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Comprender a retenção de membros em centros de fitness: Um estudo em áreas urbanas de Portugal

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Resumo: Tem-se como objetivo compreender a retenção de membros e como esta é influenciada em clubes de fitness de áreas urbanas em Portugal. A retenção de clientes é crucial no fitness devido ao seu impacto na rentabilidade das organizações. Por esse motivo, vários estudos tentam compreender e explicar seus antecedentes. A metodologia baseou-se na revisão bibliográfica, incluiu artigos sobre retenção de fitness em Portugal, publicados entre 2012 e 2017 e revistos por pares. A pesquisa foi realizada nas bases de dados B-on e repositórios universitários. A análise incluiu o exame de títulos e palavras-chave das publicações, considerando os termos relacionados à retenção de clientes. The results refer to one of the largest Portuguese fitness networks. Os antecedentes que influenciam a retenção dos membros em centros de fitness em Portugal são a qualidade do serviço, os resultados indicam que a percepção de alguns atributos influencia a retenção (e.g. instalações e equipamentos). A influência da satisfação na retenção também tem sido relatada como uma variável direta e indireta para a retenção, mas não é suficiente para a retenção. As expectativas em relação aos clubes de fitness têm uma relação direta com a retenção de membros, embora moderada. O bem-estar no clube é um preditor da intenção de recomendar e, conseqüentemente, de retenção. Da mesma forma, a frequência de uso é usada como um determinante de retenção. Recomenda-se que as organizações de fitness, a fim de manter os membros, excedam as expectativas dos seus membros, prestando especial atenção àqueles que frequentam menos.

Palavras-chave: Comportamento do consumidor, marketing de serviços, academias e health clubs.

Abstract: The objective of this study is to understand retention of members and its antecedents in fitness clubs of urban areas in Portugal. Customer retention is crucial in the fitness industry because of its impact on the profitability of organizations. For this reason, several studies have focused on understanding and explaining their antecedents. The methodology was based on

literature review, including articles on retention of fitness in Portugal, published from 2012 to 2017, and peer-reviewed. The research was carried out in the B-on databases and university repositories. The analysis included the examination of titles and keywords of the publications, considering the terms related to fitness retention. The results refer to one of the largest Portuguese fitness networks. The antecedents that influence the members' retention in Portuguese fitness clubs are the service quality, the results indicate that the perception of some attributes influence the members' retention in Portuguese fitness clubs (e.g. facilities and equipment). The influence of satisfaction on retention has also been reported as a direct and indirect variable for retention, but that alone is not sufficient for retention. Expectations regarding fitness clubs have a direct relationship with retention of members, although moderate. Well-being in the Club is a predictor of the intention to recommend and, consequently, retention. Likewise, frequency of use is used as a determinant of retention. It is recommended too that fitness organizations, to retain members, exceed their members' expectations, paying special attention to those who attend less.

Key words: Consumer behavior, service marketing, gyms and health clubs.

1. Introduction

The fitness market continues to grow worldwide. In 2017, the International Health, Racquet & Sport Club Association (IHRSA) identified 55,003,000 Gyms and Health Clubs (GHC) with 56,900 million members, in Europe. In Portugal, where these studies were carried out, in 2017, 1430 GHC were registered to 770 thousand members. These figures have increased very slightly since 2010. The gradual increase in membership began in 2012 due to the increase of small specialized fitness spaces and gyms with low-cost strategies that have boosted the market. However, what was expected to be positive for the market, increased competition and forced the market to adapt to the changes, keeping its members as long as possible - retention of members.

Retention involves the process of keeping members as long as possible after registration. When a member decides to enroll in a GHC, the retention process must begin. For Talley (2008), retention is the final result of proper member service, improving retention means improving service and improving the member's experience. To understand the importance of retention, it is essential to realize the value of a member. According to McCarthy (2007), the financial value of a member can be substantial: it costs five times more to attract a new member than to keep a member inscribed. Vilares and Coelho (2005) seem to corroborate this idea when they report that the cost of loyalty to a member is much lower than that required for the acquisition of a new one. Clubs usually measure retention by comparing the number of members at the end of the year with the number of members at the beginning of the year, but this measure is imprecise and does not mean that members are the same. For Talley (2008), true retention is a change in the behavior of members because they feel the club gives them an advantage. However, there is no unanimity in the literature about what the member considers most valuable.

Studies that attempt to perceive the behavior of the consumer before their physical organization at the moment of making the stay decision (e.g. Alexandris, Zahariadis,

Tsorbatzoudis, & Grouios, 2004) are frequent. This decision depends on one or more variables, which can be studied in isolation or interrelated.

