Service Quality and Behavioral Outcomes in Ski Tourism: A SERVQUAL-Based Study of Jilin Province Ski Resorts

Huang Chenhui[1] and Jiang Fugao[2*]

[1,2] Faculty of International College, Krirk University, Thailand
[1] E-mail: 605774421@qq.com, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3313-4395
[2*] Email: seawindsd@163.com, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3935-4963

Abstract

Background and Aim: In China's rapidly growing winter tourism sector, understanding how service quality influences skier behavior is critical to enhancing competitiveness and visitor satisfaction. This study aims to explore the relationship between service quality, behavioral motivation, and customer satisfaction among mass-market skiers in Jilin Province. It focuses on how emotional and interpersonal service factors shape skiers' post-visit evaluations and loyalty intentions.

Materials and Methods: A structured SERVQUAL-based questionnaire was administered to 480 skiers across three major ski resorts. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) and bootstrapped mediation analysis with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals to test both direct and indirect effects.

Results: The findings showed that responsiveness ($\beta = 0.197$, $p < 0.001$) and reliability ($\beta = 0.158$, $p < 0.001$) were the strongest predictors of both behavioral motivation and satisfaction. Behavioral motivation partially mediated the relationship between service quality and satisfaction, with a significant indirect effect (B = 0.307, 95% CI [0.221, 0.398]). The integrated model demonstrated good fit and explained substantial variance in skier satisfaction.

Conclusion: This study confirms the importance of service experience in shaping skier perceptions and behaviors. Resorts should prioritize staff responsiveness and consistent service delivery while designing emotionally engaging, user-centered service strategies. The results provide theoretical support for applying SERVQUAL in experience-rich, non-Western tourism contexts and offer actionable insights for improving customer retention in China's ski industry.

Keywords: SERVQUAL; Ski Tourism; Winter Sports Service Quality; Motivational Mediation; Tourist Satisfaction; Jilin Province; Consumer Behavior

Introduction

Ski tourism in China has experienced rapid growth in the wake of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, as national campaigns aim to engage 300 million citizens in snow and ice sports. Jilin Province, located in Northeast China's snow belt, has emerged as a leading winter tourism destination due to its favorable climate and increasingly sophisticated resort infrastructure. However, despite rapid infrastructure expansion—Jilin Province alone added over 20 new ski venues between 2018 and 2023—many resorts have faced criticism for inconsistent service quality, especially in terms of staff training, responsiveness, and emotional engagement. Online reviews and tourist feedback platforms (e.g., Mafengwo, Ctrip) frequently cite long wait times, inattentive service, and lack of multilingual support as key complaints. This service gap presents a major barrier to fostering skier satisfaction and loyalty, particularly among novice tourists and family-oriented groups.

Thus, there is a pressing need to understand how service quality—not just physical facilities—shapes behavioral responses and emotional evaluations. This gap highlights the importance of systematically assessing service delivery using established models like SERVQUAL and integrating behavioral theories to explore satisfaction formation.

While considerable investment has focused on infrastructure, relatively little attention has been paid to how perceived service quality shapes skiers' emotional engagement and behavioral responses. Much of the existing literature emphasizes policy, safety, and logistics, but overlooks the psychological and experiential dimensions of tourism. In emotionally immersive leisure activities such as skiing—where enjoyment, trust, and comfort are essential—service quality plays a pivotal role beyond functional delivery. As Alexandris et al. (2006) argue, service quality significantly influences customer loyalty in high-contact

recreational settings like ski resorts, where emotional and relational elements can outweigh technical performance.

To address these gaps, this study adopts the SERVQUAL model, which evaluates service quality across five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Despite its wide application in tourism research, SERVQUAL has seen limited empirical use in the context of Chinese winter sports. This study further integrates behavioral motivation as a mediating variable to explore how service perceptions translate into skier satisfaction. By applying this model to mass-market ski resorts in Jilin Province, the study aims to offer both theoretical insight and practical guidance for improving service design in China's evolving winter tourism sector.

