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The analysis of customers' e-complaints and service quality at spa services in Thailand

Many past studies have explored customers' e-complaints in hospitality businesses such as hotels and restaurants. However, there has been a limited examination of these issues in wellness tourism, particularly in the spa business. This study aims to examine customers' e-complaints at day spas in Thailand's major tourism cities and to analyze them in relation to service quality dimensions. Content analysis and descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data collected from TripAdvisor. The findings indicate that major e-complaints are related to the poor skills of spa therapists, poor services, and non-recommendations for using spa services. Through the analysis of service quality dimensions, major e-complaints were found to be associated with reliability, assurance, and responsiveness. The study adds to the understanding of spa complaints and their constructs as well as providing new insights into their relationships with the service quality dimensions. Suggestions for spa businesses are provided in order to improve spa service quality.

Keywords: online reviews, e-complaints, day spas, TripAdvisor, Thailand

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Introduction

The spa business has been gaining in popularity over recent decades (Han, Kiatkawsin, Kim & Lee, 2017) due to the increasing demand of consumers to enjoy a better quality of life and well-being (Quintela, Costa & Correia, 2016). The spa business offers specific water-based facilities, which may include health, relaxation, and beauty services (Hashemi, Jusoh, Kiumarsi, & Mohammadi, 2015). In Thailand, the spa market has grown rapidly owing to the increasing health-consciousness of Thai and international consumers (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017), the expansion of the spa businesses, the popularity of spa services, the welcoming hospitality, and the inexpensive cost (Ministry of Public Health, 2014). This phenomenon consequently makes Thailand one of the largest spa destinations in the Asia Pacific region (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017). In particular, the spa business is directly associated with wellness tourism in that tourists spend some of their free time receiving services that enhance their physical and mental well-being. When tourists visit a destination, they may seek leisure activities that affect their health and well-being through physical, psychological, or mental activities offered by spa service providers (Dimon, 2013; Lo, Wu, & Tsai, 2015). In other words, tourists go to spas to pursue their wellness, which is a multi-dimensional state, and a sense of well-being through a wide range of spa services (Corbin & Pangrazi, 2001). Today, the spa business is a significant tourism product currently promoted by the Thai government to stimulate economic growth (Klaysung, 2016; Ministry of Public Health, 2014).

One of the factors accelerating the growth of the spa industry is the Internet by offering a wide range of spa services, sales promotions, and a relaxing environment (D'Angelo, 2010; Wisnom & Capozio, 2012). In particular, the Internet also provides a suitable environment for customers to give feedback online and influence the travel and tourism industry (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The use of the Internet gives customers with

efficiency in the communication of information (O'Connor, 2010), and it is a fast and easy way to express opinions about products and services (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015). Due to the growth of the spa business in Thailand's major tourist locations such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, and Phuket, many foreign tourists who visit Thailand use spa services in these cities. After using spa services, they may share feedback about their experiences through travel review websites (e.g., TripAdvisor).

Spa establishments who have delivered unsatisfactory or unprofessional services may lose their customers or business reputation due to the negative word-of-mouth from dissatisfied customers through travel review websites (Dawson & Titz, 2012; Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015). With free access to these websites, negative reviews or e-complaints can be distributed to millions around the world very quickly (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015). However, most past research has explored customers' e-complaints in hospitality businesses such as hotels and restaurants, but limited attention has been given to these issues in the spa business. Further research to investigate customers' e-complaints in the spa industry is necessary to find out what customers say online about spa services. Understanding these issues may assist spa businesses in improving their services, which may enhance customer satisfaction and spa experiences (Dawson & Titz, 2012).

Furthermore, scholars have not yet examined customers' e-complaints (including spa services) in relation to service quality dimensions. Service quality is an important issue for spa businesses because providing spa services involves a direct service encounter between spa staff and customers. Most spa products are services and are strongly affected by the staff's service performance. The spa business, therefore, is a high-contact service industry which mostly requires staff to provide customized services for customers (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014). Customers perceive the quality of spa services through staff performance.

Service quality is, therefore, vital to the spa business in terms of the staff's ability to provide customers with high-value spa experiences that meet customer expectations.

In recent years, several scholars have examined the relationship between customer perceptions of spa services and service quality mainly through questionnaire surveys or quantitative approaches (e.g., Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Markovic, Loncaric, & Loncaric, 2014; Lo et al., 2015). However, they may better understand spa service quality through the analysis of secondary data sources, for example, in customer reviews. The secondary data from major travel review websites can be useful in informing service providers about their service quality (particularly in negative reviews), leading to the development of enhanced guest services and business performance (Dawson & Titz, 2012; Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015).

