

IMPACT OF THE SERVICE QUALITY OF TURKISH THERMAL HOTEL ENTERPRISES ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

There are numerous studies in the literature emphasizing customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in hospitality sector in general. However, the literature on thermal hotels and their quality attributes and loyalty perceptions is scant. This study set out to examine the impact of service quality of Turkish thermal hotel enterprises on customer loyalty. A questionnaire was employed to collect data. The questionnaire was administered to 1314 participants. The data obtained were using correlation and regression analysis. The results show that there is a correlation between service dimensions and customer loyalty at moderate level, which suggests that the quality of wellness services offered are influential on building loyalty.

Keywords: thermal hotels, service quality, loyalty, service dimensions, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

In the marketing literature, the significance of being customer oriented, ensuring customer satisfaction and creating customers that are loyal both to the company and its products is an undisputed truth, and also constitutes a managerial goal for

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the companies nowadays (Kotler et al., 1998). Today, the representatives of various management models, particularly total quality management, are highlighting the customer-related topics. At the core of these studies lies the understanding that businesses need to satisfy their customers to become economically successful. For businesses, customer satisfaction is a priority as it is related to repurchase by the customers, their loyalty to the company and its products, total earnings, and profitability. Also thanks to customer satisfaction, the tolerance of customers to the price fluctuations of the given company's products or services is higher compared to their competitors, which shows that businesses that ensure customer satisfaction do not lose as many customers as their competitors after price escalations.

When it comes to hospitality sector, one of the most important conditions of customer retention and customer loyalty is to ensure customer satisfaction, owing to the expectation that the customer would remain loyal to the particular facility, and would continue their relations with it for longer years. Businesses can ensure customer satisfaction by serving their customers with an added value in their products and services; in this way, a sentimental connection can be established between the customer and the facility, creating customer retention. In order to ensure customer satisfaction, the real needs and expectations of customers have to be known

(Srivastava, et. al., 1999). In this regard, hospitality businesses put a great effort to provide services that are suitable to customers' expectations, and to learn how "quality" is perceived by the customers as well as is the strategies of their competitors. The main objective of this study is to determine the impact of the services offered at thermal hotels on customer loyalty.

CONCEPT OF THERMAL TOURISM FACILITIES

There has been a growing consensus that tourism movements deriving from health and health-related issues are on the rise. (Hudson and Li, 2012). Hence, it is no surprise that thermal facilities draw the attention of many people in Turkey as it does in other countries. Aslan (1992) describes thermal facilities as "an establishment that is located around thermal water resources, and includes accommodation services, a thermal treatment center, and a curation park is called a thermal tourism business". In addition to services provided by other accommodation facilities such as accommodation, eating and drinking, rest and entertainment, thermal

tourism facilities also include services such as thermal facilities as well as supplementary and complementary treatments which constitute the primary aim of these businesses (Kozak, 1992). Although from a different perspective with some similarities, According to the PKF spa report of Trends in the Hotel Spa Industry (PKF Consulting and PKF Hospitality Research, 2009), spas get revenues from a variety of spa/wellness/health-related products and services including massages, treatments such as facials and body wraps, hair and nail services, fitness programs, and retail products such as exercise tools, skin-care products, and herbal supplements. In the PKF spa report, spas are grouped into four groups: hotel spa, destination spa, medical spa, and day spa.

PROPERTIES OF THERMAL FACILITIES

Thermal tourism facilities provide treatment services to care for and maintain human health in addition to the accommodation, eating-drinking, entertainment and recreation, which highlights the various features of these facilities (Fidancı, 2002).

The features of thermal tourism facilities that distinguish them from other tourism facilities are listed below (Kozak, 1992):

- To have one's discomfort of treatment by a doctor the duration of which varies according to length of stay, usually thermal tourism the accommodation establishments ranged from two to three weeks.

- Thermal tourism enterprises experienced and specialized personnel in the business of required.

- Thermal tourism centers around the treatment of some of the people In order to utilize curing centers, while others, both leisure and cure centers are the centers to take advantage of. Therefore, the to respond to the expectations of people with different plants, thermal tourism enterprises must be well-organized.

- Thermal tourism enterprises benefiting patients cure centers As well as applications implemented balneotherapy, sleep, rest and diet, such as applications are also available. Therefore, thermal tourism enterprises, a diet regulation and enforcement need to be done is serious about food.

- Thermal tourism enterprises in order to treat people from the presence of these centers, the need to devote more attention to the rules of hygiene makes.

