

From Compliance to Customer Experience: Managing Service Operations Quality in Chinese Swimming and Fitness Centers

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Abstract

This paper examines customer experience in Chinese swimming and fitness centers through an operations lens. Although prior research in sport and fitness services has consistently shown that service quality affects satisfaction and future behavioral outcomes, less attention has been paid to the operational conditions that make quality stable, visible, and reproducible in high-contact, risk-sensitive service systems. Addressing this gap, the paper develops the concept of service operations quality to explain how compliance-oriented managerial inputs are translated into customer experience across the service journey. The analysis organizes service operations quality around three interdependent dimensions: hygiene and safety, staff professionalism, and facilities and environment. Rather than treating these dimensions as isolated service attributes, the paper argues that they function as a coordinated operational capability through which venues become governable, intelligible, and dependable in customers' eyes. This capability is shown to become visible across acquisition, entry, use, change, and after-sales touchpoints, where operational consistency shapes whether the service is experienced as orderly, trustworthy, and worth repeating. The paper further argues that, in multi-store swimming and fitness networks, customer experience depends less on isolated moments of excellence than on the repeated consistency of operational control across outlets, staff teams, and time windows. On this basis, the study offers a managerial framework for standardization, service consistency, and resource prioritization under real-world constraints. By shifting the discussion from perceived service quality to service operations quality, the paper contributes a more practically grounded account of how compliance can be converted into stable customer experience in contemporary sport services.

Keywords

Service Operations Quality; Customer Experience; Swimming and Fitness Centers; Multi-Store Management; Sport Services; China

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Across urban sport services, the question facing managers is no longer simply whether facilities are available, but whether service can be delivered with sufficient stability to make repeated use feel safe, orderly, and worthwhile. This shift is especially visible in Chinese swimming and fitness centers, where customer experience depends on far more than the core act of swimming or exercising. Entry procedures, locker-room conditions, crowding, equipment readiness, information transparency, and exception handling all shape how the service is judged. Because these venues combine high customer contact with visible safety exposure and recurrent operational interruptions, customer experience is formed across the entire journey rather than at a single encounter.

The literature has already shown that service quality is central to customer outcomes in sport and fitness settings. Classic service research established the links among quality, value, satisfaction, and future behavioral intentions (Cronin et al., 2000). More recent work in fitness services has reached a similar conclusion with greater contextual specificity. A systematic review by Barbosa et al. (2022) identified facilities, staff, service recovery, price, and relationship maintenance as persistent determinants of customer satisfaction in fitness centers. Empirical studies likewise report that facilities and equipment, program delivery, communication, and environmental conditions are strongly associated with satisfaction in sport and health centers (Álvarez-García et al., 2019), while process quality and outcome quality jointly shape satisfaction and behavioral intentions in fitness centers (Foroughi et al., 2019). At a broader sport-service level, meta-analytic evidence from spectator sport further indicates that service quality exerts significant positive effects on perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Biscaia et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that quality-related judgments remain a robust predictor of downstream customer outcomes across different sport-service environments.

Evidence from China points in the same direction, while also indicating why a more operationally grounded perspective is necessary. Research on health-fitness clubs in China shows that service recovery, service assurance, facility function, program operations, coach quality, and staff performance remain salient dimensions through which customers interpret service quality (Xu et al., 2021). Related Chinese research on national fitness public services likewise demonstrates that perceived quality and perceived value are key antecedents of satisfaction, suggesting that the quality–value–satisfaction logic is not confined to commercial service settings but is increasingly embedded in broader Chinese service evaluation and governance contexts (Tian et al., 2025). This broader context matters because it highlights a shift in managerial expectations: customers are no longer evaluating only whether a service is available, but whether it is delivered in ways that are dependable,

intelligible, and worth returning to.

Even so, the conventional service-quality lens does not fully capture the managerial problem facing swimming and fitness centers. Much of the literature explains how customers evaluate service attributes or how perceived quality translates into loyalty. Managers, however, must ensure that service is delivered repeatedly, under fluctuating demand, through multiple touchpoints and often across more than one outlet. This is where an operations perspective becomes essential. In practice, customers do not encounter hygiene, staffing, maintenance, queue governance, and information routines as separate managerial domains. They encounter them as a single experience of smoothness or disruption. Research on fitness centers repeatedly points to the importance of equipment integrity, cleanliness, staff competence, and service reliability (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019), and recent studies show that the effects of service quality on satisfaction and loyalty are further conditioned by customer involvement and by psychological mechanisms such as price fairness, exercise flow, and employee–customer rapport (Huang & Kim, 2023; Kim & Kim, 2024). These findings suggest that what matters is not only what quality means to customers, but how organizations make that quality operationally stable. Swimming and fitness centers make this issue especially visible. Unlike many low-contact services, they require continuous coordination between backstage control and frontline delivery. Hygiene and safety failures are immediately perceptible. Staff professionalism is tested not only during routine interaction but also when schedules change, equipment breaks down, or customers need clarification. Facilities and the physical environment influence not merely ambience but the basic usability of the service. From this standpoint, compliance is only a threshold condition. What ultimately shapes customer experience is whether compliance can be translated into visible assurance, predictable routines, and consistent service performance across acquisition, entry, use, change, and after-sales touchpoints. In multi-store settings, this challenge becomes even sharper because variation across outlets, staff teams, and time windows can quickly erode trust and weaken the brand promise (León-Quismondo et al., 2020).

1.2. Aim and contribution of the paper

Against this background, the present paper develops an operations-centered account of customer experience in Chinese swimming and fitness centers. It uses the term service operations quality to describe an organization's ability to deliver compliant, stable, and reproducible service performance across touchpoints and time windows. Rather than approaching quality as a set of isolated customer perceptions, the paper treats it as a managerial capability that is built through three interdependent pillars: hygiene and safety, staff professionalism, and facilities and environment. Read in this way, customer experience is not produced by frontline interaction alone; it emerges from the coordination of standards, people, space, equipment, and information throughout the service journey.

The contribution of the paper lies in the way it repositions an established debate. Existing sport-service research has shown, with considerable consistency, that service quality supports satisfaction and future intentions. Less attention has been paid to the operational conditions under which that quality remains dependable in high-contact, risk-sensitive service systems. By shifting the discussion from perceived service quality to service operations quality, the paper offers a framework that is better aligned with the realities of swimming and fitness management. It also introduces a journey-based reading of operational performance, showing how the same three pillars must be sustained from pre-arrival and access to use, change, and after-sales. In addition, the paper speaks to a practical concern shared by multi-store operators: how to prioritize improvement when resources are limited and experience failures rarely occur in only one part of the service system. The sections that follow elaborate the operating context of Chinese swimming and fitness centers, develop the three-dimensional architecture of service operations quality, and explain how an operations lens can help turn compliance into a stable customer experience.