Thus, we intend to examine the antecedents that influence the behavior of retention in fitness in the Portuguese context, and its evolution in the last 6 years.

2. State of art

2.1. Service quality

In the last decades, several studies have emerged to evaluate the quality in sports services, both the perceived (subjective) quality and the objective quality (Pérez, Minguet, & Freire, 2010). It is unanimous that the quality of service can contribute to achieve customer satisfaction and, consequently, the attitude of remaining in the sport organization. However, it is important to understand the different dimensions of service quality in sport. The study of Bodet (2006) on the influence of service quality on retention, relates retention to perception about service attributes. This is, how the consumer thinks and feels the attributes of that service (Kim, Chun & Petrick, 2005). Perception depends on how the consumer relates to one or several attributes that he or she understands as meaningful for his or her stay in the club (Reinartz, Thomas & Kumar, 2005). If the consumer does not recognize the key points, the option may not be effective (Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders & Wonga, 2002).

A review of studies in this area identifies a set of perceived attributes and dimensions as having a positive impact on consumer satisfaction and, consequently, on retention. Parasuraman et al. (1994) analyzed the perception of consumers in quality services, identified several attributes that consumers consider relevant defining the SERVQUAL model, confirms 4 dimensions (tangible, reliability, responsiveness and safety). Although SERVQUAL has been the main reference for many studies, it is not enough to measure the quality of sports services. Howat,

Crilley, Absher and Milne (1996) established a four-element model (CERM) that included four factors (core services, quality of employees, general facilities and secondary services). Later, Howat et al. (1999) reviewed the model and proposed three factors (employees, main services and peripheral services). Chang and Chelladurai (2003) proposed a model for quality analysis in fitness clubs, where nine dimensions were identified. Three of these dimensions were included in the entry stage (commitment to quality management, development of essential services and services); five dimensions in the intermediate stage (interpersonal interactions with employees, task interactions with employees, physical environment, contact with other consumers and problem solving) and a dimension in the exit stage (perceived quality service). A model (SQFS) was developed to measure this multidimensional construct.

Brady and Cronin (2001) proposed a model that integrates quality services based on three dimensions that influence the attitude of the members: quality in interaction (employee attitudes, behavior and professionalism), physical involvement (environment, facilities design and social factors) and results quality (waiting time, tangible elements and valences). Later, Alexandris et al. (2004) applied this model to the *fitness* industry. The results of the study revealed that the physical involvement and the quality of the results significantly influence the satisfaction, that, consequently, has much influence in the word pass and the commitment. Several researchers add attributes to services, such as *design* and pricing (Parks, & Quaterman, 2003; Zeithaml, & Britner, 2003). (Shank, 2002; Zeithaml & Britner, 2003), brand status (Shank, 2002), safety, responsibility, trust, empathy, sensitivity and service (Zeithaml & Britner, 2003). For Ferrand et al. (2010) there seems to be a set of important attributes to be found in the investigations, such as cleanliness, staff, reliable services and safety, although there is no clear agreement on what is important for the situation of specific fitness services. In the study of García-Fernández et al. (2018) the perceived quality is mentioned by managers of sports organizations as important. However, they argue that customer loyalty may depend of emerging sports models. But, research

has been limited in relation to the attributes that are perceived as more relevant to satisfaction and, especially, due to the absence of researches, to study retention of members in sport.

2.2. Satisfaction

For Shank (2002) the satisfaction of needs is the essence of marketing orientation, because everyone has needs that they want to satisfy with the acquisition or use of a particular product or service. In addition, stimulation of involvement may activate the desire for satisfaction or accentuate a need (Mullin et al., 2000). Customer satisfaction is a direct determinant of customer fidelity/loyalty, which in turn is a central determinant of customer retention. Satisfaction is generally recognized as a key element in the members relationship with the services, demonstrating a positive relationship between the members satisfaction and their loyalty (Pedragosa & Correia, 2009). The influence of satisfaction on retention has been continuously explored (Alexandris et al., 2004; Murray & Howat, 2002). However, it should be noted that not all attributes have the same weight and therefore can not be reflected in satisfaction (Bodet, 2006; Brenda & Stotlar, 1996; Ferrand, Robinson & Valette, 2010). As such, it is crucial to realize which are the most significant (Bodet, 2006). In addition, studies that evaluate services in fitness centers indicate that satisfaction seems to play a mediating role in the relationship between quality of service and behavioral intentions (Theodorakis et al., 2014; Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014), others show an direct effect from satisfaction with loyalty (Murray & Howat, 2002), which justifies the continuous investigation in this area in different contexts.

