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Research Article

EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPLOYEES' INTERNAL MARKETING LEVELS AND THE WINTER TOURISM SERVICE QUALITY PERCEIVED BY TOURISTS

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Abstract

Using a relational screening model, this study aims to determine the relationship between the internal marketing levels of employees and the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists participating in winter sports tourism. In the study, data from 974 participants, including 462 employees and 512 tourists, were collected to answer the research questions. The analysis of the data first involved the assessment of the validity and reliability of the data collection tools. Then, methods that are suitable for the data were identified, and the research questions were answered using parametric statistical techniques. The results showed that the internal marketing levels of the employees and the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by the tourists were high. Additionally, it was concluded that there is a weak, positive, and significant relationship between the internal marketing levels of the employees and the quality of winter sports tourism services perceived by the tourists. Moreover, the results showed that the internal marketing levels of the employees explained 1.4% of the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by the tourists. It was also determined that the internal marketing levels of employees and the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists differ based on several variables. The study's results lead to several recommendations for researchers, decision makers, and practitioners.

Keywords: Service Quality, Internal Marketing, Winter Sports Tourism, Sarıkamış

Introduction

Winter sports tourism is a significant sector of the tourism industry that concentrates in regions where various winter activities such as skiing, mountaineering, and ice skating are conducted, attracting millions of tourists annually. This tourism sector requires high-quality services and an effective marketing approach, as well as natural beauty and suitable climatic conditions (Bichler and Pikkemaat, 2021: 2). Customer expectations in winter sports tourism are not limited to basic services such as accommodation and transportation, but also include the organization of events, security measures, and entertainment elements (Gozalova, Shchikanov, Vernigor and Bagdasarian, 2014: 93). In this context, the concepts of internal marketing and service quality have an important place in terms of successful business management and customer satisfaction.

Internal marketing can be described as the process of accepting an organization's employees as service providers and providing them with the necessary training and motivation (Ay and Kartal, 2003: 16). In busy seasonal and customer-oriented sectors such as winter tourism, employee satisfaction and motivation directly affect service quality. In fast-paced and seasonal labor-intensive sectors such as winter sports, employee satisfaction, training and motivation are among the factors that determine service quality (Kaurav, Paul and Chowdhary, 2015: 313). Internal marketing strategies aim to improve the performance of employees who deal directly with the customer by increasing the service quality of the staff (Ahmed and Rafiq, 2003: 1179), which is an important factor to gain competitive advantage and create customer loyalty in winter sports tourism. Service quality can be defined as providing services that meet tourists' expectations and satisfy them (Park and Jeong, 2019: 20). Winter sports tourism involves high standards and special demands. Providing quality service is one of the key elements of increasing customer satisfaction and attracting returning visitors. Ensuring that customers have a safe, fun, and comfortable experience can directly affect the success of businesses (Şen,

Taş and Güneş, 2024: 82). Employee satisfaction and motivation provided by internal marketing can enable sustainable success by supporting service quality (Wu, Wang and Ling, 2021: 2). This study aims to reveal the relationship between internal marketing levels of employees in winter sports tourism and service quality and to offer recommendations on human resources management and motivation strategies for businesses in the sector based on the results. This study also aims to develop recommendations that can contribute to increasing the competitiveness of businesses by encouraging more efficient and satisfactory service delivery in the tourism sector.

Conceptual Framework

Internal Marketing

In the business world, it is becoming increasingly difficult for organizations to achieve success by focusing only on foreign markets. The sustainable success of businesses depends on the motivation, loyalty, and satisfaction of their employees, who are their internal customers (Brown et al., 2024: 13). Internal marketing has evolved day by day to align employees with the organizational culture, increase their performance, and strengthen overall business efficiency. Internal marketing has become a strategic tool that directly affects not only employee satisfaction but also customer satisfaction (Serafim et al., 2024: 1215).

Internal marketing can be defined as practices aiming to increase the commitment of all stakeholders within the business (employees, managers, etc.) to the goals and values of the organization (Özdemir, 2014:58). Effective implementation of internal marketing can positively impact a company's profitability by increasing the satisfaction of both employees and customers. Employees are the most important representatives of the business. The motivation and loyalty of employees directly reflect positively on customer experience (Telli, Işıkay and Demir, 2022:58). A successful internal marketing strategy includes elements such as open communication, employee participation, continuous improvement opportunities, and rewards. Organizations can strengthen their employees' commitment to the company by valuing their ideas (Awad et al., 2024:556). Additionally, internal marketing can allow employees to increase their capabilities by investing in training and development processes. When employees feel valued, they have higher motivation, which directly improves their performance (Qiu, Boukis and Storey, 2022:53).

Internal marketing is an important strategy for modern businesses to grow and achieve sustainable success. Employee motivation, commitment, and general satisfaction can also directly affect the external success of organizations (Kocaman, Durna and İnal, 2013: 22). Internal marketing not only supports employee development but can also help create a stronger brand identity, increasing the company's competitiveness. Therefore, every organization needs internal marketing strategies to achieve success (Awwad and Mohammad Lafi, 2023: 302-303).

