

Importance given to the reasons for sport participation and to the characteristics of a fitness service

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Abstract

The main motives for sports participation in Portugal are: health improvement (67%), relaxation (32%) and better physical appearance (28%) (*European Commission*, 2014). Regarding fitness activities, gym location (close to home or workplace), price and flexible schedules are the main characteristics when deciding the place for sports practice (Cracknell, 2015). The present study has **two aims**: to analyse the importance given by the clients to the reasons for fitness participation and to assess the importance given to the characteristics of a fitness service. Forty-five fitness clients, which were also university students, participated in this study. Regarding the first objective, health related motives [adopt a healthy lifestyle (M=6.18) and improve health (M=6.09)] were the most important. Regarding the second objective, facility hygiene and cleanliness (M=6.33) price (M=6.27) good technical support (M=6.20) and a diversified schedule (M=6.16) are the factors to which most importance is given. This research supports Franco, Pereira and Simões (2008) and Campos (2015) statements, arguing that, gym and health club owners should consider the importance given by the clients to the facilities' characteristics and their motivations for sports participation.

Keywords: Fitness, gym, sports participation, service

1. Introduction

Gym sports and physical activities have increased in the last decades. According to the Sport and Physical Activity Eurobarometer, gym based sports activity have increased. In 2009, 11% of sports practitioners chose to practice their sports and physical activities at a gym (health or fitness centre). In 2013, this value raised to 15% (EC, 2014). In the Portuguese context, the values are higher than EU average, where in 2013 17% of active people claimed that they practice sports at a gym or health club facility. The tendency is also consistent with the rest of Europe, having raised 5% since 2009. Considering that this is a relatively recent, yet emerging market, its analysis, particularly as to the specificity of their target population is concerned, is important. Therefore, gyms and health clubs might adequate and aim their services to their clients' expectations, needs and preferences (Campos, 2015).

Motivation for sports, whether in a competitive or recreational manner, is one for the most studied areas of Sports and Exercise Psychology. Research about this topic is extensive. In general, their aim is to identify the reasons for adhesion and/or retention to a specific sport or sport organisation. According the EC (2014), reasons for sports participation are health improvement (62%), improvement of fitness levels (40%), relaxation (36%) fun (30%) performance enhancement (24%) weight management (24%), improvement of physical appearance (23%) and socialization (20%). In Portugal, the top 3 reasons for sports participation are health improvement (67%), relaxation (32%) and improvement of physical appearance (28%) (EC, 2014). Within the fitness context, the reasons for practice are similar. Fermino, Pezzini and Reis (2010) add that the main reasons for sports participation within the gym and health clubs' context are health, physical fitness, physical appearance, a better mood, harmony, fun, weight management and body image.

Considering the crescent importance of fitness services, it is important to consider their most valued characteristics. Firstly, a service might be defined as an economic area in which the result is not tangible, but something consumed along with its production (Zeitham, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Additionally, it is any act, action or performance that a party offers, intangible, that does not

result in the material propriety of any good (Porter, 1998). Knowing that the quality of a service corresponds to the level of efficacy that correlates with consumer expectations (Grönroos, 2000), this perception can be influenced by the consumer's previous experience and personal needs, as well as the nature of the communication between the organization and the consumer. Therefore, within the fitness context, gym location, close to residence and/or workplace, prices and flexible schedules are the features considered by users when choosing a gym. Conversely, the equipment and the activities offered are considered as less important features, compared with the previous ones (Cracknell, 2015). In a different study, International Health Racket & Sports club Association (IRHSA) (2010) identified facility overcrowding, dissatisfaction with staff, programmes and activities and lack of communication or response by the club managers as the main reasons for dropout. Finally, Franco, Pereira and Simões (2008) identified lack of compatibility between work and gym schedules, low financial capacity and lack of complementary activities as reasons for dropout.

