

The relationship between service quality and place attachment in women's fitness clubs in Kerman

Abstract

Purpose

This research aimed to investigate the relationship between service quality and place attachment in women's fitness clubs in Kerman. Since sports venues require customer retention to sustain themselves, understanding how service quality impacts place attachment can help improve customer loyalty and satisfaction.

Methods

The study was a descriptive correlational research. The statistical population included all female athletes (customers) of women's fitness clubs in Kerman from April to the end of May 2024. A total of 384 participants were selected using convenience sampling based on the Morgan Table. Data were collected using Safarnia's place attachment questionnaire (2018), based on Low and Altman's theory (1992), and the SERVQUAL model by Theodorakis et al. (2013) to assess sports service quality. Data analysis was conducted using Pearson's correlation and multivariate regression tests in SPSS version 24.

Results

The results indicated a direct and significant relationship between service quality and place attachment in women's fitness clubs. Additionally, all components of service quality, including access and security, responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility, were positively correlated with place attachment.

Conclusion

Among the components of service quality, tangibility and responsiveness were the strongest predictors of place attachment. These findings highlight the importance of enhancing the physical environment and customer service responsiveness to strengthen customers' emotional and functional connection to fitness clubs.

Keywords: Service quality, Place attachment, Sports club, Fitness, Women

Introduction

In recent years, humanistic geography has tried to move from trying to know the places to knowing the social forces that shape the places or knowing the places that shape the human culture (Behrouzi, 2022). The place is a part of the geographical space that is in the form of a device and a limited set in which social relations, identity, and life arise (Shakoui, 2022). Martin Heidigger (1958) states that "place puts man in a path that reveals to him the relationship and external connections of his existence, and at the same time, the depth of his freedom and existential authenticity." This is a deep and complicated dimension of the experience of man in the world (Noghsan Mohammadi et al., 2020). Place attachment is a bond between people and their meaningful environments. It has gained a lot of scientific attention in recent years. Place attachment occurs when people establish an emotional bond with a specific place and prefer to remain in that place because they feel safe and comfortable there (Hernandez, 2017). It is a concept related to the connection and environmental meaning of that place. It means perceptual connection,

psychological aspects, and environmental experiences within that place or district. Place attachment is a form of connection between people and the place where they live (Hidulgo, 2021), a reflection of performance, is an emotional connection to how people understand their identity (Shamsadding, 2018). Place attachment is an aspect of the overall sense of place and the positive emotional attachment that develops between people and the place (Stedman, 2003). Place attachment arises from the activities and interactions between man-place and man-man in a particular place (Relph, 1976), and deals with a specific place with the interaction of emotions, knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors. In addition, there is a direct relationship between people's attachment to a place and their attention to it, so with the increase of people's attachment to a place, people's attention and care also increase (Haidari, 2019). Place attachment refers to the emotional impact of a place that people are attracted to emotionally and culturally. The sensory, emotional, and inner impact of a place on a person is the center of thinking about place attachment. Because people can be attracted to an object, a house, a building, a neighborhood, or a natural setting, place attachment is a symbolic connection with a specific place or land given by people which is formed based on the way a group or individual perceives a place and how they connect with it. Place attachment is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon with different aspects and a person-place bond that is excited by the confrontation of emotions, cognitions, beliefs, and behaviors that are related to the place (Rollero, 2020). Sense of place has been defined as a complex of physical elements, activity, and meaning, which are the result of people's experiences of the place (Shamsodin, 2018). One of the factors affecting place attachment is the quality of services provided in that place (Zohrevand, 2020). Parasuraman (1988) considers the concept of service quality as the quality that satisfies customers' expectations. The satisfaction of people (customers) in companies and organizations is considered one of the main indicators of measuring efficiency, growth, and development. Components such as accuracy and precision in doing the client's affairs, speed, quality of doing things, manner of behavior and dealing with service recipients, service costs, equipment and cleanliness of the environment, transparency, and appropriate information-giving are the factors that help to gain customer satisfaction, and finally, increasing public trust is one of the biggest supports for companies and brands (Khayyatzadeh, 2016). Deming, quality optimization by creating creativity and increasing efficiency and quality control of the production process and operations, not products and services, reduces the cost of production and increases the amount of production or operations. The problems in service quality mostly arise in companies and brands that do not focus on recognizing and meeting the needs and expectations of customers (Ghobadian, 2018). The lack of direct communication with the customer makes it impossible for decision-makers and planners to properly prioritize items, which causes service performance to fail to meet customers' expectations, resulting in a quality gap. The service quality gap means the difference between the customers' expectation of the desired situation and their perception of the present situation. The basic step to compensate for this gap is understanding the perceptions and expectations of the customers and the organization regarding the quality of service and determining the size of the gap (Parasuraman et al., 2003). Understanding and measuring the perceptions and expectations of customers and managers of the organization is a necessary component that can be considered to improve the quality of services provided by service providers. Most of the owners of goods and merchants, are customers and the main actors, therefore, determining the level of satisfaction with the quality of services can provide valuable information for planners to improve the quality of services needed (Bradli, 2016).