- Thermal tourism businesses, at or near sources of thermal water installed near. Thermal tourism businesses, thermal hotel, cure center and park economics of this complex formation has occurred, the investment return as soon as pay.

As thermal tourism facilities embody the features above that distinguish them from other establishments, it is essential that these facilities take these features seriously in to consideration to have a modern outlook. Thermal tourism is viewed not only as a cure for those with physical ailments, but also as a means for keeping a good health, rejuvenation, and as physiological nutrition. Besides, in the words of Hudson and Li (2012) "... health care services may include medical examinations by qualified doctors and nurses at the resort or hotel, special diets, acupuncture, and special medical treatments for various diseases such as arthritis, and herbal remedies".

SERVICE QUALITY MANAGEMENT AT THERMAL TOURISM FACILITIES

Before getting into service quality management, the concepts of "service" and "quality" should be mentioned in general. Service, on the whole, can be defined as an action or performance that is consumed where it is produced. Quality, on the other hand, can be defined as all the sufficiency of a product or service in satisfying the given or possible needs, as well as all the related features.

In thermal tourism facilities, quality is a tool for creating the products and services to satisfy the customers' given or possible needs, for increasing productivity, and for decreasing costs via an efficient cost control. Service quality in thermal tourism facilities is determined by the customers' needs, fulfillment of expectations, uninterrupted success, complete and flawless service, and therefore is a value that can be measured and assessed.

Zeithaml, et. al. (1991) define "service" as all the economic activities that are consumed at the time of its production, providing positive values such as comfort and time without tangible product; and "service quality" as the comparison of the expected service and the perceived service performance. They define the

“dimensions” of service quality as reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy and tangibles. As it can be seen here, while defining service quality, the customer-related aspects are placed in the foreground. The most important point here which is not expressed explicitly is the significance of determining the needs and expectations of the customer.

In this light, service quality management can be viewed as an approach advocating the significance of evaluating the level of service as perceived by the customers by taking the expectations and needs of customers as the basis of analysis (Snoj and Mumel, 2002). Service quality management must focus on customer satisfaction, and therefore on providing the right service at the first time, on developing compensatory strategies when a mistake is made, and improving service constantly. Being aware of the primary role that “people” have in the area, service quality managers and businesses must encourage their employees in this regard. In the service sector, elements of quality related to non-technical personnel (the facial expression of personnel during food service, voice, tone, politeness or tact of the reception personnel while speaking with a customer) must be given equal or higher significance than the technical quality (the extent to which the product fulfills its purpose, e.g. for a television this would be the quality of sound, quality of image and color, or the capacity to receive signals from long distances), for the real ultimate element on the level of quality as perceived by the customers are these elements of non-technical quality (Tian-Cole, Crompton, and Willson, 2002).

THE NOTION OF CUSTOMER LOYALTY

According to Kumar and Shah (2004), while loyalty is a notion that is known for hundreds of years, in the later years it began to be used as a means to maximize power and control. They argue that today financial and solid criteria are not sufficient indicators of productivity for businesses, and that notions such as quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty are the indicators that reflect the competitive potential of different establishments. In order to survive in fierce competition, businesses are trying to come up with strategies to keep their existing customers and turn them into loyal customers. In the marketing literature, there does not appear to be a consensus on the notion of loyalty of customer. According to Lee (2010), the term customer loyalty indicates the inclination to become the customers of

their current service providers based on their past experiences and future expectations. According to Kim and Yoon, (2004). Customer loyalty is the willingness of customers to recommend services that they always receive. They define customer loyalty as the customers' constant positive attitude towards the particular establishment and their willingness to repurchase. Apart from providing a service that is in line with the needs and expectations of customers and customer satisfaction, the primary aim of businesses is to ensure customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Especially in the highly competitive tourism market, customer satisfaction is not enough to ensure continuous success for a business. According to Goderis (1998), to raise the level of customer loyalty, customer satisfaction has to be at its highest. Satisfying the needs of customers by including extra elements into service becomes a must. While the notion customer loyalty allows the continuum and development of the relations between the customer and the given business, it may also include the particular recommendation of its own product or services to potential customers by other firms or companies (Hançer, 2003). At the top of all the elements that define customer loyalty, quality comes first. The quality of a given product or service is a significant factor with regard to customer loyalty. According to Hauser (1993), the extent to which the customers are loyal to a business, its products and services, is based on the quality level of the products and services offered by the company. Another element that affects loyalty is how some customers personally relate to particular brands. Customer relations must be given highest importance while turning a loyal group of customers into fans. Businesses are responsible for ensuring that customer relations continue towards a positive direction.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CUSTOMER LOYALTY FOR BUSINESSES

