

Expected and perceived service quality at basketball stadiums in Greece

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Abstract

The purpose of the current research was to examine the differences between expected quality of service and the perceived quality of service experienced by spectators at selected professional basketball stadiums in Northern Greece. Five hundred spectators filled in the evaluation instrument created for the purpose of the study. The Wilcoxon's matched-pairs signed-ranks test showed a statistically significant difference in all 23 items between expectations and perceptions of service quality and in all cases only organizational weaknesses were proved to exist and no strengths. The exploratory factor analysis revealed nine factors: "show time expectations", "installation's evaluation", "convenience and employee evaluation", "show time evaluation", "employee expectations", "convenience expectations", "installation's expectations", "comfort evaluation" and "comfort expectations". The challenge of providing a high quality sport and recreation service becomes less difficult when sport managers know what their customers expect from a service and what they feel is important to quality. From a managerial perspective, identifying the dimensions and knowing both a spectator's evaluations and expectations of a provided service indicates the direction that management should take in investing its efforts and resources to increase the probability of the customer experiencing a positive outcome from watching.

Keywords: *service quality, professional sport, basketball stadium, spectator, perceptions, expectations*

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Introduction

Service quality is strongly related with customers' satisfaction and may improve an organization's profitability in any consumer market (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988) since a satisfied customer will probably re-use or repurchase the service (Anderson & Sullivan, 1990; Bernhardt, Donthu & Kennet,

2000; Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987; Gale, 1997; Howat, Murray & Crilley, 1999; Murray & Kowat, 2002; Philip & Hazlett, 1997). In the past two decades, general interest in service quality has been intensified by research findings that improvements in service quality could lead to improved organizational performance and competitiveness (Douglas &

Connor, 2003; Rosen, Karwan & Scribner, 2003; Rust, Denaher & Varki, 2000). The past few years, a growing body of literature has emerged that seeks to apply service quality concepts and techniques to sport organizations (Alexandris & Palialia, 1999; Costa, Tsitskari, Tzetzis & Goudas, 2004; DeKnop, van Hoecke & de Bosscher, 2004; Howat, Crilley, Abser & Milne, 1996; Lentell, 2001; Murray & Howat, 2002; Papadimitriou & Karteliotis, 2000; Robinson, 1999; 2003a; Theodorakis & Kambitsis, 1998; Woratschek, 2000).

The vast majority of this research has examined service quality in participant/recreation sport settings, as in sport and fitness centers (Afthinos, Theodorakis & Nassis, 2005; Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsozbatzoudis & Grouios, 2004; Costa, et al., 2004; Crompton & Mackay, 1989; Howat, Crilley, Absher & Milne, 1996; Kim & Kim, 1995; Papadimitriou & Karteliotis, 2000; Van de Graaf, 1994; Williams, 1998). In this type of setting, the consumer participates actively in the sport-consumption process. On the contrary, fewer papers have examined service quality in other parts of the sports industry where the consumer acts as a spectator (Kelley & Turley, 1999; McDonald & Milne, 1998; McDonald, Sutton & Milne, 1995; Theodorakis & Kambitsis, 1998).

Regarding basketball, a spectator should be well served by a complete package of pre-game activities, half time entertainment and post-game parties. However, in Greece, basketball games promotion consists primarily of scheduled games and the provision of refreshments. This limited promotion strategy may be negatively related with the number of spectators in Greek basketball stadiums. Therefore, it seems that it is time to expand the entire basketball experience so that a wider range of people will be attracted to this sport. To achieve this, the expectations of the consumer should be determined and the gap between the expected and the perceived service quality should be identified. Then, the differences between the expectations and the actual quality can be narrowed or eliminated through effective, research-based management decisions.

Literature review

According to Robinson (2006), underpinning quality improvements is the concept of customer expectations. Knowledge of what customers expect from sport organizations allows important service attributes to be identified (Crompton & MacKay, 1989; Theodorakis, Kambitsis, Laios & Koustelios, 2001). Moreover, it is necessary to understand the level of customers' expectations for the service, as it is generally accepted that customers use their service expectations to decide whether the service received is of an acceptable level of quality (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Gronroos, 1984; Ojasalo, 2001; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985; 1994a; 1994b; Robledo, 2001).