Objectives

1. To evaluate the perceived service quality of ski resorts in Jilin Province using the SERVQUAL model.

2. To assess the direct effects of service quality dimensions on skier behavioral motivation and satisfaction.

3. To examine the mediating role of behavioral motivation in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Literature review

1. Conceptualizing Service Quality in the Context of Ski Tourism

Foundational models of service quality emphasize the dual importance of physical infrastructure and interpersonal interaction, both of which are critical in the context of ski tourism. Among these models, SERVQUAL is one of the most widely adopted frameworks, measuring service quality across five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Originally developed by Parasuraman and refined by subsequent scholars, SERVQUAL has been applied extensively in tourism, hospitality, and sports service settings (Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Meligdis, 2006; Chen & Chen, 2010). However, some researchers have critiqued its applicability across cultural and contextual boundaries. For instance, Baker and Crompton (2000) argue that SERVQUAL's fixed dimensional structure may fail to fully reflect emotional and symbolic expectations in non-Western tourism environments. These limitations suggest the need to adapt and recontextualize SERVQUAL in China's winter tourism sector, particularly in regions like Jilin Province, where service encounters are shaped by emerging consumer norms and seasonal dynamics. As Bitner (1990) points out, while tangible elements such as facilities and equipment are important in shaping first impressions, dimensions like responsiveness and assurance often dominate customer evaluations in high-involvement tourism settings such as ski resorts.

2. Behavioral Motivation in Sport and Leisure Tourism

Behavioral motivation serves as a critical psychological mechanism linking service encounters to downstream behaviors such as revisit intention, word-of-mouth, and loyalty. Dann's (1981) Push–Pull Theory provides a foundational distinction: "push" factors refer to intrinsic motivations like escape or relaxation, while "pull" factors reflect destination-specific attributes such as scenery, service, or novelty. To better align with decision-making models, recent research integrates this theory with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Blackwell et, 2001) and Expectation–Confirmation Theory (Chen & Tsai, 2007), both of which highlight the interplay between cognitive appraisals and affective responses in shaping behavioral intention. In the context of ski tourism—particularly among mass-market participants—feeling safe, welcomed, and emotionally supported can be more influential than rational evaluations alone. Previous studies (Dann, 1981) show that emotional signals, especially responsiveness and empathy, activate motivation more strongly than utilitarian features. Thus, behavioral motivation not only reflects post-service appraisal but also mediates how service quality translates into affective evaluations and loyalty behavior.

3. Customer Satisfaction in Tourism and Recreation Services

Customer satisfaction is broadly defined as the degree to which a service experience meets or exceeds prior expectations (Hair et al, 2010). In tourism contexts, satisfaction involves both cognitive evaluations—such as the match between expectations and outcomes—and affective dimensions, including emotional fulfillment and comfort. While much of the literature (e.g., Han & Ryu, 2009) identifies service encounters as key drivers of satisfaction, few studies distinguish the emotional specificity of contexts like ski resorts, where many visitors are first-timers, family travelers, or risk-averse individuals. In such settings, interpersonal variables such as courtesy, empathy, and real-time responsiveness often outweigh physical or technical performance (Kim & Trail, 2010). However, satisfaction is still often measured through simplified post-visit ratings, overlooking its dynamic and emotionally contingent nature. In China's evolving winter sports market, there are risks of underestimating the symbolic and affective elements that shape long-term customer attachment and brand trust.

4. Integrated Framework: Linking Service Quality, Motivation, and Satisfaction

An increasing number of researchers have proposed integrated models that link service quality to behavioral intention and satisfaction (Chen & Tsai, 2007). These studies consistently reveal that behavioral motivation serves as a partial mediator in this relationship. This indicates that service quality alone may be insufficient to generate high satisfaction unless it also activates internal psychological engagement. In ski tourism, where interactions are emotionally intense and physically immersive, this triadic relationship becomes particularly important. However, empirical studies on this mediation mechanism remain rare in China's winter tourism industry. The current study addresses three core gaps in the literature: (1) limited application and contextual adaptation of the SERVQUAL model in China's ski tourism sector, (2) insufficient integration of motivational theory into service quality frameworks, and (3) the tendency to treat satisfaction as a static endpoint rather than a dynamic emotional process. By positioning behavioral motivation as a mediating variable, this study offers a more holistic model that reflects the emotional depth and complexity of skier experience, contributing to both theoretical development and practical strategies in service quality management.