The positive correlation between customer loyalty and profitability is well-known concept. The most contrastive example on this topic is presented by Reichheld and Sasser (1990). According to the authors, a business can increase its profitability from 25% to 125% simply by keeping a 5% of its customers loyal. Additionally, the positive correlation between customer loyalty and profitability is further supported by Bowen and Shomaker (1998). They suggest that because loyal customers will make repetitive trade with the given business, and the likelihood that

they will turn towards rival businesses is low, customer loyalty will affect business profitability positively and strongly.

The ability of businesses to decrease their costs and provide better and cheaper product or service to their customers by making use of customer loyalty offers these businesses a significant advantage in competing with their rivals in the market without changing their price. Bowen and Shomaker (1998) argue that the most suitable and reliable way for introducing a business into a competition of prices is to increase their market effectiveness by controlling expenditures.

Word-of-mouth publicity by loyal customers to potential customers is a significant positive value granted by customer loyalty. Özer (1991) defines word-of-mouth positive publicity as a verbal and informal way of communication where consumers inform and recommend other consumers, especially their relatives and friends in their immediate social circles, about the products, brands, services and businesses that they have used or received. Word-of-mouth positive publicity by loyal customers has a positive impact on the performance of businesses on various aspects, such that potential customers are drawn to the given business establishment.

METHODOLOGY

Variables and Measurement: In this study, the main objective of which is to determine the effect of service quality on customer loyalty, three variable groups have been employed. The first group covers the demographic features (sex, age, education, marital status, income and occupation), the second group includes 19 items related to service quality scale comprising the 5 dimensions, which are medical services, physical attributes, hygiene, price and personnel, and in the third group are 7 items related to customer loyalty scale. Both scales are in the form of 5-point Likert scales, with service adequacy scale ranging from definitely inadequate (1) to definitely adequate. As for the loyalty scale, it ranges from definitely disagreed (1) to definitely agreed (5).

Participants: The population of the study consists of the customers at 5-star thermal hotels in Turkey. Due to the time, cost and distance constraints, a sample

of customers at thermal hotels in Izmir, Denizli and Afyonkarahisar, renowned for thermal establishments, was taken. The questionnaire was administered to a total of 1314 customers, 461 in Izmir, 421 in Denizli and 432 in Afyonkarahisar during summer months of 2011.

Data Collection and Analysis: The data in this study was collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire is made up of three parts (demographic features, service quality scale and customer loyalty scale). The scale on the service adequacy in cure centers was adapted from (Lebe, 2006; Athen, et.al. 2009; Lee, 2010; González, and Brea, 2005; Alénet, et. al., 2006), on the other hand, the loyalty scale was taken from (Tsaura, et. al., 2002; Kim and Kim, 2005; Karatepe, 2006; Nasution and Mavondo, 2008; Williams and Soutar, 2009; Yuksel, et. al., 2010). The perception of service quality and the level of loyalty of the participants were described using item frequency, percentage distribution, arithmetic averages and standard deviation values. In order to measure the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, correlation and regression analyses have been performed. Besides, factor analysis has been applied and Cronbach's Alpha coefficients have been calculated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 reports the findings on demographic features. 50.9% of the customers are female, while 49.11 male, 70.5% of the customers are single and 29.5% married. 21.3% of the customers are between 35-44 years of age, while 7.9% of the customers are below 24 and below, which makes up the smallest percentage. Those who are 55 and above makes up the highest percentage rate, 35.8% (n=471). When it comes to education, those with a high school degree make up the highest percentage, 31.3%. It is worth considering that the number of those with primary school degree is more than the ones with undergraduate degree. The highest number of participants is from the self-employed ones, with 21.1% and civil servants with 17.4%.

