

Perceptions of Recreation Quality in Hong Kong

香港人對康體服務的印象

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Abstract

Due to the developed economics during the last few decades, increasing demand for leisure services in Hong Kong cannot be denied. The main purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of quality on service providers from the respective participants. Six participating settings (two public, two non-profit and two commercial) were invited to participate in this study. A total of 350 respondents completed the SERQUAL instrument (either English or Chinese). The findings indicated that participants' perception of the recreation quality (five dimensions – reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles) in commercial setting was better than public or non-profit organization. It is important for us to identify a number of keys to pursue excellence and meet the changing needs.

摘要

隨著過去數十年的經濟發展，香港人對於康體服務的素求亦不斷增加。本研究之主要目的是探討本地參加者對康體服務之印象。總共有六個機構(包括兩個公營、兩個非牟利及兩個商業)被邀請參與這研究；總共有三百五十位參加者回應英文或中文版之SERQUAL問卷。研究結果顯示商業機構所提供之康體服務質素的評分較高，研究結果亦加深我們確定追求卓越之服務質素，與時並進之要素。

Introduction

The most marked change in the structure of developed economies in the last half of the 20th century has been the transformation from a manufacturing to a service economy. In Hong Kong alone, the percentage of workers employed in the service sector has risen from 56.7% in 1990 to 82.1% in 2000 (Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce, 2001). Within the broad framework of the service sectors, the following classification of services is offered by Payne (1993): retail and wholesaling; transportation, distribution and

storage; banking and insurance; real estate; communications and information services; public utilities, government and defense; health care; business, professional and personal services; recreational and hospitality services (leisure services); education and other non-profit organizations.

The service nature of leisure service organizations as well as the increasing demand for leisure services cannot be denied. People are now beginning to collect experiences (services) as they once collected things. For example, in tourism, Holloway (1986) writes that tourism experiences:

...are, in my view, to become deeper and more meaningful over time, so that tourists instead of merely collecting visits to sites in a whirlwind tour of Europe will begin to collect interactive experiences, in which people will become as important as places. This desire to meet people at an individual and meaningful level will help to encourage the movement of tourists away from the present centers of mass tourism, where relationships between hosts and guests are ephemeral and impersonal (p. 10).

To be prepared to give individual customers the experiences they seek, it is important to understand the nature of delivering quality services. This entails understanding both the nature of delivering services and considering the role of quality in providing leisure and recreation services. A traditional starting place for defining services is understanding how they differ from products. It is frequently argued that services have unique characteristics that differentiate them from goods or manufactured products. The four most commonly identified characteristics ascribed to services are:

- **Intangibility.** In services, what is actually purchased is the experience rather than a tangible thing. As a result, evaluative criteria are complex and difficult to capture.
- **Heterogeneity.** This refers to the potential for variability in service delivery. This is especially prominent when a substantial labor component is involved. The quality of services is largely dependent on the actions of people. The quality of interactions between personnel and customers is likely to vary among staff members and even for individual staff members the quality of the interactions may differ from day to day.
- **Inseparability of production and consumption.** Services are often rendered and experienced simultaneously. This usually requires the presence of both the consumer and the provider during the delivery process and can not be taken back and exchanged if the customer is not satisfied.
- **Perishability.** It is not possible to store services in inventory.

Using the above characteristics by no means fully describes the difference between leisure goods and services as some products have one or more of the above characteristics and not all services display all of these characteristics. Services can only be described as having a tendency towards intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability. Any given service will display a different combination of each of these four characteristics. This suggests a continuum for each of these characteristics. For example, programming in a racquet club is high on tangibility, highly standardized, performed near to the customer and is perishable. Whereas childcare is less tangible, highly varied (day camps to babysitting), is performed with the customer and is perishable. Understanding the position of a particular service on each continuum is an important step in not only providing services but also in incorporating the emerging dimension of quality.

