

Relationship between Service Quality and Spectators' Behavioral Intentions of Pro League Clubs of Golestan Province

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study relationship between service quality and spectators' behavioral intentions of Pro League clubs of Golestan Province. The population of the study consisted of all spectators of Pro League clubs of Golestan province (Gorgan Basketball Team & Gonbad Kavos Volleyball Team) in 2014 (N=8050) that 367 spectators was selected as research sample that finally 361 questionnaires was returned. For this purpose, sport service quality questionnaire. Reliability of questionnaires after a pilot study using Cronbach's alpha test, respectively ($\alpha=0.82$) and ($\alpha=0.81$) were obtained. Descriptive and inferential statistics methods for data analysis were used. Research results showed that there is no correlation between reliability and spectators' behavioral intentions. Correlation coefficient showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between assurance and spectators' behavioral intentions. In addition, a positive and significant correlation was observed between tangibility and spectators' behavioral intentions. Result of research showed that there is no correlation between empathy and spectators' behavioral intentions. Finally, a no correlation was observed between responsiveness and spectators' behavioral intentions.

Keywords: Service Quality, Behavioral Intentions, Spectators, Pro League, Golestan Province.

INTRODUCTION

Professional clubs across the world employ different ways of financing such as sponsors, commercial goods promotion, player transfer, selling sports products and services, and ticketing among which generating revenue through spectators of sports events is of special place (Theodorakis, 2004). Hansen and Gauthier (1992) argue that the most important factor in prosperity of professional sports is to increase the number of spectators. Not only do

spectators directly provide revenues for professional clubs and leagues by buying tickets, they also play an important role indirectly in revenue generation through attracting sponsors, sale of television rights and subsidiary services (Hansen & Gauthier, 1992). Moreover, their attendance at sports matches makes such events attractive which is an important feature of sports events (O'Neill et al., 1999).

In fact, sports events spectators are customers of sports events and organizations. In recent years, paying attention to customers' needs and being accountable to their demands, either in production or services sectors, have turned into the main and the most necessary tasks or goals of organizations. This fact that more than half of GDPs of most countries in the world is rooted in the services sector and due to unique features of this sector (like direct contact with customers) make this sector very important (Howat et al., 1998). Despite the long time elapsed since the subject of service quality and its assessment methods was brought up, not only has it not lost its importance, it also has gained a significant role more than ever because of the increasing importance of services in countries' economies (Soon Yu et al., 2014). Managers of service organizations are aware that top quality will lead to better performance and will bring them about benefits such as customer loyalty, accountability to their needs, market share growth and productivity. They deploy service quality as a leverage to create competitive advantage. This will be realized if organizations know how their customers perceive the quality of their services (Roberts et al., 2003). Also, customers' satisfaction is contingent upon service quality and higher service quality would probably increase customers' satisfaction. This attitude would yield customers' commitment, their intention to return, stability in buying services, expansion of commercial relations between customers and service providers, increased patience with likely deficiencies of future service and positive publicity for the organization by customers (Newman, 2001).

Research in this area indicates the importance of service quality in forming positive behavioral intentions in customers. In a research titled "the relationship of service quality and satisfaction with customer loyalty in sports gyms (bodybuilding and aerobics) of Tehran", Mahmoudi (2011) showed that there was a significant relationship between service quality and satisfaction and also between service quality and customer loyalty. Saatchian et al (2010) in a research named "the effects of service quality, satisfaction and loyalty on customers' future behavior decisions to attend fitness and aerobics center", concluded that the factors service quality, satisfaction and loyalty were stronger predictors of customers' returning to these centers. The research by Nuviala et al (2012) on the roles service quality and perceived value in satisfaction of sports organizations' customers in Spain showed that service quality and perceived value would affect customers' satisfaction. Theodorakis (2004) showed that service quality played a remarkable role in predicting future behaviors and satisfaction of sports clubs fans in Super league Greece. In a research titled "investigating the relationships among service quality, perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions", Lien et al (2011) concluded that service quality affects perceived value, customers' satisfaction and their behavioral intentions (Lien et al., 2011). Calabuig Moreno et al (2008) stated in their research "the effects of service quality and perceived value on basketball spectators' satisfaction in Spain" that the quality of provided services affects spectators' satisfaction (Calabuig Moreno et al., 2008).

