

# **Exploring the Relationship of Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty: In the Case Study of Fitness Centers in Cambodia**

**Loem Huot<sup>1</sup>, Pithoon Thanabordeekij<sup>2</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Cambodian Fitness market space nowadays is getting more crowded than ever. Therefore, loyalty to fitness members is very important for business owners. However, overall studies about dimensions and relationships to build customer loyalty in fitness centers is insufficient. The purpose of this paper is to: (1) investigate how perceptions of service quality influence members' satisfaction of fitness-clubs in Cambodia; (2) determine key drivers of loyalty outcome behaviors which attribute from the loyal customer in fitness centers. The methodology involved the compilation of a literature review and conduction of a quantitative approach. The instrument used in this study was adopted from Service Quality Assessment Scale (SQAS) scale and Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty Outcome scale. Survey data were collected from 424 members who have been using the clubs more than 3 months from the four fitness centers. The finding results showed four dimensions out of six service quality perception namely; Staff, Physical facilities, Workout Facilities, and Childcare, that capture the customer attention to be satisfied to the club and they possibly contributed favorable loyalty outcomes to club such as refer club's identification to their peers, club's exclusive consideration to service usage, word of mouth, strength of preferences to buy other product lines that brand has, and share of wallet. The result of this study would enable management to identify service quality dimensions influencing their members' satisfaction which led to membership loyalty.

**Keywords:** Perceived quality; Customer satisfaction; Customer loyalty; Fitness; Cambodia

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## การวิเคราะห์ความสัมพันธ์ของคุณภาพบริการที่ส่งผลต่อความพึงพอใจและความภักดีของนักศึกษาลูกค้าพิทเนสในประเทศไทยและประเทศไทย

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### บทคัดย่อ

ปัจจุบันธุรกิจพิทเนสในประเทศไทยมีความสำคัญเป็นอย่างยิ่งสำหรับเจ้าของธุรกิจ ในขณะที่การศึกษาวิจัยเกี่ยวกับปัจจัยส่งผลต่อความภักดีของสมาชิกพิทเนส จึงมีความสำคัญเป็นอย่างยิ่งสำหรับเจ้าของธุรกิจ ในการศึกษาวิจัยเกี่ยวกับปัจจัยส่งผลต่อความภักดีของสมาชิกพิทเนสในประเทศไทยมีจำนวนน้อย ดังนั้น งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ศึกษาการรับรู้ถึงคุณภาพการบริการที่มีผลต่อความพึงพอใจของสมาชิกพิทเนสในประเทศไทยและศึกษาความภักดีเชิงพฤติกรรมที่มีผลมาจากการรับรู้ถึงคุณภาพการบริการตามตัวแบบ SQAS รวมถึงความพึงพอใจและความภักดีของสมาชิกพิทเนส 4 แห่ง จำนวน 448 คนที่เป็นสมาชิกมาแล้วอย่างน้อย 3 เดือน จากการศึกษาพบว่า ปัจจัยสำคัญที่สุดที่มีอิทธิพลต่อความภักดีของสมาชิกมี 4 มิติที่สำคัญ ได้แก่ มิติด้านพนักงาน สิ่งอำนวยความสะดวกทางกายภาพ สิ่งอำนวยความสะดวกทางกายภาพ และบริการดูแลเด็ก ซึ่งส่งผ่านไปยังความภักดีเชิงพฤติกรรม อาทิ การแสดงตัวตน (Identification) การพิจารณาเป็นพิเศษ (Exclusive Consideration) การบอกต่อแบบปากต่อปาก (Word of Mouth) ความหนักแน่นในสิ่งที่ชอบ (Strength of Preference) และการมีส่วนร่วมในการปกป้อง (Share of Wallet) ผลลัพธ์ที่ได้จากการวิจัยนี้จะช่วยให้ผู้บริหารสถานประกอบการพิทเนส ทราบถึงมิติด้านคุณภาพการบริการที่สมาชิกพึงพอใจซึ่งส่งผลถึงความภักดีของสมาชิก