Quality and value have become increasingly important elements in delivering services in the last twenty-five years. Quality, a perception of excellence, is the extent to which the products and services received by the customer equal or exceed expectations. Customer expectations for programs and services are developed in many ways. Factors which influence customer expectations include word of mouth communications from other customers, personal needs, past experiences, external communication and the concept of equity, especially in the public and nonprofit sectors (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; Crompton & Lamb, 1986). As Albrecht (1992) notes:

...the most fundamental change in management's thinking going on today is the shift from managing the boxes on the organizational chart to managing customer outcomes... Call it the customer revolution, the quality revolution, or the service revolution or whatever you like. All of the various energies and lines of action that businesses are putting forth now are beginning to converge to a single focus: winning and keeping the customer's business by doing the right things outstandingly well (pp. ix, 10).

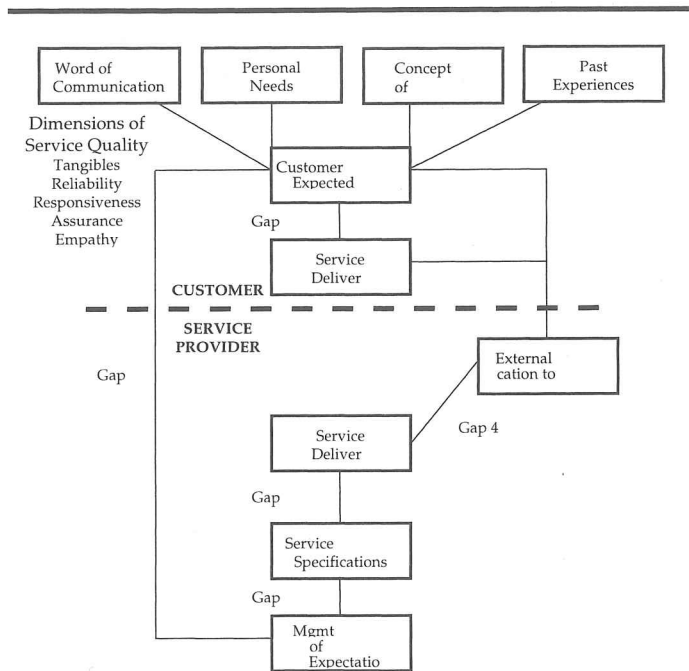
Taking this concept one step forward is realizing the importance of delivering customer value, moving beyond customer satisfaction to customer delight.

Despite the importance being placed on service quality, measuring an organization's progress can be difficult. Quality is an elusive and indistinct construct. Often mistaken for imprecise adjectives like goodness, or luxury, or shininess, or weight, quality and its requirements are not easily articulated by customers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985).

Figure 1 suggests a model, which is intended to explain the process by which a consumer evaluates recreation service quality. This model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1985) and adapted by MacKay and Crompton (1988) to evaluate recreation service quality identifies five potential gaps in delivering quality services. Recreation service quality is operationalized as the difference between what is expected

from each of the service dimensions and what a consumer perceives he or she receives from them. Highly satisfactory quality occurs when perceived performance exceeds expectations. Satisfactory quality results from when performance meets expectations. Unsatisfactory quality implies that perceptions fall short of expectations.

Figure 1. Gap Model of Service Quality.



Research completed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Barry (1985) has identified five dimensions of quality service, in order of importance: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. Reliability refers to the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Responsiveness is the willingness to help customers and provide prompt attention. Assurance indicates courteous and knowledgeable staff who convey trust and confidence. The empathy dimension includes offering caring, individualized attention to customers. The tangible dimension represents the physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel. A follow-up study in public recreation facilities and programs completed by Crompton and Mckay (1990) found similar results with reliability and responsiveness ranked one and two respectively.

Despite the number of studies examining quality in Europe and North America, very few studies have been completed

in non-westernized countries related to perceptions of quality. In addition, beyond the work of Crompton and McKay, little research has been completed examining the concept of quality in recreation settings and programs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, the study sought to better understand the perceptions of quality of participants in various public, non-profit, and commercial recreation programs and facilities in Hong Kong. Second, the study sought to understand the relationship between selected variables (gender and ethnicity) as they related to the perceptions of quality of participants in various public, non-profit, and commercial recreation programs and facilities in Hong Kong.

