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Market-Retention in Fitness Centers: Identifying and Ranking the Factors Affecting Customer Retention

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to identify and to rank the factors affecting market retention in fitness centers. 14 participants including the customers and managers of fitness centers participated in a semi-structured interview to collect the required data. Sixteen factors were extracted from the interviews and sixteen experts evaluate the relationships among these factors with pairwise comparisons. Based on Interpretive-Structural Modeling, the factors categorized in five levels, i.e. 1) customer relationship quality, customer experience quality, reputation, price, perceived value and satisfaction, 2) Overall service quality, secondary services and ethical climate, 3) Training type and schedule, location and accessibility and social responsibility, 4) Interior design and equipment, 5) Manager communication and trainer's competencies. For the sake of customer retention, fitness centers are required to align their decisions with their customer requirements. Ranking the effective factors in this study can provide the fitness centers' managers with a better understanding of the factors affecting customers' decisions.

Introduction

Providing appropriate services to customers plays a critical role in creating value for companies in today's world economy, and service-based economy receives a major share of the global economy. The very complex nature of services can be explained by numerous interactions involved in their provision for customers and their inseparability from the environment (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000). These features of services coupled with their increased diversity in markets have resulted in the needs

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of service institutions for activities that distinguish their services and effectively retain their customers and preserve their financial performance (Wang, Lo, & Hui, 2003). In other words, more choices offered to customers have increased their power in today's markets. After attracting customers, firms are therefore required to make their utmost efforts for their retention (K. Lee, 2008). The same need arisen in the sports industry in the past two decades has coerced sports businesses as in the case of other service industries to make efforts mainly to retain their current customers and also attract new customers (Robinson, 2006), as a 5% increase in customer retention yields a 95% added value for the organization (Greenberg, 2001).

Fitness services are an important part of the health and activity industry, which has experienced significant growth in recent years. Fitness centers provide "the overall intangible services based on physical activities that creates value for individuals by offering them physical, psychological, social and economic benefits" (Yildiz, 2009). But, prosperity of these centers, as mentioned above, needs to attract and retain customers in the long term. On the other hand, in today's competitive market, marketing strategies must be based on multivariate models because several factors can influence the customer selection process. The present study seeks to identify important factors for customer decision to retain in fitness centers. This can help managers of fitness centers to develop their marketing strategy based on multiple needs and demands of customers.

Market orientation and paying attention to the requirements of customers can affect their decisions on continuing with or withdrawing from their membership in the fitness centers (Kölbl, Blank, Schobersberger, & Peters, 2019). Satisfying customers and creating customer-friendly values therefore constitute a principle in fitness centers. Identifying customers and their expectation levels helps the managers of fitness centers more effectively evaluate the degree to which their services affect the attitudes, decisions and behaviors of their customers (Douglas & Connor, 2003). The satisfaction or dissatisfaction of customers depends on their evaluation of the services they receive versus their needs and expectations. Feeling satisfied with the services provided in a way that their expectations are met (Liu & Chen, 2012) reinforces their loyalty and causes the repetition of their experience. On the other hand, dissatisfaction with a service leaves a negative impression and consequently causes the customer to forsake the service provider (Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2015). In today's competitive era, success is undoubtedly reserved for a businessman who can meet the expectations of his customers and maximize their satisfaction in a way that their complete loyalty and long-term retention are guaranteed (Zaboyar, Ziyaae, & Nargesiyani, 2012). Recent developments in the sports industry and changes in customer preferences have caused fitness centers to face the challenge of better understanding their customers to ensure their retention and loyalty (Polyakova & Ramchandani, 2019). Delivering satisfactory services requires a system for comprehending the needs of customers and making accurate predictions to meet their needs. Therefore this study was set up to identify and to rank the factors affecting market retention in fitness centers.

