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Hard job: Defining job descriptions and responsibilities of basketball managers a case study of Turkey

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Abstract

Sport clubs consist of simple or complex organizational structures that have typical properties of social organizations. For a sport club to continue its existence and to be managed effectively, the club needs specialised human resources and personnel with necessary training. Additionally, it can easily be stated that current sports do not allow an improvisational management style due to the complex structure of them and demands of professionals and that there are different duty and responsibility distribution within unique hierarchical structures of each sport club. It is possible express that general managers, working for basketball clubs or in basketball departments of sport clubs, have important roles at managerial level. However, there are no written scientific materials in Europe regarding job definition, scope of responsibility/authority, and competence of basketball managers. Well-defined job description should meet the priorities and needs of an organisation. Therefore, in basketball clubs, it is important to develop job description for general managers. Within this scope, the purpose of this study was to determine occupational definitions, duty-responsibility fields, and competences of basketball general managers working in teams competing in Turkish Men's Basketball Super League and Turkish Men's Basketball League. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with total of 10 general managers. Obtained data were coded compliant with content analysis methods and divided into themes. In this context, total of 41 codes were created under 7 themes. Based on these codes and themes, it was found that general managers are individuals who have different roles to act as a bridge to provide happiness of team and organisation, who act in almost all stages of various management process within the club, who put efforts for all work and operation solutions, who have various personal competence in addition to certain level of sportive, education, management history, and who are generally responsible towards president and board of directors.

Keywords: General manager, basketball, basketball management.

INTRODUCTION

Especially since 1990s, sport has become a global, attractive industry with fans and wide range of opportunities for business development (Westerbeek, 2010). Concordantly, sections within sport industry have been developing and changing with social changes. Sport clubs that has an important place within this industry are identified as the main institutions to emphasise sports in social life, to realise social integration and make this integration permanent, and for organisation of sports (Masteralexis et al., 2005: 167). Sport clubs that have functions such as to identify national-regional identity, strengthen this identity, to answer socio-cultural and economic needs of the society, to unite players for a common goal can keep up to date such functions thanks to their own dynamics (Baloğlu and Davutoğlu, 2009:83).

Sport clubs consist of simple or complex organizational structures that has typical properties of social organizations (Andersen, 2011). For a sport club to continue its existence and effectively managed, the club needs specialised human resources and personnel with necessary training. Today, complex structure of sports and professional demands prevent improvisational management style (Simeva, 2015). At this point, although each sport club has different organisational structure, it could be stated that each club has unique hierarchical structure, different task and responsibility distributions (Michaela et al., 2014). Within this context, clubs put efforts to clearly identify and define tasks and responsibilities of personnel in this organisational structure for effective and efficient management (Robinson, 2010; Acimovic et al., 2013). Constantly increasing interest towards sports and diversification of this interest with inclusion of various sectors mobilise sport institutions/organisations towards growth and development (Beech and Chadwick, 2004:5; Covell et al., 2007:2). This leads increasing demands of sport federations and clubs to have sport managers with occupational competence (Horch and Schutte, 2003).

Generally, sport club employees can be analysed under two groups as managers and technical personnel. Technical personnel in sport clubs are individuals who work towards performance and managers are individuals with responsibilities and authority to direct activities of their subordinates i.e. technical personnel (Parks et al., 1998: 175-179). Additionally, it is possible to talk about a hierarchical structure under certain task/responsibility framework for sport club organisation (Parks et al., 1998: 175-179; Robinson, 2010; Acimovic et al., 2013). In the most general sense, structure for related hierarchy is shown in Figure 1.
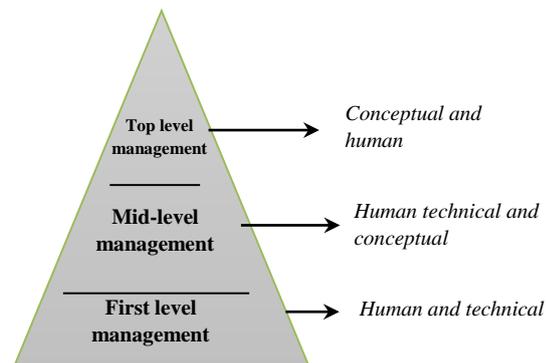
Figure 1. General hierarchical structure of sport clubs (Robinson, 2010)

Some managers in sport clubs are as follows (Parks et al.,1998: 175-179);

o President
o CEO (Chief executive officer)
o Site Managers
o Regional Directors
o Team Manager
o Coordinators (Supervisors)
o General Managers
o Sportive Director

When studies at international literature were reviewed (Parks et al.; 1998: 175-179; Wong and Deubert, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Wong and Deubert, 2011; Acimovic, 2013), it can be seen that managers are at

top level and mid level management (Figure 1) within sport club structure. Managers can be defined as individuals that affect current and future state of a sport club and individuals who are authorised to plan personnel policy as well as management of these policies. Based on this fact, for general managers working under basketball clubs or under basketball branch of sport clubs, it is possible express that these managers have important roles at managerial level.

Basketball managers can be considered as individuals who are devoted to coordination of various works in basketball clubs and basketball branches of sport clubs, who are active at every step to realise related process, and who work to keep functioning intact. Some of the responsibilities of managers can be given as identification of team needs, finding practical solutions to problems, and forming a team around provided resources (Wong and Deubert, 2010).

Since managers have multiple responsibilities, they may be forced to work every day, and every hour and can experience harsh working conditions (Aschburner, 2009). For success under these harsh conditions, managers need qualified managerial skills. Baum et al. (2001) divides managerial skills into two as general and special. General skills include decision making, conceptual skills, effective information processing skill, leadership, supply, using appropriate concepts, and using power and authority where special skills include technical and technological skills. Basketball managers with these skills can act as leaders within management structure, hierarchical order, and within their own job definitions in addition to having a voice in upper level management. Additionally, having job definitions for managers by basketball clubs is regarded as an important task to achieve targeted objective. Well-defined job description can address priorities and needs of an organisation and represent position responsibilities, working programs, and performance standards. With comprehensive job descriptions, basketball managers can have the chance to know their field responsibilities and how they will be evaluated (Robinson, 2010). However, it is possible to see different approaches in the U.S. and Europe regarding tasks and responsibilities of basketball managers. Wong and Deubert (2011) studied on National Basketball Association – NBA professional basketball league sample and stated that general managers can be responsible for operational business of the club such as finance, marketing, stadium/facility, media, and public relations under budget provided by title holders as well as quality and quantity management such as trainer selection, talent scouting, managers, trainers, individual trainers, assistant coaches, contract processes, and most importantly player transfers (Won and Deubert, 2011). In other words, to make the team successful in every field, general control and directing all organisations is the task of manager (Wong and Deubert, 2010; Wong and Deubert, 2011; Deubert et al., 2013). Based on this fact, when scientific studies in Europe and Turkey were analysed, it was determined that there are no studies regarding job description, responsibility/authority field, and competence of basketball managers.