2. The Operating Context of Chinese Swimming and Fitness Centers

Chinese swimming and fitness centers are best understood as service environments in which operational performance is continuously made visible to customers. The value of the service is not exhausted by access to a pool, a gym floor, or a scheduled class. It is also embedded in the sequence through which customers obtain information, arrive at the venue, move through access control, use facilities, interpret rules, and respond to interruptions when plans change. What is often described as customer experience is therefore inseparable from the practical organization of service delivery. In this setting, the operating context is not a neutral backdrop. It shapes whether quality is perceived as stable, whether trust can be sustained across repeated visits, and whether the venue appears governable rather than merely available.

2.1. Compliance pressures and service complexity

Swimming and fitness centers combine two kinds of exposure that are not always equally intense in other leisure services. They are high-contact environments, since customers move through shared spaces, depend on recurrent interaction with staff, and often revisit with considerable frequency. They are also risk-sensitive environments. Water conditions, surface safety, ventilation, equipment readiness, and emergency response are not abstract managerial concerns; they remain directly tied to customers' willingness to use the service with confidence. Because of this dual exposure, compliance pressure is not simply administrative. It becomes customer-facing. A venue may satisfy technical requirements on paper and still generate unease if cleanliness appears uneven, crowding is poorly managed, or

frontline explanations vary across touchpoints.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in the Chinese market, where research on health-fitness clubs suggests that customers interpret quality through a combination of service recovery, service assurance, facility function, program operations, coach quality, and staff performance (Xu et al., 2021). The implication is quite revealing. Customers do not separate operational elements from experiential ones in the way organizational charts often do. Assurance, recovery, facility readiness, and staff conduct are read together as parts of a single service system. A broader systematic review arrives at a similar conclusion, identifying facilities, staff, price, ancillary services, recovery, and relationship maintenance as recurring determinants of satisfaction in fitness centers (Barbosa et al., 2022). This integrated reading is also echoed in qualitative work from women's fitness-service experiences, where assurance and safety, genuine care, convenience, and a comfortable atmosphere appear less as isolated attributes than as a combined basis for judging service quality and satisfaction (Tamanna, 2023). What appears at first to be a matter of customer perception is therefore also a question of operational control.

The difficulty is compounded by the service complexity of swimming and fitness venues. These organizations must absorb variable demand across days and hours, manage distinct user goals within the same site, and preserve service continuity under routine constraints of maintenance, labor allocation, space availability, and time pressure. Peak periods intensify this challenge rather than merely amplifying it. Small disruptions in entry procedures, locker turnover, equipment availability, lane access, or queue communication can quickly affect the perceived order of the entire venue. Studies of sport and health centers show that facilities and equipment, together with programs and communication, carry substantial weight in explaining satisfaction (Álvarez-García et al., 2019), while attribute-based analyses in fitness services highlight equipment integrity, cleanliness, and staff competence as particularly influential (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019). This helps explain why operational inconsistency can override otherwise positive impressions of the service offer.

The problem becomes sharper once service is delivered across more than one outlet. Multi-store management introduces another layer of exposure, because customers no longer compare only moments within a visit but also experiences across branches, schedules, and staff teams. A brand promise that appears coherent at the marketing level may weaken quickly if one venue handles crowding effectively while another struggles with access, maintenance, or communication. Research on fitness-center sustainability suggests that service friendliness, clarity of terms, digital coordination, and tangible quality need to be treated as elements of a coherent operating approach rather than as isolated improvements (León-Quismondo et al., 2020a). In this sense, compliance pressure and service complexity cannot be managed separately. The more visible the operational

environment becomes, the less convincing it is to treat backstage control and customer experience as unrelated domains.

2.2. Why an operations perspective is needed

These conditions make an operations perspective not only useful but necessary. The service-quality literature has already shown, with considerable consistency, that quality affects satisfaction and future behavior in sport and fitness services. That literature remains essential, yet it often approaches quality as a set of customer-perceived attributes or as a post hoc evaluation of what customers experienced. The managerial problem in swimming and fitness centers begins earlier and runs deeper. It concerns whether standards, staffing, space, and routines can be coordinated so that good service becomes reproducible rather than occasional. Evidence from fitness centers indicates that process quality and outcome quality jointly influence delight, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Foroughi et al., 2019). The message is clear enough: customers respond not only to what the service ultimately delivers, but also to how reliably that delivery is organized while the experience is taking shape.

This is precisely where the idea of service operations quality becomes useful. Rather than reducing quality to a bundle of perceived service attributes, it frames quality as the organization's ability to convert standards into stable performance across repeated touchpoints, from acquisition and entry to use, change, and after-sales. In Chinese swimming and fitness centers, that ability depends on more than courteous interaction or appealing facilities. It depends on the coordination of hygiene and safety routines, the professionalism of frontline and supervisory staff, the usability and readiness of facilities, the alignment between online and on-site information, and the organization's capacity to handle crowding, exceptions, and service disruptions without creating avoidable friction. The analytical advantage of this perspective lies in its attention to repeatability. A single positive encounter may improve a customer's impression; operational stability is what makes that impression durable.

Recent studies in fitness services further support this shift in emphasis. Research shows that the effect of service quality on loyalty becomes stronger when customers are more involved in the activity, suggesting that repeat and committed users become more sensitive to reliable delivery rather than less dependent on it (Huang & Kim, 2023). Other work demonstrates that multidimensional service quality exerts its influence through psychological mechanisms such as price fairness, exercise flow, and employee–customer rapport (Kim & Kim, 2024). These findings do not diminish the relevance of operational analysis. On the contrary, they indicate that psychological responses are shaped by the extent to which the service system remains dependable. Where the system is unstable, customers face more uncertainty, more interpretive effort, and more opportunity for dissatisfaction to accumulate over time.

For this reason, the present paper treats the operating context of Chinese swimming and fitness centers as the point from which customer experience must be understood, not simply the setting in which it happens. An operations lens makes it possible to explain why a venue may appear efficient on one day and frustrating on another, or why a technically adequate service may still fail to feel trustworthy. More importantly, it shifts attention from isolated service moments to the conditions that make those moments possible in the first place. The next section develops this argument by specifying the three core dimensions through which service operations quality becomes visible to customers: hygiene and safety, staff professionalism, and facilities and environment.