Given the existing research gaps, this study aims to analyze and categorize spa complaints into major themes and meaningful constructs as well as to analyze them in regard to service quality dimensions. The results of the study are expected to allow a deeper understanding of spa complaints and to gain new insights into their relationship with the service quality dimensions. The findings will also assist spa businesses in taking appropriate action to make improvements in service quality to meet customer expectations and to enhance customer satisfaction. High levels of service quality will help to strengthen the growth of spa and wellness tourism in the destinations.

Literature review

Spa business and wellness tourism

The term ‘spa’ originally referred to health through water, but nowadays spa is understood to refer to water-based facilities that offer diverse types of treatments and care for health, relaxation and beauty (Hashemi et al., 2015). A spa business provides services related to health promotion. The main products of spa businesses are massage and body treatments, and they may have additional services such as beauty treatments, saunas, exercise for health, nutrition programs, yoga and meditation courses (Ministry of Public Health, 2014). According to the International Spa Association (2012), there are seven major types of spa: day spa, club spa, medical spa, mineral spring spa, resort & hotel spa, cruise ship spa, and destination spa.

The day spa is the focus of this study because it is the type that is widely found in major tourism cities where many tourists use their services. According to Thailand’s Ministry of Public Health (2017), the majority of health-related establishments are day spas. In general, a day spa is a business that provides facilities on a day-use basis by primarily offering rejuvenating and renewing spa treatments. Day spas usually offer a wide range of spa treatments in a calm and nurturing environment and private treatment rooms so that each client can receive a personal service (Day Spa Association, 2006). People use the services of day spas to revitalize their physical and mental health (Lo et al., 2015). As previously stated, day spas are directly related to wellness tourism, which refers to health and well-being—related travel through physical, psychological, or mental activities (Dimon, 2013). During holiday trips, tourists may seek various services and activities to enhance their wellness and well-being such as physical fitness, beauty treatments, body massages, healthy food, relaxation/stress relief, meditation, yoga, and other health-related activities.

The importance of online reviews

The widespread use of the Internet has led to a phenomenon known as eWOM or electronic word of mouth (Dawson & Titz, 2012, 67). According to Stass (2000), eWOM is defined as any positive or negative statement made by actual or former customers regarding a product or service, which is made available via the Internet. eWOM can take place in many ways such as customer reviews, web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, newsgroups, blogs and other social media channels (Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). An issue for many tourism businesses is that online reviews can be done anonymously and easily by anyone (Dawson & Titz, 2012). Thus, online reviews can be made and spread word-of-mouth without fear of identification (Black & Kelley, 2009). Online reviews can be both positive and negative messages about a specific service or product (Xie, Miao, Kuo, & Lee, 2011). However, scholars have not yet examined complaint reviews by spa customers. Customer complaints will be a valuable tool for spa service providers to improve their services and correct service failures as well as to enhance company performance (Wagner, 2008).

Service quality

Spa businesses mainly sell an ‘experience’ that includes beauty care, massage services, and health-related treatments (Wuttke & Cohen, 2008). The spa experience does not only rely on physical services but also includes mental well-being by including relaxation and resting activities (Sundbo & Darmer, 2008). As previously stated, the spa business is a service-oriented business in which people mainly deliver the service. Most spa products are services (e.g., treatments and beauty care). These services are highly related to staff performance. In this regard, customers perceive the quality of spa services through the assessment of how the services correspond to their needs and expectations. Due to these

distinct features, service quality is important for spa service providers in understanding what customers need and expect.

One approach to gain deeper insights into spa services and their performance is through service quality. Service quality is a concept that describes the evaluation of how well a delivered service meets customer expectations. Service providers (e.g., hotels, spas) often assess service quality in order to improve their services and enhance customer satisfaction. Service quality is, therefore, an important issue for tourism businesses, including spa establishments, in order to understand how well their services meet customer expectations. Understanding these issues may help businesses to improve customer services as well as to enhance customer satisfaction and business performance (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Lo et al., 2015). In order to measure service quality, SERVQUAL (or service quality dimensions) is employed. SERVQUAL is a multi-dimensional research instrument designed to measure consumer expectations and perceptions of the service in terms of 5 dimensions: 1) reliability, 2) responsiveness, 3) assurance, 4) empathy and 5) tangibility (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Previous studies have used SERVQUAL to examine spa service quality through questionnaire surveys (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Markovic et al., 2014; Lo et al., 2015). However, scholars do not often conduct an analysis of service quality based on secondary sources. This study will apply the concept of SERVQUAL to analyze the contents of customers' e-complaints to further understand spa service quality with a secondary data approach.