When basketball managers were evaluated for Turkey, it can be seen that Turkish Spor Toto Men's Basketball League is one of the most important European leagues in terms of audience, financial status, world-class players in teams, and trainers. Additionally, Turkish Men's Basketball Super League has become the league with the highest brand value in Europe with important investments and support of related sponsors (TBF, 2015). It could be said that this effected Turkish Men's Basketball Super League market share proportionally. Therefore, management of basketball teams or basketball branches of clubs that desire to take place under current conditions and that want to be successful and stable is becoming more important (Andersen, 2011; Benar et al., 2014). Under the scope of good management of basketball clubs/teams, based on the important and determinant role of the manager, the need to analyse tasks and

responsibilities of managers working in these teams and to determine competence levels of managers arises to well-manage basketball clubs or basketball branches of sport clubs in Turkey.

Based on these information, the purpose of this study was to determine occupational definitions, duty-responsibility fields, and competences of basketball managers working in teams competing in Turkish Men's Basketball Super League and Turkish Men's Basketball 1st League.

METHOD

Materials and Procedures
Based on the fact that experience of individuals working in manager positions of basketball teams can be obtained with interviews in depth, using qualitative methods for data collection was mandatory for this study. Accordingly, semi-structured interview technique among qualitative research methods was adopted to collected data in this study. When scientific studies in Europe and Turkey were analysed, it was determined that there are no written studies regarding job description, responsibility/authority field, and competence of basketball managers. Therefore, based on the fact that managers are individuals with the highest competence and knowledge on related subjects, universe of this study consisted of general managers working in professional basketball clubs or basketball branches of sport clubs in Turkey. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with team managers selected with simple random sampling working in Turkish Spor Toto Men's Basketball Super League and Turkish Men's Basketball 1st League. The purpose of structured interview is to determine similarities and differences between information provided by individuals and make comparisons accordingly. Babbie (2006: 305-306), Gupta and Awasthy (2015:74) stated that semi-structured interviews can provide information that could not be collected with scale or survey. Within this context, to obtain more qualified information, semi-structured interview form developed by researchers with the help of the literature research was applied. Interview form include 9 questions about general manager job descritriptions, responsibilities and experiences.

Participants
Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with team managers selected with simple random sampling working in Turkish Spor Toto Men's Basketball Super League and Turkish Men's Basketball 1st League. For Glaser and Strauss (2017:61), when answers to research questions and processes are repetitive (saturation point), data collection stage can be completed with the judgement of researchers. Within this scope, as data collected from total of 10 general managers from interviews were completed after reaching to saturation point.

Data Analysis
Interviews in this study were recorded with an audio recording device and these records were deciphered and turned into texts. Obtained data were analysed with content analysis method. Main objective of content analysis is to organise and interpret similar data under certain concepts and themes. Content analysis process consists of data coding, theme identification, code and theme organisation, findings definition, and interpretation (Taylor et al., 2016:161-194).

Researchers that conducted individual interviews were given two hours basic quantitative research and individual interview training to refresh research and individual interview information. Data obtained within the scope of this study were organised under the guideline of Kolpe and Burnett (1991) and coded by 5 researchers with doctorate degree complaint with content analysis methods. Reliability between coders regarding conducted analysis was calculated based on Conformity / (Conformity +

Unconformity) x 100 formula stated by Miles and Huberman (1994: 64) which is called internal consistency and represents conformity between coders. Accordingly, answers to each questions in semi-structured form were coded and collected under related titles. Reliability analysis of related titles varied between 0.83-1.00. For content analysis, it is stated that coefficients for reliability between coders should be 0.80 or higher (Miles and Huberman, 1994:64; Neuendorf, 2002:142-143; Patton, 2002). Accordingly, it could be stated that codes in this study and reliability between related coders are at acceptable levels.

RESULTS

Information about interviewed general managers and teams are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Information About Participants and Teams

Team Symbol	National League in 2016-2017 Season	Did Team Participated Any International Organisation in 2016-2017 Season?	International Organisations in 2016-2017 Season	Success in International Organisations in 2016-2017 Season
T1	TMBSL*	Yes	Euro league	Winner
T2	TMBSL	Yes	Euro league	Quarter Final
T3	TMBSL	Yes	EuroCup	Group Stage
T4	TMBSL	Yes	Champions League	Last 16
T5	TMBSL	Yes	FIBA European Cup	Top 16
T6	TMBSL	Yes	Champions League	Group Stage
T7	TMBL**	No	-	-
T8	TMBSL	No	-	-
T9	TMBSL	No	-	-
T10	TMBSL	No	-	-
Total interview duration with participants was 422 minutes 17 seconds.				

* Turkish Men Basketball Super League

** Turkish Men Basketball League

As seen on Table 1. most of general manager who participated in research are working Turkish Men Basketball Super League and competing International organisations (Euroleague, Euro Cup, Champions League, FIBA European Cup).

Coding table and reliability coefficients for answers to interview questions are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Codes and Reliability Coefficients Between Coders After Content Analysis

Theme	Code	Reliability Coefficients Between Coders
Duty Definition	Being Bridge (Team-Management-Technical Team-Player)	1.00
	Happiness of Team	
	Organisation of Team	
Authorisation and Responsibility	Planning season	0.93
	Preparation camps and planning (pre-season, between season, camp season etc.)	
	Infrastructure planning	
	Planning tournament etc. organisations	
	Management of transfer process	
	Determining player fees (transfer payments, premium)	
	Management of relationship between manager and personnel	
	Management of relationship with federation and other institutions	
	Contract jobs (player, personnel etc.)	
	Mutual agreements (agreements with sponsors, agreement to supply sport materials, jersey etc., agreement to rent gym, agreement to rent lodgement, agreement for TV broadcasting income/advertisement)	
	Genera budget process and coordination	
	Marketing and corporate relationships	
	Match day organisations (ticketing etc.)	
	Licence procedures	
	Foreign player procedures (work permit, immigrant management etc.)	
Background-Experience	Educational Background	1.00
	Sportive Background	
	Managerial Background	
Manager Properties	Communication Network	0.91
	Tenacity/Occupational Passion	
	Player Psychology	
	Manager Psychology	
	Patience	
	Sportive Background	
	Management Background	
	Practical Intelligence	
	Analysis Skill	
Main Challenges	Communication Problems	0.83
	Economic Issues	
	Density of Fixture	
	Personnel Problems	
	Transportation Problems	
	Facility Problems	
	Accommodation Problems	
Season Planning	Pre-Season Planning	0.86
	Season Planning	
	Post-Season Planning	
Hierarchical Responsibility	President	0.90
	Director of Boards	

As seen from Table 2, based on interviews, there were total of 41 codes under 7 themes. Some selected samples from themes and codes are given as follows:

Duty Definition
Being Bridge (Team-Management-Technical Team-Player)

T6: *"...being a bridge between management, between president and board of directors and team is one of the most important factors."*

T8: *"...general manager is the most important transition point of the team. Manager will sustain dialogues with team and management and present notifications from both sides."*

T5: *"..We are a bridge between trainer-player, player-trainer, and trainer, player and management."*

Organisation of Team

T5: *"...things a manager will do is to organise the entire team and to make basketball team, 12 players, 4 assistant coach, one main coach, 1 ball boy, and physiotherapist without any question marks in their head and win that game."*

Happiness of Team

T2: *"...my duty is to make the player to be on field with happiness and health and to make the player perform in that game."*

Authorisation and Responsibility

T2: *"making agreements, licencing, programming all trips, if necessary, organise cars, houses, resistance permit of all foreign players and all works in Turkey."*

"I have the authority with single signature to sign agreements, in correspondence with federation, or any other representations..."

