



Phenomenological Analysis of Sports Club Customers' gratitude

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyze the phenomenology of sports club customers' gratitude. The method of this research is qualitative and its approach is hermeneutic phenomenology. The participants of this research were 14 customers of sports clubs who had experienced gratitude. These people were selected, using purposeful sampling based on theoretical saturation. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. In this study, the strategies of credibility, transferability, conformability, process audit study, and inter-coder agreement were employed to assess the reliability and trustworthiness of the results. The data was analyzed using Van Manen's (2016) phenomenological method in three stages of coding. Based on the holistic and selective analysis, 6 main themes with 14 sub-themes emerged from the combination of 53 sub-themes. It was also found that the behavioral performance of employees, organizational factors, and individual factors are the drivers of customer appreciation, sports club customer appreciation has two behavioral and emotional aspects, and grateful customers show favorable psychological and behavioral reactions. Therefore, it can be pointed out that customer appreciation is the result of an involuntary exchange process that is accompanied by favorable psychological and behavioral reactions. In addition, any increase in customer appreciation depends on the customer's self-evaluation, the behavioral performance of employees and organizational factors.

Introduction

The global sports market is valued at \$5.488 billion (Klubusink, Pleskiewicz, & Warbel, 2019). One of the crucial components that ensures the sustainability of the sports industry is sports customers (Rezvandi, Tajari, & Sadeghzadeh, 2019). Based on theoretical foundations, there are four types of sports customers: active sports customers (individuals who actively participate in sports and recreational activities), inactive sports customers (individuals who are spectators of sports competitions), tangible sports products customers (individuals who purchase sports equipment and

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apparel for sports, exercise, fashion, and lifestyle purposes), and sports events customers (individuals who participate in or attend sports events) (Naghshbandi, Fazlhashemi, & Zakizadeh, 2017). Understanding their motivations and behaviors is crucial for sports organizations, particularly sports clubs, that aim to conduct targeted marketing efforts, as there is a difference between the motivations of sports customers and their consumption behaviors. It is valuable for sports organizations to comprehend how their loyal customers feel about them and what stimulates their support and desired behaviors (Clark, Giouris, & Bouris, 2022).

Sports customers often experience gratitude (Kim et al., 2010). A positive reaction or feeling to receive benefits from another's good intentions (Fredrickson, 2009), which is due to valuable consequences such as; strengthening and improving positive word of mouth and intention to continue (Khashan et al., 2023), positive attitude (Cao et al., 2023), intention to purchase. (Bock & Thomas, 2023), repeat purchases (Fu et al., 2023), positive brand evaluation and brand trust trusting the brand (Thomas et al., 2023) and other valuable outcomes in the field of marketing are increasing attention to good has attracted (Fu et al., 2023).

Gratitude is a human virtue, and in some cultures, it is considered the mother of all human virtues, whose origins go back to studies in the field of philosophy and religion in the 1820s and in the 1940s, it was officially included in the field of psychological research. In the last 10 years, it has been considered in marketing (Tu et al., 2021).

In different sciences of psychology, sociology, anthropology, management, economics etc., different definitions for gratitude have been presented. However, all of these sciences agree that gratitude represents the "emotional core" of reciprocity (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Gratitude has been emphasized from various perspectives in different theories. The theory of moral emotions suggests that gratitude acts as a barometer, strengthening morality. Expansion and construction theory states that creation helps individuals understand and absorb information, expanding their perspectives. According to emotional event theory, gratitude is a transcendental feeling formed based on circumstances. The self-regulation theory posits that gratitude resources require personal regulation to achieve goals. Lastly, the social exchange theory emphasizes the analysis of benefit-cost in governing social relations (Subramanian R & Thakur, 2022).

Customer gratitude is an essential factor for the customer's psychological ownership (Fu et al., 2023) and occurs when the customer perceives the behavior of others towards him as beneficial (Shi & Chen, 2014). According to Qiqi et al (2021) customer gratitude is a positive emotional behavior in which customers show towards the services they received from the service provider (Wang et al., 2021). Also, Fazal e Hasan and colleagues consider it as a positive feeling that can stimulate emotion-oriented and cognition-oriented behaviors (Fazal-e-Hasan et al., 2017).

