

Understanding Dissatisfied Customers' Expectations of Spa Service Quality

Aswin Sangpikul

Dhurakij Pundit University, Thailand

aswin.sal@dpu.ac.th

Most studies examining customers' expectations of spa service quality are conducted through quantitative approaches, which have certain limitations for deeper understanding of what customers actually expect and perceive from the delivered services, particularly the unpleasant experiences. This research, therefore, has an objective to analyze customers' expectations and perceptions of spa service quality from online reviews in regard to spas in Bangkok by focusing on dissatisfied customers. Using an integrated method, the literature has been synthesized to form a framework with eight service dimensions to examine customers' expectations of spa service quality. Content analysis and descriptive statistics are employed to analyse the data. According to the findings, customers make complaints when the quality of service is lower than their expectations. Spas in Bangkok seem to have problems with service delivery in all service dimensions, particularly reliability, empathy and courtesy dimensions. In addition, the study has integrated eight service dimensions into three important constructs: service process, physical elements, and service outcomes. Overall, this study has advanced and contributed to the existing literature by employing eight service dimensions to more deeply understand dissatisfied customers' expectations of spa service quality, and also conceptualizes them into three meaningful constructs. Importantly, the people element and technology-based services can help to generate service innovation for the spa industry.

Keywords: spa, service quality, online complaints, negative reviews, Bangkok, TripAdvisor



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Introduction

Typically, customers compare perceptions with expectations when evaluating a company's service (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Understanding customers' expectations and perceptions is an important issue for a service provider because it is prerequisite for providing superior services (Parasuraman et al., 1991). In addition, examining this topic will help a service provider to understand its service performance from customer perspectives (Lo et al., 2015; Sangpikul, 2019). The spa industry is one of the leisure sectors and service-oriented businesses which mainly relies on the deliv-

ery of high service quality to provide customers with personalized services (Lo et al., 2015; Sangpikul, 2022). Spa customers generally judge the quality of delivered services through their expectations and perceptions. If the delivered service is higher than expectations, customers are likely to feel satisfied; in contrast, if the delivered service is below their expectations, this may result in service dissatisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988). To further understand customers' expectations and perceptions in the spa industry, there are three important issues established as the background of the research problems.

First, there are several studies examining customers' expectations and perceptions in the spa industry in various settings such as hotel/resort spas (Albayrak et al., 2017; Gonzalez & Fraiz Brea, 2005; Lo et al., 2015; Tsai et al., 2012), health spas (Alen et al., 2006; Loke et al., 2018; Snoj & Mumei, 2002; Bakirtzoglou et al., 2018), and day spas (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Sangpikul, 2019; Sulaiman et al., 2020). However, the review of literature indicates that most studies are conducted through quantitative approaches based on numeric findings. Quantitative studies generally reveal the relationships of the variables being examined with numeric interpretation (e.g. Snoj & Mumei, 2002; Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Sulaiman et al., 2020). Despite their advantages, the quantitative approaches still have some limitations in further understanding another side of service quality raised by dissatisfied customers regarding their unpleasant experiences or unmet services (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sangpikul, 2021). Customers who face unpleasant experiences are crucial for spa service providers because they are telling something about the delivered services which do not meet their expectations, causing customer dissatisfaction, service complaints, and negative word-of-mouth (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sangpikul, 2022). However, there are a few studies for further understanding another perspective of spa service quality from dissatisfied customers in the spa industry.

Second, given the availability of online information, understanding customers' expectations of spa service quality should not be limited to quantitative studies. Research indicates that online information has been widely regarded as another useful approach to better understand different phenomena which cannot be obtained by quantitative approaches (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sangpikul, 2021). In this regard, understanding dissatisfied customers' expectations of spa service quality through online reviews is worthy of further investigation because it may help to obtain important information from customers, leading to better service improvement and innovation. Unfortunately, there are limited attempts to implement the contextual approach to understand dissatisfied customers in the spa industry.

Third, past studies find that many negative reviews are sometimes unclear or even unfair for a service firm because of emotive or subjective characteristics of the review content (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sangpikul, 2021). The literature also indicates that a number of customers make their service evaluations based on personal emotions or feelings rather than the facts of the services (Lo et al., 2015; Sangpikul, 2022). In the spa setting, the non-factual judgments may make it difficult for service providers to identify the actual causes of customers' dissatisfaction and for subsequent service improvement. Therefore, examining the factual and non-factual opinions can assist spa managers to appropriately identify the causes of service problems and to enhance service improvements (Sangpikul, 2021). However, most studies tend to ignore or fail to further analyse customers' online complaints based on factual and non-factual judgments.

