

Service Quality in Football: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This systematic review analyses the existing research on service quality in football academies, focusing on its impact on user satisfaction and loyalty. Several factors can influence user satisfaction in football academies. Some of them are: academy infrastructure, quality of training, expert and professional staff, location and environment of the academy, status and reputation of the academy, levels of competition, as well as prospects in terms of career progression and career management in youth football. All of these factors contribute to better service and directly influence the increase in user satisfaction and loyalty, i.e., future members of the academy. For this reason, it is necessary to analyse the existing research on this topic to understand the measurement of service quality and the impact it has on the value and satisfaction of athletes. This systematic review aims to investigate service quality and to analyze the current state and factors that influence quality in the management of football academies. For this research, the electronic databases Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar were searched to find relevant articles on this topic. The following inclusion criteria were applied during the search: only topics related to service quality, scientific papers covering the field of management, papers written in English, papers published from 2009 to the present, and full-text papers available. The results of the selected studies for this research showed that service quality is a key factor in achieving a high level of user loyalty towards a football academy.

Keywords: service quality · football · satisfaction · loyalty

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Introduction

The relationship between service quality, user satisfaction, and loyalty has been explored by numerous authors (Akbari et al., 2013; Martínez-Caro et al., 2014; Dam & Dam, 2021). When considering the service quality offered by organizations, the central idea is the level of service quality provided by the service organization to its clients (Ikbāl et al., 2018). An integrated approach to sports is of paramount importance for its development, starting with the management structures of sports organizations. In the field of sports participation, studies have confirmed that staff expertise plays a key role, with the significance of their expertise emphasized as a critical factor for service quality and user satisfaction (Aslan & Kocak, 2011). The importance of research lies in the practical application of the obtained findings. Given that sports, particularly football, have become increasingly popular in recent years, it is both justified and logically necessary to examine elements that can contribute to the overall improvement of football quality. This specifically refers to services, where quality is one of the prerequisites for satisfaction and, subsequently, for the success of athletes.

In football, the world's most popular and widespread sport, the primary goal must be to achieve the highest quality service for athletes (Zid et al., 2021). User satisfaction is achieved by enhancing all segments contributing to the overall development of players. Due to the high competition and numerous football clubs and academies focusing on identifying, selecting, and developing young players, the role of service quality has become increasingly important. This quality can be realized through marketing, brand management of the academy, promotion of talents, athletes who have had successful careers, creating partnerships, incorporating sponsorships and advertisements, and more (Calabuig et al., 2021). All these factors are crucial for providing higher-quality services and creating a recognizable image.

Football training services represent a long-term process encompassing various aspects, including the environment in which the service is provided, the delivery process, the service program, and its results. For players to assess the quality of service across these aspects, they must be engaged over a specified period. Moreover, the specificity of the context is a key factor, as applying existing measures developed for other industries may overlook the unique characteristics of youth football academies (Shi et al., 2022).

Modern football academies adopt a comprehensive approach that should include the highest quality services, such as medical staff, psychologists, educators, fitness experts, trained coaches, nutritionists, management personnel, and others (Rincon et al., 2023). Given that the provision of quality services is a key factor for the success of sports organizations and the satisfaction of users, it is essential to clearly define the concept of service quality and develop a psychometrically valid instrument to measure youth participation in football through a thorough analysis of the existing literature (Allsabah et al., 2024). Satisfaction encompasses the evaluation of the services provided by the football club for player training, including aspects such as material attributes, reliability, responsibility, safety, and empathy (Álvarez-García et al., 2019). The factors contributing to the success of youth football clubs include the high percentage of players trained by the club who later become professional athletes, achievements in youth football championships, and the evaluation of the quality of training provided by the club to its players (Newman et al., 2018).

This paper will explore the significance of football academy services in the context of sports, athlete development, management, and marketing, focusing on the key elements that contribute to the formation of successful players and sustainable institutions in modern football. This paper contributes to the existing literature by providing a systematic review of how these factors have been empirically studied and their impact quantified.

Method

Database search and study selection

A systematic review was conducted following a predefined protocol and established guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). The search was performed between March and June 2024. The literature review encompassed relevant studies addressing internal and external service provision in the sports domain, with a particular emphasis on service quality in football. Boolean logic, incorporating the operators "AND," "OR," and "NOT," was employed to refine and enhance the precision of the search strategy, ensuring the inclusion of sources aligned with the established selection criteria. Electronic database searches were conducted using computers, covering the following primary sources: Scopus, Web of Science, and an additional source, Google Scholar, along with references from studies that met the inclusion criteria. Databases were selected based on their extensive coverage of sports management and

educational research, ensuring a comprehensive retrieval of relevant studies. Keywords varied depending on the database being searched, using relevant controlled terminology, and the most common included "service quality," "football," "satisfaction," and "loyalty."

