Can service quality predict customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in the sport tourism industry? An application of the SERVQUAL model in an outdoors setting

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Abstract

This paper aimed to investigate the applicability of the SERVQUAL model in predicting customer satisfaction and customer behavioral intentions in one of the segments of the sport tourism industry, named outdoors. Two hundred and eighty seven (N = 287) individuals took part in the study. These individuals participated in an outdoor program that took place in the lake Plasteera, Greece, and included activities such as lake canoe/kayak, orienteering, and archery. Service quality was measured by the SERVQUAL scale, satisfaction was measured by Oliver (1980) scale, and behavioral intentions were measured by Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) scale. Two sets of data were collected: the first one before customers’ participation in the programs in order to measure their quality expectations, and the second one after customers’ participation in the program, in order to measure their quality perceptions. The gap scores were calculated, and these scores were used in order to predict customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. The results of the study did not provide support for the applicability of SERVQUAL in outdoor services. The five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model predicted very low amount of variances in both the satisfaction and behavioral intentions variables. These results indicate the need for further research on the factors that determine customer satisfaction in outdoor settings.

Keywords: Sport Tourism, Service Quality, Outdoors

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Introduction

Three broad categories of sport tourism have been proposed in the literature (Gibson, 1998a, b). The first category includes tourists who visit places in order to attend sport events, such as world and European championships, the Olympic Games etc. The second category includes visitors of famous sport related attractions, such as famous sport facilities, stadiums and museums. Finally, the last category includes active tourists who travel with the objective to do active holidays and participate in sport and recreation related activities, such as outdoors, water related activities, golf, tennis etc. This study was based on a sample of local sport tourists who participated in outdoor programs in Greece.

The sport tourism industry is a service industry, and as such is largely influenced by the quality of the services provided. Service quality has been suggested as a key concept for organisations; since research has shown that it is directly related to customer retention rates, and higher profits for organisations (Backman & Veldkamp, 1995; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Bloemer, Ko de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 1999; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). There has been evidence that when customers’ perceptions of service quality are positive, the behavioral intentions are favourable, which strengthens their relationship with the organization (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). On the other hand, when service quality assessments are negative, the customers’ behavioral intentions are unfavorable. A number of different components have been included within the concept of customers’ behavioural intentions, such as purchase intention, word-of-mouth communications, and paying a price premium to the company (Alexandris, Dimitriadis, & Kasiara, 2001; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996). In the present study we used the concept of purchase intentions (intention to keep on participating in outdoors) as the main dependent variable of the study.

The increasing interest of researchers on the issue of service quality is also justified by the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction. It is widely accepted today that service quality has a direct effect on customer satisfaction. A customer with positive perceptions about service quality is likely to report high levels of satisfaction (e.g., Caruana, 2002; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Spreng & Chiou, 2002; Spreng & McKoy, 1996; Woodside, Frey, & Daly, 1989). While this relationship is widely accepted today in the services marketing literature, there is no empirical evidence to support it in outdoors. Research on the applicability of service quality models in outdoor settings is still limited. The objective of this study was to examine the degree to which outdoor customers’ satisfaction levels, and their intentions to continue taking part in the programs can be predicted by their service quality evaluations, as measured by the SERVQUAL model.

Theoretical Background

Conceptualization of Service Quality

Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) defined perceived service quality as a global judgment or attitude relating to the superiority of a service. It is widely accepted today that service quality is a multi-dimensional concept. There have been a variety of service quality models in the literature. One of the most widely used models is the SERVQUAL, which was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, (1988).
The model proposed that service quality is measured by five dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness. Reliability refers to an organization’s ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; assurance refers to employees’ knowledge and their ability to convey trust and confidence; tangibles refers to an organization’s physical environment, such as facilities, equipment, and communication materials; empathy refers to employees’ willingness to provide individualized attention to customers; and finally responsiveness refers to employees’ willingness to help customers and to provide prompt services. Each dimension is measured with four to five items. The model is a useful management tool since it aims to identify the gaps between customers’ expectations and customers’ perceptions of the services.