2.3. Expectations

Expectations are what is expected of a given service or organization based on the needs, desires, motivations, past experiences, word of mouth, social media, price and image (Robinson, 2006). The literature suggests that the higher the needs, desires and motivations, the higher the

expectations with the service (Parasuraman et al., 1994; Ting & Chen, 2002). If needs, wants and motivations are identified, organizations can influence consumer expectations (Ting & Chen, 2002). For authors, consumers use their expectations about the service to determine if it has an acceptable quality and satisfaction level, thus making essential to understand expectations about the organization. There are several attributes that can influence expectations. Price seems to be one of the attributes with more effect on expectations, since for the consumer it means the level of service quality. Clow et al. (1997) also recognize that the image is an important antecedent of expectations and explain that this is because the image allows consumers to see and perceive an organization and this has a significant impact on expectations. In this way, it becomes essential to understand the expectations regarding the organization, how they are created and how they can be influenced (Robinson, 2006). Some studies (e.g. Power, 2008) explain the retention of fitness members through expectations, such as Robledo (2001) for services in general. But lacks greater understanding in each fitness context.

2.4. Well-being

Diener et al. (1997) refer to well-being as the way people evaluate their lives, including variables such as life satisfaction and marital satisfaction, absence of depression and anxiety, as well as positive moods and emotions. The authors further point out that the assessment of well-being in life can be made by the form of cognitions (i.e. when people makes conscious value judgments about satisfaction with their life as a whole and evaluation judgments or reactions about specific aspects of their life) and through forms of affection (i.e. people who experience unpleasant or pleasant states of mind and emotions in relation to their life). Barros and Gonçalves (2009) refer to happiness as influential in satisfaction and consumption in fitness. In relation to physical activity, Kural (2010) refers to the psychological and physical well-being associated with its consumption, arguing that the values associated with the physical activity seem to have

changed along with well-being. Still, fitness consumption related to the concept of well-being is poorly documented.

2.5. Frequency of use

Frequency of use is referred by fitness managers as influent in retention (Talley, 2008) and already was included it in the empirical studies (e.g. Ferrand, 2011). Going to the club in the first weeks after subscribing is considered a vital condition that influences the retention of members. On the other hand, it avoids systematic absences and for extended periods which usually lead to early dropout (Talley, 2008). This evidence is highlighted by the fitness club managers suggesting that the frequency of visits tend to decrease when members do not intend to renew their membership. Thus, the frequency of use must be well planned by the instructors and managers to meet the members' goals to keep them in the organization for long time.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research strategy and selection of studies

A survey of peer-reviewed articles about fitness client retention in Portugal, published between 2012-2017, was conducted in the B-on databases and repositories of Portuguese Higher Education Institutions. It should be noted, however, that some of the studies published in the last 6 years necessarily reflect previously collected results. The decision to restrict selection to the studies published in this period intend to show a recent reality about fitness in Portugal, since it is an ever-changing industry.

The surveys included the analysis of article titles and key-words, considering the terms related to fitness retention: Gyms and Health Clubs, consumer behavior, retention, members loyalty and fidelity, quality of service, satisfaction, repurchase, purchase intention and

recommendation. At this stage, all relevant articles were retrieved and read to identify studies that meet the eligibility criteria. In the scope of this research, ten articles were found, of which three were eliminated because they predate 2012. Thus, seven articles were considered in the screening, two PhD theses and thirteen publications in national and international congresses. It should be noted that the results under analysis are related to gyms located in urban areas (large and medium-sized cities), in Portugal. The fitness market in urban areas is characterized by a lot of competition among fitness clubs, dropout, as well as great customer churn and human resources. Additionally, all the samples of different Gyms and health clubs have enrollment fee and 12-month contract.

4. Results and discussion

The current research focused on studies of member's retention in fitness clubs' organization to understand the background of retention in fitness consumers. It is important to refer that the focus is fitness context in urban areas of Portugal. The understanding of fitness retention and how is influenced is essential to perceive the relationship between the consumers and the fitness organizations, in a given context, so that, in this way, the managers can better adapt the services to their members.