Table 1: The findings on demographic features (n=1314)

Variables	Groups	n	%	Variables	Groups	n	%
Sex	Female	669	50.9	Marital status	Single	926	70.5
	Male	645	49.1		Married	388	29.5
Age	24 and below	104	7.9	Income	1000 TL and below	37	2.8
	25-34	168	12.8		1000-1999TL	652	49.6
	35-44	280	21.3		2000TL and above	625	47.6
	45-54	291	22.1				
	55 and above	471	35.8				
Education	Primary	219	16.7	Occupation	Civil servant	229	17.4
	High school	411	31.3		Employee	192	14.6
	Bachelor's	215	16.4		Employer	131	10.0
	Undergraduate	325	24.7		Pensioner	196	14.9
	Graduate	125	9.5		Self-employed	277	21.1
	Other	19	1.4		House wife	179	13.6
				Other	110	8.4	

Table 2 reports the findings on the service adequacy of the thermal facilities. On the whole, customers find the services delivered adequate in terms of the five service dimensions under consideration, for the average score on statements are 4.0 or higher, which signifies that customers find the services definitely adequate. For example the average score for the statement “thermal water to rooms” in medical services is 4.3, and the average score for the statement in physical attributes “Physical conditions of saunas and baths” is 4.4, then follows the statement “Evacuation of thermal water vapor and smell” with an average score of 4.3. When it comes to the hygiene dimension, the statement with the highest score is ($\bar{x}=4.3$) “Cleanliness of the private family pools”.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on the service adequacy of the thermal facilities

Factors	Items	Negative (Definitely inadequate or inadequate)		Moderately adequate		Positive (Definitely adequate or adequate)		Mean (\bar{X})	S.d.	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha
		f	%	f	%	f	%				
Medical Services	Thermal water quality	159	12,1	145	11,0	1010	76,9	4,07	1,19	,893	.742
	Clinical services	63	4,8	166	12,6	1085	82,6	4,25	,90	,892	
	Experience of the medical staff	58	4,4	169	12,9	1087	82,7	4,27	,86	,578	
Physical attributes	Thermal water to rooms	60	4,6	119	9,1	1135	86,4	4,34	,87	,611	.787
	Evacuation of thermal water vapor and smell	66	5,0	113	8,6	1135	86,4	4,31	,89	,549	
	Equipment	58	4,4	148	11,3	1107	84,2	4,23	,82	,733	
	Physical conditions of the thermal pools	49	3,7	166	12,6	1099	83,6	4,23	,84	,732	
	Private family pools	49	3,7	166	12,6	1099	83,6	4,23	,84	,698	
	Physical conditions of saunas and baths	37	2,8	120	9,1	1157	88,1	4,38	,76	,700	

Hygiene	Overall cleanliness	54	4,1	143	10,9	1117	85,0	4,28	,85	,759	.797
	Maintenance and cleanliness of the thermal pools	54	4,1	145	11,0	1115	84,9	4,27	,85	,761	
	Cleanliness of the private family pools	37	2,8	125	9,5	1152	87,7	4,34	,78	,721	
	Cleanliness of baths and saunas	53	4,0	171	13,0	1090	83,0	4,24	,84	,537	
Price	Competitiveness	63	4,8	194	14,8	1057	80,4	4,19	,93	,557	.764
	Medical services	80	6,1	305	23,2	929	70,7	3,97	,95	,796	
	Special services (massage, skin care, solarium, etc...)	99	7,5	298	22,7	917	69,8	4,00	,99	,715	
Personnel	Experience of the staff	60	4,6	122	9,3	1132	86,1	4,33	,87	,713	.792
	Knowledge level of the staff	69	5,3	114	8,7	1131	86,1	4,30	,90	,845	
	Understanding customers' psychology	65	4,9	167	12,7	1082	82,3	4,24	,91	,801	

In Table 3, introductory statistics are indicated for the loyalty levels of customers. It can be said that customers generally give a positive opinion (I completely agree with, I agree with) in each comment. Hence, this matter has been reflected on the arithmetic means calculated for the opinions related to this subject, and according to these findings, the arithmetic means calculated for each opinion is 4.0 or higher. Hence, it's possible to comment as "they show loyalty in high level for services provided" for customers of the thermal hotel enterprises in the survey.

Table 3: Descriptives on customer loyalty

Items	Negative (Definitely disagreed or disagreed)		Moderately agreed		Positive (Definitely agreed or agreed)		x̄	S.d.	Cronbach's Alpha
	f	%	f	%	f	%			
This thermal facility is my first preference	116	8.8	252	19.2	946	72.0	4.01	0.96	0.93
I would prefer to stay here due to the quality of the services offered, despite the high rates	85	6.5	317	24.1	912	69.4	3.97	0.91	
I would like to re-stay here, even though it is costly.	116	8.8	252	19.2	946	72.0	4.01	0.96	
I would like to revisit as long as the conditions are appropriate	88	6.7	325	24.7	901	68.6	3.95	0.92	
I will recommend this facility to other people	122	9.3	268	20.4	924	70.3	4.02	0.99	
I will inform other people about the high quality of services	125	9.5	277	21.1	912	69.4	4.02	1.00	
I prefer this facility even though I have encountered some problems.	116	8.8	252	19.2	946	72.0	4.01	0.96	

Table 3 reports the findings on customer loyalty. As in Table 2, the general means for each statement is 4, the lowest score is for the statement “I would like to revisit as long as the conditions are appropriate” ($\bar{x}=3.95$) and the highest ones are for the statements “I will recommend this facility to other people” and “I will

inform other people about the high quality of services” ($\bar{x}=4.02$). Considering the findings as a whole, it will not be wrong to say “there is high level of loyalty among the customers under consideration.”

