# SERVICE EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC SPORTS SERVICES: LEVERAGING SERVICE DELIVERY AND DESIGN

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## Abstract

This research provides an in-depth study of the current status and future development trends of public sports service quality management in rural Zhuang ethnic regions of China, with the goal of improving service quality, and explores the significant impacts of competency, public sports service delivery, and service design on public sports service quality. By analyzing the data using SmartPLS, the study verified the validity of the measurement tools and the significant relationships between the key variables in the structural model. The results of the study indicate that competency has a significant positive impact on Public sports service delivery and service design, which in turn have a positive effect on public sports service quality. The study validated the indirect effects through the Bootstrap program, further supporting the pathways of competency, service design and public sports service delivery on public sports service quality. Finally, the study provides strong guidance for improving public sports service quality in rural China at both the theoretical and practical levels,

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and offers new perspectives and suggestions for academic research and policy formulation in related fields.

**Keywords:** public service quality, Service delivery, Service design, Zhuang

**Introduction**

This research explores ways to improve service quality through an in-depth study of public sports service in Rural Zhuang Ethnic Regions of China. Against the backdrop of the Western New public Management movement, there are problems of inequality and lack of quality assurance in China's rural public sports services. The thesis proposes the need to clarify the factors influencing service quality and verifies the critical role of Competency, Service provision and Service design in improving quality through quantitative research. This research provides useful guidance for the theory and practice of rural public sport service delivery.

As an important component of the "basic social conditions necessary for the realization of comprehensive human development", public services are a key indicator of high-quality social development (Zhou, 2000). which once again provides strong support for the development of China's sports undertakings. In the context of the new era of national fitness and the development strategies of a healthy China and a strong sports nation, promoting the development of public sports service quality is not only in line with the needs of the construction of a harmonious socialist society with Chinese characteristics, but also a way of guaranteeing the active participation of the people in sports activities.

In this context, public expectations are increasingly demanding that governments emulate the operations of commercial firms. There are large differences in Public sport service delivery between regions, especially in the

rural areas of economically underdeveloped ethnic minority regions, where public sports service quality faces a lack of effective safeguards (Wen, 2021). The construction of China's public sports service system has not yet been perfected, and there are obvious inequities. There are large differences in Public sport service delivery between regions, especially in the rural areas of economically underdeveloped ethnic minority regions.

Clarifying the subjects, processes, evaluations helps to identify the entry points and exits for rural public sports service quality improvement. Satisfy the public's demand for rural public sports services help to enhance the public's "happiness", thus better realizing the "Healthy China Strategy". thereby better realizing the "Healthy China" strategy.

**Public Sports Service Quality**

In 1978, Sasser et al. introduced the concept of service quality, distinguishing it into Expected Service Level and Perceived Service Level (Sasser et al., 1978). In 1982, Churchill and Surprenant defined service quality as the degree of consumer satisfaction based on the gap between actual service and expectations (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982).

In 2011, Jiang Mingsheng and Wen Shunsheng emphasized that the quality of public services focuses on the service level and quality provided by government and related organizations (Jiang & Wen, 2011). For public sports services, it's defined as how well the process and outcomes meet regulatory requirements and public needs (Yuan et al., 2019).

**Competency**

In 1973, McClelland (1973) highlighted that academic performance doesn't predict future career success or life achievement. He emphasized the need to assess competency beyond intelligence or knowledge in specific areas, sparking the Competency movement. Nelson (1997) stated that traditional HR management falls short in adapting to organizational change. Competency-

based HR management can predict career development and job competency, aligning with organizational goals.

Akerson (2014) discovered that low entry barriers for personal fitness instructor certification in the US negatively affect the fitness industry. Huang Jin's study (2018) in Fuzhou City found a strong positive correlation between fitness trainer competency and customer satisfaction in various aspects.

**Public Sport Service Delivery**

Different agents exhibit varying levels of competitive efficiency, with the public sector having the capability to achieve cost savings and improved efficiency (Ferris & Graddy, 1994). Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) argue that government's altruism can facilitate efficient provision of certain public services. Public services can be delivered through government or non-governmental means, including diversification and joint provision. In the early 1990s, as public demand increased, there was a decline in service quality and efficiency in public institutions. To address this, Stiglitz suggested that the government could entrust the private sector with service production and delivery while maintaining macro-control (Prychitko, 1996).

In the UK, sports affairs are indirectly managed through organizations like UK Sport, Sport England, and the Youth Sport Trust, while local councils maintain a high degree of autonomy. Various sports social organizations and institutions, encouraged by the government, actively provide public sports services: sports clubs offer personalized services, voluntary sports organizations contribute through clubs, sports associations promote their respective sports, and sports foundations provide financial support (Wang, 2017).