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes an integrated conceptual framework to explain how perceived service quality influences customer satisfaction in the ski tourism context. Drawing from the SERVQUAL model and motivation theory, the framework posits that service quality—particularly responsiveness and reliability—directly affects behavioral motivation, which in turn shapes overall customer satisfaction. Behavioral motivation acts as a mediating variable, translating service experiences into psychological engagement and post-visit evaluations. Additionally, a direct pathway from service quality to satisfaction is included to account for immediate perceptual effects. This dual-path structure provides a more nuanced understanding of how service delivery activates both emotional and cognitive mechanisms in skier decision-making and supports targeted improvements in resort management.
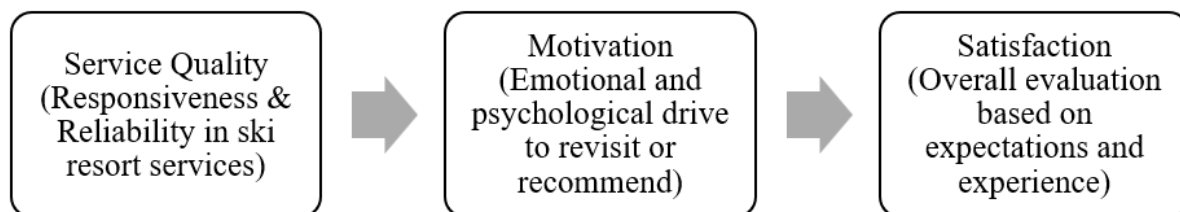
Figure 1 Research Framework
Note: Constructed by the researcher

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among perceived service quality, behavioral motivation, and customer satisfaction in the context of ski tourism in Jilin Province, China.

1. Sampling and Data Collection

A total of 480 valid responses were collected from mass-market skiers at three major ski resorts—Wanda Changbai Mountain Resort, Vanke Songhua Lake Resort, and Beidahu Ski Resort—during the 2023–2024 ski season. A purposive sampling strategy was used to target recreational skiers actively engaged in on-site services. The response rate reached 96%.

2. Survey Instrument

The questionnaire was developed based on the SERVQUAL model and incorporated validated multi-item scales to measure the five service quality dimensions, behavioral motivation, and skier satisfaction. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The SERVQUAL dimensions were operationalized as follows (adapted from Chen & Tsai, 2007):

Tangibility: Physical facilities, cleanliness, and signage

Reliability: Consistency and accuracy of service delivery

Responsiveness: Timeliness and helpfulness of staff

Assurance: Professionalism, safety, and trust

Empathy: Personalized attention and understanding of individual needs

Behavioral motivation was conceptualized as the skier's intention to revisit, recommend, or remain engaged with the resort, based on leisure tourism literature (e.g., Dann, 1981). Customer satisfaction was defined as the emotional and cognitive evaluation of the ski experience, consistent with expectation-disconfirmation theory and affective service models.

3. Reliability Testing

All constructs demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.85 for each dimension, confirming the reliability and coherence of the measurement instruments.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

To test the hypothesized relationships, especially the mediating role of behavioral motivation, the study employed bootstrapped path analysis with 5,000 resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. This technique provides robust estimates of indirect effects and is appropriate for medium-to-large sample sizes. The total sample size met the recommended threshold for multivariate analysis and mediation modeling, as prior methodological studies suggest that a minimum of 200 respondents is adequate for structural equation modeling involving latent constructs.

5. Methodological Summary.

A summary of key methodological components is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary Table of Research Methodology.

Research Method Component	Description
Research Design	Quantitative, cross-sectional survey
Sampling Method	Purposive sampling of mass skiers at 3 Jilin ski resorts
Sample Size	480 valid responses (response rate: 96%)
Survey Tool	Structured SERVQUAL-based questionnaire (5-point Likert scale)
Key Constructs Measured	Service Quality (22 items), Behavioral Motivation (6 items), Satisfaction (4 items)
Reliability Testing	Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.85$ for all constructs

Results

1. To evaluate the perceived service quality of ski resorts in Jilin Province using the SERVQUAL model.

To assess the perceived service quality of ski resorts in Jilin Province, this study employed the SERVQUAL model, encompassing five core dimensions: Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. Based on survey responses from 480 mass skiers, each dimension was rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The findings revealed that all five dimensions received mean scores above the neutral midpoint of 3.00, indicating a generally positive service perception among skiers across the sampled resorts.

