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THE USE OF THE DELPHI METHOD IN THE CREATION OF THE SERVQUAL MODEL FOR MEASURING THE QUALITY OF SERVICES IN FITNESS CLUBS

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to explore the applicability of the Delphi method in developing a SERVQUAL model for evaluating service quality in the Serbian fitness clubs, while also providing a practical tool for this emerging fitness market.

Methodology: Building upon established SERVQUAL frameworks, a three-round Delphi process was conducted with 14 experienced fitness professionals from Serbia. Participants assessed and refined an initial 33-item questionnaire structured around the five SERVQUAL dimensions. The study applied strict consensus criteria and used statistical measures including the Shapiro-Wilk test, interquartile range (IQR), and boxplot analysis to validate the reliability and internal consistency of the instrument across iterations.

Results: The final model consists of 25 statements and demonstrates a high level of adaptability of the SERVQUAL framework to specific needs of the Serbian fitness market, while maintaining theoretical consistency.

Conclusion: The study confirms the Delphi method as an efficient tool for constructing reliable service quality measurement instruments in fragmented and under-researched markets. The resulting SERVQUAL model holds both methodological and practical value. As the Serbian fitness industry continues to grow, this validated instrument offers stakeholders a valuable basis for quality enhancement.

Keywords: Delphi method, research methodology, SERVQUAL model, fitness industry, service quality

1. Introduction

The increasing popularity of recreational exercise has amplified the need for effective service quality measurement in fitness clubs (Jasinkas et al., 2013). Understanding customer expectations and percep-

tions is crucial for maintaining competitiveness and improving customer satisfaction in this rapidly evolving industry (Douglas & Connor, 2003; Robledo, 2001). The SERVQUAL model, a widely used framework for evaluating service quality, has been

applied to fitness clubs worldwide (Peitzika et al., 2020; Soita, 2012); however, Serbia's fitness market presents unique characteristics that necessitate an adapted version of this model.

Despite the growing number of fitness clubs in Serbia, there is no unified or standardized approach to assessing service quality. The number of fitness clubs is difficult to establish due to irregular business registrations and non-disclosure of membership data. Estimates suggest that in 2017, Serbia had approximately 1,000 fitness clubs, with projections indicating an increase by 2024 (Matić et al., 2017). Additionally, fitness clubs often do not fully report their members, impacting revenue transparency (Tomašević et al., 2024). The Serbian Recreation and Fitness Association (SFRS, 2021) reports a post-pandemic increase in fitness participation, aligning with global trends emphasizing healthier lifestyles and improved physical appearance (Ratković et al., 2023; Thompson, 2022). Furthermore, due to the coexistence of profit-oriented and non-profit fitness clubs, there is inconsistency in service delivery standards and approaches to quality assessment. This lack of uniformity complicates data collection and makes reliable comparisons across clubs difficult. Consequently, it impacts the methodological validity of applying standardized instruments like SERVQUAL, requiring a carefully adapted model that accounts for such market-specific variability. These challenges underscore the importance and practical value of developing a tailored SERVQUAL model suited explicitly for the Serbian fitness context.

Although international studies have successfully employed SERVQUAL to measure service quality in fitness clubs (Peitzika et al., 2020; Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2007), no specialized questionnaire designed exclusively for the Serbian fitness market has been created in the academic literature to date. The influence of media, particularly social media, has also impacted fitness service expectations, increasing awareness of global fitness trends but without a structured approach to evaluating service delivery (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Kumar et al., 2016). Furthermore, Serbia's fitness industry lacks a comprehensive service quality framework due to socio-cultural differences that distinguish it from other markets (Nedeljković et al., 2018).

This study addresses this methodological gap by systematically employing the Delphi method, recognized for its capability in synthesizing expert

judgment through iterative consensus-building, to develop a SERVQUAL model suited explicitly for the Serbian context. The Delphi method was selected due to its proven efficacy in systematically deriving expert consensus, particularly in contexts characterized by fragmented standards and subjective expert opinions. Specifically, this research employed a structured Delphi approach involving three iterative rounds with fourteen fitness industry experts from Serbia. The selection of these respondents, comprising fitness club managers and trainers, ensures the validity and relevance of the adapted SERVQUAL questionnaire for the local market.

Through this methodological approach, the research provides a validated measurement tool designed explicitly to improve service quality assessment, enhance customer satisfaction, and increase operational efficiency within Serbia's fitness industry. Moreover, by establishing a standardized measurement instrument, this study offers both a methodological contribution and practical value for business stakeholders. Fitness club managers can leverage the findings to measure and improve their service quality and increase customer satisfaction. Furthermore, this research provides insight into how Serbia's fitness market compares to international trends, highlighting the need for localized quality assessment tools.

2. Theoretical considerations

The fitness industry has experienced significant growth worldwide in recent decades, driven by rising health awareness, social media influence, and lifestyle changes (Kercher et al., 2022, 2023; Statista, 2023; Thompson, 2019; 2022). However, unlike highly regulated markets in some countries, Serbia's fitness club industry lacks formal oversight and standardized service quality evaluation. It is also important to recognize that not all fitness clubs are classified as profit-oriented organizations that offer services within the realm of recreation. As a result, understanding service quality expectations and differences between Serbia and other markets is essential for fitness clubs and industry development, as Serbia confidently follows the trend of increasing popularity of the fitness industry. The worldwide health and fitness club market was estimated to grow 7.67% annually between 2023 and 2030 (Statista, 2022). In addition, by 2030,

this industry was estimated to be worth approximately 169.7 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2022). The increasing popularity of fitness is unequivocally driven by two main factors: the ubiquitous presence of sports in people's lives globally and the media's unparalleled ability to promote and showcase various sports events. Today's modern media enhance global sports visibility and emphasize the importance of exercise. The sports market generates significant income, and the growing popularity of sports has resulted in increased recreational participation among the general population. The trends stem from the growing popularity of sports worldwide, supported by the media, and changes in the socio-cultural environment. Observations cannot be made in isolation. Trends like increased focus on health and physical appearance drive fitness engagement. Fitness clubs also serve as spaces for socializing and indicate social status.