T10: *"It starts from the moment of agreement with player, rom the first agreement... Special agreements in legal framework, health agreements, licencing, health, accommodation, eating...all types of problems if you add life problems..."*

"...All organisations in Europe, flights, drawings, all organisation is made via me..."

T8: *"What needs do you have to represent the team? You say, I need this number of players, personnel, and assistant personnel. You identify the need. You allocate certain budget. You do what needs to be done. You collect that unit, people with that need, and bring them..."*

T5: *"I am talking with the coach, he says I need 3 Turkish players, 2 young players, and 6 really well foreign players. We can pay maximum 300 thousand dollars to foreign players but we need to lower the price as much as we can. ...we make player scale. Then, how many hotel do we have, how many away games? There are 7 İstanbul teams. There are 8 away games. How much will the hotel cost for 8 away games? For example, it is 100 thousand lira, you make it 125. Buses, planes, and other stuff... For organisations... You make the budget at the beginning of the season. You find a sponsor for that budget. When you are in Super league, you make agreement with tour company..."*

T1: *"General managers are actually individuals who do filtering operations, sustain balance between operation side and management side, complete ticketing, technical sides, team, players, trainers, marketing, and all other decisions, and in reality all departments have their own responsibilities but there is one person to make all decisions..."*

T7: *"...then, after selecting technical team, of course we need team setup, we call it team engineering. I mean, we have a budget here. We form our budget at the beginning of the season. Here, I mean, I try to take solid steps. At the beginning of the season, we are meeting with club sponsors or individuals and people that support the club and create a budget. After guarantee of this budget, we move on to team engineering..."*

Manager Properties

T10: *"everything is under the control of the club... We pay the money, we organise the house, restaurants to eat, and even cars. Some of them want to include education of their children in the agreement. In such cases, we take them to day-care and introduce them. With all these and all responsibility of foreign players, club creates work intensity...", "I think a general manager should have player psychology, sociology, diet, legal knowledge or some of these knowledges, if a person will be assigned for the first time, as a general manager, that person should have those" "I mean, that person must know basics, additionally, manager title is a completely different thing. "*

T8: *"I mean, certainly that person must have good personal relationship, amazing analysis skill, practical intelligence, and instantly produce solutions... Because this job we are living have no definition."*

T5: *"...I mean, how can an outsider do that? A person should be in this business for at least 10 years to know psychology of couch and players... But still, it is too hard... As long as that person doesn't do that job."*

T1: *"Having a sport background is extremely beneficial. I mean, if he is working in the same branch, the branch he played in, for knowing people in that branch, I was a renowned basketball player when I quit basketball. I knew all referees, all federation authorities, all other people in the team. This was an easy transition for me. Because imagine that you take a person who has no idea about basketball, that person will meet with people, communicate with them, develop a network. I say this in all other things but the most important thing in sports is network."*

T6: *"Of course, during the season, people fight at home with their wife or father. There are these problems during the season. I am one of those people who will find the best solution to those problems, to manage that crises."*

Main Challenges

T3: *"I mean, we frequently face communication. Communication. Communication within the club. Communication outside the club...Generally, club has good communication with outside. Sometimes there may be lack of communication between people in the club. When there is no communication, there are misunderstandings and that causes us to lose time. It causes us to lose energy actually it doesn't have major impact but I think the hardest thing is to manage finance.*

T10: *"...First, economy...because if you don't have money, you need to find sponsor, health sponsor, accommodation sponsor, advertisement, and money." "..we experience gym problem. We try to solve this problem with bilateral relations. I mean, we have that major economic problems."*

T5: *"...It is important, the couch is shouting, getting angry, trainer is offended. What happened? He doesn't understand me and all that, he always favours foreign players... Let's go and have dinner. Get into his subconsciousness, talk, I am also a player, I did this, I did that, all that stuff... He gets nary. A player who can understand can make it. Some doesn't understand...", "...he makes all organisation. Books hotel, books dinner, coach says ok. He says I found the money... But when it is about dialogue between player psychology and trainer, he sizzles."*

T1: *"The biggest thing is we have numerous people that we don't talk the same language. I mean, when the things you want to do and things the opposite side wants to understand are different, you experience lots of problem. Second, we are competing in European championship, Euro League, for a long time. But there are serious legal and economic difference between Euro League, Europe, and Turkey. This is challenging."*

T9: *"...We face with various problems to solve in just one day. Because we face with challenges that can be called donkey work. I believe that general manager position should create and manage a team. But other than that team, you are brining 13 high ego player together and each one of them has different background, different culture, different city, or different country. Bringing them together and forming a chemistry between them is challenging and you are also forming a coach team where they will spend all their days and times."*

T6: *"...away game preparations, hotel accommodations, finding these with affordable prices, you request prices from 3-4 hotels. Making rooms lists and determining who will stay with who. All check-in and check-out processes, you need to notify the police, we ask for private security, escort, all these. We need to give driver name, licence plate of the bus to Eskisehir security branch manager. We need to write to federation for TV."*

Season Planning

T7: *"...I mean, we make agreements with technical team at the beginning of the season. Like, we first select technical team. The most important thing in management is to select the right people. I mean, if you select the right people, your work load decrease almost by half."*

T4: *"Beginning of the seasons is intense. My most intense period is between 15 August and 15 October. Until the first game of the league starts... Because the player, actually we don't even have a player. They don't need to come. When the training starts, all these materials, interviews, everything about players, bringing players one by one, settling them to their houses..." "...all preparations, hotel preparations, road preparations, from service to materials, I mean everything is hard... You can relax when the first game starts. Ready. Then what? Routine. Definitely the hardest period is before the season. The hardest period... Second hardest period...is when Europe starts... If you are playing in European cup, if you don't, you have nothing. Nothing... Because you play one game per week. Playing one game per week is nothing... Playing two games is extremely hard..."*

T1: *"It is intense for me at the beginning of the season. I mean planning the season with administrative manager, I need to sit and talk with trainer, actually, we need to talk to all. Who will go and who will stay at the end of the season? Who will be our new players? After determining these, there is certain agreement period.*

...When season starts, these thing, I mean there is also licencing at the beginning of the season, completing agreements and licencing. After the season starts, we have normal tempo. Of course it is intense, currently, we are complaining about intense game tempo. We play a game at every 2.8 days. As managers, we always thing of the next game, the next game. We even think of the next two games..."