Literature Review

Market retention refers to all the methods, tools and activities aimed at retaining customers and market share and improving customer loyalty through establishing long-term relationships with customers. A review of literature was performed to investigate the following effective factors in market retention:

Quality of services and secondary services

A large body of literature on improving service quality in the field of sports is devoted to evaluating customer expectations of services (Robinson, 2006). Basically as a performance-based cognitive construct, service quality refers to the overall customer perception of the relative superiority of an organization and its services (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994). Numerous studies have reported positive relationships between service quality and customer retention in fitness centers (Barshan, Elahi, & Aghaei, 2017; García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, et al., 2018; S. Y. Lee, 2017; Lim, 2006). Identifying customer expectations helps characterize services. According to Watanabe, Matsumoto, and Nogawa (2013), the physical service environment is the first thing that faces customers and their perception of the service. Research suggests the environment and facilities of fitness centers play a key role in

customer retention (Afthinos, Theodorakis, & Nassis, 2005; García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, Vélez-Colon, Ortega-Gutiérrez, & Fernández-Gavira, 2018; Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore, 2002; S. Y. Lee, 2017). Performance of the staff and trainers can also cause services to come to customer expectations (Afthinos et al., 2005; S. Y. Lee, 2017; Liu & Chen, 2012). As another dimension of fitness services, the type and schedule of exercises play a key role in customer loyalty (Afthinos et al., 2005; García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, et al., 2018). Murray and Crilley (1999) found secondary or peripheral services such as food and beverage facilities provided along with the main services in sports centers to affect the future behaviors of customers. Service quality can be therefore investigated from different perspectives depending on the type of customers and service environment (Robinson, 2006). Quality of sports services has been mainly investigated using the SERVQUAL model in five dimensions, i.e. reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Previous studies have focused on the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty as dependent variables and rarely investigated the relationships of the components of these variables with other independent variables such as price, perceived value, location, customer relationship and so on.

Price and perceived value

As an amount of money paid for receiving a service, price depends on the purchaser's perception of the benefit-cost of paying the fee for receiving the service (Ferrand, Robinson, & Valette-Florence, 2010). Price is an important variable that affects customer expectations (Robinson, 2006) and plays a role in customer satisfaction (Calabuig, Núñez-Pomar, Prado-Gascó, & Añó, 2014). A study by Afthinos et al. (2005) on public and private Greek fitness centers found price to affect the selection of the center. Perceived value is also a significant determinant of customer behaviors (García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, et al., 2018). Zeithaml (1988) defined perceived value as the overall utility of a service based on customer perception of what is received against what is paid. Customers measure the value of services versus their payments and select more economical services. According to Oh (2000), the price paid and the time spent for receiving a service affect the perceived value. In addition, effort and prestige were identified by Petrick and Backman (2002) as effective factors in comparing a service received and the value perceived. Cost or price was, however, found to play the most critical role in the satisfaction and future intentions of customers (García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, et al., 2018). Price has been often investigated either independently or as a component of the perceived value. Price and value have rarely investigated as independent variables and in relation to other factors.

Accessibility and location

Appropriate and accessible location is a factor that affect the presence and length of stay of individuals in fitness centers (Afthinos et al., 2005; Seiders, Voss, Godfrey, & Grewal, 2007). Location refers to the place of a fitness center and its distance to one's place of residence, accessibility, availability of parking, and security of the area (Hanlon, Jenkin, & Craike, 2019; Pouliou, Lowe, & Higgs, 2019). Assuming that interest in exercise dominates accessibility, interested individuals were, however, reported to come to terms with access problems (Shrestha, Kestens, Thomas, El Aarbaoui, & Chaix, 2019); nevertheless, the importance of accessibility and location cannot be ignored, especially in metropolises, as proper access can cause peace of mind and save one's time. It is worth noting that the role of this factor in retaining the customers of fitness centers has rarely been addressed in literature.

