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Lack of pupils in German riding schools? – A causal-analytical consideration of customer satisfaction in children and adolescents

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Abstract

Not only the horse as a living creature, but also equestrian sport, has a positive influence on the general upbringing and development of young people. Although equestrian sport still exerts a strong fascination, it is becoming more difficult to inspire young people to take part in this time-consuming and costly sport. It is not only the equestrian sport which is affected by this – the majority of sport clubs offering different types of sport have registered diminishing member numbers. Especially those riding schools which consider themselves as being service providers in equestrian sport are confronted with the challenge of binding children and adolescents to their school for a longer term, thereby enabling the schools to manage themselves sustainably. The present study has, therefore, investigated the various factors which influence customer satisfaction in riding schools and their significance by using a structural equation model. A survey of 203 children and adolescents was undertaken in five different German riding schools. Customer satisfaction was particularly influenced by the "design of the riding lessons" and the "school horses". The influence of the "riding instructor", however, was more indirect (acting over the direct impact on the design of the lessons and the school's horses) than direct. One most noticeable aspect of the results is the strong influence of customer satisfaction on recommendation behaviour.

Keywords: customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, riding schools, Partial Least Squares (PLS)

Introduction

The demographic development and an increasing number of full-time schools are two of the key aspects which describe the present-day difficulties for riding schools. Concepts must be especially developed for those riding schools that have specialised in the training of children and adolescents, so that they can continue to win and retain these young people for equestrian sport in the future. Although equestrian sport still exerts a strong fascination (SCHOENWAELDER, 2000), it is becoming more difficult nowadays to inspire young people to take part in this time-consuming and costly sport. It is not only equestrian sport which is affected by this – the majority of sport clubs offering different types of sporting activities have registered diminishing member numbers (DOSB, 2009). This situation is part of a change affecting the whole of society. While many people previously showed a strong loyalty to their clubs, loose connections are becoming more important in modern, individualised societies these days (BRAUN, 2002). Moreover, the manner in which leisure time is spent by the continually decreasing proportion of young people in western societies has clearly changed (FN, 2010). More activities are taking place at their homes, where particularly visual media are of central importance (GAST & AHSBAHS, 1999).

According to a survey of the polling firm EMNID (2002), every third German child for instance suffers from poor posture and every sixth is overweight. One of the main causes of this is considered to be a severe lack of exercise (95%). Equestrian sport can, in this respect, have a positive effect on the physical and psychological development of school children (the target group of this study). The movement potential of equestrian sport can act as a basis for a healthy lifestyle by leading to an improvement in a child's physical performance and function, especially nowadays when children tend to suffer from an acute lack of exercise. In addition, contact with horses can be seen as a meaningful way of spending one's leisure time and as an

opportunity for self-fulfilment. It also provides education in and experience of team competence (TIETZE, 2004).

Riding schools are of great importance to young people doing equestrian sport as they enable them to undertake this sport without any firm commitment and also allow them to do other types of sport at the same time as the time-consuming daily maintenance of one's own horse is not necessary (TIETZE, 2004). As a consequence, it is especially important for riding schools to consider the wishes and needs of children and adolescents. Their satisfaction with the riding school will enable equestrian sport to compete with the multitude of other leisure activities and sports that are available. Also such satisfaction will possibly ensure the school's continuing existence by inducing a long-term commitment. A decisive indicator for the degree of emotional bonding with a club or firm is the satisfaction of its members or customers. This fact is already known by many clubs but has only in a few cases led to a consequent member orientation (ESER, 2000).

The aim of the present analysis is to determine the different criteria which influence riding-school customer satisfaction using a survey of riding school pupils. In addition, the effects of the customers' total satisfaction with the riding school on their willingness to recommend it to others and their willingness to change to another riding school is considered. This study has an explorative character as, for the first time, it considers the customer satisfaction of young people with the training programmes offered within equestrian sport as a factor of success. Due to the study's small sample size, it should be considered as a preliminary exploratory study and it makes no claim to be representative.

In the following, an overview of the significance of equestrian sport for young people and of customer satisfaction as a business success factor will be given. Then the Partial Least Squares method, with which the structural equation model is estimated, will be explained. Finally, the results of the analysis will be described and discussed.

The Significance of Equestrian Sport for Children and Adolescents

The horse has played an important part in human history. Its domestication was first described in about 4,000 BCE. This formed the basis for this species being used in a variety of ways. While initially, the horse was primarily employed for war and agriculture, nowadays in the western world, it is used mainly as a leisure and sport partner (TIETZE, 2004).

Horses often are very attractive to children and adolescents, and these animals have a strong stimulative nature (OTTE, 1994). The horse as a social creature is inquisitive, animated and as a rule, responds to attention. Horses also clearly show when limits are not being respected when they are handled (SCHOENWAELDER, 2000).

