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Customer perceptions of quality – a study in the SPA-industry

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to explore dimensions of customer perceptions of factors important for a quality experience in the SPA-industry and to assess service quality implications for these dimensions.

Design/Methodology/Approach

The empirical study involved seven Swedish SPA-hotels. The first part was qualitative, consisting of seven focus group interviews with hotel guests. In addition, service providers' perceptions of customer quality were collected through seven Quality Cafés. The qualitative parts were analysed with the constant comparative technique from the grounded theory approach. Based on the findings from the interviews, a questionnaire was delivered to 400 randomly accessed women. The responses were analysed with exploratory factor analysis and cluster analysis.

Findings

The focus-group interviews showed that the customers' perception of quality could be expressed in the dimensions: *physical effects*, *mental effects*, *pleasure* and *flexibility*. The dimensions for customer quality seen from the staff's perspective were *treatments*, *climate* and the *SPA-facility itself*. The exploratory factor analysis defined the underlying factors *enjoyment*, *treatments*, *practicality*, *fitness*, *cost* and *calm*. The cluster analysis resulted in four

groups of customer profiles: the *more of everything group*, the *enjoyers*, the *savers* and the *fitness-freaks*.

Research limitations/implications

A limitation is that the study has only been carried out in one country. The main implication for research is a better understanding of quality dimensions and perceptions of service quality in the SPA-industry.

Practical implications

The study provides a comprehensive insight into the dimensions of quality for SPA-visitors. Moreover, four distinct groups of customers have been identified. This knowledge should be useful for SPA-managers.

Originality/Value of paper

Only limited amounts of research have previously been carried out in the SPA-industry. The paper provides a framework depicting perceptions of quality dimensions in SPA-hotels.

Key words

Quality dimensions, Service quality, Grounded theory, SPA-hotels, SPA-industry

Research paper

Introduction and purpose

A study in the Swedish SPA-industry has been carried out. This is an industry that is expanding in most parts of the world. Still, not much research has been carried out in this sector even though it is an important industry for the well-being of many people. SPA-hotels

aim to promote overall well-being through different kinds of health or wellness related professional services. Thus, they may contribute to the general health status in society. SPA-hotels constitute rather interesting combinations of health and hospitality organisations. The SPA-segment is a highly significant part of the hospitality industry but in the hospitality literature its uniqueness is rather overlooked and there are very few benchmark studies (Koh et al., 2010). On the other hand, although quality in health organisations is widely studied, SPA hotels are largely absent also from the health literature, although SPA-visits have been shown to have the possibility to improve several health conditions such as fibromyalgia syndrome (Zijlstra et al., 2005), osteoarthritis (Guillemin et al., 2001) and chronic back pain (Constant et al., 1998). Thus, quality in this sector should merit further scientific study.

This study takes the customer perspective of SPA-hotels. It is part of a larger research project in the SPA-industry where different aspects of health, management and marketing in the SPA-industry are examined. This specific section concerns customers' perception of quality in order to understand the nature of quality in the SPA-hotels. This is a widespread approach especially in the service literature (Parasuraman et al., 1985). According to several authors in that field, what accounts is quality as it is perceived by the customers (Buzzel and Gale, 1987, Grönroos, 1990, Zeithaml et al., 1990).

The purpose of the study is to identify dimensions of customer perceptions of factors important for a quality experience in the SPA-industry and to assess service quality implications for these dimensions.

In traditional service quality, general quality dimensions for services have been defined (Parasuraman et al., 1985, Zeithaml et al., 1990, Grönroos, 1990). Notwithstanding their

usefulness for the conceptual understanding of service quality, they may be inadequate for an in-depth knowledge of quality in a specific context. Therefore, specific quality dimensions should be useful for the operations of practitioners as well as for scientific understanding of specific empirical areas.

Service marketing and service quality

Service marketing has expanded from a relatively new and pristine field of study in the 1980s to an active and very productive research field. Much focus has been on the differences between goods and services along with the implications for management (Gummesson, 1993, Lovelock, 2000, Shams and Hales, 1989). The reason may be that in the early stages the research field had to motivate its own existence (Brown et al., 1994). Nevertheless, some scholars have begun to question the relevance of services marketing as a field focusing solely on marketing of services. Rather, they claim that there is a certain service logic that can be applied to any offering. This new way of regarding service marketing, called the service dominant logic of marketing, SDL, is promoted as a completely new logic for all marketing activities (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The approach has gained considerable ground and is becoming more and more established.

