der Wiele <sup>[21]</sup> noticed boredom and confusion among respondents when both the expectations and perceptions versions of SERVQUAL were administered simultaneously and this affected data quality. Biased responses occur "when expectations and experience evaluations are measured simultaneously, respondents will indicate that their expectations are greater than they were before the service encounter" <sup>[22]</sup>. The authors further suggest that "customers who had a negative experience with the service tend to overstate their expectations, creating a larger gap; customers who had a positive experience tend to understate their expectations, resulting in smaller gaps." The authors argued that measurement of customer expectations must be done before a service is provided and evaluation of actual performance after the service has been performed.

The study could be extended to examine the relationship among customer retention, satisfaction, perceive value and loyalty in different sociocultural settings. At the same time, the reasons why customers go to other fitness centres could also be explored by the researcher. It is also important to examine the effects of intervening variables such as previous

experience, the number of years of becoming a member, demographic and social situational factors in future studies.

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