Alexandris et al. (2023) showed that the quality of service in physical fitness centers is an effective factor in explaining the level of customers' satisfaction with hardware facilities, the image of the club, attachment to the sports venue, and club fees.

McCormack et al. (2023) reported that the physical environment can potentially affect people's physical activity and increase people's tendency to physical activity. Environmental aesthetics is one of the characteristics of the environment that can affect people's physical activity. They pointed out that aesthetics has a positive relationship with different levels of physical activity.

Lin (2022) in his thesis entitled "The Study of Exercise participation Motivation, and the Relationship among Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, and Customer Loyalty at Selected Fitness Health Club in Taipei City, Taiwan " concluded that the best and most important service quality factor for the satisfaction of customers is facilities, which will seek customers loyalty in pursuit of satisfaction.

Drodian et al. (2023) investigated the effect of social capital on place attachment according to the mediating role of commitment to sports facilities in customers of water sports venues. They reported that social capital has a significant effect on commitment to sports venues and place attachment, respectively. Commitment to sports venues also affects place attachment.

Also, commitment to sports venues plays a mediating role between social capital variables and place attachment. It was also found that the components of commitment to sports venues, except the normative component, can explain place attachment. In addition, the continuous and emotional components had the most and the least effects, respectively.

Azizi et al. (2023) investigated the relationship between the quality of sports services provided by Mashhad Municipality and the level of satisfaction of female citizens based on the SERVQUAL model. The results showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between the quality of sports services and its various dimensions with female customers' satisfaction. Also, the results of the regression analysis showed that the components of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, and service guarantee are qualified to predict satisfaction.

Fasnaqari et al. (2022) investigated the effect of service quality dimensions on the satisfaction of female customers of sports clubs and reported a positive and significant relationship between service quality and female customers' satisfaction.

Also, among the five dimensions of service quality based on the SERVQUAL model, tangibility and empathy were stronger predictors of customer satisfaction. The results of factor analysis showed that reliability with a factor load (0.95) was the most important and credibility with a factor load (0.88) was the least important in the service quality priorities of sports clubs.

Motaghed et al. (2021) investigated the effect of environmental qualities on the degree of place attachment in urban spaces. The indicators and criteria measured in connection with the degree of place attachment include social-semantic, physical-functional, contextual-structural, and perceptual-emotional components. The central square of Hamedan city has been selected as a case study due to its spatial-historical characteristics. The research results show that physical, social, and semantic factors have a direct relationship with place attachment in urban areas. The feeling of optimal enclosure in the square space, the role of the square as a perceptual sign in the city, the position and placement of the square in connection with the surrounding areas, and the variety of existing uses are the most important effective factors in attachment to urban squares.

Today, health and fitness clubs have become the most popular sports venues in the world. In all countries of the world, as well as in our country, the establishment and activities of fitness and health clubs are increasing, and the role of these centers in increasing the level of health, mental vitality, and fitness is not hidden from anyone. It is noteworthy that the excessive expansion of the

number of these centers has led to the formation of a highly competitive environment among private clubs to attract customers. Considering this issue, sports clubs should use new and modern marketing techniques and appropriate service quality to create a good feeling in their customers and provide a safe and attractive place for them so that the customers are interested in doing exercises in that place. Attracting and retaining customers is possible by using new marketing methods and place attachment, subsequently, the goals of sports clubs will be achieved, they will create a special place in the minds of customers, and they will bring a competitive advantage to their club. In today's era, the importance and maintenance of customers and paying attention to their demands has become more important day by day, and also, with these conditions, creating a kind of satisfaction, double perceived value and providing good service quality and place attachment to create behavioral and attitudinal loyalty and revisiting customers in various fields of competition and sports have become more important, and special attention to it has become necessary. Unfortunately, in our country, place attachment is still not well known, and very little research has been done in this field, especially in the field of sports; this is one of the reasons for the necessity and importance of conducting this research in sports clubs. Also, using this approach, it is possible to give a pleasant experience and place to the customers and sell sports services at a higher price and quality compared to competitors in the highly competitive market. On the other hand, the results of this research can provide solutions to increase the quality of services and attachment to sports clubs among customers. Also, the results of this study are valuable for the researchers because the status of the research variables and the relationship between them were examined.