The core of SDL is contained in its fundamental premises (Vargo and Lusch, 2006). The eight original premises are (ibid, p. 44):

1. The application of specialized skills and knowledge is the fundamental unit of exchange
2. Indirect exchange masks the fundamental unit of exchange
3. Goods are distribution mechanism for service provision
4. Knowledge is the fundamental source of competitive knowledge
5. All economies are service economies

6. The customer is always co-creator of value
7. The enterprise can only make value propositions
8. A service-centered view is customer oriented and relational

Already in the early stages of development of service marketing, quality issues were highlighted (Brown et al., 1994) and the service quality area has been one of the strongest currents within service marketing (Lagrosen and Svensson, 2006). Several early efforts concerned the dimensions or criteria for service quality (e.g. Grönroos, 1990, Gummesson, 1993, Zeithaml et al., 1990). Many studies have sought to conceptualise service quality theoretically while some studies have addressed the issue of the use of actual quality management practices and values (e.g. Lagrosen and Lagrosen, 2003).

Service quality dimensions

In the early service quality literature general quality dimensions or criteria for services were proposed. In their seminal article Parasuraman et al. (1985) identified ten determinants of service quality: *reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding/knowing the customer* and *tangibles*. They were later condensed into the five more overarching dimensions *reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy* and *tangibles* (Zeithaml et al., 1990).

According to Grönroos (1982, 1990) there are three factors that form the customer's quality experience. They are the dimensions of *technical quality*, which is outcome-related (i.e. *what* the customer receives); and *functional quality*, which is process-related (i.e. *how* the service is received). Moreover the feature of *image* is added as an additional factor. The company's image acts as a filter for how the service is experienced. Thus, although not a quality dimension in itself it is a factor that influences the other quality dimensions. In a related

fashion Rust and Oliver (1994) propose that there are three main components of service quality: *the service product, the service delivery and the service environment*.

As a synthesis of the major models in the field Brady and Cronin (2001) present a Hierarchical research model of service quality with three main dimensions which each as three subdimensions.. They argue that the main dimensions of service quality are: *interaction quality* with the subdimensions *attitude, behaviour and expertise*; (ii) *physical environment quality* with the subdimensions *ambient conditions, design and social factors*; and (iii) *outcome quality* with the subdimensions *waiting time, tangibles and valence*. These dimensions have been developed and tested through qualitative and quantitative research.

Svensson (2006) stresses the importance of interactivity of service quality in service encounters. He proposes a model with three generic subcomponents: *tangibles* (with the dimensions explicit and implicit), *intangibles* (with dimensions interactive and interfacial) and *outcome* (actual and interpreted).

The generic quality dimensions and components proposed above are highly relevant for the conceptual understanding of service quality. However, for a more in-depth understanding of a certain empirical research area as well as for managers practising service management, specific quality dimensions identified explicitly for the studied area are useful. Several research studies have identified specific quality dimensions in various contexts (see e.g. Katiliūtė and Kazlauskienė, 2010, Mahlke and Lindgaard, 2007, Lindqvist and Bjork, 2000, Lagrosen et al., 2004, Gounaris et al., 2003, Narayan et al., 2009)

Service quality in health care, fitness and the SPA-industry

Service quality and services management in the health-care sector have attracted significant research attention in recent years, but most studies have focused on traditional health care (e.g. Lagrosen, 2000, Wagar and Rondeau, 1998, Yasin and Alavi, 1999, Rashid and Jusoff, 2009, Naidu, 2009). Nevertheless, even in traditional health care, experiential factors such as sensory perceptions have been shown to be important (Ugolini et al., 2014). SPA-hotels could be viewed as a multiservice organisation. They have a wide range of offers: treatments, accommodations, conferences, relaxed environment, wholesome and delicious food etc. Bigné et al. (2003) highlight the importance for multiservice organisations to consider the customers perceived overall quality since it determines the overall satisfaction. Service quality and customer satisfaction has been shown to influence behavioural intentions in the SPA-industry (González et al., 2007).

Athanasopoulou et al. (2013) studied relationship quality dimensions in Greek fitness centres and found them to be *trust, commitment, satisfaction, cooperation, social bonds* and *adaption*. In a qualitative study of Swedish fitness centres, gyms and SPA-hotels, the quality dimensions were found to be *physical change, mental change* and *pleasure* (Lagrosen and Lagrosen, 2007). In a study of American SPA-goers, factor analysis revealed four main factors regarding the benefits sought: *social, relaxing, healthy* and *rejuvenating* (Koh et al., 2010). On this basis, cluster analysis identified three main cluster groups among the customers. The *escapists* are more interested in health and rejuvenation. The *neutralists* appreciate release of stress and relaxation but are not interested in socialising. Finally, the *hedonists* like amusement, sharing the SPA experience, being pampered and escape from daily life as well as valuing health and rejuvenation.