There is also interest in service quality in the sports industry such that today, service quality is one of the most important topics in the field of service management and sports marketing (Robinson, 2006). Accordingly, with intense competition between sports service providers, understanding spectators' levels of expectations of sports organizations will allow marketers to determine whether provided services are of acceptable quality (Shonk & Chelladuraie, 2008). Based on these discussions, if sports organization properly understood factors affecting customers' satisfaction, they could better benefit positive outcomes of enjoying satisfied customers because meeting customers' expectations about service quality will lead to higher satisfaction and will make customers loyal to the services. Therefore, given the increasing growth of economic aspects in sport, focusing on the quality of services offered to customers and proper understanding of their expectations will help managers of private and public clubs to provide customers' needs, gain more financial benefits in the light of customers' loyalty and play a greater role in attracting and preserving new customers. Most research done on the quality of sports services in Iran has investigated service quality in bodybuilding or fitness gyms while the quality of services offered to spectators is mostly overlooked. On the other hand, the quality of services and customers' play an important role in customers' behavioral intentions (Nuviala et al., 2012). Many researchers believe that satisfaction operates as a mediator variable and is affected by service quality and price and affects customers' behavioral intentions like intention to return in future and publicity (Calabuig et al, 2008). Understanding the importance of the environment where sports services are provided and also the factors which affect satisfaction and retention of Sports halls' customers is a critical issue for managers of these sports places. On the other hand, focusing on the matter may play an important role in profiting these sports environments (Macintosh & Doherty, 2007). Having these issues discussed and given the importance of sports service quality and customers' satisfaction, this paper tries to answer the question that if there is a relationship between service quality and

behavioral intentions of spectators of Pro League clubs of Golestan Province.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of current study is applied and its method is correlated descriptive, which is conducted as a field study. The population of the study consisted of all spectators of Pro League clubs of Golestan province (Gorgan Basketball Team & Gonbad Kavos Volleyball Team) in 2014 (N=8050). To select sample size, stratified sampling method was used and 367 spectators was selected as research sample that finally 361 questionnaires was returned. The content validity of the questionnaires was approved by five professors of sports management. To calculate the reliability of the questionnaires, a pilot study was conducted whereby a number of 30 questionnaires were distributed among spectators. The results showed a reliability coefficient of $\alpha=0.82$ for sport service quality questionnaire and $\alpha=0.81$ for behavioral intentions questionnaire, which indicated the consistency of measurement. A demographic data sheet was used to collect the data on personal information including age, level of education and attendance record at sporting events. SPSS software (Version 16) was used to analyze the data. As to the statistical measures, descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation and tabulations were used to describe the data. Inferential statistics including Pearson correlation formula was used to test the hypotheses.

RESULTS

The results showed that the participants were 31 years old on average. 67.3 percent of the participants had Diploma or higher degrees and mean of spectators' attendance record at sporting events was 7.3 years.

Table 1. Description of research variables.

| Statistic Variables | Mean | SD |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|
| Reliability | 2.81 | 0.93 |
| Responsiveness | 2.85 | 0.86 |
| Empathy | 2.80 | 0.93 |
| Assurance | 3.11 | 0.89 |
| Tangibility | 3.01 | 0.87 |
| Service quality | 2.94 | 0.70 |
| Behavioral Intentions of Spectators | 3.82 | 0.82 |

As shown in Table 1, among dimensions of service quality assurance has the highest average and empathy had the lowest average. Mean of service quality scores was 2.94 out of 5 which indicates that the service quality mean scores is higher than average from perspective of spectators. Also mean of behavioral intentions of spectators' scores was 3.82 out of 5.