On the other hand, since privatization is associated with competition and private sports clubs compete with other private sports centers to attract customers to reuse their services and ultimately, to earn more profit, this competition increases the level of service quality. This leads to the satisfaction of customers and attachment to the sports clubs, and subsequently, leads to the customers' intention to return and loyalty to use those clubs. It should be noted that due to the limited resources and facilities of sports venues, and also, the need to ensure customer satisfaction in the shortest possible time, club managers must first identify the factors affecting place attachment from the customers' point of view to take the necessary measures for improving customer satisfaction; because determining the effective factors such as the quality of service on place attachment in sports venues and improving these factors can provide the basis for the satisfaction and continuous participation of customers and improve the public health of the society. Therefore, according to the above-mentioned points, this research seeks the appropriate answer to the following main questions:

Is there a relationship between service quality and place attachment in women's fitness clubs in Kerman?

Materials and methods

In this descriptive-correlational research, the statistical population of this research includes all athletes (customers) of women's fitness clubs in Kerman from April to the end of April 2024. Based on Morgan's table, the sample size was determined to be 384 people who were selected using the convenience sampling method. Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient and multivariate regression statistical tests by SPSS version 24. The required data were obtained using two questionnaires.

A) Place attachment Scale

This scale was created by Safarnia (2009), based on the theory of Low and Altman (1992) and the experimental studies of Jorgensen and Stedman (2003) and Gil et al. (2004), who had an attitudinal view of place attachment. This scale consists of 22 items that have four components and three domains: cognitive (place identity), emotional (emotional attachment), and behavioral (place attachment and social ties), and measure place attachment based on a 5-point Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Items 1 to 4 measure place identity, items 5 to 14 measure emotional attachment, items 15 to 18 measure place attachment, and items 19 to 22 measure social ties. The reliability of the questionnaire was obtained using Cronbach's alpha (0.92) and retest (0.91), which indicates the satisfactory reliability of the questionnaire. Also, the questionnaire has a good form and structure validity (Safarinia, 2009). In this research, the reliability of the questionnaire was obtained 0.864 using Cronbach's alpha method.

b) Service quality questionnaire

To collect data related to the quality of services, the 18-question SERVQUAL Sports questionnaire, which was created by Theodorakis et al. (2013) and validated by Sarani and Elahi in Iran, was used. This questionnaire has four dimensions including access and security (questions 1 to 7), responsiveness (questions 8 to 11), reliability (questions 12 to 15), and tangibility (questions 16 to 18). The questions in the 5-point Likert scale are scored from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Sarani and Elahi (2015) have confirmed the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. In this research, the reliability of the questionnaire was obtained 0.866 using Cronbach's alpha method.

Results

According to the results of descriptive statistics, out of 384 studied respondents, 57 people (14.8%) were under 20 years old, 138 people (35.9%) were 21 to 30 years old, 111 people (28.9%) were 31 to 40 years old, and 78 people (20.3%) aged more than 40 years. In terms of education level, 104 people (27%) had high school and postgraduate education, 165 people (43%) had bachelor's degree, 103 people (26.8%) had master's degree, and 12 people (3.2%) had doctoral education. In terms of occupational status, 146 people (38%) were housewives, 104 people (27.1%) were self-employed, 86 people (22.4%) were civil servants, and 48 people (12.5%) were retired.

The results of the description of the research variables showed that 48 people (12.5%) mentioned the service quality as low, 244 people (63.5%) mentioned it as average, and 92 people (24%) mentioned it as high. 48 people (12.5%) had low attachment to the place, 266 people (69.3%) had medium attachment, and 70 people (18.2%) had high attachment to the place.

Table 1. Pearson's correlation coefficient between service quality and its components (access and security, responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility) and place attachment in women's fitness clubs in Kerman city

Variable	Pearson's Correlation Coefficient	Significance	Coefficient of Determination	Relationship	Type of Relationship
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Service quality	0.377	0.001	0.142	Yes	Direct
Access and security	0.364	0.001	0.132	Yes	Direct
Responsiveness	0.309	0.001	0.096	Yes	Direct
Reliability	0.248	0.001	0.062	Yes	Direct
Tangibility	0.369	0.001	0.136	Yes	Direct

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between service quality and its components (access and security, responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility) with place attachment in sports clubs. Data analysis shows that Pearson's correlation coefficient between service quality and its components (access and security, responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility) with place attachment was 0.377, 0.364, 0.309, 0.248, and 0.369, respectively. Statistically significant levels were considered at $P < 0.05$. As a result, there is a significant and direct relationship between service quality and its components (access and security, responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility) and place attachment in sports clubs. The positive correlation coefficient indicates a direct relationship between these variables (Table 2).