The first contact with horses activates human emotions: its physique, the child-like form of its head (large eyes, high forehead), the aesthetics of its movements, its gentle look of being as a rule (with appropriate husbandry and treatment) a friendly creature, its soft mouth, its coat, and its special smell, etc., all induce various stimuli in people. The horse's character also determines its power of attraction.

By working closely with horses and children, certain similarities in their needs and behaviour can be observed. Both are inquisitive, playful, demanding, bestow attention and devotion, and have a will of their own. Sometimes, however, they will also react with scepticism, fearfulness and even stubbornness. Horses, like children, are individuals with their own characters.

For these reasons, the horse provides a multitude of motivational stimuli. As a living creature with a hair coat, it stimulates an incentive to touch it. At the same time, as it is a social creature, it is usually receptive to emotional devotion shown by stroking, reacting with positive responses. These characteristics and the emotional relationship experience for people do not only make the horse valuable in various therapies (FN, 1997). The horse as a living creature, and even equestrian sport, has a positive influence on the general upbringing and development of young people. The methods used in teaching equestrian sport are mostly not just directed at

the single rider but at a whole group of riders, as well as the trainer and the horse. All of these individuals interact closely and directly with each other (GAST & AHSBAHS, 1999).

The repeatedly voiced demand for an upbringing which enables children to learn to act independently has a large significance in equestrian sport. The rider should be taught, as far as possible, to independently look after and ride a horse in an appropriate (i.e. suitable to horses), responsible and considerate manner. These are characteristics which will aid the rider in his dealings with other people (GAST & AHSBAHS, 1999). In addition, as equestrian sport is an outdoor pasttime, it can provide children and adolescents with valuable experiences with nature. Furthermore, the relationship with an animal also has a positive effect on a child's psyche. The horse is always there for the child, as a rule it returns the child's affection, it "listens", provides solace, is thankful and loyal, accepts a person as it is, enables special experiences to be had, and thus is considered to be a "friend" and "partner" (MEYER, 1982). In addition, the association with horses also facilitates social contact to other children and adolescents. Especially in this age group, riding is rarely done alone. The mutual interest in horses bonds them and often results in friendships that extend beyond the riding lessons.

Whether a young person, when he/she has decided to do equestrian sport, will continue doing the sport for a longer period of time is dependent on a number of factors, especially in the first years when the person is possibly trying out different types of sport. These factors, for example, include the family's financial situation, the accessibility of the different sporting facilities or the person's talent for doing equestrian sport. Customer satisfaction with a "local" riding school most probably also has a significant effect on whether or not a young person will continue doing equestrian sport on a regular basis and over a long time. This is because it is in the riding school where equestrian sport is actively undertaken and depending on the intensity with which a young person does the sport, a considerable part of that person's leisure time may be spent.

Customer Satisfaction as a Business Success Factor

Riding schools are understood to be service providers in equestrian sport. By providing the necessary infrastructure they enable equestrian sport to be undertaken (even without people having to own their own horse). The equestrian sport market situation has changed considerably over the past years due to a high degree of competition and changes in customer behaviour.

Customer satisfaction is an important target and challenge for many companies or clubs (ANDERSON & MITTAL, 2000; OLIVER, 1997), so that nowadays the analysis of customer satisfaction belongs to standard marketing practice (PARASURAMAN ET AL., 1988; SIVADS & BAKER-PREWITT, 2000). According to ZEITHAML and BITNER (2003), satisfaction is "[…] the consumer fulfilment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment". In the literature, many studies have shown that customer satisfaction is closely related to the concept of service quality (BOLTON & DREW, 1994; KOUTHOURIS & ALEXANDRIS, 2005, citing ALEXANDRIS ET AL., 2001; CARUANA, 2002; CRONIN & TAYLOR, 1992; SPRENG & CHIOU, 2002; SPRENG & MCKOY, 1996; WOODSIDE ET AL., 1989). Service quality is generally defined as "the consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority/superiority of the organization and its services" (BITNER & HUBBERT, 1994). Even if there is disagreement in the literature as to how customer satisfaction and service quality can be differentiated (ANDERSON & FORNELL, 1994), it can be assumed that customer satisfaction is a broader concept than service quality as it contains both cognitive and affective evaluations. Evaluations of service quality, in contrast, are mainly of a cognitive nature (KOUTHOURIS & ALEXANDRIS, 2005, citing OLIVER, 1997; TIAN-COLE & CROMPTON, 2003).

It is agreed that there is a relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, which is reflected in the consumers' behavioural intentions and their attachment to a particu-

lar company (ATHIYAMAN 1997; CRONIN ET AL., 2000; FORNELL ET AL., 1996). Customer loyalty has, therefore, a strong influence on the performance and profitability of a company (BOWEN & CHEN, 2001; HALLOWELL, 1996; LAM ET AL., 2004).