Service Quality

The service sector has become an important component of today's economy, and increasing competition requires businesses to make improving service quality a priority (Ghotbabadi, Feiz and Baharun, 2015:268). Service quality is one of the most critical factors in the success of a business to increase customer satisfaction, ensure customer loyalty, and strengthen the brand (Aydın, 2005: 1111). Service sector businesses have had to constantly monitor and improve service quality, both due to the nature of the service and the diversity of customer expectations. Service quality can be defined as a concept that determines to what extent a service meets customer expectations and how it affects customer satisfaction (Woo and Ennew, 2005: 1180). Customers assess both the physical service and the delivery of the service in the businesses from which they receive service. These evaluations directly affect the sustainability and success of the business (Tuncer, Unusan and Cobanoglu, 2021: 450).

Quality in the service sector is related not only to the technical and managerial aspects of the service but also to its interaction with the customer. The value and experience felt by the customer play a much more important role in determining the quality of the service (Kılıç, 2010: 121). In service sector businesses, service quality is a critical factor for success, and increasing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and brand value is possible by improving service quality. Continuous improvement of service quality dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, empathy, physical evidence, and trust) will provide a competitive advantage to businesses. Additionally, effective use of technology and customer feedback can help improve service quality (Akbaba, 2006: 173). Identification of providing quality service as a goal for service sector businesses not only meets customer expectations but can also ensure sustainable growth of businesses in the long term (Khoo, 2022: 106-107).

Research Purpose, Significance, and Questions

To better understand the purpose of this study, firstly, the literature on internal marketing and service quality perception was examined. As shown in Table 1 presenting relevant research, there are studies showing the positive effects that internal marketing has on organizational commitment (Kocaman, Durna and İnal, 2013), job satisfaction-performance (Ergün and Boz, 2017; Ekti and Buluk, 2018; Yıldız, 2017), customer satisfaction (De Bruin, Roberts-Lombard and De Meyer-Heydenrych, 2021; Kadic-Maglajlic, Boso and Micevski, 2018; Özdemir, 2014; Piercy, 1995) and service quality (Akroush et al., 2013; Barnes, Fox and Morris, 2004; Joseph, 1996; Tsai and Tang, 2008; Tsai and Wu, 2011). Although numerous studies in the literature demonstrate the impact of internal marketing on customer satisfaction and service quality, the limited number of studies examining the relationship between internal marketing and perceived winter sports service quality using data obtained from both employees and tourist consumers indicates that this study holds a unique value. However, in this study, the results obtained by obtaining data from both employees and tourist consumers are presented with a multifaceted perspective. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to tourism managers, marketing employees, researchers, and marketing/tourism literature.

This study primarily aimed to determine the internal marketing levels of the employees of the accommodation establishments operating in Sarıkamış Ski Resort. Additionally, the study also aimed to determine the level of service quality perceived by tourists in Sarıkamış Ski Resort, focusing on winter sports. In addition to these objectives of the study, it was aimed to determine the relationship between the internal marketing levels of the employees and the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by the tourists participating in winter sports tourism. On the other hand, another purpose of the study is to examine the internal marketing levels of employees according to the variables of gender, marital status, age, education level, average income (monthly), and year of work (in the same business) and to examine the differences in winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists according to the variables of gender, marital status, age, education level, having visited Sarıkamış before, and the type of accommodation establishment. In quantitative studies with a correlational research design, hypotheses can be formulated; however, research questions are often preferred, especially in exploratory or descriptive studies. This choice depends on the context of the research and the data analysis approach. Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012: 83) state that, unlike hypotheses, research questions can be used to guide the general direction of the study rather than explicitly predicting the existence or possible direction of a relationship. Similarly, Creswell (2012: 138) emphasizes that, particularly in correlational designs, the use of research questions provides a flexible framework for examining the nature of relationships between variables. On the other hand, Büyüköztürk et al. (2020: 110) indicate that the correlational research model aims to reveal the existence and direction of relationships among variables and that hypotheses are not mandatory. For these reasons, in the present study, since the goal is to explore, describe, and reveal the relationship between employees' levels of internal marketing and tourists' perceived service quality in winter sports tourism without predefining the direction of this relationship, research questions were preferred over hypotheses. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the main research question to be answered is: *"1. What is the effect of employees' internal marketing levels on tourists' perceived service quality in the winter sports tourism sector, and do these levels significantly differ according to the demographic characteristics of employees and tourists?"* To thoroughly address this main research question, the following sub-research questions are posed:

1.1. What are the internal marketing levels of the employees?

1.2. What are the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists?

1.3. Is there a statistically significant difference between the internal marketing levels of employees and the variables of gender, marital status, age, education level, average income (monthly), and the number of years worked in the same organization?

1.4. Is there a statistically significant difference between the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists and the variables of gender, marital status, age, education level, having visited Sarıkamış before, and type of accommodation establishment?

1.5. Is there a statistically significant relationship between employees' internal marketing levels and tourists' perceived winter sports tourism service quality?

1.6. Are employees' internal marketing levels a statistically significant predictor of the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists?