T6: *"...at the beginning of the season, yes, that two month, that one and a half-two month period is the most serious. After that, of course the season starts, in the first month, you have order. I mean in the meantime, you may have some extras of course, but still you have order in the first three month period..."*

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Based on interviews with participants, main titles regarding job descriptions, duty-responsibility field, and competence of general managers working in basketball clubs or basketball branches of sport clubs was formed. Accordingly, information and details regarding general manager duty can be discussed as follows:

When general manager job description is evaluated based on participants views, this description emerged as executing team organisations, being a bridge between team-management-technical team and providing happiness of team. In the interviews, general managers expressed that managers, players, and technical teams take certain successful-unsuccessful events with high emotion, and there may be lack of communication between each piece of the whole under these circumstances. Similarly, it was emphasised that demands or complaints should be presented for mutual evaluation or there is need for intermediary to transmit these demands, and this mission should be taken by general manager. Managers characterised this mission as "*being bridge*" and identified this as one of the fundamental duties. Wong and Deubert (2011) stated that in basketball, general manager concept is underdeveloped and with developing conditions, things will become more complex and complicated. At this point, general manager duty that is not only restricted with team organisation has brought together missions such as happiness of team and being a bridge. General manager of a team that played quarter final at Euro League level used the following expressions to define general manager job:

> *"...my duty is to make the player to be on field with happily and healthy and to make the player perform in that game."*

These statements emphasise the above mentioned complex structure. Additionally, team organisation duty expected from general managers brings together certain authorisation and responsibilities. Depending on the organisations, although certain authorisation and responsibilities of general managers differed, there were certain emphasised points in this study. These authorisation and responsibilities can be listed as follows:

o Planning season
o Preparation camps and planning (pre-season, between season, camp season etc.)
o Infrastructure planning

- Planning tournament etc. organisations
- Management of transfer process
- Determining player fees (transfer payments, premium)
- Management of relationship between manager and personnel
- Management of relationship with federation and other institutions
- Contract jobs (player, personnel etc.)
- Mutual agreements (agreements with sponsors, agreement to supply sport materials, jersey etc., agreement to rent gym, agreement to rent lodgement, agreement for TV broadcasting income/advertisement)
- General budget process and coordination
- Marketing and corporate relationships
- Match day organisations (ticketing etc.)
- Licence procedures
- Foreign player procedures (work permit, immigrant management etc.)

When authorisation and responsibilities of general managers were evaluated, it can be seen that planning process was one of the most important process. Planning and managing all season under different titles can be expressed as main success factors (Watt, 2013:20). A general manager who is working in a team that has championships national and international organisations and was interviewed within the scope of the project emphasised the importance of planning as follows:

> *"...You always need to have a strategy and a plan. Being a general manager is not only about selecting players or coaches. You need to know everything about basketball and how everything is done. There are various elements..."*

In addition to these, there were authorisations and responsibilities containing audit process simultaneously with transfer, budget processes, and intense player procedure management. Processes for transfer, budget, and agreement executed under planning decisions were expressed as one of the hardest processes general managers experienced at the beginning of the season. Under these circumstances, some general manager expressed their opinions as follows:

> *T10: "...compensations from player agreements or other things... We were in FIBA. We experienced transfer bans. We couldn't pay player fees due to economic crises and as a result, we experienced legal problems, and we learned by experiencing these problems..."*

> *T2: "...you are making rent contract. We have tons of rent contract for player. Cars, I mean we have contracts for cars, I mean, everything works on contracts..."*

> *T1: "...I was managing my budget by enabling cash flow in the team, I was sending monthly reports, I was controlling everything. Within our power, I could only get 3 million dollar worth players. I could do anything. But I knew what I need to do and that was we couldn't lose money..."*

> *T9: "Budget is the most important part of management... One of my most important responsibilities in this club is to make budget planning at the beginning of the*

season and complying to this budget as much as I can. Other than extreme events, not to make any unnecessary change or spending...”

In addition to these, procedures related with foreign players were expressed as important and emphasised responsibilities.

T6: “...when foreign players come, they have residence permits, bringing them here, flight organisations... Of course, all these are duties of general manager...”, “Bringing a foreigner here has enormous cost...Because when you bring them, you buy plane tickets. You need to give a house when they come. Then, you need to go civil registry for residence permit. Then, you go to immigration office. We have these procedures for residence permit...”

T7: “...having player visa for foreign players in foreign consulates, completing correspondence with ministry of sport or more precisely with ministry of interior about player visas, then, health controls, making the contract valid after health controls, when you look at the following stages, these are about accommodation, placing players, field organisations...”

In addition to all these, marketing and corporate relationships were expressed as responsibilities of general manager. Marketing activities and corporate relations that can be expressed as indispensable factors of sustainability of sport clubs (Wakefield, 2007:30; Funk, 2009:4; Shank and Lyberger, 2014:5; Kaser and Oalkers, 2015:15) and healthier organisations are generally executed with a team under hierarchical structure of the clubs.

When educational, managerial, or sportive background answers of general managers for their duties were analysed, it was seen that importance of education, sportive, and managerial background were emphasised. To better understand in-field and outside field situations experienced by players and technical team, in other words, to form empath, advantages of sportive background was emphasised, and importance of education and managerial background was emphasised to manage all processes in healthy manner especially, the legal procedures. Most significant expression on this topic was as follows:

“...I mean, how can an outsider do that? A person should be in this business for at least 10 years to know psychology of couch and players... But still, it is too hard... As long as that person doesn't do that job.”

Properties that should be under general manager duties may be expressed to have common properties under sportive background, management background, player psychology, and manager psychology titles. It could be said that experiences and sportive/managerial background are key roles to be a successful general manager. In addition to these properties, all of the participants expressed that network was the main requirement of general management duty. Network that was emphasised as important for almost all management processes including transportation, accommodation, facility management, and official procedures was expressed as follows:

T10: “...I mean, no matter where you graduate, if you have no experience, if you didn't do anything, you have a hard job...”

T2: "..I say this in all other things but the most important thing in sports is network. Who do you know and at what level? How do you know them? How will you approach people? Of course, doing the job correctly is important but the network you form shows you more..."

T1: "...network is key to increase your chance, develop, and learn."

T9: "...a serious network is required. The most important thing in this job is network... This is not only for Turkey, it is around the world, it is global. Forming correct networks around the world, this is one of the biggest responsibilities of the general manager... When you get a good research network with these networks, this team, this team you formed in the summer will dream of minimum error..."

Relationship and network were regarded important for general managers to execute team organisation and execute various organisations and camp planning within season in healthy manner. Masterman (2014: 152) emphasised necessity to organise all data based on relationship with each shareholder group to execute event planning and organisation and to expand existing sectoral network. Within this scope, it could be said that social capital of general managers is an important element. Social capital is defined as a whole that connects interpersonal active relationships and human networks and groups, enables cooperation, and consists of trust, mutual understanding and common values (Cohen and Prusak, 2001:4). Main idea of social capital is that social communication networks are valuable assets (Field, 2006:16). At this point, it could be stated that general manager duty and social capital concept intersect at multiple points during relationship process and this intersection is important (Girginov, 2008: 281).

Watt (2013) listed qualities that sport manager should have as leadership, communication skill, thinking and evaluation skill, understanding and patience, planning, and resource use. Accordingly, patience, practical intelligence, and analysis skills that were presented within the scope of this study showed similarities with general manager properties. Similarly, Wong and Deubert (2010) stated that for general managers to effectively conduct business within the club, they need to express required vision and leadership and to make final decisions when necessary. Whitmore (2010:10) mentioned that leadership and coaching duty focused on revealing potentials of individuals and to maximise their potentials, and when applied correctly, this could help increasing employee involvement. At this point, it is possible to state that general managers who are communicating with numerous individuals in different departments and who act as a bridge with their leadership properties are important for all connections.