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## 1. Introduction

After decades, Asian people's mindset toward taking care of their health by coming to fitness clubs has been changing continuously. Today, fitness clubs are considered as people's "third home" aside from their residence and workplace. From time to time, Asia Pacific people are earning much higher paid salary than ever, therefore the majority of people are adapting new lifestyle from European countries (International Health, Racquet & Sportclub Association, 2006). According to Phnom Penh Post, they reported that 94 fitness clubs in Phnom Penh was opening to compensate the increasing demand (Phnompenh Post, 2013) which made up gym density availability rate increased to 3.65 fitness centers in one kilometer square in Phnom Penh. Cambodian people start to go to the gyms in average 3.96 days per week because they become more aware of the benefits of exercising and promoting from governments about healthier lifestyles to combat rising obesity (International Health, Racquet & Sportclub Association, 2006).

Conversely, the fitness market space nowadays is getting more crowded than ever. The struggles of the club's operation cost together with many hidden barriers still cannot be solved (Walsh, 2013). In like manner, customers nowadays are expecting a superior standard which leads the fitness center owners underperformed the customer satisfaction over the past years (Walsh 2013). The fitness service management are complicated and extraordinary; customer relationship often stands in need of the service provider to communicate with each other (Chelladurai et al., 1987). Henceforth, understanding the customer's demanding and their ideal perception value have been becoming an exploration topic that rise to prominence; especially for the clubs' owner in the challenging market (Lagrosen, 2001).

This study attempted to understand how the customer makes a decision on choosing the only fitness center that they have a long-term commitment with and determine key drivers of loyalty outcome behaviors, which attribute from the loyal customer in fitness centers.

## 2. Objective

- 2.1 To investigate how perceptions of service quality influence members' satisfaction with fitness-club in Cambodia.
- 2.2 To determine key drivers of loyalty outcome behaviors which attribute from the loyal customer in fitness centers.

### 3. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis

#### 3.1 Literature Review

##### 3.1.1 Service Quality Perception

Service is given the characteristics as an action that transfers the intangible value from one individual or a group of people to one another without arise any physical possessions (Kotler and Armstrong, 2003). Operation, attitude, and fulfillment were illustrated specifically as the nature of service (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). Based on the definitions above, services are created by human being or machine, and services basically are invisible; The distinctive of services has four main natures in common such as intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Backward to the last four decades, service quality had a really remarkable attraction for many marketing researchers to put the spotlight on. Therefore, the wave of major fundamental evolution of instruments to measure the service quality was born (Harvey, 1998). Later on, a standout model called SERVQUAL model was established by Parasuraman et al. (1985), and its clarification, measurement, and practices had been acknowledged. Consequently, service quality was defined as "a comparison of expectations with performance" from various contexts.

Although the SERVQUAL may be famous and has been used in various service business setting in that era till now (Hussey MK, 1999); however, it had become a controversial instrument that received a massive amount of opposite comments (Babakus & Boller, 1992). The most critique problems that many researchers have seen on the SERVQUAL is that this model is measurable to any service business setting (Carman, 1990); under those circumstances, it is found lacking to address certain service business.

##### 3.1.2 Development of Service Quality Perception in Fitness Industry

The fitness industry possesses its own extraordinary characteristics that is potentially distinctive from other industries (Murray and Howat, 2002) because it requires an on-going customer engagement which correlated with service usage. Henceforth, the usage of the most common model like SERVQUAL might not be practically applicable to the real observation in the study. As a result of the unavailability of this essential attribute in SERVQUAL, the push of demanding research studies specifically for fitness industry happened in order to originate the substitute construct of the existing SERVQUAL construct. Later on, one construct called scale of attributes of fitness services (SAFS) was initially developed by Chelladurai et al. (1987), and it was the first service quality construct ever that measure the insight in the fitness industry. Many researchers have evolved the scale of measuring the service quality in the fitness industry and take it to next level on understanding the industry in depth.

