


## UNDERSTANDING SERVICE OUTCOMES IN THE SPA INDUSTRY

### Abstract

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*Purpose* - There is a scarcity of research to provide an in-depth understanding of spa service outcomes. This research note aims to examine the characteristics of spa service outcomes from three sources of information.

*Design/methodology* - The information from past studies, online reviews, and customer interviews is analysed through a content analysis method.

*Findings* - First, service outcomes in the spa industry involve two attributes: physical and mental outcomes. Second, the assessment of customer satisfaction on spa services includes two elements: service satisfaction and outcome satisfaction. Third, spa service outcomes may be regarded as a distinct variable as the experiences of spa service outcomes may be depended on certain factors (e.g. skills of therapists and the understanding of customer needs), meanwhile, they also have subsequent influences on post-consumption behaviours.

*Originality* - This is an initial study to fully examine the characteristics of spa service outcomes. The study has conceptualised spa service outcomes for future investigation to strengthen knowledge development in the field.

**Keywords** spa; wellness tourism: service outcomes; service quality

### Research note

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### INTRODUCTION

Service outcomes are generally defined as what customers receive after their service consumption (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Grönroos, 1984). In the spa industry, service outcomes are related to the consequence of spa services or what customers feel after the completion of spa services in regard to their health benefits, for example, relaxation or skin beauty (Thipbharos & Sangpikul, 2022). Typically, spa customers expect to experience service outcomes during or after services, and this outcome-based experience may affect their subsequent behaviours, for example, satisfaction and repeat consumption. A number of studies in other service sectors (e.g. banks, hospitals) support this argument (Choi & Kim, 2013; Hsieh & Hiang, 2004). In this regard, service outcomes should be regarded as an important attribute of service quality in the spa industry. However, there is a scarcity of research to provide an in-depth understanding of them with the following research gaps.

First, a review of literature indicates that most spa studies fail to examine service outcomes to fully understand customer needs and expectations (e.g. Bakirtzoglou et al. 2018; Löke et al., 2018; Sangpikul, 2019; Tsai et al., 2012; Vryoni et al., 2017). This may be due to the weakness of the service models being employed, which are mostly SERVQUAL (which lacks an outcome dimension). These studies, therefore, may fail to provide a thorough understanding of the overall picture of spa service quality.

Second, past studies employing Gronroos (1984)'s model or Brady and Cronin (2001)'s model, a two-dimensional construct including technical and functional quality, seem to provide inadequate information to fully understand spa service outcomes. For example, Clemes et al. (2020) employ a modified model with technical and functional quality constructs. However, their study provides limited information to understand the attributes of spa service outcomes, for instance, the lack of service outcome characteristics and its measurement. In addition, most spa studies using quantitative approaches may have limitations in fully explaining the characteristics of spa service outcomes due to the numeric findings, for example, Bakirtzoglou et al. (2018), Clemes et al. (2020), Lo et al. (2015), Löke et al. (2018), and Vryoni et al. (2017). Researchers may find a better approach to fully understand them to expand the body of knowledge.

Third, related literature implies that service outcomes are a special feature as they can be employed either as an independent or a dependent variable in quantitative studies, similarly to the satisfaction variable (Choi & Kim, 2013; Murti et al., 2014; Padlee et al., 2019). Past studies revealed that service outcomes (independent variable) can impact customer satisfaction and loyalty in banks and hospitals (Hsieh & Hiang, 2004; Choi & Kim, 2013). In addition, Murti et al. (2014) found that other independent variables can affect service outcomes (dependent variable) in healthcare services. This suggests that service outcomes play an important role in service industries. However, researchers have failed to further examine its role in spa literature.

Given the background of the study, there are related research questions: 1) besides quantitative studies, is there a better approach to fully understand spa service outcomes and their characteristics/roles? and 2) how are service outcomes related to customers' post-consumption effects and satisfaction? To answer the research questions, this study (research note) aims to analyse and conceptualise spa service outcomes from three different sources (i.e. past studies, online reviews, and customer interviews). The study also aims to examine the role of spa service outcomes in relation to post-consumption effects and customer satisfaction. The findings are expected to provide a better understanding of spa service outcome attributes, and to extend service literature in the spa industry. Understanding service outcomes not only helps spa practitioners to thoroughly understand spa service quality, but also benefits researchers in further examining this important variable to strengthen knowledge development in the field.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The information from past studies, online reviews, and customer interviews is analysed through a content analysis method. First, past studies regarding spa service quality and service outcomes from Scopus and Google Scholar databases were examined to present what has been documented about spa service outcomes. Both databases were employed because not all spa related studies were included in Scopus. Second, online reviews from the TripAdvisor website were investigated for a 1-year period (April 2021 to March 2022) to understand customer opinions about spa service outcomes. This approach was conducted with spas in Thailand through a list of the Ministry of Public Health (2020) with a total of 138 registered spas. Only 30% of them were randomly examined as an exploratory study. Third, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with spa customers to better understand the characteristics of spa service outcomes and their role on post-consumption behaviour. As a preliminary study, ten spas in Bangkok were invited to participate in the study; however, only five spas accepted the invitation. Data collection was conducted at spa venues during March 2022. The study was conducted with the ethics guidelines of the university. All participants were informed about the research objectives and were requested to use audio recordings for data analysis, given their consent. The participants were interviewed about service quality in general, and more specifically about service outcomes. The interview questions were, for example, 'What is your motivation or reason to go to spas?', 'What do you expect to experience after the completion of spa services', and 'How are service outcomes important to you?'. The researchers stopped the interviews with 21 customers when there was sufficient or saturated data, as no additional information was obtained (Cohen et al. 2000). Following the literature, the researchers transcribed the interviews, and later they were coded based on the words, phrases, and sentences within the texts (Cohen et al. 2000). The data were then further classified into major themes, and finally data interpretation was performed to acquire an overall understanding of the findings (Sangpikul, 2022).