Consequently, one of the major problems addressed in the literature for satisfying consumer demands is management's inability to identify what the consumer sees as important. Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) conducted an investigation into the gap between consumer needs and management provisions at sport centers in the United States. They found that although management concentrated on the acquisition of modern and high tech equipment, these dimensions were considered by consumers as less important and usually tended to meet or exceed their expectations. However, other aspects of service that consumers perceived as important, such as facilities scheduling, convenience and social services, were ignored by the management.

A key issue in creating a perception of high service quality is to ensure that perceived service quality and delivery meet or exceed consumers' expectations. According to Theodorakis and Kambitsis (1998), by manipulating service-performance cues, sports managers can positively influence spectators' future behaviours, such as loyalty, positive word-of-mouth and intention to re-buy. This must be ascertained through an evaluation of consumers' perceptions of the service delivery performance between the desired level of performance and the perceived one. This discrepancy will identify the opportunities and limitations for: a) marketing the plan and b) instituting improvements in service quality (Barber, 1992).

In the case of leisure and sport services, especially when the customer must stay in the facility for an extended period of time (perhaps several hours), Bitner (1992) has suggested that the facility itself, or "servicescape" may have a substantial effect on customers' satisfaction with the service experience, and, hence, will play an important role in determining whether customers will repatronize the service provider (Wakefield & Blodget, 1994). This is especially true for non-traditional customers. For example, in order to accommodate a more entertainment-oriented market, sporting venues have revised their missions from providing a competitive team to embrace a more comprehensive entertainment objective. Evidence of this trend is apparent in the addition of game rooms, restaurants, bars, etc. to the sporting venue "servicescape" (Hightower, Brady & Baker, 2002).

In addition to the interest that the added amenities have drawn, the facilities alone – in most counties and sports – have attracted notable attention due to the venue's impact on the financial health and competitiveness of professional sports franchises (Robinson, 1997; Shank, 2005), though little empirical evidence is available that connects a venue's "servicescape" to such notable services constructs as enduring involvement, perceptions of value, service quality, behavioural intentions and waiting time. What is known is that customer service quality perceptions are influenced by their interaction with employees (i.e. functional quality), the perceived outcome of the service encounter (i.e. technical quality) and the service firm's physical environment (Gronroos, 1982; Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1982; Rust & Oliver, 1994). This last parameter seems to be the key factor in retaining customers.

From the above, it is concluded that meeting customers' expectations and satisfying their needs are important elements in the effect that an organization makes to retain its customers and gain competitive advantage (Parasuraman, et al., 1988). However, although customers' perceptions of service quality have received much attention from both service marketers and academic re-

searchers, customers' expectations have received relatively little attention in the literature. In addition, we have not found any research examining the expectations of spectators and the actual provisions of service quality at basketball games in Greece.

The purpose of the current research was to examine the differences between expected quality of service and the perceived quality of service experienced by spectators at selected professional basketball stadiums in Northern Greece.

The following research questions were asked:

1. What is the difference between spectators' expectations and perceived quality of the service provided in basketball installations?
2. Is there a single or are there multiple dimensions underlying the 48 items of evaluating the expected and perceived quality of the service provided in these grounds?

Methodology

Data collection.

Data were recorded during five randomly selected games, using a chart of random numbers from the professional league schedule in Greece. Each game took place in different professional basketball installations within Northern Greece. Only one game in each court was selected, in order to eliminate the possibility of asking the same fans. Only non season ticket holders were selected. In order to randomly select the subjects at each game, the interviewers obtained a seating chart of each of the facilities and selected 100 seats prior to the games, using a random number chart. In cases that pre-assigned seats were empty, the alternative numbers-seats were chosen. If those seats were also empty, the subjects would be marked as "Non-Respondent". In total, 505 questionnaires were distributed and 500 of them were completed by the fans. It was found that men represented 75,6% of the sample while women only 24,4%. Subjects aged less than 19 were 16,4%, 40,6% were between 20-29, 24% were 30-39, 10,6% were 40-49 and 8,2% were older than 50. More demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample demographics

