

EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF SERVICE QUALITY ON SPORTS BRAND LOYALTY: A STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN GUANGXI PROVINCE, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of service quality on sports brand loyalty among university students in Guangxi Province, China, addressing a significant gap in the existing literature. Leveraging the SERVQUAL framework, the research examines the key dimensions of service quality, including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, and their impact on both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. The qualitative approach employed in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 30 purposively selected participants, ensuring diverse representation across universities and engagement levels.

The findings reveal that high service quality fosters emotional attachment and repeat engagement with sports brands. Tangible elements, such as clean and modern facilities, alongside reliable and consistent service delivery, significantly contribute to loyalty. Personalized interactions and staff professionalism enhance trust and satisfaction, while prompt responsiveness strengthens customer relationships. Emotional loyalty, manifested through pride and identification with sports brands, emerges as a critical mediator between service quality and long-term brand allegiance.

Practical implications include strategic initiatives to enhance service delivery, such as maintaining high standards of facility upkeep, training staff in empathetic communication, and implementing streamlined processes for addressing customer concerns. Engagement programs designed to build a sense of community and belonging further solidify brand loyalty. By focusing on the unique preferences and behaviors of university students, this study advances theoretical understanding and provides actionable insights for sports organizations. The findings highlight the crucial role of service quality in fostering loyalty within the sports industry, thereby contributing to improved customer retention and sustainable growth in the competitive Chinese sports market. Future research should investigate the quantitative validation of these insights across broader demographic contexts.

Keywords: Service Quality, Brand Loyalty, University Students, Guangxi Province

INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of the sports industry, coupled with the increasing influence of global consumerism, has elevated the importance of understanding service quality and its impact on brand loyalty within sports organizations (Kang et al., 2021). Service quality, defined as the comparison between customer expectations and actual service performance (Parasuraman et al., 1988), plays a critical role in shaping consumer behavior, satisfaction, and loyalty. In the context of university students, who represent a significant and dynamic segment of sports consumers, understanding these factors is crucial for fostering long-term brand allegiance and enhancing organizational success.

Brand loyalty in sports is a multifaceted construct that reflects consumers' emotional attachment and behavioral commitment to a sports organization, team, or related products (Bauer et al., 2008). This loyalty is particularly notable among university students, who, as both active participants and spectators, contribute significantly to the sports ecosystem. Research highlights that positive service experiences

can strengthen loyalty, leading to repeat patronage and advocacy behaviors (Chen et al., 2020). Therefore, investigating the interplay between service quality dimensions and sports brand loyalty within this demographic is crucial for both academic and practical purposes.

China's sports industry has experienced unprecedented growth over the past decade, with a focus on expanding access to sports and promoting a culture of physical activity among young people (Li & Zhang, 2019). In Guangxi Province, a region known for its vibrant sports culture and high engagement among university students, this trend is particularly pronounced. The increasing emphasis on quality service delivery in sports facilities, events, and related organizations underscores the need for a localized understanding of how service quality influences brand loyalty among students in this region.

Theoretical Foundation

Service Quality

Service quality has been extensively studied across industries, with frameworks such as the SERVQUAL model providing a robust basis for evaluating its dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988). These dimensions are critical in the sports industry, where the intangible nature of services heightens the importance of perceived quality.