Methodology

The research methodology of this study includes the following steps: 1) identifying spa establishments 2) setting the criteria for sample selection 3) data collection and 4) data analysis. Firstly, in order to identify the spa establishments, customer complaints, and negative reviews regarding spa services in Thailand were the focus of this study. These reviews came from foreign customers (mainly tourists) who had used or experienced Thai spa services. After experiencing the services, they wrote reviews by sharing or reflecting on their experiences, particularly their dissatisfaction or bad experiences, about the spa services on a travel review website. Before analyzing the reviews, spa businesses (or spa establishments) need to be identified. In this study, spa businesses are those registered with the Ministry of Public Health (the government department that regulates the standard of spa businesses in Thailand). These registered spas have met certain standards required by the government, and they are the targets in the promotion of wellness tourism in Thailand. In order to enhance data reliability, spa establishments in Bangkok, and other major tourist cities in Thailand were included in the analysis. They were ChiangMai (north), Nakhon Ratchasima (northeast), Pattaya (east), and Phuket (south). According to the Ministry of Public Health (2017), Bangkok has the highest number of registered day spas with 128 establishments, followed by Phuket with 26, Pattaya with 18, Nakhon Ratchasima with 7, and Chiang Mai with four spa establishments. For the five major tourism cities, there is a total of 183 registered day spas included in the analysis.

Secondly, the sample selection (spa complaints) was found via a popular travel review website, TripAdvisor, which is an important and useful travel website providing reviews of travel-related products around the world (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015). Previous studies used TripAdvisor to analyze online customer complaints at hotels and restaurants (e.g., Au, Buhalis & Law, 2014; Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sparks & Browning, 2010). Given the

usefulness of TripAdvisor, criteria were adapted from previous work (Au et al., 2014; Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015) in order to collect the required data as follows.

1. Name of the registered day spas should be found on TripAdvisor. Only those found on the website were taken for data collection.
2. Day spas with 5 or more foreign customer reviews (English language) were considered for data analysis.
3. Only complaints or negative reviews were chosen for analysis to correspond with the research objective of the study.

Table 1: Number of registered day spas and complaint issues

| Region | Number of registered day spas | Number of day spas meeting study's criteria | Number of negative reviews | Number of complaint issues |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| North: Chiang Mai | 4 | 4 | 14 | 43 |
| Northeast: Nakhon Ratchasima | 7 | 7 | 27 | 81 |
| Central: Bangkok | 128 | 84 | 168 | 677 |
| East: Pattaya | 18 | 13 | 41 | 129 |
| South: Phuket | 26 | 22 | 55 | 205 |
| Total | 183 | 130 | 305 | 1,135 |

Table 1 shows the number of registered day spas, the number of day spas meeting the study's criteria, the number of negative reviews, and the number of complaint issues. In this study, 305 negative reviews from all 130-day spas were examined, yielding 1,135 complaint issues (suggesting that one customer may post or share negative spa experiences on several issues).

Thirdly, data collection was conducted during March - April 2018. The data were collected over a period of one year based on the methodology of past studies in order to provide sufficient data (Au et al., 2014; Sparks & Browning, 2010). Content analysis was used in this study because it is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many

words of text into fewer content categories based on rules of coding as well as having the flexibility to analyze qualitative data (Stemler, 2001). Data analysis was undertaken with the guidance of past research. For example, it was suggested to conduct the data coding process by hand to determine the types of online review, which were in the form of words, phrases, sentences, and descriptions (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015). In addition, Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken (2002) suggested that data should be read and re-read to ensure validity and consistency in measurement. Importantly, six phases of qualitative analysis were applied: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, after collecting the data, the complaints were analyzed and categorized into similar themes. They were then sorted to establish meaningful constructs. For the analysis of spa service quality, the complaints were analyzed and then grouped in terms of 5 dimensions of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility. Each dimension was linked to certain spa practices based on the literature on spa service quality (e.g., Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Lo et al., 2015; Markovic et al., 2015).