Given the above issues, this study is important because there is limited research to implement a contextual method to examine the actual expectations and perceptions of spa service quality of dissatisfied customers in the spa industry. Also, there is still inadequate literature to understand the characteristics of customers' online complaints based on factual and non-factual judgments in order to distinguish them for appropriate service improvement. To fulfil the research gaps, this study has the following objectives: (1) to analyze customer expectations and perceptions of spa service quality from negative reviews, (2) to classify negative reviews into factual and non-factual judgments, and (3) to identify the meaningful constructs for spa service quality. The findings of the study are expected to assist spa managers to better understand customers' expectations and perceptions in the spa industry (particularly the dissatisfied customers), and also help them to better correct the service mistakes for future service improvement. In addition, this study will advance the literature by analysing the negative reviews based on the synthesis of service quality literature in the spa industry. This qualitative approach is expected to supplement the quantitative studies to yield a better understanding of dissatisfied customers' expectations of spa service quality, and will also theoretically contribute to the spa literature.

Table 1 Past Studies Examining Spa Service Quality in Different Contexts

Studies employing SERVQUAL	Alen et al. (2006); Bakirtzoglou et al. (2018); Lo et al. (2015); Loke et al. (2018); Snoj and Mumel (2002); Sangpikul (2019, 2022); Sulaiman et al. (2020); Vryoni et al. (2017)	Reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, tangibles (SERVQUAL)
Studies employing modified models	Albayrak et al. (2017) Choi et al. (2015) Clemes et al. (2020) Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2016) Tsai et al. (2012)	Tangibility, competence & courtesy, credibility & safety Spa facility, spa programme, staff, uniqueness Interpersonal quality, environ. quality, admin. quality, technical quality Skills and knowledge, tangibles, process, outcome Environment, service experience, aug. service quality, value, reliability

Literature Review

Spa Business and Service Quality

Spa originally referred to health through water, and nowadays it generally refers to water-based services that offer health-related services such as body massages, facial/skin treatments, and additional services such as saunas and exercise courses (Hashemi et al., 2015; Lo et al., 2015; Sangpikul, 2022). Today, there are 7 major types of spas, namely, the resort and hotel spas, club spas, day spas, mineral spring spas, medical spas, cruise ship spas, and destination spas (International Spa Association, 2012 as cited in Sangpikul, 2022).

In general, spa establishments provide customers with a wide range of personal services in a calm, beautiful and relaxing atmosphere (Day Spa Association, 2008). Spa experiences, through a wide range of services (e.g. body massages, skin treatments, or other health-related services) not only provide customers with physical improvements, but also promote psychological well-being like rest and relaxation or stress-relief activities (Sundbo & Darmer, 2008). Spas are related to wellness tourism because they may be a part of tourists' leisure activities which help to promote their physical and mental well-being (Dimon, 2013). For example, tourists may spend their free time on spa services in order to enhance their well-being, such as body massages, skin treatments, and physical fitness. Customers usually judge the quality of spa services through the assessment of how well the delivered services meet or correspond to their expectations. In order to deliver the expected services, spa service providers need to rely on service quality (Lo et al., 2015; Sangpikul, 2019).

Service quality generally refers to an evaluation of how well a delivered service meets customer expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Understanding service quality can assist spa managers in delivering superior services to meet customer expectations, contributing to customer satisfaction, word-of-mouth communication, and loyalty (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Lo et al., 2015). One of the well-known instruments to access service quality is SERVQUAL, identified by Parasuraman et al. (1988). It is a global instrument aimed to access consumer expectations and perceptions of service performance based on 5 dimensions: (1) reliability, (2) empathy, (3) assurance, (4) responsiveness, and (5) tangibles. During the past decade, there have been several studies examining spa service quality based on various models which will be reviewed in the next section.

Studies about Spa Service Quality

In order to better understand customer expectations on spa service quality, Table 1 summarizes past studies from various settings. According to the literature review, related studies can be classified into two groups which are: (1) studies employing SERVQUAL and (2) studies employing modified models.

For the studies employing SERVQUAL, Alen et al. (2006), for example, examined customers' gaps between expectations and perceptions of Spanish spa establishments. They found that there were no significant differences between customer expectations and perceptions of the service quality delivered by spa establishments. Out of 22 attributes, there were 6 attributes rated higher than customer expectations:

Table 2 The Synthesis of Service Dimensions from Past Studies

Studies	Reliability	Response	Empathy	Assurance	Tangibles	Courtesy	Com.	Outcome
Bakirtzoglou et al. (2018); Lo et al. (2015); Loke et al. (2018); Snoj and Mumel (2002); Sangpikul (2019, 2021); Sulaiman et al. (2020); Vryoni et al. (2017)	•	•	•	•	•	-	-	-
Albayrak et al. (2017)	•	-	-	•	•	•	-	-
Choi et al. (2015)	•	•	-	-	•	•	-	-
Clemes et al. (2020)	•	•	-	-	•	•	•	-
Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2016)	•	-	-	-	•	-	-	•
Tsai et al. (2012)	•	•	•	•	•	-	•	-

natural surroundings, reputation, decoration, well located establishment, quiet place, and friendly employees. Likewise, Chieochankitkan and Sukpatch (2014) examined spa service quality in Thailand, and found that the level of actual service performance was higher than customers expected. All gaps between customer expectations and perceptions of spa service quality in all dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles) were found to be positive, implying customer satisfaction. Bakirtzoglou et al. (2018) used the SERVQUAL framework to examine which service dimensions were important to customer satisfaction from hotel spa managers' perspectives in Greece. Through factor analysis, the study identified the three most important dimensions: responsiveness, reliability, and tangibles.

