



## European Business Review

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### Article information:

To cite this document:

Yvonne Lagrosen Stefan Lagrosen , (2016), "Customer perceptions of quality – a study in the SPA industry", *European Business Review*, Vol. 28 Iss 6 pp. 657 - 675

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/EBR-05-2016-0070>

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

Customer  
perceptions of  
quality

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Received 28 May 2016  
Revised 28 May 2016  
Accepted 15 August 2016

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this 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 following 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 following 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** – 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.

**Keywords** Service quality, Grounded theory, Quality dimensions, SPA hotels, SPA industry

**Paper type** 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



European Business Review  
Vol. 28 No. 6, 2016  
pp. 657-675

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited  
0955-534X  
DOI 10.1108/EBR-05-2016-0070

The authors wish to acknowledge the Swedish Knowledge Foundation for its valuable financial support.

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 (Guillemín *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 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 and 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 service 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 (SDL) of marketing 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 (Vargo and Lusch, 2006, p. 44):

- (1) the application of specialised skills and knowledge is the fundamental unit of exchange;
- (2) indirect exchange masks the fundamental unit of exchange;
- (3) goods are a 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; and
- (8) a service-centred 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 (Grönroos, 1990; Gummesson, 1993; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). Many studies have sought to conceptualise service quality theoretically, whereas some studies have addressed the issue of the use of actual quality management practices and values (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:

- (1) reliability;
- (2) responsiveness;
- (3) competence;
- (4) access;
- (5) courtesy;
- (6) communication;
- (7) credibility;
- (8) security;
- (9) understanding/knowing the customer; and
- (10) tangibles.

They were later condensed into the five more overarching dimensions:

- (1) reliability;
- (2) responsiveness;
- (3) assurance;
- (4) empathy; and
- (5) 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 have three sub-dimensions. They argue that the main dimensions of service quality are:

- (1) interaction quality, with the sub-dimensions attitude, behaviour and expertise;
- (2) physical environment quality, with the sub-dimensions ambient conditions, design and social factors; and
- (3) outcome quality, with the sub-dimensions 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 sub-components:

- (1) tangibles (with the dimensions explicit and implicit);
- (2) intangibles (with the dimensions interactive and interfacial); and
- (3) 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 and 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 (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 service management in the health-care sector have attracted significant research attention in recent years, but most studies have focused on traditional health care (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 multi-service 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 multi-service organisations to consider the customer-perceived overall quality because it determines the overall satisfaction. Service quality and customer satisfaction have 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 adaptation. 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 escaping from daily life as well as valuing health and rejuvenation.

Exploratory factor analysis was also used to identify the quality dimensions of food and beverage in Turkish SPA hotels (Giritlioglu *et al.*, 2014) The dimensions were found to be:

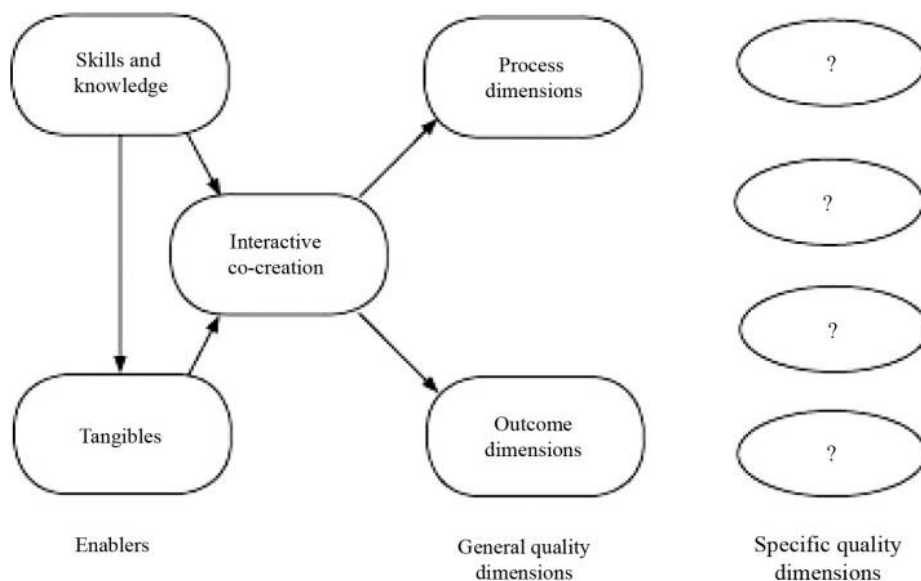
- assurance and employee knowledge;
- healthy and attractive food;
- empathy;
- tangibles;
- responsiveness of service delivery; and
- reliability.

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 following 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 1, the theoretical basis for the study is depicted.

In line with the SDL of marketing, we conclude that the skills and knowledge of the service provider are the basis for quality in services. They can be applied directly or mediated by tangible objects. This is then what enables quality. Nevertheless, again



**Figure 1.**  
A conceptual model  
of service quality  
dimensions



referring to the SDL 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 the customer experiences after the actual consumption has ended. 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 to provide valid and representative assessments. First, focus-group interviews with guests at each of the seven hotels were conducted 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 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 to have 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).