Researchers have found that gratitude plays an important role in the stability of the relationship between clubs and customers, and clubs should strengthen customers' sense of gratitude by providing services tailored to the needs and demands of customers and applying appropriate policies (Abdavi et al., 2021; Zohrevandian & Mondali Zadeh, 2019). However, these researchers have not provided a framework that accurately defines customer gratitude.

On the other hand, despite the interest in gratitude in the marketing literature and its connection with the subject of services, there are limited studies of what appears in the minds of sports customers in relation to gratitude. For example, Kim et al. have focused on inducing feelings of gratitude in sports consumers and do not provide any explanation of how sports consumers experience gratitude (Kim et al., 2010). Zhang et al. (2023) have also evaluated the mediating role of gratitude in the relationship between co-created values on residents' support of sports events. However, they did not specify what gratitude means to residents, and their research results did not include the insights of sports customers (Zhang et al., 2023). Finally, Kim et al. answered the question of, what is the role of gratitude in stimulating consumer reciprocity? They have limited the investigation of consumer behavior to purchase intention and positive word-of-mouth advertising and have not analyzed how the phenomenon of gratitude is formed and what its structure is (Kim et al., 2010).

Despite the fact that gratitude plays a fundamental role in shaping behavioral decisions in sports environments (Kim et al., 2010), research conducted in other fields has presented contrasting arguments and interpretations of customer gratitude. For example, Tu et al. (2021) reviewed the literature on customer gratitude and its future prospects and concluded that customer gratitude has

three structures (emotional, cognitive and behavioral), company investments in relationship marketing, social responsibility and the benefits provided are the primary factors affecting customer gratitude, at the same time, the altruistic behavior of employees and customer evaluations also affect customer gratitude. Finally, customer gratitude affects the relationship between customers and the external environment and positive behaviors for the benefit of the company. It stimulates employees and society. At the same time, Audrain-Pontevia and Garnier (2021) in response to the question of whether your customers are gratitude? How customer gratitude affects loyalty program effectiveness. They showed that customer gratitude is positively and strongly related to loyalty, and in this relationship, the advantages of entertainment and recognition have a significant mediating role. Mangus et al. (2017) also investigated the theory of moral influence in the transfer of feelings in connection with customer gratitude and showed that salesperson's extra-role behaviors improve customer gratitude. This study also showed that in addition to the extra-role behaviors of employees, information sharing also has a positive effect on customer gratitude and customer commitment, but these behaviors are more in situations where the relationship between the seller and the service recipient has not reached maturity. Also, Qi et al. (2023) investigated the effect of service atmosphere on gratitude in guiding customer actions and, concluded that gratitude plays the role of a mediating variable in the relationship between service atmosphere and customer satisfaction, and customer-oriented behaviors are the level of customer satisfaction and gratitude. Increases. Mittal and Maity (2022) also addressed the question of whether the relationship between investment in communication, customer gratitude, and customer loyalty is influenced by contextual and individual factors. They found that investment in communication has a significant impact on customer gratitude and customer loyalty. Additionally, they found that factors such as purchase channel (online and offline), regularity, and to some extent gender, each separately moderate the relationship between marketing investment in communication and customer gratitude with loyalty.

In addition, Fernandes and Cruzeiro (2023), investigating the perception of special requests as a driver of customer citizenship behaviors: the mediating role of gratitude and satisfaction, reported that special customer requests are requests that fall outside of employees' normal job duties and It is necessary to adapt to the needs of customers, and adaptive behaviors through gratitude and satisfaction lead to customer citizenship behaviors. In another study, Cao et al. (2023) investigated when and why instrumental gratitude from customers leads to employee deviance. It showed that customer gratitude leads to attitude change. Finally, Khashan et al. (2023) by examining the relationships between smart customer experience, customer gratitude, continuance intentions and positive word of mouth, showed that smart customer experience directly increases the continuous intention to adopt smart services and positive word of mouth. Also, gratitude increases continued intentions and positive word of mouth.

What can be inferred from the results of past researches is that customer gratitude is subject to various stimuli, there are fundamental differences in the description of the structural components of customer gratitude, and a wide range of quantitative methods and approaches attributed to them have been used to investigate gratitude. In previous researches, the customers' lived experiences of gratitude, which can help to better understand the reality of gratitude and which is emphasized by Batra et al. (2012), have not been paid attention to. Despite the fact that gratitude is a positive emotional reaction rooted in people's attitudes, perceptions, and lived experience, only those who have personally experienced it can truly convey it. To gain a deep understanding of the concept and layers of customer gratitude, it is essential to focus on personal experiences as an inherent reality. Customer gratitude has always been complex and multidimensional, and according to al Tu et al. (2021), it remains a point of disagreement. Therefore, it should be investigated what gratitude means to the customers of sports clubs? What factors lead to the formation of customer gratitude of sports clubs? Moreover, what reactions do sports club customers show in response to gratitude?