Method

Research Model

The design of this study employs a quantitative method, the relational screening method, that is commonly used in studies focusing on the relationship between variables (Büyüköztürk et al., 2020). By describing a subject (tendency, attitude, perception, etc.), the relational screening method shows the relationship and impact between the relevant quantitative variables and their weight to reveal (Creswell, 2017; Erdoğan, 2021; Karasar, 2021). The quantitative nature of the relational screening method made it suitable for this study, which aimed to determine the internal marketing levels of employees at Sarıkamış Ski Center and the service quality perceived by tourists, focusing on winter sports. The implementation of the study took approximately six months. Approval for the application was obtained from the Sarıkamış District Governorship, and *ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Committee of Kafkas University.* Data were collected between December 30, 2024, and February 10, 2025. Throughout all stages of the research, scientific ethical principles were strictly adhered to.

Population and Sample

The data of this study were obtained from two different samples selected from two different main populations. The first main population of the study consists of employees of accommodation establishments in Sarıkamış Ski Resort. The second main audience of the study consists of touristic consumers visiting Sarıkamış Ski Resort. Since it was not possible to reach the entire population of both groups, sampling was used. At this stage, a simple random sampling method was used to give each individual in the main population the same opportunity to participate in the sampling. In this sampling method, the researcher aimed to contribute to the reliability of the study by obtaining data from randomly selected individuals from the main population (Büyüköztürk et al., 2020; Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2012). The sample size was calculated with 95% confidence and 5% error according to the sample calculation formula ($n = \frac{t^2 pq}{d^2} = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.5)(0.5)}{(0.5)^2}$) for which the main population is unknown, and it was determined that at least 384 participants from both sample groups should be reached. During the data collection process, 462 employees of accommodation establishments were interviewed in person using the "Internal Marketing Scale in Service Firms," while 512 tourist consumers were reached through remote participation (online) with the "Sports Tourism Service Quality Scale." Ultimately, data were collected from a total of 974 participants. The demographics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

| Employees				Tourist Consumers			
Demographics		**n**	**%**	**Demographics**		**n**	**%**
Gender	Female	172	37.2	**Gender**	Female	296	
	Male	290	62.8		Male	216	
Marital Status	Married	168	36.4	**Marital Status**	Married	181	
	Single	294	63.6		Single	331	
Age	18-30	245	53.0	**Age**	18-30	187	
	31-42	135	29.2		31-42	189	
	43-55	42	9.1		43-55	92	
	56+	40	8.7		56+	44	
Level of Education	Primary Education	66	14.3	**Level of Education**	Primary Education	30	
	High School	180	39.0		High School	236	
	University	216	46.8		University	246	
Average Income (Monthly)	₺ 15.000-30.000	294	63.6	**Accommodation Establishment Type**	3-4* Hotel	167	
	₺ 30.001-45.000	120	26.0		5* Hotel	235	
	₺ 45.001 or more	48	10.4		Other	110	
Years of Employment (Same Establishment)	Less than 5 years	274	59.3	**Previous Visits to Sarıkamış**	Yes	203	
	More than 5 years	188	40.7		No	309	

Data Collection Tools

In this study, the data were collected using the Sport Tourism Service Quality Scale (STSQS) developed by Osmanoğlu et al. (2018), the Internal Marketing Scale for Service Firms (IMSSF) developed by Weber (2015) and adopted to Turkish by Yüksekbilgili (2018), and the Information Form (IF). The STSQS was used to collect data from tourist consumers visiting the Sarıkamış Ski Resort, and the IMSSF was used to collect data from employees at the Sarıkamış Ski Resort accommodation establishments.

While the 28-item STSQS consists of 5 dimensions – Sports Area Dimension (13 items), Employees Dimension (6 items), Entertainment Dimension (4 items), Hygiene Dimension (3 items), and Hotel Room Dimension (2 items)- the IMSSF, consisting of 10 items, has a one-dimensional structure. While the Information Form includes six questions regarding the demographics of employees such as gender, education level, age, marital status, income, and years of employment, the information form for tourism consumers consists of six items that are gender, education level, age, marital status, previous visit to Sarıkamış, and the preferred type of accommodation establishment.

The validity and reliability of STSQS were determined by Osmanoğlu et al. (2018), while the validity and reliability of IMSSF were checked by Weber (2014) and Yüksekbilgili (2018). However, validity and reliability studies were also conducted in this study to increase the validity and reliability of the results. In this context, the construct validity of the scales used in the study was tested with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), while the reliability of the data was checked with the Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient. The CFA diagram of STSQS and IMSSF are presented in Figure 1, and the analysis results are presented in Table 2.