In a study applied to the biggest In a study applied a biggest network of fitness in Portugal, a model was used to test the relationship between quality of service attributes (prestige, Innovative equipment, pleasant environment, capacity to solve problems and good reputation) and the intention to recommend. This model revealed a significant effect of service quality on intention to recommend (Gonçalves et al., 2014). This significant effect is consistent with previous studies in the fitness context (Chang & Chelladurai, 2003; Ferrand et al., 2010). The results of the study, in the Portuguese context, suggest that the Gyms and Health Clubs (GHC) which are engaged with people from society with a good image, the prestige of these gyms can be

strengthened among the current members, leading them to recommend the service. For Shank (2002) the good reputation and prestige of the GHC are also important aspects of service quality attributes that highlight the role of brand status. In addition, studies suggest that celebrity recommendation leads to favorable opinions about the recommended brand (Spry, Pappu & Cornwell, 2011).

In the study of Gonçalves and Diniz (2015), a retention model was tested where two attributes of quality of service with direct influence on retention were detected: innovation and equipment; and human resources. However, retention is mostly influenced by facilities and equipment (tangible attributes of the organization and environment). In this regard, Alexandris et al. (2001) and Nadiri et al. (2008) present the tangible factors of the services as having a direct impact on the intention to repurchase. Human resources also have an influence on retention; these results are further suggested in international studies on repurchase intentions (e.g. Ferrand et al., 2010).

Moreover, these service quality attributes, along with service innovation, have an indirect effect on retention in Portuguese context, when the satisfaction mediator variable is included. However, not all service attributes carry the same weight in the members' perception, and therefore, not all have the same influence on satisfaction (Bodet, 2006; Brenda & Stotlar, 1996; Ferrand et al., 2010). In addition, there seems to be no consensus in the literature about which service attributes lead to satisfaction.

In Portuguese fitness centers the attributes that influence consumer satisfaction were identified and also have an indirect influence on retention, through satisfaction as a mediator variable in retention: innovation and services, facilities and equipment, and human resources (Gonçalves & Diniz, 2015). Likewise, McDougall and Levesque (2000) proposed a causal path, where the quality of service interferes with the feelings of satisfaction that, in turn, influence consumer behaviors and intentions. The innovation and services are the attributes that most

influence satisfaction and consist of the set of attributes linked to the main and secondary services. This is also reported in international studies (e.g. Alexandris et al. (2004); Chang & Chelladurai (2003); Ferrand et al., 2010) as influential in satisfaction. Contrary to our expectations, and the results of several international studies (e.g. Chang & Chelladurai, 2003; Ferrand et al., 2010), the innovation and services do not directly influence retention of members, thus making a modest contribution in explanation of the model for the retention of fitness clients in Portugal. One possible explanation for these results is that, although an attribute or construct contributes to the satisfaction of the member, this does not mean that it is determinant for their permanence in the Portuguese fitness clubs. Corroborating some studies in fitness (e.g. Barros & Gonçalves, 2009; Chang & Chelladurai, 2003), which refer to physical environment in fitness organizations (facilities, equipment and good atmosphere) with satisfaction, also in Portugal the study of Gonçalves and Diniz (2015) refers to the attribute facilities and equipment as influential in satisfaction. This Portuguese study also found that human resources have a positive influence on satisfaction in fitness centers, such as, Ferrand et al. (2010), Chang and Chelladurai (2003) which refer the interpersonal interaction as a fundamental attribute for the fitness service and Kotler et al. (2002) for services in general. However, other attributes and dimensions are identified in the literature, which suggests that attributes that impact on satisfaction and retention are influenced by different contexts and by specific consumer segments, and it is very difficult to identify trends throughout the investigations, such as are suggested by Ferrand et al. (2010) in their study. However, it is referred that fitness managers need to realize which attributes are relevant to their GHC, which should improve, eliminate or even add to achieve the satisfaction and consequent retention of their members.

When analyzing the variable expectations in the different studies elaborated in Portugal, we can conclude that members' expectations are important for retention. The studies of Gonçalves, Correia and Diniz (2014) and Cordeiro, Carvalho, and Gonçalves, (2016) support a

direct relation between expectations and retention, although the values of significance are not very high. This relationship of expectations with retention is in line with the study of Robinson (2006) and Pedragosa and Correia (2009), which describes a positive influence of expectations on satisfaction and retention, through satisfaction as a mediating variable. However, these studies show a moderate relation of this variable, suggesting a continuous analysis. In this way, Gonçalves, Sousa, Paipe, and Carvalho (2017) once again explored the variable in Portuguese context, and this time, expectations were the variable with greater significant power for the retention of members. Thus, if fitness managers want to know their members, by meeting their expectations or even exceeding them, they are more likely to keep them in the club.