Eligibility criteria

The search covered scientific articles that met the following criteria: (1) topics related only to the quality of internal and external services, (2) scholarly

papers addressing management, (3) papers written in English, (4) papers published since 2009, and (5) papers with full-text access. All articles not meeting the search criteria were excluded. A significant number of papers addressed service quality but were not relevant to this topic. Furthermore, the search was narrowed by excluding papers related to services in fields unrelated to sports or management. A detailed overview of the database search procedure is presented in Figure 1.

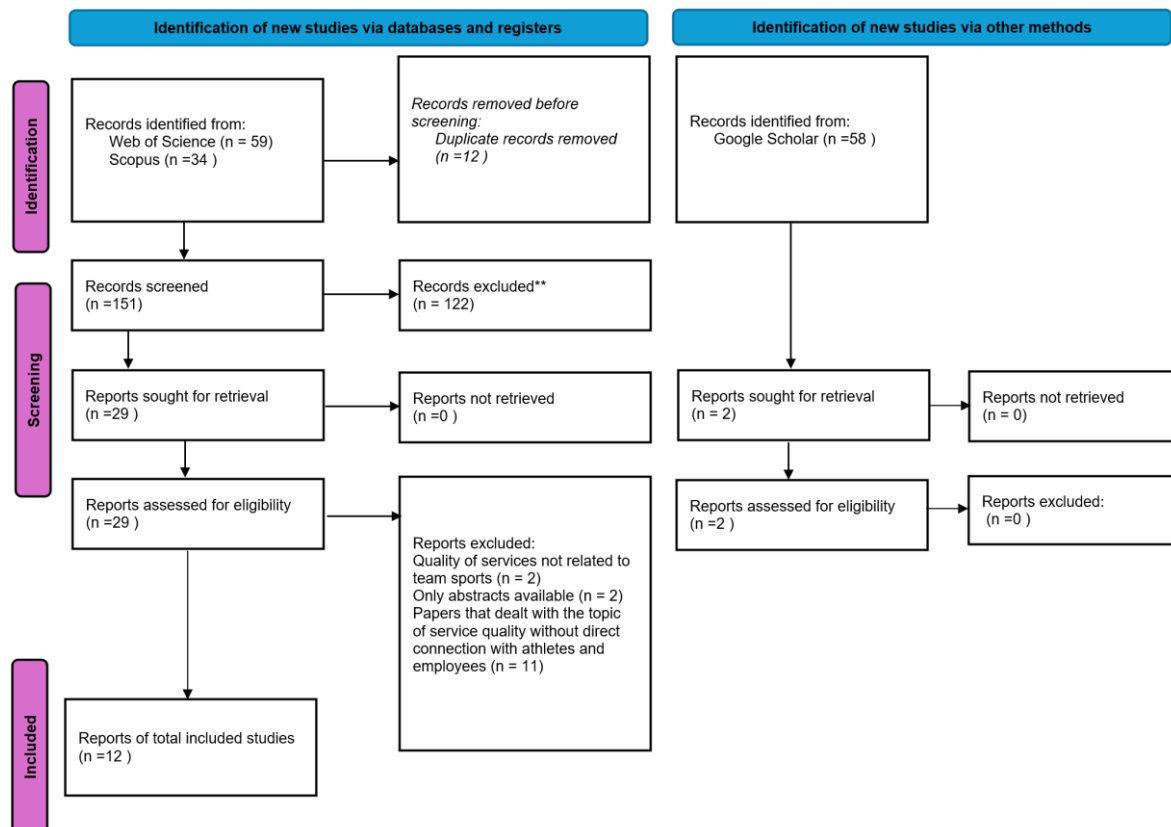


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the literature selection process

DATA Extraction

The author of the paper performed data extraction, resolving any inconsistencies through personal judgment. Subsequently, essential information from each selected study was extracted and organized in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The collected data encompassed the study title, characteristics of the research sample, instruments employed, name of the first author, year of publication, source journal, research objective, and key findings. Regarding the "research objective" parameter, its purpose in the Excel table was to verify whether it aligned with the objective of this study. As for the "research results" parameter, its goal was to analyze them to gain insights into service quality in football.

The selected literature encompassed professional, national, international, and youth football players. Accordingly, the findings reported in each study were examined and synthesized through a descriptive approach within the framework of this research.