Even in the field of sport, there have been many studies which have considered customer satisfaction, service quality or customer loyalty and their relevance for successful commercial practices (KO & PASTORE, 2005; MARTÍNEZ CARO & MARTÍNEZ GARCÍA, 2007; THEODORAKIS ET AL., 2001; TRIADÓ ET AL., 1999). In contrast to the example of the centres of higher education in which customer satisfaction has been declared to be an important aim of their training/education schemes and which has been increasingly investigated (ATHIYAMAN, 1997; GRUBER & VOSS, 2004), this has not been the case in equestrian sport. Investigations analysing factors that have an influence on customer satisfaction with respect to riding schools have, to our knowledge, not yet been undertaken. This publication should serve as a first attempt to fill this void. The special feature of this study lies in its combination of the field of customer satisfaction with the assessment of training in a sport.

Conceptual Design of the Empirical Study

In the present study, a total of 203 riding school pupils in five different riding schools (three riding clubs and two commercial riding schools) in the area of Goettingen (Lower Saxony) in Germany were questioned using a standardized written questionnaire in the summer of 2008. The questionnaire contained various criteria of customer satisfaction; for example, a question on the overall satisfaction with the riding school, questions on the organisation of the riding school, about the riding instructor, the school's horses, etc. The questions were set up on the basis of expert discussions with the operators of various riding schools and a number of riding instructors as well as a comprehensive literature study. The questionnaire contained 58 ele-

ments, divided into 25 blocks of questions. The questions were mainly formatted using 5-point Likert scales.

The study utilised a multi-attributive survey of riding school pupils as described by PARASURMANN ET AL. (1988). In this method, there is a demarcation of the concept of attitudes by a retrospective assessment of the service, which assumes that the people questioned have a specific previous knowledge or experience. The variance analysis of the results consisted of a comparison of the customers' expectations, their ideal concept of a riding school and their experience with a specific riding school (KOSCHATE, 2003). The evaluation of the data was undertaken with the statistics programme SPSS (Version 16.0) using uni-, bi- and multivariate analytical methods.

The statistics programme SmartPLS Version 2.0M3 was used to discover the influence of the success factors on customer satisfaction, their recommendation behaviour and their willingness to change riding schools (RINGLE ET AL., 2005). With the aid of this software, a causal model was estimated using a Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis (HANSMANN & RINGLE, 2004).

Model Development and Hypothesis Formulation

At the start of the present investigation, it was assumed that three constructs were basically at the bottom of a customer's overall satisfaction with a riding school: the riding instructor, the school's horses and the design of the riding lessons.

As mentioned above, horses exercise a large attraction to children and adolescents (SCHOENWAELDER, 2000). In contrast to other forms of sport, it is not a piece of inanimate equipment that is at the centre of attention in equestrian sport but a living animal – which ultimately accounts for the specific characteristics of this type of sport. It was, therefore, as-

sumed that the perceived quality or customer satisfaction with the school's horses would have an influence on the customer's overall satisfaction with the riding school.

Furthermore, it was supposed that the design of the riding lessons would also have an influence on the customer's overall satisfaction. A versatile style of tuition which takes into consideration the different age groups, performance standards and interests of the pupils (GERLACH, 1989), and in which children and adolescents take part with pleasure should therefore lead to a higher degree of customer satisfaction with the respective riding school.

Moreover, it was also assumed that the customers' assessment of the riding instructors would decisively affect their overall satisfaction with the riding school. It was thought that the "riding instructor" would have the strongest influence and would also affect the assessment of the constructs "school horse" and "design of the riding lessons". In conjunction with this, it was expected that the riding instructors would have a high degree of professional, social and teaching competence. Professional competence consists, in this case, of specialist knowledge of equestrian sport. Social competence describes the riding instructor's personal and social communication skills. The instructor's teaching competence includes his/her ability to find a suitable method to teach the lesson according to the age group and performance ability of the pupils as well as to have the talent to keep the pupils motivated and at the same time to encourage their development without being over-demanding. In addition, the instructor should be able to match each pupil with a suitable horse (FN, 2007). Often the "sergeant-major" tone dominating in those clubs which train riders for the three conventional equestrian disciplines (dressage, jumping and eventing) forms a precarious area of conflict. The new target groups of equestrian sport require a new type of service culture. According to RITTNER (2003), the riding instructor must be both a trainer and an entertainer. Ultimately, the quality of the riding instructor – although this is difficult to measure (ROCKOFF, 2004) – determines the development of his/her (riding) pupils.

Bearing all these factors in mind, the following hypotheses were set up:

H_1: The higher the customer satisfaction with the school's horses, the higher the overall customer satisfaction with the riding school.

H_2: The better the assessment of the riding instructor, the better the assessment of the school's horses.