Service quality assessment plays a crucial role in customer satisfaction and loyalty in fitness clubs (García-Fernández et al., 2018; Alexandris et al., 2004). A modern fitness club is highly efficient in using time and space in architecture and the simultaneous use of fitness technologies (Addolorato et al., 2020). Given the centrality of service quality to the mission of sports and recreation clubs, research toward a better understanding of the nature of service quality should be a primary concern for all organizations (Tsitskari et al., 2006).

Measuring tools are essential for the growth of the fitness industry. They will improve their service quality which will influence the health of users engaged in recreational fitness and increase profits for market participants. Therefore, measuring the quality of services provided, is the key to developing this industry. Creating scientific models used in this field, such as SERVQUAL, is necessary to achieve these goals.

The SERVQUAL model is widely used in the academic literature to measure service quality (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2007; Peitzika et al., 2020; Šíma & Ruda, 2019; Wang et al., 2015). The SERVQUAL model measures service quality and gaps between perceived and expected quality through 22 statements across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsibility, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The use of the SERVQUAL questionnaire to measure the perception of the quality of services provided in the fitness industry has been demonstrated in numerous examples (Lagrosen &

Lagrosen, 2007; Peitzika et al., 2020; Šíma et al., 2020; Šíma & Ruda, 2019; Soita, 2012). In addition to this model and similar objectives, other scales are used in the sports market, such as the SQAS (Altinişik & Çelik, 2021; Polyakova & Mirza, 2016) or other measurement methods by Chao (2015) and Tsitskari et al. (2014). In Serbia, the SERVQUAL questionnaire for measuring the quality of services in fitness clubs has not been used, i.e. no one has yet attempted to use the items (assertions) in this branch of the sports market. The dimensions of quality assessment in sports centers can differ significantly across various countries and distinct service sectors (Tsitskari et al., 2006), so applying the SERVQUAL model to Serbia requires adaptation due to the unique characteristics of the market. For example, Serbia's fitness clubs differ from those in Western Europe and the U.S. in terms of socio-cultural specificities (Nedeljković et al., 2018). The market includes a mix of profit and non-profit fitness clubs, which affects how service quality is perceived and delivered. Additionally, due to economic and cultural factors, Serbian fitness service users may prioritize certain service quality dimensions differently than in other countries (Jasinkas et al., 2013; Ruiz-Montero et al., 2015). Peitzika et al. (2020) found that in Greek fitness clubs, the physical elements, the reliability of promised services, the ability of fitness clubs employees to convey trust and confidence, and the individualized attention that these clubs provide to them are considered important elements of service quality. In Swedish fitness clubs, determined fitness quality dimensions are pleasure, mental change and physical change (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2007). Šíma et al.'s (2020) study findings led to the development of an enhanced four-factor SERVQUAL model tailored to the Czech fitness industry, indicated that local fitness service users primarily evaluate service quality based on facility conditions, service dependability, staff interactions, and program effectiveness. They developed an enhanced four-factor SERVQUAL model for Czech fitness clubs, where responsiveness, assurance, and empathy were merged into a single staff behavior factor, reflecting customer perceptions. The remaining dimensions, tangibles, reliability, and technical quality were retained. Soita's (2012) study from Uganda confirmed that there are significant gaps in service quality in Ugandan fitness clubs. The overall service perception score was negative, indicating that customer expectations were not met across all dimensions of service qual-

ity. The most critical service quality aspects for fitness service users were assurance (trust and confidence in staff), tangibles (facilities and equipment), and empathy (personalized attention), while fitness service users highly valued professional, knowledgeable, and courteous staff who ensure safety and provide reliable services.

Given these industry-specific challenges, this research used the Delphi method to create a SERVQUAL model tailored to the Serbian fitness market. In this study, the first questionnaire was created entirely based on other published research on service quality in fitness clubs. Many sources were used, following the nature of the service quality dimension defined by the SERVQUAL model. Four sources were used for the *tangibles* dimension, which consisted of eight statements in the first version of the questionnaire (Naik et al., 2010; Pi et al., 2022; Šima et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021). The *reliability* dimension is based on five statements and four sources in the initial version of the questionnaire (Naik et al., 2010; Peitzika et al., 2020; Šima et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021). The *responsibility* dimension is based on eight statements derived from three sources (Ko & Pastore, 2005; Naik et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2021). The *assurance* dimension is based on five statements and one source (Xu et al., 2021). The most prominent aspect of service quality in fitness clubs is the characteristic of assurance (Ojeh & Azizian Kohan, 2021). Defining claims related to assurance requires a clear understanding of the basic assurance aspects at the place of exercise (Adi Nurrohman & Rofiah, 2024). Following the assurance dimension, the empathy dimension is based on seven statements and six sources (Naik et al., 2010; Peitzika et al., 2020; Pi et al., 2022; Soita, 2012; Xu et al., 2021). The SERVQUAL questionnaire initially included 33 questions. Many other research studies have demonstrated the importance of the questions defined through this model.