Variable	Value label	Value (%)
Profession	Public servant	15,6
	Business owner/ Free-lancer	21,6
	Private sector employee/ Labourer	20,4
	Unemployed/pupil/student	41,8
Total monthly income	≤ 500	36,8
	500 – 1000 €	31,2
	1000 – 1500 €	18,2
	≥ 1500 €	13,8
Education	Elementary	1,4
	Secondary (high school/ lyceum)	50,2
	Higher (bachelor's degree)	41,0
	Master's degree/doctorate	7,0

Instrument

Expected and perceived service quality was measured using an evaluation instrument created to serve the needs of the study. The researchers included variables that

Table 2. The 23 Perception and Expectation variables

Variable
1. Clean restrooms
2. Good lighting
3. Clean facilities
4. Courteous staff
5. Private lounge
6. Covered seating
7. Souvenir shop
8. Good commentary on games - information about the game and the players
9. Game magazine
10. The pre-game entertainment
11. The half-time entertainment
12. The post-game parties
13. Meeting the players
14. Snack and refreshment counters
15. Restaurants
16. Statistical information concerning the game
17. Telephones
18. Security
19. Parking
20. Accessibility of facility
21. Knowledgeable employees
22. Courteous employees
23. Accessible employees

would constitute the evaluation tool after a thorough review of the bibliography concerning expected and perceived service quality in sport installations and by using as a model an instrument created by Choo (1998) that evaluated both the expected and the perceived quality offered in corporate basketball games in South Korea. A panel of five experts was invited to screen the instrument for its content validity. The qualitative comments led to an instrument which consisted of three sections: the first gathered the spectators' demographic characteristics, the second included 23 items used for the evaluation of the service quality provided in basketball installations, while the third section included 23 identical items for the expression of the spectators' expectations for the service provided in basketball grounds (Table 2). Respondents were instructed to indicate the extent of their evaluation of each item using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1: "very bad" to 5: "very good". The evaluation tool was then completed by 60 sport fans who attended an amateur basketball game in one of the sample installations in Thessaloniki. Factor and reliability analysis conducted on this data gathering revealed six factors of the service quality expected in basketball grounds: "show time", "staff", "comfort", "installations", "luxury" and "socializing".

Using the above questionnaire the researchers conducted a test-retest pilot study during two amateur basketball games in two of the researched installations. The sample in the pilot study consisted of 120 spectators. The first part of the survey was conducted on-site while the re-test was conducted two weeks later by phone (the researchers obtained this information from the respondents). The results of the interclass correlation coefficient were more than satisfactory ($r > .70$). More specifically, for the "show time" factor the $icc = .70$, for "staff", $icc = .81$, for "comfort", $icc = .72$, for "installations" $icc = .85$, for "luxury", $icc = .75$ and for "socializing" $icc = .78$.

For the needs of the study, the evaluation tool will be from now on referred to as "SERVEXPERC".