Exploratory factor analysis was also employed to identify the quality dimensions of food and beverage in Turkish SPA-hotels (Giritlioglu et al., 2014) The dimensions were found to be *assurance and employee knowledge; healthy and attractive food; empathy; tangibles; responsiveness of service delivery; and reliability*. The study furthermore indicated that the studied SPA hotels did not live up to their customers' expectations. In a study on SPA-goers in China, exploratory factor analysis yielded the dimensions *tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy*, which are basically the same dimensions as in the SERVQUAL-model (Lo et al., 2015) which were also used in a study of hot spring hotels in Taiwan (Hsieh et al., 2008).

A conceptual model of service quality dimensions

In figure I, the theoretical basis for the study is depicted

- Take in Figure I about here -

In line with the service dominant logic of marketing, we conclude that the *skills and knowledge* of the service provider is the basis for quality in services. They can be applied directly or mediated by *tangible* objects. This is then what enables quality. Nevertheless, again referring to the service dominant logic of marketing and to Svensson (2006), we observe that quality services are created by service providers and customers together, in an *interactive co-creation* process. This provides the basis for quality dimensions, which on the more abstract level are *general quality dimensions*, such as proposed in the general service literature. These dimensions are either *process dimensions*, concerning the direct experience

during the consumption of the service, or *outcome dimensions*, regarding the lasting effects that customer experience after the actual consumption has finished. In the actual empirical area they translate into specific quality dimensions, which describe the particular features needed to create quality for the organisations that are studied. This model will be revisited when discussing the results of the study.

Methodology

This study adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to provide valid and representative assessments. First, focus group interviews with guests at each of the seven hotels were conducted in order to explore the possible quality factors for a SPA visit.

The hotels and the focus groups are presented in Table I. The settings for the interviews were rooms in the hotels with relaxed furnishings. Refreshments were served in order to make the participants feel comfortable. The focus group interviews were informal to their nature. They were carried out by two researchers, one leading the interview and the other recording and taking notes. No fixed questionnaire was used. Instead, the researchers introduced the subject and asked the respondents to freely discuss what is important for them having a quality experience of a SPA-hotel. The researchers continuously probed further into points that the respondents took up. In the terminology of Seymour (1988) the interviews were non-directive and of the practical 'do-a-job' type. The data from the focus groups were analysed with the constant comparative technique from the grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992, Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

- Take in Table I about here -

Based on the findings from the interviews, a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was delivered by post to 400 randomly accessed (from the Swedish SPAR-register) women in Gothenburg, which is the largest city in Western Sweden. A total of 180 questionnaires were returned which corresponds to a response rate of 46%, which must be considered very high for a mail survey. Having a high response rate was considered to be important. For this reason, a SPA- weekend was raffled off to the one of the respondents. The disadvantage with this way of acting may be that there may be a bias in the response rate with those who answered being more interested in SPA-services than those who did not answer. However, as the purpose of the study is to explore quality dimensions, the views of those who are interested may be more useful, and overall the value of having a high response rate was considered to be more important than this potential bias.

The questionnaire contained 20 statements (see appendix I). The scale went from 1 to 5 and concerned how important each aspect was for a SPA hotel visit with the endpoints *not at all important* to *crucial*. In addition, a background question was included regarding their frequency of SPA visits, with at least one overnight stay, with the options 1) never, 2) rarely, 3) regularly, on average at least once a year, 4) regularly, on average at least once a month.

In addition, seven quality cafés (Lagrosen and Lagrosen, 2013) were carried out at all the seven SPA-hotels and included employees from different departments of the hotels. The quality café method is based on the world café method (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) which is a method developed for harnessing the qualitative value of informal conversations. In a number of sessions, the participants discuss in small groups whose composition is changed between every round. Afterwards the results are synthesised in order to capture the views and ideas of the entire group of participants. The method has been used for research in many different settings (see e.g. Peddler and Abbot, 2008, Tan and Brown, 2005). In the quality café, the method affinity diagrams (Bergman and Klefsjö, 1994), which is common in quality management, has been added in order to provide a more structured and complete synthesis of the results from the conversations in the world cafés. The quality cafés in this study had 12 to 16 participants. They continued for about three hours each. The question discussed in the study was formulated: What do you think is necessary for customers in order for them to experience quality at your SPA hotel?

Findings and Analysis

The results from the focus-group interviews were that the customers' perception of quality during a SPA visit can be expressed in four dimensions: physical effects, mental effects, pleasure and flexibility. Many parts of the SPA-hotels offerings are included in several or all the dimensions (e.g. the treatments). The dimensions concern the different ways that these offerings contribute to the perceived quality of the customers. The meanings of the dimensions are further elaborated below.

