

Examining the Effect of Service Quality on Customer Loyalty: The Fitness Center Context in Mid Northeastern Provincial Cluster

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to study the perceived service quality in the fitness center and how it affects customer loyalty, using perceived value and satisfaction as intermediate variables. The results show that the perceived service quality in the fitness center does affect perceived value and satisfaction. Perceived value has a positive influence on satisfaction and loyalty. Satisfaction has a positive influence on loyalty, although service quality does not have a significant direct influence on it. The research findings are beneficial for entrepreneurs in fitness centers who want to increase customer loyalty. Service providers need to ensure their service quality to meet consumer expectations. If service providers want consumers to be loyal, they need to create perceived value and satisfaction.

Keywords: Service Quality, Perceived Value, Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, Fitness Center

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, people have increased their interest in health. Not only healthy products such as herbal drinks, non-toxic vegetables, and herbal remedies, but also healthcare services. Due to increasing trends for being healthy among Thai people, they exercise both indoors and outdoors. It seems that the popular places where Thai people spend time are fitness centers. Modernized consumers would prefer several types of fitness or sport centers to fulfill individual desires (Lee, 2017). Thailand has 372 fitness centers, reflecting a 4.46% increase from 2023 (Smartsrapers, 2024). Hence, there is a high competition in the fitness industry (Chang et al., 2019). To survive in the high competition, customers' patronage and loyalty

should be created among existing customers in the fitness industry. Customer loyalty is essential for fitness enterprises to establish enduring company stability (Klomplong & Soonthonsmai, 2021). Retaining existing customers is as important or more important than attracting new customers, as the cost of attracting new customers is higher than retaining existing ones (Ghadiri et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the acquisition of new clients remains crucial because new customers may turn to be patronage and loyal to fitness centers. To retain customers' patronage and loyalty, fitness managers need to have competitive advantages and be able to differentiate from their competitors. According to the Economic Intelligence Center (2017), one of the customers' considerations for choosing fitness centers is location, which medium and small fitness centers gain this advantage due to the location nearby residents and workers. Next, high service quality can enhance consumer perceived value and encourage repeat purchase intention (Wang & Chiu, (2023). Also, customer perceived value significantly influences service intention in fitness centers, serving a crucial role in establishing competitive advantage (Ferreira-Barbosa et al., 2024). Customer satisfaction is accepted to be associated with service quality. Moreover, businesses should pay attention to satisfaction as one of crucial factors to have long term success (Foroughi et al., 2019).

According to previous findings, some authors study a relationship between service quality and customer loyalty by having mediators such as customer satisfaction (Lee et al., 2018; Boonlertvanich, 2019; Haron et al., 2020; Gopi & Samat, 2020; Dileep et al., 2020), trust (Boonlertvanich, 2019; Kalia et al., 2021) and value (Marcos & Coelho, 2022). Although extensive research exists on the correlation between service quality and loyalty, there is a deficiency of primary studies examining the relationship between perceived service quality and loyalty, incorporating perceived value and satisfaction as mediating variables within a single model, particularly in the context of fitness centers. Furthermore, a direct impact of service quality on loyalty has been investigated (Dam and Dam, 2021; Supriyanto et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2023). However, the research results have been contradictory. Some studies indicate that service quality has a positive effect on loyalty (Lubis et al., 2021; Asnawi et al., 2019). In contrast, some authors have already noted that service quality does not have a major influence on customer loyalty (Lemy et al., 2019; Supriyanto et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2023; Agarwal & Dhingra, 2023).

Khon Kaen, Makasaram, Kalasin, and Roi Et are a cluster of provinces situated in the middle northeastern region of Thailand. These provincial groups have significant

development challenges, including human resource development, social quality enhancement, and sustainable community and urban development. Fitness centers serve as vital resources for community members to enhance their health, hence improving overall quality of life and contributing to the advancement of developmental objectives in these provincial groupings.