The process of data analysis was a content-based approach based on related literature (Au et al., 2014; Berg, 2007; Sparks & Browning, 2010). The data were analyzed and coded by two academics with content analysis experience, who worked independently. The two academics conducted a pilot test with 30 samples by analyzing and categorizing customer complaints from the TripAdvisor website before the final data collection to make sure that they interpreted contents and consistently categorized the complaints. During data collection, when there was a disagreement about the coding process, the final coding and interpretation were discussed and agreed. Inter-coder reliability was also tested (using Krippendorff's Alpha) as suggested by the literature (Au et al., 2014; Krippendorff, 2004), with a value of 0.81, indicating a high level of agreement between the two coders. In order to ensure the

reliability and validity of the categorization process as suggested by past studies (Au et al., 2014), the coding scheme and complaint categories were carefully checked and refined by the researcher. Also, descriptive statistics were used to describe the data in terms of frequency and percentage.

Results

Table 2 presents a summary of the spa customer complaints. The analysis of demographic details indicated that among 305 reviewers, 48% were female, 39% were male, and 13% did not specify their gender. Most customers were aged between 31 and 45 years old (40%), and 46 and 60 years old (35%). They mainly were Asians (46%) and Europeans (34%) while the rest came from Australia/New Zealand (8%) and the Americas (5%).

Table 2: Profile of spa reviewers

| Description | Frequency (n=305 reviewers) | Percentage |
|-----------------------|--|-------------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 119 | 39% |
| Female | 146 | 48% |
| Not indicated | 40 | 13% |
| Age | | |
| 25-34 | 33 | 11% |
| 35-49 | 125 | 41% |
| 50-64 | 110 | 36% |
| 65 or older | 21 | 7% |
| Not indicated | 16 | 5% |
| Region | | |
| Asia | 151 | 49% |
| Europe | 115 | 38% |
| Australia/New Zealand | 30 | 10% |
| Not indicated | 9 | 3% |

Table 3 presents an analysis of spa complaints and related themes. As shown in Table 2, from 305 reviewers, there were 1,135 spa complaints. The number of complaints indicates that one customer may post or share negative spa experiences on several issues. The complaints were then categorized into ten major themes. The most common complaint was “poor skills of spa therapists” (22.8%); followed by “poor behavior or etiquette of spa therapists” (19.7%); “non-recommendation for using spa services” (11.8%); “noise disturbance” (9.6%); “weak English language” (7.7%); “unfriendly staff” (6.7%); “poor facilities and atmosphere” (6.0%); “poor value for money” (5.9%); “limitation of products” (5.6%); and “uncleanliness” (4.2%).

Table 3: An analysis of spa complaints and related themes

| Themes | Frequency | Examples of statements |
|---|----------------|---|
| 1. Poor skills of spa therapists | 258 (22.8%) | <p>“The massage quality is not properly trained”</p> <p>“The therapists are not up to standard, the service is bad”</p> <p>“The standard of message was really below average, especially when you pay high price with unprofessional service”</p> <p>“The pressure of therapists was not consistent, sometimes too hard and sometimes too light”</p> <p>“Go there for a basic Thai massage but avoid facials as they do not seem to have the equipment nor skills to provide this treatment” “Therapists here were below average and they overused the massage oil which were not well absorbed by my skin”</p> <p>“At first I thought it probably was just my bad luck ending up with a poor masseuse but afterwards we found out that the experience was the same for all three of us. It was obvious that all three masseuses were terrible and untrained”</p> |
| 2. Poor behavior or etiquette of spa therapists | 224 (19.7%) | <p>“Etiquette of the therapists were not good”</p> <p>“I got a different masseur and she was extremely rude, not smile, and rush to finish her work. I did not enjoy my massage this time”</p> <p>“The therapist was rude from beginning to end, no smile at all, no attention to details, the massage was rough and without passion”</p> |