In regard to the studies employing modified/extended models, Tsai et al. (2012), for example, identified the five service dimensions related to male consumers' perceived performance of Hong Kong Hotel spas, namely: environment, service experience, augmented service quality, value, and reliability. The environment dimension was found to be the important factor that significantly influenced respondents' satisfactions with hotel spa services. A study by Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2016) examined customer perceptions of quality in hotel spas by identifying four specific dimensions: smoothness, pleasure, physical effects, and mental effects. The study indicated that smoothness and pleasure were the process dimensions by concern-

ing customer experience during the consumption of the service while physical and mental effects were the outcome dimension by concerning customer experience after the service.

Although there are several studies examining customer expectations and/or perceptions of spa service quality in various settings, they are conducted through quantitative approaches with certain limitations. The quantitative studies generally rely on the relationships between the variables being examined and the numeric findings. They still lack opportunities to further understand customers from different perspectives, particularly the dissatisfied customers. What makes customers feel dissatisfied with the services may not be similar to the findings identified by the quantitative studies. Importantly, dissatisfied customers have freedom to share the information about their unmet services, helping spa managers to obtain wider feedback in regard to their service weaknesses (Barlow & Moller, 2008; Sangpikul, 2022). As such, examining the feedback from dissatisfied customers may provide important implications for the spa industry. Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of literature to further investigate this important issue in the spa industry.

Framework to Understand Customers' Expectations of Spa Service Quality

As there are two groups of studies examining customers' expectations and/or perceptions of spa ser-

vice quality, it is better to combine or synthesize them to obtain a thorough understanding about spa service quality in the setting of dissatisfied customers because they may share a wide range of service quality issues from their actual experiences. Table 2 presents the synthesis of related literature from various settings to obtain relevant service dimensions for the current study. The service dimensions being employed in each study are separately analysed, and finally they are combined to be the framework for this study. Through the analysis of literature, only 8 suitable dimensions are identified to examine customers' expectations of spa service quality, namely, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, tangibles, courtesy, communication, and outcome.

Methodology

This study aims to examine the negative reviews regarding spa service providers in Bangkok. Most reviews are posted online from foreign customers (mainly international tourists) who had spa service experiences in Bangkok. After the spa services, they might wish to write something about their unpleasant experiences through travel review websites, and this is worthy of further investigation to better understand service problems. There are 4 steps for the research methodology adapted from past studies (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sangpikul, 2019): (1) identifying spa service providers, (2) selecting a travel review website, (3) setting the criteria for data collection, and (4) conducting data analysis.

Firstly, spa service providers were identified. Bangkok was selected as an area of investigation because it is the most important tourist city in Thailand. A source of information about spa service providers is available through the Ministry of Public Health which is in charge of promoting wellness businesses in Thailand. According to the Ministry of Public Health (2020), there were 102 registered day spas in Bangkok.

Secondly, TripAdvisor was selected as a source for data analysis because it is an important and useful travel website providing a number of reviews regarding hospitality and tourism products (Au et al., 2014; Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015). Related studies employed TripAdvisor as their source of secondary

data to examine service quality in service industries including spa business (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sangpikul, 2019; Sparks & Browning, 2010).

Thirdly, the criteria to select the reviews were adapted from previous work (e.g. Au et al., 2014; Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sangpikul, 2019; Zheng et al., 2009) as follows:

1. Names of spas were found through TripAdvisor.com.
2. Spas with 3 or more reviews were included in the data analysis.
3. Online reviews in the English language were selected, and they were collected from 'poor to terrible' scales.
4. The reviews were carefully examined by focusing on spa service quality; non-relevant contents were excluded from the analysis.
5. Data were covered for a one-year period.

At the time of data collection in August 2021, there were 102 registered day spas in Bangkok. However, only 94 spas met the study's criteria, and there were 312 negative reviews with 845 scripts relevant to spa service quality.

Finally, content analysis was used to analyse the data as it is appropriate for a systematic coding and categorizing method used for analysing textual information to determine patterns of words, phrases and the structures of communication (Mayring, 2000; Stemler, 2001). In particular, this method can help the researcher to analyse specific observations and to identify meaningful themes in relation to spa service quality (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sangpikul, 2022).