Main challenges experienced by general managers in their occupation was determined as the theme with major unconformity (Reliability Coefficient Between Codes=.83). The main reason for such circumstance was conducting interviews with general managers who work in different clubs with different economic and administrative structures. Main challenges experienced by general managers towards their occupation was expressed as communication, transportation, facility, accommodation problem, fixture intensity, personnel shortage, and economic issues. Related main challenges and certain economic issues can be eliminated. For example, by overcoming economic issues, accommodation, transportation, and personnel shortage can be overcome at certain levels while processes for fixture intensity, communication, and facility problems should separately be evaluated.

Under the scope of this study, it was determined that general managers were hierarchically responsible towards president or board of directors. Accordingly, it can be seen that general managers are regarded

as a part of management level in the structure of the sport clubs and they are among top and medium level managers within hierarchical structure (Figure 2).
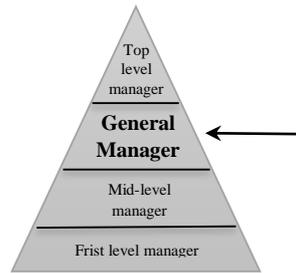
Source *Adapted from Robinson (2010).*

Figure 2. Position of general managers within hierarchical structure

Although there are different structures, in terms of executed work and operations, general managers could be regarded as the captain of their own ship (Browne, 2010). Aschburner (2009) emphasised that work of general managers is complicated and harder from various duties within basketball structure, even from couching with "as general managers, we have lots of works things to do. We need to have infinite energy because we have work 24/7" expression. Similarly, McPherson (2015) stated that being a general manager is more difficult than it is thought to be by saying "there are great difference between work of general managers and what we think" expression.

As a result, it was found that general managers are individual who have different roles to act as a bridge to provide happiness of team and organisation, who acts in almost all stages of various management process within the club, who put efforts for all work and operation solutions, who have various personal competence in addition to certain level of sportive, education, management history, and who are generally responsible towards president and board of directors.

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The Relationship among service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty: An empirical investigation of sports and physical activity sector

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Abstract

This study examined the hierarchical relationship among service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty for sports and physical activity sector. Considering the service characteristics and heterogeneous nature of sports services, it is conceptualized that customer satisfaction will play a mediating role between service quality and customer loyalty. Using previously developed and tested instruments in the literature, the relationship among these constructs were empirically tested using primary data collected (n=172) from current customers of a large sports and physical activity center, which specializes service offerings in the area of water sports and exercises. Consequently, it was revealed that customer satisfaction played a partially mediating role in the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty.

Keywords: Service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, sports and physical activity sector

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, studies in the literature argued that a strong emphasis on service quality and customer satisfaction result in better corporate performance and competitiveness (Robinson, 2006; Simsek, 2016). To understand how customer expectations are met, organizations have focused on identifying and measuring service quality and customer satisfaction levels in their units (Dabholkar, Shepher, and Thorpe, 2000). Therefore, examination of service quality and customer satisfaction constructs and their role on organizational performance have attracted significant attention of practitioners and as well as researchers (Cevik, Simsek, and Yilmaz, 2017).

During the same time period, we have witnessed a remarkable growth trend in demand for sports and physical activity centers around the world as well as in Turkey (Ekmekçi, Ekmekçi ve İrmiş, 2013). For instance, there are over 29000 such centers in the USA serving more than 40 million members (IHRSA, 2006). Similarly, there are more than 33000 of these centers with more than 36 million members in Europe. These numbers represent an average of 14.2% growth over the previous year in the USA and a 5.5% growth in Europe. According to 2002 data, the number of health and fitness centers in Turkey reached to 2000 (Sekendiz, Kocak, and Korkusuz, 2009). The global fitness and health club industry generated more than 80 billion U.S. dollars in revenue in 2015 (https://www.statista.com, Retrieved September 13, 2018). Therefore, these sports service providers need to adopt customer-oriented approach in order to be able succeed in this highly competitive global marketplace. Marketing literature suggest that customer-oriented firms should focus all their efforts to satisfy the needs of their customers and differentiate themselves from the rest of the competition. The literature shows that the service quality is an important factor that leads to customer satisfaction. From this perspective, understanding

the service quality of sport and physical activity services is a vital task for managers. As mentioned earlier, they are facing strong global competition and these organizations in the sports and physical activity services sector must meet the high levels of service quality expectations of their customers (Macintosh and Doherty, 2007). Accordingly, understanding the customer loyalty has gained significant attention along with service quality and customer satisfaction concepts. Customer loyalty means less resources spent to recruit new customers and more profitable results due to the higher lifetime value of each customer. Customer loyalty has been studied frequently in the marketing literature and has become a vital terminology for customer oriented organizations. Accordingly, research has focused on understanding the relationship among service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty particularly in the highly competitive service industries (Wantara, 2015).

We support the views that service quality and customer satisfaction are important antecedent of customer loyalty (Bernhardt, Donthu, and Kennett, 2000; Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, and Zeithaml, 1993; Cronin, Brady, and Hult, 2000). Understanding the existing strengths in the levels of these variables and the relationships among them provides opportunities for the sports and physical activity center marketers to achieve better competitive positions and organizational outcomes (Howat, Crilley, and McGrath, 2008). A review of the sports and physical activity services literature shows that a number of studies have concentrated in understanding the relationships between service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. However, these studies are limited to specific fields such as spectator sports (Kuenzel and Yassim, 2007) and other limited-scope sports services (Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsorbatzoudis, and Grouios, 2004; Howat, Murray, and Crilley, 1999; Shonk and Chelladurai, 2008). Furthermore, considering the heterogeneous nature of these services (Taylor, Sharland, Cronin, and Bullard, 1993), differences in the results with respect to the relationship among these variables are expected. Therefore, we assert that it is imperative for further studies investigating the relationships among these variables in the field of sports and physical activity services sector. Such studies should prove to be valuable with respect to providing further evidence about the hierarchical relationship among these variables and will have significant managerial implications in the practice (Howat et al., 2008). To the best out our knowledge, no studies have investigated the relationship among service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty for a multi-purpose sports center in an emerging market. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship among service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty on participation-based sports and physical activity center. More specifically, we investigate the mediating effect of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. We expect that the service quality loyalty relationship will improve when the relationship is mediated by customer satisfaction.

Conceptual Framework
Service quality and customer satisfaction

Although there are different definitions of services and service quality, Lovelock (2000, p.3) defines a service as "the process or performance rather than a thing". Service quality, on the other hand, is defined as the degree of firm's ability to meet customer expectations and needs (Asubonteng, McCleary, and Swan, 1996). Grönroos (1984) noted two dimensions that affect the total quality of a service, which are *technical quality* and *functional quality*. In the framework of these dimensions, the quality of a service provided is measured as a result of an evaluation process, in which consumer expectation and perception is compared. Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) define three quality dimensions: *physical quality*, which involves the physical aspect of a service (facilities or equipment); *corporate quality,* which involve image and profile; and *interactive quality*, which involves the interaction between contact personnel and customers and interaction between customers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985, p.43). The basic argument here is that service quality occurs as a result of the interaction between service components

producing the service and customers. Rust and Oliver (1994) offer three quality dimensions: the service product (i.e., technical quality), service delivery (i.e., functional quality), and service environment. Brady and Cronin (2001) also use three quality dimensions: interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality.