Service quality is, therefore, one of the main items to consider in fitness services (Barreira & Carvalho, 2007). Franco et al. (2008) recommend the development of strategies to increase perceived quality and, inherently, customer's satisfaction and retention. Understanding what users look for and how they assess quality through the relevance given to certain aspects of the service is, therefore, important to direct and adapt its service to their target (Grönroos, 2000), motivating them to sports participation, increasing satisfaction and retention (Campos, 2015). Considering the above, the aim of this research is to (1) assess the importance given to the reasons for fitness participation and (2) assess the importance given to the characteristics of a fitness service.

2. Methodology

2.1. Instrument

Qualitative research is one of the most usual methods in Social Sciences (Almeida & Freire, 2003). Of the different forms of

data collection available - interview, observation and questionnaire (Tuckman, 2005), the latter was used in this research.

After reviewing the most recent literature about the subject (CE, 2014; Cracknell, 2015 IHRSA, 2010; Franco et al., 2008), twenty-two possible motives for fitness practice and eighteen characteristics of a fitness service were listed. A 7 items Lickert scale was used to assess each item, where 7 was absolutely important and 1 not important at all.

The questionnaire was then sent to two specialists in the field of study and altered to its final form according to their recommendations, thus ensuring facial validity (Litwin, 1995). Google forms was used to make the questionnaire publicly available and able to be responded online.

2.2. Participants

Forty-five fitness sports participants participated in the research [13 male (29%); 32 female (71%)]. They were all undergraduate students, with ages between 18 and 53 ($M=27.96\pm 10.02$). Prior to their participation, they were all informed about the objective of the research and all questions were clarified.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

To evaluate the importance given to the reasons for participation in fitness activities and the characteristics of a fitness service, IBM-SPSS Statistics was used. The analysis was done using descriptive statistics and average values, minimum, maximum and standard deviation was analysed.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the main results regarding the reasons for fitness participation:

Table 1. Importance given to the reasons for fitness participation.

	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
To have a healthy lifestyle	2	7	6,18	1,28
To improve my health condition	1	7	6,09	1,35
To feel more satisfied with my body	3	7	5,73	1,37
To mentally relax	1	7	5,56	1,56
To increase my muscle mass	1	7	5,47	1,66
To better perform daily activities and routines	2	7	5,42	1,41
To lose weight	1	7	5,13	1,85
To be fit	1	7	5,11	1,67
To run away from the day-to-day life	1	7	4,98	1,59
To improve my mood	1	7	4,87	2,00
To be more physically attractive	1	7	4,78	1,89
To test my skills/ abilities	1	7	4,60	1,85
To mingle	1	7	4,38	1,81
To participate in recreational activities	1	7	4,36	1,84
To feel good with myself	1	7	4,27	2,06
To learn new skills	1	7	4,20	2,17
To have time for myself	1	7	4,20	2,27
To fight against food disorders	1	7	4,13	2,16
To meet new people	1	7	3,76	1,96
To compete	1	7	3,58	2,22
To be with people that share the same interests	1	7	3,51	2,15
To improve my communication skills	1	7	3,44	2,19

The first aspect to report is the fact that the indexes with the highest mean values (above 6) are related with health concerns. Having a healthy lifestyle ($M=6.18$) and improve health in general or specifically ($M=6.09$), are the motives which have the highest importance given.

Motives related with mental aspects appear in a second order of importance. Here, to feel more satisfied with one's body ($M=5.73$) and to mentally relax ($M=5.56$). At the same level, concerns with image such as those related with body composition ($M=5.47$), weight ($M=5.13$) or general appearance [being fit ($M=5.11$)] are of relative importance. Physical fitness is also referred as important [To better perform daily activities and routines ($M=5.42$)].

Running away from the day-to-day life ($M=4.98$), improve the mood and to be more physically attractive, test the skills, mingle, to learn new skills, having solitary moments and fighting food disorders have values that are still considered positive, being comprised between 4 and 5.

Finally, values related with the social importance of sports participation such as meeting new people ($M=3.76$), being with people that share the same interests ($M=3.51$) and to improve communication skills ($M=3.44$) are seen as the least important motives, along with competition ($M=3.58$).