Among the dimensions, Tangibility (M = 4.01, SD = 0.58) and Responsiveness (M = 3.94, SD = 0.60) emerged as the most highly rated attributes. The strong performance of tangibility suggests that skiers highly valued the physical and visible aspects of the resort environment, including modern equipment, clear signage, architectural aesthetics, and facility cleanliness. This result aligns with earlier research emphasizing that in visually immersive environments like ski resorts, physical infrastructure plays a foundational role in shaping first impressions and perceived professionalism (Chen & Chen, 2010).

However, it was responsiveness that proved most psychologically significant. Defined as the ability of service personnel to provide timely, attentive, and helpful assistance, responsiveness consistently ranked among the highest-rated dimensions and showed the strongest correlations with behavioral outcomes in later analyses. These results corroborate prior findings in winter tourism (Alexandris et al., 2006) and service encounter literature, which highlight responsiveness as a core determinant of customer satisfaction in high-involvement, emotionally charged service settings.

More importantly, responsiveness in this context served not only as a technical metric of efficiency, but also as a relational signal. It communicated emotional presence, trustworthiness, and care, especially to novice or risk-sensitive skiers unfamiliar with skiing protocols. Timely support during equipment rentals, trail navigation, or weather-related uncertainties likely contributed to skiers' psychological safety and comfort, which in turn fostered favorable service evaluations.

Reliability (M = 3.87, SD = 0.63) and Assurance (M = 3.90, SD = 0.62) also received strong ratings. These dimensions reflect the consistency, dependability, and perceived competence of service delivery. In risk-oriented recreational activities such as skiing, where expectations around safety, punctuality, and preparedness are high, these service dimensions are critical to building operational trust. Skiers' favorable evaluations of reliability and assurance suggest that resorts generally delivered on their service promises, contributing to a sense of confidence and control in the skiing environment. This is particularly important given that skiing often involves navigating unfamiliar terrain, managing physical risk, and relying on support systems (Alexandris et al., 2006).

By contrast, Empathy (M = 3.86, SD = 0.61) received the lowest mean score among the five dimensions, though still above the neutral threshold. Empathy, as conceptualized in SERVQUAL, involves personalized attention, staff sensitivity to individual needs, and emotional attunement to customer concerns. The relatively lower score suggests a shortfall in personalized service delivery, especially for subgroups such as first-time skiers, family groups, or elderly visitors who may require differentiated guidance or reassurance. This finding echoes the recommendations of (Alexandris et al., 2006), who argued that segmentation-based service design—tailored by skier profile and experience level—is essential for elevating empathy perceptions and overall service resonance.

To ensure statistical robustness, the study also tested the normality and reliability of the SERVQUAL measures. Descriptive analysis confirmed acceptable distribution characteristics, with skewness ranging from –0.46 to –0.21 and kurtosis from –0.67 to –0.32. Furthermore, Cronbach's α coefficients exceeded 0.84 for all five SERVQUAL dimensions, indicating strong internal consistency and validating the reliability of the measurement instrument in the context of Chinese ski tourism.

Kim and Trail (2010). These findings establish a solid empirical foundation for subsequent inferential analysis. The dominance of responsiveness and reliability in skiers' service evaluations suggests that interpersonal and procedural elements of service delivery are more influential than infrastructure alone in shaping tourist perceptions. In ski tourism—where risk, affect, and immediacy are highly salient—service quality is internalized not only through what is delivered, but through how it is delivered and how it makes the skier feel.

Huang and Hsu (2009). As the next step, this study investigates whether these perceived quality dimensions also exert predictive power over skiers' behavioral motivation and overall satisfaction, and whether behavioral motivation functions as a psychological bridge linking perception and affective evaluation.

2. To investigate the direct effects of service quality on the behavioral motivation and satisfaction of mass skiers.

To investigate the direct effects of perceived service quality on behavioral motivation and satisfaction among mass skiers, the study employed both correlation analysis and multiple regression modeling, focusing on the five SERVQUAL dimensions: Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. These dimensions were treated as independent variables, while behavioral motivation and customer satisfaction were considered the dependent outcome variables of interest.