The Delphi method is characterized by several distinct features related to the respondents and the repetition of the questioning procedure. The respondents are typically experts in the field and are highly relevant for defining research questions and assertions within the SERVQUAL model. To achieve a consensus among respondents, a minimum of three iterations of the questionnaire must be completed (Balasubramanian & Agarwal, 2012; Thangaratinam & Redman, 2005). Respondents must not collaborate or consult with each other

during the research. Their task is to rate the written statement on a scale, indicating their level of agreement (Murray & Jarman, 1987). A consensus may be achieved only if 90% of the questions in the questionnaire attain a median score of five. Furthermore, an additional requirement is that the mean score must be within the threshold of an excellent rating (4.50 and above).

The Delphi method has been employed for several decades as a forecasting technique that gathers data from specific research domains, relying on the insights and predictions of experts in those fields (Eret, 2017). Its primary advantages include obtaining expert opinions without the constraints of time and geography that often accompany alternative methodologies (De Meyrick, 2003). The Delphi method is particularly advantageous when physical meetings are not feasible (Humphrey-Murto et al., 2020). A key characteristic of the Delphi method is its recursive nature (Kari et al., 2011), which is a fundamental reason for its application in research, particularly in developing a questionnaire suitable for individual practitioners and those training in groups or one-on-one with a coach. Research by Costa (2005) demonstrates the validity of the Delphi method in the context of sports management, as it facilitates the exploration of new perspectives and opinions. Okoli & Pawlowski (2024) also highlighted the significance of the Delphi method in managerial decision-making.

The SERVQUAL model will be determined based on the characteristics of the population exercising in Serbia since local experts will be involved in the research. The SERVQUAL model is frequently employed in research about service quality in Serbia, particularly in the banking and postal sectors (Pavlović et al., 2018). Due to its wide applicability across diverse markets, its design to assess multiple dimensions of service quality, and its capacity for significant modification, this model has emerged as the most effective solution for this research. The capacity for modification was crucial, given that the study involved managers who also serve as trainers, conducting various forms of training ranging from personal sessions to small and large groups of participants. This necessity for adaptability is why the authors opted for the Delphi method in developing the SERVQUAL model. Specifically, the perception of service quality in fitness contexts varies according to the type of training, and only the Delphi method can facilitate a consensus among respond-

ents. The behavior of fitness service users in Serbia is correlated with global trends. The questionnaire indirectly integrates these specifics through the comments adopted on the proposed assertions during the implementation of the Delphi method.

3. Research methodology

The research was conducted in Serbia from June to November 2023 and involved 14 respondents (experts in fitness clubs: 10 trainers/managers, 4 trainers) aged 25 to 48. Each respondent had a minimum of 5 years of experience, with the majority having over 10 years of experience. The respondents hailed from various cities, predominantly Belgrade and Novi Sad. Iterations were documented with tables summarizing comments, changes, and rationales.

Based on a literature review of fitness service user satisfaction and service users in general, the first version of the questionnaire was developed comprising 33 statements. The questionnaire was based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). The statements were grouped according to the five service quality dimensions in the SERVQUAL model. Each dimension was marked with a different color: *tangibles*, *reliability*, *responsiveness*, *assurance*, and *empathy*. Respondents were given space to explain the grades they assigned and to leave comments at the end of each dimension. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents with clear instructions to indicate their level of agreement with the statements. The instructions were also provided verbally to each respondent. The respondents did not consult each other about the research, as they did not know the identities of other participants in the study. MS Excel 2016 and SPSS v. 25 were used to process the questionnaires.

Respondents rated statements (a 1–5 scale) and suggested revisions. After interviews clarified misunderstandings, the second iteration refined the questionnaire to 28 statements. The initial report comprised ten pages and concluded with a note stating: “It was observed that coaches conducting individual training sessions in a space with only one athlete perceived certain statements quite differently from others; thus, these statements were modified to also apply to group, independent, and personal training.” This issue was not identified in the subsequent questionnaire.

After conducting personal interviews and obtaining the necessary clarifications, respondents were

sent a second questionnaire consisting of 25 statements developed from the results of the first two rounds, which was then distributed for a third iteration. This step was completed entirely online, without additional verbal explanations. The final version of the questionnaire comprises 25 statements and includes general questions about the sample of respondents and future research purposes when applying this model. A question about exercise motivation was added to the basic questions about gender, age, and education (Dong et al., 2012). Exploration of motivations for engaging in fitness activities provides insights into the potential for enhancing service quality and informing the content of promotional messages for fitness clubs (Ratković et al., 2023). Research indicates that common motivations include health improvement, aesthetic enhancement, social interaction, and other factors (Vartanian et al., 2012). Identifying motivation is essential for making decisions regarding the successful positioning of a fitness club (Wilson et al., 2008).

The described procedure fulfils the Delphi method’s basic condition, i.e. a minimum of three iterations (Balasubramanian & Agarwal, 2012; Thangaratinam & Redman, 2005).

The results were processed using measures of central tendency and dispersion. The Delphi technique typically presents results using the median and interquartile range (IQR) as measures of central tendency and dispersion (Fish & Busby, 2005). High scores for all questions are expected, given the lack of normality and right-hand skewed curves. Since the median and IQR exclude extreme values, some authors recommend using the mean and standard deviation as alternatives (Thangaratinam & Redman, 2005). To ensure accuracy and account for divergent results, a boxplot diagram was included, illustrating data distribution, the IQR (a blue bar), the median (a bold line), outliers, and data distribution. This diagram effectively combines sensitivity and insensitivity to normality issues, enhancing Delphi data analysis.