Table 3. Mean (SD) scores of perceived and expected service quality

Variable	Mean (SD) (perception)	Mean (SD) (expectation)	Wilcoxon's Z
Clean restrooms	3,22 (1,17)	4,58 (0,68)	15,956*
Good lighting	3,84 (1,10)	4,67 (0,59)	13,079*
Clean facilities	3,29 (1,12)	4,63 (0,66)	16,205*
Courteous staff	3,21 (1,08)	4,21 (0,95)	13,904*
Private lounge	1,36 (0,96)	3,01 (1,60)	13,662*
Covered seating	2,41 (1,26)	3,97 (1,14)	15,128*
Souvenir shop	1,64 (1,14)	3,83 (1,23)	16,536*
Good commentary on games – information about the game and the players	1,89 (1,25)	3,95 (1,20)	16,174*
Game magazine	2,03 (1,37)	3,88 (1,24)	15,443*
The pre-game entertainment	1,91 (1,19)	4,00 (1,15)	16,356*
The half-time entertainment	1,98 (1,24)	4,05 (1,10)	16,593*
The post-game parties	1,53 (1,01)	3,34 (1,52)	15,381*
Meeting the players	1,75 (1,18)	3,97 (1,21)	16,463*
Snack and refreshment counters	3,24 (1,13)	4,41 (0,76)	14,911*
Restaurants	1,33 (0,88)	3,42 (1,53)	15,554*
Statistical information concerning the game	2,06 (2,89)	3,79 (1,29)	15,843*
Telephones	2,84 (1,17)	3,92 (1,04)	13,270*
Security	3,37 (1,02)	4,73 (3,01)	15,330*
Parking	3,25 (2,40)	4,49 (0,82)	14,645*
Accessibility of facility	3,39 (1,15)	4,49 (0,73)	14,294*
Knowledgeable employees	2,92 (0,99)	4,06 (0,91)	14,814*
Courteous employees	3,22 (1,01)	4,24 (0,87)	14,450*
Accessible employees	2,97 (1,01)	4,06 (0,96)	14,858*

* $p < .001$

Results

The Wilcoxon's matched-pairs signed-ranks test was used to test the difference between spectators' expectations and perceived quality of the service provided in bas-

ketball installations, at $p < .05$. The results showed statistically significant differences, between expectations and perceptions of service quality, in all 23 items of the questionnaire (Table 3).

Table 4. Rotated component matrix for the nine-factor solution (factor names are shown before the loaded variables)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	H ²
"Show time expectations"										
Pre-game entertainment	,746									,662
Game magazine	,740									,657
Good commentary on games – Information about the game and the players	,727									,653
Half-time entertainment	,679									,679
Meeting the players	,602									,602
Statistical information concerning the game	,572									,630
Post-game parties	,498									,646
"Installation evaluation"										
Clean restrooms		,809								,737
Good lighting		,803								,776
Clean facilities		,789								,743

Table 4. (continued)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	H ²
Snack and refreshment counters		,706								,601
Courteous staff		,552								,549
"Show time evaluation"										
Half-time entertainment			,836							,794
Pre-game entertainment			,817							,781
Good commentary on games – information about the game and the players			,668							
Post-game parties			,610							,642
Restaurants			,540							,564
Game magazine			,514							,513
Meeting the players			,492							,563
Covered seating			,408							,650
"Convenience & employee evaluation"										
Telephones				,312						,466
Accessible employees				,843						,780
Courteous employees				,841						,785
Knowledgeable employees				,771						,669
Accessibility of facility				,519						,563
Security				,488						,531
Parking				,394						,202
"Employee expectations"										
Knowledgeable employees					,707					,664
Accessible employees					,672					,610
Courteous employees					,636					,622
Restaurants					,446					,570
Telephones					,406					,472
"Convenience expectations"										
Parking						,761				,612
Security						,727				,609
Accessibility of facility						,674				,542
Snack and refreshment counters						,370				,391
"Installation's expectations"										
Clean facilities							,830			,758
Clean restrooms							,791			,791
Good lighting							,742			,742
Courteous staff							,494			,607
"Comfort evaluation"										
Souvenir shop								,710		,625
Private lounge								,450		,450
Statistical information concerning the game								,401		,243
"Comfort expectations"										
Private lounge									,742	,682
Covered seating									,710	,640
Souvenir shop									,620	,583
% of variance	19,27	12,36	7,05	5,14	4,25	3,79	3,04	2,94	2,73	
Total Variability	19,27	31,64	38,69	43,83	48,08	51,88	54,92	57,86	60,59	
Eigenvalue	8,86	5,68	3,24	2,36	1,95	1,74	1,40	1,35	1,25	

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for the 9-factor solution

Subscale	Mean	SD	Alpha	N items
Show time expectations	3,86	,91	,8540	7
Installation's evaluation	3,34	,91	,8635	5
Show time evaluation	1,81	,78	,8344	8
Convenience & employee evaluation	3,12	,81	,7595	7
Employee expectations	3,93	,78	,7603	5
Convenience expectations	4,51	,56	,7395	4
Installations expectations	4,52	,57	,7766	4
Comfort evaluation	1,63	1,20	,6266	3
Comfort expectations	3,56	1,08	,7348	3