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|--|----------------|--|
| | | “My masseur went outside the room for 10 minutes to talk on the phone and did not apologize anything” |
| 3. Non-recommendation for using spa services | 134 (11.8%) | <p>“Would not suggest this place at all unless you don’t have a choice”</p> <p>“I will not recommend this place and won’t come back for sure”</p> <p>“I would not recommend this pricy spa”</p> <p>“Can’t recommend this place and will not be returning”</p> <p>“Would not recommend to try this spa”</p> |
| 4. Noise disturbance | 109 (9.6%) | <p>“Only thing to be aware of is that the massage rooms are separated by only curtains so you can hear noise from the reception area which bother us”</p> <p>“The two ladies kept talking with each other for the whole time, making it a bit hard to relax completely”</p> <p>“Another bad thing is the masseurs talk a lot among themselves while giving massage which is very irritating at times”</p> <p>“The masseur is very noisy, always talking to her co-worker on the other room, so it’s very irritating”</p> |
| 5. Weak English language | 88 (7.7%) | <p>“The staff at this spa didn’t understand English”</p> <p>“Receptionists don’t appear to speak much English”</p> <p>“The two therapists we encountered hardly know English so we gave up to explain to them”</p> <p>“The masseurs did not understand my requests because they are poor English”</p> |
| 6. Unfriendly staff/receptionists | 76 (6.7%) | <p>“The lady at the front desk was condescending and rude”</p> <p>“The attitude of the receptionist put me off this place for life”</p> <p>“The lady at the reception was a little rude and unwelcoming and mostly interested in getting the money and that’s it”</p> <p>“Receptionists here lack of smiling face”</p> |
| 7. Poor facilities and atmosphere | 68 (6.0 %) | <p>“The atmosphere of the spa is cold”</p> <p>“Room too cold and the music too loud”</p> <p>“Bath and shower did not work very well”</p> <p>“The treatment room, ceiling and walls were full with molt”</p> <p>“Too many mosquitos and we had to repeatedly ask for a repellent”</p> <p>“My biggest complaint was the air conditioning in the room that was blowing on me constantly and it was cold”</p> |
| 8. Poor value for money | 67 | “It is more pricy than the street spas and also |

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|---------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| | (5.9%) | worse than those, against our expectation” “However, I think the price is a little higher than other spas” “With the price tag, I'm sure one can get better experience somewhere else” “The price was super expensive too for 1 hour service” “The spa here is not worth the money” “The spa is over price with ordinary service” “The manager tried to sell a high price package for me” |
| 9. Limitations of products | 64 (5.6%) | “We also feel the aroma oil used is not in good quality” “Facial cream and mask are not good quality products” “I don't know what massage oil they use, smells very awful” “Avoid facials as they do not seem to use good products to provide this treatment” “No choice of massage oil at all” |
| 10. Uncleanliness of facilities | 47 (4.2%) | “The toilet had bad smell” “Bathrooms and shower need some improvements” “Towels are not clean (wet)” “Towels are smelly and some spots on it” “Cockroaches were walking in the massage room. I was really shocked especially when almost naked” “I was so disappointed with the condition and cleanliness of the place. The washroom floor was wet and lack cleaning service” |
| Total | 1,135 (100%) | |

Table 4 reports the three main constructs of spa complaints: 1) people and services 2) non-recommendations and others and 3) physical elements. The 1,135 complaints grouped into ten major themes in Table 3 were later sorted into more meaningful constructs (Table 4). Among the three constructs, people and services are the largest construct (66.6%) followed by non-recommendations and others (23.3%), and physical elements (10.1%). Each component has sub-themes (see Table 4). Under the first construct (people and services), there are two key components which are spa therapists and front desk staff. The second construct (non-recommendations and others) is comprised of 3 sub-themes, and the third

construct has two sub-themes (physical elements). The findings on the spa complaint constructs will provide a more in-depth understanding of spa complaints in Thailand as well as will indicate further implications for spa businesses in handling these complaints and in improving their services.

Table 4: Main constructs of spa complaints

| Main constructs & themes | Frequency (n=1,135) |
|--|---|
| 1. People and services (66.6%) 1.1 Spa therapists 1.1.1 Poor skills of spa therapists 1.1.2 Poor behavior or etiquette of spa therapists 1.1.3 Noise disturbance from spa therapists 1.1.4 Weak English language 1.2 Front desk staff 1.2.1 Poor services of front desk staff 1.2.2 Weak English language | 258 (22.7%) 224 (19.7%) 109 (9.6%) 53 (4.7%) 76 (6.7%) 35 (3.2%) |
| 2. Non-recommendations and others (23.3%) 2.1 Non-recommendations 2.2 Poor value for money 2.3 Limitations of spa products | 134 (11.8%) 67 (5.9%) 64 (5.6%) |
| 3. Physical elements (10.1%) 3.1 Poor facilities and atmosphere 3.2 Uncleanliness of facilities | 68 (5.9%) 47 (4.2%) |
| Total | 100% |

Table 5 shows the analysis of spa complaints and service quality dimensions. Given Table 3, with a total of 1,135 complaints, where approximately 944 complaints (or 83% of 1,135) were related to the five dimensions of service quality. The service quality dimension with the most complaints was reliability (32.7%) while the second and the third were assurance (23.5%) and responsiveness (19.3%), respectively. Empathy (16.4%) and

tangibility (8.1%) were fourth and fifth, respectively. In regard to reliability, there were many complaints regarding poor staff performance, poor skills or unprofessionalism for spa therapists, and poor English for spa employees. For assurance, many customers complained about poor staff knowledge, uncleanliness, low-quality products, and noise disturbance while complaints about responsiveness included poor customer services, unhelpful/unfriendly staff, and slow services. In regard to empathy, many complaints were related to the lack of caring by staff and ignoring customer needs. For tangibility, many complaints were associated with the uncleanliness of facilities, the poor atmosphere, and inappropriate room temperature.