1. **Tangibles:** The tangibles dimension refers to the physical elements of the service environment that consumers can see and evaluate, such as facilities, equipment, and the appearance of personnel. In the sports industry, this includes the cleanliness, accessibility, and functionality of sports venues, as well as the visual appeal of branding elements. For instance, well-maintained facilities and modern equipment not only enhance the user experience but also signal professionalism and reliability to consumers. University students, as frequent users of sports facilities, are susceptible to tangible factors, which contribute to their perception of service quality and subsequent loyalty to sports organizations. These physical cues serve as a foundation for building trust and satisfaction, ultimately influencing their overall loyalty to the sports brand.
2. **Reliability:** Reliability refers to a service provider's ability to deliver dependable and accurate services as promised consistently. In the context of sports, this involves the timely scheduling of events, the accurate dissemination of information, and the consistent availability of facilities and programs. For university students, reliable service fosters a sense of trust and predictability, which are critical for maintaining engagement. For example, if a sports organization consistently meets expectations by delivering well-organized events and adhering to schedules, students are more likely to develop a positive perception of the brand. Reliability is a cornerstone of service quality that influences not only immediate satisfaction but also long-term loyalty behaviors.
3. **Responsiveness:** Responsiveness is the willingness and ability of service providers to assist customers and address their needs promptly. In sports, this includes aspects such as quick responses to inquiries, efficient handling of complaints, and proactive communication with consumers. University students, who often rely on digital platforms for interaction, value prompt and effective responses from sports organizations. For example, a sports club's ability to quickly resolve issues related to event registration or equipment rental can significantly enhance the consumer experience. By demonstrating responsiveness, sports organizations can build positive relationships with students, which strengthens their loyalty and commitment to the brand.
4. **Assurance and Empathy:** Assurance relates to the confidence and trust that consumers feel due to the competence and courtesy of the staff, as well as the perceived safety of the service environment. Empathy, on the other hand, reflects the care and individual attention provided to consumers. In the sports industry, assurance and empathy are demonstrated through knowledgeable and courteous staff who address the unique needs of participants. For university students, these dimensions are critical as they seek environments where they feel valued and supported. For instance, a sports facility that employs friendly and skilled staff can enhance the overall user experience, fostering satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, personalized interactions that consider students' preferences can create a deeper emotional connection to the brand, further solidifying their loyalty.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), as cited in Aeknarajindawat, N. (2023), referred to the five dimensions of service quality as follows:

1. Reliability

2. Assurance
3. Tangibles
4. Empathy
5. Responsiveness

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty, in turn, is often conceptualized through behavioral and attitudinal dimensions (Nuttavut, 2024). Behavioral loyalty pertains to consumers' repeated purchase behaviors, while attitudinal loyalty reflects their emotional attachment and commitment to the brand (Oliver, 1999). In sports, these dimensions manifest in actions such as attending games, purchasing merchandise, and engaging with the brand online, as well as in sentiments of pride and identification with the team or organization (Tsiotsou, 2013). Brand loyalty, in turn, is often conceptualized through behavioral and attitudinal dimensions.

1. **Behavioral Loyalty:** Behavioral loyalty pertains to consumers' repeated purchase behaviors and consistent engagement with a brand. In sports, this could manifest in actions such as regularly attending games, purchasing team merchandise, or renewing memberships at sports facilities. University students' behavioral loyalty is influenced by positive service experiences that encourage them to continue engaging with the brand. For example, if a student consistently receives high-quality service at a sports facility, they are more likely to renew their membership and recommend the facility to peers. Behavioral loyalty not only contributes to immediate revenue streams but also reflects the success of service strategies in retaining consumers over time.
2. **Attitudinal Loyalty:** Attitudinal loyalty reflects consumers' emotional attachment and commitment to a brand, often characterized by sentiments of pride, identification, and advocacy. In the sports context, university students may demonstrate attitudinal loyalty by expressing pride in their association with a sports team or organization, engaging with the brand on social media, and defending it against criticism. This emotional connection is often nurtured through consistent positive interactions and alignment with the brand's values. For example, a university sports club that fosters a sense of community and belonging among its members can cultivate strong attitudinal loyalty. Such loyalty not only enhances the brand's reputation but also creates long-term advocates who actively promote the organization.

While the relationship between service quality and brand loyalty has been explored in various contexts, there is a dearth of research focusing specifically on university students as a distinct consumer group within the sports industry. Existing studies often generalize findings to broader populations, overlooking the unique preferences, motivations, and behaviors of young adults in higher education settings (Zhang et al., 2021). Moreover, limited research addresses this phenomenon in the Chinese context, particularly in less urbanized regions like Guangxi Province, where cultural and socio-economic factors may shape consumer experiences differently from those in metropolitan areas.