Data were analysed based on the related literature. For example, data coding was undertaken by hand to categorize the online reviews by focusing on words, phrases, and sentences (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015). Data were carefully examined to ensure validity and consistency in measurement (Lombard et al., 2002). Data were analysed and coded by the researcher through a pilot test with approximately 30 reviews. TripAdvisor was used as the source of data. During the coding process, codes were set for the patterns or themes of the messages (Sparks & Browning, 2010), and later they were categorized into appropri-

Table 3 The Analysis of Customers' Expectations and Perceptions from Negative Reviews

Dimensions	Examples of negative reviews	Expectations	Perceptions
1. Reliability 304 (36%)	'The massage skill is really very disappointed, very lousy skill which unexpected' 'So disappointed on the masseuse skill, compared to outside massage' 'The works pedicure was meant to be a deluxe pedicure which includes: cleanse, trim, deep moisturize, color, exfoliate & massage reflexology points. What we got was bits of some and no reflexology massage' 'Our treatment ended 20 minutes earlier. Didn't feel like a relaxing massage cause it was rushed throughout' 'My masseuse spent most of the 1 hour 45 minutes (when it should've been 2 hours, I checked the clock in the room)'	Skilful/experienced therapists Provisions of standard services Delivery of promised services	Receiving the services from unskilled or unprofessional therapists Receiving services below the standard Receiving unpromised services
2. Empathy 169 (20%)	'Of the three areas I asked the therapist to focus on, she did one and forgot the other two' 'I ordered a Royal Thai massage very strong but it was more a very soft given by a sweet, very inexperienced masseuse' 'Before the massage, you will be given a form to fill to state the areas to be focused, unfortunately the massage staff does not really understand and they do not focus where it should be'	Understanding of customer needs/requests Offering personalized services	Ignorance of customer requests Ignorance of delivering personalized services
3. Courtesy 135 (16%)	'At the desk, there is no traditional Thai welcome or smile, it feels more like a business transaction' 'Everyone was very inconsiderate and acted like they did not even want the business' 'Receptionist is not friendly, no smile'	Friendly/courteous staff Welcoming reception	Meeting unfriendly or uncourteous employees
4. Responsiveness 77 (9%)	'Our booking was 8.00 p.m. We reach the spa at 7.45 p.m. and brought to a room around 8.00pm. The masseurs only come in at 8.30pm' 'It was confusing for me since the spa itself seems very upscale and would have trained their staff in providing proper customer service in which one is trying to help the customer make the best decision. We didn't book anything and left in search of somewhere else'	Provision of prompt services Willingness to help customers	Delayed services Unhelpful employees

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ate themes and dimensions. For example, a statement such as 'So disappointed on the masseuse skill, compared to outside massage' was classified into the reliability dimension, whereas a statement like 'Of the three areas I asked the therapist to focus on, she did one and forgot the other two' was categorized into the empathy dimension. The coding scheme and review categories were carefully re-checked and refined by the researcher to ensure the categorization process (Au et al., 2014; Sangpikul, 2022). Descriptive statistics were employed to describe the data in terms of frequencies and percentage.

Findings and Discussions

General Information of Spa Reviews

Based on 312 negative reviews about spas in Bangkok, 36% were posted by Asian tourists, 32% by European, 14% by tourists from other regions (e.g. North America and Australia), and 18% did not provide any information.

Analysing Customers' Expectations and Perceptions from Negative Reviews

Table 3 analyses customers' expectations and perceptions of spa service quality from negative reviews.

Table 3 Continued from the previous page

Dimensions	Examples of negative reviews	Expectations	Perceptions
5. Service outcomes 60 (7%)	'Other scrubs were too rough, left scars on my legs even after a week. So the scrub didn't make my skin smooth at all' 'Most of the staffs did not know what they are doing. I don't feel any better after their massage' 'I just feel painful during the massage'	Favourable physical/mental outcomes	Unfavourable physical or mental outcomes
6. Tangibles 51 (6%)	'My husband and I had to join 5 other females and males in the same room with no form of partitions between us. So you can imagine how tensed one will be. What a disturbing experience' 'It was also peculiar that our masseuses would talk/laugh to each other during the massage so it wasn't as quiet/relaxing as I would have liked it to be' 'I had a severe problem with the air-con, it was so loud that no relaxing atmosphere was possible. The masseuse stopped three times and tried to fix it but without success' 'The room temperature was unacceptable, it was too warm'	Service privacy Good maintenance of facilities Pleasant/relaxing atmosphere Customer security	Lack of customer privacy Noise disturbance Poor maint. of facilities Less pleasant atmosphere Cust. belongings security
7. Assurance 32 (4%)	'The water in the foot bath was very dirty' 'Not sure if it is sanitized properly. No hand gel for customers. Masseuse has no proper masks. They wear cloth mask that doesn't protect customers' 'I had face and head massages. When her fingers touched my face I realized they were smelling of onions and garlic' 'The aroma smell is artificial and cheap quality'	Cleanliness of venue/facilities Hygiene of staff and equipment Quality of products	Uncleanliness of facilities Less hygienic practices Low quality product
8. Communication 17 (2%)	'I had a very bad experience massage experience here. The herbal compress was very hot which hurts me. I've told her I don't like it and stop it. But she said she don't understand and keep doing' 'I understand the language barrier, but instead of telling me what she wants me to do, she would pull my leg or body not so gently when she needs to position it' 'The service was poor because the therapist was unable to speak English, so a bit communication breakdown'	Communicating with customers during service delivery Basic English communication	Poor communication with customers Poor English communication

Notes N = 845.