## 3. FINDINGS

Table 1 analyses related literature about spa service outcomes to understand what has been documented. Most studies did not include or examine service outcomes in their studies. Although there are some studies employing an outcome construct (e.g. Clemes et al., 2020; Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2016), there is still limited literature to fully understand service outcome attributes. In addition, none has examined the role of service outcomes or the post-consumption effects to extend the existing literature. The findings seem to echo what is mentioned in the introduction about the scarcity of research regarding spa service outcomes.

Table 1: Literature analysis regarding spa service outcomes

Studies	Dimensions	Assessment of service outcome items	The role of service outcomes
Bakirtzoglou et al. (2018); Lo et al. (2015); Löke et al. (2018); Vryoni et al. (2017)	Reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy, tangibles	-	-
Choi et al. (2015)	Spa facility, spa program, staff, uniqueness	-	-
Clemes et al. (2020)	Interpersonal quality, environmental quality, administrative quality, technical quality	-	-
Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2016)	Process dimension, specific quality dimension, outcome dimension	Relaxation	-

Table 2 shows the analysis of customer reviews to better understand their opinions about spa service outcomes. They are presented based on the sampled reviews with sufficient opinions about spa service outcomes. Only the reviews with a sufficient number of opinions of service outcomes are included in the analysis, and some of them are presented in table 2. Given the

various opinions, it can be said that spa service outcomes, through customer reviews, may be classified into two features: mental and physical outcomes. Most mental outcomes are related to relaxation benefits while physical outcomes may be related to body muscle relief or skin beauty. The findings suggest that customers expect to experience spa service outcomes, and also evaluate them during/after the service consumption. Next, customer interviews are presented to provide more in-depth information as summarised in tables 3 & 4.

**Table 2: The analysis of customer reviews about spa service outcomes**

Customer reviews	Outcome attributes	Categorisation
1. "We left the spa with very calming and relaxing experiences" 2. "We felt so relaxed and comfortable the entire time" 3. "I received my first Thai massage and the experience was amazing. I left feeling relieved and refreshed" 4. "Pressure was a little light to start but progressively firmed up for a great experience of relaxing"	Relaxing Calm Comfortable Refresh	Mental outcome
5. "I felt a great relief of pain after the back massage" 6. "The massage helps my legs become less painful after a long shopping walk" 7. "The pain in my lower back and shoulders disappeared after the massage" 8. "This is the real Thai massage without oil. You will feel the pain but muscles are refreshed the next day"	Body & muscle relief Physical pain relief	Physical outcome
9. "This is my first Bastien treatment. I never knew that my hands, feet, and nails could be made to look and feel so fantastic. The results are the feeling of radiance and beautiful nail texture" 10. "With a facial treatment, I could feel my facial skin become softer and hydrated after the pamper" 11. "Facial with hot & cold ultrasound, this treatment was top. My skin feels new again" 12. "A good spa, my nails are beautiful after the nail treatment, very good"	Skin beauty/improvement	Physical outcome

Table 3 presents the interview findings by comparison with the other two sources. Based on the literature review, it seems that the assessment of spa outcome attributes may be limited to only the relaxation item (mental) while the examination of customer reviews provides additional items about mental and physical attributes. Interestingly, the interview method seems to provide more items for both mental and physical attributes, for example, energetic enhancement, rejuvenation, skin beauty, and body cleanliness. The interview findings suggest that there is limited knowledge to fully understand the attributes of spa service outcomes from the existing literature.

**Table 3: Summary of outcome attributes based on three different sources**

Category	1) Outcome attributes based on literature	2) Outcome attributes based on customer reviews	3) Outcome attributes based on interviews
Mental outcome	- Relaxation (Clèmes et al., 2020; Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2016)	- Relaxing, calm, comfortable	- Rest & relaxation (e.g. calm, comfortable, concentrated) - Stress, tension and anxiety relief - Energetic enhancement (e.g. refreshing, fatigue reduction) - Rejuvenation
Physical outcome	- N/A	- Skin beauty/improvement - Body/muscle relief - Physical pain relief	- Skin & body beauty or improvement - Body/muscle relief - Physical symptom or pain relief - Body cleanliness

Table 4 presents additional interview findings regarding outcome satisfaction and the role of service outcomes on post-consumption effects. First, the respondents indicated that, in the real setting, they would prefer to judge the quality of spa services based on two stages which are service satisfaction and outcome satisfaction. This finding suggests a distinct characteristic of customer satisfaction assessment in the spa industry as it involves two stages. Service satisfaction, based on the interviews, refers to customer satisfaction towards the service process, spa employees, and tangible aspects, but not the service outcomes whereas outcome satisfaction refers to customer satisfaction towards the actual outcome they receive after the completion of services. According to table 4, there are a number of studies examining customer satisfaction on spa services; however, none has specifically examined outcome satisfaction.