H_3: The assessment of the riding instructor has the greatest influence on the assessment of the overall satisfaction. The greater the customer satisfaction with the riding instructor, the greater the overall customer satisfaction with the riding school.

H_4: The better the assessment of the riding instructor, the better the assessment of the design of the riding lessons.

H_5: The greater the customer satisfaction with the design of the riding lessons, the greater the overall satisfaction with the riding school.

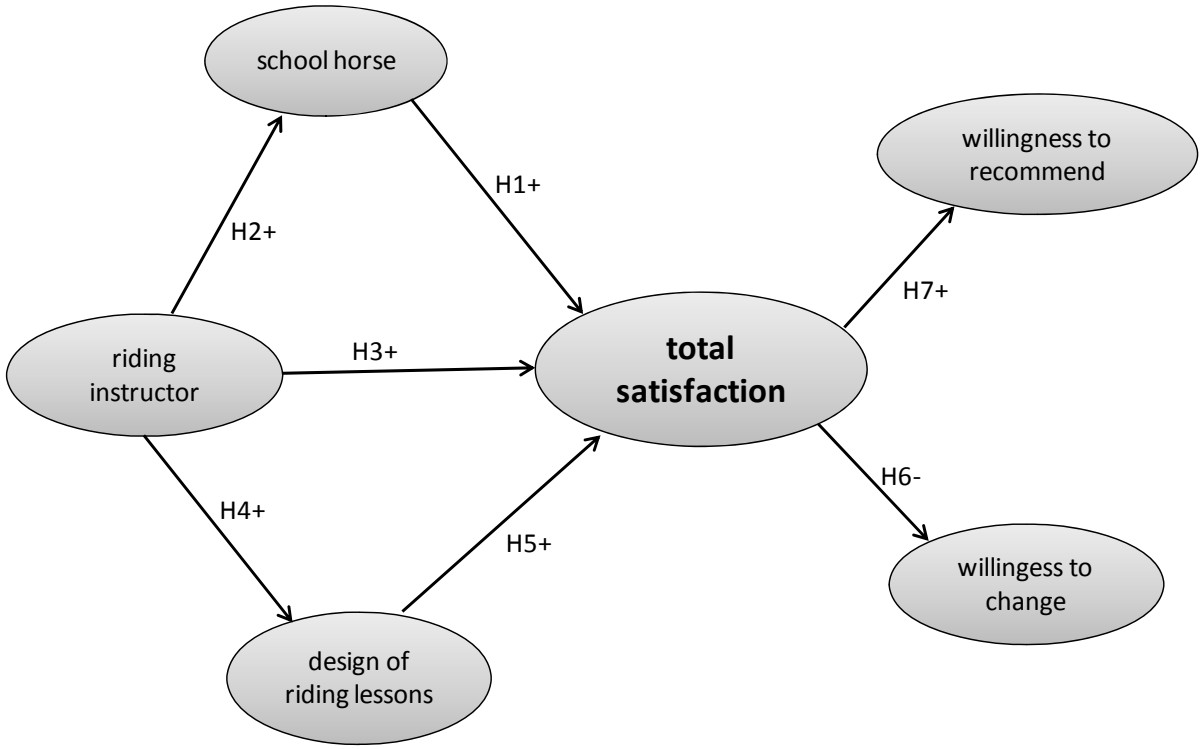
As stated before, the effect of positive customer satisfaction has been broadly discussed in the literature (ATHIYAMAN, 1997; CRONIN ET AL., 2000; FORNELL ET AL., 1996). It is assumed that increased customer satisfaction leads to positive effects, such as fewer complaints and an increased customer loyalty (FORNELL ET AL., 1996). Customer loyalty may be expressed as a lower willingness to change schools than shown by disloyal customers, and that loyal customers carry out positive "word-of-mouth" advertising and show a willingness to recommend the company to others (ANDERSON, 1998; BOWEN & CHEN, 2001; LAM ET AL., 2004). Customer recommendation behaviour is of vital importance in equestrian sport. The rider is the best advertising agent of an organisation, because he/she is characterised by a high willingness to recommend. Accordingly, club members or riding school pupils have a central multiplier function in the winning of new members (ESER, 2000). Even when a high degree of customer satisfaction does not necessarily lead to loyalty (MITTAL & LASSAR, 1998), e.g. due to external effects (in this study e.g. a change of address or a changed financial situation), the following hypotheses were deduced:

H_6: The higher the overall satisfaction, the lower the willingness to change the riding school.

H_7: The higher the overall satisfaction, the greater the willingness to recommend the riding school to others.

The resulting research model, shown in Figure 1, was used to measure customer satisfaction in riding schools and its effect on the customers' willingness to change schools and their willingness to recommend the school to others.

