

# SERVICE RECOVERY SATISFACTION AND COMMITMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF SPECTATOR SPORT INDUSTRY: STUDY ON CROATIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE CONSUMERS

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## **Abstract**

Successful service recovery is one of the major tasks for every service provider. This paper transfers the theory of service recovery from traditional industries to the spectator sport context, more precisely to football. A satisfied and committed consumer is one of the main goals for every business entity, as well as for football clubs. The main purpose of this paper is to examine factors that predict satisfaction with service recovery and its outcomes in the context of the spectator sport industry. The research methodology used previously established scales related to service recovery satisfaction in terms of other industries, which are modified in order to meet the requirements of this research. The research was conducted on 408 active consumers of services provided by Croatian football clubs. The research results show that perceived service recovery equity affects recovery satisfaction in terms of football as the most popular spectator sport in the world. Furthermore, it has been established that recovery satisfaction predicts satisfaction with club services and trust in football clubs. Relationships between predictors such as recovery satisfaction, satisfaction with club services, trust and its proposed outcome, such as commitment towards the club could not be supported. This could be due to the fact that spectator sport consumers possess enormous emotional and psychological loyalty towards the club, which surpasses traditional consumer theory understanding. Furthermore, a significant relationship between consumer commitment and positive word of mouth has been established.

**Implications for Central European audience:** Obtained results can also be of interest for audience from other Central European countries where football is also an extremely important part of their leisure activities and overall culture.

**Keywords:** Service recovery; perceived equity; satisfaction; commitment; sports club

**JEL Classification:** M30, M31, L83

# Introduction

Sport is deeply ingrained in everyday life, which is why Grove et al. (2012) consider it to be one of the most important institutions nowadays. The importance of sport for the entire population of Earth is so great that according to De Bruijn and Leijten (2007), the biggest football organization, Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), has more members than the United Nations (UN). Furthermore, McDonald et al. (2002) point out that sport, especially football, is firmly embedded in contemporary culture, and Kaynak et al. (2007) consider it to be an international language that breaks down religious, social and linguistic barriers across the globe.

On the professional sports market, there is strong competition as on any other market where there is a large number of different sports clubs from various sports who fight to sell their integrated sports services to their potential consumers (James et al., 2002). At the same time, researchers point out the goals of every sports club, as well as every business entity that places products or services on the market, which is to attract as many consumers as possible, retain them and ultimately form the largest possible but still very loyal consumer bases. According to Mullin et al. (2007), sports clubs compete not only with each other but also with other alternative forms of entertainment, such as going to the cinema or the theatre. According to Meyer and Schwager (2007), sports clubs should make every effort to offer complete, diversified and high-quality service which has the potential to attract and retain as many consumers as possible and offer them the maximum perceived value, satisfaction and experience they can get. Sports clubs whose management understands the needs and desires of their own and potential consumers will benefit through their loyalty (Ferrand & Pages, 1996).

Furthermore, it is important to point out some uniqueness of the spectator sport market. One of the basic features of an integrated sports service is actually its unpredictability and inconsistency (Mullin et al., 2007) because management does not have direct control over the club's win/loss ratio, so it is reasonable to expect consumers motivated by experiencing success through club victories (which are many), but sometimes to be unsatisfied with the club's product. It should also be noted that characteristics such as intangibility, simultaneous production and consumption, and also intense human interaction in the provision of some of the peripheral services (e.g., catering service) within the match as an integral sports service leads to the conclusion that it is impossible to expect sports service with a zero defect rate. The aforementioned could sometimes lead consumers to perceive service as unsuccessful (Hui et al., 2011; La & Choi, 2019).

According to Byon et al. (2013), integral sport service is usually split into two basic elements, namely core service and peripheral service. Core service refers to the sporting event in terms of factors that are directly connected to the sports field, such as player performance and opponent characteristics, while peripheral service is related to the catering service, interaction with employees, stadium comfort, etc. (Yoshida & James, 2010). This paper focuses on peripheral elements of sport service due to the fact that those are under the direct control of the football club managers (Byon et al., 2013; Greenwell et al., 2002).

From the consumer's point of view, failed service is any service that does not meet their expectations (Hoffman & Bateson, 1997) or any service which went wrong regardless of who is responsible for such an outcome (Palmer et al., 2000). For instance, in terms of sport

service, it could be related to any peripheral element of the service, such as the cleanliness of the stadium, discipline at the stadium, professionalism of the staff, parking, etc. (Trail et al., 2008). Such services lead to unwanted experiences for the consumers and lead to a poor perception of the service provider and his services (Toister, 2013). The most serious problem arising from service failure is the possibility of destroying the relationship between the consumer and the service provider, which can ultimately lead to negative comments related to the service provider (Ha & Jang, 2009) or can negatively affect consumer trust and commitment towards the service provider; in this case, football clubs (Weun et al., 2004). Furthermore, taking into account the characteristics of the services, including sport results, it is important to point out that unsuccessful services are inevitable in any business, but successful recovery from such experiences is one of the key challenges for any service provider on the market (La & Choi, 2019; Pai et al., 2018).

Service recovery is defined by Hoffman and Kelley (2000) as the process by which a service provider, in this case, a football club, tries to correct a failure that has occurred within the service delivery process. Successful service organizations try to correct the loss that consumers have experienced by taking necessary steps to overcome the failure (Grönroos, 1988). Furthermore, service recovery is, according to Huang (2011), a critical part of service management.