Customer relationship management and manager communication

As a component of communication marketing, customer relationship management seeks to develop long-term relationships with customers. Kellen (2002) identified customer relationship management as a win-win strategy through which customers and organizations fulfil mutual expectations while strengthening their bond. Sun and Liu (2009) found customer relationship management to enhance customer confidence and commitments. Stronger relationships between fitness centers and customers therefore appeared to yield behavioral loyalty (S. Y. Lee, Cong, & Choi, 2017; Nyadzayo, Leckie, &

McDonald, 2016). In addition, the role of the manager and the type of his relationships with the staff and customers can significantly affect customer retention, especially in small fitness centers with direct relationships between the manager and customers. The manager should properly behave towards customers and provide his staff with the necessary information and guidelines for behavior towards customers (Mathe, Scott-Halsell, & Roseman, 2016). According to Mathe et al. (2016), manager communication can affect the customer orientation and his/her satisfaction. Sports centers seeking to increase their profitability should consider the role of this variable along with other variables.

Ethical climate

Decent ethical behaviors can affect customer retention in the environments with many customer-customer and customer-staff interactions (Okpara & Wynn, 2008). Ethical climate is defined as observing ethical codes and implementing acceptable norms, beliefs and values in the service delivery environment (Elçi & Alpkan, 2009). Schwepker Jr and Hartline (2005) found ethical climate to promote the staff commitment to service quality through improving their satisfaction. In fact, ethical climate can improve relationships between the staff and customers and result in customer satisfaction, which can cause customer retention and loyalty, as discussed earlier (García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, et al., 2018; Jin et al., 2015; Lim, 2006; Liu & Chen, 2012). Ethical climate also depends on the personality and spirit of people simultaneously exercising as a group. Customer commitment to ethical codes and observance of the rights of one another affects the acclimatization of customers to the environment and their working with other members of the group (Fallah, 2015) and can result in their loyalty to the sports center. This finding has been, however, reported in few studies and therefore requires further investigations.

Social responsibility

Social responsibility is explained as participation in social and environmental issues associated with a business and its stakeholders (Pérez & del Bosque, 2015). This category encompasses a collection of measures taken to increase the social benefits of a firm irrespective of its financial benefits and legal liabilities (McWilliams & Siegel, 2000). Participating in social issues Leads to develop a positive image in customer mind and promote his/her loyalty (Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013; Nyadzayo et al., 2016; Pérez & del Bosque, 2013). In the field of sports, a large body of literature is devoted to the social responsibilities of athletes, clubs and governing bodies, whereas the roles of these individuals and entities in delivering fitness services has rarely been addressed.

Reputation

An organization's reputation affects customer behavioral intentions, including satisfaction and commitment (Su, Swanson, Chinchanchokchai, Hsu, & Chen, 2016). From a marketing perspective, reputation refers to the overall perception of stakeholders of an organization, which is obtained from their interactions with the organization and based on the messages received about it (Chun, 2005). In fact, reputation forms when others seek to know some specialized features or overall quality of a service (Su et al., 2016). Reputation therefore constitutes a valuable intangible asset that creates competitive advantage by helping customers with their pre-purchase evaluation given that services cannot be judged before their delivery. Research on the sports field has mainly focused on the reputation of sports teams (Lin & Lin, 2008), Sportswear and equipment brands (Kinuthia, Keren, Burugu, Muthomi, & Mwiwaki, 2012) and tourism destinations (Sato, Gipson, Todd, & Harada, 2018) and rarely on services in fitness centers.

Customer experience quality

The Dictionary (2015) defines "experience" as what happens to an individual and affects their sensations. Service experience aims at arranging a chain of actions based on the needs and requirements of customers in a way that their sensations are engaged in a memorable event (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). To promote this experience, environmental factors and social interactions should be

considered along with cognitive and emotional issues (Funk, 2017). According to Schembri and Sandberg (2002), different individuals differently interpret service experience given its contextual and dynamic nature. Marketers should therefore take measures to make individual customers face unique and amazing experiences with long-lasting effects (Güzel, 2013). A study on the tourism industry by Zins (2002) found the emotions associated with experiences to affect the cognitive evaluation of the overall consumption process. Yoshida (2017) found experience quality effective in customer satisfaction and decisions. A review of studies on services by Bueno, Weber, Bomfim, and Kato (2019) demonstrated the relationships of customer service experience with perceived value and customer satisfaction and loyalty. Sports service experience is, however, a pristine field of research. Investigating the relationships of service experience with other variables is therefore essential for improving quality of service in fitness centers.