Subjects and Data Collection

Subjects in the study were recreational users in one of three types of leisure service organizations in Hong Kong in the spring of 1997. Each of the participating settings was chosen to meet pre-determined criteria (e.g. type of organization -- public, non-profit, and commercial) and included two public facility based clubs (Urban Council indoor games hall and a Urban Council swimming pool), two nonprofit facility

based clubs (YMCAs), and two commercial facility based fitness clubs. Within each setting, a convenient sampling method was used with researchers asking every customer entering the facility during a prescribed time period if they would be willing to complete a survey related to quality services. A total of 350 respondents completed the questionnaire. The demographics of this sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Study Demographics (n=350).

	Total Number	Percentage
Gender		
Males	227	64.9
Females	123	35.1
Missing	0	0
Ethnicity		
Asian	228	65.1
Caucasian	110	31.4
Other	12	3.4
Missing	0	0
Service Orientation		
Public	133	38.0
Non-profit	105	30.0
Commercial	112	32.0
Missing	0	0

Prior to the actual study the SERVQUAL instrument was translated into Chinese. A pilot test using a test/re-test procedure had seventeen bilingual participants (n=17) complete the instrument in English and two weeks later complete a translated version of the instrument. The results of this test yielded the following correlation coefficients, the expectations portion of the instrument, $r=.86$ and the evaluation portion of the instrument, $r=.94$.

Once the instrument proved reliable, data for the actual study was collected over a three-day period in the spring of 1997. A morning, afternoon, and evening timeslot were used, with researchers at each of the six facilities collecting data at the same time. Each subject completed either an English or Chinese translation of the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985, 1988). The SERVQUAL instrument measured both the expectations of customers regarding the five dimensions of service quality as well as an evaluation of these five dimensions at the leisure

service facility at which they took the questionnaire. Data was analyzed using an SPSX statistical package.

Results

The results of the study are presented in this section and are organized around the two-fold purpose of the study. First, the study sought to better understand the perceptions participants had of the quality of recreation programs and facilities in Hong Kong. This entailed looking at both the expectations of participants related to the five dimensions of service quality identified by Parasuraman, et al., as well as examining how participants ranked each of the public, non-profit and commercial recreation programs and facilities in Hong Kong on these five dimensions. Table 2 presents the mean scores of all respondents related to the expected and perceived quality on each of these five dimensions.

Table 2. Mean Scores of Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality.

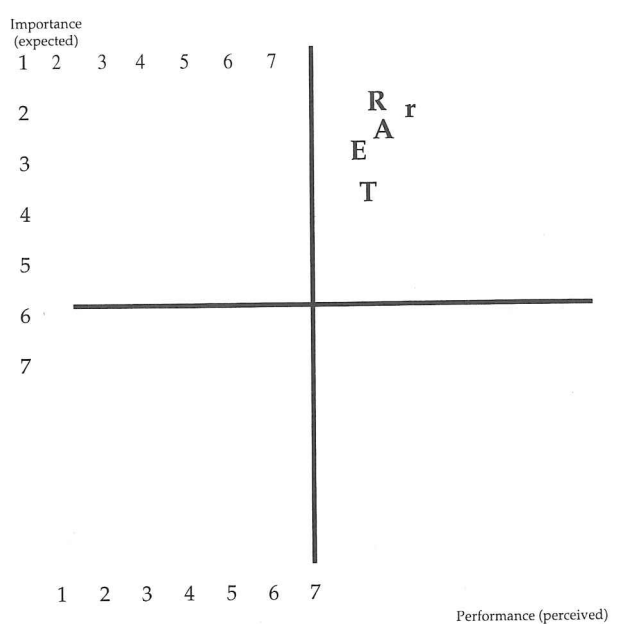
	Tangibles		Reliability		Responsiveness		Assurance		Empathy	
	E	P	E	P	E	P	E	P	E	P
Total	5.09	4.76	6.20	4.85	6.19	5.08	6.12	4.98	5.70	4.67
Gender										
Male	5.06	4.76	6.15	4.82	6.10	5.04	6.08	4.98	5.69	4.68
Female	5.16	4.74	6.29	4.92	6.34	5.12	6.17	4.98	5.72	4.65
Ethnicity										
Asian	5.04	4.49	6.09	4.82	6.12	5.06	6.02	4.94	5.51	4.54
Caucasian	5.16	5.23	6.44	4.92	6.37	5.50	6.34	5.01	6.10	4.92
Service Orientation										
Public	4.95	4.47	6.18	4.78	6.16	4.87	6.00	4.67	5.47	4.40
Nonprofit	5.00	5.11	6.09	5.14	6.15	5.40	6.08	5.48	5.87	5.06
Commercial	5.35	4.76	6.31	4.66	6.25	4.94	6.23	4.88	5.87	4.63