Service quality has been frequently studied in the services marketing literature during the past two-decades or more. Most of these studies have used some form of SERVQUAL instrument and adopted the gap model during this time period (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985, 1988). Parasuraman *et al.* (1985; 1988) has identified ten dimensions and then reduced these to five dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) to represent service quality construct. The gap model and the SERVQUAL instrument are based on the disconfirmation paradigm. According to the disconfirmation paradigm, if the customer's expectation and service quality fully matches, then the expectation and perceived performance in confirmed. If the expectation is different from the quality received, then there may be a negative or positive disconfirmation (Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1994) occurs. Negative disconfirmation is the situation where quality is lower and positive conformation occurs when higher quality is received.

Despite their widespread adoption, both the gap model and SERVQUAL instrument have been subjected to serious criticisms. These criticisms ranged from lack of generalizable dimensions of SERVQUAL to incompatibility with different sector environments (Babakus and Boller, 1992; Buttle, 1996; Carman, 1990; Saravanan and Rao, 2007). Perhaps the most serious criticism came from Cronin and Taylor (1992; 1994). They mainly argued that there was not enough empirical and theoretical evidence to support the "expectations" measurement in the instrument suggesting the use of a modified measurement instrument, SERVPERF which is mainly a "performance-based" model of service quality. SERVPERF used all five dimensions of SERVQUAL but only based on the perception of customers. Despite these criticisms, SERVQUAL has the choice of service quality measurement for most researchers. SERVQUAL has also been used in the area of sports services but a number of researchers argued that it has been inadequate in representing the core service attributes of sports and physical activity services (Lam, Zhang, and Jensen, 2005; Yildiz, 2012; Yildiz and Kara, 2012). Accordingly, a number of researchers have either modified SERVQUAL or totally developed new service quality instruments for the field of sport and physical activity services.

Although service quality and customer satisfaction concepts are considered to be closely related to each other, the direction of relationship between these two concepts is not very clear. Oliver (1997) defines satisfaction as the psychological condition resulting from matched customer expectations with the previous consumptions experiences. In other words, "it is a judgment that the product or the service itself is providing a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under or over fulfillment (Oliver, 1997, p.13)." Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), Bitner (1990), Bolton and Drew (1991) and Boulding *et al.* (1993) reported that service quality and satisfaction as two separate constructs. A review of the literature shows that there are three different views on the causal relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. First, view argues that the service quality is the antecedent of satisfaction (Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann, 1994; Brady, Cronin, and Brand, 2002, Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, and Bryant, 1996; Parasuraman *et al.,* 1994) while the second view argues that the satisfaction comes before service quality (Bitner, 1990, Bitner and Hubbert, 1994). Finally, the third view argues that the direction between the service quality and satisfaction does not stay the same all the time and could change in different contexts (Dabholkar, 1995). In summary, although there is no consensus regarding the direction of the causality between service quality and customer satisfaction, most researchers agrees that service quality should precede customer satisfaction.

Customer loyalty

Researchers deliberate whether satisfied customers with the quality of services will be loyal to the service provider. While some researchers strongly argue for this relationship, others caution that the satisfaction-loyalty relationship is complex because the factors that affect customer satisfaction differ from what affects loyalty (Reichheld, 2001). Caruana (2002) argued that customer satisfaction played a mediating role between service quality and loyalty. Szymanski and Henard (2001), in their meta-analysis presented studies showing positive and statistically significant correlations between satisfaction and loyalty. Customer loyalty is generally conceptualized as repeat-purchase behavior (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman, 1996). Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) offer a frequently used theoretical base, proposing that loyalty is repeat-purchase behavior based on cognitive, affective and behavioral intention. Oliver (1999) augmented this framework by emphasizing that loyalty begins with repeated experiences, reinforced cognitions, and affective responses which lead consumers to develop motivation to rebuy and engage in brand-consonant behaviors.

Researchers usually use three conceptual perspectives—behavioral, attitudinal, and combination (Bowen and Chen, 2001). Behavioral perspective relates to the repeated behavior. Attitudinal perspective is related to customers' changing positive view about company offerings. Customers become more likely to possess stronger purchase intentions and recommend the product (Zeithaml *et al.,* 1996). Combination perspective combines both repeat buying behaviors with positive customer dispositions towards company. Dick and Basu (1994), on the other hand, views loyalty as the strength of the relationship between relative attitude and patronage behavior. According to this view, customer loyalty is variable and the strength of the relationship between relative attitude and repeat purchase behavior can have different levels—no loyalty, latent loyalty, spurious loyalty, and loyalty to true. True loyalty level is very important for businesses because its impact on customers long term value and positive word-of-mouth communications (Lawrence, 1993).

The relationships between service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty

Literature on the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty presents two divergent views. The first view argues that there is a direct relationship between the two constructs (Boulding *et al.,* 1993) while the second vies assumes an indirect relationship between service quality and loyalty (Baker and Crompton, 2000). Although considerable number of research points to a direct effect on behavioral intentions, a larger body of literature points to an indirect effect of behavioral intentions (Cronin *et al.,* 2000). Perhaps Zeithaml *et al.* (1996) study is one of the most important studies that argued for the direct relationship between service quality and the behavioral intentions outcome of loyalty. They found that service quality was associated with behavioral intentions and higher levels of service quality would result in positive behavioral intentions and the customer would continue to buy the service from same company. Bloemer, Ruyter, and Wetzels (1999) have found a direct relationship between service quality and repeat purchase behavior. However, Zeithaml *et al.* (1996) reported no significant relationship between service quality and customer complaint behavior. Later, Cronin *et al.* (2000) study identified strong direct relationship among service quality, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

Other studies have argued for the presence of an indirect relationship between service quality and loyalty (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Customer satisfaction is considered to serve as a bridge between service quality and customer loyalty and, therefore, it has an indirect effect on loyalty (Olsen, 2002). Caruana (2002) and Dabholkar *et al.* (2000) studies provided strong support to this view mainly showing that the effects of service quality influence on behavioral intentions are present only through the customer satisfaction path. Similarly, Brady *et al.* (2002) and Lenka, Suar, and Mohapatra (2009) studies

confirmed those finding and showed that service quality influences customer satisfaction and then customer satisfaction influences repeat buying behavior.

There are a number of different attempts have been made in the sport and physical activity services literature to examine the service quality, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions relationship. These studies mostly differ in terms of the context of sport and physical activity services selected for the research conducted. Studies conducted to examine the role of service quality on public sports and leisure centers (Howat *et al.,* 1999), on public aquatic centers (Howat *et al.,* 2008), on event sport Shonk and Chelladurai (2008) have all reported fully mediated role of service quality on customers intention to return. Examining the health club customers, Alexandris *et al.* (2004) reported that service quality affected customer satisfaction, customer satisfaction affected word-of-mouth communications and psychological commitment. Investigating the cricket spectators, Kuenzel and Yassim (2007) reported that satisfaction directly influenced joy and behavioral outcomes (word-of-mouth and revisit) and Koo, Andrew and Kim (2008) reported that satisfaction directly influenced service quality judgments and behavioral intentions of women's college basketball fans. On the other hand, Brady, Voorhees, Cronin, and Bourdeau (2006) found customer satisfaction had strong mediation role between valence and behavioral intentions of sports fans. Finally, more recently Yoshida and James (2010) reported a positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions of baseball and football spectators.