- *Physical effects.* The customers expect to feel better physically after their visit at the SPA hotel. It include physically effective treatments of different kinds, possibilities for training, healthy food and rest.
- *Mental effects.* The customers also want to feel better mentally after their visit. Much of this concern stress. They express desires during their visit to calm down, moderate stress and feel more relaxed.
- *Pleasure.* An important part of the SPA-visit concerns pleasure. Aspects regarding this include a nice environment, beautiful facilities, enjoyable treatments and bath, delicious food, and friendly staff and beautiful environment with a feeling of luxury.
- *Smoothness.* In order to sustain high quality, smoothness and flexibility are necessary. The customers want to have a lot of freedom to choose treatments in place without pre-booking, a hotel not too crowded with people, absence of hassle, limited travelling time and reasonable price.

The two first dimensions concern the lasting results that customers desire to have after they have returned from their visit at the SPA. They describe the continuous effects of the SPA-visit that the customers expect to perceive after the visit. Thus they are dimensions of a more technical quality nature according to Grönroos (1982). They regard the outcome of the visit that the customers expect to perceive after utilising the SPA-hotel's services. The two latter dimensions are process dimensions; they concern the customers' experiences during the utilisation of the services of the SPA-hotels. Thus, they can be viewed as belonging to the

functional quality dimension according to the terminology of Grönroos (1982). They describe the kind of experience the customer seek for and expect during the visit.

These four dimensions were elaborated into 20 statements contained in the questionnaire (see appendix I. Items 1-5 and 9 come from physical effects, 6-8 from mental effects, 9-15 from pleasure and 16-20 from smoothness).

The questionnaire showed the importance of each item and their means are compared in Table II.

- Take in Table II about here -

The items regarding the gym and training classes as well as availability to health specialists scored lower than the other items. This indicates that on average the respondents attached less importance to these factors than to the others. However, the standard deviation is quite high which indicates that there is a substantial variation in the opinions of the different respondents and the actual frequencies confirm that for some respondents these factors are crucial.

The mean scores on the items calm atmosphere, possibility to relax in pools etc., delicious food, friendly staff, availability to SPA treatments and well-cleaned premises are very high

which indicates that they are generally highly important for almost all the respondents. These factors are probably seen as a basic need for a SPA-visitor and the central part of the quality experience. Other factors perceived almost as important were healthy food, beautiful facilities and environment, feeling of luxury, flexibility and not too crowded with people. In addition, price and distance are regarded as fairly important. They may be necessary for making the SPA-visit feasible.

Six of the 20 variables in Table II are negatively skewed and fall outside the range of -1 indicating a substantially skewed distribution (Hair et al., 1998). However, since those six variables had substantially larger mean values than the rest of the variables, a ceiling effect has probably occurred which explains the negative skewness. Ceiling effect occurs when a measure possesses a distinct upper limit for potential responses and a large concentration of participants score at or near this limit (Hessling et al., 2004). The rest of the variables fall in the limits of -1 and +1 and all variables had approximately the shape of a normal curve.

The respondents were also asked how often they have visited a SPA hotel and stayed overnight. The answers to this question are presented in Table III. Please note that the potential bias towards respondents interested in SPA-services discussed above may have an impact on this question. Nevertheless, the purpose was not to map the frequency of SPA-visits in the general population but only to provide some background information of the activity level of the respondents.

-Take in Table III about here -

In order to examine the underlying structure of the findings, explanatory factor analysis was carried out. The results are presented in Table IV.

- Take in Table IV about here -

The latent root criterion which implies that factors should have an eigenvalue higher than 1 to be considered significant (Hair et al., 1998), was used. Varimax rotation was performed in order to simplify the columns. Generally, loadings should be at least .5 in order to be considered significant (Hair et al., 1998). One item, regarding the possibility of choosing treatments while at the SPA, did not load sufficiently on any of the factors. Consequently, it was deleted. The factors were labelled according to the underlying dimensions.

Since we wanted to compare the factors we created summated scales on the basis of the means of the included variables. The means and standard deviations of the summated factors are presented in Table V.

- Take in Table V about here -

In the next step, we wanted to analyse the structure of the consumers' preferences. For this reason, we carried out cluster analysis. K-means clustering was chosen and several runs with different numbers of clusters showed that a four cluster solution gave the most meaningful description of the population. It is presented in Table VI.

- Take in Table VI about here -

Analysing the features of the different clusters, we labelled and described them as following.

1. *The more of everything group (19%)*. This group considers everything to be very important while still emphasising low cost. This is not really feasible to combine since many of the items (e.g. gym, classes, treatments, health specialists, pools) are costly. Consequently, having high levels on the other factors is probably impossible for a SPA-hotel while still offering low prices. This is also the smallest group and in addition it is this group that less often visits a SPA. Thus, this group is probably the least interesting of the four.
2. *The enjoyers (31%)*. The overarching aim for this group is to really enjoy their stay at the SPA. They value the *enjoyment* factor and the *calm* factor highly and for them, *practicality* is also vital. Enjoying *treatments* is important for them while they are not

interested in *fitness* activities. They are not very price-sensitive and this is the group that most often actually visits a SPA.

