



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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ISSN: 2222-6990

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i7/4424>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i7/4424

Received: 02 June 2018, **Revised:** 19 June 2018, **Accepted:** 29 June 2018

Published Online: 28 July 2018

In-Text Citation: (Yusof, Popa, & Geok, 2018)

To Cite this Article: Yusof, A., Popa, A., & Geok, S. K. (2018). Relationship between Perceptions of Fitness Facility Service Quality and Future Intentions of Fitness Center Users in Thailand. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(7), 863–871.

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Vol. 8, No. 7, July 2018, Pg. 863 - 871

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Relationship between Perceptions of Fitness Facility Service Quality and Future Intentions of Fitness Center Users in Thailand

Aminuddin Yusof¹, Arporn Popa² and Soh Kim Geok³

^{1,3} Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

² Health & Sport Science Department, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between perceptions of fitness facility service quality and future intention to use campus fitness center at Mahasarakham university, Thailand. A total of 250 campus recreation fitness center users (males = 189, females = 61) comprising of students and staff from Mahasarakham University was selected to participate as subjects in the study. The questionnaire consisted of items based on the Likert-scale Service Quality Assessment Scale (SQAS) developed by Lam, Zhang and Jensen (2005). Future intention was measured using two items by Zeithaml et al. (1996): word-of-mouth communications and repurchase intentions. The results showed fitness facility service quality ($\beta = .300, p < .05$) and overall facility service quality ($\beta = .278, p < .05$) contribute significantly towards predicting behavioral intention. This means fitness center users in Mahasarakham University are more likely to renew their membership and recommend the recreation center to other people if they are satisfied with the fitness facility service quality aspects.

Keywords: Service Quality, Campus Fitness Center, Behavioural Intentions

Introduction

Health and fitness is a growing industry worldwide with an annual worth of \$18 billion in the United States. In the United States, there are about 4900 health and fitness clubs with membership totaling about 33.8 million in 1985 (International Health, Racquet and Sport Club Association, 2007). There was a jump of 30-fold in terms of membership in fitness center for a 20-year period from 1982-2002. Changes in consumption patterns as well as increasing consumer awareness about the importance of health and fitness have resulted in a significant increase in health-fitness centers in colleges and universities, work-places, residential buildings, hotels, and resorts. This is due to the demand for health and fitness from customers who wants to exercise either at their place of work or residence. Corporations are investing in fitness centers to reduce the number of staff who are absent from work due to illness as well as reducing the costs of medical insurance.

Providing quality service in a fitness facility is one important element to influence member retention (McDonald & Howland, 1998; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Stum and Thiry (1991) argue that the quality of service in a fitness facility must be met or exceeds the expectations to satisfy users. Service quality in a fitness facility can be defined as the extent of the performance of a fitness center matches or exceeds the what members expect. Service quality is about ensuring customers, both internal and external to achieve their need and desires (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985, 1988, 1991) and representing, producing services or productions in terms of what the customer wants. This can make extra competitive advantage for organisations or companies (Kordi, 2015). Furthermore, service quality which is outstanding is key to any give an organisation to have a competitive edge. This in turn leads to better sales and profit (Szmigin, Canning and Reppel, 2005). If the service provided by an organization is to be better than expected service, customers are more likely to repeat using the service or provide a good word of mouth to others about the organization. On the other hand, customers that experiences bad service will their experience publicly. This will result in discouraging potential customers from using the service at the organization.

Factors that have been found to be related to service quality are the concepts of customer expectations and satisfaction (Bolton & James, 1991). The literature suggests that service quality comes first before service satisfaction (Brady & Robertson, 2001; Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Izogo, 2017). Satisfaction is defined by Oliver (1980) as the gap between service expectations and actual service performance. If a service performance is higher than expected service, then satisfaction is the results. On the other hand, dissatisfaction happens if the actual service performance is lower than what is expected. Since repeat customers in a fitness center are often those who are satisfied with the service, high customer satisfaction is important not only for a better image and reputation but also fewer complaints and getting new customers. In addition, a satisfied fitness center user is more likely to frequent the fitness center as well as participating in other activities at the fitness center. A satisfied user is also more likely to be willing to pay for services even if there is an increase in fees (McAlexander, Kaldenberg, & Koenig, 1994).

Thus, measurement of service quality is important for a fitness facility to ensure the service quality level is consistently high and to identify the level of member satisfaction. Service quality is determined by post-experience customer research (Robinson, 2003) allowing sports organizations to identify weakness in service quality and introduce quality improvement. Most common type of measurement is done by using a survey given to users to find out whether users are satisfied with the service provided at the fitness facility. In the literature, there are many models to measure service quality. Among the most widely used is the Gap Model (Parasuraman et al. 1985). The Gap Model identify the difference between customers' expectations and their actual experience. The more the actual experience exceeds service expectations, the higher the perception of service quality.