α of the whole scale = .8766

The internal structure of the expectations/perception service quality construct was examined through an exploratory factor analysis based on the 46-item inventory. The extraction method employed was principal component followed by varimax rotation, to enhance the interpretability of the extracted factorial model. The results from this analysis give a nine-factor model (KMO: 0,855) with each factor's eigenvalue greater than 1.0, which explained 60,59% of the total variance. The rotated component matrix for the above is presented in Table 4.

The internal consistency reliability of the nine factors was assessed by computing Cronbach's alpha coefficients (Table 5). Afterwards all factors were given names according to their loaded variables, clear relations were demonstrated among similar factors of expectations and evaluations. More specifically, the first factor that was accounted for, "*show time expectations*" corresponded to the third factor named "*show time evaluation*". In addition, the second factor named "*installation evaluation*" corresponded to the seventh factor named "*installation expectations*" and the fourth factor that was accounted for, "*convenience & employee evaluation*" corresponded to the fifth and the sixth factors named "*employee expectations*" and "*convenience expectations*" respectively. Moreover, the eighth factor named "*comfort evaluation*" clearly corresponded to the ninth factor, "*comfort expectations*". However, no expectations and evaluation variables were found to be loaded together on the same factor, which is evidence

of poor relations between the expectations variables and their equivalent evaluation variables that were included in the questionnaire.

Conclusions and discussion

Concerning research question 1, there was a statistically significant difference on all 23 items between expectations and perceptions of service quality. In all cases, expectations were more highly rated than perceptions of the service quality offered. Identifying consumer perceptions may enable management to assess organizational strengths and weaknesses. According to the results of the survey, no strengths were found. This research provided insight into market segments, employee performance, service problems and entertainment in basketball games in Northern Greece – most importantly by evaluating the opinions of fans who seemed to be loyal to their teams and to the game of basketball. The managers of these teams and/or installations should consider the problems that the spectators indicated to improve their programs and increase their consumers' satisfaction.

As Wakefield and his associates (Wakefield, Blodgett and Sloan, 1996; Wakefield and Sloan, 1995) have shown, the content in which spectator services are provided (i.e. the stadium in which a contest takes place) is a significant predictor of a fan's attendance and loyalty. And only the consumers (i.e. the spectators) know the quality of a service as they experience it. Of course, a very important issue is what the client thinks of as the core service. Some spectators may consider as the

core service the excellence exhibited by the team while others may consider the context (e.g. the ambience and the stadium) (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000). In this research only the physical context including the facilities and equipment in which the service is provided was studied. And as proved, sports managers of the teams and/or stadiums studied should make major improvements in all aspects of the service they offer inside (e.g. cleanliness) and outside (e.g. parking) the installation if they wish to enhance spectators' perceptions of service quality.

In this context the study is very significant because it highlights the need to identify marketing methods in order to satisfy spectators' expectations for service quality at professional basketball organizations. Thus, the research provides data which can be used to improve marketing and service quality in stadiums by Greek basketball managers. However, it should be taken into account that, in general, customers of sport services expect more than they perceive they get. Research carried out by Howat et al. (1996) with customers of leisure centers in Australia; by Theodorakis et al. (2001) with spectators at professional basketball matches; and Williams (1998) with customers of sports and leisure services in the UK has consistently shown that customers rate their expectations higher than their perceptions of the quality of service they receive.

Walsh (1991) identified that as people become used to a service they begin to expect more. In our research, most spectators seemed to be used to the service quality offered as he/she had attended games in the particular grounds for about five years. No excuse, of course, exists to the attempt that the teams' and installations' managers should make in order to improve the physical context in which the service is provided (i.e. the basketball installation).

