

Measuring Customer Satisfaction in the Context of Health Clubs in Portugal

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The present study aimed to test the satisfaction levels of customers of health clubs in Portugal, based on a sample of four hundred and twenty six (N=426) individuals, who were members of five private clubs in Braga, Portugal. The need-satisfaction scale (Alexandris et al., 1999) was used to achieve the objectives of the study.

The principal component analysis of the need-satisfaction scale revealed five dimensions, which were labeled as follows: facilities / services, staff, relaxation, health / fitness, social / intellectual. All the sub-scales were shown to have good internal consistency reliabilities. The descriptive statistics indicated high mean scores for all the need-satisfaction dimensions. Demographic comparisons furthermore indicated that females were less satisfied than males in the facilities / services dimension, while the most educated individuals were the least satisfied both in the facilities / services and social / intellectual dimensions. The implications of these results are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Meeting the demand for customer satisfaction is an important task for managers in the growing competitive environment of the fitness industry today. Research in the services marketing literature has shown that customer satisfaction is closely related with positive behavioral intentions and customer loyalty (Backman & Veldkamp, 1995;

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Baker & Crompton, 2000; Bloemer, Ko de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 1999; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996). It is also an intervening variable, which mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and behavioral intentions (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). The issue of customer loyalty is an important one in the sport and fitness industry (Gerson, 1999; Sawyer & Smith, 1999). Dishman (2001) reported that about half of the individuals who start taking part in sports drop out within a short period of time. With reference to the fitness industry, Sawyer and Smith (1999) reported that the average facility in America loses 40% of its entire customer base each year.

The majority of the studies in the services marketing literature have treated satisfaction as uni-dimensional construct (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1999). However, in the leisure literature, Beard and Ragheb (1990) and Mannell (1999) suggested an alternative approach. They developed the construct of need-satisfaction, which is a multi-dimension approach, based on the motivation literature. Alexandris and Paliatia (1999) adopted this approach and successfully developed and validated (Alexandris et al., 1999) a scale to measure dimensions of satisfaction in the context of fitness clubs in Greece. Measuring satisfaction in a more detailed level is highly desirable for practitioners in order to identify specific gaps between customers' expectations and service provision (Gerson, 1999). The present study aimed to measure the satisfaction levels of fitness clubs customers in Portugal, and investigate possible demographic differences.

THE SATISFACTION CONSTRUCT

The term satisfaction has had a variety of meanings and applications in the literature. In the general marketing literature satisfaction has been defined as "a cognitive and affective reaction to a service incident" (Oliver, 1980, p.164). In the leisure literature, Beard and Ragheb (1980) defined leisure satisfaction as: "the positive perceptions or feeling which an individual forms, elicits, or gains as a result of engaging in leisure activities and choices. This positive feeling of contentment results from the satisfaction of felt or unmet need of the individual" (p.22). Mannell (1999) conceptualized satisfaction as need-satisfaction and appraisal satisfaction. Need-satisfaction is closely tied to the idea of motivation and results when people meet or "satisfy" corresponding needs or motives through their participation. This conceptualization suggests that satisfaction is evaluated against the expected outcome, and should be treated as a multi-dimensional construct. In contrast, appraisal satisfaction is seen to be unconnected to needs, and it is closer to the construct of service quality (Mannell, 1999). Further conceptualization of satisfaction can be made according to the level of specificity (Mannell, 1989). There have been studies investigating specific needs for specific activities (e.g., Ewert, 1985; Aguilar & Petrakis, 1989), while others have investigated needs in general (e.g., Beard & Ragheb, 1980). Since the present study was based on the need-satisfaction approach, the construct of the appraisal-satisfaction will not be further discussed.

Researchers who adopted the need-satisfaction approach are mainly concerned with the factors that arouse, energize and activate behavior (Mannell, 1999). The terms "needs", "drives" and "expectations" have been used to label these internal activating factors. The disconfirmation of expectations model (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), which has been developed in the services marketing literature, views satisfaction as an outcome of a four-step process. The first step includes customers' pre-purchase needs and expectations about the performance of the service. In the second step customers establish perceptions about the performance of the service. These perceptions then are compared with the original expectations. The

result of this comparison is a level of perceived disconfirmation, which determines the level of satisfaction (third step). If the performance of the service fulfills the original needs and expectations the outcome is satisfaction.