A review of literature on customer retention in sports services suggests different variables whose relationships have been measured in quantitative models. A limited number of variables were, however, selected for investigation depending on the personal experiences or specialized field of researchers. Performing a comprehensive study to identify effective factors in market retention from customer perspectives and determine their relationships can therefore provide the managers of fitness centers with useful information. The present study therefore seeks to determine the factors that increase customer retention in fitness centers as well as the significance and direction of the relationships among the identified factors.

Methodology

The present applied descriptive study evaluated the relationships among the variables using ISM. The effective factors in customer retention were first identified by conducting 14 semi-structured interviews with the managers and customers of fitness centers. The participants included in this stage of the study were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience, art of discourse and willingness to participate. The interviews continued until the codes extracted from the qualitative content analysis reached theoretical saturation and repeated data were obtained by selecting new participants. Sixteen categories or variables extracted at this stage of the study were labeled based on previous studies and used in the next stage to design the 16×16 pairwise comparison matrix. This matrix was distributed among 16 of the participants to determine the relationships between pairs of the variables. The participants selected at this stage using purposive sampling completed the matrix based on the following principles:

The potential effect of the factor of row (i) on the factor of column (j) is represented as V or a single-sided arrow from i to j.

The potential effect of the factor of column (j) on the factor of row (i) is represented as A or a single-sided arrow from j to i.

The reciprocal effect the factor of row (i) on the factor of column (j) is represented as X or a double-sided arrow.

No relationships between the factor of row (i) and factor of column (j) is represented as O or a dash. Warfield proposed ISM in 1974 to determine and comprehend relationships among the elements of a complex system (Huang, Tzeng, & Ong, 2005). The matrices were manually analyzed to determine the hierarchy of the variables.

Findings

The results of the ISM of market retention variables were obtained in seven stages, which are described as follows:

ISM factors

To design the market retention model, sixteen variables related to the study subject were identified at this stage as per table 1 by reviewing the theoretical foundations and analyzing the conducted interviews.

Reachability matrix

The reachability matrix was established by substituting 0 and 1 for the symbols of the SSIM according to the following rules:

- The value of cell (i,j) with symbol V is 1 and that of its symmetrical cell 0.
- The value of cell (i,j) with symbol A is 0 and that of its symmetrical cell 1.
- The value of cell (i,j) with symbol X and that of its symmetrical cell both equal 1.
- The value of cell (i,j) with symbol O and that of its symmetrical cell both equal 0.

Table 3. Initial Reachability Matrix

Variable	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅	C ₆	C ₇	C ₈	C ₉	C ₁₀	C ₁₁	C ₁₂	C ₁₃	C ₁₄	C ₁₅	C ₁₆
C ₁	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1
C ₂	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
C ₃	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
C ₄	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
C ₅	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1
C ₆	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
C ₇	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1
C ₈	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
C ₉	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
C ₁₀	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1
C ₁₁	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
C ₁₂	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
C ₁₃	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1
C ₁₄	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1
C ₁₅	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
C ₁₆	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1

Consistency of the reachability matrix

After deriving the initial reachability matrix, its internal consistency should be established in a way that if A causes B and B causes C, then A causes C. If the reachability matrix does not meet this condition, it should be modified and missing relationships be inserted into the matrix. In other words, the initial matrix can be made consistent by raising the initial reachability matrix to the power of (K+1) for K≥1 based on Boolean rules such as 1+1=1 and 1×1=1. The results of adapting the matrix are shown in table 4, in which * denotes a change from 0 in the initial matrix to 1 in the adapted matrix.