Regarding research question 2, the research is moreover significant because an instrument was standardized ("SERVEXPERC") for measuring the spectators' expectations and perceptions of quality of services provided at basketball grounds based on a sample of the Greek population. The model consists of nine

subscales, four of which relate to different service evaluations and the five of them reflect the fans' expectations over the service quality that should be offered in basketball installations. The scale developed in the present study can be a useful tool for sport managers of professional teams or basketball grounds in their efforts to evaluate the degree to which they meet their consumers' expectations and wishes. Identifying spectators' expectations and perceptions may enable management to: a) better serve the consumer, b) assess organizational strengths and weaknesses and c) identify opportunities to increase consumer satisfaction.

The findings of the factorial analysis substantiate the argument repeatedly mentioned in the literature that service quality is a multi-dimensional construct. In the case of spectator sports, Wakefield and his colleagues (Wakefield et al., 1996; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995) have already talked about the "sportscape", as they labeled the context which consists of several dimensions including stadium access and parking, facility aesthetics and cleanliness, scoreboard quality, seating comfort, layout accessibility, space allocation, crowding, signage, food service and fan control. The "place" variable of the marketing mix seem to attract the attention of many researchers (Alexandris, Kouthouris & Meligdis, 2006) who have talked about the relation of "place attachment" to a variety of behavioural outcomes, such as satisfaction levels (Hwan, Lee & Chen, 2005), recreation specialization and leisure participation patterns (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck & Watson, 1992), perceived crowding (Kyle, Graefe, Manning & Bacon, 2004c), and behavioural loyalty (Kyle, Graefe, Manning & Bacon, 2003b).

The multi-dimensionality of service quality in professional sport has also been a finding in the research by Theodorakis and Kambitsis (1998), who proposed six dimensions of quality when referring to spectator sport: satisfaction, access, responsiveness, reliability, security and tangibles. McDonald et al. (1995) have also examined service quality in professional sport teams (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) which

were also based on the idea that quality judgments are based on the gap between customer expectations and customer perceptions. Kelley and Turley (1999) investigated the importance of service attributes used by sport fans when evaluating the quality of service and level of satisfaction they experience at sporting events. The findings from this study suggest that there exist nine quality factors in the sporting event context and some of them are unique to this particular service encounter: employees, price, facility access, concessions, fan comfort, game experience, show time, convenience and smoking.

In professional and spectator sport, the actual playing of the game – such as players' performance, star participation, recruitment and so on – cannot be controlled by the sport marketers who may only focus on the extensions of the playing product in order to satisfy the needs and wants of their consumers (Shilbury, Quick & Westerbeek, 1998; Theodorakis et al., 2001). According to Gerson (1999), customer satisfaction surveys may help facility managers to close the gap between customers' perceptions and the perceptions of the service provider. He also suggested that customer satisfaction surveys should be conducted at least quarterly so that an organization may indicate its improvement over time. Setting such a monitoring system and collecting information regularly will be a good marketing exercise for Greek sport clubs and/or installations where marketing literature is still limited (Alexandris and Palialia, 1999).

By using the "SERVEXPERC" scale regularly, marketing managers of professional teams and installations will have the chance to record the probable reduction of the gap between customers' perceptions and expectations of the service quality provided. As McDonald and Milne (1998) have stated, the unpredictable nature of outcomes in professional sports, together with the inability of the sport marketer to control the core product, provide a great challenge and opportunity to influence customer satisfaction by offering high quality services. By analyzing the information gathered by the "SERVEXPERC" scale, sport marketers can make corrections

and improvements in specific service elements or can invest in those aspects that seem to be important to the fans.

In conclusion, the above findings together with the future use of the "SERVEXPERC" instrument are likely to assist the management of professional basketball installations to: a) obtain systematically information for identifying their spectators' desires, b) take regular action to improve service delivery and fulfil spectators' wishes and c) establish standards of performance to address the identified needs of customers.

Further research is, of course, required to examine customers' perceptions and expectations in basketball grounds all over Greece and in other sport installations as well as in different cultural contexts. Moreover, the research's orientation should move from primarily focusing on quality improvement guided by the development of assessment tools to an understanding of how customers' expectations are created and how they can be influenced.

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