Figure 1: Research model for the measurement of customer satisfaction in riding schools



Description of the Probands

A total of 203 riding school pupils (94.4% girls and 5.6% boys) between the ages of 8 and 18 were questioned in Lower Saxony (Germany) during the summer of 2008. The average age was 12 years old; 82% of the probands were between 8 and 14. This age distribution is equivalent to the official numbers published by the *Deutsche Reiterliche Vereinigung* [German Riders Association] also known as the *Fédération Équestre Nationale* (FN) (FN, 2008),

though their reported gender distribution is 89.2% female riders and 10.8% male riders in the age group 7 to 18 years.

More than half of the children (62%) rode once a week; only 7% were trained by a riding instructor for three times or more each week.

Verification of the Measurement Model

The measurement model is used to consider the correlations between the individual constructs and their respective observable variables, whereas the structural model consists of the relationships between the constructs (see Figure 1). As the PLS method is a non-parametric method, it underlies fewer restrictions than an analysis of covariance structures. The PLS method is a combination of a path, principal components and a regression analysis, and it tests the interrelationship of the latent constructs in a single step. The use of PLS is especially interesting when the assumed relationships are not adequately developed theoretically (GOETZ & LIEHR-GOBBERS, 2004; RINGLE, 2004). PLS is especially suitable for complex models (even when there is a low number of probands) and explorative studies (BARCLEY ET AL., 1995; CHIN, 1998; JACOBOWICZ & DERQUENNE, 2007). For these reasons, this method was chosen for use in the present investigation.

The analysis of the PLS model is based on a two-step approach. First of all, the goodness of fit of the measurement model with respect to its reliability and validity is determined before the structure model is tested. As no global quality criterion exists, certain criteria were suggested so that the reflective and formative constructs as well as the whole model could be evaluated (GOETZ & LIEHR-GOBBERS, 2004).

Reflective measurement models were applied in the present investigation, in which each of the respective hypothetical constructs caused the indicators which were assigned to it. The testing of the reflective models was undertaken using individual-item reliability, internal con-

sistency and the discriminant validity. The individual-item reliabilities were evaluated by examining the factor loadings of the items on their respective constructs (see Table 1). Only items with a factor loading of at least 0.5 were considered to be significant and retained in the measurement model (HAIR ET AL., 1998). The internal consistency of the different constructs was assessed by calculating the composite reliabilities (CR); a value of > 0.7 was considered to be reliable (FORNELL & LARCKER, 1981). Another indicator of internal consistency is Cronbach's alpha (CRA), which indicates the reliability of a construct with a value > 0.6 (NUNALLY, 1978). The discriminant validity was measured using the average variance extracted (AVE). The AVE is the average variance shared between a construct and its items and it should have a value of > 0.5 (CHIN, 1998). As shown in Table 2, the model had satisfactory values for all these accuracy criteria and could therefore be classed as being appropriate.

Table 1: Overview of the constructs with their factor loadings

Latent variables	Statements	Factor loadings
School horses	How satisfied are you with your horse?*	0.882
	How satisfied are you with the abilities of the school's horses?*	0.741
	How satisfied are you with the health status of the school's horses?*	0.697
	How satisfied are you with the sizes of the school's horses?*	0.699
Riding instructor	My riding instructor encourages us during the riding lessons.**	0.846
	My riding instructor is a role model for me.**	0.794
	My riding instructor is totally cool!**	0.794
	My riding instructor takes care of each of the pupils equally well during the lessons.**	0.753
	How satisfied are you with your riding instructor?*	0.743
	My riding instructor can empathise with each of the horses equally well.**	0.738
	My riding instructor has a friendly tone.**	0.711
	My riding instructor is not only my teacher, but is also my friend.**	0.507
Design of riding lessons	How satisfied are you with what you learn in each lesson?*	0.864
	Do you like taking part in the lessons?***	0.838
	How satisfied are you with the range of the lessons?****	0.834
	How satisfied are you with the riding lessons in general?*	0,526
Total satisfaction	How satisfied are you with your riding school?****	0.887
	My riding school is the best of all.*****	0.811
	Do you feel happy at your riding school?******	0.778
Willingness to change	Have you ever wished to change your riding school?*******	1
Willingness to recommend	Would you recommend your riding school to others?******	1

5-point Likert scale, scale from *+2= very satisfied/ -2= very dissatisfied; **+2= very true/ -2= not true at all; ***+2= strongly like/ -2= strongly dislike ****+2= totally satisfied/ -2= totally dissatisfied; *****+2= strongly agree/ -2= strongly disagree; ******+2= absolutely yes/ -2= absolutely not; *******+2= yes, very often/ -2= no, never