A variety of studies have been published in the sport and leisure literature aiming to investigate needs and motives for sport and recreation participation (e.g., Aguilar & Petrakis, 1989; Alexandris & Carroll, 1997; Beard & Ragheb, 1980; Ewert, 1985). A review of the literature indicates that individuals are driven by multiple motives towards sport participation. Examples include improvement of their health (Mathes, McGivern, & Schneider, 1992; Frederick & Ryan, 1993), relaxation (Markland & Hardy, 1993), socialization (Davis, Fox, Brewer, & Ratunsky, 1995; Glancy & Little, 1995), competition and intellectual (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997). There have been limited attempts to measure the fulfillment of these needs in sport settings, and develop measurements of the need-satisfaction concept. The leisure satisfaction scale developed by Beard and Ragheb (1980), and the recreation experience preference scales developed by Driver, Tinsley, and Manfredo (1991) are the two scales that have been widely used in the literature. They have both been developed in the context of leisure and recreation. A third scale has been recently developed by Alexandris and Paliatia (1999) and further elaborated by Alexandris et al., (1999) in the context of health and fitness clubs in Greece. The scale was tested by these authors and was shown to have good psychometric properties.

SPORT PARTICIPATION IN PORTUGAL

Marivoet (2001) reported that 27% of the adult population reported participation in some type of physical activity in 1988; this percentage fell to 15% five years later (MARKTEST, 2000). However, the most recent figures (1998) indicate a significant increase, since 27% of the adult individuals were reported as sport participants (Marivoet, 2001).

Non-profit sport clubs faced a decrease of their resources the last years due to financial crisis and management decisions. This resulted to a significant decrease of membership figures in public sport clubs (Sarmiento et al., 2000). The competition between the public and private sector in sport provision changed significantly in the last decade. The private sector that was almost absent until the 90's, when it started a rapid growth and soon gained market share of the public sector and non-profit sport organizations. Statistics from 1998 indicate that 43% of sport participants are members of non-profit sport clubs, 36% use public sport facilities, 24% are members of private sport clubs, and 15% do sports in parks and natural spaces (Marivoet, 2001). Research in the private sector is still limited in Portugal. Despite the rapid development, the majority of the private sport centres are still small. Their services are limited to indoor facilities and activities such as aerobics, dancing, and keep fit classes. Only few fitness clubs offer both indoor and outdoor facilities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

As previously discussed, research on customer satisfaction can reveal problems in service delivery, and it is important for marketers and managers in their effort to meet the demands and expectations of their customers. Furthermore, it has been suggested that customer satisfaction is strongly related with customer retention and loyalty (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). Building customer loyalty is one of the difficult tasks facing club managers, considering the low customer retention rates that have been reported (Sawyer & Smith, 1999). Previous research (e.g., Alexandris et al., 1999) has shown that measuring satisfaction in a more detailed - multi-dimensional level - can help market

segmentation and meeting the demand of groups with similar characteristics (e.g. demographic groups). Considering these implications, the present study aimed: a) to test the satisfaction levels of customers of health clubs in Portugal; and b) investigate possible demographic differences in the need-satisfaction dimensions.

METHODS

Sampling

The sample of the study consisted of four hundred and twenty six (N=426) individuals, who were members of five private fitness clubs in Braga. The city of Braga is located in the north part of Portugal and has a population of 50.000 individuals. These clubs were selected randomly from the list of 13 private clubs that were in operation in the city, when the research was conducted. The demographic information of the sample is presented in Table 1. As shown, women (62%) were the majority in the sample. In terms of the age, the youngest age group (18-25) was the biggest group (44%), followed by the 26-35 age group (36%). The questionnaires were distributed within the facilities; participants filled them in a convenient place, prior to their work out. The collection was achieved with the co-operation of the staff of the facilities.