Figure 1. CFA diagrams of STSQS and IMSSF
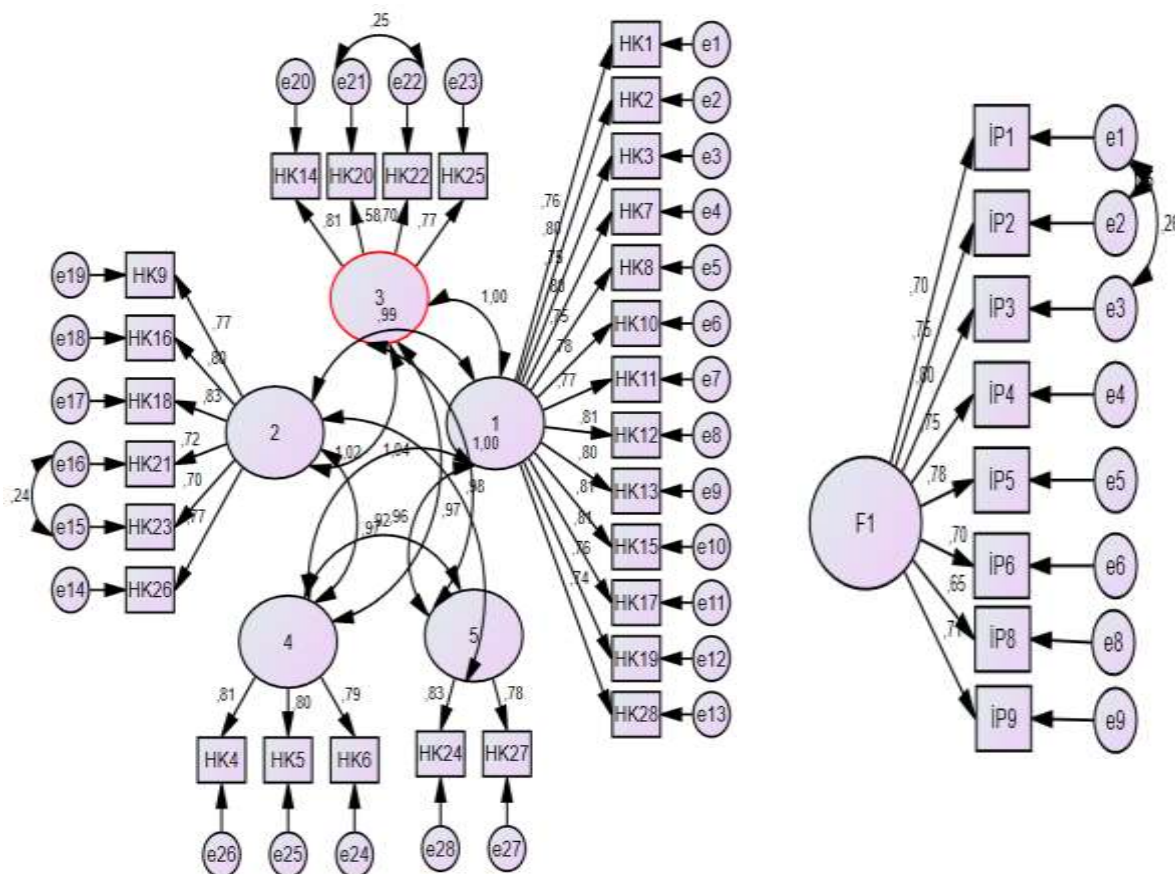
The item factor loadings for the STSQS and IMSSF data collection tools are higher than .50, as shown in Figure 1. This is within the reference ranges set by Jöreskop and Sorbom (1993) and indicates that the items are significant in the scale. However, low factor loading led to the removal of item 7 from the IMSSF scale. Additionally, modifications were made between items 1-2, 1-3 in IMSSF and items 20-22, 21-23 in STSQS. At the final stage, the fit index values obtained from CFA are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. CFA Results (Fit Indices*) for STSQS and IMSSF

Fit Indices	Values		Results		Evaluation	
	Good	*Acceptable*	**STSQS**	**IMSSF**	**STSQS**	**IMSSF**
CMIN/DF	$0<\chi^2/sd\leq3$	$3<\chi^2/sd\leq5$	2.896	3.337	*Good*	*Acceptable*
RMSEA	$0\leq RMSEA\leq.05$	$.05\leq RMSEA\leq.08$	.061	.071	*Acceptable*	*Acceptable*
GFI	$.90<GFI\leq1$	$.80<GFI\leq.90$	.876	.969	*Acceptable*	*Good*
AGFI	$.90<GFI\leq1$	$.80<GFI\leq.90$	.851	.937	*Acceptable*	*Good*
CFI	$.95<CFI\leq1$	$.90<CFI\leq.94$	.946	.979	*Good*	*Good*
RMR	$0\leq RMR\leq.05$	$0.05\leq SRMR\leq.10$	.037	.047	*Good*	*Good*
TLI	$.95<TLI\leq1$	$.90<TLI\leq.94$	.940	.967	*Good*	*Good*
NFI	$.95<TLI\leq1$	$.90<TLI\leq.94$	.920	.970	*Good*	*Good*
DF			338	18		
CMIN			978.902	60.062		

Fit Index Reference Range Values: (Byrne, 2011; Hooper, Coughan and Mullen, 2008; Kline, 2011; Schermelleh-Engel and Moosbrugger, 2003; Yaşlıoğlu, 2017)

As shown in Table 2, the fit indices of STSQS and IMSSF are within the reference ranges. This finding also ensures the construct validity of the data collection tools. Table 3 presents the Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficients (CAICC) obtained to check the reliability of the data obtained from STSQS and IMSSF.

Table 3. CA Values

IMSSF	CA	STSQS	CA
		Sports AreaDimension (13 Items)	.953
		Employee Dimension (6 Items)	.894
IMSSF-Total Scale (9 Items)	**.907**	Entertainment Dimension (4 Items)	.813
		Hygiene Dimension (3 Items)	.841
		Hotel Room Dimension (2 Items)	.782
		STSQS-Total Scale (28 Items)	**.975**

The CA values of IMSSF and STSQS presented in Table 3 are within the reference ranges defined by Vaske et al. (2017), and the data were found to be highly reliable. On the other hand, the STSQS and IMSSF are 5-point Likert scales with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The grading of the scales is 1.00- 1.80=Very Low, 1.81-2.60=Low, 2.61-3.40=Medium, 3.41-4.20=High, 4.21-5.00=High level.