E=Expected
P=Perceived (Evaluation)

In Figure 2, the mean scores on the expected and perceived quality of the five dimensions have been placed on an importance/performance grid, thus giving an overview of the performance of all organizations involved in this study on reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. Additional grids could be created for each of these five dimensions, which compare the performance of each of the organizations on each dimension (i.e. Figure 3). By using a grid to

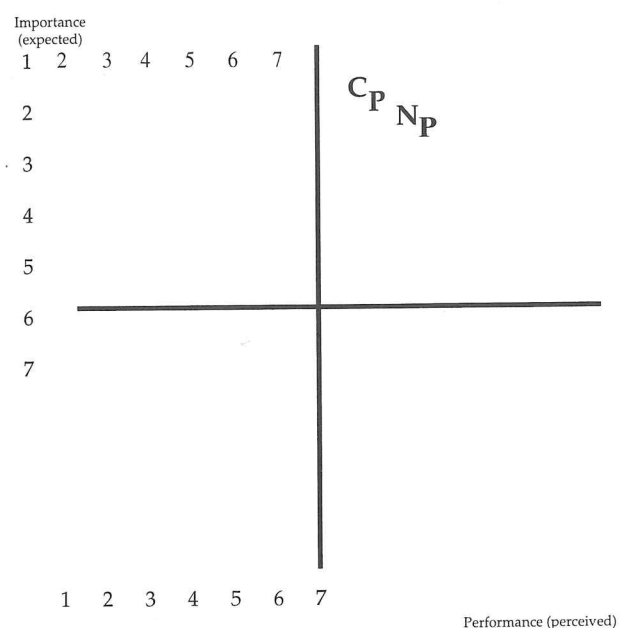
compare the importance and performance items, organizations can see which areas need improvement, which areas are doing well, which areas should be moved to a lower priority and which areas are being stressed more than they need to be. In examining Figure 2, it is important to note the overall importance of all five dimensions. In addition, it is also interesting to note that participants expected more than they are getting in each of these five dimensions.

Figure 2. Importance/Performance Grid on the Five Dimensions of Service Quality Total Sample.



R - Reliability
A - Assurance
T - Tangibles
r - Responsiveness
E - Empathy

Figure 3. Importance/Performance Grid on Reliability by Type of Organization N=350.



C - Commercial
NP - Nonprofit
P - Public

Results of a three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed the following significant differences in the expectations of customers regarding the five dimensions of services quality:

- The effect of gender was significant for responsiveness as this dimension was significantly more important (at the .01 level) to females than males.
- The effect of ethnic background was significant for assurance and empathy. Assurance was significantly more important (at the .001 level) to Caucasians than Asians. Empathy was significantly more important (at the .01 level) to Caucasians than Asians.
- Although respondents consistently expect more from commercial organizations than their counterparts in the nonprofit and public sectors on all dimensions of service quality, the effect of service orientation was only significant (at the .01 level) for tangibles and empathy.

Results of a three way ANOVA in the evaluation portion of the instrument revealed no significant differences in the evaluation of organizations on reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles related to gender, race or education level. A significant difference in all five dimensions of service quality within the service orientation of the organizations was found at the .01 level. In examining this difference, private, nonprofit organizations were consistently evaluated higher than their counterparts in the commercial and public sectors.

Discussion

Results of the total sample were similar to other studies (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Barry, 1985; White, 1998) completed in a variety of settings in which participants listed in order of importance the five dimensions of service quality - reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy and tangibles. This order of importance was also borne out in studies examining the service quality of recreation programs in the United States (MacKay & Crompton, 1988, 1990), thus demonstrating some consistency in customers' expectations of service quality. However, differences were found based on gender (for responsiveness), ethnicity (for assurance and empathy), and service orientation.