The Pearson correlation matrix indicated statistically significant and moderately strong positive relationships between all five dimensions of service quality and both behavioral motivation ($r = 0.517$–0.583) and satisfaction ($r = 0.567$–0.618). Notably, Responsiveness displayed the highest correlation with both outcome variables, suggesting that tourists' perceptions of how quickly, attentively, and helpfully staff responded to their needs played a dominant role in shaping their emotional and cognitive assessments of the skiing experience. This finding resonates with prior research in hospitality and sport tourism (Cronin et al., 2000), which highlights responsiveness as a core element of service engagement and a key driver of loyalty intentions.

Importantly, these results suggest that responsiveness is not simply an operational factor, but also a relational and psychological signal. In the emotionally charged and risk-sensitive environment of ski tourism, especially for novice or mass-market participants, responsiveness communicates care, competence, and attentiveness—qualities that reduce uncertainty and enhance perceived psychological safety.

To determine the unique contribution of each service quality dimension, multiple regression analyses were conducted separately for behavioral motivation and satisfaction. In the behavioral motivation model, Responsiveness again emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.189$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Reliability ($\beta = 0.144$, $p < 0.01$) and Assurance ($\beta = 0.138$, $p < 0.05$). These findings suggest that behavioral motivation—defined as the skier's intention to revisit, recommend, or emotionally re-engage with the resort—is not solely triggered by structural features or promotional strategies, but by the perceived credibility, consistency, and attentiveness of service encounters.

In the satisfaction model, Responsiveness maintained its leading influence ($\beta = 0.197$, $p < 0.001$), while Reliability also showed a significant impact ($\beta = 0.158$, $p < 0.001$). These dimensions reflect the ability of the ski resort to both fulfill its service promises and adapt effectively to customer needs, critical attributes in dynamic, high-expectation recreational settings like skiing. While Tangibility (e.g., cleanliness, signage, equipment) and Empathy (e.g., personalized service) were statistically significant, their beta coefficients were lower, indicating that they served more as supportive or reinforcing variables, rather than as primary drivers of satisfaction.

This tiered result structure suggests a hierarchy of service impact, in which interpersonal and process-related competencies—such as promptness, professionalism, and consistency—form the core drivers of motivational and satisfaction outcomes. In contrast, physical infrastructure and symbolic expressions of care, though important, appear to play a moderating or amplifying role, reinforcing rather than initiating skier loyalty mechanisms.

These results lend strong empirical support to the direct pathway hypothesis of the study: all dimensions of perceived service quality positively influence both behavioral motivation and satisfaction, but they do so with differing levels of intensity and psychological resonance. The results emphasize that the skier experience is not purely transactional or infrastructural—it is deeply affected by emotional and cognitive evaluations rooted in human interaction.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce the psychological premise that service perception is internalized through emotional filters, particularly in leisure contexts where risk, novelty, and enjoyment intersect. This validates the integration of SERVQUAL dimensions within broader consumer behavior models, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, which views behavioral intention as shaped by attitudinal and experiential inputs.

From a managerial perspective, ski resort operators should recognize that investments in staff training, real-time responsiveness systems, and service consistency protocols may yield greater returns in customer loyalty and satisfaction than purely upgrading facilities. For instance, digital queue management, proactive staff engagement, and multilingual customer support are likely to enhance perceived service reliability and emotional connection, two core predictors of sustained consumer behavior.

In summary, this stage of analysis confirms that service quality dimensions—particularly responsiveness and reliability—directly influence skier outcomes, both motivational and affective. This provides a critical empirical basis for exploring whether behavioral motivation also plays a mediating role in translating service perceptions into satisfaction, as examined in the following section.

3. To examine the mediating role of behavioral motivation in the relationship between service quality and skier satisfaction.

To further investigate the psychological mechanism linking perceived service quality to customer satisfaction, the study tested a mediation model with behavioral motivation as the mediating variable. This analysis aimed to determine whether improvements in perceived service quality indirectly enhance skier satisfaction by first activating the skier's intention to re-engage with the resort, through recommending it to others, returning for future visits, or developing an emotional attachment to the experience.

