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Consumer Behaviour in Fitness Club: Study of the Weekly Frequency of Use, Expectations, Satisfaction and Retention

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Abstract: This study aims to understand the relationship between the weekly frequency of use, expectations, satisfaction and retention of members in a fitness Clubs. In this market it is indispensable to understand the characteristics of faithful members, in order to act appropriately with each segment. Accordingly, the weekly frequency, which a member goes to the gym, their expectations, satisfaction and retention are key variables to understand them. Data was collected with a sample of 146 members. The instrument was constituted by the sample characterization and questions to understand the consumer behaviour in fitness (weekly frequency of use, expectations, satisfaction and retention behaviours). The statistical analysis consisted on descriptive and inferential analyses, using SPSS software. In this study the weekly frequency did not show the explanatory capacity to predict the satisfaction and retention. The relationship between expectations with satisfaction (73%) and retention (64%) was statistically significant. Finally, the relationship between satisfaction and retention (63%) was positive and significant. The results indicated that fitness club managers must act to keep those who are less likely to remain, who aren't the ones who go less times a week to the club, but those who have a lower satisfaction and, consequently, lower retention.

Keywords: Fitness Industry, Management, Managers, Marketing, Members, Organizations, Services.

INTRODUCTION

It is important to understand the consumers' behaviour in fitness industry in order to act accordingly to each segment of the population and, consequently, raise the fitness clubs yield, keeping more and better members [1 - 4]. The fitness market is growing fast and it is seen as an important economic field. In 2010, the number of fitness clubs in Portugal was about 1,400, which represented around 600,000 members [5]. However, the activity reports show a decreasing number of permanent members [6]. Previous studies mention difficulties in retaining members and show high dropout levels [7, 8]. With the increase of the competition in number and quality of fitness clubs, it is important to understand what drives the members to stay and what drives them to premature dropout. Based on these evidences, studying the fitness club members' weekly frequency of use seems relevant to understand the decision to remain at the club [8]. Ferrand and colleagues [1] refer that regular frequency of the fitness club is vital to members' retention and positively impacts on the clubs' profitability. Moreover, the authors add that the frequency that the members go to the club it's synonym of their satisfaction at the club and, consequently, their decision to remain. This idea is also corroborated by fitness industry managers [6], who refer that the frequency of use reflects the permanence at the club for a longer period of time. However, there's still few research on the relation between the weekly frequency of use, expectations, satisfaction and retention.

Expectations are considered as what it's expected of a given service or organization, based on the needs, desires and

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motivations of consumers, as well as their past experiences and perceived knowledge of the organization. The media communication, price and image are also organizations' features that weigh on the expectations [9]. In this perspective, the previous experiences of the service or similar services are considered essential to the expectations. Familiarity with the service increases the probability of having realistic expectations, although O'Neill and Palmer [10] refer that regular consumers have more complex expectations than new consumers. In this regard, Talley [6] states that if the fitness organizations satisfy the members and provide services in order to meet or even exceed the members' expectations, they can increase retention. Previously, Robinson [9] related the members' expectations of provided services with retention. A study on the members' retention in fitness clubs [11] supports this direct relationship between expectations and retention of fitness members'.

In addition, the literature states that the expectations have a positive influence on satisfaction [9, 12, 13] and that these can influence retention. Thus, members' expectations about the service or fitness organization influences their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service and, consequently, has an effect on retention. However, there's still few research on the relationship between expectations and satisfaction.

Zeithaml and Bitner [14] believe that satisfaction is an affective response to the service and suggest that satisfaction is a general concept built in a long term, that provides information about members' behaviour towards the service, as well as their decision to reutilize it [12, 15, 16] or intention to repurchase [1, 17]. Satisfaction is usually recognized as key element in the relation between members and service, showing a positive relation between members' satisfaction and retention [18]. In a study developed by Vásquez-Carrasco and Foxall [19], the results indicate that a satisfied customer will have higher probabilities of maintaining the established relationship and Howat, Murray and Crilley [20] found evidences that customers' satisfaction in sporting centres is positively related with service recommendation, reuse and increase of frequent visits to the club.