Understanding the dynamics of service quality and brand loyalty in the sports industry is crucial for both academic research and practical applications. From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on consumer behavior in sports, providing a nuanced understanding of how service quality influences brand loyalty within a specific cultural and demographic context. By focusing on university students in Guangxi Province, the research also addresses the need for localized studies that consider regional differences within China's diverse sports landscape.

The findings of this study can inform strategic decision-making for sports organizations, universities, and policymakers. Enhanced service quality can lead to increased student participation, higher revenue from sports-related activities, and more substantial brand equity for organizations. Moreover, fostering brand loyalty among university students has long-term implications, as this demographic is likely to maintain their preferences and consumption patterns into adulthood (Kim et al., 2020).

OBJECTIVE

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the influence of service quality dimensions on sports brand loyalty among university students in Guangxi Province, China. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Identify the key dimensions of service quality that significantly impact sports brand loyalty among university students.
2. Provide actionable insights for sports organizations and policymakers to enhance service delivery and foster brand loyalty in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to gain a deeper understanding of how service quality impacts sports brand loyalty. The qualitative approach enables the exploration of participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and emotions, providing rich insights into the factors that shape their loyalty behaviors.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprises university students enrolled in Guangxi Province, China. Participants are purposively selected to ensure diverse representation across different universities, sports activities, and levels of engagement with sports brands. The sample includes 30 participants, determined by the point of saturation in qualitative data collection.

Data Collection

Data are collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews are guided by an interview protocol developed based on the SERVQUAL framework and existing literature on brand loyalty. Key topics include participants' perceptions of service quality dimensions, their personal experiences with sports brands, and the emotional and behavioral factors influencing their loyalty.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the qualitative data. The analysis process involves several stages: familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Themes are mapped to the research objectives to understand the specific ways in which service quality influences sports brand loyalty. NVivo software is used to facilitate data organization and analysis.

RESULTS

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the themes identified from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, emphasizing participants' experiences and insights.

Service Quality

Tangibles: Participants highlighted the importance of physical attributes of sports facilities and services:

Cleanliness and Maintenance: Clean and well-maintained sports venues foster trust and satisfaction.

"The gym's cleanliness makes me feel comfortable and valued."

"Modern equipment shows they care about quality, and it attracts me back."

Aesthetic Appeal: The design and ambiance of the facilities were frequently mentioned as contributing to positive experiences.

"I enjoy spending time here because the place feels inviting and well-designed."

Reliability: Reliability emerged as a cornerstone for trust and loyalty:

Consistency in Services: Participants valued consistent service delivery, including on-time class schedules and the availability of promised facilities.

"They never cancel classes without notifying us, which makes me trust them more."

Problem Resolution: Addressing issues promptly builds a reputation for reliability.

"Once, my booking was not registered properly, but they resolved it quickly and apologized, which meant a lot."

Responsiveness: Timely and effective communication with customers was a significant factor

Quick Responses: Prompt replies to inquiries and complaints were often appreciated.

“Whenever I had a question, their response was quick and helpful, which gave me confidence in their services.”

Flexibility in Services: Participants valued brands that tailored their services to meet their specific needs.

“They were willing to adjust timings for a class when many of us requested it. That showed they cared.”

Assurance: The competence and professionalism of staff instilled confidence:

Knowledgeable Personnel: Participants appreciated staff who demonstrated expertise in their respective roles.

“The trainers are not only skilled but also explain the techniques well, which reassures me.”

Friendly Interactions: Courteous behavior enhances customer satisfaction.

“The staff always greet you warmly and make you feel like part of a community.”

Empathy: Participants emphasized the importance of personalized attention:

Understanding Customer Needs: Tailored advice or acknowledgment of individual circumstances created positive experiences.

