

Does satisfaction affect a member's psychological commitment to a fitness center?

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Published online: December 25, 2013

(Accepted for publication November 22, 2013)

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2013.04082;

Abstract:

The purpose of the present study was twofold: first, to examine whether satisfaction may be used as predictors of psychological commitment and second to investigate whether satisfaction, non satisfaction and psychological commitment to fitness services' providers may differentiate between female and male participants. Three hundred questionnaires were distributed to five of the eight fitness clubs registered in the area of Komotini; 198 of them were completed and able to be used, giving a return rate of 66%. Satisfaction was measured using a six-item scale proposed by Oliver (1997) while Psychological commitment was measured using the three out of the four items forming the scale created by Scanlan, Simons, Carpenter, Schmidt and Keeler's (1993). Both scales have been used in the past in Greek fitness clubs' populations and their validity and internal consistency were proved. Results of the Linear Regression analysis indicated that Satisfaction may only moderately predict Psychological commitment. Independent samples t-test revealed that women declare more dissatisfied with their fitness club's membership than men. The results seem to agree with the ones of previous researches in fitness centers and other leisure contexts. Although generalizations are not suggested, the findings are indicative and may become a useful tool for fitness clubs' managers who wish to develop customer relations and retention strategies.

Key words: Fitness center; satisfaction; psychological commitment; gender; participants

Introduction

Although evidence exist that the fitness industry is worldwide a rather growing sector (European Commission, 2004; Gerson, 1999; Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2007; Tawse & Keogh, 1998), there are indications that its services management, especially the management of customer relations, is quite deficient (Hurley, 2004). Fitness services require physical interaction between the customer and the management/employees and its operations are both complex and distinctive (Chang & Chelladurai, 2003; Chelladurai, Scott & Heywood-Farmer, 1987; Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2007). The reason for this is that it is more than difficult to standardize its services, such as aerobic classes, personal training programs, and fitness consultancy. Hence, the unique characteristics of services in general such as intangibility, heterogeneity and perishability, are particularly applicable in the fitness sector (Alexandris, Dimitriadis & Kasiara, 2001).

Research in this area is moreover important for despite the industry's size and services offered, health and fitness clubs suffer from low retention rates (Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsorbatzoudis & Grouios, 2004; Gerson, 1999; Sawyer & Smith, 1998). As Rintjema (1998) declared, the fitness industry is one area of recreation that has traditionally been associated with high customer turnover. Chaet (1994) stated that a fitness center is doing well if it has an attrition rate of only 11-16%. Using this figure, a club that has 1000 members would be losing 110-160 members per year due to reasons other than moves, injuries or deaths. Chaet (1994) further argued that the cost of membership retention can only be as little as half the cost spent in order for the club to attract new members. All these illustrate the importance of membership retention to fitness centers and the need for a systematic and ongoing research in this area.

In order for this research to be integrated, the demographic characteristics of the fitness clubs' members are also important to be recorded and understood, as practice indicates that they seem to differentiate from one region to the other or from one fitness provider to another. In marketing literature, previous research had laid an interest in gender differences, especially for the evaluation of service quality, and concluded that female customers tend to rate perceived quality lower than men (Lin, Chiu & Hsieh, 2001; Snipes, Thomson & Oswald, 2004; Tan & Kek, 2004), with few exceptions (Lee, Kim, Ko & Sagas, 2011).

In general, gaining new customers has been calculated as being five to six times greater than the cost of keeping existing ones (Rosenberg & Czepiel, 1983; Schmittlein, 1996). Researchers believe that customer retention is likely to be the single biggest predictor of future profitability (Petrisson, 1993; Kamakura, Wedel, deRosa & Mazzon, 2003). Elben (2000) similarly argued that companies and service providers can get a much

better return by investing in existing customers than by acquiring new ones. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether satisfaction and/or non-satisfaction may be used as predictor of psychological commitment. Moreover, it aimed to investigate whether satisfaction, non satisfaction and psychological commitment to fitness services' providers may differentiate between female and male participants.