Table 2. Coefficients of the regression model of service quality components (access and security, responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility) depending on the location in sports clubs

Variable	β Estimation	Standard Variation	β Standard Estimation	t-value	P-value
Access and security	0.537	0.285	0.173	0.886	0.06
Responsiveness	0.54	0.254	0.129	2.128	0.034
Reliability	0.382	0.338	0.078	1.128	0.26
Tangibility	1.308	0.517	0.207	2.528	0.012

Multivariate regression was used to investigate the simultaneous relationship between service quality components (access and security, responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility) and place attachment in sports clubs. According to the P-value calculated in the regression model coefficients test, H_0^2 and H_0^4 (responsiveness, tangibility) were rejected at the p-value of 0.05, and the t-value for responsiveness and tangibility was equal to 2.128 and 528.2 at the P-value less than 0.05, hence, the level of place attachment is different according to the level of responsiveness and tangibility. Therefore, responsiveness and tangibility simultaneously predict place attachment, and based on the obtained β -value, it can be stated that the most important predictors of place attachment are tangibility and responsiveness, respectively (Table 2).

Discussion

The results of the research showed that there is a direct and significant relationship between service quality and its components (access and security, responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility) and place attachment in sports clubs. According to the results of the multivariate regression test, among the components of service quality, the most important predictors of place attachment are tangibility and responsiveness, respectively. These results are consistent with the results of the studies by Motaghed et al. (1400) and Alexandris et al. (2023).

In explaining the results, it can be stated that although the key element in marketing is customer satisfaction, in some cases, customer satisfaction alone is not enough and efforts should be made to create some kind of attachment among customers. The concept of attachment originates from the deep and stable understanding of emotional bonds in the relationship of one person with another person in the field of a specific subject, time, and place, and gradually enters into other types of relationships. While place attachment is a branch of people's experiences, behaviors, and feelings, it is also the driver of their behavioral motivations, so people try to pay more attention and care to that place with their behaviors and actions. However, in today's competitive world, companies and organizations should try to keep their customers satisfied and loyal. Service quality is one of the basic concepts in conducting transactions in all rounds of business. Therefore, based on the results obtained from the research, it can be said that the higher the service quality of sports clubs from the point of view of people, the higher the level of place attachment to the place among people. Managers of sports centers should pay attention to the location of the club in terms of access before building the club. That is, the proximity of the club to urban transportation, having a dedicated parking or a public parking near the club, and providing transportation supply with a reasonable cost for customers to some parts of the city can encourage customers to choose this club for sports activities, and as a result, customers become attached to the sports club. Therefore, based on the results obtained from the research, the higher the access and security of sports clubs from the point of view of people, the higher the level of place attachment among people. When the customers become attached to the desired place, this gives them a better view and feeling towards that place, and as a result, this issue is effective in the customers' next intention, so that they often visit that place and use it. Also, if the clubs' officials are responsive to the customers, as a result, the place attachment will increase among the customers. In addition, based on the results obtained from the research, the higher the responsiveness level of sports clubs from the point of view of people, the higher the level of place attachment among people. Attachment to a place has been defined as an emotional-cognitive bond in the environment. This means that the strengthening of this bond, which itself is rooted in feelings and emotions, has a logical and cognitive aspect. With these conditions, when people become attached to a place, they consider that place as an important thing in their life compared to other places, and as a result, being in that place will be valuable for the people. Therefore, based on the results obtained from the research, the higher the level of reliability of sports clubs from the point of view of people, the higher the level of place attachment among people. Whenever the club customers are pleasant and satisfied with the interaction with the coaches and staff of the sports club and other customers, and whenever the club customers have a warm greeting with the coaches and staff of the sports club and other customers, we can expect place attachment to be increased among club customers. Therefore, based on the results obtained from the research, the more tangible the sports clubs from the people's point of view, the higher the level of place attachment among the people.

Conclusion

The results showed that there is a relationship between service quality and place attachment in sports clubs. Therefore, if sports clubs want to be successful in attracting their customers, they must provide high-quality services and pay attention to the preferences of customers, who are the main assets of sports venues. If the customers are satisfied with the quality of the service, the perceived value is higher, and this will make them feel a sense of belonging and attachment to the sports venue, and they will visit the sports venue with more desire and trust.

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