**Service Design**

The concept of "service design" was first introduced in 1982, it was proposed service blueprints, and set up service visibility and service evidence, and proposed the use of service blueprints to improve the experience of the

service (Shostack, 1982). In the 1990s, there were different designers and enterprises such as Donald A. Norman, Angus, Jenkinson and IDEO, etc., who put forward design concepts and design methods such as "user-centered", "user prototype", "user portrait", "user journey map", etc. These theories and methods were helpful for designers to build intangible services by visualization at that time. They have come up with design concepts and methods such as "user-centered", "user prototype", "user portrait", "user journey map", etc., which can utilize visualization to show intangible Service design, and these theories and methods were of great help to designers at that time when they were constructing the framework of user stories and researching the target users. These theories and methods were of great help to designers at that time in constructing user story frameworks and researching target users, which improved designers' thinking logic and expanded their Service design methods.

Later, in the late 20$^{th}$ century, Kimbell argues that Service design is a unique form of design that focuses on designing and improving service experiences and processes rather than just the design and manufacture of products. This reflects an understanding and emphasis on the multiplicity of Service design (Clatworthy et al., 2009).

**Hypotheses**

H1: Competency affects service quality through service delivery.

H2: Competency affects service quality through service design.

H3: Service design affects service quality through service delivery.

## Method

### Participants

Using quantitative methods and non-probability sampling techniques, the study was conducted in counties with more than 90% of China's Zhuang population. The sample consisted of 485 residents who lived in these counties

and used or participated in local public sports services. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed and 485 valid questionnaires were returned.

The age of the participants was mainly between 36–55 years old, predominantly male, which accounted for 71.5% of the sample, and female, which accounted for 28.5%. In terms of education, the residents in the sample are mostly from High school and below, in terms of Unit property, mainly Farming, in terms of Nature of post, mainly Self-employed and Ordinary employee, Years of participation mainly 5–15 years, and monthly income mainly below 5,000 RMB.

**Instrument**

Competency was measured using the COSM measurement tool (Toh & Jamieson, 2000) with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.97. Public sport service delivery is measured using five indicator dimensions proposed by Pu et al. including facilities construction, fitness instruction, policies and regulations, fitness test, and public sport information (Pu, 2020). Service design uses Customer Needs Scale used by Huang and Kuo. Service quality was modeled using the SERVQUAL service quality gap model, proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

**Data Analysis**

The statistical technique chosen for this study is Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), employed through the use of SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM is a robust multivariate analysis method that is particularly suited for exploratory research when the goal is theory building or when the research model is complex. It allows for the analysis of complex relationships between observed and latent variables within a structural equation framework. This method is preferred in situations where the data may not necessarily

follow a normal distribution, making it a flexible choice for a wide range of research topics, including those dealing with service quality and design.

In this study, PLS-SEM is utilized to verify the measurement model's validity and to explore the significant relationships between competency, public sports service delivery, service design, and public sports service quality. The use of SmartPLS for data analysis is indicative of a focus on understanding the structural relationships between variables rather than merely their individual impacts. This approach is particularly effective for testing hypotheses related to indirect effects and mediation between constructs, as evidenced by the study's exploration of how competency influences public sports service quality through service delivery and design.

## Results

### Measurement Model

In evaluating the measurement models, we conducted assessments on loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR). Our criteria included loadings greater than or equal 0.5, AVE greater than or equal 0.5, and CR greater than or equal 0.7. As depicted in Table 2, all constructs surpassed the threshold values, with AVEs exceeding 0.5, CRs surpassing 0.7, and loadings meeting or exceeding the 0.5 criterion (Hair et al., 2019). Notably, considering our incorporation of three second-order constructs-Competency, Public Sports Service Delivery, and Public Sports Service Quality.

During the second step, we applied the HTMT criterion proposed by Henseler et al. (2015) and refined by Franke and Sarstedt (2019) to evaluate discriminant validity. The stringent HTMT criterion set was ≤0.85, with a more lenient criterion of ≤0.90. As indicated in Table 4, all HTMT values fell below 0.85. Hence, we can confidently assert that respondents distinguished among

the individual constructs. In summary, both validity tests provided strong evidence supporting the effectiveness and reliability of the measurement items.