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of the sample (% of total sample)

| Gender Groups | | Age Groups | | Marital Status | | Educational Groups | |
|---------------|-----|------------|-------|----------------|-----|--------------------|-------|
| Males | 38% | <20 | 18.4% | Single | 70% | Elementary | 10.7% |
| Females | 62% | 21-29 | 45.7% | Married | 30% | High school | 42.6% |
| | | 30-39 | 21.8% | | | College 3-5 yrs. | 39.7% |
| | | >40 | 14.1% | | | Graduate school | 6.7% |

Instrument

Customer satisfaction was measured using the scale developed originally by Alexandris and Paliatia (1999), and further improved by Alexandris et al. (1999). This is a 24-item scale, which was developed for health and fitness clubs. The factorial validity of this scale was supported by the above two studies. Six need-satisfaction dimensions were revealed in both the studies: Facilities: included seven items, such as the facilities are modern; Staff attitude: included four items, such as the fitness instructors are friendly; Relaxation: included three items, such as the programs help me relax; Intellectual: included four items, such as exercising in the center gives me a sense of accomplishment. Health / fitness: included three items, such as the programs help me keep fit; Social: includes three items, such as exercising in the center gives me a chance to socialize. Furthermore, all the sub-scales were shown to have acceptable internal consistency reliabilities (ranking from .70 to .91). Furthermore, Alexandris et al. (1999) reported that the scale successfully differentiated on satisfaction levels between customers of public and private fitness centers. This scale was translated into Portuguese by a professional translator, and was proof read by two sport scientists and the sport center managers. No modifications were made in terms of the number of items used.

Statistical Analysis

A principal component analysis was firstly run with the objective to test the factorial structure of the scale. The alpha scores were calculated to examine the internal

consistency reliability of the sub-scales. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the satisfaction levels of the customers. Finally t-tests and ANOVA's were run to test the demographic differences on the satisfaction levels.

RESULTS

Principal Component Analysis

A principal component analysis with varimax rotation was performed to test the factorial structure of the scale. Only factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1 were retained. As shown in Table 2, five factors emerged from the analysis, which accounted for 69% of the total variance. These factors were defined as follows: 1). Facilities / programs: items were related to satisfaction derived from factors related to the facilities' conditions, and the programs offered. 2). Staff: items were related to satisfaction derived from staff responsiveness and expertise. 3). Relaxation: this dimension examined the degree to which participation in the clubs' activities satisfied relaxation related needs.

TABLE 2
Principal Component Analysis of the Customer Satisfaction Scale

| | Facilities | Staff attitude | Relaxation | Health-fitness | Social & Intellectual |
|---|------------|----------------|------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| The facilities are attractive | .81 | | | | |
| The facilities are modern | .80 | | | | |
| The facilities are well designed | .77 | | | | |
| The exercise places are clean | .70 | | | | |
| The changing rooms are clean | .67 | | | | |
| There is a wide range of programs | .57 | | | | |
| The programs are interesting to me | .44 | | | | |
| The staff is helpful | | .76 | | | |
| The instruction in the session is good | | .71 | | | |
| The fitness instructors are friendly | | .70 | | | |
| The instructors are well educated | | .69 | | | |
| The programs help me reduce my stress | | | .78 | | |
| The programs help me relax | | | .74 | | |
| The programs contribute to my psychological well-being | | | .71 | | |
| The programs help me keep healthy | | | | .81 | |
| The programs help keep fit | | | | .81 | |
| The programs help my physical restoration | | | | .75 | |
| Exercising in the center gives me the chance to meet new people | | | | | .84 |
| Exercising in the center gives me the chance to socialize | | | | | .83 |
| Exercising in the center gives me the chance to learn new things | | | | | .80 |
| Exercising in the center gives me the chance to increase my knowledge | | | | | .72 |
| I use a variety of skills when exercising in the center | | | | | .67 |
| The participants in the program are friendly to me | | | | | .57 |
| Exercising in the center gives me a sense of accomplishment | | | | | .51 |
| Eigenvalue | 2.49 | 2.00 | 1.30 | 1.13 | 9.66 |
| % of variance explained | 16.30 | 12.48 | 12.34 | 10.78 | 17.26 |
| Cronbach alpha | .87 | .85 | .89 | .90 | .89 |

Total scale's alpha = .93

4). Health fitness: this dimension examined if participation satisfied customers' health and fitness needs and expectations. 5). Social / Intellectual: this dimension examined if sport participation satisfied customers' intellectual and social needs.