This study aims to explore and describe the lived experience of sports club customers in terms of gratitude. It seeks to understand the genuine feeling of gratitude, independent of any specific perspective that has been proposed previously. By doing so, it aims to uncover the truth about customer gratitude and define what it means to be a customer. The ultimate goal of this research is to gain insight into the experience of sports gratitude, which will contribute to a better understanding of customer gratitude. This understanding is particularly valuable for sports industry activists and

marketers, especially those involved with sports clubs. It will enable them to better comprehend the impact of their marketing efforts based on gratitude, as well as assess how their customers are valued and the emotions they evoke through their policies. In addition, this study contributes to the existing literature in the field of customer gratitude because it brings us back to the source of the meaning and the phenomenal and natural form of gratitude, which was previously discussed in past research both in the field of sports and in other fields. It has not been paid attention to.

Methodology

Van Manen (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological method was used to investigate the gratitude experiences of sports customers (Table 1). This approach, by being placed in the interpretation paradigm, seeks to understand the everyday world and extract meaning from it. This type of phenomenology, relying on the opinions of Heidegger and Gadamer, wants to reach a deep understanding of a phenomenon through concrete interpretations (Ricoeur, 1975). In essence, this research approach seeks to study phenomena as they are consciously experienced (Beck, 1994).

Table 1. Application of Van Manen's six-step approach

Six methodological steps Proposed by Van Manen (1990)	Researcher's activity in study
Turning to the nature of phenomena	Thinking and writing pre-assumptions about customer gratitude, formulating the phenomenological question
Investigating experiences as we live it	In this step researcher concerned with performing in-depth interview and prolong engagement with participant to investigate the lived experiences
Reflecting on essential themes	Reflecting on the themes identified from the interviews, conducting thematic analysis through holistic and selective approach
Hermeneutic phenomenological writing	Writing transcript to make the participants' insights visible, writing about subthemes and themes, writing and rewriting to creating phenomenological text according to the participants' quotes.
Maintaining a strong and oriented relation to lived experiences	The researchers tried to remain focused on the research question by creating strong and deep relationship with text and main phenomenon.
Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole	Researcher attempt to make a balance in the field of linking whole and parts by constantly review of whole and parts through holistic and selective approaches and according to the main research question

In this study, a total of 14 customers were selected from bodybuilding and fitness clubs. These customers had been acknowledged by the clubs at least twice during their membership. The participants were chosen using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: (1) individuals who had received acknowledgment solely from the club they were a member of, (2) individuals who had availed of a discount or special offer provided by the club as part of the acknowledgment, which was communicated through club media, (3) participants who were 18 years of age or older to ensure voluntary participation, and (4) individuals who were paying fees to the private sports clubs for the services they received. On the other hand, individuals who met the following limitations were not included in the study: (1) those who had terminated their relationship with the club within the past year, (2) those who had no interest in participating in the study, and (3) those who expressed interest but did not have enough time for an interview.

The data collection tool used in this study was semi-structured interviews. These interviews were recorded as audio files from April 2023 to September 2023 and transcribed using Microsoft Word 2010. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their interviews. On average, the interviews lasted 41 minutes. Data saturation was achieved after conducting interviews with 12 participants, at which point all researchers agreed that no new data was emerging within a category, and the characteristics and relationships of the data had been identified. To further ensure reliability, two additional interviews were conducted. Sample interview questions can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. List of interview questions

Type of question	Questions
Opening question	Can you please introduce yourself briefly?
Introductory question	What has your journey been like since gratitude has been expressed by the club?
Transition question	What was your greatest of happiness when you experienced gratitude?
Key questions	What does gratitude mean to you?
	The first time you receive gratitude is often a memorable experience. How would you describe the emotions and thoughts that accompanied that moment for you?
	What changes occurred in your mind when you receive gratitude for the second time?
	How has your connection with the club evolved since you experienced gratitude?
	How do you typically share or express this unique moment with the club?
Closing question	Is there anything else you would like to add?