Table 5: Analysis of spa complaints and service quality dimensions

| Service quality dimensions | Frequency | Examples of spa complaints |
|---|----------------|---|
| 1. Reliability: ability to perform services accurately/correctly (e.g., staff performance, work skills, and English proficiency) | 309 (32.7%) | <p>“The massage started late 5 minutes and finished before 1 hour”</p> <p>“I don't think they know what they are doing at all when it comes to facials, so avoid getting one here”</p> <p>“At first I thought it probably was just my bad luck ending up with a poor masseuse but afterwards we found out that the experience was the same for all three of us. It was obvious that all three masseuses were terrible and untrained”</p> <p>“Go there for a basic Thai massage but avoid facials as they do not seem to have the equipment nor skills to provide this treatment”</p> <p>“The massage was very hard which we never experienced that hard of a massage before”</p> <p>“I wasn't quite relaxed with all the talking and annoyed when therapist constantly moved her working hand away. I don't think what she did was professional”</p> <p>“I were both unhappy with the treatment and conduct of massage therapists”</p> <p>“The staff at this spa didn't understand English”</p> <p>“Receptionists don't appear to speak much English”</p> <p>“The two therapists we encountered hardly know English so we gave up to explain to them”</p> |

| | | |
|--|------------------------|--|
| <p>2. Assurance: ability to convey trust and confidence (e.g. staff knowledge, cleanliness, quality of products, value of product, privacy, safety)</p> | <p>222 (23.5%)</p> | <p>“Staff seem confused with the massages we wanted” “Therapists talked to each other often which was very annoying” “The two ladies kept talking with each other for the whole time, making it a bit hard to relax completely” “At the end of the massage, I realized it's totally not worth to pay more here with poor service” “Another bad thing is the masseurs talk a lot among themselves while giving massage which is very irritating at times” “This spa used low quality massage oil and very smelly” “Cockroaches were walking in the massage room. I was really shocked especially when almost naked”</p> |
| <p>3. Responsiveness: willingness to assist customers and provide prompt services (e.g. interaction with customers, customer service, friendliness of staff, explanation, enquiry and answer)</p> | <p>182 (19.3%)</p> | <p>“Etiquette of the therapists were not good” “The lady at the front desk was condescending and rude” “Reception lady is very unfriendly and not helpful” “On several occasions I had a communication problem with receptionist regarding bookings” “I ask front staff about the product difference but she told me to ask another girl and offer me a higher price” “I was waiting in a massage room, reception told me that massage lady will come after 10 minutes. Finally massage lady came after 15 minutes but that 15 minutes delay was counted into the massage time of 2 hours at my cost” “The receptionist says please wait for the service around 5 minutes but I am waiting for the massage to be ready for 15 minutes”</p> |
| <p>4. Empathy: caring services or individual attention (e.g. personalized services/treatments, understanding customers' needs)</p> | <p>155 (16.4%)</p> | <p>“I highlighted shoulders and legs to be massaged a bit more, but the lady didn't seem to pay any attention to this” “Had requested for a shower after the whole services but was denied by the massager” “I requested change of massage therapist but was told that the service already started half way which unable to and afterward massage therapist used lots of strength focus on some areas which caused bruise on my wife” “During the massage we asked for it to be stronger but didn't seem to help” “The massage staff did not understand me when I told that the pressure was too hard and</p> |

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|--|---------------|---|
| | | became painful” “My face ended up breaking out during the facial in an allergic reaction and when I told the spa personnel. They did not apologize and did nothing except tell me to wash my face” |
| 5. Tangibility: appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and environment (e.g. spa facilities, decoration, atmosphere) | 76 (8.1%) | “Toilet paper holder and tap are broken” “Room too cold and the music too loud” “Bathrooms and shower need some improvements” “The massage room was too cold and too much light” “The air in the room smelled musty” “I was so disappointed with the condition and cleanliness of the place. The washroom floor was wet and lack cleaning service” |
| Total | 944 (100%) | |

