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## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **Influence of Service Quality and Satisfaction in Future Behavioral Intentions among Health and Wellness Users**

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**This paper analyses the influence of service quality and satisfaction in future behavioral intentions in health and wellness tourists. Service quality was defined by Parasuraman, Zeithaml e Berry (1985) through the SERVQUAL scale with five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. To analyse the future behavioral intentions, we considered the return and recommend intentions. A survey was conducted at five health and wellness tourism units situated in the central region of Portugal and the sample was constituted by a total of 268 users. The result analysis permitted to verify that service quality and satisfaction influences future behavioral intentions. It appears to be evident that the dimensions of assurance and empathy are the ones that most influence future behavioral intentions. In what concerns to satisfaction, we verify that it's related with these both intentions, but mainly with the intention to return and to and reuse those health and wellness services. These results and the implications for health and wellness tourism organizations are discussed.**

**Keywords:** Service quality, satisfaction, behavioral intentions, health and wellness tourism, intention of return, intention of recommend.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism represents nowadays a significant driving force of economic development with a spillover effect on its many associated industries. The beginning of the 21st century has been characterized by massive changes that keep determining the future of the tourism sector (Costa, 2006).

In this context appear health and wellness tourism as one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors internationally, and many countries, including Portugal, are currently

planning legally and practically for this market (Heung et al., 2010).

In the specific case of Portugal, health and wellness tourism is considered by the National Plan for Tourism Development for the period of 2006-2015 is one of the most important markets for the development of tourism. Besides that, was created new legislation in 2004 making the distinction between classic thermalism and wellness, giving the possibility of companies to develop a varied

offer, combining both. Health and wellness tourism has registered a big development in Portugal, appearing as a strong market niche, sustained by a constant increasement of intern tourism and extern tourism and representing an important increasement with economic benefits to the sector in a regional scale. Thermal centres constitute development poles in a local and regional scale, generating important benefits on the economic and social tissue, contributing also for the enrichment of the quality of life of the local population as well as for regional asymmetries (Antunes, 2010) and the assertion of inland destinations (Ramos and Costa, 2010).

The growth of the demand for health and wellness tourism around the world and particularly in Europe is due to a large number of social circumstances, such as, shifts in demographic structures as well as lifestyles – the ageing of the European population, an increasing desire to live longer and better (healthier lifestyles), the need for stress reduction among the working population, a shift in the medical paradigm towards prevention and alternative practices, and an increase search for new and different leisure experiences and customized forms of travel (Smith and Puzckó, 2009; Laesser, 2011). This emerging market segment is directed not only for those who pursue solely thermal treatments but also for those seeking illness prevention, physical improvement and spiritual balance or even cultural, relaxation and wellbeing programs.

In this context of growth of the offer and of the competitiveness, health and wellness become important topics in tourism research and tourism business, demanding a special attention of the researchers and agents of the tourism sector. Recognizing the growth of the number of persons interested in enjoy of leisure time with quality, becomes evident and necessary that the offer gives special attention to service quality as a competitive factor to this industry and as an answer to the needs, desires and expectations of the consumers, corresponding to the fulfilment of their satisfaction levels. To date the study of service quality and satisfaction issues have dominated the services literature (Cronin et al., 2000) and has been critical concepts in the specific field of tourism and leisure, as well as in the field of marketing, in the way they can be used as productivity indicators, acting like a guarantee to achieve the organizational goals with success. Service quality and satisfaction are seen as essential aspects, with a growth importance for tourism companies because valorize its services and can compete effectively in the market (Quintela, Correia and Antunes, 2011).

However, the prevailing perspective holds that satisfaction and service quality are distinctive concepts there's been a conceptual debate about the relationship between them (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Cronin and Taylor, 1992). According with Oliver (1993), service quality is a specific judgment of services availed of while satisfaction is evaluated in broader terms being a highly

subjective variable as compared to service quality. Consequently, service providers can exercise some control over service quality, but overall satisfaction with the services is outside the provider's control (Crompton and Love, 1995) because other factors such as emotions, mood and attributions come into play to produce satisfaction (Rust and Oliver, 1994). And, as an exogenous construct, can influence such constructs associated with future behavior (Kim and Severt, 2011). Likewise, it is assumed that quality plays a significant role in predicting consumer satisfaction along with future behavior (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Petrick, 2004) and as indicated, quality appears to be directly predicted by consumer satisfaction along with future behavior (Kim and Severt, 2011).