In this paper, emphasis is placed on the spectator sport industry, more precisely football. This area of study lacks systematic research on the relationships between service recovery expectations, perceived equity and service recovery satisfaction. To fill this research gap, the current study extends the service recovery literature to examine the most widely accepted predictors (Awa et al., 2016; Li-Hua, 2012) of service recovery satisfaction in terms of football consumers, such as perceived equity and recovery expectations. This paper aims to examine the impact of service recovery expectations and perceived equity on service recovery satisfaction. Furthermore, it estimates the overall influence of service recovery satisfaction on consumer satisfaction with club services as well as on consumers' trust and commitment. Previous research has addressed this topic in some other industries, such as Matikiti et al. (2020), who dealt with this topic in the airline industry; however, little is known about this topic concerning the spectator sports market.

At this point, it should be mentioned that sports services in the Republic of Croatia are quite poor due to the fact that the football infrastructure is very bad (Čeferin, 2016), and the clubs, in general, do not seem to recognize the importance of service quality and see their consumers as a random phenomenon (Van Leeuwen et al., 2002). Croatian football clubs do not recognize the importance of providing well-designed integrated services which could enrich consumers' overall experience (Zeithaml et al., 1996), as a football match is a sporting event and could serve as an opportunity for the football clubs to earn money. This results in Croatian football clubs having poor visits, absence of sponsors, low revenues, and many other negative consequences (Obućina, 2019).

The purpose of this research is to examine factors that predict satisfaction with service recovery and to define its outcomes in the context of the spectator sport industry, more precisely football. This paper also examines the moderating role of perceived quality of services experienced in the past on the relationship between service recovery satisfaction and consumers' commitment to football clubs.

The paper is organized as follows. After the introduction, where the importance of football and the uniqueness of the spectator sport market is discussed, a theoretical framework is offered with theories grounding the study and formulation of hypotheses. This part focuses strongly on explaining the main constructs, such as service recovery expectation and perceived equity as the predictors of service recovery satisfaction, as well as satisfaction with club services, trust and commitment, and positive word of mouth as their consequences. Perceived quality of past services is discussed as a moderator on the relationship between service recovery satisfaction and consumer commitment towards the football club. This is followed by the methodology section, which provides details on the research context and sample as well as the research instrument. The next section on empirical findings analyses sample characteristics, their validity and reliability and tests the posited hypotheses. The paper ends with discussion and conclusion about the results of the survey and states the paper's limitations and offers ideas for further research.

# 1 Theoretical Framework

## 1.1 Theories grounding the study

This study uses the equity theory and the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. When it comes to service delivery, equity stands for consumers' judgment of exchange through a comparison between what they have contributed and what they have received (Olsen & Johnson, 2003). The explanation behind equity theory is that consumer perceptions due to observed efforts towards service recovery determine their behavioural intentions in the future (Hess et al., 2003). The aforementioned authors claim that if an individual perceives the relationship outcomes as being inequitable or unfair, they will become distressed (Hess et al., 2003). Furthermore, according to the commitment-trust theory proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust and commitment are the most important variables that explain the relationship between consumer and service provider (Boateng & Narteh, 2016). According to Bostrom (2014), trust and commitment between participants in the service delivery context are viewed as a very important competitive advantage that brings business to the organization.

The vast majority of studies related to service recovery are based on justice theory (Lopes & da Silva, 2015; Matikiti et al., 2018) and attribution theory (Hewett et al., 2018; Matikiti et al., 2019). This paper uses the aforementioned two theories, equity theory and commitment-trust theory, to be tested in the context of service failure and recovery in terms of the spectator sport industry and also to determine what precedes and what follows service recovery satisfaction in the identified industry. The proposed model includes constructs of relationship theory together with the construct of equity theory, namely perceived equity. Furthermore, the "positive word of mouth" construct was subsequently added to the model.

Recovery expectation is actually a strong consumer belief or assumption about how the service provider – in this case, a football club – should react to address the failure in some segment of its integrated sports service (Awa et al., 2016). Consumers expect the service provider to consider measures that are in line with their expectations in order to ensure service recovery (Weber & Sparks, 2010). Meeting or going beyond consumers' expectations leads to satisfaction (Matikiti et al., 2020). Effective recovery of the service is essential for maintaining satisfaction among consumers (Huang, 2011), as well as for achieving consumer loyalty. Lastner et al. (2016) support previous researchers by claiming that successful service

recovery strategies prevent consumer losses and improve the relationship between consumer and service provider.

Furthermore, the importance of equity theory in marketing literature has been explored and highlighted by many authors, such as Oliver and Swan (1989) and Oliver (1997). When it comes to perceived equity, Tax et al. (1998) claim that perceived equity refers to the degree to which consumers feel treated fairly after experiencing service failure. Olsen and Johnson (2003) also consider that equity stands for consumer judgment which is based on the fairness of an exchange. Equity in the context of service failures is similarly viewed by La and Choi (2019), who explain perceived equity as a self-directed evaluation based on the exchange between losses caused by failed service and gains made by service recovery. Consequently, the recovery satisfaction level is affected by the way in which consumers view and analyse recovery efforts made by the service provider (Jha & Balaji, 2015). Through studying the importance of equity, Hess et al. (2003) point out that consumer perception of how much effort a service provider has invested in the recovery of the service determines their future behavioural intentions and indicates future levels of exchange.

