

## **APPLICATION OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTINUUM MODEL TO UNDERSTAND CUSTOMERS' INVOLVEMENT AND SATISFACTION IN A FITNESS CENTER**

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### **Abstract**

This research examined how customers' perceptions of service quality influence the degree of their involvement and psychological connection to a sport activity at a fitness center by applying the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). Research instruments consisted of the PCM and SERVQUAL and administered to customers at a fitness centre in Malaysia (n = 248). In terms of sport involvement, the results showed most subjects are in the level of attachment. Results showed all dimensions of service quality have negative mean scores which mean customers are dissatisfied with all aspects of service quality at the fitness centre. A one-way ANOVA showed differences in satisfaction with service quality based on the PCM level of involvement for tangible, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy dimensions of service quality. Customers at the higher level of involvement (allegiance) reported less dissatisfaction with the tangible, responsiveness, empathy, and reliability dimensions of service quality compared with those at the awareness level.

*Keywords:* Service quality, sport involvement, psychological connection

### **Introduction**

More attention has been given to the study of service quality in the sports industry because it has been shown to be related to cost efficiency (Wu & Ai, 2016; Crosby, 1979) and the financial well-being of an organization (Rust and Zahorik, 1993). One factor that has been found to be related to quality improvement is the concept of customer expectations (Bolton & James, 1991). Service quality is determined by post-experience customer research (Robinson, 2003) allowing sports organizations to identify

weakness in service quality and introduce quality improvement. Previous studies demonstrate service quality comes before service satisfaction (Brady & Robertson, 2001; Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Izogo, 2017). Oliver (1980) defined satisfaction as comparing expectations before a purchase is made to actual service performance. Based on this definition, satisfaction is the results of a service performance being higher than expected service, but dissatisfaction occurs when service performance is lower than expectation.

The concept of service quality is important to sport organizations and can be applied to fitness centers (Robinson, 2003). Additionally, the concept of sport involvement is becoming very important for the sports industry in understanding consumer behavior (McGehee, Yoon, & Cárdenas, 2003). The theoretical framework that is related to sport involvement is the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) introduced by Funk and James (2001). PCM is important in the sport marketing context where it is a useful tool or strategy for marketing segmentation and may help the marketer to develop better target marketing activities. For example, it can help the sports marketer to do some promotion and improve the way they communicate with their customer because customers at a different level on the PCM may vary in terms of their needs and wants. For a fitness centre, it is important for fitness centre managers to be able to identify accurately the levels of consumer involvement so that managers can formulate the right strategies to attract and retain customers, and facilitate loyalty.

The fitness industry in Malaysia (Yusof & Shah, 2008) is facing difficulty retaining customers amid fierce competition by foreign-owned fitness centers. One strategy that has been proposed is for sport industry in Malaysia to pay more attention to service quality and customers satisfaction (Muhammad, Muhammad, Jati, Jennifah, & Irwan, 2017; Yusof & See, 2008; Popa & Yusof, 2011; Dolinting, Yusof & Soon, 2013; Barkhordari, Yusof, & Geok, 2014). Assessing the impact of sport involvement is important for fitness centers in Malaysia to design quality programs to attract more customers. It is also important to know the reason for a customer to continue becoming customers of a fitness center. The reasons might be because of satisfaction with service quality. Currently, no research has been undertaken in Malaysia using both the PCM and SERVQUAL to study differences in satisfaction with service quality based on levels of sport involvement. This study explores this gap by investigating the following research questions:

1. What is the level of sport involvement among customers of a fitness center?
2. What is the satisfaction of service quality among customers of a fitness centre?
3. Are there differences in satisfaction based on levels of sport involvement?

## **Methods**

Data were collected from customers (n=248) of a fitness centre in Negri Sembilan, Malaysia using questionnaires to measure demographic information (gender, age, ethnic, income, and months of involvement), subjects' perception of service quality, expected service quality and subjects' level of sport involvement. The SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithmal, and Berry, 1988) was used 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. In this study, satisfaction is determined by subtracting the value of perception of actual service performance from the expectation of service.