Table 4: Correlation between service dimensions and loyalty

Service dimensions	Number of items	n	Loyalty r	p
Medical services	3	1314	0.564***	0.000
Physical attributes	6	1314	0.404***	0.000
Hygiene	4	1314	0.438***	0.000
Price	3	1314	0.672***	0.000
Personnel	3	1314	0.356**	0.004

** : $p < 0.01$ *** : $p < 0.001$

Table 4 reports the correlation coefficients between service dimensions and loyalty. There is positive and statistically significant correlation between the variables ($p < .01$). The highest three correlation coefficients of the service dimensions with loyalty are price ($r=.672$), medical services ($r=.564$) and hygiene ($r=.438$). There is moderate correlation among the variables.

In Table 5, results of the regression analysis indicates the influence of the service quality of thermal hotels on customer loyalty, and the multi-linear regression analysis applied has been found significant ($p < .001$).

Table 5: Variance Analysis for Multiple Linear Regression Model

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
1 Regression	364.112	5	72.82		
Residual	417.170	1308	0.31	228.32	0.000*
Total	781.282	1313			

* $p < 0.001$ Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty

Table 5 reports the result of variance analysis for multiple linear regression model on the effect of the service quality on customer loyalty. The finding is significant at $p < 0.001$. Below is the regression model using the coefficients in Table 6.

Table 6: Multiple Linear Regression Model Coefficients

Dimensions	B	Std. Error	t	p
(Constant)	0.076	0.018	1.479	0.042*
Medical services	0.232	0.039	6.195	0.000***
Physical attributes	0.179	0.019	3.281	0.023*
Hygiene	0.188	0.025	5.093	0.002**
Price	0.293	0.042	8.318	0.000***
Personnel	0.088	0.021	2.802	0.032*

** : $p < .01$ ** : $p < .01$ *** : $p < .001$ *Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty*

$Loyalty = .076 + Medical * .232 + physical\ attributes * .179 + hygiene * .188 + price * .293 + personnel * .088$

When the t values of the regression coefficients reported in Table 6 are examined, the variables increasing the customer loyalty in order of magnitude are price, medical services and hygiene, from highest to the lowest. These findings are in line with the correlation analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study has found that service quality and customer loyalty in thermal hotels is high. Also the study has revealed that service quality in thermal hotels significant impacts on customer loyalty. Thermal tourism in Afyonkarahisar as well as in other cities such as Kutahya, Denizli is flourishing rapidly; the number of thermal hotels' customers is on the increase, and new hotels are built in the region. In order to keep the present customer profile, thermal hotels should take the satisfaction levels of customers into consideration in order to compete with other thermal hotels. On the other hand, new hotels should also pay attention to customers' satisfaction for more customers (Emir and Saraçlı, 2011). Similar to Emir and Saraçlı (2011), Kim (2011) found out in his study that customer' decisions to remain loyal depend directly on their satisfaction and found that customers' perceptions of

service quality have an indirect influence on customer loyalty via customer satisfaction. As Emir and Kozak (2011) suggested in their study, the high level of customer turnover, requires a continuous administration of product development and improvement studies as well as a continuous measurement of the current performance of hospitality services on the basis of various indicators of service quality

Unless it is supported by efficient and to-the-point marketing efforts, the quality-based loyalty can not stand alone. The hotels under consideration offer nearly the same services and facilities. Offering more variety along with strengthened infrastructure could increase the appeal of the thermal hotels all over Turkey.

As for the limitation of the study, first, this paper covered only three cities in Turkey, which are Afyonkarahisar, Izmir and Denizli. Hence, it would serve better if the scope of similar studies were expanded. Secondly, seasonality is an important factor. A wider coverage of seasons is likely to yield healthier outcomes. Hence, it might be a good idea if prospective researchers take the above-mentioned points into consideration to obtain sound and robust conclusion.

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