The data were analyzed using the hermeneutic phenomenological research method of Van Manen (1990). First, two researchers read the transcripts several times to understand the overall meaning. Next, words, sentences, and paragraphs were examined one by one, and important texts were identified and categorized based on their meaning, context, and relationships. At this stage, hermeneutic reduction was applied, which refers to the process of extracting essential meaning from complex phenomena in order to interpret and understand them. Specifically, we extracted underlying themes that captured participants' experiences. Third, the classified texts were categorized into themes to structure the meaning of the participants' lived experiences. This study ensured the accuracy of the research based on the criteria of truth value, applicability, consistency and impartiality (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). In this study, the strategies of credibility, transferability, conformability, process audit study, and inter-coder agreement were employed to assess the reliability and trustworthiness of the results.

Table 3. Validity and reliability of the results.

Result	Method	Strategy	Validity/Reliability
Confirm	Research process confirmation by eight experts	Credibility (reliability)	Validity
Confirm	Using two coders for coding multiple interview samples	Credibility (reliability)	Validity
Confirm	Opinions of three experts who did not participate in the study	Transferability	Validity
Confirm	Recording and documenting all interviews	Conformability (verifiability)	Validity
Confirm	Sharing information with five participants in the study	Process audit study	Reliability
Reliability between two coders is 88%	Analyzing three interviews by the researcher and a co-worker and identifying similar and dissimilar codes	Inter-coder agreement	Reliability

Results

A total of 14 customers who were previously thanked participated in this study. Their age ranged from 25 to 38 years, with an average age of 32.6 years. Most of them were single (64.3%). The number of times they were appreciated by the club varied from 2 to 7 times with an average of 3.7 times (Table 4).

Table 4. General characteristics and related to sports history and the number of times gratitude was given to customers

No.	Age (years)	Marital status	Sports history (years)	Have been appreciated (number)
P1	35	Single	10	4
P2	37	Single	13	3
P3	32	Married	11	4
P4	37	Single	14	4
P5	29	Single	11	3
P6	25	Single	9	2
P7	31	Married	10	4
P8	38	Married	18	7
P9	38	Single	12	3
P10	34	Married	15	3
P11	27	Single	13	5
P12	31	Married	15	4
P13	30	Single	13	2
P14	33	Single	14	4

Based on Van Manen (1990) holistic and selective analysis conducted by the research team, in response to the first research question, what does gratitude mean to sports club customers? It was found that sports customers look at gratitude from two emotional and behavioral dimensions. Also, in response to the second question of the research, what factors lead to the formation of gratitude of sports club customers?

It was found that the level of customer gratitude is influenced by the behavioral performance factors of employees, organizational factors and individual factors. The behavioral performance of employees in this study consists of the sub-themes of extra-role behaviors, employee information sharing, and adaptive behaviors of employees. At the organizational level, clubs can form customer gratitude with relational marketing and structural investment. Individual factors also include customer perception and customer attitude. Finally, in response to the third question of the research, what are the reactions of sports club customers in response to gratitude? It was found that appreciative customers have two types of reactions or behavioral orientations. Psychological reactions are the first type. Psychological reaction refers to changes in a person's views, thoughts, feelings and psychological states, whose sub-themes in this study are customer satisfaction, customer commitment and customer trust. It is worth noting that psychological reactions caused by customer gratitude mainly focus on customers' cognitive evaluation of relationship quality and relationship value. The second type of this reaction is the behavioral reactions that express visible and behavioral changes that occur in a person. In this study, customer loyalty and reciprocity were included in the category of behavioral reactions (Table 5).

Table 5. Lived experience of customer gratitude

Main themes	Sub themes	Themes	Interview code
Behavioral performance of employees	Extra-role behaviors of employees	Spend more time with customers	P1, P5, P10
		Voluntary assistance to customers	P1, P4
		Helping customers beyond job expectations and requirements	P3
	Share employee information	Providing necessary information to customers	P1, P6, P7
		Sharing the goals and achievements of the club	P7
		Share expertise and knowledge of employees	P2, P6, P12