Purpose of Study

An increasing number of university campuses in Thailand (Senakham, 2010) are establishing campus fitness facilities due to the concern that students are inactive and leading a sedentary lifestyle. In Thailand, the building of campus fitness facilities costs a lot of monetary investment as well as man power to manage the facilities. Additionally, the facilities also require regular maintenance and upkeep. To ensure the fitness facilities are used optimally, it is important for university administrators to determine whether staff and students are actually regularly using the fitness facilities provided by

the universities. One way is to study the relationship between perceptions of fitness facility service quality and intentions to use the facilities. A study on perceptions of fitness facility service quality is important because it has always been cited as reasons (Lagrosen and Lagrosen, 2007) for continued usage of fitness centers. Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between perceptions of fitness facility service quality and future intention to use campus fitness center at Mahasarakham University, Thailand.

The research questions for this study are:

- 1) What are the perceptions of fitness facility service quality among fitness center users in Mahasarakham University?
- 2) What are the perceptions of overall facility service quality among fitness center users in Mahasarakham University?
- 3) What are the behavior intentions among fitness center users in Mahasarakham University?
- 4) What are the relationship between perceptions of fitness facility service quality and overall facility service quality with fitness center users' intention to use campus fitness centers in Mahasarakham University?

Methodology

The research design of this study is using surveys to collect data from respondents to examine their perceptions of service quality of campus recreational facilities. Survey questionnaires were distributed to a total of 250 campus recreation fitness center users (males = 189, females = 61) comprising of students and staff from Mahasarakham University. The subjects were conveniently selected for the study. Table 1 shows the age distribution of the subjects.

Table 1: Age of Subjects

Age	n	%
Under 18	5	2.0
18-25	223	89.2
26-35	13	5.2
36-50	7	2.8
More than 50	2	0.8

The questionnaire used in the study consists of items based on the Service Quality Assessment Scale (SQAS) modified from the original developed by Lam, Zhang and Jensen (2005) to measure user perceptions of service quality in terms of six dimensions of service quality: staff, programme, locker room, physical facility, workout facility and childcare. The reliability of the 40 items Likert-scale Service Quality Assessment Scale (SQAS) was reported to range from 0.71 to 0.85. The convergent validity of the measure was reported to be from .62 to .92 (Taghizadeh, Ghorbani and Begnam, 2015). Future intention to use campus fitness at Mahasarakham University, Thailand was measured using two subscales proposed by Zeithaml et al. (1996): word-of-mouth communications (e.g., saying positive things about the facility to others) and repurchase intentions (e.g., membership renewal soon).

Descriptive analyses were used to address research questions regarding the perceptions of fitness facility service quality, overall facility service quality and behaviour intention among fitness center users in Mahasarakham University. Standard multiple regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between perceptions of fitness facility service quality and overall facility service quality and fitness center users' intention to use campus fitness centers in Mahasarakham University Thailand. Multiple regression was used to determine which independent variables are the significant predictors of behaviour intention. It was to research the statistical significance in a regression among the independent variable.

Results

The first research question examines the perceptions of Mahasarakham University fitness center users about their perceptions of fitness facility service quality. Fitness facility service quality refers to the availability of modern-looking equipment, adequacy of signs and directions, variety of fitness and exercise equipment. It also refers to the availability of workout facility and equipment as well as the overall maintenance of facility and equipment.

Table 2: Perceptions of Fitness Facility Service Quality

N	Mean	Sd
249	18.21	3.92

Table 3 examines the perceptions of overall facility service quality. This is to address research question two. The results show fitness center users in Mahasarakham ($m=37.48$) have a high perceptions of overall program service quality. The results suggest that the fitness center should be concerned with overall facility service quality such as the convenience of location, hours of operation, availability of parking as well as parking lot safety. It also refers to temperature control, lighting and pleasantness of the facility in terms of environmental friendly.

Table 3: Perceptions of Overall Facility Service Quality

N	Mean	Sd
244	37.48	8.93

Research question three examines the behaviour intentions of fitness center users. Behaviour intention is defined as the concept of trying to perform a behavioral goal or a given behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In this study two questions were used to measure behavior intentions. The first asked respondents whether will recommend the recreation center to other people while the second asked respondents whether they have the intention to renew their membership. The results as shown in

Table 4 suggest users at Mahasarakham University ($m=3.73$) have a moderate level of intention to use the fitness center again in the future.