Based on the findings, it is suggested that customers had various expectations of spa service quality. Among 8 dimensions, reliability, empathy, and responsiveness received more reviews than any other dimensions. This suggests that customers had high expectations of these attributes (e.g. skilful therapists, understanding customer needs, and provision of prompt services). But when the performance of these attributes was below their expectations, this resulted in service dissatisfaction and negative reviews. The findings are similar to past studies indicating that customers generally expect all service components from service

providers, including pre-services, during services, and post-services (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Sangpikul, 2019). In particular, they had high expectations of certain dimensions like reliability and empathy because they expected to receive professional and personalized services from spa service providers (Lo et al., 2015; Sangpikul, 2019). This finding may help to extend spa service literature as most past studies generally give the results of customers' expectations based on 5 dimensions of SERVQUAL. However, this study has disclosed that customers may have a wide range of service expectations including 8 different service

dimensions. This finding may provide an implication for spa managers to better understand various aspects of customers' expectations of spa service quality. With the advantages of contextual analysis, the findings help to better understand what customers actually expect and perceive through their written messages when compared to the quantitative studies. In addition to the 5 original dimensions, spa managers now may need to understand additional service dimensions, namely, employee courtesy, communication, and service outcomes. These findings suggest that customers expect and perceive all dimensions during spa service delivery.

In addition, this study has given another important finding regarding service outcomes. The service outcomes here refer to what customers feel after the completion of spa services (e.g. skin beauty, muscle relief or relaxation). Based on the findings, customers reviewed the service outcomes (either physical or mental) which did not meet their expectations. This suggests that, in addition to customer-employee interaction, customers had expectations of the end results of spa services. The finding helps to identify an existence of service outcomes as expected by spa customers. The finding regarding spa service outcomes has rarely been discussed and examined in past studies (e.g. Gonzalez & Fraiz Brea, 2005; Loke et al., 2018). This may be a drawback of the quantitative studies which fail to obtain another side of service information from dissatisfied customers when compared to a contextual analysis. The current study has identified another new finding regarding spa service outcomes through a contextual method, thereby extending the spa service literature. This provides evidence and implications for spa managers to fully understand that customers expect to experience service outcomes from spa services either physically and/or mentally. It is a responsibility of the spa manager to train their employees to provide customers with personalized services and expected service outcomes.

Classifying Negative Reviews into Factual and Non-Factual Judgments

Table 4 classifies the negative reviews into factual and non-factual judgments based on a service qual-

ity framework. The study has found that all negative reviews regarding spa service quality can be classified into two categories: factual and non-factual judgments. According to the findings, approximately 58% of the negative reviews ($n = 488$) fall into non-factual judgments (emotional judgments) while 42% are in the objective category or factual judgments ($n = 357$). A factual judgment is, for example, 'Of the three areas I asked the therapist to focus on, she did one and forgot the other two,' whereas, a non-factual judgment is a statement like 'The massage skill is really very disappointed, very lousy skill which unexpected [sic]'. The findings are consistent with the literature, indicating that most service evaluations generally rely on customers' subjective opinions (emotions) rather than their objective judgments (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sangpikul, 2022).

This finding may help to extend the online complaint literature as most past studies fail to examine this special characteristic of e-complaints (electronic complaints), and little is known about factual and non-factual judgments in regard to spa service quality. In particular, the quantitative studies cannot reveal such findings due to the limitations of numeric interpretation. Based on the current finding, it helps to extend the service literature in that online complaints may be classified into factual and non-factual judgments. This also gives an implication for spa managers. For example, the factual judgments are likely to help spa managers to identify the causes of customer dissatisfaction more easily than the non-factual judgments due to the facts of the services (not customers' emotions). Now spa managers can distinguish between the factual and non-factual judgments when exploring customers' negative reviews, which also helps them to prioritize service corrections accordingly.

Identifying the Service Construct for Spa Service Quality

As there are 8 different service dimensions being identified from Tables 3 and 4, it is better to combine them to thoroughly understand the service constructs for future implementations or conceptualization regarding spa service quality. Based on Table 5, some dimensions are similar to each other as they are related to ser-