Defining and identifying a consensus is a necessary step before commencing Delphi research. The Delphi technique assumes that respondents will reach a consensus after several rounds of research. However, it is important to note that this technique does not provide guidance on determining a consensus or the required number of research rounds. The Delphi technique usually involves three rounds

to achieve a consensus, but there is no limit to the maximum number of rounds (Landeta, 2006). The minimum number of rounds required to reach at least two is recommended. To determine a consensus, it is crucial to be realistic, as complete agreement among respondents is often unattainable. However, aiming for the highest possible percentage of agreement, even up to 90% (Landeta, 2006), is essential. This research aimed for respondents to agree on questions between 80% and 90%. Ideally, 90% of the questions in the questionnaire should have a median score of 5, with a minimum of 80%. The mean value must fall within the range of an excellent grade (4.50 and above) for the entire questionnaire and each of the five service quality dimensions in the SERVQUAL model. This is a crucial requirement for achieving high service quality standards.

4. Results

The questionnaire consisted of 33 questions (Table 1), and it was distributed to respondents in the initial round. Using the Shapiro-Wilk test in SPSS, the

normality of the distribution of respondents' ratings was checked. Out of the 33 variables, only Q19 and Q20 met the normality conditions with $p > .05$. The analysis indicates that 32 variables (excluding Q20) display significant positive skewness, implying that their distribution is skewed to the right of the mean and that their curves are right-skewed, approaching the maximum. The respondents were instructed to rate their level of agreement with each assertion on a scale from 1 to 5 based on their experience and knowledge as fitness marks. The aim was to specify the form of the questions and the logic, correctness, and completeness of the questionnaire. All 14 respondents in the sample completed the questionnaire in full and provided 32 comments, demonstrating their full participation in the assessment.

Of the 33 questions, 81.82% had a median score of 5, while the mean score for all dimensions was 4.44, i.e. below the target of 4.50. Three of the five quality dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, and empathy) did not receive an excellent rating. Although the evaluators are not subject to examination, respondents 6 and 7 gave very low marks, with an average below 4.00.

Table 1 The results of the first round

Questions	Experts	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12	E13	E14	Mean	SD	Max	Min	Range	Median	1st Q	3rd Q	QR	RIR	Σ Mean		
Examination of service quality - dimension of Tangibles:																												
1. The fitness centre has modern equipment		5	5	5	5	5	3	4	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	4,64	0,63	5	3	2	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15		4,58	
2. The fitness centre has all the necessary equipment and props		5	5	5	5	3	2	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	4,50	0,94	5	2	3	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15			
3. The fitness centre is visually appealing		4	5	4	5	5	2	4	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4,50	0,85	5	2	3	5	4	5	1	0,20			
4. The fitness centre has available parking		5	4	5	5	5	2	5	5	5	5	3	4	5	5	4,50	0,94	5	2	3	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15			
5. Coaches and other employees have a neat and professional appearance		5	5	4	5	5	5	3	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	4,64	0,63	5	3	2	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15			
6. Social media profiles are visually appealing		5	5	5	4	5	3	4	5	4	4	3	5	5	5	4,43	0,76	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20			
7. The fitness center is clean		5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,93	0,27	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
8. I sleep better after training		5	5	5	5	5	2	5	1	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,50	1,29	5	1	4	5	5	5	0	0,00			
Explanation of ratings and comments:																												
						K7	K9	K13	K18	K22																		
Examination of service quality - Reliability dimension:																												
9. Employees are reliable		4	5	3	5	5	4	3	5	5	4	5	5	5	3	4,36	0,84	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20		4,29	
10. The fitness centre is reliable in providing customer service		5	5	3	5	5	2	2	5	5	4	5	5	5	3	4,21	1,19	5	2	3	5	3,25	5	1,75	0,35			
11. In the fitness centre services are performed flawlessly		4	5	5	5	2	3	5	5	4	4	5	5	3	4,29	0,99	5	2	3	5	4	5	1	0,20				
12. Employees provide prompt service		4	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	3	4	5	5	4	4,50	0,65	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20				
13. The Fitness Center maintains error-free records		5	5	4	4	5	2	4	1	5	4	4	5	5	4	4,07	1,21	5	1	4	4	4	4	5	1	0,25		
Explanation of ratings and comments:																												
				K1			K10	K14	K19	K25				K29														
Examination of service quality - Responsiveness dimension (responsibility, operability)																												
14. The fitness centre is quick to respond to complaints		4	5	3	5	4	4	4	5	5	3	5	5	5	4	4,36	0,74	5	3	2	4,5	4	5	1	0,22		4,29	
15. Coaches and other staff are always willing to help		4	5	5	5	5	5	3	5	5	3	4	5	5	4	4,50	0,76	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20			
16. Trainers are trained to respond to requests from service users		4	5	3	3	5	5	3	1	5	4	5	5	5	4	4,07	1,21	5	1	4	4,5	3,25	5	1,75	0,39			
17. Procedures for dealing with complaints are simple		5	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	4	4,64	0,50	5	4	1	5	4	5	1	0,20			
18. Working hours are appropriate		5	5	5	5	5	5	3	5	5	4	5	5	5	3	4,64	0,74	5	3	2	5	5	5	0	0,00			
19. Exercise equipment is always available		5	5	5	3	3	2	2	1	5	5	3	5	5	3	3,71	1,44	5	1	4	4	3	3	5	2	0,50		
20. The locker rooms are never crowded		4	5	5	3	3	2	3	2	5	3	3	5	4	3	3,57	1,09	5	2	3	4	3	3	4,75	1,75	0,58		
21. Social media information is regularly updated		5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	4,86	0,36	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
Explanation of ratings and comments:																												
				K2	K4	K8		K11	K15	K20	K23	K26		K30														
Examination of service quality - Assurance dimension:																												
22. Trainers instill confidence in service users		4	5	5	5	5	3	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	3	4,50	0,76	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20		4,63	
23. Service users feel safe in training		5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
24. The coaches are knowledgeable and professional		4	5	5	5	5	2	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	3	4,50	0,94	5	2	3	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15			
25. Exercise equipment and space are safe		5	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	4,71	0,61	5	3	2	5	5	5	0	0,00			
26. Personal belongings stored in changing rooms and lockers are secure		5	5	5	5	5	3	5	5	5	3	4	5	5	5	4,64	0,74	5	3	2	5	5	5	0	0,00			
Explanation of ratings and comments:																												
				K5			K16			K27				K31														
Examining service quality - Empathy dimension:																												
27. Employees assist customers individually		4	5	4	5	5	2	2	1	5	4	5	5	5	5	4,07	1,38	5	1	4	5	4	5	1	0,20		4,43	
28. Employees are friendly and polite		4	5	5	5	5	3	3	5	5	4	4	5	5	4	4,43	0,76	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20			
29. Coaches work in the best interests of service users		4	5	5	5	5	4	2	5	5	3	4	5	5	3	4,29	0,99	5	2	3	5	4	5	1	0,20			
30. Trainers understand the needs of users of their services		4	5	5	5	5	4	3	5	5	3	4	5	5	4	4,43	0,76	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20			
31. I feel happy after training		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4,93	0,27	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
32. Employees are always smiling		5	5	3	3	5	3	3	5	4	4	5	5	5	5	4,14	0,95	5	3	2	4,5	3	5	2	0,44			
33. Communication with employees is easy		5	5	5	5	5	3	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,71	0,73	5	3	2	5	5	5	0	0,00			
Explanations of ratings and comments:																												
				K3	K6		K12	K17	K21	K24	K28			K32														
Average expert rating (mean)		4,58	4,97	4,55	4,67	4,79	3,52	3,58	4,27	4,85	4,00	4,36	4,97	4,97	4,12	4,44	0,83										Total	4,44