Results

A total of 151 relevant articles were retrieved through the search process. (Web of Science 59, Scopus 34, and Google Scholar 58). After removing duplicates (12) using the Mendeley program, the final number of articles was 146 (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the articles with key information and research results

Title	Sample	Instruments	Authors	Journal	Study aim	Results
A service quality framework in the context of professional football in Greece.	415	A quasi-experimental survey research design was used.	Theodorakis, N.D., et al (2011)	International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship	The study examines the mediating effect of the overall quality of service on the relationship between quality of service and customer satisfaction in professional football.	The authors determined that overall service quality accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in fan satisfaction. Moreover, overall service quality served as a mediating variable in the relationship between the five individual service quality dimensions and overall satisfaction among fans.
Members' segmentation, service quality, and behavioral intentions: a case study of a professional football team.	6820	A survey was used that included four demographic questions and 35 items to assess the quality of service.	Biscaia, R. D. G. N., et al (2012)	Revista Intercontinental de Gestão Desportiva	This research seeks to distinguish various member segments within a professional football club and to analyze how these segments differ in their perceptions of service quality and corresponding behavioral intentions.	Authors identified three distinct segments of members who showed statistically significant differences in service quality perceptions and behavioral intentions.
Predicting spectators' behavioural intentions in professional football: The role of satisfaction and service quality.	350	Reliability estimates and a confirmatory factor analysis via EQS were used to evaluate the psychometric properties of the measurement model.	Theodorakis, N.D., et al (2013)	Sport Management Review	This research investigated the interrelationships among service quality, spectator satisfaction, and behavioral intentions within the setting of professional football events.	Authors found that the quality of the outcome had a greater impact on the level of viewer satisfaction compared to functional quality. It has also been found that satisfaction partly mediates the relationship between the quality of service and viewers' behavioral intent.
Relationship quality in sports: a study in football teams and fitness centres.	200	Data collection included face-to-face interviews.	Athanasopoulou, P., et al (2013)	Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal	This study seeks to identify the key determinants and dimensions underlying the quality of the relationship between consumers and providers of sports-related services.	The authors found that in fitness clubs, the relationship between customers and service providers is perceived as complex, encompassing trust, satisfaction, commitment, social connections, collaboration, communication, and service customization. In contrast, the relationship between season ticket holders of football clubs is somewhat simpler and based on trust and satisfaction, where customers feel committed to the team.
The relationship between the perception of quality of services and spectators' satisfaction in the Tractorsazi Tabriz football team.	225	Two questionnaires were used to collect the data.	Akbari Yazdi, H., et al (2013)	Sport Management Studies	This study aimed to examine the association between team identity and spectator satisfaction within the context of the Tractorsazi Tabriz football club.	The authors found that the status of the football team's identity among its spectators was significantly above average. The level of spectator satisfaction was significantly above average. It was also confirmed that there is a significant positive relationship between team identity and spectator satisfaction.
The analysis of the service quality of the IR Iran football premier league based on SERVQUAL.	442	A questionnaire for spectators, players, and managers was used in this study.	Akbari Yazdi, H., et al (2014)	Sport Management Studies	This study analyzes the discrepancy between expected and perceived service quality among Iranian Premier League football players, employing the SERVQUAL model as the assessment framework.	Authors found that the statistical analysis of assumptions showed a significant and negative gap in all items and dimensions of customer needs, as well as in determining the ranking of customer expectations and perceptions.