Table 1 shows a summary of studies that investigated the relationship among service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in the spectator and participation sports. Further empirical studies investigating these relationships in different sports organizations should prove to be beneficial in terms of improving our understanding of the complex relationships among these variable in the sports and physical activity service industry. Such efforts should significantly contribute to the participation-based sports and physical activity services literature.

Table 1. The linking quality, satisfaction, and loyalty to various service encounter outcomes in the sport literature

Source	Relevant Constructs	Link(s) to Outcomes	Empirically Tested?	Context
Barshan, Elahi, and Aghaei (2017)	SQ, SAT, LOY	SAT	Yes	Participation
Howat, Crilley, and McGrath (2008)	SQ, SAT, LOY	SAT	Yes	Participation
Koo, Andrew, and Kim (2008)	SQ, SAT, BI	SAT	Yes	Spectator
Shonk and Chelladurai (2008)	SQ, SAT, IR	SAT	No	Spectator & Participation
Kuenzel and Yassim (2007)	SQ, SAT, LOY	SAT	Yes	Spectator
Brady et al. (2006)	V, SAT, BI	SAT	Yes	Spectator
Alexandris et al. (2004)	SQ, SAT, LOY	SAT	Yes	Participation
Howat, Murray, and Crilley (1999)	SQ, SAT, BI	SAT	Yes	Participation

SQ=Service Quality, SAT=Satisfaction, LOY=Loyalty, BI=Behavioral Intentions, IR=Intent to Return, V=Valence

Research model and hypothesis

Based on the literature support provided above and using the model presented in Dabholkar *et al.* (2000) study, we use the conceptual model presented in Figure 1 to test the hypothesized relationships in this study.
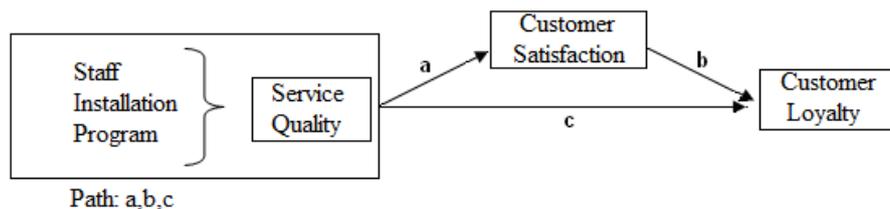

Figure 1. Conceptual model used in the study

Adopted for the sports and physical activity centers, this model presents the direct and indirect relationships among three constructs discussed, namely service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty. According to this conceptual model, we hypothesize a direct relationship between service quality →customer satisfaction and a direct relationship between customer satisfaction → loyalty. Therefore, we argue that the relationship between service quality and loyalty is mediated through the customer service path. It is argued that higher levels of service quality will lead to increases in customer satisfaction levels which in return lead to customer loyalty.

H_1: Service quality will have a positive relationship with customer satisfaction in the sports and physical activity centers.

H_2: Customer satisfaction will have a positive relationship with customer loyalty in the sports and physical activity centers.

H_3: Customer satisfaction will mediate the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in the sports and physical activity centers.

METHOD

Questionnaire

In this study, we used a fourteen-items QSport-14 scale developed by Yildiz and Kara (2012) to operationalize the service quality construct. Three-items customer satisfaction and five-items customer loyalty scales were adopted from Cronin *et al.* (2000) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1996), respectively. Scales were assessed using a Likert type scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Questionnaire also included section gathering information about the demographic information of the subjects.

The sample

Simple random sampling method was used to select the subjects. Two hundred and fifty scales were distributed to the customers of four large commercial sports and physical activity centers (fitness, swimming, scuba and water sports including wind surfing, canoe and catamaran sailing) in western Turkey. Two weeks later, one hundred and ninety three completed scales were returned yielding 77.2% response rate.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the basic features of the sample in this study. Construct validity of the scales was tested through varimax rotation – principal component factor analysis – and Cronbach's alpha coefficient test was used to check their reliability. A correlation analysis was carried out using the average values of the scale items for each instrument and the hierarchical regression analysis was used in order to verify the hypotheses.

RESULTS

Descriptive analysis

Descriptive analysis showed that 57% of the participants were male and 44% of the sample was in the 21-30 age group. A large proportion (69%) of the sample had college level education (Table 2). Sizeable groups were in the swimming (44%) and fitness (31%) programs while the rest of participants were in scuba, wind surfing, canoe and catamaran training programs. About a third of the respondents indicated that improving skills were their main motivation to utilize sports and physical activity center services while the other third emphasized health/fitness as the major reasons to join. Summary of descriptive results are provided in Table 3.

Table 2. Sample demographic characteristics

Gender	f	%	Age (years)	f	%	Education	f	%
Males	98	57	Less than 20	37	21.5	Primary	12	7
Females	74	43	21 - 30	76	44.2	Secondary	42	24.4
			31 - 40	33	19.2	College	118	68.6
			More than 41	26	15.1			

Table 3. Choice of programs, length of use, and motivation for participation

Programs	f	%	Length of service use	f	%	Motivation for participation	f	%
Fitness	54	31.4	Less than 2 months	45	26.2	Learn skills	64	37.2
Swimming	75	43.6	3 to 6 months	47	27.3	Health and fitness	63	36.6
Scuba	14	8.1	7 to 11 months	45	26.2	Body building	2	1.2
Wind surfing, canoe, catamaran sailing	29	16.9	1 to 2 years	23	13.4	Weight loss	20	11.6
			More than 3 years	12	7.0	Shape-up and toning	6	3.5
						Peace of mind	14	8.1
						Socialization	3	1.7

Factor analysis and reliability coefficients

To examine the validity of the scales used, exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation is employed. Using Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, we assessed the appropriateness of factor analysis (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black, 1995). The KMO measure is computed and the results indicate and index of 0.863 ensuring and excellent sampling adequacy and supporting the factor structures determined. Bartlett's sphericity test was used to examine that the variables are uncorrelated in the population (χ^2=1798.380; df=231; p=0.000). Eigenvalues greater than 1.00 were kept in the analysis and factor scores less than 0.40 were eliminated. Results of exploratory factor analysis show the existence of five dimensions explaining 64.159 percent of the total variance. Factor loadings of the scale items are relatively large ranging from 0.430 to 0.866, which are significantly more than the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.30 (Hair *et al.,* 1995; Grandzol and Gershon, 1998) for adequately representing the construct validity.

An analysis of Table 4 shows that the first, second and fourth factors had five items each while third factor consisted of four and the fifth factor had three items loaded. Second, third and fourth factors are related to service quality while first factor relates to loyalty and the fifth factor is related to customer satisfaction. Reliability of the scale is assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The values of Cronbach alpha obtained for factors ranged from 0.772 and 0.869 indicating very good reliability scores and exceeding the 0.70 threshold cited in the literature.