Trust, according to Morgan and Hunt (1994), is defined as consumer confidence in the reliability of a service provider, in this case, sports club. Doney and Cannon (1997) point out that trust is an essential element for a long-term relationship. Wu et al. (2012) point out that trust is a very important prerequisite for relationship quality between the consumer and the service provider. Wu et al. (2012) also stress that trust is an essential element for a long-term relationship, as well as belief in the exchange of partners' (service provider – club) credibility/honesty and goodwill. When related to sports, they stressed that such a belief in trust is in harmony with the spirit of sport, where honesty is valued as the foundation of sporting activities.

Furthermore, according to Funk and James (2001), commitment, as an extremely important marketing construct, is the relationship level between the consumer and the sports club in which an individual's psychological connection to the club has formed and is stable across conditions. Funk and James (2006) also note that commitment is a process that occurs when an individual assigns emotional and symbolic meaning to ideas, thoughts and images associated with the sports club. Furthermore, Morgan and Hunt (1994) claim that commitment is a strong desire of consumers to maintain a relationship with the service provider. According to Gangai and Agrawal (2015), the basic difference between the constructs of commitment and satisfaction is that commitment is the consumer's emotional feeling towards the service provider, while satisfaction is the consumer's feeling towards the service itself.

It should also be noted that many authors emphasize the fact that exchange between consumers and service providers should not be viewed individually but collectively, as the sum of all transactions. Bitner and Hubbert (1994) first confirm and then define it as a cumulative evaluation of all encounters and experiences between consumer and service provider. Furthermore, Hess et al. (2003) claim that the quality of past service experiences is actually a consumer perception of the quality of the relationship with the service provider. High-quality relationships are usually demonstrated by the fact that consumers are satisfied with the experiences of previous transactions and expect positive future interactions with the service provider (Wong & Sohal, 2002).

When talking about the quality of past service experience, spreading positive word of mouth has to be mentioned as well. Chang and Chiu (2016) point out that it is the most convincing type of promotion to potential consumers, which is also completely free. Furthermore, the same authors point out the fact that this phenomenon increases clubs' income and, at the same time, reduces marketing costs. According to Severt et al. (2007), positive speech in the presence of others is 700% more effective than newspaper advertising, 400% more effective than personal sales, and 200% more effective than radio advertising. According to Westbrook (1987), positive speech in the presence of other people is defined as an informal form of communication between consumers through which positive news and positive reviews about a product or, in this case, service spread.

## 1.2 Formulation of hypotheses

One of the main goals of any successful service is to act in line with consumer expectations because otherwise, consumers will feel dissatisfied (Li-Hua, 2012). Consumer expectation of the football club's readiness to undertake necessary actions to solve his problem could influence his service recovery satisfaction. The aforementioned authors also claim that if consumer expectations are met or even exceeded, we can expect their service recovery satisfaction. In line with the aforesaid, Lai and Chou (2015) found a significant correlation between consumer service recovery expectations and their service recovery satisfaction because higher expectations are caused by more severe service failures which often result in more effort expressed by the service provider in order to resolve the bad service experience. Furthermore, perceived equity is emphasized by Cantor and Richard (2019), who believe that regardless of the severity of the failure, there is always a way to provide successful service recovery by performing at a high level of equity. There is an expectation that if the club treats its consumer fairly and with adequate flexibility, even when a failure occurs, that should positively influence their service recovery satisfaction. Alternatively, although the service failure is severe, the football club management's reaction to it can diminish unsatisfied reactions among spectators and positively influence service recovery satisfaction. Furthermore, Rejikumar (2015) claims that there is a significant correlation between perceived service recovery equity and service recovery satisfaction, primarily because equity directly moderates consumers' feeling of justice (La & Choi, 2019). Bearing the aforementioned in mind, the following hypotheses are formulated:

**H1:** *Service recovery expectations positively influence service recovery satisfaction.*

**H2:** *Perceived service recovery equity positively influences service recovery satisfaction.*

Consumers who are satisfied with the club's reaction related to a service failure and offered a satisfactory solution to their problem often have higher chances to be satisfied with overall club services. Furthermore, Jimenez et al. (2016) point out that consumer belief in the integrity and reliability of a service provider – in this case, sports club – is the foundation for developing trust in the club. Those clubs who are ready to react and undertake actions to satisfy their consumers even when a service failure occurs gain trust among them. Moreover, Wu et al. (2012) point out that consumers' trust in sports clubs is a very important prerequisite for a relationship with them. Previous work on service recovery confirms the fact that service recovery satisfaction is a predictor of trust towards service providers (Kim et al., 2009). Similarly, Jeon and Choi (2017) confirm that there is a connection between service recovery satisfaction and consumer trust. Liang et al. (2018) also emphasize the link between service

recovery satisfaction and trust in the service provider. Based on the aforementioned, the following hypotheses are formulated:

**H3:** *Service recovery satisfaction positively influences satisfaction with club services.*

**H4:** *Service recovery satisfaction positively influences consumer trust in the club.*

Shukla et al. (2016) point out that satisfaction is a predictor of commitment to the service provider; Yoshida and James (2010) study consumers' loyalty in a behavioural sense but also their commitment to the club in a psychological sense as a consequence of consumers' satisfaction with the service. According to Anderson et al. (1994), a satisfied consumer tends to connect more with the service provider; hence, commitment is experienced. Furthermore, Van Leeuwen et al. (2002) claim that satisfying consumers in the sports spectator context is equally important as it is in any other industry. Consumers who are pleased with the club's reaction after a service failure and who are overall satisfied with the club's services often express higher levels of commitment towards the club. Bearing the previous in mind, the following hypotheses are formulated:

