

Antecedents of members retention in fitness: study of Fitness Clubs in Portugal

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The objective of the present study is to understand the members retention antecedents on fitness clubs in Portugal, in the last five years. The fitness market in Portugal, although not exponentially, continues to grow (IHRSA, 2017). This phenomenon, which was expected to be positive for the market, also increased competition between fitness clubs. As a result, they had to adapt to the changes while at the same time try to keep their members as long as possible - members retention.

Members retention is critical in the fitness market because of its impact on the organizations' profitability. For these reasons, there is a great general interest from the academic and professional field to understand what leads members retention. Bodet (2006), in his study explored quality attributes in a sport service and relates consumers retention to perception about the attributes of the service, that is, how the consumer thinks and feels the attributes of that service. The influence of satisfaction on retention has been continuously explored and is a direct determinant factor in customer loyalty, which in turn is a central retention determinant (e.g. IHRSA, 2017). Some studies (e.g. Robinson, 2006) explain the fitness members retention through expectations for services in general and for fitness services in particular. Diener, Tay and Oishi (2013) equate well-being in life, including life satisfaction and positive and negative affects, this variable has already been tested as influential in satisfaction and consumption of fitness. In turn, the frequency of use is referred to by managers as influential, this variable has already been included in empirical studies of the fitness industry (Ferrand, 2011).

The current review of the literature is based on articles published in national and international literature about fitness in Portugal and peer-reviewed, from 2012 to 2017. The research was carried out in the B-on databases and university repositories, considering the analysis of article titles and key-words by considering terms related with the fitness industry (members retention, loyalty, gyms and health clubs), the consumption-related experiences (service quality, satisfaction, expectation, wellbeing, frequency of use), and the future behaviors (behavioral intentions, recommendations, purchase intentions). Only empirical studies conducted within the Portuguese fitness context and testing the psychometric properties of the proposed constructs were considered to be eligible (Biscaia, 2016). In the scope of this research, ten articles were found, of which three were eliminated, because they were prior to 2012. Thus, seven articles were considered in the triage, two PhD theses and thirteen publications of national and international congresses.

This review of the literature focuses on studies of the fitness industry in Portugal, from 2012 to 2017, and tries to understand what influences the retention of members in fitness clubs in this current context. Regarding the quality of the service, the results indicate that the perception of the attributes facilities, equipment, human resources and accessibility were the ones that most influenced the members retention in the Fitness Clubs. The influence of satisfaction on retention was continually reported in the studies under analysis as a direct and indirect variable for retention, but that alone is not sufficient for members retention. Sometimes the members of the fitness club are not satisfied but remain in the club for other reasons (e.g. accessibility, being with friends, kind employees). Likewise, satisfied customers may leave the club or even practice physical activity, due to work changes, personal life alterations, among others. Although most of the studies in analysis refer to expectations with a moderate effect on customer retention in fitness in Portugal, these have a direct relationship in the permanence of the members. Well-being in the Club was the greatest predictor of the intention to recommend and, consequently, retention. Curiously, the well-being in life was identified as having a negative influence on the permanence of the members in the Club. This may indicate that partners who feel well-being in life have no need and/or desire to participate in the practice of physical activity. A study applied in a Club of the biggest network of fitness in Portugal refer the frequency of use to be determinant for member retention in fitness. Thus, we can conclude that the studies in analysis recommend to fitness organizations in Portugal that, in order to retain members, they must match and, if possible, exceed their clients' expectations in service quality, human resources, facilities and equipment. In addition, fitness organizations should continually care about members, paying special attention to those who attend less the Fitness Clubs. Thus, the members' satisfaction should be assessed regularly in order to better predict their future intentions towards the relationship with the Club.

Keywords

well-being, frequency of use, expectations, quality of service, satisfaction

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