Data Analysis

The data obtained through data collection tools were converted into numerical data, and the analysis process was completed using statistical package programs. The normality of the research data was assessed first during the statistical analysis procedure to determine the appropriate analytical methods. At this stage, Kolmogorov-Smirnov/Shapiro-Wilk (K-S/S-W) tests, graphs (box plot-histogram, etc.), skewness/kurtosis, mean ($\overline{x}$)- standard deviation (sd) data were considered as a whole. The data obtained were found to be within the reference values specified by Büyüköztürk (2019), Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) and George and Mallery (2000) for the formation of normal distribution conditions (p>.05 for K-S/S-W, $\pm$1.5 for skewness/kurtosis). Homogeneity of the data was assessed with the Levene test, which showed that there was homogeneity of variance. Accordingly, answers to the research questions were sought during the analysis process by using independent sample T-tests, one-way variance analysis, Pearson correlation coefficient, and simple linear regression, which are parametric statistical techniques.

Results

Table 4 shows the mean ($\overline{x}$) and standard deviation (sd) scores for IMSSF and STSQS to determine the internal marketing levels of employees and the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists.

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviation Scores for IMSSF and STSQS

Data Collection Tools - DCT	Dimension/Overall	n	$\overline{x}$	sd	Level
STSQS	Sports Area		3.90	.83	**High**
	Employee		3.88	.86	**High**
	Entertainment	512	3.87	.83	**High**
	Hygiene		3.90	.88	**High**
	Hotel Room		3.97	.91	**High**
	STSQS-Overall		**3.90**	**.92**	**High**
IMSSF	**IMSSF-Overall**	462	**3.45**	**.87**	**High**

Table 4 shows that the levels of overall STSQS and its dimensions [($\overline{x}$ $_{Sports\ Area}$=*3.90/sd.83*); ($\overline{x}$ $_{Employees}$=*3.88/sd.86*); ($\overline{x}$ $_{Entertainment}$=*3.87/sd.83*); ($\overline{x}$ $_{Hygiene}$=*3.90/sd.88*); ($\overline{x}$ $_{Hotel\ Room}$=*3.97/sd.91*); ($\overline{x}$ $_{STSQS-Overall}$=*3.90/sd.92*)] were high. Similarly, IMSSF was determined to be at a high level (=3.45/sd.87). On the other hand, it was also found that the level of winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists was high.

Tables 5 and 6 present the results of the analyses completed to determine the differentiation of employees' internal marketing levels in terms of gender, marital status, age, education level, average income (monthly), and years of employment (in the same establishment).

Table 5. Difference Tests-1 for IMSSF

Variable	DCT	Classification	n	$\overline{x}$	ss	sd	t	p
Gender	IMSSF	Female	172	3.45	.79	460	-.023	.982
		Male	290	3.45	.92			
Marital Status	IMSSF	Married	168	3.33	.83	460	-2.387	**.017***
		Single	294	3.53	.89			
Years of Employment	IMSSF	Less than 5 years	274	3.33	.92	460	-3.560	**.000***
		More than 5 years	188	3.62	.77			

Table 5 shows that employees' internal marketing levels differ statistically in terms of marital status (t$_{(460)}$=-2.387, p<.05) and years of employment (t$_{(460)}$=-3.560, p<.05); no significant difference was found in terms of gender (t$_{(460)}$=-.023, p>.05). In terms of the marital status variable, a significant difference was identified between employees who are married ($\overline{x}$ =3.33, sd=.83) and employees who are single ($\overline{x}$ =3.53, sd=.92) in favor of single employees. In terms of years of employment, there was a significant difference between individuals who worked for less than 5 years ($\overline{x}$ = 3.33, sd = .92) and individuals who worked for more than 5 years ($\overline{x}$ = 3.62, sd = .77) in favor of individuals who worked for more than 5 years.

Table 6. Difference Tests-2 for IMSSF

Variable	DCT	Classification	n	$\overline{x}$	ss	sd		KO	F	p	Difference
Average Income	IMSSF	1) 15.000-30.000	294	3.33	.93	GA	2	7.285	9.966	**.000***	2>1, 3>1,
		2) 30.001-45.000	120	3.57	.75	Gİ	459	.731			
		3) 45.000+	48	3.67	.61						
Education Level	IMSSF	1) Primary Education	66	3.26	.73	GA	2	8.766	12.099	**.000***	3>1, 3>2
		2) High School	180	3.27	.99	Gİ	459	.724			
		3) University	216	3.66	.76						
Age	IMSSF	1) 18-30	245	3.45	.88	GA	3	3.149	4.235	**.006***	3>2, 4>2
		2) 31-42	135	3.30	.91						
		3) 43-55	42	3.73	.69	Gİ	458	.744			
		4) 56+	40	3.73	.69						

Table 6 shows that the employees' levels of internal marketing were statistically different based on their average income (F$_{(2-459)}$=9.966, p<.05), education level (F$_{(2-459)}$=12.099, p<.05) and age (F$_{(3-458)}$=4.235, p<.05). The intra-group differences obtained in the LSD test performed to determine the intra-group differences are as follows: In terms of average income variable, there was a significant difference between employees with an income of 15,000-30,000 TL ($\overline{x}$=3.33, sd=.93) and employees with an income of 30,001-45,000 TL ($\overline{x}$ =