**H5:** *Service recovery satisfaction significantly influences consumer commitment towards the club.*

**H6:** *Satisfaction with club services significantly influences consumer commitment towards the club.*

Service failures lead to dissatisfaction; furthermore, Cho et al. (2017) point out that a stronger perception of service failure leads to a higher level of negative emotions and, consequently, greater consumer dissatisfaction. Furthermore, Sugandini et al. (2017) point out that there is a connection between the quality of past experience with the service and consumer commitment towards the service provider. In this research, the assumption is that after the experience of a failed service and its recovery, the quality of past experience with the service provider will moderate the relationship between service recovery satisfaction and consumer commitment towards the service provider; in this case, sports club. Bearing in mind the aforementioned, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H7:** *The perceived quality of services experienced in the past moderates the relationship between service recovery satisfaction and consumer commitment towards the club.*

Chang and Chiu (2016) emphasize that the extent to which fans believe in a sports club significantly determines their loyalty towards the club. Wu et al. (2012) also highlight the fact that trust significantly influences the development of consumer psychological commitment to the club, which is similar to Bricci et al. (2016), according to whom trust is a precursor of consumer commitment towards the service provider. Those consumers who believe that the club is willing to protect their interests and who believe that the club cares about them are often incredibly committed to their clubs. Keeping up with the previous, the following hypothesis is formulated:

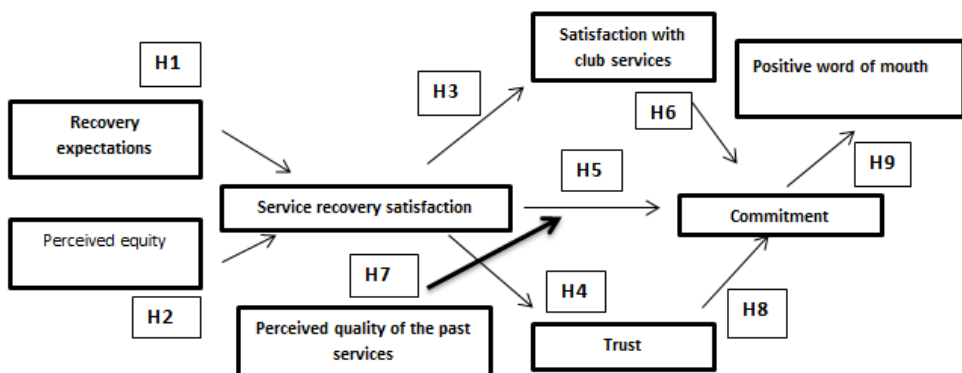
**H8:** *Consumer trust towards the club significantly affects consumer commitment towards the club.*

Fierro et al. (2014) claim that consumers' commitment affects their willingness to spread positive comments about the service provider (sports club) because they often feel that they are emotionally connected with the club and develop a strong sense of belonging to the club. It is also important to emphasize that Purnasari and Yuliando (2015) and Maisam and Mahsa (2016) found a positive connection between commitment and dissemination of positive word of mouth in the presence of others. With all of the above, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H9:** *Consumer commitment towards the club significantly affects spreading positive word of mouth.*

Based on the stated hypotheses, a conceptual framework is proposed and a research model is stated (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 | Proposed research model**



Source: Illustration by authors

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Research context and sample

This study uses a quantitative research model to empirically explore the relationships among variables in the research model (Figure 1). The target group of respondents is individuals who attend live matches of the Croatian football league and who have at least once experienced failed service delivered by the club and can recall such an experience. Since access to the clubs' fan bases is not possible, individuals were examined randomly via the Facebook page "HNL" – a platform that gathers Croatian football clubs fans and has approximately 58,000 members. Only those respondents who could recall some unsuccessful service by the club were included in the research. The main reason for using the Facebook page "HNL" lies in the fact that a large number of fans (approximately 58,000) who follow Croatian football clubs are present and reachable through this page.

Data were collected over a period of a month between October and November 2021 using an online questionnaire via the Limesurvey platform. A total of 775 responses were collected, from which 408 were retained for further analysis due to the fact that the rest of the



questionnaires were completed by respondents who could not recall any service failure related to Croatian football clubs.

The research results are analysed using descriptive statistics for analysing respondents' profiles. The reliability analysis uses Cronbach alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE), as well as maximum shared variance (MSV), maximum reliability (Max(R)h) and inter-correlations among constructs for validity. Confirmatory factor analysis is used to estimate the measurement model. For testing the stated hypotheses, a multiple regression analysis is used (Field, 2018) as well as a moderation method using the "PROCESS" tool by Hayes as proposed by Field (2018). SPSS version 26 and AMOS 28 statistical software is used to process the research results.

## **2.2 Measurement instrument**

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part deals with identification questions, while the second part focuses on the construct measurement proposed by the model (Figure 1). In order to ensure the credibility of the measurement, the questionnaire used statements that were previously established. Service recovery expectations were measured using Jha and Balaji's (2015) scale, perceived equity based on de Matos et al. (2012), trust was based on Liang et al. (2018) and Matikiti et al. (2020), while commitment on Shukla et al. (2016). Service recovery satisfaction, satisfaction with club services, spreading positive word of mouth and perceived quality of past services were borrowed from Matikiti et al. (2020). These items were modified to meet the requirements of this paper and its service failure and recovery context within the spectator sport industry. The constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree". Items for individual constructs and corresponding authors from which the scales were adopted are presented in Table 2.