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, corresponding to a response rate of 46 per cent, 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 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). The scale went from 1 to 5 and concerned how important each aspect was for a SPA hotel visit with the end points *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; and 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),

SPA hotel	Location	Specific focus	No. 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 and fitness and training	7	1 h 35 min
Stenungsbaden Yacht Club	Seaside on the northern west coast	American east coast image and yachting	8	1 h 55 min
Varbergs Kurort	Seaside on the west coast	Traditional Swedish treatments such as seaweed baths and 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



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 to capture the views and ideas of the entire group of participants. The method has been used for research in many different settings (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 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 3 h 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 includes 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 concerns 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, friendly staff and beautiful environment with a feeling of luxury.
- *Smoothness*: 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 seeks for and expects during the visit.

These four dimensions were elaborated into 20 statements contained in the questionnaire (see Appendix. 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.

The items regarding the gym and training classes and 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, 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, because 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).

Item	Mean	SD	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, etc.	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

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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.

To examine the underlying structure of the findings, explanatory factor analysis was carried out. The results are presented in [Table IV](#).

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 to simplify the columns. Generally, loadings should be at least 0.5 to be considered significant ([Hair et al., 1998](#)). One item, regarding the possibility of choosing

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

Frequency of overnight stays	No. 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	0.6
Partial non-response	7	3.9

**Table IV.**  
The results from the factor analysis (only loadings above 0.5)

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	

**Notes:** Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization

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.

Because 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](#).

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](#).

Analysing the features of the different clusters, we labelled and described them as follows:

- *The more of everything group (19 per cent)*: This group considers everything to be very important while still emphasising low cost. This is not really feasible to combine because many of the items (e.g. gym, classes, treatments, health specialists and 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.
- *The enjoyers (31 per cent)*: 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, but 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.
- *The savers (25 per cent)*: 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

Factor	Mean	SD
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

interested in treatments, possibly because of the fact that those often are fairly expensive.

- *The fitness freaks (25 per cent)*: 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 to experience quality at your SPA hotel?

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

- (1) *Treatments* included that the customers get a natural, cordial and helpful treatment. They should feel uniquely treated and their expectations should preferably be exceeded.
- (2) *Climate* includes harmony and good cooperation among the personnel. The personnel, therefore, need to be healthy and not stressed to give the customer authentic smiles. The customers must feel safe with the staff and the environment.
- (3) *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, whereas the customers also include the long-term effect of a SPA visit and 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 of [Mak et al. \(2009\)](#) that relaxation and relief are considered to be most important factors for a SPA visit, 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, regarding some factors the benefits need to be weighed against the costs. For instance, luxury and freedom to choose treatments during the visit is expensive for the companies to provide.

The quality dimensions identified in this study are generally fairly different from the general quality dimensions proposed in the service marketing literature (Brady and Cronin, 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, whereas 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* as well as the *hedonists* and the *enjoyers* basically share the same characteristics. 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 SDL 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.

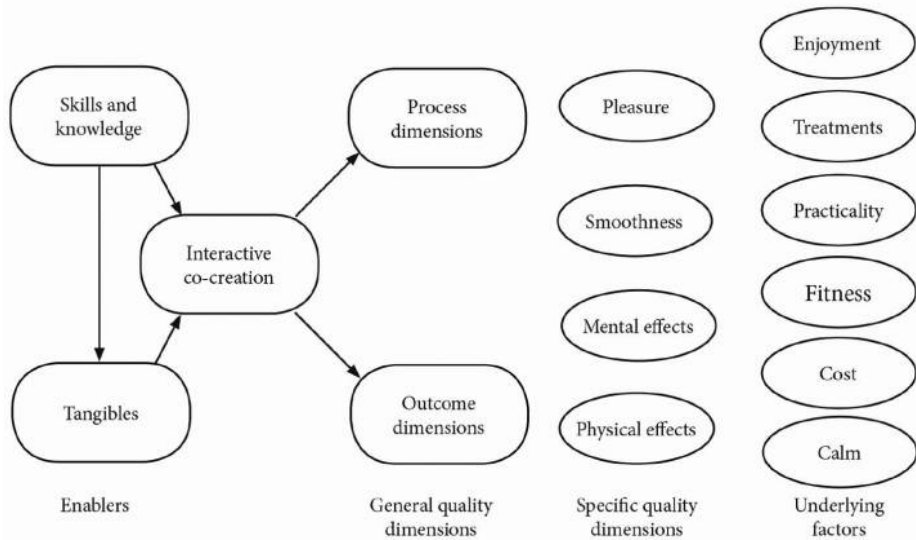
#### *A framework of quality dimensions in SPA hotels*

Figure 2 contains a framework in which the findings of the study are summarised. Based on the general model presented in Figure 1, this framework now includes the specific quality features of SPA hotels that were found in this study.

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 ends. 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 and for the conceptual understanding of service quality in this sector.





**Figure 2.**  
A framework of  
quality dimensions in  
SPA hotels

### *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. Because 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. Because 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 because gaps between expectation and perceptions also could help detecting weak points of SPA hotels. This could help them to build up 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 has 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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#### **Appendix. 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 or 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; and
- regularly, at least once a month.

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