As previously stated, we can summarize the research gaps between the two issues. The first issue is a lack of primary research that studies the impact of service quality on loyalty using perceived value and satisfaction as intermediate variables in a structural model, especially in the fitness center context. The second issue is that the findings of a relationship between service quality and loyalty have not been unanimous. To shed some light on these research gaps, a structural model was proposed with four variables, including perceived service quality, satisfaction, perceived value, and customer loyalty based on fitness center context.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Examining the effect of the perceived service quality on customer loyalty in the fitness center, using perceived value and satisfaction as intermediate variables.

HYPOTHESES AND THE PROPOSED MODEL

The relationships between service quality (SQ), perceived value (PV), satisfaction (SAT), and customer loyalty (CL) in the fitness center context have been investigated in this study. The proposed model is illustrated in Figure 1. Hypotheses are as follows:

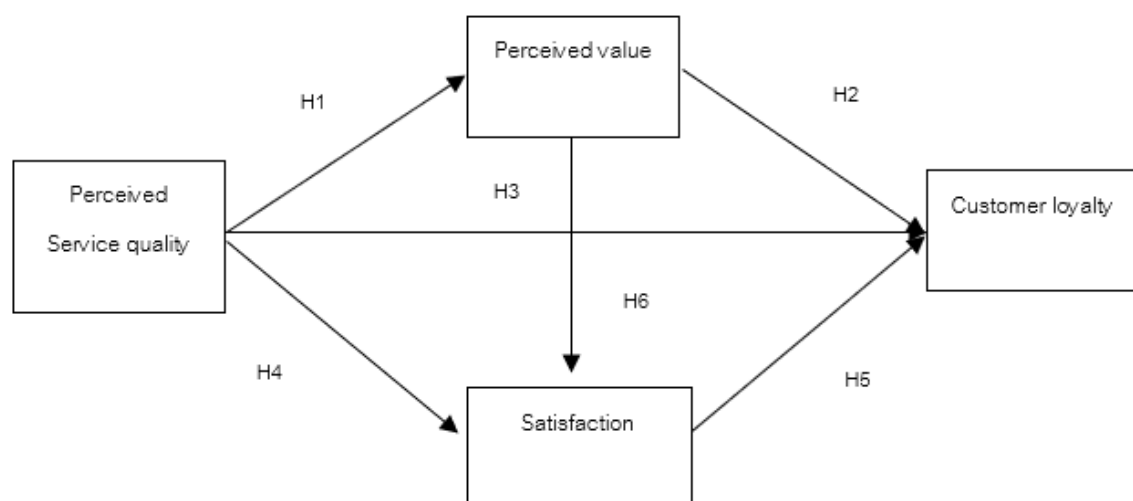


Figure 1. The proposed model

H1: *SQ* impacts on *PV* positively.

H2: *PV* impacts on *CL* positively.

H3: *SQ* impacts on *CL* positively.

H4: *SQ* impacts on *SAT* positively.

H5: *SAT* impacts on *CL* positively.

H6: *PV* impacts on *SAT* positively.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire

The questionnaire for this study is divided into four parts: service quality, perceived value, satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The total items are adopted and modified from concerned literature reviews and advisors' suggestions to fit in with local fitness centers in Thailand.

All questionnaire items are measured on a 5-point, Likert-type Scale (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). For the *SQ* section, 18 items are borrowed from Parasuraman et al. (1988); and Dabholkar et al. (1996). The seven items of *PV* are modified by Sweeney and Soutar (2001). According to the *SAT* section, researchers utilize nine items from Yu and Ramanathan (2012). Also, the researchers modified four items from Yu and Ramanathan (2012) for the *CL* section.

Sample Selection and Data Collection

The validity of the questionnaire was reviewed by three academicians. Before distributing the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted on 30 fitness centers' customers in Khonkaen, Thailand to test the reliability of total variables with the result of 0.967. A total of 335 respondents were obtained from the research area, including Khonkaen, Makasarakham, Kalasin, and Roi-et provinces.