In this sense, the main goal of the present study is to determine the influence of the service quality perceived and satisfaction on future behavioral intentions of health and wellness users, analyzing the intention to return and the intention to recommend. A further aim of the study is to contribute for a better knowledge of the market of health and wellness tourism, permitting the definition of an offer more directed to the interests and profiles of its market-targets, looking for a better use of its potentialities. We also considered that this aspect constitutes a fundamental factor in what concerns to regional development of inner regions of Portugal, where this kind of touristic offer is mainly found. The central region of Portugal is predominant in hot springs and thermal spas and is an authentic example for the relative importance of this tourism product for the regional development. This research is also justified for the existence of a large number of thermal units and thermal spas that contribute for the regional development.

After a brief review of health and wellness tourism and of its importance for the regional development, the remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, the existing literature and theoretical frameworks about the constructs of service quality, customer satisfaction and future behavior intentions are reviewed. Second, the followed method is described. Third, the results are presented and discussed and finally, the conclusions the article concludes with an outline of the research limitations and areas of further research in the field.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Service Quality

Service quality has been increasingly identified as a key factor in differentiating service products and building a competitive advantage in tourism (Hudson et al., 2004). Thus, the pursuit for service quality has become an imperative factor for all organisations that are driven by the need to survive and remain competitive (Hu et al, 2009).

Numerous attempts have been made to define service quality and the closely related concept of customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1980; Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) define quality in general as something superior or excellent, and as a consequence, considered the perceived quality as "the judgment of the consumer about the superiority or general excellence of a product", what means the same as depends on the subjective answers of the users. The SERVQUAL approach by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1990) concentrated on the belief that measurement is possible through consideration of customers' expectations, experience and satisfaction levels. This approach highlights several dimensions that are important to customers when assessing the level of service quality, and these can be considered to be nonmutually exclusive determinants of service quality (Hudson et al., 2004). Service quality has been described as a kind of attitude, related but not the same as the satisfaction that results from the comparison of expectations with perceptions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988; Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Service quality is a crucial factor in evaluating the overall performance of an organization and is often valuable in differentiating itself from competitors to gain a competitive advantage. Previous studies have suggested that service personnel play an important role in customers' evaluations of service quality (Luoh and Tsaur, 2009).

Bitner (1990) suggested that a high level of service quality will lead to service loyalty. Parasuraman et al. (1991) found a positive and significant relationship between customer's perceptions of service quality and their intention to recommend (Hu, 2009).

The increased significance of the services sector has led to a heightened concern by practitioners and consumers for the quality of services being offered (Sung et al., 1997).

### Customer Satisfaction in Tourism

Customer satisfaction has been the object of numerous discussions, and recent trends indicate that customer satisfaction remains in the limelight, especially in the service field. Customer satisfaction is typically defined as an overall assessment of the performance of various attributes that constitute a product or a service (Bartikowski and Llosa, 2004).

While quality is measured from service providers' perspectives, satisfaction is measured from service takers' perspectives (Baker and Crompton, 2000). In marketing, consumer satisfaction is viewed as affective or emotional responses toward tangible and intangible products or services (Kim and Severt, 2011).

Oliver (1980), have developed a rich body of literature focusing on the antecedents (e.g., comparison standards) and consequences (e.g., behavioral intentions) of

satisfaction. Moreover, the same author argues that satisfaction is affected by performance and multiple comparison standards.

The literature on customer satisfaction has established that it has a positive effect on customer loyalty, and customer satisfaction is therefore a key objective for every company that wishes to increase customer loyalty and thereby produce a better business performance (Yang et al., 2009). Consumer satisfaction is generally construed to be a post-consumption evaluation dependent on perceived quality and value (Hu et al., 2009).