3. The Core Dimensions of Service Operations Quality

If the operating context of swimming and fitness centers makes an operations perspective necessary, the next question concerns what, precisely, constitutes service operations quality in this setting. The answer cannot be reduced to a generic inventory of service attributes. In high-contact sport services, quality becomes operationally meaningful only when it refers to the organizational conditions that allow service to remain safe, understandable, usable, and dependable over repeated visits. For that reason, service operations quality is better conceived as a structured capability rather than as a diffuse impression. In Chinese swimming and fitness centers, this capability can be organized around three interdependent dimensions: hygiene and safety, staff professionalism, and facilities and environment. Although these dimensions are analytically separable, they are experienced by customers as parts of the same service system. A venue may present appealing facilities yet still feel unreliable if hygiene cues are weak; conversely, a clean and well-regulated site may still frustrate users when staff responses are inconsistent or equipment downtime is poorly managed. The three dimensions therefore should not be treated as parallel checkboxes. Together, they define whether the venue appears operationally under control.

This way of framing service operations quality remains close to the broader sport and fitness literature, but it also extends it. Recent studies have consistently shown that facilities, staff, assurance, and recovery are central to customer evaluations in fitness services (Barbosa et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2021). What deserves greater emphasis, however, is that these elements do not merely shape customer perception after the fact. They form the organizational base from which stable customer experience becomes possible in the first place. Qualitative evidence also suggests that users often interpret assurance, genuine care, convenience, and environmental comfort as an integrated service package rather than as neatly separable service attributes (Tamanna, 2023). Complementing this, research on fitness centers indicates that satisfaction and positive behavioral responses are influenced by the combined effect of service conditions that customers encounter in everyday use

(Miranda et al., 2021). Seen from this angle, the three dimensions below are not peripheral components of service delivery. They are the main channels through which compliance, coordination, and repeatability become visible to customers.

3.1. Hygiene and safety

In swimming and fitness centers, hygiene and safety occupy a position that is both foundational and unusually visible. This dimension extends well beyond the idea of general cleanliness. It includes water clarity and disinfection, the sanitary condition of locker rooms and shower areas, the timely removal of waste, anti-slip measures, clear safety signage, the presence of lifeguards or safety personnel, and the prompt handling of hazards when they arise. What makes this dimension distinctive is that customers do not encounter it as a distant technical process. They see it, infer it, and continuously judge it through sensory and situational cues. In a service setting where water exposure, shared surfaces, moisture, and physical exertion intersect, hygiene and safety define the minimum conditions under which customers are willing to trust the venue.

The literature offers strong support for treating this dimension as a core component of operational quality. Research on health-fitness clubs in China identifies service assurance and service recovery, alongside facility function and staff performance, as central dimensions through which customers evaluate quality (Xu et al., 2021). A broader systematic review of fitness-center service quality reaches a similar conclusion, showing that facilities, staff, guarantees, and recovery practices repeatedly appear among the strongest determinants of customer satisfaction (Barbosa et al., 2022). Attribute-based studies likewise underline the salience of cleanliness, equipment condition, and staff competence in shaping user evaluations (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019). Taken together, these findings suggest that hygiene and safety are not merely compliance obligations imposed from outside the service. They are among the most direct ways in which customers interpret whether the service organization is trustworthy.

Their operational significance lies precisely in this interpretive function. Hygiene and safety stabilize expectations by reducing uncertainty before customers actively test the service. When visible signs of control are present—clean public areas, well-maintained wet zones, posted safety information, immediate attention to hazards—the venue communicates order before customers have even formed a detailed opinion of the rest of the experience. In this respect, hygiene and safety serve as a form of visible assurance. They lower the vigilance burden placed on the customer and reduce the probability that subsequent inconveniences will be read as symptoms of broader organizational weakness. For swimming and fitness centers, this is especially important because perceived risk is cumulative: a single ambiguous cue may cast doubt on unrelated aspects of the service. Hygiene and safety, then, are not only about preventing failure. They are a primary means by which operational competence becomes legible.

3.2. Staff professionalism

If hygiene and safety provide visible assurance, staff professionalism determines whether operational standards can be enacted consistently in real time. This dimension should not be confined to courtesy or friendliness, even though interpersonal tone remains part of the experience. In operational terms, staff professionalism includes competence in assigned duties, accuracy of explanations, consistent adherence to procedures, appropriate handling of exceptions, proactive assistance, respect for privacy, and the ability to respond to fluctuating demand without losing clarity or composure. In swimming and fitness centers, staff are not simply representatives of the organization. They are the medium through which rules, schedules, recovery procedures, and safety expectations are interpreted for the customer.

The empirical literature points to the same conclusion. Research in Chinese fitness clubs identifies coach quality and staff performance as distinct contributors to perceived service quality (Xu et al., 2021). Studies focusing on key attributes in fitness centers similarly show that staff politeness and competence remain among the most influential elements in customer evaluation (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019). Related work further demonstrates that process quality and outcome quality in fitness settings are shaped through responsiveness, contact quality, and the effectiveness of interaction, all of which feed into satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Foroughi et al., 2019). More recent evidence suggests that the effects of service quality on satisfaction and loyalty also depend on psychological mechanisms such as employee–customer rapport, price fairness, and exercise flow, indicating that staff conduct matters not only at the level of immediate service exchange but also in the formation of deeper evaluative responses (Kim & Kim, 2024). Research on sports fitness centers likewise emphasizes that reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy remain central to the way service quality supports loyalty, particularly when customer involvement is high (Huang & Kim, 2023).

What distinguishes staff professionalism within a service-operations framework is its role as a translating mechanism. Backstage systems, formal standards, and compliance routines do not speak for themselves. Customers understand them through the explanations they receive, the predictability of staff action, and the consistency with which procedures are executed under ordinary and nonroutine conditions. This becomes especially evident when the service deviates from plan. A delayed class, an unavailable lane, a malfunctioning device, or a request for schedule change tests professionalism more sharply than routine transactions do. Under those conditions, customers are not merely asking whether staff are polite; they are assessing whether the organization can remain coherent when disruption occurs. Professionalism, therefore, is best understood as the frontline expression of operational order.

The managerial implications are equally significant. A venue may invest in strong

infrastructure and formal standards, yet still appear unreliable when staff explanations vary across shifts or when problem handling depends too heavily on individual improvisation. In multi-store systems, this risk becomes greater because customers compare not only people but also branches and time windows. Staff professionalism is thus inseparable from standardization, training, and scenario-based preparedness. It is the dimension through which organizational capability becomes interactionally credible.

3.3. Facilities and environment

The third dimension, facilities and environment, is often discussed in service research as part of the physical setting or servicescape. In swimming and fitness centers, however, its significance is more operational than decorative. Facilities and environment encompass equipment working condition, repair responsiveness, the adequacy of lockers and showers, temperature and humidity control, lighting, ventilation, layout clarity, wayfinding, noise, air quality, and accessibility. These factors do influence ambience, yet their more fundamental role lies in enabling the service to function with continuity and ease. Customers do not merely consume an atmosphere. They move through space, wait for access, locate resources, adjust their pace to crowding, and rely on infrastructure to support safe and uninterrupted use.