Statistical methods

The statistical metrics employed for the examination of demographic factors are frequency and percentage. The structural equation modeling method was applied to test hypotheses. Normed (CMIN/DF), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI) and root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) were indices of the model overall fit.

RESULTS

Demographic Information of Respondents

The total of 335 respondents for fitness centers' customers, 189 (56.40%) were males and 146 (43.60%) were females. Most respondents were below 25 years of age (57.0%) holding a bachelor's degree (61.80%). The average income per month is less than 10,001 baht (52.8%). Most respondents settle down in Khonkaen (36.4%).

Structural Model Results

In this study, the structural equation modeling method was applied to test hypotheses. Normed (CMIN/DF), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI) and root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) were indices of the model overall fit. A good construct validity was ensured by large and significant loadings for all items.

Four measurement models were separately analyzed to determine the acceptable level of each index. The outcome of the analysis showed that all fit indices for each measurement model met their acceptable amount. In summary, all measurement models have a good fit. Consequently, the researchers tested hypotheses by applying the structural equation model. The overall fit indices of the final model showed all indices met their acceptable amount. For the overall model of the original sample, the Chi-square statistic of the structural model was 118.153 with 116 degrees of freedom, normed (CMIN/DF) = 1.019 (≤ 2 (Schermelel-Engel et al., 2003), goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .963 (≥ 0.90 (Hooper et al., 2008), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) = .946 (≥ 0.90 (Hooper et al., 2008), comparative fit index (CFI) = .999 (≥ 0.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999, as cited in Sirimongkol, 2022), root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = .007 (< 0.08 (Hooper et al, 2008) and Root of Mean Square Residual (RMR) = .008 (nearly 0 (Schermelel-Engel et al., 2003)). This indicated that the model's fit is acceptable.

Table 1 displays the path coefficients for all hypothesized paths in the model. The *SQ* positively impacts *PV* and *SAT* indicating support for hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 4. The *PV* positively associates with *CL* and *SAT*, which means hypothesis 2 and hypothesis 6 are supported. The *SAT* positively influences *CL* (hypothesis 5 is supported). Therefore, *SQ* does not impact on *CL* (hypothesis 3 is not supported).

Table 1. Structural Parameter Estimates.

Hypothesized path	Coefficient	Results
Hypothesis 1: $SQ \rightarrow PV$	0.947*	Supported
Hypothesis 2: $PV \rightarrow CL$	0.689*	Supported
Hypothesis 3: $SQ \rightarrow CL$	-0.438	Not supported
Hypothesis 4: $SQ \rightarrow SAT$	0.434*	Supported
Hypothesis 5: $SAT \rightarrow CL$	0.702*	Supported
Hypothesis 6: $PV \rightarrow SAT$	0.494*	Supported

Note: *p < 0.05

Measuring the total effect by estimating *CL* verifies the effect of the fitness center: *SQ* indirectly via *PV* and *SAT* (Table 2). Moreover, the parsimonious model is demonstrated in Figure 2.

Table 2. Total effect estimates

Dependent	Effect	Independent Variables		
		<i>SQ</i>	<i>PV</i>	<i>SAT</i>
<i>PV</i>	DE	0.947*	0.000	0.000
	IE	0.000	0.000	0.000
	TE	0.947*	0.000	0.000
<i>SAT</i>	DE	0.434*	0.494*	0.000
	IE	0.468*	0.000	0.000
	TE	0.902*	0.494*	0.000
<i>CL</i>	DE	-0.438	0.689*	0.702*
	IE	1.285*	0.347*	0.000
	TE	0.847*	1.036*	0.702*
	R ²		0.909	