Table 4: Behaviour Intentions

N	Mean	Sd
250	3.73	.05

Research question 4 seeks to determine the relationship between perceptions of fitness facility service quality and overall facility service quality and fitness center users' intention to use campus fitness centers in Mahasarakham University Thailand. The standard multiple regression analysis (Table 5) shows that fitness facility service quality and overall facility service quality are significant predictors for behavioral intention of fitness center users in Mahasarakham University, $R^2 = .365$, $R^2_{adj} = .354$, $F(4, 225) = 32.395$, $p < .05$. Based on this analysis, it shows that fitness facility service quality ($\beta = .300$, $p < .05$) and overall facility service quality ($\beta = .278$, $p < .05$) contribute significantly towards predicting behavioral intention. The results showed that fitness center users in Mahasarakham University are more likely to renew their membership and recommend the recreation center to other people if they are satisfied with the fitness facility service quality aspects such as having equipment which are new and modern looking as well as having a variety of different fitness equipment. In addition, fitness center users are also more likely to continue using the facility in the future if the facility is conveniently located as well as having convenient hours of operation, availability of parking as well as parking lot safety.

Table 5: Multiple regression of predictors of intentions for Mahasarakham University Fitness Center Users

Variable	β	t	p
Fitness facility service quality	.300	3.675	.001*
Overall facility service quality	.278	3.928	.001*

* $p < .05$

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the assumption whether service quality and would result in satisfaction and influence the future behavior intention to frequent a university recreation fitness center. Based on the Customer Satisfaction Theory (Klaus, 1985), service quality is viewed from the perspectives of the customer, with the proposition that a fitness center can be considered as possessing quality if a customer is satisfied with its services. The results of this study supported this proposition and showed that behavior intention of fitness center user at Mahasarakham University could be best predicted by fitness facility service quality and overall facility service quality. Based on the findings, it was found out that, good quality service would influence fitness center users recommending others to use the facilities. In addition, users who are satisfied with the services

provided are more likely to renew their membership. On the other hand, if fitness center members are not satisfied, they will not renew their membership. Poor service will be more likely be heard by more people than good customer service. Bad service can hamper the fitness center efforts to increase membership and bring in new members. In other words, poor service would result in members telling their experience to others resulting in less new members. Thus, it was concluded that the quality of service provided directly influence behavior intention of fitness center users.

It is important that that customer satisfaction be constantly monitored as this is key to loyalty and retention (Kotler, 2009). The information on customer satisfaction can also be used to evaluate productivity and performance for improving services. According to Faullant et al. (2008), the first impression of service providers plays an important role towards customer retention. If a customer has a positive image towards the service provider, the customer has the tendency not to emphasize on the overall performance evaluation and is willing to provide a further chance if service is not as expected. Thus, it is important to create greater value with new customers and preserve its image. Additionally, to sustain customer satisfaction and loyalty, fitness centers must ensure that the high quality of differentiation and superior quality of service meets satisfied levels of the customers' needs. Since many customers perceive the satisfaction of how programmes are carried out to be related with future satisfaction, fitness center operators should enhance this perception with sincerity and guarantee. Often, customer satisfaction begins to decline when they realised that their needs are not going to be met even before purchasing. Thus, a positive first image is something that fitness center needs to emphasize.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Administrators at Mahasarakham University could use the findings to attract more students and staff to frequent and use the fitness centers. This would encourage staff and students to lead a much healthier lifestyle and at the same time allow them more freedom to enjoy better work life balance. The current trend of more youngsters seeing the importance of exercise is something positive but according to Ong and Andrews (2011), the practice of active lifestyle among youngsters would stop after they finish high school. It is important for university administrators to encourage the youngsters to continue their healthy lifestyle when they enter the university. This can be done by having a well-managed fitness centres.

For Mahasarakham University, retention of members and measuring their loyalty are important. A major source of revenue for a campus fitness center is membership fees and this source of income is directly related with s the ability of the fitness center to retain students and staff as members in the long run. Members' retention is related with loyalty which in turn is related to how they perceived the fitness center service quality. This leads to satisfaction if members are satisfied with the service provided by the provider. The following are some suggestions to retain current members and to attract new ones:

1. Create programs to encourage current users to bring non-users to the fitness centres on special occasions for free.
2. Provide a flexible schedule in terms of the times of operation that can attract new users as well as maintain current users.
3. Conduct activities that can attract attention and increase awareness of the offerings of the fitness center.

4. Create a program aimed at providing good first-time impression for prospective members or a new member who have just signed up.
5. Encourage loyal members to maintain their membership by providing privileges and special benefits.
6. Continuously maintain and upgrade the quality of the equipment at the fitness centre.

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