This interpretation is supported by a substantial body of evidence. Studies of sport and health centers show that facilities and equipment, together with programs and communication, are among the strongest predictors of customer satisfaction (Álvarez-García et al., 2019). Research examining fitness-center attributes similarly identifies equipment integrity, maintenance, cleanliness, and overall physical conditions as particularly influential in customer evaluations (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019). The broader review by Barbosa et al. (2022) reinforces this pattern by locating facilities among the most persistent determinants of service quality and customer satisfaction across the fitness literature. More nuanced work also indicates that users do not value the same environmental elements equally. Perceptions differ by gender and age, with certain customer groups placing greater weight on cleanliness, locker security, and other tangible aspects of the venue (León-Quismondo et al., 2020b). Related evidence further shows that perceived quality in fitness services varies systematically according to sex and age, confirming that evaluations of physical conditions and service priorities are not uniform across user groups (Ortega-Martínez et al., 2021). This variability does not weaken the importance of the dimension; it shows that facilities and environment are not passive background conditions but active elements in how different users assess service adequacy.

Within a service-operations perspective, facilities and environment are best treated as operational infrastructure. Their value lies in making service use smoother, less interruptive, and more predictable. A well-maintained environment reduces the need

for customers to compensate for the system—by searching for information, navigating around faults, waiting for access, or tolerating discomfort that should have been prevented. In swimming centers, this is especially important because environmental conditions are inseparable from perceptions of care and safety. In fitness areas, equipment readiness and spatial layout shape not only convenience but the rhythm of use itself. When facilities perform reliably and the environment supports legibility and comfort, customers are less likely to experience the venue as fragmented or exhausting. The contribution of this dimension is therefore practical before it becomes symbolic.

The boundaries among the three dimensions are, of course, porous. Hygiene and safety rely on staff routines and facility conditions; staff professionalism is more persuasive when the environment is orderly and the system is visibly maintained; facilities and environment matter partly because they reinforce assurance and reduce the burden placed on frontline recovery. That interdependence is precisely why service operations quality should not be decomposed too mechanically. Its dimensions are distinct enough to guide diagnosis, but they create value only when they perform together. In the context of Chinese swimming and fitness centers, the three-dimensional structure proposed here captures the main organizational channels through which compliance is converted into dependable experience. The next section builds on this foundation by explaining how these operational dimensions become visible across the customer journey.

4. Translating Operations into Customer Experience

The three dimensions discussed in the previous section acquire managerial significance only when they are translated into the sequence through which customers actually encounter the service. Customers do not experience hygiene and safety, staff professionalism, and facilities and environment as separate managerial categories. They encounter them as a journey that begins before arrival, continues through access and use, and remains open when plans change or post-visit issues must be addressed. In swimming and fitness centers, customer experience is therefore cumulative rather than episodic. What customers finally describe as smooth, trustworthy, or frustrating is often the result of how consistently the organization performs across touchpoints rather than the result of any single interaction.

This point matters because much of the sport-service literature has understandably focused on customer perceptions after service use, while managers must make those perceptions possible through operational coordination before, during, and after the encounter. Studies in sport and health centers have already shown that facilities, communication, staff conduct, and program delivery shape satisfaction in substantive ways (Álvarez-García et al., 2019). Research in fitness centers likewise indicates that process quality and outcome quality work together in forming satisfaction and

subsequent behavioral responses (Foroughi et al., 2019). An operations lens adds a different emphasis. It draws attention to the way organizational reliability travels through the customer journey and becomes visible not as an abstract standard, but as a felt sequence of clarity, order, continuity, and control.

4.1. Acquisition, entry, and use

The translation of operations into experience begins before the customer enters the venue. Acquisition is often treated as a preparatory stage, yet it already exposes the operational character of the service. Customers search for schedules, compare options, check prices, interpret rules, review availability, and decide whether the venue appears manageable enough to justify a visit. At this stage, quality is encountered not through the swimming pool or the fitness floor, but through the coherence of information and the credibility of the service promise. When reservation systems, pricing terms, opening schedules, and access conditions are presented consistently across channels, customers are more likely to interpret the venue as organized and dependable. When these elements are fragmented or contradictory, doubts about the service arise before actual use begins. Findings from sport and health centers show that programs and communication carry considerable weight in shaping satisfaction (Álvarez-García et al., 2019), while research in Chinese health-fitness clubs suggests that assurance and operational clarity form part of the quality bundle customers meaningfully evaluate (Xu et al., 2021). Acquisition, in that sense, is already an experience of operations.

The entry stage makes this translation far more immediate because operational decisions become embodied. Customers now move from anticipation to contact: they arrive, queue, check in, follow signage, locate changing areas, and assess whether the venue appears orderly enough to support the visit they had expected. The three dimensions of service operations quality converge very clearly at this point. Hygiene and safety are inferred from the cleanliness of access areas, locker rooms, wet zones, and transitional spaces. Staff professionalism is interpreted through the clarity, consistency, and composure with which frontline personnel manage entry, answer questions, and handle exceptions. Facilities and environment become visible through layout legibility, circulation efficiency, crowd density, and the basic usability of support spaces. Research on key attributes in fitness centers has repeatedly shown that cleanliness, staff competence, and equipment-related conditions are among the most influential elements in customers' judgments (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019). What this means in operational terms is that entry is not a neutral step before "the real service" begins. It is one of the most concentrated moments in which customers decide whether the venue is under control.

This is also why technically adequate service may still be experienced negatively when access feels disorganized. A customer may eventually enter the venue and use the core service, yet the impression formed during entry can redefine the meaning of

everything that follows. Confused crowd flow, inconsistent explanations, unclear queue progression, or visible neglect at threshold spaces are rarely interpreted as isolated inconveniences. They are often read as evidence that the service organization lacks coherence. Once that interpretation is established, later signs of quality carry less persuasive force. The experiential effect of entry therefore lies not only in its own convenience but in the way it frames the credibility of the venue as a whole.

The use stage takes this logic further. At this point, operational quality is no longer perceived as a precondition; it becomes the material of the experience itself. Swimming or exercising unfolds through a series of small but consequential confirmations: equipment works as expected, lanes or exercise zones remain usable, the environment is comfortable enough to sustain concentration, hygiene routines remain visible without becoming intrusive, and staff are present in ways that support rather than interrupt the service. In research on fitness centers, process quality and outcome quality have both been shown to shape satisfaction and behavioral intentions, suggesting that customers respond not only to what they achieve but also to how effectively the organization enables that achievement (Foroughi et al., 2019). This distinction is important in swimming and fitness services, where the customer's goal may be highly personal—exercise, leisure, recovery, social routine, or skill improvement—yet the achievement of that goal depends heavily on the operational environment in which it unfolds.