The well-being in the club was a variable included in the studies of fitness, in Portugal, since 2009, to understand the satisfaction and permanence of members in the fitness clubs. The introduction of this variable began with the study of Barros and Gonçalves (2009), which refers to happiness. However, the variable that has been used for happiness and well-being is an adaptation of the scale satisfaction with life, of Diener and Lucas (2000), applied during these 6 years in Portugal and, therefore, compare moments. In different studies in Portugal the results indicated that well-being in the club was the strongest predictor of intention to recommend (Gonçalves et al., 2014), satisfaction (Gonçalves & Diniz, 2015) and retention (Gonçalves, Sousa, Paipe, & Carvalho, 2017). These results are in line with the idea of how members feel about the club and their achievements related to the club are important for guiding future behavioral intentions (Barros & Gonçalves, 2009). Consistently, some studies in the sport field suggest that the evaluation of consumers and their consumption experiences is fundamental to understanding future actions (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Marôco & Ross, 2012). Thus, in order to increase members well-being, clubs can implement strategies that help the members assess their club satisfaction levels on a regular basis, such as offering personalized services and benefits, in especial when the members motivation decrease. On the other hand, the study of Gonçalves, et al.

(2014) showed that well-being in life had a negative effect on the Portuguese fitness members' intention to recommend the club. On the other hand, the study of Gonçalves, et al. (2014) showed that well-being in life had a negative effect on the Portuguese fitness members' intention to recommend the club. Even so, the low magnitude of this pathway could indicate that the significant effect is only observed because of the large sample size and this relationship may not make sense, as Cohen refers (1988). These results suggested continued investigation of the variable in Portuguese fitness context. In the study of Gonçalves, Meireles and Carvalho (2015) the well-being in life is reported again to have a direct negative effect on retention.

Unlike well-being in club, which has a very significant direct positive effect on retention. These results are consistent with those reported by McAuley et al. (2005) who describe very positive responses to well-being in their study with a focus on exercise and well-being. In this way, it can be affirmed that the people involved in fitness activities, who feel good with the positive effect of the exercise, remain in the GHC, directly promoting their retention. In addition, well-being in the club has a direct positive influence on satisfaction and, therefore, has an indirect effect on retention, through satisfaction as a mediating variable.

The study of Meireles, Gonçalves and Carvalho (2015) intended to understand the relationship between the frequency of use, satisfaction and retention of members in fitness, in a fitness center of Porto city. For this purpose, the frequency of use variable was included for the first time in fitness studies in Portugal. It was found that the percentage of those who go three or more times to the gym is significant, showing that most members, who are very satisfied with their gym, intend to remain and would recommend the gym to others. These results were corroborated *a posteriori*, in the study of Cordeiro, Gonçalves and Carvalho (2016) and Gonçalves, Meireles e Carvalho (2016) in fitness clubs of Northern Portugal. The results indicate that fitness club management should work to keep members who are less likely to remain, those who have a lower frequency, lower satisfaction, and consequently lower retention at the gym.

5. Conclusion and implications

The objective of this study was to understand the retention and its antecedents in fitness clubs of urban areas in Portugal, during the last 6 years. The results indicate that service quality attributes (good reputation, prestige, innovation and equipment) play some role in retention. Similarly, innovation and services, facilities and equipment and human resources are direct influencers in the satisfaction of fitness members in Portugal.

It was found that expectations regarding fitness clubs have a direct relation with member retention, although moderate, and that the well-being in the Club is a predictor of the intention to recommend, satisfaction and retention. Well-being in life, in turn, has shown a negative effect on the intention to recommend, although of a small magnitude, but whose continuous study seems interesting. This means that if well-being in a club is not strong among members, these strategies will only have a marginal effect on raising recommendation levels. In the Portuguese context in urban areas, to further emphasize that the higher the frequency in the fitness clubs, the greater the probability of the member remaining.

The results suggest that fitness managers in Portugal should continue to work on innovation in terms of facilities and equipment and show interest in meeting members' needs. Fitness organizations in Portugal are advised for retain members, they correspond and, if possible, exceed their clients' expectations of service and satisfaction quality, and continually care about the members with special attention to those who attend less. It is vital that fitness managers understand the relationship and the importance of the variables that members value the most. Research suggests that managers should not overlook the member satisfaction because it is determinant for retention and to hence the profitability of the club, which is one of the main concerns of managers. Thus, the members' satisfaction must be accessed to better predict their future intentions towards the relationship with the club.

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