3. *The savers (25%)*. This group is very price sensitive and eager to find low prices. They are generally interested in the other factors except that they are less interested in treatments, possibly due to the fact that those often are fairly expensive.
4. *The fitness-freaks (25%)*. This group values physical exercise and healthy food highly. They are interested in treatments, calm and enjoyment, although less than the other groups. On the other hand, this is the least price sensitive group. They are prepared to pay and travel to have the health treat that they strive for.

The definition of clusters should be useful for positioning purposes in the SPA-industry.

The seven Quality Cafés discussed the issue regarding what do you (the employees themselves) think is necessary for customers in order to experience quality at your SPA hotel?

The findings can be expressed in three dimensions: treatment, climate and the SPA facility itself.

- *Treatments* included that the customers get a natural, cordial and helpful treatment. They should feel uniquely treated and their expectations should preferably be exceeded.
- *Climate* includes harmony and good cooperation among the personal. The personal need therefore be healthy and not stressed in order to give the customer authentic smiles. The customers must feel safe with the staff and the environment.

- *The SPA facility itself* includes high quality of treatments, food, products and activities. Well-cleaned facilities, good organisation and impressions of wholeness are important.

Comparing these service providers' perceptions of customer quality with the customers' own perceptions, we can conclude that the perceptions differ somewhat. The employees regard the functional quality as most important while the customers also include the long-term effect of a SPA-visit, the mental and physical effects. On the other hand, the staff take a more internal view in that they realise the importance of the climate for them to be able to provide good service to the customers.

Discussion and conclusion

The descriptive data identified which items are important in the quality expectations during a SPA visit. A *calm atmosphere* had the highest mean score of the items. This is in accordance with the findings that relaxation and relief are considered to be most important factors for a SPA-visit (Mak et al., 2009), although they studied a specific type of SPA-visitors. The factors *friendly staff* and *well-cleaned facilities* in the SPA-hotels were also considered crucial. This is in line with the findings of Giritlioglu et al. (2014) that well-qualified and kind employees play a major role regarding especially food service quality in SPA-hotels. This finding also resembles the findings of Chen et al. (2013) in which cleanliness and safety were found to be crucial service factors especially for older customers. The respondents also rated delicious food and possibilities for own relaxation as very important. On the other hand, some factors are not considered important for many of the customers but very important for some. Examples are most of the 'health factors' such as gym, healthy food and variety of training

classes. Further, some factors demand a balanced consideration such as luxury and freedom to choose treatments during the visit contra price since luxury and flexibility is costly.

The quality dimensions identified in this study are generally fairly different from the general quality dimensions proposed in service marketing literature (Brady and Cronin Jr, 2001, Rust and Oliver, 1994, Grönroos, 1990, Parasuraman et al., 1985, Zeithaml et al., 1990). They resemble more the specific quality dimensions identified in previous research on the SPA-industry (Koh et al., 2010, Lagrosen and Lagrosen, 2007). This might not be as contradictory as it may seem. The general quality dimensions are on a higher level of abstraction while the specific quality dimensions specify their concrete meaning in the specific empirical context. In this way, they fill the same functions as substantial theory and formal theory in the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thus, general and specific quality dimensions should probably be seen as complementary rather than contradictory and useful for different purposes.

The differences in the perceptions of quality dimensions that were found between the staff and the customers are interesting. As Svensson (2006) emphasises, service quality is interactive to its nature. Moreover, research has shown that employees' feelings impact their performance regarding service quality (Slåtten, 2010). Thus, the perceptions of employees as well as customers should be taken into account and differences should be addressed.

There is some resemblance between the customer profiles identified in this study and those that were found by Koh et al. (2010). The *escapists* and the *fitness-freaks* basically share the same characteristics as well as the *hedonists* and the *enjoyers*. For the other groups the characteristics differ. However, in general it seems that SPA-hotels have one typical group of

customers who are more interested in the health benefits and another who rather focus on the pleasure and enjoyment of the SPA-experience in itself.

Referring back to the service dominant logic of marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), we can note that the customer in this case definitely is the co-creator of value, or even the creator. Most of the items that were included among the quality expectations require more or less customer participation. In some instances the value of the item is entirely dependent on the customer's own effort. For instance, a gym is of no value to the customer if she/he does not train in it. Others, such as beautiful environment and facilities require less active participation from customers but they are still dependent on the customers' perceptions. This makes customer orientation and handling of relationships ever more important.