## **3 Empirical Findings**

### **3.1 Sample characteristics**

The descriptive results shown in Table 1 indicate that there were a total of 775 respondents in the survey. The number of respondents was reduced to 408 due to the key question, "Can you remember any service failure (any service that has not met your expectations) that occurred during your live match attendance?" Only 408 out of the 775 respondents answered "yes", which led them to the second part of the questionnaire. The rest of the respondents were then excluded from further research.

**Table 1 | Sample characteristics**

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	775	
<b>Number of respondents who can recall any service failure</b>	408	
<b>Gender</b>		
M	400	98.00%
F	8	2.00%
<b>Age group</b>		
18-25	163	40.00%
26-35	151	37.00%
36-45	63	15.40%
46-55	23	5.60%
56-65	7	1.70%
>65	1	0.20%
<b>Education level</b>		
Elementary school	0	0.00%
High school	224	54.90%
Bachelor's degree	89	21.80%
Master's degree	82	20.10%
Postgraduate/MBA degree	10	2.50%
PhD degree	3	0.70%

Source: authors

Table 1 shows that the majority of the respondents were male (98%). In terms of age, 40% of the respondents were between 18-25 years old, 37% between 26-35, 15.4% between 36-45, 5.6% between 46-55, 1.70% between 56-65, and only 1 respondent (0.20%) was 66 or older. When it comes to the education level, the vast majority of the respondents have a high school diploma (54.90%), followed by 21.80% of the respondents with a bachelor's degree, 20.10% with a master's degree, 2.5% with a postgraduate/MBA degree, and 0.70% with PhD degree. The respondent structure does not perfectly represent the actual structure of the Croatian football league spectators due to the fact that this survey is conducted using social media (Facebook), which is usually used by younger individuals; this is evident from the fact that 77% of the respondents are 35 years old or younger. Still, according to the survey carried out by Ofcom (2005) on the example of the Premier League, the majority of Premier League fans were between 24-35 years old, which matches this paper's respondent structure.

Table 2 presents items, means, standard deviation and reliabilities for the 408 retained respondents.

**Table 2 | Items, their means, standard deviations and reliabilities**

Service recovery expectations	Mean	SD	Cronbach's $\alpha$
I had high expectations that the club would do whatever it can to solve my problem.	3.534	1.311	0.983
I expected a quick and efficient reaction by the club when it comes to my problem.	3.532	1.379	
I expected from the club to implement right policy when it comes to solving my problem.	3.593	1.378	
I believed that the club would accept my complaint and do everything it can in order to correct the problem that I have encountered.	3.473	1.423	
Perceived equity			
I think that the club has treated me fairly throughout the service recovery process.	2.752	1.368	0.901
I think that the final outcome of the service recovery is fair.	2.762	1.377	
The club has shown adequate flexibility in solving my problem.	2.662	1.380	
Service recovery satisfaction			
I am satisfied with the way the club reacted in order to solve my problem.	2.632	1.382	0.967
I am pleased with how the club has solved my problem.	2.625	1.421	
I am satisfied with the treatment by the club's employees who were involved in my problem solving.	2.838	1.414	
I am satisfied with the procedures and efforts invested in solving my problem.	2.642	1.352	
In my opinion, the club offered me a satisfactory solution to my problem.	2.642	1.345	
I am satisfied with the overall outcome of the service recovery process.	2.694	1.394	
Satisfaction with club services			
Overall, I am satisfied with the services provided by the club.	2.833	1.342	0.924
I am pleased with the overall experience with the club.	3.069	1.315	
I am satisfied with the club as a service provider.	2.875	1.291	
Trust			
I believe that the club is doing everything to protect my interests.	2.701	1.361	0.943
I believe that the club cares about its fans.	2.752	1.404	
I believe that the club can be trusted.	2.833	1.385	
I believe in the club and I can count on them always treating their fans correctly.	2.836	1.400	
Commitment			
I feel emotional commitment towards the club.	4.610	0.843	0.777
The club means a lot to me as an individual.	4.640	0.735	
I feel a strong sense of belonging to the club.	4.566	0.833	
The club deserves my loyalty.	4.088	1.180	
Positive word of mouth			
I spread positive comments about the club.	4.211	1.028	0.862
When I talk to friends and relatives about the club, my comments are always positive.	3.963	1.064	
I like to talk positively about the club.	4.355	0.950	
Perceived quality of past services			
The quality of services provided by the club has always been above average.	4.211	1.028	0.922
The quality of services provided by the club has always been excellent.	3.963	1.064	

Source: authors

Table 2 shows the constructs used in this paper with average grades per item. According to Table 2, the construct with the lowest average grade is service recovery satisfaction with  $\bar{x} = 2.679$ , while the construct with the highest average grade is commitment with  $\bar{x} = 4.476$ . All the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients presented in Table 2 are above 0.7, which indicates acceptable values according to Nunnally (1978).

Furthermore, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used. The analysis of goodness-of-fit statistics shows the following:  $\chi^2 = 893,877$ ,  $df = 349$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.00$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.561$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.0679$ ,  $GFI = 0.872$ ,  $NFI = 0.930$ ,  $CFI = 0.956$ . According to Wheaton et al. (1977), the value of  $\chi^2/df$  should be  $\leq 5$  for the model to be considered fit. According to Cangur and Ercan (2015), RMSEA should be less than 0.1, while according to Gaskin (2016), GFI should be  $\geq 0.9$ , NFI should be  $> 0.9$  and CFI should be  $\geq 0.95$ . All the parameters except GFI have acceptable values, indicating that the model fits the data well.

