

Assessing tourist behavioral intentions through perceived service quality and customer satisfaction

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Abstract

Despite their importance in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, research surrounding consumer behavior intentions remains insufficient. The authors develop a model to depict how service quality perceptions and customer satisfaction influence behavioral intentions. This proposed model identifies some appropriate measures for a questionnaire distributed to consumers visiting spa resorts. The results clearly demonstrate the influence of service quality and customer satisfaction on behavioral intentions in the tourism industry.

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In recent years, spa resorts have become some of the most relevant tourism services in Spain. According to the *Asociación Nacional de Estaciones Termales* (ANET), approximately 100 national spas reported 138 million euros in revenue and created more than 6000 new jobs in 2000. The strategic importance of this form of tourism emerges not only from economic data but also from the characteristics of the resort industry, including the nonseasonality of demand, average length of stays, and their common locations far from the Spanish coast, which in many cases helps local economies (Alén et al., 2001).

Nonetheless, little research pertaining to spa resorts appears in tourism or marketing journals. The lack of information about this sector represents a potentially serious problem, because high fragmentation and poor professional management characterize the industry and have prevented the application of appropriate strategies toward potential markets (Vazquez-Illá, 2000). For example, because perceived quality has a significant influence on firm choice (Ogorelc and Snoj, 1998), resorts require greater information about competitive strategies that focus on offering the best possible service quality and ensuring customer satisfaction.

Existing empirical research on perceived quality and customer satisfaction in the area of tourism frequently yields contradictory results (Ekinici and Riley, 1998). Researchers

generally posit that these two variables influence consumers' behavioral intentions, but no research has determined the precise nature of the relationship, and existing research takes only some variables into consideration, such as the probability of repeat consumption or recommendation. To refine existing theory in the resort context, marketers must consider new variables (Oh, 1999). In response, this article aims to not only develop a better understanding of such constructs but also explain their reciprocal relationship and, consequently, consumer buying behavior. To do so, this research observes the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the context of spa tourism and treats behavioral intentions as an outcome of both constructs.

The remainder of this article employs the following organization: The authors first consider in some detail existing literature, then formulate a model on the basis of prior research. They then employ the model to test the proposed hypotheses. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of some major theoretical and practical implications of the findings for spa resort management.

1. Theory

Although defining the term *service quality* is not easy, marketing theorists generally accept that the concept is personal and subjective and that consumer perceptions constitute an essential element of its conceptualization. The most common

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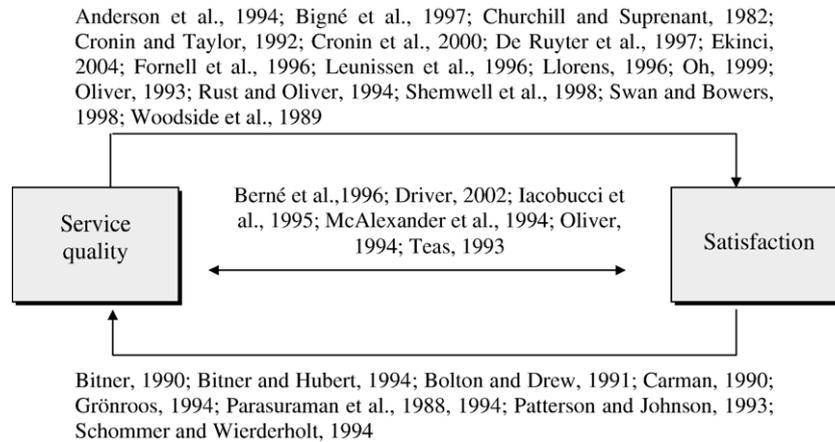


Fig. 1. Causal relationships between satisfaction and service quality.

definition of service quality relies on a global consumer judgment of the superiority of the product or service (Parasuraman et al., 1988), and thereby integrates consumer expectations of the service and perceptions of the firm providing the service (Grönroos, 1994; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Some researchers employ the gap model and measure perceived quality on the basis of disconfirmations of consumer expectations. A more general application entails the use of the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman et al., 1985), though some empirical research has indicated reliability and validity problems with this scale (Teas, 1993). Consequently, recent recommendations suggest the use of consumer perceptions to determine service quality (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), which appears to offer a superior criterion of psychometric and predictive evaluations (Parasuraman et al., 1994; Zeithaml et al., 1996).

However, if consumers perceive service quality as satisfaction or meeting of expectations, confusion arises regarding the use of the term *satisfaction*. Due to their similar meanings, some authors identify a high interrelation between service quality and satisfaction (Cronin et al., 2000; Spreng and Mackoy, 1996), though they differ in some respects (Bansal and Taylor, 1999; Oliver, 1980). Emerging definitions make this distinction more clear: Customer satisfaction results from individual and global transactions, whereas service quality involves a general impression of the superiority or inferiority of the service provider and the services (Bitner and Hubert, 1994) or a general attitude toward services (Bitner, 1990).

Furthermore, some questions still remain with regard to the causal relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality. However important this relationship may be, the goal of this research is to consider consumer evaluations (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Most articles that attempt to examine this relationship are not empirical (Iacobucci et al., 1995); those few tend to be confusing because consumers have trouble distinguishing between the different levels (service versus global quality) and between quality and satisfaction (Bitner and Hubert, 1994).

According to some authors, satisfaction represents an antecedent of perceived service quality (Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Carman, 1990) (see Fig. 1). That is, satisfactory

service quality experiences may lead a consumer to develop and modify his or her global attitude in the long run, such that an accumulation of specific evaluations (satisfaction with a transaction) results in a global evaluation (perceived quality). Other articles contradict this claim and argue that service quality is an antecedent of satisfaction (see Fig. 1). In their attempts to resolve this controversy, both Cronin and Taylor (1992) and Ekinci (2004) find that service quality must be an antecedent of customer satisfaction.

An alternative conceptualization imagines perceived service quality as both an antecedent and a consequence of satisfaction; many researchers concur with this view (see Fig. 1). For example, Iacobucci et al. (1994) examine the issue both empirically and by comparing structural models and determine that service quality represents an antecedent of customer satisfaction while customer satisfaction also offers an antecedent of service quality. Therefore, the relationship between global service quality and customer satisfaction is reciprocal, which means that determining empirically which is the antecedent of the other proves impossible

Table 1
Studies that relate service quality and behavior intentions

Study	Result variable studied
<i>Direct relationship:</i>	
Cronin and Taylor (1992)	Repurchase
Boulding et al. (1993)	Repurchase and recommendation
Baker and Crompton (2000)	Intention to purchase, loyalty, and probability of paying more
Alexandris et al. (2002)	Word-of-mouth communication and intention to purchase
<i>Indirect relationship via satisfaction:</i>	
Woodside et al. (1989)	Intention to purchase
Gremler and Brown (1997)	Loyalty
Shemwell et al. (1998)	Complaining behavior and loyalty
Oh (1999)	Repurchase intention and word-of-mouth communication
Caruana et al. (2000)	Loyalty
Bou et al. (2001)	Intention to purchase
Jeong et al. (2003)	Repurchase intention and word-of-mouth communication

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