Service quality in grassroots football clubs in the region of Murcia. An application of the importance-performance analysis	1076	A questionnaire based on the SERVQUAL scale was used.	Martínez-Caro, E., et al (2014)	Sport Tk-Revista Euroamericana De Ciencias Del Deporte wb	This paper examines the role of user satisfaction within grassroots football clubs to formulate a strategic assessment of service delivery practices based on the perceptions and experiences of the club members.	Authors found that the strength of grassroots football clubs in the Murcia region is mainly in the areas of responsiveness and security. However, the weak points are related to the undirected investment of resources in attributes that are less important to users, especially reassurance and empathy.
Influence of service in a sports environment: case study on Borussia Dortmund.	100	The study used two questionnaires, a demographic survey and a customer satisfaction survey on the quality of service.	Sauer, P., et al (2017)	The Sport Journal	This study investigated how internal and external service-related factors influence user satisfaction within the context of the sports sector.	Sauer et al (2017) found that employee service satisfaction had the most significant impact on overall customer satisfaction.
Determination of internal service quality in a sports organization: the case of "Kaunas Žalgiris" football club.	9	A semi-structured in-depth interview was used in the study.	Miknevičius, E., et al (2022)	Independent Journal of Management & Production wb	This study focused on evaluating the internal service quality within the "Kaunas Žalgiris" football club.	Authors found that different users of internal services receive different quality of services. Coaches, players of the men's football team, administration, and service staff receive the highest quality of internal services. In contrast, women's and youth football teams receive the lowest quality of internal services.
Impact of service quality on youth football participation in China: a moderating role of country-of-origin.	2	In this study, a measuring scale was designed explicitly for youth participation in football.	Shi, Y., et al (2023)	European Sport Management Quarterly	This paper examines the perception of service quality within youth football and evaluates the associated levels of player satisfaction.	Shi et al. (2023) demonstrated notable indirect effects of user satisfaction across multiple dimensions linking service quality to membership renewal intentions. Furthermore, the relationship between service quality and satisfaction was shown to be partially moderated by the country of origin (COO), highlighting its role as a contextual influencing factor.
Assessment of the Service Quality Measurement Model for Youth Football Academies.	543	In the initial stage of the research, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was carried out to identify and verify the latent structure of the proposed measurement scale. In the subsequent phase, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to provide additional empirical validation of the revised model derived from the EFA results.	Shi, Y., et al (2022)	European Sport Management Quarterly	This research endeavors to enhance theoretical foundations and inform practical methodologies for the evaluation of perceived service quality within youth football academy environments.	Shi et al. (2022) found evidence supporting internal consistency, along with convergent and discriminant validity. A total of 46 items were retained, while two subdimensions—employee expertise and employee attitude—were combined and redefined as a single construct: employee trust.

Subsequently, all articles were reviewed, and those not meeting the criteria were excluded. The focus was solely on articles closely related to sports management and topics related to service quality. In the end, 12 articles were selected and used in this study, covering the necessary aspects required for addressing the topic. The research results presented in the table indicate that service quality significantly impacts user satisfaction and plays a pivotal role in shaping the connection between various quality dimensions and overall satisfaction. Different user segments have been identified, with variations in their perceptions and behaviors. Most studies confirm the hypothesis linking service quality and satisfaction, demonstrating that different service users experience varying levels of quality.

Discussion

These results underscore the need for football academies to prioritize staff training and infrastructure development to enhance user satisfaction, or something of this nature. Management in the sports industry is becoming increasingly complex due to the numerous tasks and activities involved (Yiapanas et al., 2023). As a result, it is increasingly important to implement appropriate evaluation programs to improve the offering of sports services (Panescu, 2024). One of the most widely discussed topics in sports management, and the subject of many authors' research, involves the interrelationships between service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. In football teams, special attention should be given to selecting players who form the key part of the service and significantly impact the club's functioning and the quality of its management (Athanasopoulou et al., 2013). Given that the quality of players directly influences operational aspects of the club, including its finances, match quality, competition level, and fan loyalty, it is essential to focus on the quality of services within academies and the development of players within these institutions (Toma & Catana, 2021). This strategy is closely related to the service quality provided by the academies.

The development of youth football clubs is crucial for shaping talent and preparing players for senior levels, as confirmed by research results (Newman et al., 2018; Wrang et al., 2022). Proper guidance and talent development are of paramount importance, with the ages of 7-8 being the optimal time for beginning sports skill development in children (Newman et al., 2018). It is imperative to perform accurate initial selection of children showing adequate talent, as the future quality of the team will

depend on this choice, provided the service is of a high level (Wrang et al., 2022). This implies that academies must deliver a satisfactory level of service from the very beginning.

Furthermore, providing high-quality services is essential for football clubs, as service quality serves as an indicator of manager performance while also contributing to the positioning of the organization, increasing satisfaction, and fostering positive behavioral intentions (Theodorakis et al., 2011). Theodorakis et al. (2013) showed that a positive perception of service quality leads to greater satisfaction, which further leads to more favorable behavioral intentions. Additionally, Biscaia et al. (2012) highlighted that service quality dimensions impact overall customer satisfaction.