Source: Authors' work

Table 2 The results of the second round

Questions	Experts	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12	E13	E14	Mean	SD	Max	Min	Range	Median	1st Q	3rd Q	IQR	RIR	Σ Mean				
Examination of service quality - dimension of Tangibles:																														
The fitness centre has modern equipment and diagnostic procedures	5	5	1	3	4	2	2	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	3,93	1,44	5	1	4	5	3	5	2	0,40		4,25			
The fitness centre has the necessary equipment and props	5	5	1	5	5	3	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,43	1,16	5	1	4	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15					
The fitness centre is visually appealing	4	5	4	5	5	2	3	2	5	5	3	5	5	5	5	4,14	1,17	5	2	3	5	3,25	5	1,75	0,35					
It is possible to park near the fitness centre	5	4	4	5	5	4	3	2	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	4,21	0,89	5	2	3	4	4	5	1	0,25					
The fitness center is clean	5	5	1	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,57	1,09	5	1	4	5	5	5	0	0,00					
I sleep better after training	5	5	3	5	5	3	3	4	1	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,21	1,25	5	1	4	5	3,25	5	1,75	0,35					
Explanation of ratings and comments:																														
				K1	K6		K8	K12	K16	K21		K26																		
Examination of service quality - Reliability dimension:																														
Employees are efficient	4	5	5	5	5	2	4	3	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	4,43	0,94	5	2	3	5	4	5	1	0,20			4,36		
The fitness centre is safe	3	5	1	5	5	2	4	4	5	3	3	5	5	5	5	3,93	1,33	5	1	4	4,5	3	5	2	0,44					
I get quality services in the fitness centre	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,71	0,47	5	4	1	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15					
Employees are educated	4	5	5	4	5	4	3	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	4,43	0,76	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20					
The fitness centre maintains error-free records	2	5	5	5	5	3	4	2	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,29	1,14	5	2	3	5	4	5	1	0,20					
Explanation of ratings and comments:																														
				K2			K9	K13	K17	K22	K25	K27			K29															
Examination of service quality - Responsiveness dimension (responsibility, operability)																														
The fitness centre is quick to respond to complaints	4	4	5	5	5	3	3	4	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4,29	0,73	5	3	2	4	4	5	1	0,25				4,50	
Coaches and other staff are willing to help	5	5	5	4	5	3	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,64	0,63	5	3	2	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15					
Trainers meet the demands of users	4	5	2	4	5	2	3	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,14	1,10	5	2	3	4,5	4	5	1	0,22					
The working hours are appropriate	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,86	0,36	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00					
Some of the equipment I want to practice on is always available	5	5	4	5	5	3	4	3	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	4,43	0,76	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20					
I have enough space in the dressing room	3	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4,50	0,65	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20					
Information on social networks is regularly updated	3	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,64	0,63	5	3	2	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15					
Explanation of ratings and comments:																														
				K3	K7		K10	K14	K18	K23																				
Examination of service quality - Assurance dimension:																														
Trainers give the impression of security	4	5	2	5	5	3	4	3	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	4,21	0,97	5	2	3	4,5	4	5	1	0,22				4,49	
I feel safe in training	5	5	3	5	5	3	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,50	0,76	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20					
The coaches are experienced	5	5	2	5	5	3	3	4	5	5	5	5	5	3	4	4,29	1,07	5	2	3	5	3,25	5	1,75	0,35					
Exercise equipment and space are safe	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	4	4,64	0,63	5	3	2	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15					
Personal belongings stored in changing rooms and lockers are safe	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00					
Explanation of ratings and comments:																														
				K4			K11	K15	K19						K30															
Examining service quality - Empathy dimension:																														
Employees take care of each user	4	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4,64	0,50	5	4	1	5	4	5	1	0,20					4,64
The employees are friendly	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00					
Experienced trainers understand the needs of the users of their services	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,71	0,61	5	3	2	5	5	5	0	0,00					
The employees are in a good mood	5	5	5	3	5	4	4	4	5	5	3	4	5	4	4	4,36	0,74	5	3	2	4,5	4	5	1	0,22					
Communication with employees is good	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4,71	0,47	5	4	1	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15					
Explanation of ratings and comments:																														
				K5					K20	K24		K28																		
Average expert rating (mean)		4,39	4,93	3,75	4,75	4,96	3,36	3,82	3,82	4,86	4,93	4,68	4,89	4,86	4,21	4,44	0,82										Total	4,45		