3.57, sd = .75) and 45,000+TL ($\overline{X}$ = 3.67, sd = .61) in favor of those with an income of 15,000-30,000 TL. In terms of educational level, it was found that there was a significant difference between employees with a university degree ($\overline{X}$ = 3.66, sd = .76) and employees with a primary education ($\overline{X}$ = 3.26, sd = .73) and high school education ($\overline{X}$ = 3.27, sd = .99) in favor of employees with a university degree. In terms of the age variable, it was found that there was a significant difference between employees aged 56+ ($\overline{X}$ =3.73, sd=.69) and 45-55 ($\overline{X}$ =3.73, sd=.69) and employees aged 31-42 ($\overline{X}$ =3.30, sd=.91) compared to those aged 31-42.

Tables 7 and 8 present the results of the analyses completed to determine the differences in winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists in terms of the variables of gender, marital status, age, education level, having visited Sarıkamış before, and type of accommodation establishment.

Table 7. Difference Tests-1 for STSQS

Variable	DCT	Classification	n	$\overline{X}$	ss	sd	t	p
Gender	STSQS	Female	296	3.92	.77	510	.554	.580
		Male	216	3.88	.88			
Marital Status	STSQS	Married	181	4.10	.63	510	4.200	**.000***
		Single	331	3.79	.89			
Previous Visits	STSQS	Yes	203	3.78	.88	510	2.71	**.007***
		No	309	3.98	.77			

Table 7 shows that the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists differ statistically in terms of marital status (t$_{(510)}$=4.200, p<.05) and previous visit (t$_{(510)}$=2.71, p<.05), while no significant difference was found in terms of gender ((t$_{(510)}$=.554, p<.05). In terms of the marital status variable, a significant difference was found between married tourists ($\overline{X}$ =4.10, sd=.63) and single tourists ($\overline{X}$ =3.79, sd=.89) in favor of married tourists. In terms of the variable of previous visit, there was a significant difference between individuals who had visited Sarıkamış before ($\overline{X}$ =3.78, sd=.88) and individuals who had not visited Sarıkamış before ($\overline{X}$ =3.98, sd=.77) in favor of individuals who had not visited Sarıkamış before.

Table 8. Difference Tests-2 for STSQS

Variable	DCT	Classification	n	$\overline{X}$	ss	sd		KO	F	p	Difference
Type of Accommodation Establishment	STSQS	3-4* Hotel	167	3.99	.71	GA	2	18.070	30.041	**.000***	1>3, 2>3
		5* Hotel	235	4.06	.61	Gİ	509	.602			
		Other	110	3.39	1.12						
Educational Level	STSQS	1) Primary	30	4.07	.76	GA	2	14.609	23.751	**.000***	1>3, 2>3
		2) High School	236	4.14	.51	Gİ	509	.615			
		3) University	246	3.65	.98						
Age	STSQS	1) 18-30	187	3.50	1.05	GA	3	15.768	27.153	**.000***	2>1, 3>1, 4>1
		2) 31-42	189	4.16	.45	Gİ	508	.581			
		3) 43-55	92	4.12	.63						
		4) 56+	44	3.98	.61						

According to the results presented in Table 8, the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by the tourists differed statistically in terms of the type of accommodation establishment (F$_{(2-509)}$=30.041, p<.05), educational status (F$_{(2-509)}$=23.751, p<.05), and age (F$_{(3-508)}$=27.153, p<.05). The intra-group differences found in the LSD test performed to determine the intra-group differences are as follows: In terms of the accommodation establishment type variable, there was a significant difference between the tourists staying in 3-4 ($\overline{X}$ =3.99, sd=.71) and 5-star ($\overline{X}$ =4.06, sd=.61) hotels and the tourists staying in other ($\overline{X}$ =3.39, sd=.12) accommodation establishments (hostels, apartments, 1-2 star hotels, etc.) in the tourists staying in other accommodation establishments. In terms of the educational level variable, there was a significant difference between tourists who are university graduates ($\overline{X}$ = 3.65, sd = .98) and tourists who are primary school graduates ($\overline{X}$ =4.07, sd = .76) and high school graduates ($\overline{X}$ = 4.14, sd = .51) tourists. In terms of age, there was a significant difference between tourists in the age groups 31-42 ($\overline{X}$ =4.16, sd=.45), 43-55 ($\overline{X}$ =4.12, sd=.63), and 56+ ($\overline{X}$ =3.98, sd=.61) and tourists between the ages of 18-30 ($\overline{X}$ =3.50, sd=1.05), to the detriment of employees between the ages of 18-30.