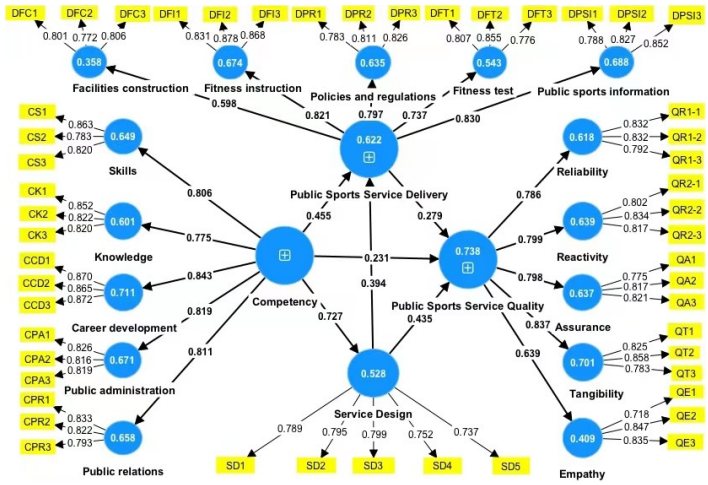


**Fig. 1** *Hypothesis testing*

**Table 1** Measurement Model for the First Order Constructs

| Constructs | Items | Loadings | α | AVE | CR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assurance | QA1 | 0.775 | 0.728 | 0.647 | 0.846 |
| | QA2 | 0.817 | | | |
| | QA3 | 0.821 | | | |
| Career development | CCD1 | 0.87 | 0.838 | 0.756 | 0.93 |
| | CCD2 | 0.865 | | | |
| | CCD3 | 0.872 | | | |
| Empathy | QE1 | 0.718 | 0.72 | 0.644 | 0.844 |
| | QE2 | 0.847 | | | |
| | QE3 | 0.835 | | | |
| Facilities construction | DFC1 | 0.801 | 0.706 | 0.629 | 0.836 |
| | DFC2 | 0.772 | | | |
| | DFC3 | 0.806 | | | |
| Fitness instruction | DFI1 | 0.831 | 0.822 | 0.738 | 0.894 |
| | DFI2 | 0.878 | | | |
| | DFI3 | 0.868 | | | |
| Fitness test | DFT1 | 0.807 | 0.743 | 0.662 | 0.854 |
| | DFT2 | 0.855 | | | |
| | DFT3 | 0.776 | | | |

**Table 1** Measurement Model for the First Order Constructs

| Constructs | Items | Loadings | α | AVE | CR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Knowledge | CK1 | 0.852 | 0.776 | 0.691 | 0.87 |
| | CK2 | 0.822 | | | |
| | CK3 | 0.82 | | | |
| Policies and regulations | DPR1 | 0.783 | 0.733 | 0.651 | 0.848 |
| | DPR2 | 0.811 | | | |
| | DPR3 | 0.826 | | | |
| Public administration | CPA1 | 0.826 | 0.757 | 0.673 | 0.861 |
| | CPA2 | 0.816 | | | |
| | CPA3 | 0.819 | | | |
| Public relations | CPR1 | 0.833 | 0.749 | 0.666 | 0.857 |
| | CPR2 | 0.822 | | | |
| | CPR3 | 0.793 | | | |
| Public sports information | DPSI1 | 0.788 | 0.761 | 0.677 | 0.83 |
| | DPSI2 | 0.827 | | | |
| | DPSI3 | 0.852 | | | |
| Reactivity | QR2-1 | 0.802 | 0.752 | 0.668 | 0.858 |
| | QR2-2 | 0.834 | | | |
| | QR2-3 | 0.817 | | | |
| Reliability | QR1-1 | 0.832 | 0.754 | 0.671 | 0.859 |
| | QR1-2 | 0.832 | | | |
| | QR1-3 | 0.792 | | | |
| Service Design | SD1 | 0.789 | 0.833 | 0.601 | 0.882 |
| | SD2 | 0.795 | | | |
| | SD3 | 0.799 | | | |
| | SD4 | 0.752 | | | |
| | SD5 | 0.737 | | | |
| Skills | CS1 | 0.863 | 0.761 | 0.677 | 0.863 |
| | CS2 | 0.783 | | | |
| | CS3 | 0.82 | | | |
| Tangibility | QT1 | 0.825 | 0.761 | 0.677 | 0.862 |
| | QT2 | 0.858 | | | |
| | QT3 | 0.783 | | | |