Table 4. Adapted Reachability Matrix

Variable	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅	C ₆	C ₇	C ₈	C ₉	C ₁₀	C ₁₁	C ₁₂	C ₁₃	C ₁₄	C ₁₅	C ₁₆	Penetration level
C ₁	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1*	0	1	1	9
C ₂	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	15
C ₃	1	1	1	1	1*	1	0	1*	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	15
C ₄	1*	0	0	1	1*	0	0	1	1*	1	1	1	1	1*	1	1	12
C ₅	1	0	0	0	1	1*	0	0	1*	1	1	1	1*	0	1	1	10
C ₆	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1*	1	1	10
C ₇	1*	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1*	1*	1	1*	1	0	1	1	10
C ₈	1*	0	0	1*	1*	1*	0	1	1*	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	13
C ₉	1	0	0	1*	1*	1*	0	1*	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	13
C ₁₀	1*	0	0	1*	1*	0	0	1*	0	1	0	1	1*	0	1	1	9
C ₁₁	1	0	0	1*	1*	1*	0	1*	1	1	1	1	1	1*	1	1	13
C ₁₂	1	0	0	1	1	1*	0	1	1*	1*	1*	1	1	1*	1*	1	13
C ₁₃	1	0	0	1*	1*	1*	0	1*	1*	1	1*	1	1	0	1*	1	12
C ₁₄	1*	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1*	1	1*	1*	1*	1	1	1	10
C ₁₅	1*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1*	0	1*	1	0	1	1	6
C ₁₆	1*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1*	1	0	1*	1	6
Dependence level	16	2	2	9	10	12	1	9	13	16	13	16	16	9	16	16	-

Ranking and level determination of the variables

To rank the variables, input and output sets are specified for every variable. The variables that originate from a given variable constitute its output set that is specified by the 1s in its corresponding row. The variables that lead into a given variable constitute its input set that is specified by the 1s in its corresponding column. A common set is determined for a variable after determining its input and output sets. The variables are then ranked by placing those with the same output and common sets at the highest hierarchical level of the model. To determine the next level variables, the previously-ranked variables are eliminated from the table and ranking is performed with the remaining variables. This process continues until all the variables are ranked (Table 5).

Table 5. Determining the Levels of the Variables

Variable	Output Set	Input Set	Common Set	Level
C ₁	1,6,9,10,11,12,13,15,16	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	1,6,9,10,11,12,13,15,16	1 st
C ₂	1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	2,3	2,3	5 th
C ₃	1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	2,3	2,3	5 th
C ₄	1,4,5,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	2,3,4,8,9,10,11,12,13	4,8,9,10,11,12,13	4 th
C ₅	1,5,6,9,10,11,12,13,15,16	2,3,4,5,8,9,10,11,12,13	5,9,10,11,12,13	3 rd
C ₆	1,6,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	1,2,3,5,6,7,8,9,11,12,13,14	1,6,9,11,12,13,14	2 nd
C ₇	1,6,7,9,10,11,12,13,15,16	1,7	1,7	3 rd
C ₈	1,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	2,3,4,8,9,10,11,12,13	4,8,9,10,11,12,13	4 th
C ₉	1,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	1,4,5,6,8,9,11,12,13,14	1,4,5,6,8,9,11,12,13,14	2 nd
C ₁₀	1,4,5,8,10,12,13,15,16	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15	1,4,5,8,10,12,13,15,16	1 st
C ₁₁	1,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,11,12,13,14	1,4,5,6,8,9,11,12,13,14	2 nd
C ₁₂	1,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15	1,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	1 st
C ₁₃	1,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,15,16	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15	1,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,15,16	1 st
C ₁₄	1,6,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	2,3,4,6,8,9,11,12,14	6,9,11,12,14	3 rd
C ₁₅	1,10,12,13,15,16	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	1,10,12,13,15,16	1 st
C ₁₆	1,10,12,13,15,16	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	1,10,12,13,15,16	1 st

The research model

The model was ultimately drawn after determining the relationships and sorting the variables in a descending order based on their level. According to table 5, the factors affecting market retention in fitness centers were categorized as five levels. The first level comprised customer relationship quality, reputation, price, customer experience quality, perceived value and customer satisfaction. The second

level comprised overall service quality, secondary services and ethical climate. The third level consisted of type and schedule of training, location and accessibility and social responsibility. The fourth level comprised equipment and machines and interior design and appearance. The fifth level also comprised manager communication and trainer's competencies. Figure 1 shows the final model of study.