The measurement of perceptions vs. expectations has been a disputable issue in the literature. While it seems logical that identifying the gaps is the best way to define quality, identify possible problems, and predict loyalty, there have been some researchers (e.g., Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993), who questioned the gap model, suggesting that measuring perceptions alone might be a better indicator of service quality, than measuring the differences between expectations and perceptions (Robledo, 2001; Zeithaml et al., 1996). From a methodological point of view, it is not always easy to adopt the gap approach, since in a real life setting it requires to collect data twice (before and after using the service) from the same customers, and compare their answers. However, from a management point of view, identifying the gaps in customers’ evaluations is always a very useful task, since strategies can be designed in order to close these gaps. In the present study, we adopted the gap approach aiming to identify service quality gaps, and use these gaps in order to predict satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. Our decision is justified by the value of this approach for managerial implications.

The importance of measuring service quality evaluations has been well justified in the literature. Studies have showed that service quality evaluations are closely related to positive behavioral intentions and customer loyalty (Backman & Veldkamp, 1995; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Bloemer et al., 1999; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Negative scores in the gap model are worrying signs for organizations, since they might mean that these customers will soon quit, if actions are not taken. As previously noted, increasing customers’ retention rates is an important task for service organizations, because it is usually associated with financial benefits for the organizations.

The SERVQUAL model has been extensively used in a variety of service sectors. While similar models have been developed in sport, recreation, and travel services (e.g., Bigne, Marty, Miquel, & Andreu, 2003; Ekinci, Prokopaki, & Cobanoglu, 2003; Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Siderelis, Moore, & Lee, 2000) the application of such models in the sport tourism industry is still limited. The REQUAL scale (MacKay & Crompton, 1990; Crompton, MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1991), and the adjusted versions, developed by Wright, Duray and Goodale (1992) and Backman and Veldkamp (1995), are example of models that have been developed for public recreation services in the United States. The REQUAL scale proposed a similar factor structure with the SERVQUAL (four factors instead of five).

The Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

According to Zeithmal and Bitner (2003), “satisfaction is the consumer 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” (p. 86). It has
been suggested that satisfaction is a broader concept than service quality. It includes both cognitive and affective evaluations, while service quality evaluations are mainly a cognitive procedure (Oliver, 1997; Tian-Cole & Crompton, 2003). A number of studies in the services marketing literature have reported that these two constructs are strongly related (e.g., Alexandris et al., 2001; Caruana, 2002; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Spreng & Chiou, 2002; Spreng & McKoy, 1996; Woodside et al., 1989). There have been very limited attempts to investigate the relationship between service quality and satisfaction in outdoors.

The Sport Tourism Industry in Greece

Active sport tourism is still a developing area in Greece. Services for active sport tourists can be categorized in the following categories: a) sea water related activities organized around marines, such as sailing, yachting, scuba diving and sea kayaking, b) outdoor activities such as climbing, trekking, cross-country skiing, lake/river kayaking and rafting, and c) activities provided by resorts, clubs and spas, such as tennis, golf, and health fitness. This study was based on the outdoor segment of the sport tourism industry.

The first organized outdoor recreation programs were introduced in Greece at the end of the 80s. They were organized in an amateur fashion by a couple of private organizations, which tried to take the lead in the development of the outdoors. The owners were individuals with long experience from outdoors mainly in mountaineering. During this early stage the customer target groups were very limited, consisting mainly from individuals, who had some experience from outdoors, and were residents of the capital of Greece (Athens). The main outdoor recreation activities offered were rafting, trekking, and lake kayaking. During this early stage, there were very limited attempts to attract international tourists interested in doing active holidays. The marketing of the programs was still very limited. Instead of following a customer-driven approach, the outdoor organizations chose a product-oriented approach. They developed the programs and tried to sell them without asking customers about their needs and expectations.