The analysis used bootstrapped mediation testing with 5,000 resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs), a method particularly suited to testing indirect effects with enhanced accuracy and reduced Type I error risk. The results were as follows:

Total effect of service quality on satisfaction: B = 0.711, p < 0.001

Direct effect (controlling for motivation): B = 0.404, p < 0.001

Indirect effect via behavioral motivation: B = 0.307, 95% CI [0.221, 0.398]

These coefficients support a partial mediation model, meaning that while a substantial portion of satisfaction is explained directly by service quality (e.g., visible facilities, consistent service delivery), a significant indirect effect also occurs through the activation of motivational processes. In other words, perceived quality not only creates immediate evaluative satisfaction but also energizes future-oriented behavioral intentions, which themselves contribute to a deeper and more sustained sense of satisfaction.

This mediation pathway suggests that skier satisfaction is not simply a function of "what was delivered," but rather a reflection of "how that delivery activated the desire to return, recommend, or emotionally re-engage."

This finding is consistent with established models in service and consumer behavior theory. For instance, Cronin et al. (2000) emphasized that behavioral intention is a critical psychological conduit through which perceived service quality influences loyalty, advocacy, and affective outcomes. Similarly, frameworks such as the Expectation–Confirmation Theory (Blackwell et al., 2001) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) argue that post-consumption satisfaction is shaped not only by direct perception but also by internal attitudinal shifts and intention formation.

In the specific context of ski tourism, especially among mass-market or novice skiers, motivational pathways may be more prominent due to the emotional intensity of the activity. As skiing involves elements of risk, skill, novelty, and physical engagement, service interactions (e.g., prompt assistance, empathetic communication, personalized guidance) may not just be appraised cognitively, but also transform into affective energy—a skier's internal desire to re-experience the environment, validate their choice, and emotionally invest in the resort brand.

This process of psychological internalization means that behavioral motivation acts as a bridge, not merely between experience and action, but between perceived value and emotional meaning.

From a managerial perspective, these findings have significant implications. They suggest that it is insufficient for ski resorts to merely meet operational standards or deliver functional service performance. Satisfaction is not a passive reaction to good service, but an outcome of active motivational stimulation. Skiers are more likely to feel satisfied not just because the resort was reliable or the equipment was well-maintained, but because the service made them feel connected, valued, and emotionally engaged.

Building on this framework, it becomes clear that behavioral motivation is not merely a mediating statistical construct but a psychological fulcrum—linking perception and experience with memory and anticipation. In the context of winter tourism, where affective intensity is high and consumer expectations are shaped by both risk and reward (e.g., physical exertion vs. scenic immersion), behavioral motivation plays a bridging role between rational assessment and emotional commitment.

What distinguishes ski tourism from many other leisure contexts is the episodic nature of the activity—it is seasonal, highly planned, and emotionally loaded. Therefore, service encounters at ski resorts are not only evaluated for their immediate utility (e.g., safety, equipment quality) but also for how they frame the entire leisure episode. When resorts activate motivation through personalized interaction and emotionally intelligent service design, they are not just solving problems—they are scripting narrative memories. These memories become the raw material from which future behavioral intentions—such as revisit decisions, word-of-mouth referrals, and social media advocacy—are constructed.

To deepen the impact of this motivational mediation pathway, ski resort operators should integrate behaviorally informed service metrics into their performance evaluations. For example:

Emotional resonance tracking: Incorporate post-service surveys that measure not only satisfaction but also emotional imprint (e.g., "What moment during your visit made you feel most connected to the resort?").

Intention mapping tools: Use data analytics to identify which service interactions most frequently correlate with positive behavioral intentions (e.g., verbal staff greetings, personalized equipment adjustments, post-run warm-up amenities).

Motivational trigger design: Apply insights from behavioral economics (e.g., commitment devices, default options, peak-end rule) to embed motivational "hooks" into the ski experience. For instance, offering a next-season reservation discount at the emotional peak of the visit (e.g., after a final group photo or celebratory drink) can increase return rates by reinforcing temporal continuity.

From a theoretical perspective, this reaffirms the Service-Dominant Logic, which argues that value is co-created not at the point of purchase, but through ongoing experiential interactions. In this model, behavioral motivation serves as a co-creation mechanism—it is not something resorts deliver, but something they enable. Emotional cues, perceived attentiveness, and responsive dialogue are the raw materials of this enablement.