Internal Consistency Reliability

In order to examine the internal consistency reliability of the scale, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for each of the five factors. As shown in Table 2, all the factors had very good values of alpha, ranging from .85 (staff attitude) to .90 (health/fitness). The alpha score for the whole scale was .93, which is also very satisfactorily. Furthermore, all the items contributed positively to the sub-scales reliabilities, and subsequently no further modifications were required.

Descriptive statistics

The high scores in all satisfaction dimensions indicated that the customers of the clubs were in general satisfied from the services that they received (Table 2). The dimension of staff had the highest score (mean=4.6). In contrast, the facilities dimension was the lowest score one (mean=4.2). The means, standard deviations and Pearson correlations are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlation coefficients for the five satisfaction subscales

| Variables | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---------------------------|------|-----|------|------|------|------|
| Facilities / Services (1) | 4.27 | .60 | | | | |
| Staff (2) | 4.69 | .46 | .53* | | | |
| Relaxation (3) | 4.57 | .56 | .36* | .52* | | |
| Health / Fitness (4) | 4.68 | .49 | .44* | .57* | .57* | |
| Social / Intellectual (5) | 4.23 | .63 | .46* | .49* | .51* | .52* |

Demographic Differences in Satisfaction

Independent sample t-test was performed in order to investigate differences in customer satisfaction scores between men and women and marital status groups. In terms of the gender differences, the results indicated that there were statistically significant differences only in the facilities dimension ($t = 2.48, p < .05$), where men (4.34) had higher scores than women (4.20). No significant differences were found for the two marital status groups.

Furthermore, one-way ANOVA's were performed to examine differences in the satisfaction scales between different educational groups. The results indicated statistically significant differences in the facilities ($F_{(3,400)} = 4.838, p < .05$), and social / intellectual ($F_{(3,403)} = 8.334, p < .01$) dimensions. In terms of the facilities dimension, subsequent post-hoc analysis (Scheffe's test) revealed significant differences between those with lowest education (elementary school, mean score=4.5) and the three other educational groups [graduates from high school (mean score=4.2), university (mean=4.2) and graduate school (mean=4.1)]. Similar results were revealed in the social / intellectual dimension, where customers with the lowest educational background (elementary school) were significantly more satisfied (4.6) from those customers with high school education (4.2), uni-

versity graduates (4.1) and post-graduates (3.9). No significant differences were revealed in the satisfaction scales among the different age groups.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to measure the satisfaction level of customers of private health clubs in Portugal. In terms of the factorial structure of the construct, the results revealed a similar structure with the study conducted in Greece (Alexandris et al., 1999), despite the differences in service provision and cross-cultural aspects between the two countries. In the present study, the principal component analysis revealed five factors, which are conceptually clear. The only difference with the Greek study was the incorporation of the social and intellectual dimensions into one in the present study.

The social dimension refers to the satisfaction derives from exercising in a social environment, meeting and making friends, and participating in group-activities. On the other hand, the intellectual dimension refers to the satisfaction derives from learning new skills and expanding personal interests by taking part in the health clubs' activities. These two dimensions are conceptually clear and distinct, as they are based on different needs and expectations (Beard & Ragheb, 1980). Further research is required to clarify the conceptualization of these two dimensions as part of the whole satisfaction construct. While the importance of the social element of fitness participation has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Davis, Fox, Brewer, & Ratunsky, 1995; Glancy & Little, 1995), the role of the intellectual needs in the context of the health clubs is an issue that needs further investigation. It is likely that health clubs' members do not have expectations to learn new skills by participating in the clubs' activities, and this might be the reason that this dimension did not emerge as a distinct one. The cross-cultural as well as the methodological differences should in any case be considered and might explain the differences between the two studies. The present study used as a sample members from private fitness clubs, while the Greek study (Alexandris et al., 1990) used customers of both private and public clubs. It is expected that the demographic and psychographic profiles of the public and private sport clubs' customers are different, as well as their personal needs and expectations.