Table 2. Correlations between research variables.

| Variables | Spectators' Behavioral Intentions | | |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|--------|-------|
| | N | r | P |
| Reliability | 361 | -0.006 | 0.910 |
| Assurance | 361 | 0.255 | 0.001 |
| Tangibility | 361 | 0.189 | 0.001 |
| Empathy | 361 | -0.031 | 0.556 |
| Responsiveness | 361 | 0.090 | 0.087 |

Pearson correlation formula was run to examine the relationship between dimensions of service quality and spectators' behavioral intentions. Regarding the results that presented in Table 2, there is no correlation between reliability and spectators' behavioral intentions ($r=-0.006$, $P\leq 0.910$). Also, the results of correlation coefficient

showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between assurance and spectators' behavioral intentions ($r=0.255$, $P \leq 0.001$). In addition, a positive and significant correlation was observed between tangibility and spectators' behavioral intentions ($r=0.189$, $P \leq 0.001$). Result of research showed that there is no correlation between empathy and spectators' behavioral intentions ($r=-0.031$, $P \leq 0.556$). Finally, a no correlation was observed between responsiveness and spectators' behavioral intentions ($r=0.090$, $P \leq 0.087$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With increasing competition in today's world, organizations' needs to employ customer-oriented approaches in their marketing strategies have increased. Organizations have learned that while it is easy to attract customers, turning them into loyal customers is a tough job. Research has shown that customers' satisfaction is not enough alone and that the important thing is to retain the customers and raise their loyalty. This goes beyond service organizations and encompasses other sectors such as sport. One of the most important concerns of clubs' managers and sports marketers is to attract spectators to sports events and to retain them. In this regard, Shonk and Chelladuraie (2008) argue that in order to attract spectators to sports events, precise marketing plans which are able to provide spectators' needs are critical.

Findings of the present study showed that no significant relationship existed between reliability and spectators' behavioral intentions; this is not in line with findings of Saatchian et al (2010) and Lien et al (2011). A significant relationship was found however, between assurance and spectators' behavioral intentions which are in agreement with findings of Saatchian et al (2010) and Lien et al (2011). About tangible factors, findings revealed a significant relationship between tangible factors and spectators' behavioral intentions which is also in agreement with findings of Saatchian et al (2010) and Lien et al (2011). Findings also showed that no significant relationship existed between empathy and spectators' behavioral intentions which is contrary to findings of Saatchian et al (2010) and Lien et al (2011). No significant relationship was found between responsiveness and spectators' behavioral intentions which is also contrary to findings of Saatchian et al (2010) and Lien et al (2011). The quality of services offered to spectators has always been an important challenge facing managers of sports events. Sports spectators would like to receive high quality services in exchange for the money they spend. In this regard, Howat et al (1998) state that two factors are always important for spectators of sports events: the quality of the event and the quality of subsidiary factors related to the event including physical factors trust in human forces that hold the event, their accountability and safety and security. O'Neill et al (1999) argue that subsidiary factors play an important role in spectators' satisfaction in sports events. Creating a calm environment for spectators and appropriate interaction of human forces in charge with spectators, addressing their problems, setting fair prices for tickets and availability of managers holding the event are factors which as O'Neill et al (1999) suggest may lead to spectators' satisfaction and reinforce their verbal publicity of the event for others and their returning to such events. On the other hand, awareness of sports spectators' expectations and providing their needs may bring about emotional loyalty of spectators to sports events. Spectators loyal to sports events play important roles in verbal publicity and can reduce much of marketing costs. Given the results of the present study, the following are suggested:

- Problems and difficulties of spectators should be identified and duly solved in each tournament. Building an informational bank of spectators and their problems would be of great help.
- Deploying and training of human forces for appropriate interaction with spectators and understanding their needs and demands.
- Tangible factors should be reviewed and improved; these include parking lots, chairs, appearance of sports halls, transportation, resting places and subsidiary factors.
- Focusing on special needs of spectators and human forces of sports complexes.
- The type of services offered to spectators along with match schedules should be precisely examined and spectators should be informed of the type of services.

In this study, only the relationship of service quality and behavioral intentions of spectators in sports events was explored and it is suggested that future research examine other factors affecting spectators' behavioral intentions.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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