Table 3 presents factor loading, composite reliability and average variance extracted, as well as maximum shared variance and maximum reliability.

**Table 3 | Items, their factor loadings, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared variance (MSV) and maximum reliability (MaxR(H))**

Service recovery expectations	Factor loading	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)
SRE1	0.83	0.939	0.794	0.207	0.948
SRE2	0.94				
SRE3	0.91				
SRE4	0.87				
Perceived equity					
PE1	0.84	0.900	0.751	0.916	0.908
PE2	0.84				
PE3	0.91				
Service recovery satisfaction					
SRS1	0.92	0.967	0.830	0.916	0.968
SRS2	0.93				
SRS3	0.87				
SRS4	0.92				
SRS5	0.92				
SRS6	0.91				
Satisfaction with club services					
SCS1	0.92	0.922	0.798	0.780	0.928
SCS2	0.85				
SCS3	0.90				
Trust					
TR1	0.87	0.945	0.810	0.785	0.946
TR2	0.92				
TR3	0.91				
TR4					
Commitment					
CMT1	0.71	0.823	0.544	0.331	0.855
CMT2	0.82				
CMT3	0.84				
CMT4	0.54				
Spreading positive word of mouth					
PWM1	0.88	0.864	0.681	0.331	0.874
PWM2	0.84				
PWM3	0.76				
Perceived quality of past services					
PQSEP1	0.90	0.923	0.857	0.785	0.932
PQSEP2	0.95				

Note: PE = perceived equity, PQSEP = perceived quality of past services, PWM = positive word of mouth, CMT = commitment, TR = trust, SCS = satisfaction with club services, SRS = service recovery satisfaction, SRE = service recovery expectations.

Source: authors

According to Table 3, composite reliability (CR) was used to further test the reliability of the constructs. In order to meet the required reliability of the constructs, all values have to be above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2011), which is achieved. Discriminant validity is also tested and represented in Table 3, which shows that the average variance extracted (AVE) for all the constructs, is well above the required threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2011). There are some concerns about poor validity indicated for two of the constructs (perceived equity and service recovery satisfaction), the values of which related to maximum shared variance (MSV) are higher than AVE, which should not be the case (Almén, 2018). The values related to maximum reliability MaxR(H) are all above the required 0.8 (Hancock & Mueller, 2001). Hence, we should be careful regarding the discriminant validity of these two constructs.

Furthermore, to additionally test the validity inter-correlation, results for the constructs of this research are shown in Table 4 below.

**Table 4 | Inter-correlation of constructs and AVE square root**

Constructs	PE	PQSEP	PWM	CMT	TR	SCS	SRS	SRE
PE	<b>0.867</b>							
PQSEP	0.737	<b>0.926</b>						
PWM	0.363	0.532	<b>0.825</b>					
CMT	0.143	0.169	0.575	<b>0.738</b>				
TR	0.781	0.886	0.470	0.158	<b>0.900</b>			
SCS	0.850	0.859	0.418	0.127	0.863	<b>0.893</b>		
SRS	0.957	0.756	0.366	0.134	0.790	0.883	<b>0.911</b>	
SRE	0.455	0.365	0.323	0.206	0.381	0.402	0.431	<b>0.891</b>

Note: PE = perceived equity, PQSEP = perceived quality of past services, PWM = positive word of mouth, CMT = commitment, TR = trust, SCS = satisfaction with club services, SRS = service recovery satisfaction, SRE = service recovery expectations.

The diagonally presented numbers in boldface are the square roots of AVE.

Source: authors

In order for discriminant validity to be satisfactory, the diagonal values presented in Table 4 should be higher than the correlation of a specific construct with any other (Hair et al., 2013). In this case, there is some validity concern related to the constructs of service recovery satisfaction and perceived equity due to the fact that the items for both constructs were quite similarly experienced by the respondents. In order to further estimate the validity of the measures, some ideas are offered in the section on further research.

### 3.2 Research results

The results of the multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 5. According to the following table, hypotheses H2, H3, H4 and H9 are supported, while H1, H5, H6 and H8 are rejected.

**Table 5 | Results of multiple regression analysis**

Independent variable	Dependent variable	$\beta$	t-value
<b>Perceived equity</b>	Consumer satisfaction with service recovery	0.87	34.93*** ( $p < 0.001$ )
<b>Service recovery expectations</b>	Consumer satisfaction with service recovery	0.04	1.58 n.s.
Model 1: $R^2 = 0.79$ ( $p < 0.001$ )			
<b>Consumer satisfaction with service recovery</b>	Satisfaction with club services	0.83	29.86*** ( $p < 0.001$ )
Model 2: $R^2 = 0.69$ ( $p < 0.001$ )			
<b>Consumer satisfaction with service recovery</b>	Consumers trust towards the club	0.77	24.12*** ( $p < 0.001$ )
Model 3: $R^2 = 0.59$ ( $p < 0.001$ )			
<b>Consumer satisfaction with service recovery</b>	Consumer commitment towards the club	0.04	0.45 n.s.
<b>Satisfaction with club services</b>	Consumer commitment towards the club	0.06	0.61 n.s.
<b>Trust</b>	Consumer commitment towards the club	0.15	1.69 n.s.
Model 4: $R^2 = 0.05$ (n.s.)			
<b>Commitment</b>	Spreading positive word of mouth	0.57	14.01*** ( $p < 0.001$ )
Model 5: $R^2 = 0.33$ ( $p < 0.001$ )			