Table 2: Assessment of the measurement model

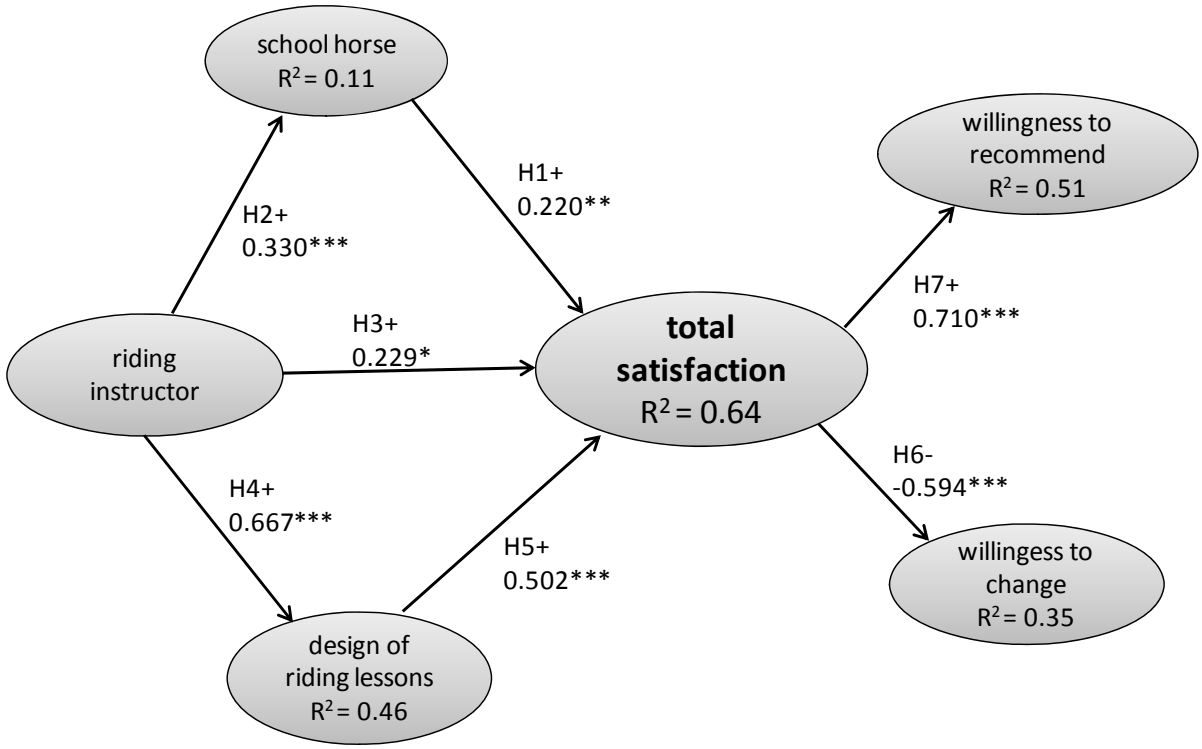
Latent variables	NOI	CRA	CR	AVE
Riding instructor	8	0.88	0.90	0.55
Design of riding lessons	4	0.77	0.85	0.61
School horses	4	0.75	0.84	0.57
Total satisfaction	3	0.76	0.76	0.68
Willingness to change	1	1	1	1
Willingness to recommend	1	1	1	1

NOI= Number of items; CRA= Cronbach's Alpha; CR= Composite Reliability; AVE= Average Variance Extracted from the construct

Results of the Structural Equation Model

The estimation of the structural equation model serves for the testing of the relationships between the latent constructs and their effects on customer satisfaction. The respective overall satisfaction was asked about in each of the constructs. The variance explained (R^2) of the endogenous variables from the regressions formed the starting point for the assessment of the internal model as the R^2 reflects the size or the proportion of the declared variance of the latent construct. It measures the goodness of fit of a regression function to the empirically acquired data (BACKHAUS ET AL., 2003). The stated path coefficients show the direction and strength of the relationship [by means of the symbol in front of the value (+ or -) and the significances, respectively] of the exogenous and endogenous variables (CHIN, 1998). The path coefficients are analogous to the standardized beta weights in a regression analysis. According to the operationalised definition from COHEN (1988), path coefficients with a value under 0.02 are considered to have a small influence, between 0.02 and 0.15 have a medium-sized influence and more than 0.35 as having a large influence. The significance of the path coefficients was determined using 200 resamples according to the bootstrapping method (VENAIK ET AL., 2001). The results of the structural model are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Structural equation model for the measurement of customer satisfaction in riding schools



***Significant at 0.001 level (2 t-tailed test - t> 3.291); **Significant at 0.01 level (2 t-tailed test - t> 2.576); *Significant at 0.05 level (2 t-tailed test - t>1.96)

The results show that the 64% of the customer satisfaction with respect to riding schools can be explained by the constructs included in the research model. As this is only an explorative study, this is a very satisfactory result. The overall customer satisfaction can be explained by three exogenous constructs. The most important factor for the explanation of customer satisfaction is the construct "design of the riding lessons" (path coefficient = 0.502). Therefore hypothesis H_5, which states that the overall satisfaction is positively influenced by increasing customer satisfaction with the design of the riding lessons, has been clearly confirmed. The second most important influence on the overall satisfaction of the riding school pupils was the construct "school horses" (path coefficient = 0.220). Accordingly, hypothesis H_1 can be accepted, which says that the overall customer satisfaction is increased by the school having well-trained horses chosen to suit the needs of the pupils.