Thus, the study of satisfaction and its importance in future behaviour has been an issue of some research [21]. The members' satisfaction must be a fundamental goal to all sporting organizations, as it can lead to the decision of repeating the experience, unlike dissatisfaction [2]. There are two ways to measure satisfaction: general satisfaction and satisfaction assessment by the service attributes of the fitness club. Bodet [18] considers that it is to be expected that the overall satisfaction is an antecedent to positive results. Because of that, the use of a single item to the general satisfaction is used in the literature [20]. On the other hand, to Gonçalves and colleagues [2] satisfaction is measured by the members' perception about the service attributes and there's the need to decide which attributes must be upgraded or removed. However, not all service attributes have the same importance so each of them has different influence on satisfaction [1, 18] and there's no consensus about which one easily leads to satisfaction. Moreover, Barros and Gonçalves [22] in a study applied to fitness clubs used a satisfaction scale based on a cognitive component, relative to satisfaction with life original scale by Diener and Lucas [23], adapted to the fitness context. Therefore, the cognitive component is intended to be an assessment that the members make of their club as a whole, as stated by Pavot and Diener for life [24].

Besides satisfaction, keeping members is critical to the continuous success and growth of fitness industry, which relies on the financial support provided by customers [25]. Thus, the retention implies a long-term commitment between the customer and the organization [26]. This concept consists in the process of keeping members for a longer period of time as the result of an appropriate customer service [5]. Retention is usually related to the concept of customer loyalty [1, 27 - 29] since it is favoured by the quality relations established between members and the organization [29].

Thus, customer retention can lead to loyalty, that benefits the organizations, since loyal members show confidence in the intentions and practices of the institutions, believe the organization shows interest in them and value their presence regardless of how much they spend. In addition, the organizations consider that the loyal consumers use their services more easily, are hardly tempted to leave them for competition, speak well of the organization to potential customers and help the organization to improve its services [29, 30].

Considering this, Reichheld and Teal [31] argue that retention is not just a statistic but the key indicator that integrates the business dimensions and measures how well the company is creating value for its customers. Thus, customer retention is critical to the fitness clubs profitability [1, 6, 7, 30], being as or more important than recruiting new customers, since it is less and less certain for organizations that there is unlimited potential customer base [26] and the cost of soliciting new customers are larger than keeping those who are already members [25, 26, 29, 32, 33].

Due to these evidences, managers are more interested in activities based on retention to keep new and existing members for a longer period of time [6]. Although there is no standard strategy to ensure the retention, there are

initiatives that can help make this happen, as a correct analysis of the market that is intended to attract, sales strategies, contracts, close monitoring of members and/or socializing in an attempt to engage in the organization [7]. So, it's not enough to keep members happy [34] but it is essential to establish relations between staff and customers. It is also important to monitor and demonstrate the benefits sought by customers for them to trust the organization [6, 25, 31, 34]. Because of this, human resources play a key role and should be trained to perform these strategies that may favour the retention [5, 20]. Managers should then have a thorough knowledge of customer needs and the abilities to understand, show interest and value the members' interests if they are to have high retention rates [4, 25, 26]. Thus, fitness club managers should find the best definition and strategies for retention, as this is vital for organizations to evaluate their performance [28]. Also, a higher retention reduces the need to get new members [8] and, therefore, spending less financial efforts in attracting new members [6 - 8, 29, 31, 32, 35].

Physical activity involvement is also considered an important condition for members' loyalty and satisfaction [36, 37]. Moreover, some authors [38, 39] argue that a higher exercise frequency is associated with higher levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of practitioners of recreational sports activities. In this sense, although it is not well known, particularly in fitness level, there are some authors who consider that the frequency of use, which is the number of times the member goes to the club, may be an indicator of a greater overall satisfaction at the club and, consequently, higher retention [1, 6].

Going to the club in the first weeks after subscribing is considered a vital condition that influences the retention of members [6]. 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. This evidence is highlighted by the fitness club managers [39] suggesting that the frequency of visits tend to decrease when members do not intend to renew your membership. Although the reasons for this are unclear, the authors suggest that this may be due to decreased satisfaction with the service. Some literature [1, 6] considers the weekly frequency of use as a variable that influence the repurchase intention. Thus, in our opinion, it is important to include this variable in the investigation. However, it's considered important that fitness club managers can balance this increase of the weekly frequency with the number of people in the club simultaneously, since an overcrowded club may cause a decrease in quality of service, which should be preserved [1]. Thereby, this study aims to understand the relationship between the weekly frequency, expectations, satisfaction and retention of members in a fitness Clubs.

METHOD

The data was collected from January to February of 2014, in a fitness club of Oporto, Portugal, that belongs to the major Portuguese fitness clubs organization. In 2014, this organization had eleven clubs all over Portugal with approximately 34000 members. The club where the data was collected is the oldest and one of the smallest of all in number of members, having 1100 members. In this club, the services available to members are fitness services (cardio and weights), group classes, free swimming and relaxing services (sauna, Turkish bath and Jacuzzi), besides the additional services of personal training, swimming lessons, massages, beauty treatments and squash.