Note: *p < 0.05

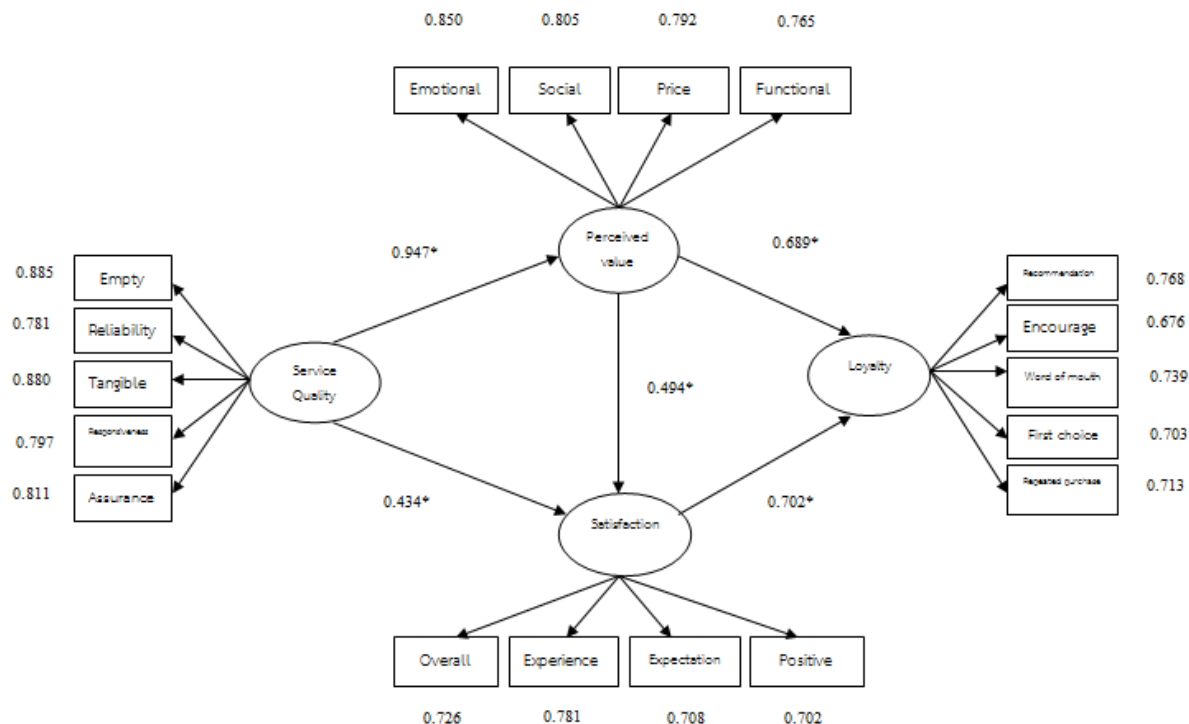


Figure 2. The parsimonious model

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study sought to empirically examine the correlation between the *SQ* of fitness centers and *CL*, with *PV* and *SAT* acting as mediating variables. The suggested model demonstrates the mediating functions of *PV* and *SAT* in the relationship between *SQ* and *CL*. This indicates that enhancing *PV* and *SAT* might amplify the impact of *SQ* on *CL*. The link between perceived *SQ* and *PV* is consistent with previous studies (Giao & Vuong, 2021; Min, 2022; Gómez-Carmona, 2022). Also, the relationship between *SQ* and *SAT* is supported by past literature (Yildiz and Duyan, 2019; Supriyanto et al., 2021; Sun & Pan, 2023). However, the association between *SQ* and *CL* was found to be insignificant. This further means that customers who have a high perception of *SQ* may not be loyal to fitness centers directly. Thanh et al. (2021) also confirmed this evidence. This may result from customer behaviors in utilizing services at local fitness centers, and customers may have diverse options of fitness facilities. Thus, the relationship between *SQ* and *CL* should be analyzed carefully.

The significant link between *PV* and *CL* shows that customers with high *PV* will be loyal to fitness centers. This is also confirmed by previous literature (Jeong & Kim, 2020; Min, 2022). Moreover, the association between *PV* and *SAT* is found to be significant. This is consistent with García-Fernández et.al. (2018); Suttikun & Meeprom (2021); Biscaia et al. (2023).