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Source: authors

In the first multiple regression model shown in Table 5, perceived service recovery equity and service recovery expectations are used as predictor variables, while consumer satisfaction with service recovery is used as an outcome variable. The analysed predictor set is a statistically significant predictor of the criterion variable (F-value = 772.295,  $p < 0.001$ ); the predictor set (2 predictors) interprets 79% variance of the criterion variable. The analysed predictor set is determined by one statistically meaningful predictor, namely perceived service recovery equity ( $\beta = 0.87$ ), and by service recovery expectations, which do not statistically significantly affect consumer satisfaction with service recovery. Table 5 indicates that perceived equity significantly influences consumer satisfaction with service recovery; therefore, H2 is supported. On the contrary, recovery expectations do not have a statistically significant influence on service recovery satisfaction, which means that H1 is not supported.

According to Table 5, consumer satisfaction with service recovery showed to be a statistically significant predictor of the criterion variable (F-value 891.474,  $p < 0.001$ ); it interprets 69% variance of the criterion variable. Therefore, it can be concluded that service recovery satisfaction has a statistically significant influence on satisfaction with club services ( $\beta = 0.83$ ). These results support H3.

Consumer satisfaction with service recovery is also shown to be a statistically significant predictor of the criterion variable (F-value 581.723,  $p < 0.001$ ); it interprets 59% variance of the criterion variable. This shows a statistically significant influence of service recovery satisfaction on consumers' trust in sports clubs ( $\beta = 0.77$ ); therefore, we can accept H4.

Consumer satisfaction with service recovery, satisfaction with club services, and consumer trust were used as predictor variables, while consumer commitment towards the club was

used as an outcome variable in Model 4. The analysed predictor set is a statistically insignificant predictor of the criterion variable (F-value = 7.704,  $p < 0.001$ ). According to these results, neither of the studied predictors, such as consumer satisfaction with service recovery, satisfaction with club services, and trust towards the club do not have a statistically significant influence on consumers' commitment towards the club. Therefore, H5, H6, and H8 are rejected.

According to Table 5, consumer commitment towards the club is shown to be a statistically significant predictor of the criterion variable (F-ratio 196.318,  $p < 0.001$ ); it interprets 33% variance of the criterion variable. Since consumer commitment towards the club significantly influences spreading positive word of mouth related to the club ( $\beta = 0.57$ ), we can accept H9.

Table 6 shows the relationship between consumers' satisfaction with service recovery used as a predictor and consumer commitment towards the club used as an outcome variable with perceived quality of past services as a moderator. The results show that the perceived quality of past services does not have a statistically significant moderating effect on the relationship between consumer satisfaction with service recovery and consumers' commitment towards the club (F-ratio 9.597,  $p < 0.001$ ); this relationship interprets only 7% variance of the criterion variable. Results are shown in Table 6 below.

**Table 6 | Moderating effect of perceived quality of past services on the relationship between consumer satisfaction with service recovery as a predictor and consumers' commitment towards the club as an outcome**

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t - ratio</i>
<b>Constant</b>	4.45 (4.37, 4.53)	0.043	104.82***
<b>Consumer satisfaction with service recovery</b>	0.02 (-0.06, 0.09)	0.040	0.393
<b>Perceived quality of past services</b>	0.13 (0.05, 0.21)	0.040	3.276**
<b>Consumer satisfaction with service recovery X Perceived quality of past services</b>	0.02 (-0.02, 0.07)	0.023	0.979
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>		0.07	
<b>F - ratio</b>		9.597***	

N=408, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

Source: authors

According to Table 6, it can be inferred that the perceived quality of services experienced in the past does not moderate the relationship between consumer satisfaction with service recovery and consumer commitment, which leads to the conclusion that H7 is rejected.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

The results show that consumers' perceived equity significantly influences service recovery satisfaction in the spectator sport industry. Furthermore, it is also revealed that service recovery expectation does not have a statistically significant influence on service recovery satisfaction. This leads to the conclusion that consumers in the spectator sport industry are not keen to develop a set of expectations about what the sports club should do after a service failure; instead, they leave service recovery up to the club and expect equity. These results support the equity theory, which states that consumer perception of the fairness of an exchange determines their satisfaction with recovery. They are in line with Cantor and



Richard (2019), Jha and Balaji (2015) and Rejikumar (2015), who claim that when a service provider devotes a significant level of equity to the service recovery process, it will end up with a satisfied consumer.

The results of this study also indicate that consumers' service recovery satisfaction influences their satisfaction with club services, which is in line with previous research, such as Cheung and To (2016). It is also in line with their trust in the club, which has been proposed by Jeon and Choi (2017) and Kim et al. (2009). This is important because it contributes to maintaining of a good relationship (Matikiti et al., 2020) between sports clubs and their consumers.

On the other hand, the results show that neither service recovery satisfaction, satisfaction with club services, nor trust are factors that significantly influence commitment when it comes to the spectator sport industry. This could be due to the fact that consumers in the spectator sport industry have a strong and intensive emotional commitment to the club (Samra & Wos, 2014). However, they also have a strong and intense psychological commitment (Funk & James, 2001) regardless of services provided by the club or their current trust in the sports club management.

Additionally, commitment to a football club influences the spreading of positive word of mouth related to the club, which is in line with previous findings of Purnasari and Yulianto (2015) and Maisam and Mahsa (2016). This leads to the conclusion that committed consumers act as a free and most convenient (Chang & Chiu, 2016) marketing communication tool by spreading positive information about the sports club of their interest to their contacts, such as friends, relatives or family.