Another explanatory power is the exogenous construct "riding instructor" (path coefficient =

0.229). However, this did not have the greatest influence on the overall satisfaction as had been presumed in hypothesis H_3. This hypothesis thus cannot be accepted without reservation (see Figure 2). Although the "riding instructor" provided the lowest contribution to increasing overall customer satisfaction, he/she was shown to be involved in both the "design of the riding lessons" ($R^2 = 0.46$) and the "school horses" ($R^2 = 0.11$); therefore the hypotheses H_4 and H_2 could be confirmed.

Fifty-one percent of the variance in the willingness to recommend the school to others can be explained by the overall satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.51$). Hypothesis H_7, in which it was assumed that an increased overall satisfaction would lead to an increased willingness to recommend, could therefore be confirmed (path coefficient = 0.710). The path coefficient of the overall satisfaction (-0.594) marks also a highly significant negative influence on the willingness to change, explaining 35% of this factor ($R^2 = 0.35$). Hypothesis H_6 can, therefore, be accepted due to its statement that an increased overall satisfaction will reduce the customers' willingness to change. The findings with respect to the seven hypotheses are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Assessment of the seven hypotheses (direct effects)

Hypothesis		Path coefficient	t-value
H_1	School horses → Total satisfaction	0.220**	2.783
H_2	Riding instructor → School horses	0.330***	4.430
H_3	Riding instructor → Total satisfaction	0.229*	2.336
H_4	Riding instructor → Design of riding lessons	0.667***	9.169
H_5	Design of riding lessons → Total satisfaction	0.502***	5.418
H_6	Total satisfaction → Willingness to change	-0.594***	7.660
H_7	Total satisfaction → Willingness to recommend	0.710***	10.436

***Significant at 0.001 level (2 t-tailed test - t> 3.291); **Significant at 0.01 level (2 t-tailed test - t> 2.576); *Significant at 0.05 level (2 t-tailed test - t>1.96)

In conclusion, each of the three constructs had a direct influence on customer satisfaction (see Figure 2). In addition to the direct effects, indirect effects can also contribute to explaining the overall satisfaction. Both the direct and indirect relationships, the "total effects", are shown in Table 4. The indirect influence is composed of the sum of the direct and indirect effects of an independent variable on a dependent variable.

Table 4: Overview of the direct and indirect effects (total effects)

	TS	WC	WR	DR	SH
School horses	**0.220****	**-0.129***	**0.156****		
Riding instructor	**0.639*****	**-0.376*****	**0.454*****	**0.676*****	**0.367*****
Design of riding lessons	**0.495*****	**-0.292*****	**0.351*****		
Total satisfaction		**-0.589*****	**0.710*****		

TS= total satisfaction; WC= willingness to change; WR= willingness to recommend; DR= design of riding lessons, SH= school horses; ***Significant at 0.001 level (2 t-tailed test - t> 3.291); **Significant at 0.01 level (2 t-tailed test - t> 2.576); *Significant at 0.05 level (2 t-tailed test - t>1.96)

The results in Table 4 show that the three latent constructs “school horses”, “riding instructor” and “design of riding lessons” not only have an indirect positive influence on the willingness to recommend and but also a negative influence on the customers’ willingness to change riding schools. The better the “school horses”, the “riding instructor” and the “design of the riding lessons”, the more strongly the children and adolescents are willing to recommend their riding school to others. Conversely, a high standard in all these constructs significantly reduces the willingness of pupils to change schools.

Discussion and Conclusions

Taken as a whole, the results of this investigation show a highly significant effect of customer satisfaction with the riding school on customer loyalty. As assumed, the three constructs “school horses”, “riding instructor” and “design of the riding lessons” had a significant influence on the overall assessment of the riding school.

Unexpectedly, it was not the construct “riding instructor” which had the greatest direct influence on the assessment of the overall satisfaction, but the “design of the riding lessons”. The lessons must therefore be exactly matched to the different age, performance and interest groups attending the school (GERLACH, 1989). Especially a mass sport orientation with offers for children and adolescents should not be neglected. The lessons should be designed so that they are varied enough to appeal to this rapidly increasing group of mass sport participants, who wish to gain knowledge about the horse as a living creature, its husbandry and training and are striving to gain confidence in working with horses and simply wish to have fun in

doing their chosen sport (TIETZE, 2004). This implies also that in addition to learning to ride, the pupils should be trained in handling horses – both theoretically and practically.

