

ACTAS I CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL MARCA, TERRITORIO Y DEPORTE

Rocío Blay Arráez
M^a Teresa Benlloch Osuna
Guillermo Sanahuja Peris
(Editores)



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**MARCA, TERRITORIO
Y DEPORTE**

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Valencia, 2019

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EDITA: TIRANT HUMANIDADES
C/ Artes Gráficas, 14 - 46010 - Valencia
TELFOS.: 96/361 00 48 - 50
FAX: 96/369 41 51
Email: tlb@tirant.com
www.tirant.com
Librería virtual: www.tirant.es
ISBN: 978-84-17973-05-6
MAQUETA: Innovatext

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Antecedents of customer retention in Portugal: Case study of the network Solinca Health & Fitness Clubs

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ABSTRACT: Customer retention is critical 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. Thus, the objective of this study is to understand the history of retention of fitness members in Portugal and its evolution over the last five years, specifically in the Solinca Health & Fitness Clubs network. The methodology was based on literature review, based on articles on fitness retention in Portugal, published from 2012 to 2017, and peer-reviewed. The research was carried out in the B-on databases and university repositories and included the analysis of titles and keywords of the publications, considering the terms related to fitness retention. In the scope of this research, ten articles were found, of which three were eliminated, prior to 2012. Thus, seven articles were considered in the triage, two PhD theses and thirteen publications of national and international congresses. The results under analysis are related to data from one of the largest fitness networks in Portugal, Solinca Health & Fitness Clubs, and the analysis of this article rests specifically on the retention of customers of this brand of gymnasiums.

Regarding service quality, the results indicate that the perception of attributes (facilities, equipment, human resources and accessibility) influence the retention of members in the Solinca Health & Fitness Clubs network. The influence of satisfaction on retention has also been continually reported as a direct and indirect variable for retention, but that alone is not sufficient for retention of limbs. Expectations regarding GHC have a direct relationship with retention of members, although moderate, and well-being in the Club is a predictor of the intention

to recommend and, consequently, retention. Gonçalves, Meireles and Carvalho (2014) also refer to frequency of use as determinant in retention. Thus, it is recommended that fitness organizations and the Solinca network in particular, in order to retain members, correspond and, if possible, exceed their members' expectations of quality of service, human resources, facilities and equipment and who are continually concerned with the members, paying special attention to those who attend less. Thus, the members' satisfaction must be assessed in order to better predict their future intentions towards the relationship with the club.

KEY WORDS: well-being, frequency of use, expectations, quality of service, satisfaction, Solinca Health & Fitness Clubs

1. INTRODUCTION

The fitness market numbers worldwide speak for themselves. In 2017, the International Health, Racquet & Sport Club Association (IHRSA) in Europe identified 55,003,000 GHC to 56,900 million members. In Portugal, where these studies were carried out, in 2017 1430 Gymnasiums and Health Clubs (GHC) were registered for 770 thousand members, values that have increased, but very slightly, since 2010. This gradual membership increase 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, has also brought difficulties with the expansion of the *fitness* market in quantity and quality in recent years. Competition has increased between GHC and therefore they must adapt to changes while keeping their members as long as possible –retention of members–.

Retention involves the process of keeping members as long as possible after application for membership. Once a member decides to subscribe a GHC, his retention process must begin. For Talley (2008), retention is the end result of proper service to the member, thus improving retention means improving service and enhancing the member's experience

To understand the relevance of retention it is essential to realize the value of a member. According to McCarthy (2007), it can be said that the financial value of a member can be substantial: it costs five times more to attract a new member than to retain an enrolled member (Grantham et al., 1998). Vilares and Coelho (2005) seem to corroborate this idea, when they report that the cost of loyalty to a member is much lower than necessary for the acquisition of a new one.

As a rule, club management measures 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 the members are the same. For Talley (2008), true retention is a change in behavior of the loyalty members because they feel that the club is giving them something of an advantage. However, there is no unanimity in the literature about what the member considers most valuable.

Are frequent the studies that try to perceive the behavior of the consumer before their fitness organization at the moment of making the decision of permanence (e.g. Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsorbatzoudis, & Grouios, 2004). This decision depends on one or more variables, which can be studied in isolation or in an interrelated way.

Bodet (2006), in his study on the influence of service quality on retention, relates retention to perception about service attributes, that is, how the consumer thinks and feels the attributes of that service (Kim, Chun & Petrick, 2005). Also, for Reinartz, Thomas and Kumar (2005), perception depends on how the partner relates to one or several attributes that he or she understands as meaningful for his or her stay in the club. If the partner 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 and categorized them into the dimensions of responsibility, security, tangibility, empathy and trust, thus defining the SERVQUAL model. 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. However, research has been limited in relation to the attributes that are perceived as more relevant to satisfaction and, especially, due to the absence of studies, to stay in *fitness*.

The influence of satisfaction on retention has been continuously explored (Alexandris et al., 2004; Murray & Howat, 2002). 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 relationship of the members with the services, demonstrating a positive relationship between the satisfaction of the members and the loyalty (Pedragosa & Correia, 2009). 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).