Adaptive behaviors of employees	Employee motivation	P10, P14
	Empathy of employees with customers	P7, P8, P10, P11
	Employees' commitment to service	P7
	Accepting customer feedback	P3, P9, P10, P11
	Role-playing appropriate to the situation	P5
	Expressing the affection of employees	P1, P5, P13
	The kind of respect employees have for customers	P5, P9, P12, P14
Organizational factors	Creating and strengthening positive relationships with customers	P4, P10
	Informing customers in different ways	P3, P5, P11
	Development of mutual trust	P2
	Allocating special benefits to specific customers	P1, P8, P10
	Providing tangible rewards (discounts) from the club to all customers	P1, P5, P12
	Improve customer experience	Providing customized services P2, P7
		Creating shared value P2
	Improving service quality P6, P10	
	Improving efficiency and increasing service speed P2, P9, P12	
Individual factors	Customization	The customer's feeling towards the service received P1, P4
		Customer expectations of received services P5, P13
		Customer adaptive perceptions of received services P3,
	Decentralization	Customer experience of received services P5, P7
		Customer's understanding of the service received P6, P13
Psychological reactions	Customer commitment	A customer's opinion about the services received P7, P12
		Continue cooperation with the club P1, P2, P6, P8, P9
		Customer support behaviors P5, P11
		Adherence and commitment to the club P5
	customer satisfaction	Positive feelings about the shopping experience P5, P8, P14
		Satisfying the wishes and needs of the customer P5, P10
	Customer trust	Customer satisfaction from the club P3, P7
Behavioral reactions		Ensuring the club's future actions P3, P11
		Believing in the goodwill of the club P5, P7, P8, P9, P11
		Belief in the quality of services provided P4, P9
	mutual behavior	Inhibition of avoidant behaviors of customers P1, P2, P7, P12
		Reduce price sensitivity P5, P10
		Positive word of mouth advertising P6, P14
	Costumer loyalty	Increase return intention P1, P2, P4, P5, P7, P14
Customer Gratitude		Higher resilience to negative experiences P4, P5
		Prefer the club to other clubs P3, P5, P10
		Support the club P9, P12, P13
	Emotional gratitude	Benefit recognition P1, P2, P3, P7
		Knowing the source of benefit P1, P10
		Inducing moral behavior to the individual P5, P7, P9
	Acknowledgment P5	
	Optimism and positive outlook P1, P2, P5, P6, P14	
	Establishing a friendly relationship P6, P13	

Behavioral gratitude	Compensation for benefits received	P1, P5, P8, P12, P13, P14
	Adherence to mutual obligations	P7, P8, P9, P10
	Showing kindness	P2, P3, P4, P7

Figure 1 reflects an overview of the findings that emerged in the context of interviews with sports clients in relation to the gratitude of these people