Subjects' level of sport involvement was measured using the PCM scale adopted from Funk (2008). The PCM consists of nine-items with three items for each involvement dimension of pleasure, centrality, and sign. The PCM was used to determine a person's involvement in terms of pleasure, centrality, and sign as well as the levels of involvement such as low, medium, and high. Subjects of the study 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 of subjects 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 %).

## **Results**

Research question 1 identified the level of involvement among fitness centre customers in four stages: (1) awareness, (2) attraction, (3) attachment, and (4) allegiance. Subjects' responses based on the PCM were used to determine a person's involvement level with the fitness center in terms of pleasure, centrality, and sign, after which each score is classified as being high, medium or low for each stage. Based on the involvement indices, the result (Table 1) shows that fitness centre customers are mostly in the in the level of attachment (64.9%) followed by awareness (15.7%), attraction (13.7), and allegiance (5.6%). The finding indicates most customers have formed a meaningful psychological connection with the activities at the fitness center and in this stage, a customer begins to attach functional and emotional value to activities at the fitness center and formed stronger attitudes towards fitness activities than those at the attraction level.

**Table 1:** Levels of involvement of fitness center customers

Level	Mean	SD	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	33.08	10.910	39	15.7
2	33.50	10.486	34	13.7
3	31.68	9.349	161	64.9
4	37.86	10.406	14	5.6
Total	32.50	9.905	248	100

Research question two examines satisfaction with service quality at the fitness center. Satisfaction is determined in this study by subtracting the value of perception of actual service performance from the expectation of service. The result (Table 2) shows all dimensions of service quality have negative mean scores. This shows customers are dissatisfied with all aspects of service quality at the fitness center. 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 customers' satisfaction the most with service quality.

**Table 2:** Satisfaction with service quality

	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

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in satisfaction of service quality based on the levels of involvement. Table 3 showed significant differences for tangible segment [F (3,247) = 4.535, p = 0.004 < 0.05], reliability [F (3,247) = 3.474, p = 0.017 < 0.05], responsiveness [F (3, 247) = 4.675, p = 0.003], and empathy [F (3,247) = 3.870, p = 0.010 < 0.50]. Post Hoc test (LSD) showed that for satisfaction with tangible dimension of service quality, customers at allegiance level of sport involvement (M = -1.643, SD = 2.468) differed significantly (p < .05) from those at the awareness level (M = -3.872, SD = 3.577) and attachment (M = -3.882) levels. The negative mean scores suggest customers are not satisfied with the tangible dimension of service quality. However, those at the higher level of involvement (allegiance) reported less dissatisfaction with the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials at the fitness center compared with those at the attachment and awareness level of sport involvement. The results also showed a significant difference in mean scores for the reliability dimension of service quality between customers at the awareness level of involvement (M= -6.641) and those at the attachment (M=-5.4534) and allegiance (M= -3.714) levels of involvement. This shows customers are not satisfied with the ability of the service center to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. However, those at the higher levels of involvement are least dissatisfied compared with those at the lower levels of involvement.

**Table 3:** ANOVA on differences in satisfaction with service quality based on levels of involvement

		SS	df	MS	F	p
Tangible	Between	80.03	3	26.67	4.535	.004*
	Within	1435	244	5.88		
Reliability	Between	118	3	39.36	3.474	.017*
	Within	2764	244	11.32		
Responsiveness	Between	1718	3	32.92	4.675	.003*
	Within	98.77	244	7.04		
Assurance	Between	74.90	3	24.97	2.613	.052
	Within	2332	244	9.55		
Empathy	Between	165	3	55.28	3.870	.001*
	Within	3485	244	13.28		

\*p < .05

In terms of satisfaction with the responsiveness which is the willingness of the fitness center to help customers and provide prompt service, the results show a statistically significant difference in mean scores ( $p < .05$ ) between customers at the awareness level of involvement ( $M = -5.948$ ) with those at the allegiance level of involvement ( $M = -3.071$ ). For satisfaction with assurance segment of service quality, the finding also showed that a significant difference in mean scores ( $p < .05$ ) between those at the awareness level of involvement ( $M = -7.538$ ) with customers at the allegiance level of involvement ( $M = -5.214$ ). Similar results were obtained for satisfaction with empathy, where those at the allegiance level were less dissatisfied ( $M = -6.571$ ) than customers at the awareness level of involvement ( $M = -9.794$ ).