The use phase is also where the interdependence of the three SOQ dimensions becomes most visible. Hygiene and safety allow customers to remain focused rather than vigilant. Staff professionalism reduces interpretive burden by making rules, assistance, and response patterns intelligible. Facilities and environment support continuity by reducing interruptions, detours, discomfort, and avoidable uncertainty. More recent work in fitness services shows that multidimensional service quality affects satisfaction and loyalty not only directly but also through psychological pathways such as price fairness, exercise flow, and employee–customer rapport (Kim & Kim, 2024). This insight is particularly useful here. It suggests that operational quality does not remain external to experience. Rather, it shapes whether customers can settle into the service with a sense of ease, trust, and effectiveness. In practice, the better the organization performs operationally, the less customers are forced to think about the organization itself.

This dynamic becomes stronger for repeat and highly involved customers. Customers who use swimming and fitness services frequently become more, not less, sensitive to reliability. They notice whether equipment downtime is becoming common, whether cleanliness varies across visits, whether staff explanations shift between time windows, and whether the venue still feels predictable when it is busy. Research on sports fitness centers indicates that service quality supports loyalty more strongly when customer involvement is high (Huang & Kim, 2023). That finding fits well with

an operations perspective. Repeat users often base loyalty not on memorable single encounters, but on whether the service continues to function with enough consistency to justify routine dependence. Experience during use is therefore not merely about satisfaction in the moment; it is also about the accumulation of operational trust over time.

4.2. Change and after-sales

The relationship between operations and experience becomes even clearer when the service does not unfold exactly as planned. Change is not a marginal issue in swimming and fitness centers. Class schedules shift, equipment becomes unavailable, maintenance interrupts access, opening times are adjusted, crowding requires temporary control measures, and customers need to modify or suspend their own arrangements. These are not exceptional breakdowns at the edge of the service system. They are part of everyday organizational reality. For that reason, change should be treated as a core moment in which service operations quality becomes legible. What customers observe under these conditions is not simply whether a problem exists, but whether the organization can absorb deviation without transferring confusion and extra burden back to them.

This is why change management belongs at the center of customer experience rather than at its periphery. Studies of Chinese health-fitness clubs identify service recovery and service assurance among the key dimensions of perceived quality (Xu et al., 2021). Broader review evidence likewise shows that recovery, guarantees, and relationship maintenance remain important determinants of satisfaction in fitness centers (Barbosa et al., 2022). These findings are often read as support for better complaint handling, and that interpretation is valid, yet the managerial implication is wider. Customers judge the organization's seriousness through the quality of its adaptation. Early notice, clear reasons for change, transparent application of rules, workable alternatives, and consistent staff explanations all communicate whether the venue remains governable when routines are disturbed. Under these conditions, operational quality becomes visible as continuity of control rather than as the absence of disruption.

Change moments also reveal how the three SOQ dimensions interact in a different temporal register. Hygiene and safety appear in decisions to restrict access, close areas, or adjust use conditions. Staff professionalism appears in whether those decisions are explained calmly, consistently, and respectfully. Facilities and environment appear in the organization's capacity to offer substitutes, restore functionality, or minimize repeated interruptions. Customers rarely expect a venue to eliminate every operational problem. What they do expect is that problems will be rendered understandable and manageable. When that happens, even inconvenience may be interpreted as evidence of responsible management. When it does not, the same inconvenience is more likely to be read as disorder.

The after-sales touchpoint extends this logic beyond the visit itself. Refunds, membership holds, billing corrections, complaints, invoice requests, feedback submission, and follow-up communication are often regarded as secondary functions because they occur after the core experience has ended. In reality, they play a disproportionate role in shaping retrospective judgment. After-sales processes tell customers whether the organization sees the relationship as ongoing or merely transactional. A venue may perform well during the visit and still lose trust if post-visit issues are handled slowly, opaquely, or inconsistently. Conversely, effective after-sales routines can stabilize the overall experience even when the immediate service encounter has been imperfect.

This matters especially in recurrent services, where customers do not decide only whether the last visit was acceptable. They decide whether future visits will remain worth planning around. Evidence from sport services indicates that service experience, engagement, and satisfaction are closely related to customers' future intentions, including continuation and recommendation (García-Pascual et al., 2023). In swimming and fitness centers, after-sales quality contributes to that future orientation by clarifying whether the organization can resolve issues without repeated negotiation, excessive ambiguity, or perceived unfairness. The experiential meaning of after-sales is therefore not limited to problem closure. It also influences whether the customer believes the venue can be trusted across time.

This is one reason why multi-store operators face a particularly demanding challenge. Customers do not compare only what happens within a single outlet; they also compare how similar issues are handled across branches, staff teams, and time windows. If one venue communicates changes early and resolves after-sales matters efficiently, while another applies different rules or offers inconsistent explanations, the brand promise begins to fragment. Qualitative work on fitness-center sustainability emphasizes the importance of friendly service, transparent terms, digital coordination, and tangible quality as parts of a coherent managerial approach rather than as isolated practices (León-Quismondo et al., 2020). Read through a journey lens, that insight becomes even sharper. Customer experience depends not simply on isolated moments of excellence, but on whether the organization remains coherent from pre-arrival contact to post-use resolution.

Taken together, acquisition, entry, use, change, and after-sales show that customer experience in swimming and fitness centers is best understood as the experiential surface of operational performance. The three dimensions of service operations quality matter because they retain meaning as customers move through the journey, even though that meaning shifts by touchpoint. At acquisition they appear as coherence and credibility; at entry as order and intelligibility; during use as continuity and usability; during change as adaptive control; and after-sales as relational reliability. When these dimensions remain aligned, compliance becomes visible assurance, staff conduct becomes reliable guidance, and facilities become

enabling infrastructure. When they drift apart, the experience fragments even if individual encounters appear acceptable in isolation. The managerial task, then, is not merely to improve separate moments of service, but to sustain operational coherence across the full sequence through which customers come to know the venue.