Table 4 Classifying Negative Reviews into Factual and Non-Factual Judgments

Dimensions	Examples of factual judgments (<i>n</i> = 357)	Examples of non-factual judgments (<i>n</i> = 488)
1. Reliability <i>n</i> = 304	130 (43%) 'My masseuse spent most of the 1 hour 45 minutes (when it should've been 2 hours, I checked the clock in the room)'	174 (67%) 'The massage skill is really very disappointed, very lousy skill which unexpected'
2. Empathy <i>n</i> = 169	77 (45%) 'Of the three areas I asked the therapist to focus on, she did one and forgot the other two'	92 (55%) 'I ordered a Royal Thai massage very strong but it was more a very soft given by a sweet, very inexperienced masseuse'
3. Courtesy <i>n</i> = 135	44 (22%) 'At the desk, there is no traditional Thai welcome or smile, it feels more like a business transaction'	91 (68%) 'Everyone was very inconsiderate and acted like they did not even want the business'
4. Responsiveness <i>n</i> = 77	45 (59%) 'Our booking was 8.00 p.m. We reach the spa at 7.45 p.m. and brought to a room around 8.00pm. The masseurs only come in at 8.30pm'	32 (41%) 'It was confusing for me since the spa itself seems very upscale and would have trained their staff in providing proper customer service in which one is trying to help the customer make the best decision'
5. Outcomes <i>n</i> = 60	22 (36%) 'Other scrubs were too rough, left scars on my legs even after a week. So the scrub didn't make my skin smooth at all'	38 (64%) 'Most of the staffs did not know what they are doing. I don't feel any better after their massage'
6. Tangibles <i>n</i> = 51	24 (48%) 'There were no lockers, personal belongings were in same room, be careful'	27 (52%) 'The room temperature was unacceptable, it was too warm'
7. Assurance <i>n</i> = 32	9 (28%) 'Room was dirty, I killed 2 cockroaches. Towels are grey and overused'	23 (72%) 'The aroma smell is artificial and cheap quality'
8. Communication <i>n</i> = 17	6 (32%) 'I had a very bad experience massage experience here. The herbal compress was very hot which hurts me. I've told her I don't like it and stop it. But she said she don't understand and keep doing'	11 (68%) 'She's unable to speak English, so a bit communication breakdown'

Notes *N* = 845.

vice process or employee-customer interaction (i.e. reliability, responsiveness, empathy) while the others are not directly related to the service process, for example, tangibles, physical assurance, and service outcomes. According to Table 5, the first construct relating to the service process includes reliability, responsiveness, empathy, courtesy, and communication. The reason to group these dimensions together is because they mainly involve employee-customer interaction. The literature supports this argument as most SERVQUAL

dimensions focus on the process of the services because they occur during service interaction between employees and customers (Alen et al., 2006; Ekinci, 2002). The findings from Table 5 can also explain this argument because customers mentioned these dimensions when they interacted with spa employees. In this regard, they are appropriately grouped together under the construct of service process.

In contrast, tangibles identified in the current findings mainly involve the physical elements (e.g. atmo-

Table 5 The Analysis and Identification of Service Construct/Framework of Spa Service Quality

Examples of reviews	Expectations	Service dim.	Construct
'I feel the therapist is less experienced in the massage. She used her hands very hard on my legs, very painful'	Skilful/experienced therapists	Reliability	Service process
'My masseuse spent most of the 1 hour 45 minutes (when it should've been 2 hours, I checked the clock in the room)'	Delivery of promised services		
'Our booking was 8.00 p.m. We reach the spa at 7.45 p.m. and brought to a room around 8.00pm. The masseurs only come in at 8.30pm'	Provision of prompt services	Responsiveness	Service process
'I felt that spa manager looked unwilling to help me with my change of booking'	Helpful staff		
'Of the three areas I asked the therapist to focus on, she did one and forgot the other two'	Understanding customer needs	Empathy	Service process
'I ordered a Royal Thai massage very strong but it was more a very soft given by a sweet, very inexperienced masseuse'	Delivery of personalised services		
'At the desk, there is no traditional Thai welcome or smile, it feels more like a business transaction'	Friendly/courteous staff	Courtesy	Service process
'Staff are not friendly at all, no one told us where to go after payment. When you ask them, they were not helpful or friendly especially the front desk'			
'I understand the language barrier, but instead of telling me what she wants me to do, she would pull my leg or body not so gently when she needs to position it'	Communicating with customers	Communication	Service process
'The service was poor because the therapist was unable to speak English, so a bit communication breakdown'			
'The room temperature was unacceptable, it was too warm'	Pleasant/relaxing atmosphere	Tangibles	Physical elements
'There were no lockers, personal belongings were in same room, be careful'	Security of bel.		
'The water in the foot bath was very dirty'	Cleanliness of venue and facilities	Physical assurance	Physical elements
'Room was dirty, I killed 2 cockroaches. Towels are grey and overused'			
'Other scrubs were too rough, left scars on my legs even after a week. So the scrub didn't make my skin smooth at all'	Physical/mental outcomes	Service outcomes	Service outcomes
'The place was very loud so I couldn't exactly relax'			

sphere, availability of facilities) rather than the service process. They are better grouped separately as 'tangibles' or 'physical' elements. Past studies in hotel studies also separate tangibles as an individual dimension, not being combined in the service process (Alexandris et al., 2006; Wu & Ko, 2013). In relation to assurance, this dimension is a little complicated because its meaning is broad and has not been well defined. 'Assurance' has been criticized in the literature as it seems to be unclearly perceived by many customers (Olorunniwo et al., 2003). Likewise, in a spa setting, assurance could be interpreted differently by

customers and spa practitioners. Consequently, the current study defines assurance in terms of *physical assurance* which refers to the basic services helping to create customers' trust and confidence when using core products. Physical assurance items are, for example, venue cleanliness, equipment hygiene, and customer privacy and security. Physical assurance as identified in this study is supported by past studies (Lo et al., 2015; Sangpikul, 2019) as they measured spa assurance in terms of venue cleanliness and customer privacy and security.