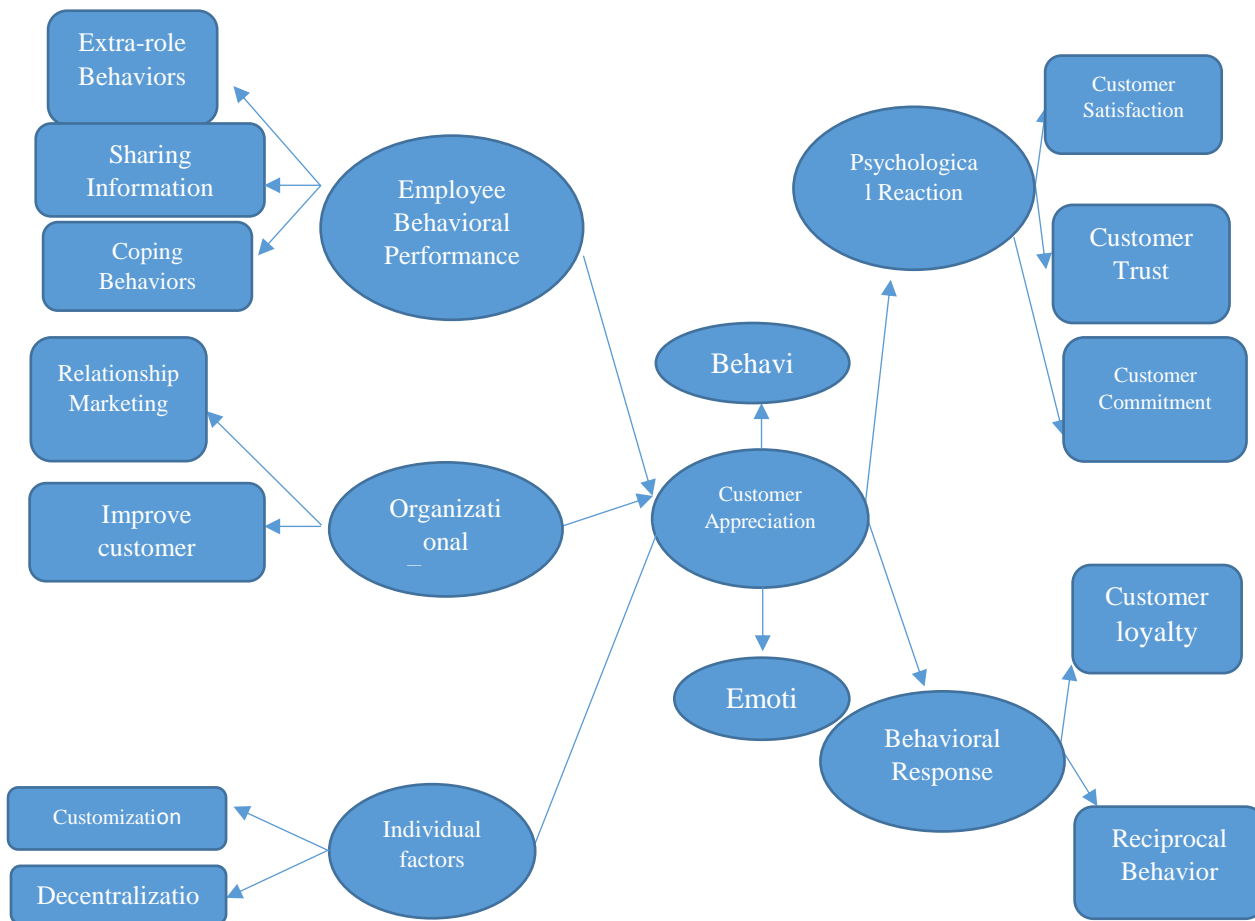


Figure 1. Main and sub-themes related to customer gratitude

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze the phenomenology of sports club customers' gratitude. Based on the data analysis, it was found that sports customers view gratitude from two emotional and behavioral dimensions. This finding is somewhat consistent with the results of the study by Tu et al. (2021), because the aforementioned study reported that the structure of gratitude has three basic aspects: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, and in this study, the behavioral and emotional aspects of gratitude are mentioned. However, in this study, a theme that represents the cognitive aspect was not observed, perhaps because sports customers recognize and recognize the benefit in the stage of emotional gratitude and then acknowledge it. Therefore, in the following, the gratitude of sports customers will be discussed from two emotional and behavioral dimensions.

Affective gratitude: is a relatively short-lived emotional state that occurs when a person perceives what he or she has received in the form of a benefit. Data analysis showed that emotional gratitude as an aspect of customer gratitude includes benefit recognition, recognition of the source of benefit, inducing moral behavior to the individual and optimism and positive outlook. This finding is consistent with the results of the study by Bock et al. (2016), which considers the emotional aspect of gratitude as a positive state that customers feel. However, the descriptors introduced by Bock et al.

(2016) study for emotional gratitude include "valued", "respected" and "supported", which seem to have little correspondence to the themes emerging in this study, rather than in meaning. The important thing about this aspect of gratitude is that this type of gratitude is the foundation of behavioral gratitude (Palmatier et al., 2009). This means that emotional gratitude occurs first and then behavioral gratitude is formed.

Behavioral gratitude: It is a voluntary and self-solicited response or reaction that the customer does not on the basis of obligation but on the basis of inner desire. Reciprocal determinism theory (Bandura, 1978) can be used to explain this dimension of customer gratitude. This theory, which shows that a person's actions, behavior and decisions are the result of events that happened in the past and human actions are only a reaction to what happened in the past, believes that gratitude is a type of reciprocal action that occurs when it means that the person has received a benefit. In fact, in the behavioral dimension, gratitude is a binding and necessary force, a force that forces the customer to return the resources received. It was also found that the amount of customer gratitude is influenced by the behavioral performance factors of employees, organizational factors, and individual factors, and these factors are part of the drivers and determinants of customer gratitude of sports clubs. Therefore, these factors will be discussed in the following.