5. Implications for Multi-Store Management

The practical significance of service operations quality becomes sharper once swimming and fitness centers are viewed not as isolated venues but as parts of a coordinated network. Customers rarely judge one outlet in complete isolation. They compare branches, time slots, staff teams, and repeated visits, often using one experience as the benchmark against which another is interpreted. In a multi-store setting, the managerial problem is therefore not simply how to improve service at a single location, but how to sustain a recognizable level of order, assurance, and usability across the network as a whole. What customers ultimately call a “reliable” brand is usually the result of repeated consistency rather than occasional excellence. This has important implications for managers in Chinese swimming and fitness centers. The earlier discussion showed that customer experience is formed through the conversion of hygiene and safety, staff professionalism, and facilities and environment into journey-level perceptions of order, credibility, and continuity. Once that logic is extended to multi-store operations, it becomes clear that service operations quality is not only a venue-level matter. It is also a system-level capability. Research in the fitness sector repeatedly identifies facilities, staff, assurance, recovery, and communication as the most influential determinants of customer evaluation, which means that outlet-level variation in these domains is not merely a local issue; it directly affects how the overall brand is interpreted (Barbosa et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2021). This broader point is also consistent with systematic work on loyalty in sport organizations, which shows that quality-related perceptions operate alongside satisfaction, trust, and commitment as part of a larger antecedent structure leading to loyalty and relationship stability (Loranca-Valle et al., 2021). For operators managing several venues under one brand name, the central challenge is therefore to convert a dispersed service system into a coherent customer experience without forcing every outlet into rigid sameness.

5.1. Standardization and Service Consistency

Standardization is often invoked as the answer to multi-store inconsistency, yet in service settings it can easily be misunderstood. In swimming and fitness centers, standardization should not mean that every outlet looks identical or that every interaction is reduced to scripted uniformity. Different venues serve different catchment areas, operate with different demand rhythms, and often face distinct spatial constraints. A useful standardization strategy must therefore aim for reliable

equivalence rather than literal sameness. What should remain stable is not every detail of delivery, but the minimum level of assurance that customers can reasonably expect wherever and whenever they use the brand.

This minimum level begins with what might be called visible control. Across outlets, customers should encounter the same basic signs that the organization is under operational command: wet areas appear clean and monitored, locker rooms do not visibly deteriorate under pressure, safety notices are intelligible, core equipment is functional, and transitions through entry and support spaces do not feel improvised. These elements matter because customers use them to infer overall organizational seriousness. Attribute-based studies in fitness services consistently show that cleanliness, equipment condition, and staff competence are among the most influential factors in customer evaluation (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019), while work on sport and health centers indicates that facilities, equipment, communication, and program organization strongly shape satisfaction (Álvarez-García et al., 2019). For multi-store operators, this means that basic operational cues cannot be left to local interpretation. If threshold conditions vary too widely across outlets, customers cease to experience one network and begin to experience a collection of unrelated venues.

Consistency, however, must also extend beyond the physical environment. Staff professionalism is one of the main channels through which a network either preserves or loses coherence. Customers do not encounter policies, schedules, safety rules, or service recovery procedures in abstract form. They encounter them through explanations, tone, timing, and the confidence with which staff members act. In a single-store setting, variation in staff conduct may already be costly; in a multi-store setting, it becomes even more consequential because customers can compare branches directly. One outlet may communicate changes early and clearly, while another offers vague or inconsistent explanations. One team may handle exceptions calmly, whereas another relies on ad hoc improvisation. Under such conditions, the customer's evaluation of the brand is shaped less by the formal policy than by the degree to which employees across outlets interpret that policy in a recognizable way. The literature suggests that this issue should not be treated as a soft concern. Service quality research in sport and fitness contexts shows that reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy remain central to customer evaluation and loyalty, particularly when customer involvement is high (Huang & Kim, 2023). More recent work further indicates that the effects of multidimensional service quality unfold through mechanisms such as price fairness, employee–customer rapport, and exercise flow (Kim & Kim, 2024). At a broader level, the systematic review by Loranca-Valle et al. (2021) reinforces the point that consistency in quality delivery matters because it is embedded in a wider loyalty formation process rather than operating as an isolated service attribute. These findings imply that staff professionalism has strategic value precisely because it stabilizes how the service

system is read psychologically and relationally. In practical terms, multi-store operators should therefore treat training as more than induction into service etiquette. What requires standardization are explanatory routines, escalation paths, exception-handling principles, and the ability to preserve composure and procedural clarity under nonroutine conditions. A network becomes credible when customers can move from one branch to another without feeling that the organization changes character each time.

Information management is equally central to service consistency. In contemporary swimming and fitness services, customers often move between digital and physical touchpoints before and during each visit. They check schedules online, confirm availability, review pricing, receive notifications, and then compare those signals with what they encounter on site. If online and offline messages diverge, the organization appears fragmented even when the core service is technically adequate. This is why multi-store consistency cannot be secured through on-site control alone. It also depends on aligned communication architectures. Qualitative work on fitness-center sustainability emphasizes that friendly service, clarity of terms, digital coordination, and tangible quality should be treated as mutually reinforcing elements of a coherent operating approach rather than as separate initiatives (León-Quismondo et al., 2020a). For network operators, this suggests that standardization must include shared rules for how prices, reservations, changes, capacity notices, and exceptions are communicated across outlets and channels.

Still, excessive rigidity would be counterproductive. Not every branch needs the same local arrangement, and not every customer segment interprets service priorities in the same way. Research using importance–performance analysis shows that service perceptions in fitness centers vary by gender and age, with some groups attaching greater weight to cleanliness, locker security, or related tangible features than others (León-Quismondo et al., 2020b). The goal of standardization, then, is not to erase local sensitivity but to ensure that adaptation occurs above a stable baseline rather than instead of one. A well-managed network allows outlets to respond to local demand while preserving a shared logic of hygiene control, frontline professionalism, facility usability, and information integrity. Service consistency is achieved not when outlets become indistinguishable, but when customers can trust that the brand's essential promises will hold across branches, staff teams, and time windows.

5.2. Prioritizing improvement under resource constraints

Even when operators recognize the need for consistency, they rarely have the resources to improve everything at once. Swimming and fitness centers must manage labor limits, maintenance cycles, capital constraints, fluctuating demand, and regulatory obligations simultaneously. Under such conditions, the central managerial question is not whether improvement is desirable, but where limited attention and resources are most likely to produce the greatest experiential return. A multi-store

perspective makes this problem even more acute because investments made at one outlet can easily be diluted if other branches continue to generate visible inconsistencies.

The literature provides a useful starting point for prioritization. Across fitness services, certain domains appear with notable regularity among the strongest predictors of customer evaluation: equipment integrity, cleanliness, staff competence, communication quality, and service assurance (Álvarez-García et al., 2019; Barbosa et al., 2022; Freitas & Lacerda, 2019). Evidence from fitness centers also indicates that these operational conditions contribute not only to satisfaction but to positive customer behavior more broadly, including the willingness to continue, recommend, and respond favorably to the service environment (Miranda et al., 2021). This convergence suggests that improvement priorities should begin not with the most sophisticated innovations, but with the most widely noticed and repeatedly experienced operational conditions. In other words, managers should first protect those parts of the journey where deficiencies are both highly visible and highly cumulative. A poorly maintained wet area, inconsistent entry management, unclear rule communication, or repeated downtime in key equipment affects far more than a single moment. It reshapes the meaning of the entire visit and often spills over into later expectations.