In terms of the descriptive statistics, the results revealed relatively high scores for all the factors, which suggests that the clubs and their services generally satisfy customers' needs. These results supported the study of Triado et al. (1999), who reported high satisfaction levels for customers of private health clubs in a study conducted in Spain. The staff competence dimension received the highest score (mean score=4.6), while the facilities / services dimension received the lowest one (mean score=4.2). This suggests that there is space for further improvement in terms of the tangible element of the facilities and the supportive services.

In terms of the influence of the demographic variables on the perception of customer satisfaction, the results indicated statistically significant differences between males and females, and among groups with different education levels. Specifically, the female members were shown to be less satisfied than male members in the facilities / services dimension. This is an issue that should be considered by the clubs' managers. As shown in Table 1, the facilities / services dimension includes a variety of items related to the aesthetic element, the cleaning conditions of both the exercise and changing rooms, but also the range of the programs provided. Considering that female members usually prefer to participate in group fitness activities and scheduled exercise programs, it could be suggested that the managers should work more on the development of a wider range

of fitness and aerobic programs that will accommodate the needs of female members.

The results also indicated lower satisfaction scores with advancing levels of education for the facilities / services and social / intellectual dimensions. These findings are related to the different expectations of the educational groups. They suggest that more educated individuals are a more demanding group; they have higher expectations from the services that they receive. A possible explanation could be that these individuals have more experience from sport services, and increased knowledge about fitness related issues. Their lower scores in the intellectual dimension can support this argument. Improving their skills and increasing their knowledge about the fitness and the health benefits of exercise might be an important element of their personal satisfaction construct. This is an issue that should be considered by the health clubs' managers. Organizing seminars and educational sessions about health and fitness related issues could be a possible suggestion to address the intellectual needs of these individuals.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study was a first attempt to measure the construct of customer satisfaction in a multi-dimensional level in Portugal. Five dimensions of satisfaction were developed to meet the objectives of the study. Future studies could further develop the construct with the inclusion of more dimensions, according to the context of the study (e.g., different sport settings). A more complete methodological approach could include the measurement of customer expectations and the comparison with customers' perceptions about their needs fulfillment. This approach would give marketers and managers the opportunity to evaluate their services and their abilities to satisfy customers' expectations. This kind of information is very useful in guiding their decisions regarding programming aspects of their facilities.

The relationship between satisfaction and loyalty was not examined in the present study and needs further investigation. It has been suggested in the services marketing literature that perceptions about customer satisfaction levels influence customers' behavioral intentions and loyalty (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). However, there have been no attempts to incorporate a multi-dimensional construct of satisfaction in a more integrated model. Published studies have included only global measures of satisfaction, and have suggested that satisfaction is an important determinant of customer loyalty (Backman & Veldkamp, 1995; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Bloemer et al., 1999; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Using both attitudinal and behavioral measures of loyalty (e.g., length of membership, frequency, intensity, etc.) could further clarify these relationships.

As previously discussed, the present study used customers of five private fitness clubs in the city of Braga. The issue of the relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality was not examined in the present study. These clubs were managed independently and it is expected that management decisions might affect the quality of services provided. The relationship between perceived service quality and satisfaction is an interesting one, since it has been suggested the two constructs, despite their similarities, are distinct. (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Satisfaction is a personal construct, which can be evaluated against personal expectations, while perceived service quality is a global judgment or attitude related to the superiority of a service (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). Controlling for service quality and testing the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty could further clarify the role of personal expectations on customers' decisions to participate in clubs' sport and health programs.

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