From 1990 the industry started to get more established. New private outdoor organizations got into the market, and some of them were organized following the principles of franchising. The market was considerably increased, as a result of the socio-economic and lifestyle trends. The local tourism market was considerably developed during these years. Participation in outdoor activities was promoted as a trendy lifestyle and an alternatively holiday for individuals, families and members of associations. The industry is still trying to find its way today. Private organizations are getting more professionals targeting both local and international tourists, emphasizing the development of the distribution network. The use of the Internet as a communication and distribution channel, and the attraction of international tourists are still challenges for the outdoor companies in Greece.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were set as follows:

1. To apply the SERVQUAL and the gap models in the outdoor segment of sport tourism aiming to identify possible gaps in service delivery.
2. To examine the degree to which satisfaction can be predicted by service quality evaluations (gap scores).
3. To examine the degree to which behavioral intentions can be predicted by satisfaction and service quality evaluations (gap scores).

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Two hundred and eighty seven (N = 287) individuals participated in the study. They completed the questionnaires before and after participating in the outdoor programs. The first set of data (before their participation in the programs) measured their quality expectations, while the second set of data (after their participation) measured their quality perceptions, satisfaction and behavioral intentions. The two sets of data were used in order to identify possible gaps in their service quality evaluations. A private outdoor company, which was located at the North of Greece, organized the program, which took place in the lake Plasteera, North of Greece, and included activities such as lake canoe/kayak, orienteering, and archery. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Instruments

Service quality The 22-item SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988), adjusted to the context of outdoors (for the specific outdoor recreational program) was used to measure the five dimensions of service quality expectations, as follows: a) Tangible consisting of four items (Cronbach’s alpha .68), such as: “outdoor companies should have up-to-date equipment”; b) Reliability consisting of five items (Cronbach’s alpha .78), such as: “When outdoor companies promise to do something by a certain time, they should do so”; c) Responsiveness consisting of four items (Cronbach’s alpha .81), such as: “Employees of outdoor companies should always be willing to help potential participants; d) Assurance consisting of 4 items (Cronbach’s alpha .85), such as: “The behaviour of employees of outdoor companies should instil confidence in participants; e) Empathy consisting of five items (Cronbach’s alpha .84), such as: “Outdoor companies should give participants individualized attention”. Perspective participants were asked the degree to which programs should posses specific service attributes. A seven point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly agree” (7) to “strongly disagree” (1) was used.

The same 22 items were used to measure customers’ perception of service quality after participating in the program (Table 2).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>Place of residence: size of the population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males: 46.8%</td>
<td>Group 1: 17 &lt; 20: 13.4%</td>
<td>Less than 10,000: 14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females: 53.2%</td>
<td>Group 2: 21 &lt; 25: 58.7%</td>
<td>Between 10,000 and 100,000: 29.5%,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3: 26 &lt; 35: 26.1%</td>
<td>More than 100,000: 56.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 4: 36 &lt; 46: 1.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Behavioral intentions were measured with three items: “I will try to participate in a similar outdoor program during the next 3 months”, “I intent to participate in a similar outdoor program during the next 3 months” and “I am convinced that I will participate in a similar outdoor program during the next 3 months”. A seven point Likert-type scale ranging from “possible” (7) to “impossible” (1) was used. A composite score was produced for the whole scale. The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was high (.91).

Customer satisfaction Satisfaction was measured with a 3-item scale taken from a measure of satisfaction developed by Oliver (1980). The scale items were the following: “I am happy about my decision to participate in this outdoor program”, “I believe I did the right thing to participate in this outdoor program”, and “I am satisfied with my decision to participate in this outdoor excursion”. The three items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The reliability of the scale was calculated using Cronbach’s alpha and was found to be .92.