Some studies (Alexandris et al., 2004; Robinson, 2006; Power, 2008) explain the retention of fitness members through expectations, corroborating Groonros (1984), Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1994) and Robledo (2001) for services in general. Expectations are what is expected of a given service or organization based on the needs, desires and motivations of consumers, along with their previous experiences, word of mouth, media disclosure, price and image (Robinson, 2006). Thus, the literature suggests that the greater the needs, desires and motivations, the higher the expectations for the service (Parasuraman et al., 1994; Ting & Chen, 2002). Consequently, if needs, desires and motivations are identified, organizations can influence consumer expectations (Ting & Chen, 2002). For the authors, consumers use their expectations about the service to determine if it has an acceptable level of quality and satisfaction, thus making it essential to understand expectations regarding the organization.

Diener et al. (1997) equate well-being with feelings, including satisfaction with life and positive and negative affections. 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 practice seem to have changed along with well-being. Still, *fitness*-related well-being is poorly documented.

More closely related to practice behavior, frequency of use is referred to by managers as influential (Talley, 2008) and already included it in the empirical studies area (eg Ferrand, 2011). Going to the club in the first weeks after subscribing is considered a vital condition that influences the retention of members (Talley, 2008). Thus, the author considers that the frequency of use must be well planned by the instructors and should meet the objectives of the new members. So, it is important that the new members go to the club at least once per week in the first weeks after subscribing, in order to guarantee that they remain for a long period of time. On the other hand, it avoids systematic absences and for long periods which usually lead to early dropout.

Thus, we intend to examine the antecedents that influence the behavior of continuing in GHC in the Portuguese context, specifically, in the Solinca Health & Fitness Clubs network and its evolution in the last 5 years.

The Solinca Health & Fitness Club network is one of the largest Portuguese gyms networks belonging to the Sonae Capital Group. The Solinca Health & Fitness Club concept was born at the Sheraton hotel in Porto in 1995, with the remodeling of a small SOLEI gym installed in the (INCA) Hotel which, after remodeling, went to Sheraton and the gym to Solinca, inspired by the name of the old gym and hotel. With an excellent location and privileged access routes, it provided the concept development for the capital of Portugal, opening two more clubs in Lisbon until 2001. Since then the expansion continues from north to south and with an investment in Malaga, the only club out of Portugal. Currently, the network has repositioned itself to adapt to the market through the *Solinca Smart Fitness* concept and is made up of 20 clubs, located in accessible and central spaces, 13 clubs in Northern Portugal and 7 clubs in the region of Greater Lisbon and Vale do Tejo.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research strategy and selection of studies.

A survey of peer-reviewed articles on fitness client retention in Portugal, published between September 2012 and May 2017, was conducted in the B-on databases and repositories of Portuguese Higher Education Institutions. The

decision to restrict selection to the studies published in this period is since it shows a recent reality about fitness in Portugal, since it is an ever-changing industry. In addition, specific terms related to fitness retention were used with a view to their integration into future studies. It should be noted, however, that some of the studies published in the last 5 years necessarily reflect previously collected results.

The surveys were conducted at the B-on and repositories of Portuguese Institutions of Higher Education and included the analysis of titles of articles and publications, considering the terms related to fitness, Gymsnasiums and Health Clubs, consumer behavior, retention, members loyalty and fidelity, quality of service, satisfaction, purchase intention and recommendation. Other sources to identify studies included the references cited in these journals, leading to the identification of studies in other scientific journals of marketing (*Revista Portuguesa de Marketing*). 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 most of the results under analysis are related to the data of one of the largest fitness networks in Portugal, Solinca Health & Fitness Clubs, and the analysis of this article specifically rests on the retention of customers of this brand of gyms.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current review study focused on studies of retention behaviors in the Solinca Health & Fitness Clubs fitness organization to understand the background of retention in fitness consumers. It is important to note that the focus is on approaching a fitness particular context in Portugal. The importance of the antecedents of fitness retention 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 the Portuguese context, it is confirmed that not all attributes of service quality have an influence on retention, as it is reported in the international literature (e.g. Alexandris et al., 2001). In a study applied to Solinca Health & Fitness Club, a model was used to test the relationship between quality of service attributes (prestige, equipment innovation, pleasant engagement, problem solving ability, good reputation, adequate facilities, coherence of innovative spaces and services) and the intention to recommend (Gonçalves et al., 2014). This model

revealed a significant effect of service quality on retention. This significant effect is consistent with previous studies in the fitness context (Chang & Chelladurai, 2003; Ferrand et al., 2010). The good reputation and prestige of the GHC (Gym and Health Club) are also important aspects of service quality attributes that highlight the role of brand status (Shank, 2002). In addition, studies suggest that celebrity recommendation leads to favorable opinions about the recommended brand (Spry, Pappu & Cornwell, 2011). Thus, the results of the study suggest that, also in the Portuguese context, the GHC that engages with people of society with a good image, the prestige of these gyms can be strengthened among the current members, leading them to recommend the service.