Discussion

The findings revealed that the major complaint themes were 1) poor skills of spa therapists 2) poor behavior/etiquette of spa therapists and 3) non-recommendation for using spa services. In order to clarify these issues, it should be noted that the services delivered by spa therapists (e.g., spa treatments/massages) are the core elements of the spa experience that provide customers with a restful and relaxing atmosphere (Lo et al., 2015; Tsai et al., 2012). Commonly, customers expect to receive favorable experiences and good services from spa therapists. If the experience does not meet their expectations, they may feel dissatisfied with the spa services (or therapists) and may want to give feedback or make complaints about spa establishments through review websites. In addition, other minor services provided by spa staff, for example, reservation, reception, staff hospitality, and extra requests, are also perceived by customers during service encounters. These minor services, together with the core elements provided by spa therapists, may contribute to overall customer satisfaction. The current findings are similar to past studies in indicating that all aspects of spa services (e.g., customer reception, spa therapists, spa treatments, and special requests) are essential

components of service quality in the spa industry (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Gonzalez & Brea, 2005; Lo et al., 2015). Any poor service performance occurring during pre-services, during services and post-services could be commented on or shared in negative ways on review websites. If overall staff performance is below customer expectations or there are poor spa standards, customers may display negative post-purchase behavior and decide neither to revisit or recommend the spa establishment.

Regarding the service quality dimensions, the study revealed that most complaints were associated with reliability while the second and the third were related to assurance and responsiveness. These findings are similar to prior work, especially in regard to reliability and responsiveness. Past studies found that the reliability and responsiveness dimensions were the important determinant factors contributing to customers' positive emotions and their satisfaction in using spa services (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Lo et al., 2015; Snoj & Mumel, 2002). For example, the current study is consistent with the studies of Lo et al. (2015) and Snoj & Mumel (2002), as both studies found similar results to the current study in that reliability and responsiveness were the top two factors when customers chose spa services. Also, the assurance dimension result was also similar to the finding of Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch (2014) who indicated that assurance was one of the significant factors for foreign tourists when choosing to use spa services in Thailand. Given the importance of these service quality dimensions, if spa service providers fail to provide these services to meet customer expectations, customers may share their unfavorable service experiences about the poor spa services or give feedback to spa establishments through review websites.

Furthermore, many complaints were about noise disturbance from spa therapists (talking to each other while on duty). This issue concerns the assurance dimension regarding the lack of privacy while customers were receiving services. The complaints regarding noise

disturbance from spa therapists seem to be more frequent than other issues in the assurance dimension, suggesting careful attention is necessary by spa managers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To conclude, this study revealed ten themes and three main constructs regarding spa complaints. The major complaint themes were about poor skills of spa therapists, poor behavior/etiquette of spa therapists and non-recommendations for using spa services while the three main constructs were related to people and services, non-recommendation, and physical elements. These three constructs could be critical factors that lead to customer complaints in Thailand's spa business. The current findings are expected to provide spa establishments with in-depth information about customer complaints and may assist them in improving their services to meet customer expectations and satisfaction.

Moreover, the findings also reveal relationships between customer complaints and service quality dimensions. Reliability was found to be the most important dimension associated with customer complaints, followed by assurance and responsiveness. The findings on service quality may assist spa establishments in better understanding customer expectations and staff performance.

For the theoretical contribution, most previous studies investigated spa issues by employing quantitative approaches (with statistics) to explain the results (e.g., relationships between independent and dependent variables). However, there has been limited investigation of other aspects of spa studies by examining customer feedback or reflections about spa services, particularly negative issues. This study used secondary data from a popular travel

review website to analyze and determine the negative issues of spa services, which may lead to unfavorable experiences for customers, and which may encourage customers to complain about the web. The study conceptualized complaints posted on the travel review website into three constructs, as mentioned earlier. This helps to provide a deeper understanding of the major constructs of customers' e-complaints regarding spa services in Thailand.

Also, this study also examined service quality in relation to the complaint issues. Most past studies analyzed customers' e-complaints in the hospitality industry but did not analyze them in relation to service quality (suggesting the lack of opportunity to understand service performance). This study found that most customer complaints about spa services in Thailand were related to reliability, followed by assurance, responsiveness, empathy, and tangibility, respectively. These findings help to further understand the importance of reliability (as the most frequently mentioned negative issue) and other service quality dimensions by revealing that poor service quality may lead to customer dissatisfaction and customer complaints. Importantly, the current findings (acquired by employing a content-based approach) help to further understand the quantitative findings of past studies on spa service quality (e.g., Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Lo et al., 2015), indicating that reliability is regarded as one of the most important factors influencing spa customer satisfaction. The current finding (see Table 5) may help to provide a deeper understanding of the importance of the reliability dimension on customer satisfaction. For example, having experienced spa therapists with excellent skills is one of the most important factors that enhance customer satisfaction. In sum, the overall findings contribute to existing spa literature by providing new insight into spa complaints and their constructs, as well as providing a better understanding of the close relationship between poor service quality and customer dissatisfaction through the analysis of online customer complaints.