Satisfaction and Psychological commitment

As a major theme in marketing research, customer satisfaction is recognized as a key element for both managers and researchers interested in service relationships (Bodet, 2006). Theory indicates that there is a significant positive relationship between customer satisfaction and his/hers repurchase intentions and/or retention (Alexandris & Palialia, 1999; Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Howat, Murray & Crilley, 1999; Murrey & Howat, 2002). Considering that membership dues are a major source of revenue for health clubs, member retention is critical for financial viability (Lam, Zhang & Jensen, 2005; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990; Sawyer & Smith, 1999). For this, customer satisfaction has been suggested as a crucial component in the success of such organizations (Alexandris & Palialia, 1999; Gerson, 1999; Cronin & Taylor, 1992).

Customers evaluate the product/service against their needs and expectations. The outcome may be either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Satisfaction serves to reinforce buyer loyalty and leads to a desire to repeat the experience, while dissatisfaction results in an adverse reaction towards the product or service often resulting in the customer dropping out (Alexandris & Palialia, 1999). Beard and Ragheb (1980) defined leisure satisfaction as the formation of a positive perception or feelings as a result of an individual's choice to participate in leisure activities. Satisfaction has a strong and consistent effect on purchase intentions (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). According to Gerson (1999), a customer of a sport center is satisfied when his/her needs, real or perceived, are met or exceeded. He argued that customer satisfaction surveys can help managers close the gap between members' and services' providers' perceptions, especially if they are conducted at least quarterly. Setting such a monitoring system and regularly collecting information would be a good practice for Greek fitness clubs where market research is still quite limited and inconclusive (Alexandris & Palialia, 1999).

Leisure and fitness literature has examined satisfaction both as a decedent (eg. Alexandris et al., 2004; Alexandris et al., 2001; Bodet, 2006; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Lentell, 2000; MacIntosh & Doherty, 2007) and, more rarely, as an antecedent of customers' behavioral intentions (eg. Alexandris et al., 2004; Alexandris et al., 2001); for example, psychological commitment. According to Pritchard, Havitz and Howard (1999), psychological commitment represents people's attitude toward a brand, such as the resistance to change their preferences toward the brand. Resistance to change refers to "...individual's unwillingness to change their preferences toward important association with, and/or beliefs about a brand" (Iwasaki & Havits, 2004, p. 50). Psychological commitment has been suggested as one of the constructs that may describe the attitudinal component of loyalty (Pritchard, Howard & Havitz, 1992) and it may predict behavioral loyalty (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998; 2004). Kelley and Davis (1994) as long as Morgan and Hunt (1994) emphasized on the role of commitment by finding the mediating role it played in key outcomes of consumer repurchasing behavior.

Two were the hypotheses that drove the analyses: first that satisfaction will positively influence while non-satisfaction will have a negative influence on psychological commitment. Second, female participants will evaluate non-satisfaction higher than males will.

Method

Participants – Data collection

The fitness clubs selected for study are located in the northeastern Greek city of Komotini, with a population of approximately 40000 people living within the metropolitan area. The city, at this time, hosts nine University Departments with approximately 9000 students. Eight private fitness clubs are registered in the area, of which five agreed to participate in the study. Although the clubs' sample was a convenient rather than a randomly selected one, all fitness centers in Komotini present quite similar characteristics in terms of size, equipment, programs offered and membership terms.

The questionnaires were completed by the fitness clubs' members prior to exercise in order to avoid feelings of fatigue or boredom. Three hundred questionnaires were distributed and 198 were completed and able to be used, giving a return rate of 66%. Of the participants, 46% exercised via weight-lifting, 17% undertook aerobics and other such classes and 26.8% participated in both. It should be noted that some members chose not to answer one or more of the demographic questions.

Measures

Satisfaction: was measured using a six-item scale proposed by Oliver (1997) in order to cover the following concepts: overall satisfaction, success attribution (2 items), regret, failure attribution and negative affect. The scale was successfully translated, adjusted and applied by Alexandris et al. (2004) in a Greek fitness clubs' population and its internal consistency was proved. A 7-point Likert type scale was used for the evaluation of members' satisfaction, ranging from 1: 'strongly disagree' to 7: 'strongly agree'. The items that

expressed regret, failure attribution and negative affect were reversed for the purposes of the analyses. Two were the factors that express evaluation of the different fitness clubs members' satisfaction: *satisfaction* (with 3 items) and *non-satisfaction* (with 3 items).