The analyses completed to determine the relationship between the internal marketing levels of the employees and the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by the tourists and the (r) and (p) values obtained are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. The Relationship Between IMSSF and STSQS

DCT/Dimension		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1-Sports Area	r	1						
	p							
2-Employees	r	.904**	1					
	p	.000						
3-Entertainment	r	.849**	.878**	1				
	p	.000	.000					
4-Hygiene	r	.911**	.832**	.780**	1			
	p	.000	.000	.000				
5-Hotel Room	r	.830**	.809**	.774**	.750**	1		
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000			
6-STSQS	r	.984**	.953**	.909**	.919**	.865**	1	
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000		
7-IMSSF	r	**.111***	**.104***	**.121****	**.109***	**.148****	**.119***	**1**
	p	**.017**	**.025**	**.009**	**.019**	**.001**	**.010**	

*significance at the p<.05 level, **significance at the p<.01 level

Table 9 shows that there is a weak, positive, and significant relationship between the internal marketing levels of employees and the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists. Additionally, it was determined that there was a weak, positive, and significant relationship between the STSQS dimensions and IMSSF. This result shows that the increase in employees' attitudes towards internal marketing activities carried out in businesses can have a positive effect on tourists' winter sports tourism service quality perceptions.

Table 10 shows the results of the simple linear regression analysis completed to determine whether employees' internal marketing levels predict the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists.

Table 10. Regression Analysis

Pred. Variable	B	SH	Beta	t	p	Tol.	VIF	DW	R	R^2	F (p<.05)
Constant	3.481	.160	.119	21.826	.000	1.00	1.00	1.54	.119	.014	6.618
Internal Mark.	.115	.045		2.573	.010						

As shown in Table 10, the validity of the regression analysis was checked with the Durbin-Watson (DW) value. Kalaycı (2010) states that there is no autocorrelation if the DW value is between 1.5 and 2.5. As the DW value in this study was 1.54, there was no autocorrelation. In addition, the fact that VIF and tolerance values are 1.00 shows that there is no problem with multicollinearity.

According to Table 10, employees' internal marketing levels explain 1.4% of the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists (R=.119; R^2=.014). In other words, employees' internal marketing levels can only affect 1.4% of the winter sports tourism service quality among tourists. This finding shows that the attitudes of employees towards internal marketing practices carried out by businesses can have a limited impact on the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

Aiming to determine the relationship between the internal marketing levels of employees and the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists participating in winter sports tourism, this study sought answers to the research questions by obtaining data from a total of 974 individuals, 462 employees and 512 tourists, using the relational scanning model. The analysis of the data included first examining the validity and reliability of the data collection tools. Then, the analysis methods suitable for the data were determined, and the research questions were answered using the parametric statistical methods, including independent sample t-test, one-way analysis of variance, Pearson correlation coefficient, and simple linear regression.

The analyses conducted to answer the first and second research questions that were "What are the internal marketing levels of employees?" and "What are the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists?" revealed that the internal marketing levels of the employees and the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by the tourists were high. While these results indicate that employees evaluate the internal marketing activities carried out by businesses at a high level, they also reveal that the quality level of winter sports tourism service enjoyed by tourists is high. When these results were compared with the literature, Ataman et al. (2017), Ataberk (2007), and Kılıç and Eleren (2009) determined the level of service quality

perceived by tourists as high. Öztürk and Seyhan (2005) identified deficiencies in the service quality perceived by tourists. Kocaman et al. (2013) found that the internal marketing levels of tourism employees were medium.

The analyses completed to answer the third research question, which was "Is there a statistically significant difference between the internal marketing levels of employees and the variables of gender, marital status, age, education level, average earnings (monthly), and years of employment (in the same enterprise)?", revealed that the internal marketing levels of employees differ statistically in terms of marital status, age, education level, average earnings (monthly), and years of employment (in the same enterprise), while there was no significant difference was in terms of gender. According to the findings of the study, internal marketing activities implemented by businesses are perceived at a higher level by employees who are single, aged 43 and above, hold a university degree, earn a monthly income exceeding 30,000 TL, and have been working in the same organization for more than five years. This indicates that internal marketing practices may be more effective for certain demographic groups. When compared with the existing literature, these results show both similarities and discrepancies. For instance, Aliyeva (2019) found no significant differences in internal marketing perceptions based on marital status, age, or education level, whereas this study revealed significant differences for these variables. Similarly, Güçlüer (2019) and Of (2019) reported no significant differences regarding age and educational level, which contrasts with the present findings. On the other hand, Göyşen (2015) found that internal marketing differed according to age, partially supporting the results of this study. Overall, the current research contributes to the literature by highlighting that employees' perceptions of internal marketing vary according to demographic characteristics and underscores the importance for businesses to tailor their internal marketing strategies in alignment with employee profiles to enhance their effectiveness. These findings confirm that employees' perceptions of internal marketing vary according to demographic characteristics and emphasize the critical importance of tailoring internal marketing strategies to employee profiles to enhance their effectiveness.