### Behavioral Intentions

Service Quality perceived and satisfaction has been shown to be good predictors of behavioral intentions (Petrick, 2004). In the current competitive market, measuring consumers' future behavior and predicting its relationship with others can be regarded as a critical concept in the current research community. When it is applied to destination management, promoting and retaining tourists' future visits would be a primary concern to be sustainable and competitive to related businesses and associations (Kim and Severt, 2011).

Most professionals in the tourist industry today would agree that their success is dependent on the levels of visitor satisfaction and the perceived quality in their service(s). Improvement in visitor satisfaction and service quality is assumed to influence visitors' post-consumption behaviors, such as revisit or return intentions, positive word-to-mouth or recommending intentions (Cole and Scott, 2004). Word-of-mouth communications in the domain of services based on experience qualities are generally recognized as important since is often considered by consumers when selecting a service provider and has a greater impact on information search, evaluation, and decision making than more formal marketing communications (Kinard and Capella, 2006).

Consumers are most likely to engage in word-of-mouth communication with other individuals not associated with the seller (i.e., private responses) or directly with the seller (i.e., voice responses). If the customer has experienced an unsatisfactory encounter, a voice response may provide a direct remedy while private response may have a therapeutic effect and help restore equity for the consumer in the exchange. In either case, the majority of consumers will engage in word-of-mouth regarding their consumptive activities (Swanson and Hsu, 2009). It is acknowledged that consumers' future behavior or intention is well-predicted, at various industries, by quality and satisfaction (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Petrick, 2004; Kim and Severt, 2011) and that in tourism is translated with future intentions to revisit the destination. Several studies that analyzed and tested the possible relationships among quality,

satisfaction, and behavioral intention of visitors have indicated that quality was found to be a sound predictor of satisfaction and future behavior. In regard to the cruise market, Petrick (2004) also reported that quality was the best predictor of repurchase intentions rather than satisfaction (Kim and Severt, 2011).

Literature review suggests that understanding future behavior of consumers or visitors, and providing consistent products and services, are considered fundamental for being competitive and sustainable in the current service market (Kim and Severt, 2011) and the benefits of maintaining a base of long-term customers is widely recognized by services marketers while customers that do not return are lost market opportunities (Swanson and Hsu, 2009). Favorable behavioral intentions frequently represent customer's loyalty. Loyalty can be defined and assessed by both attitudinal and behavioral measures. The attitudinal measure refers to a specific desire to continue a relationship with a service provider while the behavioral perspective refers to the concept of repeat patronage (Chen and Chen, 2010). The degree of destination loyalty is frequently reflected in tourists' intentions to revisit the destination and in their willingness to recommend it (Chen and Tsai, 2007).

### **Hypotheses of the Study**

Through this study we intend to analyse the impact of service quality perceived and satisfaction in the loyalty of the users of health and wellness units, focusing on the future behavioral intentions, based on the intention of return and the intention to recommend, we defined the following study hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. There's a positive relation between service quality and future behavioral intentions.

H1a. There's a relation between service quality and the intention return.

H1b. There's a relation between service quality and the intention recommend.

In what concerns to the consequences of satisfaction in future behavioral intentions, the literature suggests that satisfaction is directly connected to returning behaviors, fidelization and positive recommendations (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Oh and Jeong, 1996). The literature has also posited the notion that customer satisfaction leads to positive behavioural intentions, such as repurchase or return patronage (Kivela et al., 1999). In this sense, we considered the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2. There's a positive relation between satisfaction and behavior intentions.

H2a. There's a relation between satisfaction and the intention of return.

H2b. There's a relation between satisfaction and the intention of recommend.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

For the empirical study, we considered individuals over 18-years-old staying at the health and wellness units to be the target population. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed among six health and wellness tourism units (5 thermal spas and 1 spa of a 4 stars hotel), situated in a central inner region of Portugal and 268 valid samples were obtained, achieving a 67% of answer rate.

The demographic profile of visitors indicate that almost an equal number of males (46,3%) and females (53,7%) responded. Most of the sample is composed by older people with a low level of education. 34,3% of the sample is over 65-years-old and between 55 and 65 years-old (31,7%). Almost all respondents are married (75,4%) and did not graduate from high school (53,8%). Most of them are retired (45,9%). A summary of demographic characteristics of respondents is provided in Table I.