For service outcomes, this attribute is mainly con-

cerned with what customers feel after the completion of spa services either physically and/or mentally. People go to spas for specific or personal purposes; they certainly expect to receive the spa service outcomes that they wish. The current findings support this argument well because customers wrote negative reviews when their expectations of service outcomes were unmet. This may significantly affect the business as many customers indicated that they would neither recommend nor re-patronize the services. There is still limited literature to investigate this important attribute, and to examine it in relation to spa service quality (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2016). Therefore, service outcomes are an important result obtained by the present study, and should be regarded as a major construct for spa service quality due to the empirical evidence.

Overall, this study has identified the new findings (new knowledge) regarding the construct or framework of spa service quality through the contextual method. The construct of spa service quality consists of 3 primary components which are: service process, physical elements, and service outcomes. This finding extends the existing literature. Past studies generally examine spa service quality based on the established frameworks by containing 3–6 service dimensions (based on Table 2). There is a lack of research to identify and conceptualize the overall construct or framework of spa service quality. This finding not only contributes to the service literature but also gives important implications for spa managers and employees. The new findings suggest that when customers judge the quality of spa services, they are likely to evaluate these 3 components through their expectations and perceptions. The findings may help spa managers and employees more deeply understand what customers expect and perceive during spa services, and may help them to do their best to respond to customers' needs and expectations.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

Firstly, the current study helps to better understand customers' expectations and perceptions of spa service quality through dissatisfied customers, and goes beyond the SERVQUAL model. Most studies employ

SERVQUAL to assess spa service quality in various settings; however, SERVQUAL has been criticized for its weakness in being fully applicable to a specific service industry, including the spa industry. In particular, several scholars (e.g. Akbaba, 2006; Ekinci, 2002) criticize that SERVQUAL focuses on the process of service delivery, not the service outcomes. This may be because SERVQUAL's conceptualization was originally developed from finance and banking businesses, not the leisure sector. The service industries being examined by Parasuraman et al. (1988) did not concentrate on the service outcomes due to the different nature of service characteristics. However, spa services are distinct from other service industries as people go to spas for specific purposes, and certainly expect to receive physical and/or mental outcomes. Given the findings of service outcomes, the present study, therefore, overcomes the weaknesses of SERVQUAL and goes beyond it by providing empirical evidence regarding customers' expectations of spa service outcomes. Following the existing literature (Table 1), there is still a scarcity of research to fully understand service outcomes in the spa industry. With the advantages of contextual analysis, the current study has identified the existence of service outcome, and its construct, helping to extend the service literature in the spa industry.

Secondly, the current study has conceptualized spa service quality by proposing 3 important constructs: service process, physical elements and service outcomes. Among the 3 constructs, it is shown that most SERVQUAL dimensions are combined into the service process construct while physical assurance and tangibles are combined in the physical construct, followed by the service outcome construct. This conceptualization suggests that SERVQUAL is not adequately or fully applicable for assessing and understanding customers' expectations of spa service quality, particularly the service outcomes.

Thirdly, the 8 dimensions being examined in the current study can make further contributions to the quantitative studies. It is suggested that all dimensions can be implemented in the quantitative studies to better understand the relationships between service quality perceptions and customer satisfactions and loyalty. Many studies often employ 5 dimensions of

SERVQUAL (reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles) to examine the impacts of service quality on customer satisfaction and behaviour intentions (e.g. Lo et al., 2015; Vryoni et al., 2017). There is still limited knowledge regarding understanding how other service dimensions identified from the current study (i.e. courtesy, communication and service outcomes) impact those dependent variables.

Fourthly, the construct of service outcomes can help to advance the existing literature, particularly the quantitative studies. This is because service outcomes are a special variable as it may be added to or modified to be an independent or even dependent variable. Past studies indicate the impacts of service outcomes on customer satisfaction and loyalty in other service industries such as banks and hospitals (Choi & Kim, 2013; Hsieh & Hiang, 2004). Unfortunately, this important variable, like the service outcomes, is still under-researched in the spa sector. This may provide an important clue for future spa studies.

Finally, the current study supports Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) conceptualization in that customers judge a firm's service through their expectations and perceptions based on an expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm. This is true in a wellness tourism sector such as the spa industry, based on the current findings. Past studies often criticize the gaps model of *SERVQUAL* (performance-expectation gaps) by arguing that there is little evidence that customers assess service quality based on performance-expectation gaps (Akbaba, 2006; Olorunniwo et al., 2003). However, the present study has shared the contextual findings that most spa customers had expectations when using spa services in various dimensions. When the delivered services did not meet customers' expectations, they were likely to be dissatisfied and wrote negative reviews. This suggests that spa customers make service evaluations based on their expectations and perceptions as postulated by Parasuraman et al. (1985). The evidence from this study confirms the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm in the wellness tourism.