The difference found for responsiveness based on gender may be based on what Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, and Freysinger (1989) identify as the importance of an ethic of

care for women. They define an ethic of care "as an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, of taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left out" (p. 122). As women have traditionally been more associated with such an ethic of care, this may account for the greater importance they place on recreation organizations being responsive to their needs. As recreation organizations look to the future, gender is likely to continue to grow in importance as a variable that organizations must consider when marketing and implementing their programs (O'Sullivan & Spangler, 1998). Additional research is needed to identify what women expect from responsive organizations as well as why there appears to be a difference between men and women related to the dimension of responsiveness.

The difference found for the dimensions of assurance and empathy based on ethnicity may be based on different expectations related to the recreation experience. Both the assurance and empathy dimensions are connected to the skill and ability of staff to build relationships and be personable. This study suggests that Caucasians expect more from staff interactions than Asians. One possible explanation is that Caucasians who participated in this study were all living and working abroad and therefore may have higher expectations of service than individuals living and working close to home. Another possibility may be related to socio-economic class as generally foreigners living and working abroad have a higher standard of living, thus, possibly accounting for the different expectations. At this point, it may be too early to surmise and additional research is needed to explore this difference as well as explore the role ethnicity plays in developing expectations for the recreation experience.

In examining the evaluation aspect of the questionnaire, it is interesting to note that despite the fact that participants expected more from commercial organizations on some dimensions, the evaluation portion of the instrument found that nonprofit organizations ranked higher in all five dimensions of service quality. These differences based on service orientation, may be unique to Hong Kong where some nonprofits have a strong orientation to the commercial sector as well as demonstrate a strong service ethic. These findings are encouraging for both nonprofit and public organizations as they demonstrate that the public and nonprofit sectors can compete in relationship to quality in both the tangible facilities, if they are well maintained, and customer service. Further research may be warranted in examining the service orientation variable in light of the role price may play in establishing a customer's expectation of

service quality as well as in the whole area of equity identified by McKay and Crompton.

In examining the overall results of this study, it is important to note the relative importance of all five dimensions of service quality. This finding indicates that the old distinction between product and service may be obsolete as both the service issue (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) and product issue (tangibles and customer benefits) are incomplete fractions of the same issue. Only when we combine them into a single, composite issue can we think sanely about quality as a competitive advantage and a way of operating a business. What exists is total customer value - the combination of the tangible and the intangible experienced by the customer during all points of contact with the organization that becomes his or her perception of doing business with an organization (DeGraaf, Jordan, & DeGraaf, 1999). The importance of understanding the perceptions of customers cannot be over stated, as perception of quality is crucial to the success of a service-oriented business. "It is not enough just to give good service; the customer must perceive the fact that he or she is getting good service" (Albrecht, 1985, p.48).

Although the intangible nature of delivering leisure services cannot be forgotten, the emphasis of delivering quality leisure services must be on the product (the benefits or value received by the customer) as well as the process by which those benefits are delivered. In order to concentrate on the total customer experience organizations must embrace the tenants of a new "customer value paradigm." Many leisure service organizations are making the transition to the customer value paradigm. McCarville (1993) has identified a number of keys to quality programming that have emerged from the quality services literature.

- Establish programming priorities. Programmers must remember to serve customers rather than simply operate programs.
- Discover customer needs. Understand what customers want and expect from the recreation programs the organization provides.
- Develop programs from customer needs, wants and expectations.
- Identify key program providers. Make program staff and customers partners in the programming process.

- Identify key encounters with clients. Programmers must manage the key interaction points between customers and staff, customers and facilities, as well as customers and customers.
- Train staff for flexibility, but when in doubt set standards.
- Ask for help. Successful programs result from endless innovation; programmers should not miss the opportunity to gather input from staff, customers and other programs in an attempt to increase the quality of their programs.

According to McCarville, "the search for program excellence never ends. Excellent programs remain in a state of constant development. Once they cease to develop, they will cease to meet the changing needs of their clientele" (p. 23).

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