The fourth research question of the study was, "Is there a statistically significant difference between the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists and the variables of gender, marital status, age, education level, having visited Sarıkamış before, and type of accommodation establishment?" The results showed that while the winter sports tourism service quality levels perceived by tourists differed statistically in terms of marital status, age, education level, having visited Sarıkamış before, and type of accommodation establishment, there was no significant difference in terms of the gender variable. In summary, the study found that tourists' perceived quality of winter sports tourism services significantly differed based on marital status, age, education level, prior visits to Sarıkamış, and type of accommodation, while no significant differences were observed concerning gender. Specifically, married tourists, those over 30 years old, non-university graduates, first-time visitors to Sarıkamış, and individuals staying at 3-star or higher-rated hotels reported higher perceptions of service quality. These findings partially align with Mercanoğlu (2015), who identified variations in perceived service quality according to gender, age, income, and education, but contradict Ovalı's (2024) results, which found no differences by age and education. Furthermore, the gender-related differences reported by Yokuş et al. (2017) and Zorba (2024) were not supported in this study. Consequently, the current results suggest that certain socio-demographic factors substantially influence perceptions of winter sports tourism service quality, whereas gender does not serve as a significant determinant, thereby both corroborating and challenging prior mixed findings in the literature. These findings indicate that perceptions of winter sports tourism service quality are significantly influenced by certain socio-demographic variables, while gender does not serve as a decisive factor, thereby both confirming and challenging the mixed results found in the literature.

The fifth research question of the study was, "Is there a statistically significant relationship between employees' internal marketing levels and tourists' perceived winter sports tourism service quality?". The results of the analyses showed a weak, positive, significant relationship between the internal marketing levels of employees and the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists. Employees' positive attitudes toward internal marketing activities positively influence tourists' perceptions of winter sports tourism service quality. This finding aligns with the studies of Barnes et al. (2004), Helmi et al. (2022), Opoku et al. (2008), Sönmez (2018), Tsai and Tang (2008), and Usta (2010), which consistently demonstrate a positive relationship between internal marketing and perceived service quality. Therefore, strengthening internal marketing within enterprises can be considered a crucial strategic factor in enhancing the perceived quality of services. This result demonstrates that employees' internal marketing levels positively influence tourists' perceptions of winter sports tourism service quality, highlighting the strengthening of internal marketing within enterprises as a key strategic factor in enhancing perceived service quality.

The sixth research question of the study was, "Is the internal marketing level of employees a statistically significant predictor of the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists?". The results of the analyses revealed that the internal marketing levels of employees explain 1.4% of the winter sports tourism service quality perceived by tourists. This study demonstrates that employees' levels of internal marketing explain only 1.4% of tourists' perceived service quality in winter sports tourism, indicating a limited effect. Similarly, the literature reports comparable findings, with Aburoub (2011), Başaran et al. (2011), ELSamen and Alshurideh (2012), Hwang and Chi (2005), Joseph (1996), and Yang and Coates (2010) identifying a significant but limited impact of internal marketing on perceived service quality. These findings confirm the contribution of internal marketing to service quality perception, while highlighting the necessity to consider its effect alongside other influencing factors. This finding indicates that employees' internal marketing levels account for only a small portion of tourists' perceived winter sports tourism service quality, demonstrating a limited effect and underscoring the need to consider internal marketing alongside other influencing factors.

When compared with other studies, the findings of this research are supported and consistent with the existing literature. Based on the results obtained from the study, various recommendations are offered for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. In this context, to improve the internal marketing levels of employees, internal marketing activities that will positively affect employees' perceptions and attitudes towards the business (improving benefits, ensuring fair wage distribution according to performance, celebrating important days, offering promotion-career opportunities, etc.) can be carried out. It is recommended to improve the internal marketing levels of employees who are married, under the age of 43, have a university degree, have an income of less than 30,000 TL, and have been working in the same business for less than 5 years, whose internal marketing levels are found to be significantly low. Tourists who are single, under the age of 31, university graduates, have previously visited Sarıkamış, and stay in facilities such as pensions or apartments, exhibit significantly lower perceived levels of winter sports tourism service quality. It is believed that these tourists' limited accommodation budgets restrict their opportunities to fully experience the range of services offered within the scope of winter tourism. Therefore, to improve service quality perception, it is recommended to broaden the service portfolio by diversifying cultural, artistic, and sports activities, concerts, festivals, youth-oriented animation programs, and nightlife entertainment venues. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these activities is directly related to the role of a qualified and well-trained workforce in service delivery; hence, increasing the employment of skilled personnel and providing continuous training can be considered critical factors in enhancing perceived service quality. Although it was determined that employees' internal marketing levels had a limited effect on tourists' perceptions of winter sports tourism service quality, by effectively maintaining internal marketing activities in businesses, tourists' perceptions of winter sports tourism service quality can be improved. This can help businesses achieve their goals. This study was conducted specifically within the scope of winter tourism at the Sarıkamış Ski Center; however, the tourism sector is multidimensional and diverse. In this context, similar research focusing on different types of tourism (e.g., ecotourism, cultural tourism, health tourism) would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between tourism service quality and internal marketing, highlighting sectoral differences. Additionally, studies conducted in destinations other than Sarıkamış would allow for a better understanding of the impact of regional and spatial variations on perceived service quality. The study employed quantitative research methods, which offer generalizable results based on a large sample. However, since experiences and perceptions in tourism are highly multifaceted and complex, the use of qualitative methods is critically important for revealing participants' in-depth views, motivations, and perceptions. Therefore, it is expected that studies employing qualitative and mixed methods will produce findings that complement and enrich quantitative results. Furthermore, longitudinal (panel) research could be conducted to better understand the dynamic nature of the interaction between internal marketing and service quality. This approach would allow for a more detailed examination of changing perceptions and employee-tourist relationships over time. Finally, experimental studies and intervention designs measuring the effectiveness of training programs and internal marketing practices in tourism enterprises could be developed to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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