For multi-store operators, a useful principle is to prioritize according to three overlapping criteria: how visible a problem is to customers, how frequently it is encountered, and how widely it disturbs the journey once it occurs. This principle does not require identical interventions everywhere, but it does change the order in which improvement decisions are made. Visible hygiene and safety control should generally receive priority because they establish the threshold of trust on which all other experience judgments depend. When customers perceive sanitation, safety supervision, and hazard management as unreliable, improvements elsewhere are often discounted. Entry and support-space performance typically deserve the next level of attention because they are repeated on every visit and quickly shape the tone of the experience. Equipment readiness, repair responsiveness, and environmental usability follow closely because they determine whether service use can proceed without interruption or compensatory effort from the customer.

A related implication concerns peak-period governance. Multi-store managers often focus heavily on aggregate attendance or outlet-level revenue while underestimating the strategic importance of how demand is absorbed at high-exposure times. Yet many negative customer judgments are formed less by average conditions than by what happens when the system is under strain. A venue that functions smoothly during quiet periods but becomes opaque, crowded, or unpredictable at peak times may still be judged as poorly managed overall. This is why resource prioritization should be informed not only by static attributes, but also by where and when the network most visibly loses coherence. Staffing adequacy at threshold moments, the

speed of minor repairs, the clarity of crowd-flow guidance, and the timeliness of change notifications are all more consequential than they may appear in budget discussions, because they sit at the point where operational pressure becomes customer effort.

After the baseline of visible assurance and journey continuity is secured, more differentiated allocation becomes possible. Research indicates that customer involvement alters how strongly service quality influences loyalty and satisfaction, with more involved users often becoming especially sensitive to reliability and relational credibility (Huang & Kim, 2023). At the same time, service priorities are not distributed uniformly across user groups. Evidence from fitness services suggests that sex- and age-related differences shape how users interpret service quality, especially in relation to physical conditions, accessibility, comfort, and service expectations (Ortega-Martínez et al., 2021). This implies a sequencing logic for multi-store operators. The first stage of improvement should focus on universal assurance: cleanliness, safety, clear rules, equipment readiness, and consistent problem handling. Only after this baseline is reliably established should resources be directed more selectively toward segment-sensitive enhancements such as program variety, branch-specific environmental refinements, or targeted communication patterns for distinct customer groups. Without that sequencing, differentiation risks decorating an unstable operating system.

This also means that managers should resist the temptation to equate improvement with visible spending alone. Some of the most influential changes in multi-store service systems are procedural rather than capital intensive. Clearer exception-handling rules, tighter alignment between digital and on-site information, better shift handovers, earlier change notifications, and shorter complaint-closure cycles may generate more customer benefit than aesthetic upgrades that do not address recurrent friction. Qualitative evidence from the fitness sector supports this broader view by emphasizing that sustainable management depends on coordinated attention to service friendliness, terms clarity, digital practices, and tangible quality as parts of one operating logic (León-Quismondo et al., 2020a). From a network-management perspective, the key is not whether an intervention looks impressive in isolation, but whether it reduces the gap between the brand promise and the experience customers repeatedly encounter across outlets.

A final implication concerns managerial monitoring. If multi-store service operations quality is to be managed consistently, it requires a small but disciplined set of shared indicators that remain closely tied to customer exposure. Measures such as visible-cleanliness compliance, equipment availability, peak-period entry delay, notification timeliness, frontline resolution consistency, and complaint-closure time are useful not because they capture everything, but because they illuminate where the network most often converts operational variation into customer friction. When monitored across outlets and time windows, such indicators make it easier to

distinguish isolated incidents from systemic weaknesses and to allocate resources with greater precision. More importantly, they encourage a shift from episodic problem solving to preventive coordination.

Taken together, the managerial implications of this study point in a consistent direction. Multi-store swimming and fitness centers should be managed as networks of reproduced reliability rather than as loosely connected venues. Standardization should protect the brand's essential promises without collapsing local responsiveness. Improvement priorities should favor high-visibility, high-frequency, and high-disruption issues before moving toward secondary refinements. When this logic is followed, service operations quality becomes more than a descriptive concept. It becomes a basis for disciplined managerial choice under real-world constraints.

6. Conclusion

The central claim of this paper has been that customer experience in Chinese swimming and fitness centers is best understood through an operations lens. In high-contact, risk-sensitive, and regulation-intensive service settings, customer evaluations are not formed solely through isolated service encounters or through abstract perceptions of quality after the fact. They are shaped by whether the organization can convert compliance requirements and managerial standards into stable, legible, and repeatable service performance across the customer journey. From this standpoint, the issue is not whether service quality matters; it clearly does. The more important point is that, in swimming and fitness services, quality becomes meaningful only when it is operationally enacted in ways that customers can repeatedly trust.

6.1. Main argument of the study

This paper has argued that service operations quality offers a more precise way of understanding that enactment. Rather than treating customer experience as the cumulative result of loosely connected service attributes, the paper has proposed that operational quality in swimming and fitness centers is structured through three interdependent dimensions: hygiene and safety, staff professionalism, and facilities and environment. These dimensions do not merely decorate the service encounter. They define whether the venue appears governable, usable, and dependable across repeated visits. The broader fitness-service literature has long shown that facilities, staff, service assurance, and recovery influence satisfaction in substantive ways (Barbosa et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2021). Broader sport-service evidence points in the same direction. Meta-analytic work indicates that service quality exerts significant effects on perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions in sport contexts, confirming that customer outcomes are systematically tied to quality perceptions rather than only to isolated consumption moments (Biscaia et al., 2023). What this paper adds is a stronger emphasis on the organizational logic beneath those

evaluations. The concern is not only what customers like or dislike, but how organizations make those conditions reproducible across time, touchpoints, and branches.

Seen in this light, compliance is only the starting point. A swimming and fitness center may meet technical standards and still fail to deliver a coherent customer experience if the service remains difficult to interpret, inconsistent across visits, or visibly strained under pressure. Conversely, the operational meaning of compliance becomes customer-facing when it is translated into visible assurance, intelligible routines, and predictable handling of disruption. Hygiene and safety matter because they reduce uncertainty before customers even begin active use. Staff professionalism matters because it transforms backstage rules and organizational routines into explanations, guidance, and problem handling that customers can understand and rely on. Facilities and environment matter because they function as operational infrastructure, enabling continuity of use rather than merely contributing to ambience. Read together, these dimensions shift attention away from isolated service moments and toward the conditions that allow good service to remain stable in practice.