Extra-role behaviors of employees: It refers to the activities that employees or service providers perform spontaneously. Data analysis showed that employees' extra-role behaviors are one of the drivers of customer gratitude. This finding is consistent with the results of the study by Mangus et al. (2017). Because this study showed that the salesperson's extra-role behaviors create gratitude in the customer. According to the moral pressure function (McCullough et al., 2001), the reason why service provider extra-role behaviors are likely to lead to customer gratitude is that when the service provider goes beyond their primary duties to the customer, in this case the customer does not. He not only feels that he has been considered valuable, but also that he feels that he has received too much attention and love. These interactions lead to a positive emotional experience with the customer, and as a result, the customer feels obligated to be grateful.

Employee Information Sharing: The disclosure of club knowledge by employees to customers is referred to as information sharing. Data analysis has shown that information sharing is a factor that contributes to customer gratitude. This finding aligns with the results of a study conducted by Mangus et al. (2017), which demonstrated that sharing information strengthens customer gratitude. The reason behind the connection between information sharing by employees and customer gratitude is likely the fact that customers utilize the information they receive from club employees to make informed decisions, thereby reducing the likelihood of regret. Additionally, information sharing can enhance the efficiency of the service delivery process. When customers perceive that employees freely share information with them, it not only increases their trust, but also elicits appreciation in response.

Adaptive behaviors of employees: It refers to the performance and behaviors that employees show in the club environment and in interaction with customers. Based on the data analysis, adaptive behaviors of employees can be effective on the gratitude of sports club customers. This finding is consistent with the results of the study by Tu et al. (2021), because this study reported that one of the determinants of customer gratitude is the altruistic behavior of employees. The reason why the adaptive behavior of the employees causes the gratitude of the customers of the sports clubs is probably that the customers gain a sense of value and respect by seeing such behaviors, and this pleasant feeling convinces them to show a pleasant emotional reaction.

Relationship marketing: Relationship marketing refers to the management of relationships with customers. Data analysis has shown that relational marketing, along with employees' extra-role behaviors and information sharing, leads to gratitude. This finding aligns with the results of the Mittal and Maity (2022) study, which demonstrated that investing in communication has an impact on customer gratitude. According to the social exchange effect theory (Lawler, 2001), the nature of the benefits received in a social exchange determines the amount and type of emotional response from a person. Similarly, perceiving a successful social exchange is likely to generate positive emotions, such as gratitude. This construct positively influences overall satisfaction and ultimately fosters the development of long-term relationships.

Improving customer experience: It refers to all the changes and actions that clubs take to improve the experience of their customers, meet their needs and expectations. Improving customer experience

includes providing customized services, creating shared value, improving service quality, improving efficiency and increasing service speed. Exchange theory can be used to explain the relationship between customer experience and gratitude. Kotler considers the exchange process as a fundamental part of marketing activity, which is not limited to goods, services, and money, but also includes other resources such as time, energy, and emotions.

Customer perception: It refers to the ideas and expectations that the customer expects from the club. The findings of this study showed that customers' perception can be effective on gratitude. This finding is somewhat consistent with the results of the studies of Fernandes and Cruzeiro (2023), because this study has shown that a special request from customers is effective on their gratitude and it is necessary to adapt their employees to it. The reason why customers' perception is effective on gratitude is probably the fact that customers evaluate a club and its services based on their perceptions. As a result, customers show more gratitude.

Customer attitude: It is the type of look and feeling that the customer has towards the services provided and it is categorized into three basic themes, namely the customer's experience of the services received, the customer's understanding of the services received and the customer's opinion about the services received. The findings showed that a positive attitude is likely to lead customers to appreciate the services and benefits they receive. The reason why customer attitude affects gratitude is probably because gratitude is the result of social information processing. Based on the social information processing theory, they see their experiences in the form of social information and these interactions influence their future attitudes and behaviors (Walther & Parks, 2002).

Finally, it was found that appreciative customers in sports clubs show two types of psychological reactions and gratitude. In other words, they have two types of behavioral orientation. Therefore, these reactions will be discussed in the following.