### 3.1.3 Service Quality Assessment Scale (SQAS)

Service Quality Assessment Scale (SQAS), the work of Lam et al., (2005), is functioning as a tool to figure out the overall perception service quality by observing customer of the fitness clubs through six factors such as Staff, Program, Locker Room, Physical, Workout Facility and Child Care. They were classified into three constructs.

1) Personnel. Service is essentially required on-going customer engagement to dive into a better understanding of customer expectation (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). In that same way, the fitness center also begins to have on-going customer engagement right in the minute each member enters into the club (Brady & Cronin, 2001).

2) Program. The program is described as the variety of programs and activities are being offered. Particularly, most of the common service quality instruments don't contain the program factor because those scales are not intentionally developed for usage in the fitness center (Rust & Oliver, 1994).

3) Facility. In this instrument, the Physical Environment factor is described as the objective or the surrounding setting equipment in the club which is the "built environment". It basically represents all the quality of all the setting including "adequate space, brightness, modern facilities, locker room with a warm atmosphere, cleanliness, availability, and variety" (Papadimitriou and Karteroliotis, 2000).

### 3.1.4 Customer Satisfaction

Parasuman et al (1985) speculated that nature of business basically contributes the service quality first prior to customer satisfaction. Another key point is that perception of service during business operation is the critical element of customer satisfaction. To assess one business service, questionnaire designing is required to include the comparison between the service benefit customer get and what service they are really demanding. Therefore, the model like the gap service quality is really effective because of its core concept (P-E); P represents the amount of service benefit customer had perceived over time from past, and E represents the ideal amount of service benefit customer actually want in their thought.

### 3.1.5 Loyalty Outcome

Speaking of customer loyalty, the service provider might need strategies to initiate the first four loyalty phases such as capturing cognitive, affective, conative and action of the customer emotion attachment A conceptualization model by Bourdeau's (2005) has been constructed to contribute theoretical framework to look into a deeper insight of composition of customer loyalty and the outcome behaviors that lead to customer's commitment. According to that declaration, most of the service provider throughout business could potentially create customer relationship management

key tools to capture identification, exclusive consideration, advocacy (WOM), strength of preference, and share of wallet behaviors from their existing customers.

1) Identification: The service providers are paying much more attention to inducement for customer to create the relationship identity and essence between person.

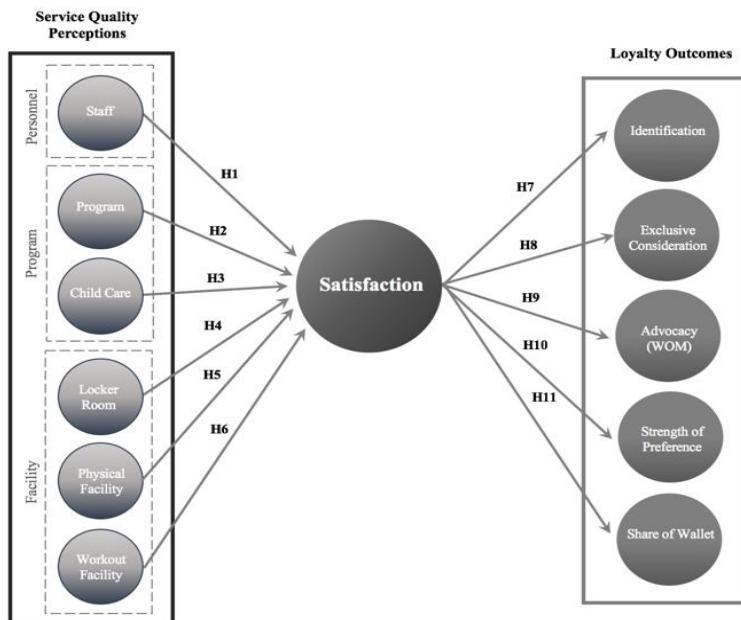
2) Exclusive consideration: Exclusive consideration is defined as the proportion of the customer's awareness while the customers are paying money for service.

3) Advocacy (Word of Mouth): Customer advocacy has been so popular to either called word-of-mouth or willingness-to-recommend. Customer advocacy is well defined as the consent to suggest a service provider to their relatives and peers by risking their own trustworthiness.