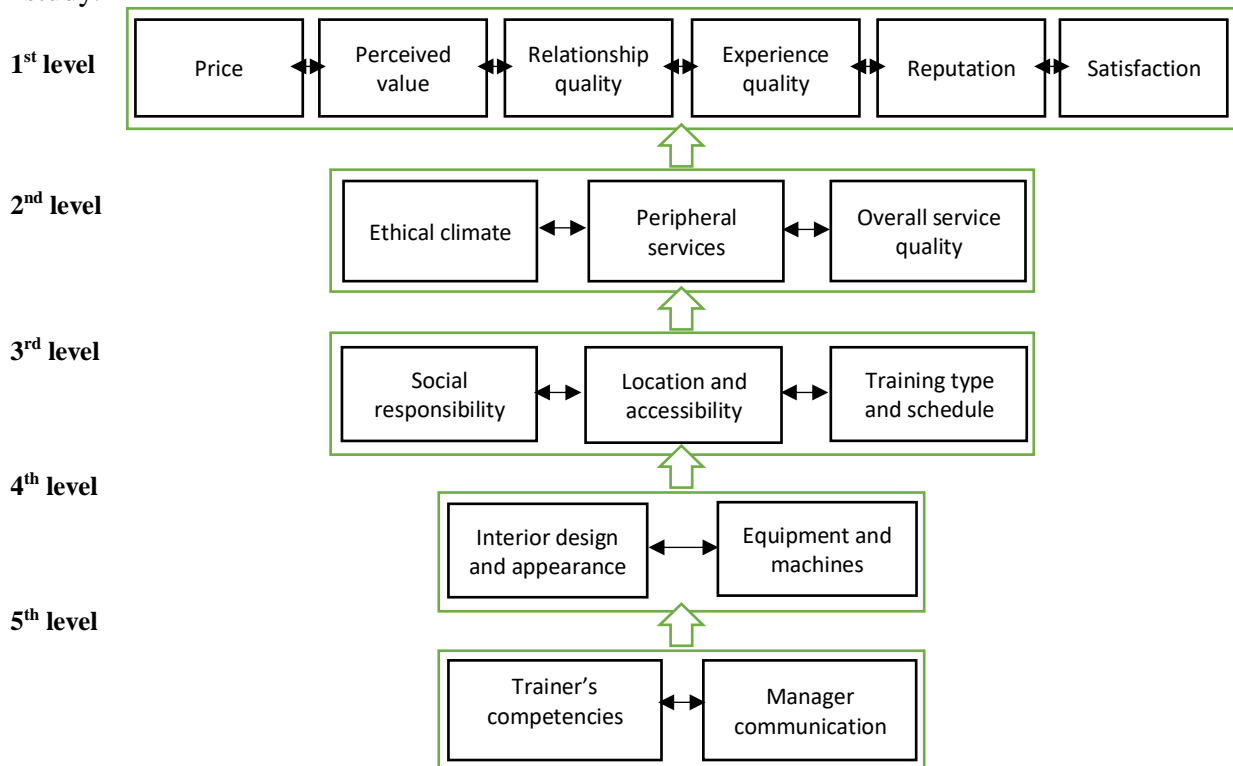


Figure 1. The Market-retention Model of Fitness and Sports Centers

MICMAC analysis

At this stage, the variables were assigned to four groups by their penetration and dependence levels. The first group, which comprised autonomous variables with low penetration and dependence levels, established insignificant relationships with the other variables of system. The second group comprised dependent variables with low penetration and high dependence levels. The third group comprised connective variables with high penetration and dependence levels. Any changes in these types of variables could affect the whole system. The fourth group comprised independent variables with high penetration and low dependence levels. Figure 2 shows the results of MICMAC analysis based on the penetration and dependence levels of the variables. Table 4 presents the penetration and dependence levels as the sum of the values in the corresponding row and column, respectively.