The sample was constituted by 146 individuals: from both sexes, with a balanced number of men (48.6%; $n=71$) and women (51.4%; $n=75$); the majority was between "19 to 34" years old (38.4%; $n=56$) and from "35 to 51" years old (30.8%; $n=45$), following the age group of "52 to 68" years old (20.5%; $n=30$); mostly single (47.9%; $n=70$) or married (44.5%; $n=65$); with a college degree (63.7%; $n=93$), employed (63%; $n=92$) and with distinct income, with just a little supremacy of individuals with a family aggregate income above 3000 euros (23.3%; $n=34$). The sample has an error margin of 10% with an error probability of $p=0.05$, due to the specific fitness context, where people are not very available to spend their exercising time to answer to questionnaires.

The instrument used was adapted from a questionnaire which was already used in the Portuguese fitness industry [2] and new items were also included. For this study, two parts of the questionnaire were used: the (A) part, composed by the individuals' personal characteristics, referred on the sample characterization; and the (B) part, composed by a question relative to the weekly frequency of use of the club by the member (1.occasionally, 2.one day, 3.two days, 4.three days, 5.four days, 6.more than four days) and by a collection of items relative to the cognitive assessment of satisfaction with the club, these items and respective scale was adapted from a scale aimed to life's satisfaction and its use was authorized by the authors [24] ($\alpha=.870$). There were also added five items related to the expectations based on literature [9, 12, 13] ($\alpha=0.891$) and items related to the construct of retention based on the literature *e.g.* [1, 2] ($\alpha=.866$).

All of the items were evaluated by the members on a Lickert-7 point scale (from 1- totally disagree to 7 – totally agree).

There were collected 158 answered questionnaires from a total of 180 questionnaires delivered to the members when they went to the club. From those, only 146 were used in the study as they were correctly filled. The data collection was made from a non-probabilistic sample.

The data was analysed through the SPSS Statistics 20.0 software, using descriptive and inferential statistics. Firstly, a descriptive analysis was made to the sample using frequency tables and the mean and standard deviation. Then, the internal consistency of the different dimensions (expectations, satisfaction and retention) was analysed in order to measure the different groups of items reliability, by Cronbach’s alpha (α) coefficient. Due to the qualitative nature of the studied variables, Pearson’s correlation coefficient was analysed to ascertain the linearity interdependence between the variables. For the prediction of the club’s weekly frequency by the members, expectations, satisfaction and retention, simple linear regression models were used, through the *Enter* method.

RESULTS

In order to answer the proposed objective, descriptive and inferential analyses were performed. Regarding the weekly frequency that the members go to the club (4.26 ± 1.31), we notice a frequency above expected of three days per week. The majority of the members that answered to the questionnaire goes to the club three or more times per week (65.7%; $n=96$), as a lesser percentage (34.3%; $n=50$) goes less than three times per week.

Concerning the descriptive analysis of the expectations (from “agree” to “totally agree”), most of the members agrees and strongly agrees that found in the club what they thought would find (68.5%; $n= 100$) and what wished to find (66.4%; $n=97$). Also, most of them agrees or strongly agrees that their current expectations are the same as when they subscribed (56.1%; $n=82$) and that the club met their expectations (67.2%; $n=98$). For a lesser number of members, the club exceeded their expectations (36.6%; $n=49$).

Regarding the cognitive assessment of the satisfaction with the club, the higher percentage of individuals evaluate their experience at the club positively (91.1%; $n=133$), a high percentage of the members are satisfied with their club (90.3%; $n=132$) and consider themselves happy when they’re there (87.0%; $n=127$). Moreover, it was verified that a great number of members would choose that club again if they could go back (77.4%; $n=113$) and they’ve been achieving everything they hoped for at their club (70.6; $n=103$). On the other hand, the dispersion, centrality and shape measures seem to confirm this tendency.

Through the frequency analysis for each of the different items of retention (from “agree” to “totally agree”) was concluded that most members want to remain at the club (92.5%; $n=135$). Also, most of them mentioned that if they were to subscribe now, they would still choose the same club (87.0%; $n=127$) and want to recommend the club to family and friends (84.2%; $n=123$). On the other hand, just almost half of the questioned members (44.5%; $n=65$) intends to use more club services.