4) Strength of preference: In the literature, strength of preference is the Antecedent research studies recommend that loyalty interfere the connection of service quality perception and customer strength of preference.

5) Share of Wallet: The last loyalty outcome is share of wallet which represents customer's want in buying any service that produced by a specific service provider.

### 3.2 Adapted Framework



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework

Adapted from “Service Quality Assessment Scale (SQAS): An Instrument for Evaluating Service Quality of Health-Fitness Clubs” by Lam et al, (2005) and “A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research” by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, (1990) and “A New Examination of Service Loyalty: Identification of the Antecedents and Outcomes of an Attitudinal Loyalty Framework” by Bourdeau, B. L., (2005)

### 3.3 Hypothesis

- $H_1$  : Staff personnel has positive effect on customer satisfaction in the fitness center.
- $H_2$  : Program has a positive effect on customer satisfaction in the fitness center.
- $H_3$  : Child Care has a positive effect on customer satisfaction in the fitness center.
- $H_4$  : Locker Room has a positive effect on customer satisfaction in the fitness center.
- $H_5$  : Physical Facility has a positive effect on customer satisfaction in the fitness center.
- $H_6$  : Workout Facility has a positive effect on customer satisfaction in the fitness center.
- $H_7$  : Fitness member's overall satisfaction have a positive effect on identification.
- $H_8$  : Fitness member's overall satisfaction have a positive effect on exclusive consideration.
- $H_9$  : Fitness member's overall satisfaction have a positive effect on advocacy (WOM).
- $H_{10}$  : Fitness member's overall satisfaction have a positive effect on strength of preference.
- $H_{11}$  : Fitness member's overall satisfaction have a positive effect on share of wallet.

### 4. Methodology

A scattering sampling of 448 (3 months active) users from 8 fitnesses under 4 brands namely Superfit, The Place, S-Fitness, and Sea Stone was conducted. The data collection was taken at those fitness center in PhnomPenh city, the capital city of Cambodia due to large density number of fitness centers which was reported that total number fitness clubs are 286 fitness clubs are operating (PhnomPenh Post, 2013). The data collection was conducted by contact to fitness center owners to allow the permission for conducting personal interviewing in person with users while their training in each fitness center. Indeed, testing of each dimension was examined by Inferential Statistic and Multiple Regression Analysis.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Results

From the table 1, the study showed that Cambodian customer's profile that come to fitness club more often are male who are 20 years to 40 years with under-graduate education and they possibly earn more than USD 500 per month and have committed to fitness lifestyle more than 6 months. For business implication, manager and business owner have to study carefully about clients' behaviors and routine to penetrate business model changes up to situation.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of respondent

Demographic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Fitness center	Super Fit	132	29.5
	S-Fitness	129	28.8
	The Place	95	21.2
	Sea Stone	92	20.5
Duration of membership	More than 3 months	75	16.7
	More than 6 months	156	34.8
	More than 1 year	155	34.6
	More than 2 years	62	13.8
Gender	Male	348	77.7
	Female	100	22.3
Age	Less than 20 years old	84	18.8
	Less than 30 years old	220	49.1
	Less than 40 years old	118	26.3
	Less than 50 years old	24	5.4
	More than 50 years old	2	0.4
Education	Less than high school	61	13.6
	High school	93	20.8
	Undergraduate degree	217	48.4
	Graduated degree	68	15.2
	Post graduated degree	9	2

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of respondent (Continued)

Demographic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Income	Less than USD 100	18	4.0
	Less than USD 200	24	5.4
	Less than USD 350	103	23.0
	Less than USD 500	133	29.7
	More than USD 500	170	37.9

**Source:** Author's calculation.

In table 2, it showed that the score of pre-test Cronbach's Alpha result (50 responses) were from 0.819 to 0.978, whereas actual Cronbach's Alpha (448 responses) in all items were in the range from 0.946 to 0.991 which indicate that they had a very strong reliability. Reason being, there were many research studies from the past have claimed that Cronbach's Alpha has to be over 0.7 to confirm the internal scale reliability (Kline, 2000). To sum up, all of the items of this instrument was reliable.