One aspect in particular is often neglected: outdoor riding. In this investigation, 17% of the riding school pupils said that riding out on a horse was the best experience in a riding school and 15% wished to be able to ride out more often. These results confirm the demand for such activities. Also different types of riding games enable the handling of horses to be learnt in a playful manner and to enhance the team spirit of the participating children and adolescents. In addition, a riding school pupil should be taught how to take care of a horse properly (i.e. in a manner suitable for horses) with responsibility and consideration (GAST & AHSBAHS, 1999).

The importance of a suitable riding instructor has been proven, not only due to the direct influence of this construct, but mainly due to its indirect effects on the other two constructs. The riding instructor is, therefore, the link holding the fabric of the riding school together. He/She is directly responsible for both the design of the riding lessons and the choice of suitable school horses. For a mass-sport target group, the riding instructor must not only be a trainer but also an entertainer (RITTNER, 2003).

Consequently, it is not enough for a riding school to just provide suitable horses to enable young riders to have general contact with these animals and to do equestrian sport; rather, they should differentiate themselves from other riding schools in that they primarily provide diversified riding lessons and employ qualified instructors (FN, 2007).

Word-of-mouth promotion is one of the most important communication instruments for riding schools. As described in the chapter on the formulation of the hypotheses, there is a higher willingness to recommend their riding school in contented or loyal customers and so to a positive "word-of-mouth" advertising (ANDERSON, 1998; BOWEN & CHEN, 2001; LAM ET AL., 2004). As riding schools often lack a budget for professional public relations or advertising, the active recommendation behaviour of satisfied pupils is an important instrument for gaining new customers and preventing customer loss (HOMBURG ET AL., 2005; VILLANUEVA ET

AL., 1998). In addition, this type of customer acquisition is more effective and cheaper than other methods of acquiring new customers. Via word-of-mouth advertising it is possible to turn people generally interested in equestrian sport into recreational sportspeople (TIETZE, 2004).

As discussed in the introduction, there is a recognisably strong tendency for deregulation (e.g. a trend not to be bound by rules and a turning away from having to compete with others) in the field of sport and a growing desire to couple sport with additional things (e.g. holidays, social contacts, etc.). As a consequence, riding schools might be particularly successful if they do not neglect the mass sport aspect and if they additionally include things outside of equestrian sport in their range of products (TIETZE, 2004).

As the current investigation has presented only an initial examination of customer satisfaction in riding schools, it should therefore be considered as a pilot study with an explorative character. This study also does not claim to be representative because of its small number of probands. Consequently, the number of customers questioned and the number of riding schools will be increased in future studies. As a pertinent exploratory study, this investigation has confirmed the significance of customer satisfaction in a riding school in binding customers to the school in the long term and in its ability to increase the customers' recommendation behaviour, thereby inspiring children and adolescents to do equestrian sport. Due to the increasing number of adults with little riding experience who are interested in doing equestrian sport, either as newcomers or returners (IPSOS, 2001), it would be sensible to undertake a similar investigation in adult riding school pupils so that this target group in this growing market can be served appropriately.

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Die Wurzeln der **Fakultät für Agrarwissenschaften** reichen in das 19. Jahrhundert zurück. Mit Ausgang des Wintersemesters 1951/52 wurde sie als siebente Fakultät an der Georgia-Augusta-Universität durch Ausgliederung bereits existierender landwirtschaftlicher Disziplinen aus der Mathematisch-Naturwissenschaftlichen Fakultät etabliert.

1969/70 wurde durch Zusammenschluss mehrerer bis dahin selbständiger Institute das **Institut für Agrarökonomie** gegründet. Im Jahr 2006 wurden das Institut für Agrarökonomie und das Institut für Rurale Entwicklung zum heutigen **Department für Agrarökonomie und Rurale Entwicklung** zusammengeführt.

Das Department für Agrarökonomie und Rurale Entwicklung besteht aus insgesamt neun Professuren mit folgenden Themenschwerpunkten:

- Agrarpolitik
- Betriebswirtschaftslehre des Agribusiness
- Internationale Agrarökonomie
- Landwirtschaftliche Betriebslehre
- Landwirtschaftliche Marktlehre
- Marketing für Lebensmittel und Agrarprodukte
- Soziologie Ländlicher Räume
- Umwelt- und Ressourcenökonomik
- Welternährung und rurale Entwicklung

In der Lehre ist das Department für Agrarökonomie und Rurale Entwicklung führend für die Studienrichtung Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften des Landbaus sowie maßgeblich eingebunden in die Studienrichtungen Agribusiness und Ressourcenmanagement. Das Forschungsspektrum des Departments ist breit gefächert. Schwerpunkte liegen sowohl in der Grundlagenforschung als auch in angewandten Forschungsbereichen. Das Department bildet heute eine schlagkräftige Einheit mit international beachteten Forschungsleistungen.

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