Managerial Implications

Firstly, service process: there are 5 dimensions involving the service process (i.e. courtesy, responsiveness,

reliability, empathy, communication). These dimensions may help spa managers and employees to better understand what elements customers expect for the service process (people performance), and to train their employees appropriately. For example, the courtesy element: when customers arrive at the spa venue, they expect to meet courteous and friendly employees, including receptionists and therapists. Spa employees should be well trained to provide customers with a warm welcome and friendly atmosphere during the whole process. In regard to responsiveness, many customers talked about the delay of services in their reviews; this suggests that customers are really concerned about the provision of prompt services when they arrive, and also expect to receive such services, beginning from receptionists to spa therapists. For reliability, customers not only expect professional services from skilful therapists, but also expect the promised services to start and finish on time (e.g. 1-hour service, not 50-minute service). Research shows that reliability (skills of therapists) is one of the most important factors contributing to customer satisfaction (Lo et al., 2015; Sangpikul, 2021). Spa managers should focus on this element by recruiting skilled and experienced therapists to provide customers with professional services (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Lo et al., 2015). A regular or intensive training programme for less skilled or new therapists is also suggested to enhance their skills (Sangpikul, 2019). As for empathy, spa therapists should keep in mind that different customers have different personal needs due to their health-related problems or personal preferences. They should be trained to deliver the personalized services that meet customer expectations. Regarding communication, spa employees are expected to communicate with locals and foreign customers regarding various issues, for example, explaining spa programmes, answering customers' questions, and communicating with customers during the services or even listening to customers' personal requests. They should be well trained to have good communication with customers. For communication in English, employees with poor English communication may affect service performance and customers' expectations of service delivery, causing customer dissatisfaction. It

is important for spa managers to recruit spa employees with proper qualifications and a good knowledge of English in order to communicate with foreign customers and deliver the services as customers expect (Sangpikul, 2019).

Secondly, physical elements: there are sub-categories under this issue, for example, atmosphere, equipment/facilities, and physical assurance. In addition to the service process, customers also expect physical elements from spa establishments, particularly the maintenance of equipment/facilities and physical assurance (e.g. cleanliness, customer privacy). As most physical elements are not directly relevant to service process, they are generally the responsibility of the management team or even spa owners (buying high-tech equipment). It is suggested that spa managers and supervisors should regularly attend to all tangible related issues to ensure that these attributes complement well the consumption of core products.

Thirdly, service outcomes: customers go to spas for specific purposes, and certainly expect to receive either physical and/or mental outcomes, for example, skin beauty, muscle relief, stress relief, and relaxation. Based on the findings, there are several causes of customer dissatisfaction that can be related to spa service outcomes, for instance, inexperienced therapists, ignorance of customer requests/needs, or employee etiquette (noise disturbance). Spa managers should realize these causes and attempt to obtain customer feedback about their perceptions of spa service outcomes to improve the services to meet customer expectations. Various approaches can be implemented to obtain such information, for example, surveys, opinion boxes, interviews or online reviews. Customers receiving the favourable service outcomes they expect are likely to re-patronize the business.

Fourthly, examining the factual and non-factual judgments from online reviews can help spa managers to better understand the nature of service feedback given by dissatisfied customers regarding their unpleasant experiences or unmet service. Spa managers can now distinguish the characteristics of emotional judgments from factual feedback, and can prioritize actions for service recovery, particularly the ones given by the fact-based evidence (Sangpikul, 2021).

Finally, to stay competitive and be a leading spa establishment in the market, in-depth understanding of certain service dimensions and technology may help to generate service innovation in the spa industry. For example, physical elements such as high-tech equipment may provide service innovation by giving better/superior services. Further, training a professional therapist (reliability dimension) by using high-tech equipment or facilities (physical elements) helps to generate service innovation in the spa industry (a combination of human and technology services), thereby giving competitive advantages. In addition, the high-tech equipment (physical elements) may help to enhance customers' physical outcomes such as skin beauty treatments.

Limitations

This study explored only registered day spas in Bangkok, which included all types of day spas such as hotel spas, luxurious spas, and ordinary spas. Customers' expectations and perceptions of spa service quality may be different based on spa categories, and may affect customer reviews. Future research may investigate similar spa establishments as well as increase the number of samples and locations of investigation to provide more accurate information and to cross-validate what this study has found. In addition, the secondary data collected from online sources should be conducted with caution because some information may not be fully accurate or credible because anyone can write the reviews or post incorrect or fake information (Sparks & Browning, 2010; Zheng et al., 2009). It is suggested to consider guidelines from past studies, and collect many reviews from different/various sources (e.g. service providers, websites, destinations) to help to enhance the credibility of the studies (Sangpikul, 2021; Sparks & Browning, 2010).

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