Source: Authors' work

All 14 respondents from the sample participated in the evaluation, and a questionnaire with 28 questions was sent to them in the second round (Table 2). To ensure the validity of the evaluation, the

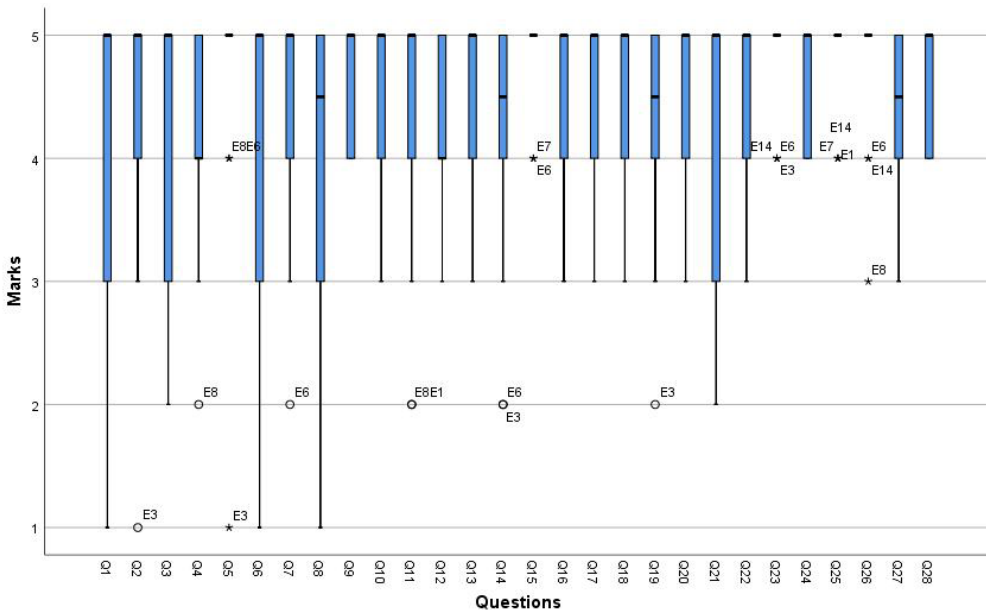
normality of the distribution of the respondents' assessments was checked using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The results indicated that none of the variables had a normal distribution ($p < .05$), and all observed

variables were determined to have negative asymmetry (skewness). The overall score improved by 0.01 percentage points but did not meet the target level of 4.50.⁴ Two quality dimensions achieved an excellent average, with responsiveness and empathy significantly improving from the first round, while reliability remained unsatisfactory. Averages for tangibles and assurance decreased, losing their excellent ratings. The number of questions with a median score below 5 remained at six. Reducing the total number of questions from 33 to 28 lowered the average score to 78.57%, below the 80% thresh-

old. Respondents provided 30 comments, slightly fewer than in the first round.

The second round saw lower scores, with four respondents scoring below 4, possibly due to communication gaps and task misunderstandings.⁵ The Delphi technique with controlled feedback is designed to minimize discrepancies and counterproductive group dynamics that may arise from group decision-making. Each subsequent iteration allows the respondents to reassess their positions, considering the group's responses as a whole, ensuring a more effective and efficient decision-making process.

Figure 2 Boxplot 2: The graph of the distribution of the results of the second round



Source: Authors' work

Feedback revealed initial communication issues reflected in a drop in Question 1's mean score from 4.64 to 3.93 in the second round, despite a stable median of 5. Graphical representations demonstrate that the lower average resulted from an increased IQR and rank in the second round (boxplot 2), significantly impacting mark dispersion. Despite this, over half the respondents scored this question 5, keeping the median unchanged from the first round (boxplot 1), where the IQR was 1 and rank 2. Only five variables in boxplot 2 had ideal positions with IQR 0 and median 5.

The unsatisfactory result was caused by providing the respondents with too much information, including answers to negative comments not written by them specifically. This confused them as to whether they should also react negatively. Our communication strategy has changed to provide individual respondents with answers based on their comments instead of providing a table with the results of the research round to all respondents. The results of the third round showed that such a strategy was successful, as the consensus was reached that was defined as the research objectives.

4 The average expert rating does not even show this increase, but this is due to data rounding and not a calculation error.