A framework of quality dimensions in SPA-hotels

Figure II contains a framework in which the findings of the study are summarised. Based on the general model presented in Figure I, this framework now includes the specific quality features of SPA-hotels that were found in this study.

- Take in Figure II about here -

Four specific quality dimensions were identified. Two of them, *smoothness* and *pleasure*, are process dimensions. They concern the experience during the consumption of the service. The two others, *physical effects* and *mental effects*, relate to the effects that customers desire to experience after the visit have finishes. Thus, they are outcome dimensions.

Moreover, the underlying factors that make up the dimensions, as identified in the factor analysis, are presented at the right side of the figure. Consequently, this framework summarises the findings and should provide an overview of the customers' perceptions of important features of a SPA-visit. Together with the descriptions of the dimensions and factors presented above this should be of value for managers of SPA-hotels as well as for the conceptual understanding of service quality in this sector.

Managerial implications

Awareness of service quality dimensions is valuable for management in their efforts to satisfy their customers. Consequently, both the more overarching quality dimensions found in the qualitative study and the more detailed and elaborated version provided by the quantitative study should be useful. In this regard, the finding regarding the discrepancy between the customers' view of quality and the understanding that the employees had regarding quality for customers, should be noted and addressed by managers. Balancing the number of guests is another challenge for SPA-managers. They need to weigh the direct economic benefit from running a full hotel against the negative effects of crowding on the customers' perception of quality under such circumstances.

The different customer profiles that were defined by the cluster analysis should be valuable for management in their efforts to position their company in the market. Currently, the positioning of the different SPA-hotels in Sweden is quite unclear and most companies offer the same services and try to entice the same market. Based on the cluster analysis, three distinct positioning strategies can be assumed. One possibility is to focus on the *fitness freaks*,

which means having ample resources for training and offering a wide range of healthy food alternatives. Since this group is the least price sensitive, a premium price could be set. Another alternative would be to focus on the *enjoyers*, offering a nice, calm experience with exquisite food in a beautiful environment. Finally, a third option is to take a low cost approach and focus on the *savers*. This would mean offering as good an experience as possible while ensuring that prices are very affordable. A more conscious positioning strategy along one of these options should benefit the individual SPA-hotels while also being beneficial for the SPA-industry as a whole increasing the possibilities of satisfying the varying demands of the different customer groups.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

The study has only been carried out in one country, which is a limitation. In addition, we did not try to measure the gap between the customers' expectations and experiences. Instead, the focus has been solely on quality dimensions.

On the other hand, the fact that both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used has increased the depth of the study. Since the sample is completely randomly assigned, the results should be possible to generalise to the whole population of women in Western Sweden, which adds to the usefulness of the results.

Further studies could add customer expectations of quality in SPA hotels since gaps between expectation and perceptions also could help detecting weak points of SPA hotels. This could help them to build in quality and design for meeting or even exceeding customers' expectations. Information technology has been shown to impact quality management practices (Mane et al., 2011). Consequently, the impact on dimensions of quality in the SPA-industry

would be interesting to delve deeper into, particularly regarding social media, which is used more and more. Moreover, carrying out similar studies in other countries should be of value. Previous research have indicated that quality is seen and managed in different ways in different cultures (Lagrosen, 2002, Mathews et al., 2001). Thus, there is reason to believe that there are differences in the dimensions of quality for SPA visitors from different cultural backgrounds.

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SPA-hotel	Location	Specific focus	Number of participants in focus group interview	Length of interview
Bokenäs Hav SPA Möten	Seaside in a serene rural part of the west coast	Natural environment experiences	7	1 h 30 min
Hotel Skansen	Seaside in the tennis town Båstad	Tennis	7	1 h 40 min
Hotel Tylösand	Seaside on the west coast	Art and music	8	1 h 40 min
Sankt Jörgen Park Resort	In a park in the city of Gothenburg	Golf. Fitness and training	7	1 h 35 min
Stenungsbaden Yacht Club	Seaside on the northern west coast	American east coast image. Yachting	8	1 h 55 min
Varbergs Kurort	Seaside on the west coast	Traditional Swedish treatments such as seaweed baths. Rehabilitation	7	1 h 35 min
Ystads Saltsjöbad	Seaside on the south coast	General relaxation and well being	6	1 h 45 min