Second, the respondents were interviewed regarding the role of service outcomes on self-post consumption perceptions (the way a person thinks, feels, and acts after consumption). Given the lack of empirical studies about this issue, the current study used an interview approach to better understand it. Customers indicated that, after spa services, they are likely to feel good or joyful with the expected mental and physical outcomes. Furthermore, they also feel happy or satisfied with the received outcomes, and some indicated that they have received a spa experience (self-experience achievement). Many thought about coming back to the spa establishment. In contrast, unmet service outcomes will give a reverse result. These findings suggest that spa service outcomes might have subsequent influences or effects on customers' post-consumption in terms of emotion, satisfaction, self-achievement, and repeat consumption. This may imply that service outcomes may have associations with certain variables, and require further investigation to better understand their relationships.

In addition, the respondents stated that they may not experience spa service outcomes and may not be happy if the service delivery is performed poorly, for example, inexperienced therapists or a lack of understanding customer needs. These findings imply that there could be some factors affecting service outcomes, but the service outcomes might later affect customer emotions, satisfaction and repeat purchase (post-consumption behaviours) as mentioned earlier. Interestingly, many customers indicated that, in a spa setting, outcome satisfaction is more important than service satisfaction. In other words, even though customers are happy with most services (e.g. spa decoration, receptionist services, employee hospitality) but if their expected outcomes (e.g. relaxation, muscle relief or skin beauty) are not met, it is likely that they may not wish to re-patronise the spa establishment and may choose other service providers. For example, several participants indicated that they went to spas for massage services or muscle relaxation and received the services from polite and friendly therapists. However, they indicated that the therapists often lacked the understanding of customer needs and did not pay attention to the concerned areas customers requested. After the services, if they did not feel as expected or did not experience the outcomes of muscle relaxation, they would feel disappointed, and might not wish to re-patronise the spa establishment or try other service providers. Overall, the current findings provide a better understanding of spa service outcomes through the qualitative exploratory approach. Future quantitative methods are required to support these preliminary findings and assumptions.

Table 4. Additional findings regarding outcome satisfaction and post-consumption effects

Literature	Customer	satisfaction	Studies related to post-consumption effects	Post-consumption effects identified by current study
	Service satisfaction	Outcome satisfaction		
Tsai et al. (2012)	√	-	-	1. Emotion
Choi et al. (2015)	√	-	-	2. Satisfaction
Vryoni et al. (2017)	√	-	-	3. Self-experience achievement
Han et al. (2017)	√	-	-	4. Repeat consumption
Löke et al. (2018)	√	-	-	
Clemes et al. (2020)	√	-	-	

#### 4. CONCLUSION

For theoretical implications, first, the study extends the theoretical understanding of service outcomes in the spa industry by identifying two outcome attributes: mental and physical outcomes. The findings help to better understand the overall spa service quality framework which includes service outcomes as a part of it. Second, the study has revealed that customers judge the quality of spa services based on two stages: service satisfaction and outcome satisfaction. The findings provide an in-depth understanding of customer satisfaction in spa services. In order to fully understand customer satisfaction in spa services, researchers not only measure service or process satisfaction but also measure outcome satisfaction to reflect the overall picture of spa services. Third, spa service outcomes may be viewed as a distinct variable as customers' experiences of spa service outcomes may be depended on some factors (e.g. skills of therapists and customer empathy), at the same time, they also have

subsequent influences on post-consumption behaviours as mentioned in the findings. Future studies are required to verify these assumptions to expand the body of knowledge or to generate new findings in spa service literature.

In terms of practical implications, the current findings help spa managers to better understand the importance of service outcomes because customers expect to experience them after the service completion. It is suggested that service outcomes should be included in the assessment of spa service quality. Customers not only evaluate the quality of spa services based on service process, employee performance, and tangible aspects, but they also judge it based on the experience of service outcomes. The assessment of service outcomes involves two attributes: mental and physical outcomes. This finding may help spa managers to appropriately design their service evaluation instrument to thoroughly understand customer feedback about their services. As customers are likely to place importance on service outcomes, spa managers should realise and understand the factors which may contribute to their expectations. Past studies indicated that the implementations of the SERVQUAL concept seems to be an important tool to deliver high service quality to meet customer needs and satisfactions (Marković et al., 2014; Lo et al., 2015). For example, spa managers should focus on the skill development of therapists (reliability), the training of employees to deliver personalised services (empathy), maintaining the beautiful and peaceful environment (tangible), and keeping the standard and quality of facilities & equipment (assurance). In addition, an understanding of service outcomes may help spa managers to appropriately design their marketing communication tools to target customers who may seek this outcome benefit.

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