A second contribution of the paper lies in the journey-based interpretation of customer experience. The argument developed here has been that service operations quality becomes visible not at one point, but across acquisition, entry, use, change, and after-sales. This is a consequential shift in emphasis. It suggests that customer experience is not reducible to what happens during active use alone. Operational quality is already being interpreted when customers search for information, assess the clarity of rules, and judge whether the venue appears manageable before arrival. It is tested again when customers pass through access procedures, navigate shared spaces, encounter crowding, and rely on the venue's ability to keep routines intelligible under pressure. It becomes especially legible when plans change, when exceptions arise, or when after-sales resolution determines whether the organization can be trusted beyond the immediate visit. This reading is compatible with prior evidence showing that process quality and outcome quality jointly influence satisfaction and future intentions in fitness contexts (Foroughi et al., 2019), while extending that logic by specifying where operational performance becomes experiential.

The paper also carries a clear managerial message for multi-store operators. A reliable brand in swimming and fitness services is not built through occasional excellence at individual outlets. It is built through reproduced reliability across outlets, staff teams, and time windows. That is why service operations quality should be treated as a system-level capability rather than as a venue-level trait. Standardization, in this context, should protect essential promises without collapsing all branches into rigid uniformity. What needs to remain stable is not superficial sameness, but the customer's ability to expect a recognizable baseline of cleanliness,

safety, professionalism, facility usability, and information consistency wherever the brand is encountered. This conclusion is aligned with qualitative work emphasizing service friendliness, clarity of terms, digital coordination, and tangible quality as mutually reinforcing elements of sustainable fitness-center management (León-Quismondo et al., 2020). It also resonates with evidence showing that the relationship between service quality and loyalty becomes stronger when customers are more involved and more dependent on reliable delivery (Huang & Kim, 2023). More broadly, it is consistent with meta-analytic findings that loyalty formation is strongly organized around the interconnections among quality, value, satisfaction, and subsequent relational outcomes rather than around single service attributes in isolation (So et al., 2024). For managers, the implication is straightforward: the stronger the role of routine dependence in customer use, the greater the value of operational consistency.

Taken together, the study has reframed the discussion from perceived service quality to service operations quality without discarding the importance of customer evaluation. The broader quality–value–satisfaction tradition remains highly relevant (Cronin et al., 2000), but the present analysis shows that, in swimming and fitness centers, the decisive managerial problem lies in the organizational conditions that make favorable evaluations sustainable. Customer experience is not an outcome floating above operations. It is the experiential surface of operational control.

6.2. Implications for future research

Although the present paper has developed a conceptual and managerial account of service operations quality, it also opens several directions for future empirical work. One immediate avenue is to test more directly how the three proposed dimensions of service operations quality influence customer evaluations through specific experiential mechanisms. Prior research in fitness settings suggests that service quality works not only through direct effects, but also through process quality, outcome quality, and psychological mechanisms such as exercise flow, employee–customer rapport, and price fairness (Foroughi et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2024). Future studies could therefore examine whether hygiene and safety, staff professionalism, and facilities and environment contribute differently to customer effortlessness, perceived value, satisfaction, and subsequent behavioral intentions. This would allow researchers to determine not only whether service operations quality matters, but which of its components matter most under different service conditions.

A second direction concerns heterogeneity. The present paper has treated Chinese swimming and fitness centers as a revealing service context, yet important variation is likely to exist across customer segments, business formats, and outlet types. The effects of operational stability may differ between high-involvement and low-involvement users, between premium and mass-market venues, or between

outlets with heavier peak-load exposure and those with more stable demand patterns. Existing research already indicates that customer involvement changes the strength of the relationship between service quality and loyalty in sports fitness centers (Huang & Kim, 2023). Future work could expand this insight by examining whether different customer groups are especially sensitive to particular dimensions of service operations quality, such as cleanliness, staff guidance, queue management, or equipment availability. In doing so, it would be useful to connect this line of inquiry to the broader loyalty-antecedent literature in sport organizations, which suggests that satisfaction should be analyzed together with trust, commitment, and other relational constructs rather than in isolation (Loranca-Valle et al., 2021).

A third research direction concerns methodology. Much of the current sport-service literature, including studies on customer satisfaction and future intentions, still relies heavily on self-reported perceptions collected at one point in time. That approach remains useful, but it offers only a partial view of operational performance. Future studies would benefit from combining customer-reported evaluations with objective operational indicators such as waiting-time distributions, equipment downtime, cleaning-compliance records, maintenance closure speed, notification timeliness, or complaint-resolution duration. Such integration would help explain more precisely how operational variation becomes customer friction and how service systems lose or sustain credibility over time. It would also strengthen the managerial utility of research by aligning experiential measures with data that operators can monitor routinely.

Longitudinal designs would be especially valuable in this regard. Swimming and fitness centers are recurrent-use services, and customer experience in such settings is not formed by one-off events alone. Repeated exposure allows customers to detect inconsistency, compare branches, and revise their trust in the service network over time. Research on service experience and future intentions in sports services suggests that satisfaction, engagement, and continued use are tightly connected (García-Pascual et al., 2023). Future studies could build on this by tracing how operational reliability accumulates into trust, habit, loyalty, and price tolerance. Such work would be particularly useful for understanding how multi-store operators move from short-term satisfaction management to longer-term relationship stability. Finally, comparative work across cities, countries, and service models would help clarify the scope of the framework developed here. Chinese swimming and fitness centers offer a highly instructive case because they combine visible compliance demands, dense customer contact, and increasing digital coordination. Yet the broader logic proposed in this paper may also apply to other high-contact leisure and wellness services where operational visibility is high and the customer journey extends beyond the immediate encounter. Future studies may also benefit from linking commercial service research with the wider Chinese satisfaction-governance literature, where perceived quality and perceived value have already been modeled

as central antecedents of satisfaction in national fitness public services (Tian et al., 2025). Testing the framework across different institutional settings would therefore show not only which aspects of service operations quality are context-specific, but also how governance environments shape the translation of operations into customer experience.

In that sense, the present paper should be read as both a reframing and a foundation. It reframes customer experience in swimming and fitness centers as an operationally produced phenomenon rather than as a purely perceptual outcome. At the same time, it provides a foundation for future work that can test, refine, and extend this argument with stronger empirical granularity. The broader implication is that customer experience in sport services becomes more intelligible when the organization is studied not only as a provider of encounters, but as a system for producing reliable conditions under which those encounters can succeed.

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