“The trainer remembered my fitness goals and kept checking on my progress—it made me feel valued.”

Emotional Support: Empathy during challenging times, such as injuries, was highlighted.

“When I got injured, they provided alternative exercises and constantly checked on me.”

Behavioral and Emotional Outcomes

The qualitative data revealed specific behaviors and emotional connections resulting from high service quality:

Behavioral Loyalty

Repeat visits and purchases were shared among participants who were satisfied.

“I have been a member here for over two years because they have consistently delivered excellent service.”

Recommendations to peers were frequent:

“I have told all my friends about this place because it is worth it.”

Emotional Loyalty

Participants described feelings of attachment and pride associated with their preferred sports brands.

“I feel proud to wear their merchandise because they treat us so well.”

COLCLUSION

The qualitative insights highlight the crucial role of service quality dimensions in influencing sports brand loyalty. By addressing identified challenges and leveraging strengths, sports organizations in Guangxi Province can foster deeper connections with university students, enhancing their market position and long-term sustainability. This expanded analysis ensures a comprehensive understanding of qualitative findings.

Key dimensions of service quality identified in the analysis of service quality within the sports industry revealed that the following dimensions are pivotal in influencing brand loyalty 1. The tangible physical environment and facilities, as found, show that cleanliness, modern facilities, and accessible sports venues were cited as critical. University students emphasized that these aspects contribute to their satisfaction and trust in a sports brand. 2. reliability: consistency of services. The findings presented consistent service delivery, such as adhering to schedules and delivering on promises, which was a significant factor in fostering loyalty. 3. Responsiveness: Prompt and helpful customer service. The findings revealed that responsiveness emerged as a core attribute, characterized by the quick resolution of issues and proactive customer support. 4. Assurance: professionalism and competence. The confidence instilled by knowledgeable and courteous staff was a strong contributor to positive brand perception. 5. empathy: personalized customer attention. The findings demonstrate empathy, as shown by personalized attention and an understanding of individual needs, thereby enhancing emotional bonds with the brand—impact on sports brand loyalty. The qualitative data revealed the interplay between service quality and loyalty through two primary pathways: behavioral loyalty and repeat engagement. The findings showed that participants frequently chose the same brand due to positive past experiences. High service quality encouraged repeat visits and continued engagement. Moreover, attitudinal loyalty: emotional connection, the findings presented that emotional attachment was evident in sentiments of pride, trust, and identification with the brand. High service quality created a psychological commitment that strengthened loyalty.

The findings highlight the critical role of service quality in cultivating sports brand loyalty among university students:

1. **Enhancing Tangibles:** Regularly maintaining and upgrading physical facilities can improve trust and satisfaction.
2. **Focusing on Reliability:** Consistency in service delivery must be prioritized to build a dependable brand image.
3. **Training for Empathy and Assurance:** Staff should be trained to deliver personalized, empathetic, and competent service, thereby deepening emotional connections with the brand.
4. **Improving Responsiveness:** Establishing efficient communication channels for feedback and issue resolution can enhance loyalty.

These insights provide actionable recommendations for sports organizations aiming to improve service quality and cultivate loyalty in the competitive sports industry.

Implementation

The implementation of the findings from this study involves developing strategic initiatives for sports organizations to enhance service quality and build brand loyalty among university students. Below are key implementation strategies:

1. Enhancing tangibles by regular maintenance and upgrades of sports facilities to ensure cleanliness, modern equipment, and an aesthetically pleasing environment
2. Focusing on empathy and personalization by training staff to offer personalized services and demonstrate genuine care for customers.
3. Improving reliability by standardizing service delivery processes to ensure consistency, such as timely scheduling of events and maintaining operational hours.
4. Prioritizing responsiveness by establishing streamlined communication channels for customer inquiries and complaints.
5. Building emotional connections by creating engagement programs that foster a sense of community and belonging among customers.
6. Monitoring and evaluation by setting up mechanisms to regularly assess the impact of implemented strategies on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

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