### **Procedure**

The questionnaire was available for users in several points of health and wellness units and was asked to them to fulfill the survey after the use of the services. After its fulfillment the questionnaire was delivered into the reception desk. Data were collected from these health and wellness users over a period of 3 months (July, August and September) which is considered the "peak" season for this sector. The days sampled included weekdays and weekends. This empiric research was previously allowed by the administrators and managers of each unit.

### **Research Instrument**

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, a quantitative research was conducted and the empirical study performed was based on information collected by means of a questionnaire as the main instrument of research. The survey instrument used mainly consisted of three sections including: (a) service quality, (b) global satisfaction with the experience (c) future behavior intentions.

### **SERVQUAL scale**

The already referred SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985, 1988, 1991) served as a starting point and provided the basis for

**Table I.** Sample – Demographic Profile of Visitors

Variables		Frequencie	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	124	46,3
	<b>Female</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>53,7</b>
Age (years)	18-24	4	1,5
	25-34	11	4,1
	35-44	27	10,1
	45-54	49	18,3
	55-65	85	31,7
	<b>Over 65</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>34,3</b>
Civil Status	Single	26	9,7
	<b>Married</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>75,4</b>
	Divorced	11	4,1
	Widow	25	9,3
	Other	4	1,5
Level of Education	<b>Less than high school</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>53,8</b>
	High school	49	18,3
	Graduate	69	25,7
	Post-graduate	6	2,2
Profession	Student	3	1,1
	Unemployed	1	0,4
	<b>Retired</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>45,9</b>
	Specialists	63	23,6
	Technicians	31	11,6
	Clerk Personnel	1	0,4
	Factory workers	5	1,9
	Non-qualified personnel	42	15,7

**Table II.** Relation between service quality and future behavioral intentions (Regression).

	Recommend to others		Return	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
<b>Empathy</b>	0.274	0.044		
F		3.107		
R		0.237		
R <sup>2</sup>		0.056		

developing the questionnaire for this study. This scale is composed by 22 itens and allows us to measure five dimensions or subscales: tangibility that is related with setting, equipment, appearance, customers, and logos, reliability was said to be at the core of service quality. Reliable services are consistent, dependable, on time, and accurate. Next, comes responsiveness which consists of promptness, convenience and accessibility. Assurance covers the elements of competence, courteousness, security, credibility, and effective communication. Empathy relates to caring, individualized attention, and approachability. According to Berry et al. (1994), companies do best at providing high-quality tangibles – the least important determinant of service quality for consumers. The answer is given about the frequency that the satisfaction level occurs regarding with

the different aspects of the service in a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) “very low satisfaction” to (5) “very high satisfaction”.

We proced to the analysis of metric qualities of SERVQUAL (reliability and validity) scale used in this study. In what concerns to the analysis of the internal consistency, we verified that the scale has an excelent internal consistence, once the Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.94. We verified that the subscales of tangibility, reability, availability and empathy present a good internal consistence ( $\alpha=0,92$ ,  $\alpha=0,99$ ,  $\alpha=0,82$  and  $\alpha=0,81$ , respectively) and the subscale confidance presents an acceptable internal consistence ( $\alpha=0.73$ ). In what concerns to scale validity, was done a factorial exploratory analysis. We verified that, although the sample is adequated for the factorial analysis

**Table III.** Relation between satisfaction and future behavioral intentions (Regression).

	Recommend to others		Return	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
<b>Satisfaction</b>	0.274	0.044	0.413	0.000
F	36.889		54.575	
R	0.349		0.413	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.122		0.170	

(KMO=0.938), the founded solution is acceptable.

### Overall Satisfaction

To analyse global satisfaction that, according with Oliver (1980) corresponds to the state of emotional reaction to a product or service experience that's influenced by the satisfaction with the product itself and for other extern factors to the performance of the product (as the previous experience and informations), presented the following sentence: "Mention your global satisfaction level with these services", having a 4 Likert-type scale ranging from (1) "not satisfied at all" to (4) "very satisfied".