5 In extreme cases, an inadequate selection of respondents may be the cause.

Table 3 The results of the third round

Questions	Experts	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12	E13	E14	Mean	SD	Max	Min	Range	Median	1st Q	3rd Q	IQR	RIR	Σ	Mean	
Examination of service quality - dimension of Tangibles:																												
1. The fitness centre performs modern diagnostic procedures		2	5	5	5	5	4	3	4	5	5	5	5	5	3	4,36	1,01	5	2	3	5	4	5	1	0,20		4,57	
2. The fitness centre has the necessary equipment and props		5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,93	0,27	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
3. The space in the fitness center is nicely decorated		4	5	5	5	5	4	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,64	0,63	5	3	2	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15			
4. It is possible to park near the fitness center		3	5	5	5	5	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	4,57	0,85	5	3	2	5	5	5	0	0,00			
5. The exterior of the fitness center is attractive		3	5	5	5	4	5	2	4	5	5	4	5	5	3	4,29	0,99	5	2	3	5	4	5	1	0,20			
6. The fitness center is clean		4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	4,71	0,61	5	3	2	5	5	5	0	0,00			
7. Ventilation works well		4	5	5	5	5	5	3	4	5	5	4	5	5	3	4,50	0,76	5	3	2	5	4	5	1	0,20			
Explanations of ratings and comments																												
							K2	K4	K5	K6					K8													
Examination of service quality - Reliability dimension:																												
8. Employees are efficient and professional		4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00		4,79	
9. I get quality services in the fitness center		4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
10. The fitness center maintains error-free records		4	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,71	0,47	5	4	1	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15			
11. I have confidence in the coaches		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	4,86	0,53	5	3	2	5	5	5	0	0,00			
Explanation of ratings and comments:																												
							K3								K9													
Examination of service quality - Responsiveness dimension (responsibility, operability)																												
12. The fitness center is prompt in responding to complaints		4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	4,79	0,58	5	3	2	5	5	5	0	0,00			
13. Coaches and other staff are willing to help		4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
14. Working hours are appropriate		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5,00	0,00	5	5	0	5	5	5	0	0,00			
15. There is always some of the equipment I want to practice on available		4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
16. I have enough space in the dressing room		4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
17. Social media information is regularly updated		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5,00	0,00	5	5	0	5	5	5	0	0,00			
Explanation of ratings and comments:																												
									K7						K10													
Examination of service quality - Assurance dimension:																												
18. Coaches give the impression of safety		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00		4,86	
19. I feel safe in training		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,93	0,27	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
20. Personal belongings stored in changing rooms and lockers are secure		4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,86	0,36	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
Explanation of ratings and comments:																												
															K11													
Examining service quality - Empathy dimension:																												
21. Employees take care of every user		4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,71	0,47	5	4	1	5	4,25	5	0,75	0,15		4,83	
22. Employees are friendly		5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,86	0,36	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
23. Experienced trainers understand the needs of the users of their services		4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,93	0,27	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
24. Employees create a good atmosphere		4	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,79	0,43	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
25. Communication with employees is good		5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4,86	0,36	5	4	1	5	5	5	0	0,00			
Explanations of ratings and comments:																												
				K1											K12													
Average expert rating (mean)		4,16	5,00	5,00	5,00	4,96	4,88	4,20	4,68	5,00	5,00	4,88	5,00	5,00	3,88	4,76	0,47									Total	4,78	

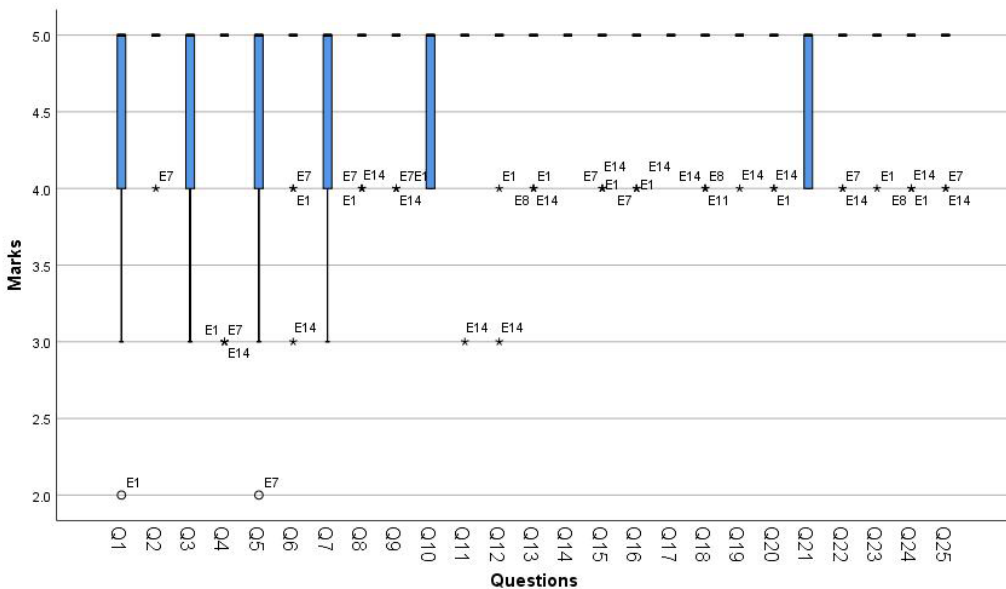
Source: Authors' work

In the third round, all 14 respondents evaluated the final 25-question version (Table 3). Shapiro-Wilk tests confirmed negative asymmetry. Respondents provided 12 positive comments, with one stating, 'That's it.' The research aimed to achieve a 90% agreement among respondents on questions posed by the median, with a minimum of 80%. Moreover, the mean value of the questionnaire, both as a whole and for each of the five dimensions of service quality in the SERVQUAL model, should be excellent (4.50 or higher). A consensus among respondents was successfully reached, and the results were obtained in the third round of testing. All 25 ques-

tions received a median score of 5, as shown in the yellow shaded fields in Table 3. The mean score was excellent at 4.78, as were all five quality dimensions, which ranged from 4.57 to 4.86.