**Table 2** Measurement Model for the Second Order Constructs

| Constructs | Indicator | Loadings | α | AVE | CR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Competency | Career development | 0.843 | 0.914 | 0.658 | 0.906 |
| | Knowledge | 0.775 | | | |
| | Public administration | 0.819 | | | |
| | Public relations | 0.811 | | | |
| | Skills | 0.806 | | | |
| Public Sports Service Delivery | Fitness instruction | 0.821 | 0.886 | 0.58 | 0.872 |
| | Facilities construction | 0.598 | | | |
| | Fitness test | 0.737 | | | |
| | Policies and regulations | 0.797 | | | |
| | Public sports information | 0.83 | | | |
| Public Sports Service Quality | Assurance | 0.798 | 0.89 | 0.6 | 0.882 |
| | Empathy | 0.639 | | | |
| | Reactivity | 0.799 | | | |
| | Reliability | 0.786 | | | |
| | Tangibility | 0.837 | | | |

**Table 3** Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

| | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Competency | | | |
| 2. Public Sports Service Delivery | 0.822 | | |
| 3. Public Sports Service Quality | 0.826 | 0.848 | |

**Structural Model**

Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2017), we assessed multivariate skewness and kurtosis. Then, as outlined by Hair et al. (2019), we utilized a resampling bootstrap procedure with 5,000 samples (Ramayah et al., 2018). Our presentation included path coefficients, standard errors, t-values, and p-values for the structural model. To address concerns raised by Hahn & Ang (2017) regarding the limitations of relying solely on p-values for hypothesis testing, we adopted their proposed approach, incorporating p-values, confidence intervals, and effect sizes. Table 6 provides an overview of the criteria used to assess the proposed hypotheses.

Regarding the R-squared explanatory degree, endogenous latent variables typically exceed 0.67, indicating a strong degree of explanation. Values between 0.33–0.67 suggest a moderately strong degree, 0.19–0.33 indicate a lesser degree, and values below 0.19 imply almost no explanation. In this study, the $R^2$ values for Public Sports Service Delivery, Public Sports Service Quality, and Service Design are 0.622, 0.738, and 0.528, respectively, signifying a relatively strong degree of explanation.

To test the mediation hypothesis, we followed Preacher and Hayes' recommendation of bootstrapping the indirect effects. If the confidence interval excludes 0, we conclude a significant mediation effect. As displayed in Table 5. All these results were found to be significant. Even after bias correction, the 95% confidence interval remained excluding 0, confirming the reliability of the findings. Hence, H1, H2, and H3 were validated.

**Table 5** Hypothesis Testing Indirect Effects

| Path | β | SE | t | *p* | BCI LL | BCI UL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Competency -> Public Sports Service Delivery -> Public Sports Service Quality | 0.127 | 0.021 | 5.975 | 0 | 0.087 | 0.17 |
| Competency -> Service Design -> Public Sports Service Quality | 0.08 | 0.013 | 6.026 | 0 | 0.055 | 0.107 |
| Service Design -> Public Sports Service Delivery -> Public Sports Service Quality | 0.11 | 0.019 | 5.941 | 0 | 0.075 | 0.149 |

**Note:** We use 95% confidence interval with a bootstrapping of 5,000

## Discussion

The assessment of the measurement model in this study confirmed the validity of the measurement instrument in terms of dimensionality and reliability, reinforcing the scientific robustness of the chosen research framework. Regarding the validation of mediating effects, the study found that Competency indirectly affects public sports service quality through public sports service delivery and

Service design, while Service design also significantly affects public sports service quality indirectly through public sports service delivery.

Notably, all errors identified using the PLS model were lower than the LM model, indicating the robustness of the model in future prediction. By elucidating the significant effects of Competency, Service design and Public sport service delivery on public sports service quality, this study provides solid theoretical guidance and practical insights for enhancing public sports services.

This finding not only provides new perspectives and support for theoretical research, but also offers practical suggestions for governmental decision-making. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of recommending a focus on Competency, Service design and Public sport service delivery in future public sport services to achieve higher levels of service quality and more comprehensive social benefits. This has positive implications for promoting the sustainable development of sport for all.

**Theoretical Implications**

The direct influence of competency, encompassing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of staff or an organization, on the delivery and design of public sports services is a critical area of exploration within service management literature. Competency impacts service quality in several key ways, underpinned by various theories and models that elucidate this relationship.

Human capital theory posits that the knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by individuals are vital economic resources that contribute to their productivity and effectiveness. In the context of public sports services, staff competencies can enhance the quality of service delivery through more efficient operation, innovative service design, and the ability to meet or exceed user expectations. Competencies in areas such as customer service, technical expertise in sports and fitness, and operational management are directly linked to the

quality of service users experience. High levels of competency allow for the development and implementation of services that are not only responsive to user needs but also proactively anticipate and shape those needs.