Customer engagement: means active engagement with an issue or goal. Data analysis showed that customer commitment is one of the reactions of customers' gratitude. This finding is consistent with the results of the study by Mangus et al. (2017) because in this study it is reported that customer gratitude has a positive effect on customer commitment. Construal theory can be used to explain how emotions, both negative and positive, can stimulate behavioral intentions such as commitment. Theorists believe that emotions are associated with practical tendencies. For example, fear is associated with the urge to escape and anger is associated with the urge to attack. Fredrickson (2009) considers these types of negative emotions to be limited intellectual acts; the mental process that constrains one's momentary thought-action process to indicate quick and decisive action. But positive emotions, such as gratitude, appear to expand people's momentary thought-action options and build their enduring personal resources. Additionally, positive emotions such as gratitude are calm and passive emotions and work well with other emotions such as happiness, contentment, love, and commitment, contributing to positive attitudes and behavioral intentions, such as commitment. It is important to mention that the customer's commitment is formed for a certain period of time and may change if the customer's needs are not met.

Customer loyalty: Loyalty refers to a deeper and more stable commitment compared to commitment, which is formed in the form of having a positive mentality towards the club, continuous use of the club's services, higher flexibility against negative experiences and preferring the club to other clubs. The findings showed that customer loyalty can be strengthened under the influence of customer gratitude. This finding is consistent with the results of Audrain-Pontevia and Garnier (2021) and Mittal and Maity (2022) studies. Because these studies showed that gratitude is positively related to loyalty. The reason that customer gratitude leads to customer loyalty is probably because a grateful customer has received a valuable benefit from the service provider and in return the customer responds positively to help develop the relationship. At the same time, in the exchange process, if the customer expresses gratitude towards the service provider or the club, it shows that he is more willing to exchange in the future. Based on the principle of reciprocity, when a person does a good deed for another person, that person obliges himself to show a suitable reaction in return or to do a good deed in response to this behavior (Ma et al., 2017).

Customer trust: refers to the customer's confidence in the club's intentions and efforts to fulfill its duties and obligations. Data analysis showed that customer trust can be the result of customer gratitude. This finding is consistent with Young (2006) argument, which states that gratitude is an

emotion that sustains a relationship by fostering trust. The reason why gratitude leads to customer trust is probably because Gratitude does not operate independently of trust and commitment and is not separated from cognitive structures. In other words, feeling and cognition are strongly intertwined, and at the same time, thinking and behavior do not occur in an emotional vacuum, but are closely related to a person's feelings.

Customer satisfaction: It is the customer's feeling and attitude towards the service he used. Data analysis showed that customer satisfaction is one of the reactions of customers' gratitude. In other words, when customers are grateful, they are happy and satisfied with the services they receive from the club. This finding is consistent with the results of the studies of Qi et al. (2023) because the aforementioned study reported that gratitude leads to customer satisfaction.

Reciprocity: Refers to two-way interactions and exchanges between the service provider and the customer. This exchange not only includes curbing customers' avoidance behaviors, but also includes reducing price sensitivity, positive word-of-mouth advertising, and increasing return intentions. This finding is consistent with the results of the Khashan et al. (2023) study, as this study showed that positive word of mouth as a reciprocal behavior is influenced by customer gratitude. Based on the conclusion of Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017), the reason why a grateful customer has a behavioral response is that customer gratitude not only strengthens emotion-oriented and cognitive-oriented mechanisms, but also requires a person to create and maintain a relationship. In practice, he should show an appropriate reaction to compensate for the benefit he has received.

In general, it can be stated that customer gratitude is the outcome of an involuntary exchange process that is accompanied by positive psychological and behavioral responses. Furthermore, the extent of customer gratitude is influenced by the customer's self-evaluation, the performance of employees, and organizational factors. If these factors are positive, it is likely that customer gratitude will increase. Therefore, it is recommended that sports clubs continue to invest in relational marketing, enhance the customer experience, and meet the needs and demands of both club employees and customers. This can be achieved by providing quality and timely services that cater to customer demand and align with their perceptions and attitudes.

This study has been associated with limitations that need to be considered. The first limitation is that the effectiveness of customer gratitude stimuli is probably not the same, so it is not possible to imagine the same role for them. Another limitation is that this study focused on customer gratitude from the perspective of private sports club customers, so the results of this study cannot be generalized to public club customers. Therefore, future researchers are suggested to analyze and evaluate the influence of macro factors identified in relation to the research topic in a survey study, and it is also suggested to investigate and analyze the lived experience of government club customers in relation to gratitude.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

Ethical points have been observed.

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Authors' contribution

All authors have contributed to the design and implementation of this study.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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