**Table 2** Cronbach's Alpha Scale Reliability Results

Variable	Code	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha (n=50)	Cronbach's Alpha (n=448)
Staff	PSTF	9	0.819	0.950
Program	PPG	7	0.911	0.983
Locker Room	PLK	5	0.934	0.984
Physical Facilities	PPHY	7	0.886	0.961
Workout Facilities	PWO	6	0.885	0.946
Childcare	PCHC	6	0.978	0.991
Satisfaction	SAT	6	0.936	0.946
Identification	IDENT	4	0.951	0.962
Exclusive Consideration	EXCLU	4	0.948	0.975

**Table 2** Cronbach's Alpha Scale Reliability Results (Continued)

Variable	Code	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha (n=50)	Cronbach's Alpha (n=448)
Advocacy (WOM)	ADVOC	3	0.948	0.971
Strength of Preference	STREN	4	0.967	0.985
Share of Wallet	SHARE	3	0.955	0.984

**Source:** Author's calculation.

According to the summary of Table 3, it has been analyzed and it showed that there was a significant connection of customer satisfaction with service quality perceptions in the fitness center with 0.00\* significant level. Once again, there were only four dimensions out of six service quality perception (Staff, Physical facilities, Workout Facilities, and Childcare) that capture the customer attention to be loyal to the firm with 0.00\* significant level at 0.05. Specifically, the hypothesis H1, H3, H5 and H6 were supported because the testing result came out with  $p < 0.05$ . On the other hand, the two dimensions, the hypothesis H2 (Program) and H4 (Locker Room) were rejected because H2 and H4 had a significant level more than 0.05, although these two dimensions had 0.985 consistency of Cronbach's Alpha score.

In the analysis, H7, the relationship between customer satisfaction and identification was significant at 0.05 levels. H8, the relationship between customer satisfaction and exclusive consideration was significant at 0.05 levels. H9, the relationship between customer satisfaction and strength of preference was significant at 0.05 levels. H10, the relationship between customer satisfaction and strength of preference was significant at 0.05 levels. H11, the relationship between customer satisfaction and share of wallet was significant at 0.05 levels

**Table 3** The relationship between Perceived Service Quality and Customer satisfaction

No.	Hypothesis Path	$\beta$	t-value	p-value	Hypothesis Supported
$H_1$	Staff → Satisfaction	0.312*	6.106	0.000	YES
$H_2$	Program → Satisfaction	-0.100	-1.679	0.094	NO
$H_3$	Childcare → Satisfaction	0.139*	0.941	0.347	YES
$H_4$	Locker Room → Satisfaction	0.062	2.042	0.042	NO
$H_5$	Physical Facility → Satisfaction	0.103*	3.746	0.000	YES
$H_6$	Workout Facility → Satisfaction	0.207**	3.427	0.001	YES
$H_7$	Satisfaction → Identification	0.435*	10.191	0.000	YES
$H_8$	Satisfaction → Exclusive Consideration	0.325*	7.248	0.000	YES
$H_9$	Satisfaction → Advocacy	0.214*	2.495	0.000	YES
$H_{10}$	Satisfaction → Strength of Preference	0.184*	3.645	0.000	YES
$H_{11}$	Satisfaction → Share of Wallet	0.156**	3.324	0.001	YES

\*significant at 0.05, \*\* significant at 0.01

**Source:** Author's calculation.

## 5.2 Discussion

The results showed that employee and workout facilities were complimenting and resulting in a great customer satisfaction and further intention to be a loyal customer (Alexandris et al., 2004). In another way, Childcare was verified having a great relation with satisfaction for users who are married which could be a new aspect that could bring to fitness market (Lam et al, 2005). However, the finding confirmed that program and locker room did not have a strong relationship in building satisfaction for future loyalty to the users (Chang & Chelladurai, 2003).