Lastly, we cannot prove the moderating role of quality of past service performance on the relationship between consumers' recovery satisfaction and their commitment to the club. The reason for this could be found in the fact that when it comes to the spectator sport industry and the relationship between football clubs and their consumers, their commitment to the club is completely independent of their satisfaction with the club as a service provider due to their irrational loyalty towards the club (Samra & Wos, 2014; Redden & Steiner, 2000). This goes beyond the scope of this paper but could be included in further research.

## 4.1 Theoretical contribution

The aim of this paper was to determine antecedents of consumer recovery satisfaction and its outcome in the spectator sport industry, which was indeed accomplished. This paper contributes to the theory of the spectator sport industry by shedding light on the significance of the relationship between perceived equity, service recovery satisfaction and satisfaction with club services. Hence, the findings of this study support equity theory about the fairness of transactions by providing evidence about the positive influence of perceived service recovery equity on service recovery satisfaction. This study also proves that consumer satisfaction with service recovery positively influences satisfaction with club services as well as trust when it comes to a football club's management. It also contributes to the literature by showing that consumers' commitment towards their favourite football club is independent of factors such as service recovery satisfaction, satisfaction with club services and even trust towards the sports club management. This is contrary to some industries, e.g., airline services (Matikiti et al., 2020), where there is a significant influence of the mentioned variables on commitment.

This paper also emphasizes that the quality of past service performance does not influence the relationship between satisfaction and commitment when it comes to the spectator sport industry. Furthermore, this research contributes to the service failure and recovery literature related to the spectator sport industry, which was previously quite neglected.

## 4.2 Managerial implications

Our research also offers several managerial implications. Football club managers should be willing and ready to satisfy justice when service failure occurs. Therefore, football clubs should invest resources (time and money) in finding the best way of delivering perceived equity to their consumers when a failure occurs.

It could be done by exploring consumer preferences through interaction with fan clubs, conversations with sport match subscribers, or even through exploring their preferences about personalized service recovery by asking individual consumers who have experienced a service failure. This could efficiently be done by following fan forums, which are a great source of information about how the fans feel about important club issues. Also, football club managers can react based on these insights: offer compensation for service failures, improving service for the next football match such as having enough drinks, cleaning toilets or employing additional people to check entrance tickets faster. Another possibility is to offer branded rewards for applicable suggestions regarding service improvements. Football club managers could also use short questionnaires or suggestion boxes via their official website, social media pages or fan groups' social media. This could lead to consumers' higher perceived equity and enhance their overall satisfaction with the football club. None of these recommendations have been recognized or used in Croatian football so far. Football clubs could point out positive testimonials of their consumers who are satisfied with the football club services via their official websites or social media profiles in order to benefit from the positive word of mouth. Unrelated to the results of this research, consumers on the sports market are not exclusively committed fans, so the results of this research should be taken with caution. There are real chances that for those consumers who are not highly identified with the club, such as the respondents in this paper, satisfaction with service recovery, satisfaction with the club's services and, in particular, trust could ultimately significantly influence their commitment towards the club. This means that football club managers should invest efforts in developing trust among consumers through transparent management of the club (transparent finances, two-way communication with fans), expressing knowledge and enhancing respect towards the club's history.

## 4.3 Limitations and Further Research

The main limitation of this paper lies in the fact that answers were collected from respondents on a Facebook page which attracts individuals who are highly related to their favourite football clubs and who are biased when it comes to expressing commitment towards the club of their interest. Furthermore, it has to be mentioned that the Facebook sample does not fully represent the actual structure of football spectators in the Republic of Croatia, especially due to the fact that the majority of the respondents in this survey are 35 years old and younger. Facebook as a social media is primarily used by younger individuals, and older ones are not so well represented, which could also be the source of bias in this paper because there is possibly some difference between service expectations of younger and older individuals, which could, in the end, affect service recovery satisfaction due to the different expectations

and different perceived equity. Additionally, the fact that the questionnaire was not answered at the exact time and in the exact place where the failure occurred could also be a potential source of bias. Another limitation of this paper is related to the fact that the survey was conducted at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Croatian authorities had restricted mass gatherings, including football matches. This means that the football clubs could only sell 50% of their stadium capacity, and they had to require all spectators to be either vaccinated or tested within the last 48 hours. Additionally, all spectators had to wear face masks and keep their distance. All those facts could potentially negatively influence spectators' experience at the stadium and affect the results of this survey. Also, as items were adopted from another industry to the spectator sport of football, it could be that respondents expressed a lack of difference between service recovery satisfaction and perceived equity items, resulting in low discriminant validity.

Hence, further research could solve this by testing different scales related to the same constructs in the spectator sport context and exploring whether differences exist. Alternatively, additional interviews could be used among individuals attending football matches to identify whether they distinguish between these constructs, as maybe they are specific to spectator sports or respondents' commitment or engagement with the football club influenced their answers. Nevertheless, this study provides insights into the service failure management process in the spectator sport industry. Future studies may try to reach less committed individuals who occasionally consume football clubs' services to explore whether these conclusions can be replicated to any consumer in terms of the spectator sport industry (regardless of their level of commitment, identification or loyalty towards the club). Additionally, future studies should be conducted live at the stadium after the match for better access to the actual structure of the spectators who attend live football matches and to have a more immersed experience of possible service failures at a football match.

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