Results

Service Quality Expectations

The mean scores in the five quality expectations and perceptions scales were calculated. In terms of customers’ expectations, the results indicated that the assurance dimension had the highest mean score (mean = 5.03), followed by the reliability and empathy dimensions (means = 4.83 and 4.82, respectively). On the other hand, the tangible dimension had the lowest mean score (mean = 4.48).

In terms of participants’ perceptions of service quality (after participating in the programs), the empathy dimension received the highest mean score (5.81), followed by the responsiveness (5.78) and assurance (5.73), while the tangible received the lowest mean score (5.05). All the results are presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service quality expectations</th>
<th>Number of items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Coefficient alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service quality expectations</td>
<td>Number of items</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Min</td>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Coefficient alpha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.36</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention toward future behavior</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identifying Gaps

Gaps in service quality were identified using the sum scores of the expectations and perceptions dimensions and the subtraction of their scores. The results are presented in Table 3. As shown, the differences between expectations and perceptions were positive, which shows that participants in general were satisfied by what they experienced in the programs.

Predicting Satisfaction from Service Quality Evaluations

A regression analysis was performed aiming to examine the degree to which service quality evaluations can predict satisfaction scores. The regression model was not statistically significant, which suggests that satisfaction cannot be predicted from service quality evaluations.

Predicting Behavioral Intentions from Service Quality and Satisfaction

A regression analysis was performed aiming to examine the contributions of satisfaction and service quality in predicting customers’ behavioral intentions. As shown in Table 4, satisfaction predicted a significant and fairly high proportion of variance (36%) in behavioral intentions, while service quality offered very low contribution (2%) to the prediction of behavioral intentions. From the service quality dimensions, only the assurance one offered a marginally significant contribution ($p < .05$).

Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the value of service quality in predicting customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in an outdoor setting. Studies in the services marketing literature emphasized on the importance of the service quality concept as a key factor in predicting customer satisfaction, and increasing customer retention rates (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). The results of the present study did not provide support for these studies. They did not provide significant evidence that service quality, as measured by the SERVQUAL model, is a key concept for predicting customers’ satisfaction levels and increasing customers’ loyalty in outdoors. The five dimensions measured by SERVQUAL did not offer any contribution to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service quality factors</th>
<th>Sum of expectations</th>
<th>Sum of perceptions</th>
<th>Differences between factor scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>944.67</td>
<td>102.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>895.67</td>
<td>1068.00</td>
<td>172.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>888</td>
<td>1082.28</td>
<td>194.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>947.67</td>
<td>1071.67</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>917.33</td>
<td>1083.67</td>
<td>166.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the prediction of satisfaction, and offered marginally significant contribution to the prediction of behavioral intentions. Two interpretations can be used for explaining these results. The first one relates to the measurement of service quality using the SERVQUAL model, and the second one relates to the unique characteristics of the outdoor product. These interpretations are analyzed below.

The SERVQUAL Model in Outdoors

The results of the present study question the universal applicability of the SERVQUAL model, as other studies have also done before (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Buttle, 1995). It appears that SERVQUAL is not a good measurement model of service quality in the outdoor industry. This model was developed and tested to a variety of service organizations such as banks, hotels, fast food chains, health centers, which, however, seem to be different in many aspects from outdoor organizations. A good example is the definition of the tangible dimension. The physical environment, facilities, equipment, the appearance of the staff, and the information material have been included within the tangible element. It is one of these dimensions that it is under the control of the management of the organization. Facilities can be improved, and the same goes to the equipment, appearance of the staff, and information material. The definition of the tangible dimension in outdoors is, however, a more complex issue. The equipment, and the information material can be easily classified within the tangible element, and can be controlled by the management of the organization. However, the actual physical environment, such as the lake, the river, the park, and the mountain, is a more complex issue. It is not controlled by the organization (although it is chosen by the leaders); it is often affected by weather conditions, and subsequently it should not be classified within the tangible element, as we did in this study. We therefore suggest that future studies that aim to measure service quality in outdoors should include a separate dimension about the physical environment.