Psychological commitment: was measured using the three out of the four items forming the scale created by Scanlan, Simons, Carpenter, Schmidt and Keeler's (1993). This scale was developed as part of a commitment model and was successfully tested for construct validity and reliability both in Greek and other populations (Alexandris et al., 2004; Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsorbatzoudis & Grouios, 2002; Carpenter, Scanlan, Simons & Lobel, 1993; Scanlan et al., 1993). The four items were adjusted to be applicable to the health clubs' context by Alexandris and his cooperates (2002) as follows: "How determined are you to keep being a member of the fitness center?", "How dedicated are you to being a member of the fitness center?", "How hard would it be for you to quit being a member of the fitness center?". The answers were given in a 6-point Likert type scale (1: 'not at all' to 6: 'very much').

Analysis

Reliability of the scales and its subscales: was measured with Cronbach's alpha.

Relation among satisfaction and non-satisfaction with psychological commitment: was examined with the use of Linear Regression Analysis.

Sex Differences: were measured through the use of Independent Samples T-test.

Results

Sample's demographic characteristics: are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Age		Sex		Profession	
< 19	24.2%	Males	72.2%	Pupil/Student	73.7%
20-29	53.5%	Females	26.8%	Public servant	11.6%
30-39	8.6%			Private employee	4.5%
> 40	7.1%			Freelancer/businessman	7.6%
				Unemployed	0.5%
				Housewife	0.5%
Marital status		Children			
Single	81.8%	With children	11.1%		
Married	10.6%	Without children	67.7%		
Divorced	3%				
In a serious relationship	1%				

Reliability analysis. The values of alpha were calculated (Cronbach, 1951) to assess the internal consistency reliabilities of the scale and the sub-scales. Alpha coefficients were 0.86 for "Satisfaction", 0.81 for "Non-satisfaction" (and 0.85 for the whole scale) and 0.84 for "Psychological commitment". According to Guagnoli and Velicer (1988), when factor loadings are in the range of 0.60 –as in the present factor solution- solutions are considered stable when obtained with samples greater than 150, as in the present research. Reliabilities, means and standard deviations of all scales and sub-scales are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliabilities, means and standard deviations of Satisfaction, Non-Satisfaction and Psychological commitment

Sub-scale	α	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Satisfaction</i>	.86	5.02	1.38
<i>Non-satisfaction</i>	.81	5.36	1.41
<i>Psychological commitment</i>	.84	3.88	1.15

Relationship among satisfaction and non-satisfaction with psychological commitment.

Linear Regression analysis was performed in order to study the first research hypothesis. Satisfaction and non-satisfaction were the independent variables while psychological commitment was the dependent one. The analysis indicated that only *Satisfaction* was correlated (R=0.68) and could significantly predict (F=78.37, p<0.01), though moderately, a proportion of variance (46.7%) of the dependent variable (Table 3).

Table 3. Regression analysis for the prediction of satisfaction and non satisfaction to a member's psychological commitment

Sub-scale	Psychological commitment			
	B	β	t	p
<i>Satisfaction</i>	.51	.615	9.57	0,000
<i>Non-satisfaction</i>	.09	.116	1.81	0,072

Differences between male and female participants

As can be seen in Table 4, the Independent Samples T-test analysis indicated strong gender differences only in the case of “*Non-satisfaction*” ($t_{190} = -3.17, p < .01$), with women declaring more dissatisfied with the fitness centers than men.

Table 4. Tests of significant gender-group differences, means and standard deviations

Sub-scales	Men		Women		T
	M	SD	M	SD	
<i>Satisfaction</i>	5.05	1.35	4.87	1.46	.79
<i>Non-satisfaction</i>	5.15	1.44	5.85	1.16	-3.17*
<i>Psychological commitment</i>	3.84	1.13	3.93	1.19	-.46

Note: * = $p < .01$

Discussion

According to a European Commission (2004) publication on national registration of the Greek sport participation, 43% of the respondents declared themselves to be exercise adherents while thirty-four percent (34%) of them stated that they used fitness centers in order to do so; i.e. the 79.07% of the exercising population. As exercising is more than important for a person's physical and psychological health, fitness clubs in Greece seem to play a truly important role for both individual and community well being. Catering the needs of the membership base is –or should be- of the utmost concern to management strategy in this competitive industry. The purpose of this research was to study how satisfaction or dissatisfaction may affect the psychological commitment of fitness centers' participants. Moreover, it aimed to add some information concerning the demographic profile of fitness clubs' members with an emphasis on their gender, by studying how it may differentiate assets of their consuming behavior. This study examined customers' satisfaction and psychological commitment with fitness centers that operate in the city of Komotini, and, hence, its results are not supposed to be generalized; though they are practically useful and important in terms of a theoretical approach of satisfaction and psychological commitment.