According to figure 2, manager communication, trainer's competencies and location and accessibility were categorized as independent variables. Customer relationship quality, equipment and machines, interior design and appearance, type and schedule of training, peripheral services, ethical climate, reputation, overall service quality, social responsibility, price and perceived value were considered connective variables. Dependent variables comprised experience quality and customer satisfaction, whereas none of the variables lay in the autonomous zone.

Penetration level	16																		
	15		C ₂ C ₃																
	14																		
	13								C ₈				C ₉ C ₁₀			C ₁₂			
	12								C ₄								C ₁₃		
	11																		
	10	C ₇							C ₁₄	C ₅			C ₆						
	9								Independent	Connective								C ₁₀ C ₁₀	
	8								Autonomous	Dependent									
	7																		
	6																		C ₁₅ C ₁₆
	5																		
	4																		
	3																		
	2																		
	1																		
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16		

Dependence level

Figure 2. The Penetration and Dependence Levels of the Effective Variables in Market Retention

Discussion and Conclusion

The present research was performed to investigate and determine the hierarchical levels of the factors affecting market retention in fitness centers. Sixteen factors identified were categorized as five levels using ISM. The results obtained showed manager communication and trainer’s competencies at the lowest level of the market-retention model. MICMAC analysis also found these factors to play the role of independent variables that affected the other variables directly or indirectly through the connective variables. Given the key role of frontline service providers in fitness centers, manager communication and the competencies and knowledge of trainer appear more effective than the physical environment and equipment in customer satisfaction. According the participants, manager communication involved interacting with the staff and customers, identifying and responding to their problems and controlling current affairs. Mathe et al. (2016) found manager communication effective

in employee attitudes towards customers and their satisfaction. Using skilled staff and trainers also helps realize the objectives of the exercises and social communication of customers. The present study found the trust of customers in a fitness center and its specialized skills to be affected by the characteristics of a competent trainer, which included level of education, practical skills, university education related to sport, sporting achievements, reputation, body type and appearance, accountability, compassion and willingness to correct learner mistakes. Trainer competence results in customer satisfaction and retention (Afthinos et al., 2005; S. Y. Lee, 2017; Liu & Chen, 2012).

The present study found equipment and machines as well as interior design and appearance in fitness centers to lie at the second level of importance from customer perspective and constitute connective variables based on MICMAC analysis. In addition to manager communication and trainer's competencies, this pair of variables constitute basic variables of the model and help the manager to encourage customers to return to the sports center. Physical status and available equipment in fitness centers were identified by García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, et al. (2018), Greenwell et al. (2002) S. Y. Lee (2017) and Lin and Lin (2008) and clean appearance and interior design by Afthinos et al. (2005) and Barshan et al. (2017) as the effective factors in customer retention. Given that an adequate number of equipment, cleanliness and novelty, a refreshing physical environment and an aesthetically pleasing arrangement positively relate to realizing the objectives of exercises and their relaxing effect, the placement of these variables at the fundamental and lowest levels of the model appears reasonable. At the next level of importance lay the type and schedule of trainings and social responsibility of the fitness center as connective variables and location and accessibility as an independent variable. Afthinos et al. (2005) and García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, et al. (2018) found the training program and timetable of services to be in great desire by the members of fitness centers. Individuals will keep on presenting to a fitness center unless the exercises conflict with their interests or daily schedule. According to the research participants, this conflict can constitute a major determinant of their possible withdrawal from exercises and fitness centers that provide their customers with the right to choose and customized schemes by offering diverse programs with flexible timetables can be assured of their customer retention. Moreover, the time required to reach a fitness center and its ease of access can affect the daily schedules of customers. Berry (2002) found the location, elapsed time and accessibility of services effective in the willingness to stay with a sports center. Afthinos et al. (2005) also found ease of access to services, as a value-creating factor for the customers, to cause their satisfaction and loyalty. In the case of the next variable at the third level of model, as for the social responsibility, the sensitivity of customers to environmental issues appears to have risen in recent years owing to increases in their knowledge. As a result, the social and environmental activities of different centers have turned into a cause for concern at least in some of the customers. Nyadzayo et al. (2016) found this type of activities to positively affect the long-term retention of customers in Australia. Not only can fitness centers align their activities with social and environmental issues, but also they can promote the social awareness of their members of these issues and therefore affect their choice of fitness center and their willingness to stay.