Table I. Participating SPA-hotels in the study

ITEM		MEAN	STD	Skewness
1	Well-equipped gym	2,56	1,15	0,190
2	Training classes	2,61	1,13	0,178
3	SPA-treatments	4,24	0,77	-1,045
4	Beauty-treatments	3,53	1,14	-0,464
5	Health specialists	2,66	1,23	0,394
6	Calm atmosphere	4,77	0,51	-2,386
7	Yoga, meditation mm	3,50	1,21	-0,592
8	Relaxation	4,55	0,70	-1,730
9	Healthy food	3,94	1,01	0,942
10	Delicious food	4,65	0,52	-1,102
11	Beautiful facilities	4,28	0,66	0,613
12	Beautiful environment	4,13	0,78	0,949
13	Friendly staff	4,62	0,48	-0,873
14	Sense of luxury	4,03	0,90	-0,798
15	Not too crowded	4,03	0,84	0,620
16	Well-cleaned	4,70	0,56	-2,098
17	Choose treatments during visit	4,14	0,70	-0,539
18	Absence of hassle	4,44	0,78	-1,340
19	Reasonable travel distance	3,22	1,10	-0,211
20	Reasonable price	3,96	0,82	-0,090

Table II. Factors important for a quality experience in the wellness industry

Frequency of overnight stays	Number of respondents	Percentage of the respondents
Never	28	15.6
Rarely	74	41.1
Regularly, at least once a year	70	38.9
Regularly, at least once a month	1	.6
Partial non-response	7	3.9

Table III. The respondents' frequency of overnight stays at SPA Hotels

Factor	Enjoyment	Treatments	Practicality	Fitness	Cost	Calm
Well-equipped gym				0.757		
Fitness classes				0.791		
SPA treatments		0.709				
Beauty treatments		0.720				
Health specialists		0.710				
Calm atmosphere						0.632
Yoga, meditation etc.		0.510				
Relaxation						0.814
Healthy food				0.692		
Delicious food	0.622					
Beautiful facilities	0.616					
Beautiful environment	0.638					
Friendly staff	0.794					
Sense of luxury			0.800			
Not too crowded			0.605			
Well cleaned			0.609			
No hassle			0.516			
Reasonable travel distance					0.761	
Reasonable price					0.848	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Table IV The results from the factor analysis (only loadings above .5)

Factor	Mean	Standard deviation
Enjoyment	4.43	0.46
Treatments	3.48	0.78
Practicality	4.30	0.56
Fitness	3.04	0.87
Cost	3.58	0.83
Calm	4.66	0.51

Table V The mean values and standard deviation for the factors

Cluster	1	2	3	4
Enjoyment	4.74	4.52	4.39	4.12
Treatments	4.36	3.63	2.89	3.19
Practicality	4.69	4.45	4.17	3.40
Fitness	3.88	2.19	3.07	3.40
Cost	4.30	3.35	4.09	2.81
Calm	4.93	4.83	4.66	4.24