The results of the survey somehow confirm the notion that participants' demographic and psychological profiles may vary depending on the company's (e.g. private or public, women's only or coed, etc) and the region's profile (eg. urban or provincial; in this case, a city with too many students). Firstly, the sample's characteristics did not accord with any other research published in the field of fitness centers (Alexandris et al., 2001; Afthinos et al., 2005; Bodet, 2006; MacIntosh & Doherty, 2007; Papadimitriou & Karteroliotis, 2000) as it was mostly consisted of single (81.8%) men (72.2%), aged between 20-29 years old (53.5%). This result may be due to the fact that most fitness clubs' members in Komotini appear to be students of the University Departments –a fact that may discourage other of the city's residents from becoming members. Managers and owners should consider this outcome in order to define their target groups and formulate fitness services and programs that will both attract and satisfy existing and possible members.

In terms of satisfaction, the respondents are only moderately satisfied (M=5.05) with their membership. Actually, they seem more dissatisfied (M=5.15) than satisfied. So, even though most of them (73.7%) are young students, they are not content with their participation. Meeting the demands of customer satisfaction is the greatest challenge facing marketers (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1995) and the Komotini's fitness clubs managers do not really seem to have achieved this. They should absolutely try to improve and differentiate themselves, mostly by investing in physical and human resources in order to satisfy their existing and possible customers. This investment may lead to their customers' psychological commitment, as –according to the results- customers' satisfaction is a predictor (though a moderate one) of commitment; a result that agrees with similar findings of Alexandris and his cooperates (2004).

According to the results, theoretically, if members' satisfaction increases, their psychological commitment will augment as well. Member satisfaction may be achieved through various techniques. Some indicatives may be the understanding of the members' needs, wants and expectations, the improvement of the communication between the staff and the members, the provision of individualized services, the organization of

social meetings, events and celebrations for the members, the request of feedback and suggestions by the participants (Alexandris & Palialia, 1999; Gerson, 1999). Surely, more research should be conducted by the fitness centers' managers before deciding and planning their actions, especially in terms of their service quality evaluations, motives and constraints of members' exercise participation.

Finally, satisfaction, dissatisfaction and psychological commitment were studied in terms of possible differentiations according to the sample's gender. The results confirmed the research question. Women, declare more dissatisfied with their fitness club's membership than men. Although marketing literature does not present gender comparisons on such consumer behavior aspects, the results quite agree with most of the researchers who presented that female customers tend to rate service quality lower than men or tend to have higher expectations of the service provided (Afthinos et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2001; Snipes et al., 2001; Tan & Kek, 2004). Surely, fitness clubs' managers should differentiate their marketing policies according to their customers' gender, as long as other demographic characteristics. Planning and provision of individualized services through regular and systematic recording of members' needs and desires, customers' observation and substantive discussions will help to this direction –especially when considering specific segments of the population (Bodet, 2006).

Each company should thoroughly examine the culture and methods which uses to obtain and keep members, develop customer service programs, train its staff, identify members who may be dissatisfied (Hurley, 2006), initiate programs for lapsed and existing members, and so on, in order to cater for customer retention. Personnel's training seems to be of the outmost importance, as the human element is a determining factor in the consistency of the service delivery.

Conclusions

Though the findings are quite region specific and should not be generalized to other fitness companies, the notion that satisfaction affect psychological commitment and that males and females differentiate according to their satisfaction and dissatisfaction levels should be recognized and accepted. Club managers should try to identify and understand their specific consumer behavior and consider it when coming to design the services provided. Of course, further research is needed to identify potential determinants of future purchase decisions to provide practical implications for the development of market segmentation strategies, especially those specific to male and female consumers, as long as other demographics, motives, involvement, commitment or value.

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