According to Avourdiadou and Theodorakis (2014), existing research in sports management suggests that service quality and customer satisfaction are key factors in achieving customer loyalty. Other studies support this link (Gammelsäter, 2021). Providing high-quality services is crucial for football clubs, as service quality serves as a performance measure for managers while also influencing organizational positioning and contributing to increased satisfaction (Theodorakis N., Alexandris K., 2008). Research focusing on various aspects of satisfaction, such as material properties, reliability, responsiveness, safety, and empathy, indicates that the average respondent rates each of these aspects positively (Allsabab, 2024). The results of a study conducted by Martínez-Caro et al. (2014) showed that the strengths of grassroots football clubs in the Murcia region lie primarily in responsiveness and safety. In contrast, their weaknesses are evident in investments in attributes less important to customers, particularly in assurance and empathy. A study by Akbari Yazdi et al. (2014) analyzed human resources, stadiums, IT, planning, management, and additional services. A questionnaire based on perceived and expected quality was distributed among participants. Statistical tests (K-S, Sign Test, and Friedman test) revealed a significant negative gap across all items and dimensions of customer needs, establishing the ranking of customer expectations and perceptions. The results of this study are consistent with existing literature in the domain of football-related research, while also reinforcing the outcomes observed in our investigation.

Customer satisfaction in sports services results from various factors, including product quality, price, service quality, and emotional aspects (Wolter et al., 2019). Some studies have noted that user or consumer assessments determine service quality, as they are the users and evaluators of the provided

services (Wolter et al., 2019). Wolter et al. (2019) explain customer satisfaction in terms of the quality of service provided. Similarly, Megheirkouni (2019) suggests that many benefits can be achieved when customers are satisfied with the services offered. One notable advantage is the enhancement of customer loyalty and the perceived value of the services delivered. In the context of youth football academies, service provision is primarily facilitated by the managerial and coaching personnel, directed toward the players as end users. Thus, the synergy between the coaching and management staff is crucial for realizing the club's vision and mission and for ensuring the optimal development of young football players (Sugito et al., 2020).

Regarding service quality, image, satisfaction, and loyalty, sports research indicates that service quality and customer satisfaction are key factors influencing customer engagement and loyalty (Biscaia et al., 2016). Therefore, it is essential for coaches working with youth categories to maintain a high standard of service delivery, recognizing athletes as primary service recipients, in order to ensure their overall satisfaction with the provided services. One of the factors contributing to the success of youth training clubs includes the numerous players from the club who have become professional athletes, success in tournaments, and the evaluation of the quality of training the club provides to its players (Newman et al., 2018).

Clubs that are not successful in training point to a lack of support within club management, manifested in a shortage of trained players, inadequate qualifications and competencies of coaches, and a lack of appropriate infrastructure (Allsabab, M. A. H., et al., 2024). Many factors contribute to the failure of football clubs in talent development, with club management that does not achieve good results being one of the key issues. On the other hand, youth football clubs play a key role in developing talent in children interested in football by providing optimal conditions for their advancement. Just as schools are crucial in the educational process and the development of human potential, youth football clubs are the most suitable framework for developing football talent (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). In clubs, it is crucial to maintain satisfaction, encompassing infrastructure, coach support during training, and services for athletes' parents, to maximize talent and direct it toward professional football. Clients who are satisfied with the services provided are not only happy but will also recommend these services to others (Kwon & Remøy, 2020).

Limitations

This review highlights several limitations due to the lack of studies focusing on the perception of service quality in football. It is noticeable that more studies are dedicated to fan perceptions and their allegiance to clubs, while research on service quality in sports is often broader in scope, including areas such as fitness centers. This points to the need for more specialized studies focusing directly on the perception of service quality in football, considering the specificities and characteristics of this sport. It is also important to emphasize that the lack of research may hinder drawing conclusions that are relevant for practical application in football clubs and organizations. Therefore, future studies should pay particular attention to this area to address these gaps and expand knowledge on the perception of service quality in football.

Further Research

It is recommended that comprehensive research be conducted in the field of football, specifically through the use of an appropriate questionnaire that will measure the perception of service quality. Such an approach would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants that shape both the selection process and sustained loyalty toward a specific football academy. It is important to ensure that the research is methodologically well-designed and conducted, using reliable statistical methods for data analysis. Additionally, it is advisable to include a broader range of variables that could affect these aspects, including the quality of coaching staff, sports infrastructure, availability of programs and services, and user satisfaction. Such comprehensive studies can provide valuable insights and guidance for improving the operations of football academies and increasing the engagement and loyalty of their users.

Conclusion

The results of existing research confirm that service quality is a key factor in achieving high levels of loyalty and affiliation to a football academy. Some studies particularly emphasize the significance of the quality and approach of coaches compared to other segments, highlighting their crucial role in creating a positive service user experience. These findings align with theories that emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships and coach professionalism in creating user satisfaction in football.

Furthermore, research indicates the need for continuous improvement of service quality in all aspects of a football academy to maintain high user loyalty and ensure long-term affiliation. This information is essential for managers and decision-makers in football academies, providing them with guidance for effectively managing service quality and maintaining a high level of user experience.

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