Table VI The cluster analysis

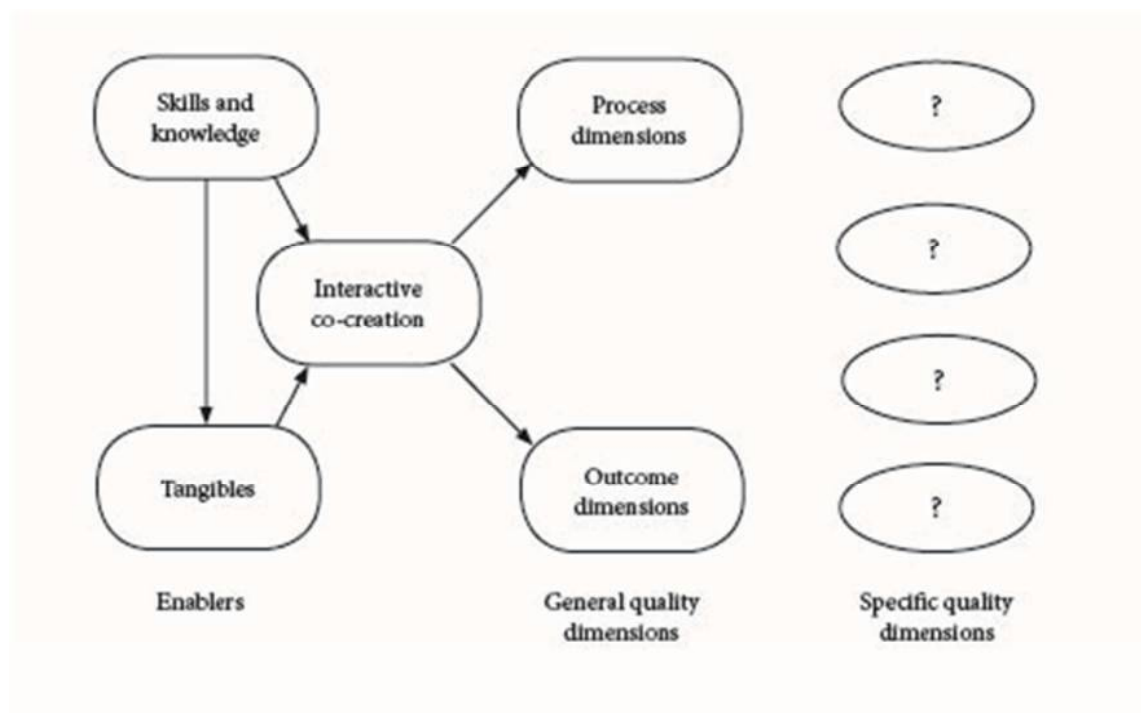


Figure I. A conceptual model of service quality dimensions

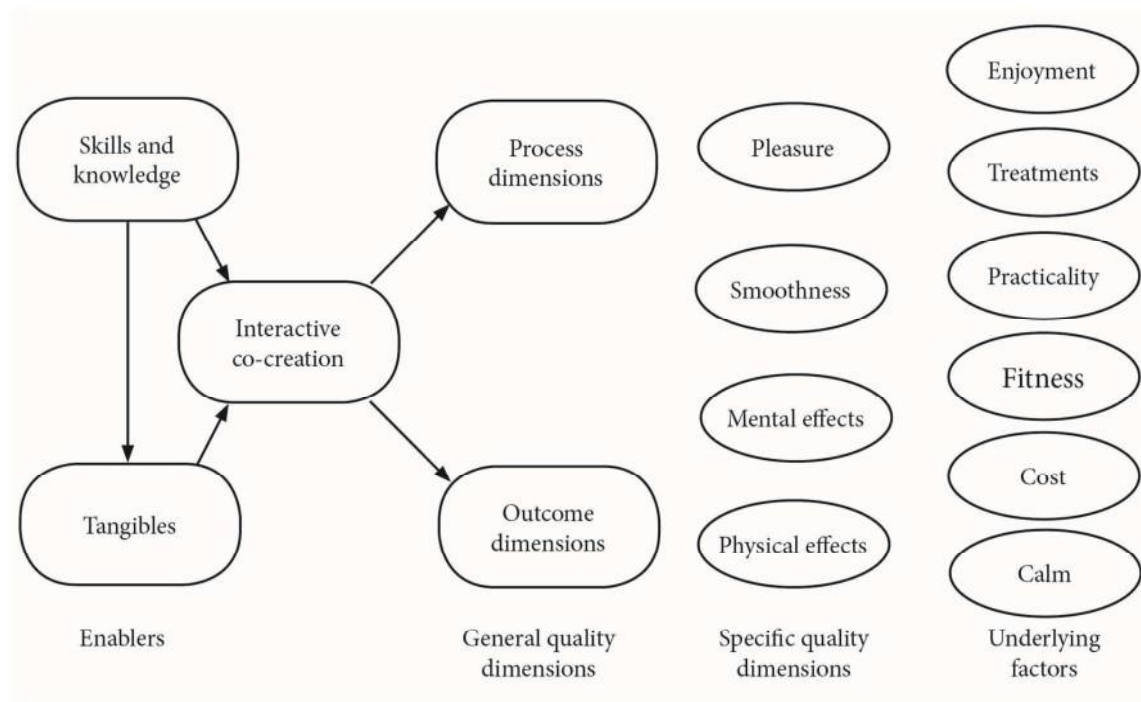


Figure II. A framework of quality dimensions in SPA-hotels

Appendix I. The questionnaire (translated from Swedish)

First we would like to know what is important for you if you would go to a SPA hotel and stay overnight. Even if you have never done it, we would be grateful if you would fill in based on what you would judge to be important if you were to do such a visit.

How important are the following factors for you if you were to go to a SPA hotel? (Please answer by ticking the figures 1 to 5 where 1 means that the factor is not important at all, 2 that it has some importance, 3 that it is important, 4 that it is very important and 5 that it is completely crucial for your choice.)

1. That there is a well-equipped gym
2. That there is a large and varied range of fitness classes
3. That there is a large and varied range of SPA treatments (massages etc.)
4. That there is a large and varied range of beauty treatments (manicure, facial treatments, make-up etc.)
5. That health specialists of different kinds are available (such as naprapath, behaviourist, physiotherapist, dietician etc.)
6. That the atmosphere is calm and relaxing
7. That yoga, meditation, qi gong and stress releasing relaxing activities are available
8. That there are ample possibilities for relaxation in pools of different kinds
9. That the food is healthy
10. That the food is delicious
11. That the facilities are beautiful
12. That the environment is beautiful
13. That the staff are friendly
14. That there is a sense of luxury
15. That it is not too crowded
16. That it is well-cleaned
17. That it is possible to book treatments in place (without pre-booking)
18. That there is no hassle during the stay
19. That the time of travel to the hotel is not too long
20. That the price is not too high

Finally, we also wonder how often you have visited and stayed overnight at a SPA hotel:

Never
Rarely
Regularly, at least once a year
Regularly, at least once a month

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