One of the things that we failed to measure with the SERVQUAL model was the outcome dimension of quality. The outcome dimension refers to what is left to the customers when the use of the service is finished (Brady and Cronin, 2001). This outcome is evaluated against the expected positive health (physical or psychological) related consequences. A recent study by Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tzorbatzoudis and Grouios (2004) provided evidence that in the case of sport, where active participation is an important aspect of the consumption, the outcome quality is a major determinant of customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. In the case of out-

| Table 4. Regression analysis for the predictors of behavioral intentions |
|--------------------------|--------|-----|-----------|-----|
|                         | B     | Beta| F     | p    |
| Satisfaction            | .72   | .59 | 9.9   | .001|
| Tangibles               | n.s.  | .024| n.s.  | n.s. |
| Reliability             | n.s.  | .17 | n.s.  | n.s. |
| Responsiveness          | n.s.  | .11 | n.s.  | n.s. |
| Assurance               | .10   | .17 | 2.0   | .05  |
| Empathy                 | n.s.  | .1  | n.s.  | n.s. |

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doors, outcome quality is probably related to the benefits (e.g., achievement, fun, enjoyment) that customers expect from their participation.

The Unique Characteristics of the Outdoor Product

A second interpretation of the findings, which is not irrelevant to the first one, relates a) to the unique characteristics of the outdoor product, and b) to customers’ expectations of participating in outdoor programs. It should be noted that in the present study we avoid using terms such as “adventure” and “extreme” activities/programs, because these terms have been shown in practice to intimidate individuals and demarket programs. Instead, it is common practice to use the term “outdoor” programs, which fits more with the expectations of the average sport tourist.

As previously reported, while the results of the study indicated that service quality is not related to behavioral intentions, satisfaction predicted a high proportion of variance in behavioral intentions. Subsequently, satisfying customers is a key component in order to increase retention rates in outdoors. The answer to the question “what satisfies a customer in outdoors” is an important one; we failed to give an answer to this question. The results of our study suggest that service quality, as measured by SERVQUAL, does not guarantee a satisfied customer. As previously discussed, satisfaction includes both affective and cognitive evaluations. Furthermore, it has been suggested (Alexandris et al, 2004; Cole & Crompton, 2003) that satisfaction is also influenced by factors, which are not related to service quality, such as situational (e.g., the weather) or personal (e.g., personal expectations). It seems that these personal or environmental factors might be more important than service quality issues. We propose that the personal factors might be the most important ones in the case of outdoors. They are related to customers’ personal expectations. Tian-Cole, Crompton and Wilson (2002) and Tian-Cole and Crompton (2003) named these expectations as quality of experience, and included factors such as achievement, nostalgia, escape, physical fitness, and socialization. This quality of experience dimension is close to the definition of outcome quality, as analyzed above. It seems that it is an important factor in outdoors, since participants’ experience determines in a large degree their satisfaction levels. More research is required in order to further define this quality of experience factor, and its influence on satisfaction and future behavioral intentions.

Conclusions

In summary, the results of the present study did not provide evidence for the value of the SERVQUAL model in one of the segments of the sport tourism industry, named outdoors, and supported previous studies that questioned the universal applicability of SERVQUAL. Satisfaction levels and behavioral intentions in outdoors cannot be predicted by service quality evaluations. These results suggest that a context-based measure of service quality should be developed in order to successfully measure service quality in outdoor programs. Models such as the one proposed by Brady and Cronin (2001) could help towards this direction. Furthermore, more research is required in order to identify the factors that influence satisfaction levels of outdoor participants. Customers’ personal expectations and the experience...
(Tian-Cole et al., 2002) factor might be useful concepts to use in the effort to predict satisfaction and customer loyalty. Participation in outdoors is an important aspect of the consumption process in outdoors, and this differentiates the outdoor product from other services.

References