### Future Behavioral Intentions

To evaluate the future behavioral intentions of users we formulated two questions: "Would you recommend these services to other persons [word-to-mouth]?" and "Would you like to return to this place and reuse these services?" The answer options were based on a Likert-type scale of 4 levels: (1) "never", (2) "not really" (3) "probably" and (4) "certainly".

## RESULTS

### Data Analysis

To explore the influence of service quality perceived and satisfaction on future behavioral intentions we used the statistical method of multiple regression, using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), 16.0 version. We considered as independent variables service quality and satisfaction and as dependente variables the returning intention and the recommending intention. The obtained results clearly showed that empathy is the only dimension of the SERVQUAL scale significantly predicty of future behavioral intentions of the health and wellness tourists. In this sense, once that the values of correlation

between empathy and the intention of recommend are positive, it means that when clientes perceive a service where the employees demonstrate interest and individualized attention the clients recommend this services to other people (Table II). Several researchers have found that the human interaction component of customer service delivery is essential to the determination of satisfaction; in particular, the behavior of customer contact employees has an influential effect on the customer (Bitner, 1990). Grönroos (1990) proposes that an employee's poor approach to customers, negligence, laxity and general slow service can significantly diminish customer satisfaction even when the technical aspect of the product is acceptable.

In what concerns to the influence of satisfaction on future behavioral intentions, we verified that satisfaction is associated with both intentions (of return and of recommend) (Table III). In this way, we can assume there is an influence of satisfaction on future behavioral intentions, what means that when users of health and wellness tourism units get satisfied with the services, they demonstrate the intention to recommend it to relatives and friends and they also intend to revisit that unit.

## DISCUSSION

In what concerns to the influence of service quality on future behavioral intentions (intention of return and intention of recommend), we verified that overall satisfaction influences on users loyalty, because according with Bowen and Chen (2001), the revisit intention is proporcional to satisfaction. Customer loyalty is an important goal in the consumer marketing community as it is a key component for a company's long-term viability or sustainability (Chen and Chen, 2010). Although there is a positive influence of satisfaction on the return intention, McQuitty et al. (2000) defends that satisfaction can not be enough to assure a long-term loyalty.

Regarding with the influence of service quality on future behavioral intentions the research hypotheses were

partially confirmed and only one SERVQUAL dimension – empathy – is related with the intention to recommend. Bitner (1990) show that customers evaluate the encounter more favourably when personnel are able to adapt and modify their behavior to meet their needs and requests, and that success is dependent on employee's interpersonal skills and character (Zeithaml et al., 1986). Human resources seem to be one of the strenghts of these units appearing as a critical success factor that must be maintained. The low levels of satisfaction about facilities and equipments' technological characteristics alert the managers to the need of developing and improve the tangibles aspects of these units.

In a perspective of applied research, the results of the study may give some clues in what concerns to the evaluation of overall satisfaction of health and wellness users, helping the managers to accede to the expectations, desires and necessities of their clients. Besides that, this kind of information may help to promote the global quality of the offered services in these health and wellness units, prioritizing objectives according with the dimensions that have a lower evaluation to achieve a maximum benefit.

The findings may contribute to the conceptual development of the existing literature about satisfaction, quality and future behavior intentions in the area of health and wellness tourism. Trough this study we intend to contribute to the development of health and wellness tourism as a determinant for the competitiveness of the sector that allows the development of the inner regions of Portugal, where most of this kind of offer can be found, looking for a more adequate use of its potentialities, not only under the cure perspective, but also and mainly, through a preventive and recreational perspective.

### Limitations and directions for future research

Although some limitations of this study we considered that the conclusions about overall satisfaction of users of health and wellness in this region constitutes the basis for a bigger research in the near future. We identify some limitations in what concerns to the use of SERVQUAL scale, because this wasn't created specifically for the health and wellness tourism. For this reason and for the fact the present research has been limited to an only and limited geographic area it doesn't permit to generalize the obtained results, for that reason we considered this an exploratory study. The purpose for future research may consist in the development of longitudinal studies, collecting new empiric data that permit evaluate how the inovation process has been evolving.

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