The Resource-Based View of the firm suggests that organizations achieve and sustain competitive advantage through the deployment of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources, of which human capital is a prime example. In public sports services, an organization's competencies can be seen as strategic resources that drive superior service delivery and design. Competent staff can leverage their skills and knowledge to innovate and improve service processes, creating unique and high-quality service offerings that differentiate the organization in the marketplace.

Service-Dominant Logic shifts the focus from goods to services, positing that value is co-created through interactions between providers and consumers. Within this framework, the competencies of staff are crucial for engaging users in the value co-creation process. Skilled and knowledgeable staff can better facilitate user involvement, tailor services to specific needs, and enhance the overall service experience, leading to higher quality perceptions.

The SERVQUAL model identifies five dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Competencies directly influence these dimensions. For instance, knowledge and skills impact the reliability of service delivery (consistent and accurate service) and assurance (confidence and trust in the service provider). Abilities in communication and empathy enable staff to understand and meet user needs more effectively, enhancing perceived service quality.

Research has established a direct correlation between the skills of service providers and perceived service quality. In public sports services, staff competencies in areas such as program design, customer service, and technical expertise in sports activities directly influence user satisfaction and service quality

perceptions. Well-designed training programs that enhance these competencies can lead to improvements in service delivery and design, directly impacting the quality of the public sports service offering.

In conclusion, the linkage between staff competencies and the delivery and design of public sports services is supported by several theories and models that highlight the importance of human capital as a key driver of service quality. By focusing on developing and leveraging these competencies, public sports services can enhance their effectiveness, innovate their offerings, and ultimately improve the quality of service experienced by users.

**Implications for Future Research**

The study acknowledges the influence of specific cultural and economic contexts, suggesting that future research could broaden its scope to encompass a more diverse range of geographic and ethnic groups for a more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, there is potential for more in-depth investigations into the specific operational mechanisms and feasibility of multiple governance bodies. Through an extensive examination of public sports service quality in Rural Ethnic Zhuang Regions in China, this thesis affirms the validity of H1, H2, and H3. Competency, Service design, and public sports service delivery were found to significantly impact service quality. This not only contributes novel perspectives and theoretical support but also offers practical and viable recommendations for governmental decision-making. In future research, expanding the sample size and delving deeper into the role of multiple governance subjects can enhance support for the development of the public service sector.

**Practical Implications**

To effectively enhance the public sports sector, it is crucial to focus on comprehensive strategies that address both broad issues and their corresponding sub-issues. This approach ensures that recommendations are not only actionable but also tailored to address specific challenges and opportunities within the sector.

Investing in the continuous professional development of staff across all levels emerges as a pivotal recommendation. This broad directive can be broken down into sub-issues such as the development of customized training programs tailored to the unique needs of various roles within the public sports sector. These programs should focus on enhancing technical skills, customer service capabilities, and innovative approaches to service design. Additionally, encouraging staff to participate in certification and accreditation programs ensures that their competencies are recognized, validated, and kept current, thereby directly impacting the quality of service delivery.

The integration of technology into service delivery and design represents another broad issue with significant potential to enhance efficiency and user experience. Sub-issues in this area include the creation of digital platforms for user engagement, allowing for easy access to services, feedback provision, and participation in the co-creation of services. Employing data analytics to gain insights into user preferences and behaviors enables data-driven improvements in service design and delivery, further enhancing user satisfaction and engagement.

Cultivating a culture of continuous improvement within organizations is essential for sustaining high-quality service delivery. Implementing structured feedback mechanisms to collect and analyze input from users and staff facilitates the integration of valuable insights into continuous service improvement processes. Developing reward and recognition programs for staff

who demonstrate excellence and innovation in service delivery and design encourages a culture that values and strives for high service quality.

Establishing strategic partnerships and collaborations with community organizations, educational institutions, healthcare providers, and private sector entities can significantly broaden and enhance service offerings. Engaging with community organizations helps in understanding and integrating local needs into public sports programs, while cross-sector collaboration offers a more diverse range of services that promote physical activity and wellness among the broader population.

Lastly, advocating for supportive policies and infrastructure developments is critical for the expansion and improvement of public sports services. Ensuring accessibility and inclusion for all segments of the population, including vulnerable and underserved communities, should be a priority. Additionally, promoting sustainable practices in the design, maintenance of sports facilities, and delivery of services contributes to the long-term viability and impact of the public sports sector.

By meticulously addressing these recommendations and their sub-issues, the public sports sector can make significant strides towards improving service quality. Such a detailed and holistic approach ensures that improvements are deeply embedded within the sector's operations, culture, and strategic orientation, leading to enduring benefits for both the sector and its patrons.

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