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 surrounding). 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 and Pedragosa and Correia (2009) mention that the facilities have an indirect effect on loyalty. In addition to facilities and equipment, 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, 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 the results of Gonçalves and Diniz (2015), attribute that influence consumer satisfaction were identified: innovation and services, facilities and equipment, and human resources. These attributes also have an indirect influence on retention, through satisfaction as a mediator variable in retention, as found in studies by Alexandris et al. (2004), Costa et al. (2005), Howat et al. (1996) and Lentell (2000). 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 concept of innovation and services is, in this study (Gonçalves & Diniz, 2015), which most influences satisfaction, consists of the set of attributes linked to the main and secondary services. This is also reported in studies by Alexandris et al. (2004), Chang and Chelladurai (2003), Costa et al. (2005) and Ferrand et al. (2010) as influential in satisfaction. Contrary to expectations and the results of several studies at the international level (eg Chang

& Chelladurai, 2003; Ferrand et al., 2010), it should be noted that 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 GHC.

Corroborating Alexandris et al. (2004), Barros and Gonçalves (2009), Chang and Chelladurai (2003), Shank (2002) and Zeithaml & Bitner (2003), who refer to physical surroundings 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. The study also found that human resources have a positive influence on satisfaction, such as, for example, studies by Alexandris et al. (2004) and Ferrand et al. (2010). Chang and Chelladurai (2003) designate by interpersonal interaction the fundamental attribute for the fitness service. In the same vein, Kotler and Armstrong (1999) and Kotler et al. (2002) refer to human resources as an important attribute for services in general and Brady and Cronin (2001) designate key quality interaction between consumers and employees.

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 realize which attributes are relevant to their GHC, which should improve, eliminate or even add to 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 expectancies and retention, although the values of significance are not very high. This relationship of expectations with retention is in line with the study by Robinson (2006) and Pedragosa and Correia (2009), which describe 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, Paípe, and Carvalho (2017) once again explored the variable, and this time, expectations were the variable with greater significant power for the retention of limbs. 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, with the study of Barros and Gonçalves (2009), that make reference to happiness. However, the variable that has been used for happiness and well-being is an adaptation of the satisfaction with life, of Diener and Lucas (2000), applied during these 5 years in Portugal and, therefore, comparable between moments. In a national study of 2014, the analysis of structural equations indicated that club well-being was the strongest predictor of intention to recommend (Gonçalves et al., 2014; Gonçalves, Sousa, Paípe, & Carvalho, 2017). These results are in line with the idea that how members feel about the club and its achievements related to the club are important for guiding future behavioral intentions (Barros & Gonçalves, 2009). Consistently, some studies in the field of sport suggest that the evaluation of consumers and their consumption experiences is fundamental to understanding future actions (Biscay, Correia, Rosado, Marôco & Ross, 2012). Thus, in order to increase member well-being, clubs can, for example, assess their club satisfaction levels on a regular basis (e.g. with interviews), provide a more personalized service (eg (for example, promotional offers for friends and family), and offer additional benefits when they meet the established goals (for example, discounts on ancillary services or vouchers for members' products). On the other hand, the same study showed that well-being in life had a negative effect on the members' intention to recommend the club. Even so, the low magnitude of this pathway indicates that the significant effect is only observed because of the large sample size and this relationship may not make sense (Cohen, 1988). That is, the coefficient of well-being in life for the intention to recommend indicated that less than one percent (0.81%) of the variance of the intention to recommend is attributed exclusively to well-being in life. Thus, recommendations based on this relationship may lead to unnecessary financial efforts and be misleading to clubs, suggesting continued investigation of the variable.

The influence of well-being on satisfaction and retention is not yet sufficiently studied. However, in the context of fitness in Portugal, well-being in life is reported to have a direct negative effect on retention. Unlike well-being in GHC, which has a very significant direct positive effect on retention (Gonçalves, Meireles & Carvalho, 2015). 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, GHC well-being 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) aimed to understand the relationship between the frequency of use, satisfaction and retention of

members in fitness, in a Gymnasium and GHC of Greater Porto. 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 (64%), showing that most members who are very satisfied with their gym, intend to remain (92.5%) and would recommend the gym to others (84.2%). These results were corroborated a year later, in the study by Cordeiro, Gonçalves and Carvalho (2016), in GHC of Northern Portugal. The results indicate that GHC management should work to keep members who are less likely to remain, those who have a lower frequency, lower satisfaction, and consequently lower GHC retention.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The objective of this study was to understand the antecedents of the retention of fitness clients, with reference to a concrete fitness organization in Portugal, Solinca Heath & Fitness Club, and its evolution in the last 5 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 GHC have a direct relation with limb retention, although moderate, and that the well-being in the Club is a predictor of the intention to recommend and, consequently, 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 and specifically in the Solinca Heath & Fitness Club, to further emphasize that the higher the frequency in the GHC, the greater the probability of the member remaining.

Based on the items in this study, 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 that to retain clients, they correspond and, if possible, exceed their clients' expectations of service and satisfaction quality, and that they continually care about members with special attention to those who attend less. It is vital that every fitness professional understands 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 assessed in order to better predict their future intentions towards the relationship with the club.

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