Importantly, this understanding also aligns with contemporary models of hedonic consumption and experiential marketing, which emphasize that consumer decisions are shaped not only by functional utility but by affective anticipation and retrospective meaning-making. Ski resorts, then, must move beyond standardized service provision toward curated emotional environments, in which motivation is deliberately cultivated through symbolic gestures, ambient cues, and ritualized closure (e.g., final-night torchlight parades, memory boards, farewell tokens).

Moreover, training programs for frontline staff should incorporate motivational psychology and interpersonal semiotics. Employees should be equipped not only to resolve issues but to read emotional states, respond empathetically, and reinforce self-perceptions of competence and belonging. For example, when a novice skier expresses anxiety, a well-timed affirmation ("You're doing great—most people fall three times in their first hour, and you're ahead of that!") does more than reassure—it recasts the experience as mastery, which fosters intrinsic motivation.

This also suggests a shift in metrics of success. Traditional KPIs such as check-in efficiency or equipment turnover should be complemented by motivation-sensitive indicators like emotional tone in customer feedback, frequency of unsolicited praise, or intensity of forward-looking expressions (e.g.,

"We'll be back," "Next time I want to try..."). These qualitative cues can be quantified through natural language processing in digital surveys or AI-enhanced voice-of-customer tools.

In sum, the inclusion of behavioral motivation in service quality research not only clarifies the mechanism through which responsiveness and reliability influence satisfaction but also opens up new directions for service innovation. It invites operators to think less about what services they deliver, and more about how these services make people feel, and want to return.

Discussion

This study confirms that service quality significantly influences both behavioral motivation and customer satisfaction in ski tourism, with responsiveness and reliability identified as the most impactful dimensions. These findings suggest that skiers are more sensitive to interpersonal service factors—such as timely assistance and consistent delivery—than to physical infrastructure alone.

The results are consistent with Alexandris et al. (2006), who found that responsiveness was a key predictor of loyalty in ski resorts, especially in emotionally intensive environments. Similarly, Cronin et al. (2000) emphasized that perceived service quality strongly affects behavioral intention when supported by emotional engagement, aligning with the partial mediation effect observed in this study.

Furthermore, the role of behavioral motivation as a mediator highlights the importance of psychological processes in shaping satisfaction. Rather than being purely a direct outcome of service quality, satisfaction also stems from the skier's internalized desire to return, recommend, or re-engage with the resort. This confirms the value of integrating motivational variables into service quality models, especially in experience-driven tourism settings.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of how perceived service quality influences behavioral motivation and satisfaction among mass skiers in Jilin Province, China. Grounded in the SERVQUAL model, it demonstrates that all five dimensions—especially responsiveness and reliability—significantly shape both motivation and satisfaction. The findings confirm that interpersonal service quality plays a more critical role than physical infrastructure in skier evaluations. Behavioral motivation was shown to partially mediate the quality–satisfaction relationship, underscoring the importance of emotional and psychological engagement. The study advances theory by integrating service quality assessment, motivation, and satisfaction into a cohesive model, and extends SERVQUAL's applicability to a culturally specific, seasonal tourism setting. Practically, it recommends that ski resorts prioritize responsive, reliable, and emotionally resonant service strategies to enhance customer loyalty. Ultimately, satisfaction in winter tourism emerges not merely from service delivery but from its capacity to activate affective and behavioral commitment, laying the groundwork for sustainable, customer-centered growth in China's ski industry.

Recommendation

1. General Recommendations

To enhance skier satisfaction and loyalty, ski resorts should focus on improving responsiveness and reliability, which were found to be the strongest drivers of positive outcomes. This includes timely assistance, consistent service delivery, and clear communication, especially crucial for novice or first-time skiers. Staff training in hospitality and safety communication, along with visible service roles such as certified instructors, can improve perceived professionalism and trust.

2. Recommendations for Further Research

Resorts should consider offering personalized service packages tailored to different skier profiles (e.g., families, beginners, advanced users), incorporating features like onboarding guides, multilingual support, and interactive tools. These experience-driven enhancements help trigger emotional connection and behavioral motivation, moving beyond infrastructure toward customer-centered service design.

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