The results confirm those presented by the European Community (2014) to the Portuguese case. The main reasons for sports participation are related with health (67%), mental wellbeing (32%), and a better physical appearance (28%), which confirms the results obtained. Curiously, EC values related with the increase of physical fitness levels are very different from the Portuguese ones (40% Vs 14%, respectively) (EC, 2014). Despite the fact that EC values refer to all types of sports participation and ours specific to the fitness segment, it is possible to verify that the result of this work is also confirmed in Fermino et al. (2010): health, physical fitness, mood, physical attractiveness, harmony, fun, weight management and body image.

Regarding the importance given to the characteristics of the fitness service, the results are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Importance given to the characteristics of a fitness service

	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Hygiene and cleanliness	4	7	6,33	0,95
Price	1	7	6,27	1,42
Good technical accompaniment	3	7	6,20	1,25
Flexible schedule	3	7	6,16	1,19
Diversity of activities	1	7	5,80	1,46
Proximity to the place of residence	3	7	5,76	1,33
Good locker rooms	1	7	5,71	1,53
Location	3	7	5,71	1,16
Free access to equipment / materials	1	7	5,53	1,73
Access to the result of evaluations	1	7	5,42	1,80
Relaxing environment	1	7	5,36	1,61
Size of the facility	3	7	5,33	1,33
Promotion of extra activities	1	7	4,96	1,85
Parking for clients	1	7	4,87	1,94
Personal Training service	1	7	4,78	1,91
Access to bar/cafeteria	1	7	3,82	1,83
To have few users	1	7	3,71	1,59
Access to beauty saloon	1	7	3,47	1,84

As in the previous analysis and with values above 6, hygiene and cleanliness of the space ($M=6.33$), price ($M=6.27$), technical accompaniment ($M=6.20$) and a flexible schedule ($M=6.16$) are the characteristics that the clients value the most.

On a second level of importance (above 5), characteristics related with the specificity of the service such as offer of activities ($M=5.80$), access to equipment ($M=5.53$), access to the result of evaluations ($M=5.42\%$) and environment ($M=5.36$). At this level, we can also find characteristics related with the quality of the facility [Good locker rooms ($M=5.71$), Size of the facility($M=5.33$)] and its location [Proximity to the place of residence ($M=5.76$), Location ($M=5.71$)]

On a third level of importance, organization of extra activities such as paintball or canoeing activities ($M=4.96$), Parking for clients ($M=4.87$) and Personal Training service ($M=4.87$) are considered relatively important characteristics.

Regarding the least important characteristics, with mean importance values below 4, we find access to bar/cafeteria ($M=3.82$), facilities with few users ($M=3.71$) and access to beauty salon ($M=3.47$).

The results obtained are within the same that Franco et al. (2008), IHRSA (2010) and Cracknell (2015) reported regarding the importance given to the fitness service.

4. Conclusions

Regarding the first objective, it is possible to conclude that a higher importance is given to reasons related with health, mind,

body image and physical condition. Contrarily, social related reasons, along with an interest in competition are the characteristics that participants are least interested in.

Considering the second objective, we conclude that the most important characteristics of a fitness service are hygiene and cleanliness, price, good technical accompaniment and a flexible schedule. Conversely the least valued characteristics considered by the clients when deciding about which service to choose are access to bar/cafeteria, having a reduced number of users and access to beauty services.

According to the recommended by Franco et al. (2008) and Campos (2015), it is important that gym and health club owners and managers consider, when designing their offer of services, the importance given by the users to their motivations and to the characteristics of the service.

By applying a questionnaire upon enrolment, managers will be able to know which objectives each client defines as important and will allow the organization to better adjust itself to their needs and preferences. Regarding the service characteristics, cleanliness is a fundamental requisite that must never be disregarded. Price can be a differentiating factor, particularly within urban centres. Staff quality provide quality of service and a wider and diversified schedule, with a broader offer of activities should also be considered in the design of fitness services.

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