Inferential analysis was used to determine the correlation between the studied variables, in relation to the weekly frequency, (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations between the studied variables.

		Weekly Frequency	Satisfaction	Retention
Satisfaction		.083		
	sig	.319		
Retention		.097	.791**	
	sig	.247	.000	
Expectations		.015	.852**	.815**
	sig	.862	.000	.000

Note. ** $p < .01$

There were found statistically significant correlation coefficients between the expectations, satisfaction and retention variables. These were positive coefficients with a moderate to high intensity, which indicates an interdependent relation between the variables that increases mutually.

So, we carried out to the study of each model through simple linear regression, to analyze the prediction between variables, (Table 2).

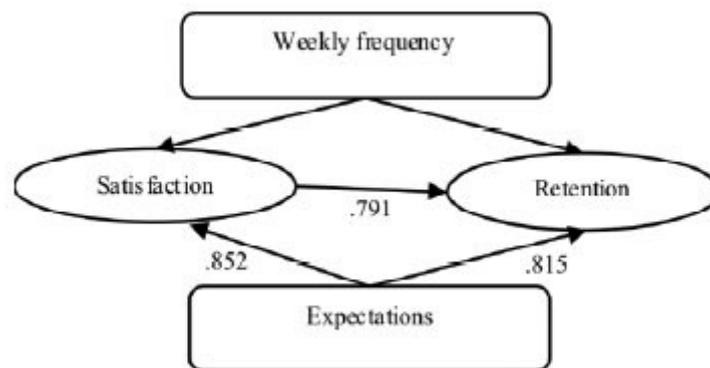
Table 2. Main results of the simple linear regression.

Models	R ²	Constant	Coefficients	Std. Error	p	F (p)
Satisfaction according to weekly frequency	.010	5.625	-.188	.154	.224	F=377.974 (p<.001)
Retention according to weekly frequency	.008	5.625	-.173	.157	.272	F=377.974 (p<.001)
Satisfaction according to expectations	.726	1.243	.809	.042	<.001	F=377.974 (p<.001)
Retention according to expectations	.664	1.274	.789	.246	<.001	F=283.061 (p<.001)
Retention according to satisfaction	.626	.981	.807	.052	<.001	F=241,167 (p<.001)

There are some quality issues of the adjustment when the weekly frequency of use variable is used to predict satisfaction and retention, since low percentages of explained variance are shown (8% to 10%). There are also some validation issues when the ANOVA Test significance is analyzed. According to these issues, one can say that the weekly frequency of use can't be used to predict satisfaction and retention, denying the studied hypothesis.

However, the expectations showed statistically significant contribution to predict satisfaction and retention as these models demonstrated an adjustment with 64% for retention and 73% for satisfaction. So, higher satisfaction contributes to a higher retention, which indicates that the satisfaction shows a statistically significant contribution to predict retention. This model demonstrates an adjustment with an explained variance around 63%.

Fig. (1) shows the regression coefficients standardized (β) in the model.

**Fig. (1).** Estimated standardized effects for the models.

Thus, the relationship between weekly frequency, satisfaction and retention didn't show a significant effect ($\beta=-.101$ and $\beta=-.09$, $p>.05$). The relationship between expectations with satisfaction ($\beta=.852$, $p<.01$) and retention ($\beta=.815$, $p<.01$) was positive and significant. Finally, relationship between satisfaction and retention ($\beta=.791$, $p<.01$) was positive and significant.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to understand the relationship between the weekly frequency, expectations, satisfaction, and retention of members in a Fitness Club. However, to frame the type of fitness club it seems relevant to analyze the sample characteristics, like sex and age, with weekly frequency.

So, comparing our results with other studies we found that in relation to the gender they are not in accordance with most studies [1, 4, 6], which refer to a higher frequency on females. For example, to Maguire [40] gender is clearly a relevant factor in the fitness market, intervening both in access to and participation in the experiment, showing that the participation rate of women in the fitness market is greater than the participation rate of men [41]. Also in the Eurobarometer [42] it appears that women have more concerns with health care and body image for improving the physical appearance and weight control, providing their stay in practice. However, this study does not exhibit these which may be due to the fact that the club under study have the particularity of being a club with great balance and heterogeneous regarding gender.

By comparing the weekly frequency to age, the results are different to other studies (e.g. [4, 18]) who reported significant differences between the groups <20 and >20years, with the <20years going less to the gym than those over 20 years old. In this case there are no significant differences between different age groups regarding the frequency with

which they go to the club, where all age groups are going mostly 3 or more times a week to the club.