Similarly, the *SAT* can be increased by creating *PV*. The correlation between *SAT* and *CL* is deemed significant. This relationship is confirmed by previous studies (Afthinos et al., 2017; Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2021; Lamberti et al., 2022). The relationship between *SAT* and *CL* is considered substantial.

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the literature on *SQ* and fitness centers. This study has some theoretical implications. Firstly, there are many *SQ* dimension concepts for sport businesses, but the original *SQ* concept by Parasuraman et al. (1988), including empathy, reliability, tangible, responsiveness, and assurance dimensions, is still valuable in the fitness center context. Secondly, the proposed model was assessed in the context of fitness center, but this model can be usable for other service contexts. The findings indicate that *CL* cannot be immediately established by perceived *SQ*; rather, *PV* and *SAT* are significant contributors to the development of customer loyalty.

Managerial Implications

In addition to prior research, *SQ* correlates with *PV* and *SAT*. Furthermore, *PV* and *SAT* exert a favorable influence on *CL*. Also, the *PV* significantly influences *SAT*. However, *SQ* does not directly impact on *CL*.

Practically, the fitness center staff should be well educated in-service minds, and prompt them to provide services and suggestions to customers, etc. For example, well-decoration, investment in modern exercise equipment, and clean service areas will endeavor to develop tangible dimensions in *SQ*. For the assurance dimension, fitness center managers should set maintenance schedules for exercise equipment to ensure customers' value and satisfaction. In the case of the reliability dimension, fitness centers should be opened during service. Also, an application for the booking service schedule should be developed to ensure the availability of equipment and trainers. Due to the responsiveness dimension, fitness center staff should be trained to help and respond to customers. Moreover, online communication channels should be offered for real-time responses. These will result in enhancing *PV* and *SAT* levels. Also, fitness center managers may create a relaxed ambiance by having appropriated colors and music for stimulating exercise moods. Also, brands of fitness centers should be recognized by local customers via available social media. These will result in enhancing *SAT* and *CL*. Moreover, fitness center managers should pay attention to creating a wonderful

experience for their customers via exercise equipment, ambient, and staff. Also, finding customer expectations is an essential task for managers. This will result in increased *CL* levels.

There is a tendency for loyalty to be affected by *SQ* in the local fitness center context as in other service businesses such as supermarkets (Dam & Dam, 2021) and superstores (Alam & Noor, 2020). However, perceived *SQ* in local fitness centers may differ from other service businesses. Due to local fitness centers in Thailand, customers participate with service providers less than other service businesses. Customers always visit fitness centers, then, they use equipment for exercising and spend time in service areas. This means customers spend a fleeting time with fitness center staff unless they pay extra money to personal trainers. As a result, there are two main dimensions of *SQ*, which can be improved, so that customers' loyalty can be affected. The first dimension is the reliability dimension. In real situations, most of the local fitness centers are operated by owners and might be opened at flexible times. When customers visit fitness centers during service time, but they are closed. Then, customers will find novel places. As a result, *CL* is not affected by this dimension of service quality. As mentioned above, fitness centers should be opened during service time. The second dimension is the tangible dimension. Clean and clear service areas, ready-to-use equipment and modern equipment should be available for customers at service time. Additionally, the other three *SQ* dimensions, including assurance, responsiveness and empathy dimensions, might be improved directly in relation to fitness center staff. They should be trained to consider customers' needs and wants and to ensure that customers' needs and wants are satisfied. For example, if customers use equipment improperly, they should provide information about how to use exercise equipment without any request from customers. These may lead to *CL* to be affected by *SQ*.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present research has some limitations. Firstly, this research was conducted in Thailand and the fitness center context, it will be worthwhile to examine the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in other countries as well as other service contexts. Secondly, researchers may concentrate on other crucial factors in service quality such as human factors and hygiene factors. Finally, other lagged responses may be considered for future research such as patronage, word of mouth, and fitness center memberships.

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