To cover up the future intension hypothesizes, the finding result confirmed in the post-stage service providing that customer satisfaction delivered a great influence to loyalty outcome to certain extent. Speaking result, it confirmed that customers want some sort of identity from their service providers when they have been paying cash on the service on several times, and they tend to be associating their group of peer and shifting the benefit to the firm (Butcher et al., 2001). Nevertheless, each of every customer is also trying to create an exclusive consideration, set of service provider collection and be loyal to their service provider in order to specify alternative selection in the exact

way they did with good products. (Kardes et al., 1993). The findings have shown that Advocacy (Word of Mouth) is always implying to the loyalty concept in term of an actual sequence from flat to full emotional attachment to the firm (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1996). Comprehensively, Strength of preference also complement customer satisfaction which confirmed as a perception which have a comparative mindset, preference loyalty, and emotion into the firm identity (Dick & Basu, 1994). Just exact same expectation from the finding, it has shown that share of wallet has direct influence customer loyalty through excellence service satisfaction (Reynolds & Arnold, 2000). Practically, this loyalty outcome is a tremendous effect in purchasing behavior.

## 6. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to: (1) investigate how perceptions of service quality influence members' satisfaction with fitness-club in Cambodia; (2) determine key drivers of loyalty outcome behaviors which attribute from the loyal customer in fitness centers.

The finding shown that there is a significant connection between members' satisfaction and service quality perceptions in the fitness-club. Four dimensions out of six service quality perception dimensions (Staff, Physical facilities, Workout Facilities, and Childcare) capture the member attention to be satisfied to the clubs. Additionally, the finding also suggested the significant relationship between satisfaction and loyalty outcomes. Members are likely to refer club's identification to their peers, club's exclusive consideration to service usage, word of mouth, strength of preferences to buy other product lines that brand has, and share of wallet.

## 7. Suggestion

### 7.1 Implication

Determining optimum levels of customer service depends on accurately assessing customer perceptions. Hence, the following suggestions need to be maintained/improved in the interest of managements to enhance members' satisfaction:

#### 1) Staff Personnel

Staff personnel compliments the most influence to great value for the service. The reason being, they are the only people who deal with the member of the club on many occasions (Zeithaml, 1988). Staffs have to have good possession of required knowledge and skills about fitness, and be courtesy in their job and always dress professionally. They must have great communication and good responding when there is any complaint and provide a consistent service to the members.

## 2) Physical Facility and Workout Facility

Physical Facility and Workout facility are confirmed its importance as perceived value and quality to contribute to the client's future intention to come back to the clubs. Since things like workout machines, equipment, kettlebell, dumbbell, cardiovascular machine, treadmill, weights plates, body weight equipment, barbell and environment of the space are required to look out carefully. The manager might need to assure those other assets such as modern equipment, the appearance of decoration on the wall or mirror of the club, and these things will be attractive as service materials to the customers. They might need to check the habit of the customer to find out which machine or equipment members mostly use.

## 3) Child Care Service

Child care program availability helps to ease the tremendous amount of difficulty to members who have kids. Service supporting program will allow the members like mom or dad to go to workout. In addition, the wireless surveillance security cameras should be installed in Child care facility. These will allow parents to monitor their kids on their smartphone, thus, they can enjoy their time spending in the club evermore.

Lastly, the club manager have to pay attention to all the details and keep trying to improve all those service quality to make their customer see and be satisfied with performance. The fitness centers should be doing their marketing and emphasizing their customer relationship on the social media platform, especially in the connected digital world like the present time.

## 7.2 Future research

This study only focuses on the fitness-clubs in Phnom Penh and does not include the fitness-clubs in other provinces. Therefore, the next research for the person who is interested in this issue can focus more on the other provinces. Moreover, there might be other variables affecting customer satisfaction and loyalty outcomes. Therefore, future researchers may investigate more on variables relating to customer satisfaction and loyalty outcomes in fitness industry for deeply understanding.

## 8. Limitation

Although, the results of this study meaningful insights on Fitness industry in Cambodia but the research results has the issue of generalizability. The data collection process was delivered to members who are only belonging in the eight fitness clubs above in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia. Thus, members' behavior among general population may differ from the study result.

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