The boxplot's ideal positions have an IQR of 0 and a median of 5, while desirable positions have an IQR of 1 and a median of 5. In the last test round, boxplot 3 achieved the ideal position for 19 out of 25 questions, while the remaining 6 had a desirable position. This is further indisputable evidence that a consensus was reached in the third round of the Delphi survey.

Figure 3 Boxplot 3: The graph of the distribution of the results of the third round



Source: Authors' work

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study confirms the effectiveness of the Delphi method in creating the SERVQUAL model to fit Serbia's fitness market. Although the research is based on the opinions of Serbian experts, the authors believe that the approach ensures its applicability at the international level.

SERVQUAL was selected as the foundation for the construction of the questionnaire due to its established effectiveness in various service sectors and its flexibility, as noted by Fernández & Bedia (2005) and Ramachandran & Chidambaram (2012). The

SERVQUAL model has been deemed suitable for assessing service quality in contemporary research, as demonstrated by studies conducted by Lagrosen & Lagrosen (2007), Peitzika et al. (2020), Šima & Ruda (2019), and Wang et al. (2015). The original SERVQUAL framework (Parasuraman et al., 1985) comprised 22 items that evaluate five quality dimensions, including tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy. The initial SERVQUAL questionnaire contained 33 items, but the final version was refined to include 25 statements. The application of the SERVQUAL questionnaire to assess the quality of services in the fitness indus-

try has been validated in numerous studies globally (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2007; Peitzika et al., 2020; Šima et al., 2020; Šima & Ruda, 2019; Soita, 2012), and it has now also been verified in Serbia.

This study successfully applied the Delphi method over three iterations to develop the SERVQUAL model, aligning with previous research (Balasubramanian & Agarwal, 2012; Thangaratinam & Redman, 2005). Notably, respondents did not collaborate or consult with one another throughout the study, as asserted by Murray & Jarman (1987). As Landeta (2006) indicated, striving for a high level of agreement, potentially reaching 90%, is crucial; this research achieved an even greater degree of consensus. This study corroborates Costa's findings (2005), which affirmed the efficacy of the Delphi method within the realm of sports management. Therefore, it can be concluded that the methodological contribution is undoubtedly significant, as it confirms the research that has already been carried out.

The questionnaire measures the quality of individual fitness clubs and overall service in Serbia, offering practical insights for industry improvement. As the fitness clubs' market in Serbia remains unregulated, accurate data on participant registration and involvement are difficult to obtain. However, this research aims to showcase the immense potential of this sector within the sports industry. Improving the quality of services leads to indirect benefits, indicating expansion and a more serious approach to business.

Therefore, the answer to the research question as to whether it is possible to create a usable SERVQUAL model based on the Delphi method is affirmative. The research conclusively demonstrates the effectiveness of the Delphi method in creating a usable SERVQUAL model.

The research clearly outlines the claims within the tangibles dimension, such as modern diagnostic procedures, necessary equipment and props, attractive decoration, convenient parking, an appealing exterior, and effective ventilation. Furthermore, it defines statements within the reliability dimension with precision and accuracy. Fitness club employees provide quality services with efficiency and professionalism. They maintain error-free records and inspire confidence in their clients. The following statements explore the next dimension of responsibility: the fitness club efficiently addresses complaints, with coaches and staff readily available to assist. Operating hours are suitable, and necessary equipment is consistently available. Adequate space is provided in the dressing room, and social media updates are frequent. Moving on, the assurance

dimension is defined by the following statements: Trainers create a secure environment for personal belongings in lockers and changing rooms. The empathy dimension is evaluated through the following statements: Employees demonstrate care towards users, understand their needs, and foster a positive atmosphere through good communication.

This research covers all types of training, including personal, independent, and group training. This circumstance represented a difficulty when formulating individual statements because some trainers work exclusively with groups while others work exclusively with individuals. Additional explanations were provided to create a statement that can be applied to all types of training. This scale can be utilized for individual, group, and independent training sessions. As previously mentioned, following the initial iteration using the Delphi method, a discrepancy was identified among respondents regarding their preferences for personal versus group training. This issue was addressed through appropriate modifications to the statements in the subsequent questionnaire version.

Research limitations include delayed respondents' responses and the inability to calculate internal consistency via Cronbach's Alpha. Future surveys with fitness users are needed to validate the reliability of the SERVQUAL scale. The research is geographically limited to Serbia and therefore excludes information from other countries in the region. Limitations also include the undefined number of fitness clubs due to informal operations and insufficient categorization of services offered. Future research should map all recreational training providers in Serbia, categorize fitness clubs, and refine service quality assessments.

The finalized SERVQUAL model provides both methodological and practical implications of this research, which was shaped through consultations with fitness experts from Serbia, utilizing the Delphi method. Although specifically developed for the Serbian market, the methodological approach can serve as a template for other markets and industries internationally, particularly those experiencing similar fragmentation or a lack of regulation. Additionally, this study offers valuable practical insights, suggesting that fitness clubs should prioritize service quality dimensions most relevant to Serbian fitness service users, particularly empathy, reliability, and assurance. Fitness clubs can use the validated 25-statement SERVQUAL instrument to identify service gaps, directly addressing areas where customer expectations are unmet.

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