## **Discussion**

This research examined how customers' perceptions of service quality influence the degree of their involvement and psychological connection to a sport activity at a fitness center by applying the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). The finding of this study shows fitness centre customers are mostly (64.9%) in the level of attachment which occurs when an individual had established the personal importance of sports participation (Funk & James, 2001) and formed a meaningful psychological connection with a product, sport activity or a team. This finding is consistent with a study done by Tachis and Tzetzis (2015) on the role of sport involvement in forming the psychological commitment and loyalty of sport customers and fans toward their favorite team or product. The authors reported that involvement in leisure activities plays a formative role in the development of social psychological commitment, which in turn, results in loyalty among the consumer to a product or organization. Further, there is a relationship in the involvement of the fans' with psychological involvement, psychological commitment and attitudinal loyalty.

It was found in this study that all dimensions of service quality have negative mean scores indicating customers are dissatisfied with all aspects of service quality at the fitness centre. Based on the gap model, this dissatisfaction is the result of customer expectations being greater than customer perceptions of actual performance. Even though all dimensions are important to customers, some dimensions are more important than others and fitness center managers need to identify which are the most important but at the same time not neglecting the others. Customers in this study reported being most dissatisfied with the empathy dimension of service quality. Empathy refers to a caring, and individualized attention a fitness centre provides its customers. Lack of empathy is the result of customers having the perception that fitness center employees are not showing enough care about them during delivery of services, which affected the customers' assessments of the fitness centre service quality. Caring about the customer is as important as providing good service. To improve customer care and empathy, fitness centre employees need to be trained to provide service with a smile and always making eye contact which is important towards showing empathy to customers.

This study also provides evidence that a customer's level of involvement with the fitness center, may have an effect on the customer satisfaction on service quality. The results

showed that customers at the higher stage of involvement (allegiance) are less dissatisfied with the tangible, responsiveness, empathy, and reliability dimensions of service quality compared with those at the awareness stage. In other words, customers perceiving services as being of high quality are more involved and satisfied with the fitness center than consumers perceiving services as being of low quality. Understanding of how involvement is related with satisfaction with service quality is important for fitness center managers in the development and implementation of marketing strategies aimed at building a positive image of the fitness center and increasing market share. It is important for fitness center managers to ensure that the perceived quality of their services among customers remains high to build long-term relationships with customers. A good understanding of the factors which affect psychological relation and involvement of the customers and satisfaction with service quality of fitness centre can assist fitness center managers to develop effective marketing segmentation. Also, it can help the managers to consider the movements of individuals using the levels in PCM so that they can extend the presence of the fitness centre members. Initially, when a person is aware of an activity such as a workout in the fitness centre or does exercise group, the burden is the responsibility of the managers to ascend the factual involvement of the persons to the next level which is attraction and then to the attachment and lastly to the allegiance level.

## **Conclusion**

The current study advances academic knowledge in the area of fitness center customers' level of sport involvement and satisfaction with service quality and has two areas of significance for fitness centre managers in Malaysia. First, the SERQUAL based on the gap model created by Parasuraman, Zeithamil, and Berry (1988) is found to be applicable regarding examining the satisfaction of fitness centre customers in Malaysia based on expected service and experienced service. According to Parasuraman et al. (1988), the gap model is based on customer needs, past experiences and word of mouth communications and there are five factors that influence the appearance of the gap (tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy). Even though all five dimensions are important to customers, this study shows some dimensions are more important than others. Specifically, empathy and assurance appear to be the two most important dimensions for fitness centers in Malaysia.

The second conclusion concerns the timing of measuring expected and perceived service. This study shows that fitness center managers desiring to measure customer expectations should not administer the two instruments simultaneously, but measurements on customer expectations should be done first, before providing service. For example, customers can complete the expectations questionnaire before beginning a fitness class or activity and evaluations of actual performance are done after the activity is completed. 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. Biassed 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"

(Clow and Vorhies, 1993, p. 28). 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.” Thus it is important for future studies measure customer expectations first, before a service is provided. Evaluation of actual performance should be done at a later time 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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