Regarding the practical contributions, the findings have important implications for spa businesses in improving their services and staff performance. Since the main findings of complaint constructs are related to people and their services, this study will offer recommendations based on spa service quality for each dimension. Most complaints pertained to the reliability dimension, reflecting the poor skills or unprofessionalism of spa therapists. This finding suggests that spa customers prioritize or place great importance on the skills and professional services of spa therapists rather than other issues. Previous studies indicated that spa customers consider the ability and skills of spa therapists as the most important factor when using spa services (Lo et al., 2015). Spa establishments need to recruit highly skilled therapists to provide customers with good spa experiences. A regular training program for less skilled or new therapists is also essential to enhance the reliability dimension.

Concerning the assurance dimension, many customers complained about product knowledge and the weak English language skills of front desk staff as well as spa therapists. Most spa customers in Thailand's major tourism cities are foreign tourists, and front desk staff and spa therapists are in direct contact with them. Spa establishments need to recruit spa staff (both front desk and therapists) with proper qualifications and a good knowledge of English in order to communicate with foreign customers. Also, in-house training for spa employees for English language and communication skills, spa education, and treatment consultation may be undertaken. Well-trained personnel may help to inspire trust and confidence. Another complaint under this dimension was about facility cleanliness (e.g., toilets, shower facilities, towels/sheets). A standard operating procedure (SOP) can help to solve the cleanliness problems by indicating what procedures should be followed for cleaning tasks (Wisnom & Capozio, 2012).

In regard to the responsiveness dimension, unhelpful staff and poor customer services were the focus of complaints. As stated, a spa establishment is a service-oriented business and requires high levels of service interaction between employees and customers. Spa treatments are generally high priced products, and customers expect to receive high levels of service quality and excellent spa experience. Front desk staff should be well-trained to provide the right and prompt services (Snoj & Mumel, 2002). According to Lo et al. (2013), customers should not feel ignored or have to wait too long. When a customer needs something, there should be someone there to assist. Regular monitoring by spa managers and standardized service procedures should be employed.

The empathy dimension was mainly related to less caring services and ignoring customer needs. Spa customers have various personal needs or health issues. They use spa services in order to alleviate their health problems, and they require individual attention. Spa therapists should be trained to provide personalized services or treatments that correspond to customer needs. Each treatment should be provided, taking into account customer preferences and their physical condition or health issues. Improvements in customer consultation and communication may help to improve the empathy dimension.

For the tangibility dimension, many complaints were about spa facilities and room temperature. Spa managers should monitor their facilities in terms of supplies, equipment functions, cleanliness, and atmosphere. Previous studies indicated that the tangibility dimension (e.g., facilities, equipment, and atmosphere) was found to affect customers' emotions (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Lo et al., 2015). Regular checks of spa facilities as well as the control of room temperature should be carried out. In particular, spa therapists may ask customers if the room temperature is comfortable for them during services.

In addition to the improvement of service quality, spa establishments should pay attention to the negative comments posted online regarding their services. Negative comments may negatively influence new customers in their perception of services at spa establishments (Sparks & Browning, 2010). Spa managers should regularly monitor negative online comments and take immediate action to offer a service recovery procedure or service improvements to decrease customer dissatisfaction as well as to build trust and confidence (Lee & Hu, 2004; Zheng, Youn, & Kincaid, 2009).

Limitations and future research opportunities

This study examined only registered day spas, which included all types of spas, such as resort spas, luxurious spas, and ordinary day spas. The quality of service and performance of spa employees may be different depending on the type of spa establishment. This may affect customer perceptions and reviews. Future research could examine other similar spa businesses to provide more accurate information. The current study also used a qualitative approach to examine the negative spa reviews from a secondary data source. Other methods (e.g., interview or questionnaire survey) may be used to better understand different aspects, such as service importance-performance, spa customer emotions, and spa experiences. In addition, data collected from a travel review website (e.g., TripAdvisor) may not be fully accurate, truthful or credible, and may not be representative of all complaints posted online (Au et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2009). Future research should adopt a cautious manner in conducting online review studies and use two or more review websites (if available) to provide more reliable information. Using the guidelines from past studies that pointed out the weaknesses of online reviews may be another useful approach for future researchers to investigate online customer complaints.

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