The present study found service quality, peripheral services and ethical climate to lie at the second level of ISM. As connective variables, they affected some of the variables and are affected by some others. They can be therefore of particular importance for the managers of fitness centers. According to the conducted interviews, the customers of fitness centers identified quality of services as equivalent to satisfying their needs in a timely manner and in the desired way. According to the study participants, level of services, comfort, effortless type of affairs and solving customer problems showed overall quality of services. Numerous studies conducted on sports services found quality to be the main effective factor in customer retention (García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, et al., 2018). Avourdiadou and Theodorakis (2014) found service quality effective in the satisfaction of all customers and a stimulus for retention only in new customers, as they found other factors effective in the loyalty of old customers of sport and fitness centers. The managers of fitness centers should, however, bear in mind that all the customers require a certain level of quality to be met as the minimum. The value of the core services of a fitness center can be enhanced by providing secondary services, including extra spaces for parking, buffet, toilet and childcare as well as holding group

entertainment programs, coupled with counseling for service options and nutritional programs. A positive ethical climate also appears to cause desirable behavioral intentions by customers. Individuals who present to fitness centers cannot continue their activities in these environments unless the center authorities and members observe and adhere to ethical standards (Okpara & Wynn, 2008). Fallah (2015) found low levels of willingness to stay in the customers of wrestling clubs with a poor ethical climate. The authorities of sports centers are therefore required to focus more on ethical problems and enforce the observation of ethical codes by their staff and customers.

The highest ISM level included the 6 main factors of customer relationship quality, price, perceived value and reputation as the connective variables and customer experience quality and customer satisfaction as the dependent variables. In other words, customer experience quality and customer satisfaction were affected by and changed with the other variables of the model. Whether or not a customer decides to re-use the services of a company, institution or business depends on their experience with the services provided for them (Bueno et al., 2019) and their level of satisfaction (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014; García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, et al., 2018). Moreover, as discussed earlier, customer relationship quality plays a key role in acquiring their trust and laying foundations for long-term relationships with fitness centers (Lin & Lin, 2008). Customers expect the owners and staff of a business to rapidly and properly respond to their requests in a way that they can trust in the business. Satisfying this expectation needs to an in-depth recognition of customers and management of their relationships (Nyadzayo et al., 2016). In addition to the factors cited, the price of a service selected is considered by many customers and the perceived value is measured versus the cost paid to determine the most economical service. This finding is consistent with those obtained by Afthinos et al. (2005), Oh (2000) and Voss, Parasuraman, and Grewal (1998). Customers also select services with the highest perceived value by measuring the value of services provided against the time and energy they spend and the social status of the fitness center, which were identified as the components of perceived value by Petrick and Backman (2002). According to the present study participants, as an effective factor in customer retention, reputation depended on the number of professional members of the fitness center, the fame of the center in fitness services, the center's prohibition of illegal activities and the scientific credibility of the methods and programs. Fitness centers should therefore strike a balance between the prices of their services on the one hand and the value presented to their customers and the club's reputation on the other.

Fitness centers are required to align their policies with the needs of their customers and take a futuristic approach to their executive decisions, as their survival depends on market retention and paving the way for the return of their customers. Applying the results obtained from identifying and rating market-retention factors in the present research can assist the managers of sports clubs in acquiring a better understanding of customer needs and controlling the effective components. The present findings can broaden the existing knowledge about market retention by proposing a novel model for evaluating the probability of retaining customers. This study pioneered the simultaneous investigation of numerous variables and their relationships in a way that the managers are provided with a better picture of the status quo. It is recommended that further studies be conducted to determine whether the effective factors in customer retention in fitness centers are the same as the factors affecting customer withdrawal in these centers and therefore develop a comprehensive model of customer behavior.

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