Correlations and hierarchical regression analysis

We then used a correlation analysis to determine the strength and the direction of the relationships between variables. The aggregate scores were then used to conduct a hierarchical regression analysis to determine the relationships among constructs. To this end, we first performed regression analysis using customer satisfaction as the dependent variable and the service quality as the independent variable. We then tested if there was a direct link between service quality and loyalty by using loyalty as the dependent variable and service quality as the independent variable. We finally used both customer service and customer satisfaction as independent variables to predict loyalty while controlling for the customer satisfaction. Table 5 and 6 illustrate the results of correlation analysis and the regression analysis respectively.

Table 5 shows that there are significant ($p<0.001$) and positive correlations between the constructs used in the study. Table 6 illustrates the three different hierarchical regression results which are all significant and positive. Moreover, service quality regression coefficient β=0.608 in Model 2 has declined significantly to 0.339 in Model 3 indicating a stronger link through the customer satisfaction path. These

results provide statistically significant support for all of the hypothesized relationships among constructs. A strong emphasis need to be placed on the mediated relationship among these three constructs.

Table 4. Results of factor analysis and reliability coefficients

Scale items	M	SD	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
18. Say positive things about this sport center to other people	4.42	.60	.805				
21. Consider this sport center your first choice to buy services	4.35	.73	.754				
20. Encourage friends and relatives to do business with this sport center	4.38	.69	.751				
19. Recommend this sport center to someone who seeks your advice	4.45	.65	.718				
22. Do more business with this sport center in the next few years	4.38	.73	.694				
8. Hygiene and cleanliness	4.21	.80		.789			
9. Equipment	4.34	.76		.719			
10. Dressing rooms, toilets and showers	4.19	.94		.685			
7. Sport areas	4.28	.76		.681			
6. Physical environment	4.29	.63		.627			
11. Program choices	4.18	.62			.866		
14. Availability of program time periods	4.22	.73			.804		
12. Program quality/content	4.23	.66			.789		
13. Size of classes (number of participant)	4.25	.64			.721		
3. Efficacy of instructors	4.45	.62				.777	
4. Personalized service	4.47	.67				.713	
2. Professionalism of instructors	4.48	.56				.666	
5. Interest showed by staff for your comeback	4.34	.75				.540	
1. Kindness and treat from the staff	4.47	.62				.430	
17. My choice to purchase this service was a wise one	4.40	.63					.768
15. I think that I did the right thing when I purchased this service	4.41	.58					.754
16.This facility is exactly what is needed for this service	4.45	.63					.752
Percentage of variance explained			33.937	12.292	7.283	5.728	4.920
Cumulative % of variance explained			33.937	46.228	53.511	59.239	64.159
Cronbach alpha			.869	.832	.813	.772	.827

Key: F1=Loyalty, F2=Installations, F3=Program, F4=Staff, F5=Satisfaction

Table 5. Correlation results among variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1.Service quality	4.31	.36	1		
			.		
2.Customer satisfaction	4.42	.53	.608$^{(**)}$	1	
			.000	.	
3.Customer loyalty	4.40	.55	.531$^{(**)}$	.521$^{(**)}$	1
			.000	.000	.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Table 6. Results of hierarchical regression analysis

Variables	Customer Satisfaction	Customer Loyalty	Customer Loyalty
	β	β	β
Model 1			
Service quality	.608*		
R^2	.369		
Model 2			
Service quality		.531*	
R^2		.282	
Model 2 and Model 3			
Service quality			.339*
Customer satisfaction			.315*
R^2			.344

* Significant at $p<0.001$

CONCLUSION

Studies indicate a positive relationship among service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in the sports and physical activity services industry (Murray and Howat, 2002; Tsuji, Bennett, and Zhang, 2007; Yoshida and James, 2010). Moreover, other studies reported that the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty depended on customer satisfaction, indicating that satisfaction played a mediating role between service quality and loyalty (Alexandris *et al.,* 2004; Brady *et al.,* 2006; Howat *et al.,* 1999; Howat *et al.,* 2008; Koo *et al.,* 2008; Kuenzel and Yassim, 2007; Motallabi and Najafzade 2015; Rahmati and Honari 2013; Shonk and Chelladurai, 2008). Our results in this study indicate that customer satisfaction played a partially mediating role in the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty. In other words, we found a direct positive relationship between service quality and customer loyalty of the sports and physical activity organizations while at the same time service quality also had a direct influence on customer satisfaction. Accordingly, service quality positively influenced customer loyalty directly and indirectly through the customer satisfaction path. The findings of this study confirm the results of other studies who found stronger indirect relationship between service quality and loyalty through the satisfaction route (Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Cronin *et al.,* 2000) while not supporting the results of other studies who identified only a direct relationships among these variables (Brady *et al.,* 2002; Dabholkar *et al.,* 2000; Olsen, 2002). In summary, our results indicate that customer satisfaction mediated the relationship between service quality and loyalty in the sports and physical activity services studied in this study. Similar results were observed in researches conducted in both the sports sector (Barshan *et al.,* 2017) and health sector. Therefore, similar results in other reseraches support our study (Meesala and Paul, 2018).

The fully mediated role of customer satisfaction of the relationship between service quality and loyalty could be explained by focusing on the role of other factors (such as price, convenience, and or availability) on customer satisfaction, which may have ultimately contributed to customer loyalty (Shonk and Chelladurai, 2008). Based on the results obtained in this study, we assert that sports and physical activity center customers value service quality but it may not be the only determinant of satisfaction. Along with quality of the service, other factors that contribute to both mental and physical experiences influence customer satisfaction and hence its impact on loyalty is enhanced.

Based on the findings of this study, sports and physical activity centers need to focus on both service quality and customer satisfaction to improve customer loyalty. Caruana (2002) stressed that customer

loyalty is the foundation of all successful service organizations and its importance has been amplified in the globalized competitive industries. Previous research indicates that loyalty contributes to the success of these companies in variety of ways one of which is the positive word-of-mouth communication. Through word-of-mouth communication, loyal customers contribute positively to communication the marketing messages of the sports and physical activity centers and rebuy their services. It is known that word-of-mouth communication is highly effective in attracting new customer and it becomes even more important when communication costs are included in the process. Repeat purchases provide consistency and stability in demand for sport and physical activity center's offerings.

Limitations and Further Studies

The results of this study should not be generalized beyond its target population since it was carried out using a limited sample in sports and physical activity sector in a single country. More research should test whether the consequence obtained in this study are consistent in other sports and physical activity environments. In summary, our study findings encourage researchers as well as the practitioners to be cautious when assuming direct relationship between service quality and customer loyalty. Given the limited research conducted in the sports and physical activity services, it is imperative the additional studies should replicate the mediation role of customer satisfaction in this field. The heterogonous nature of the sports and physical activity services further complicate the generalizability of findings. Therefore, drawing upon from the other disciplines, researchers should attempt to develop theoretical framework for the relationship among these constructs in the field of sports services and empirically test those relationships in specific sports services environments.

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