In this study, surprisingly, there were no significant differences between how often members are going to the club and the items of satisfaction. These results are in accordance with the study by Gonçalves and colleagues [2]. However, they are not in accordance with the studies of Ferrand and colleagues [1], carried out in a fitness club in France, and with some practice references [6] which states that managers refer to frequency of use as a predictor of satisfaction.

Similarly, the weekly frequency in relation to retention wasn't significant. This result doesn't confirm the proposed assumption and contradicts the results of Ferrand and colleagues [1], Howat and colleagues [2], Pawlowski and colleagues [43] and the suggestions of fitness managers who report frequent visits as a determining factor in members retention (e.g. [6, 44]).

In the present study, the expectations demonstrated a statistically significant contribution to predict satisfaction and retention. Regarding the relationship of expectations with satisfaction the present data meet the literature statements that consider the expectations as influential in satisfaction with the service [9, 13]. Consumers have expectations for each encounter with the real service and develop feelings of satisfaction with the service [45]. Expectations that lead to satisfaction consist on what consumers think that fitness clubs should offer. The present study shows, as the model with more prediction, a positive relationship between expectations and satisfaction, as suggested by Robinson [9]. However, expectations have also demonstrated statistically significant contribution to predict retention. These results follow the line of Kristensen *et al.* [11] whose study results demonstrate a positive, direct and significant relationship between expectations and retention, even though, in this study, expectations also have greater influence on satisfaction than retention.

The present results show that satisfaction has a statistically significant contribution to predict retention, corroborating other studies that report satisfaction has a significant influence on retention. Thus, adds to the body of literature a reference that suggests satisfaction as an influential factor on retention [11, 14, 46]. On the other hand, these results contradict the studies that found no significant influence of satisfaction on repurchase intention [1] and that mention satisfaction with moderate effect on retention [47 - 49]. The different results in the investigation suggest the constant research on satisfaction in different fitness contexts, as one of the possible explanations for the different results in various studies might be the difference in the variables used or the contexts where studies are done.

In terms of the explanatory nature of the variables under study, the relationship between the variables of expectations, satisfaction and retention are not very strong, yet they are significant. This suggests that in addition to these relations there may be others that are also significant. However, as ascertained in this study, the weekly frequency of the club doesn't contribute to a higher satisfaction nor retention.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on the relationship of the weekly frequency, expectations, satisfaction and retention, this study concluded that not all variables have a positive relationship with the weekly frequency. The results show that a large percentage of members attends the club three or more times per week.

However, the inferential study concluded that the weekly frequency can not predict satisfaction and retention. These results may be due to the fact that members who attend the club three or more times a week, already have high levels of satisfaction and retention.

On the other hand, the expectations of the members have a positive relationship to predict satisfaction and retention, this being the variable with the largest contribution to this model. Additionally, the results indicate that satisfaction has a positive relationship to predict the retention of members. It seems pertinent to clarify that satisfaction, in the fitness organizations, relies heavily on members' expectations about the service. So, its important to constantly maintain and, if possible, exceed the expectations of members so that they remain satisfied longer.

Thus, when managers intervene in expectations regarding customer satisfaction with the service, they influence retention. Therefore, 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.

The low ratio of the weekly frequency with satisfaction and retention and the relevance of expectations and

satisfaction and retention encouraged the continued study and understanding of these variables. However, the context of fitness organizations, the members' characteristics and the involvement of organizations can influence the results of this study and others of this kind. It is suggested that the context and characteristics of the clubs deserve a continuous study of the satisfaction, expectations and retention, in relation with the weekly frequency of use. The results suggest that further research and analysis, in this and other clubs, is necessary, since it can't be drawn generalized conclusions.

As with any study, there are limitations that may be considered in future research. Firstly, the study sample consisted of members of a single fitness club, so it can't generate generalized results to other contexts. Thus, we suggest that, in future studies, the data collection is done from a sample with members of several fitness clubs, within different contexts, to confirm or not the results. On the other hand, the inclusion of other behaviours for consumption in fitness, proposed in the literature, such as training duration [50] and emotions during physical activities [51] can bring added benefit to the results, as they can help to understand future actions of members in fitness clubs. This study aims to help fitness managers to better understand the behaviour of its members, in order to develop management strategies to satisfy and retain longer. Thus, this study intends to make a small contribution to the understanding of members in fitness. Even though the conclusions are not as expected they have their value and suggest the advancement of knowledge to other clubs and elsewhere.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that this article content has no conflict of interest.

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