

## Investigating the relationship among service quality, customer satisfaction and psychological commitment in Cyprian fitness centres

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### Abstract:

An International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association's report (2013) recently referred to Cyprus as an emerging market in the fitness industry. Although Cypriot fitness agencies appear to be a growing business that both demands the acquisition of new members and, most importantly, the upkeep of the existing ones, not such research seems to have ever taken place in the country. This study's aim was to examine the patterns of service quality and satisfaction that may be used as safe predictors of members' psychological commitment to fitness industry, as psychological commitment has been suggested as one of the attitudinal components of loyalty. Four hundred and twenty questionnaires were distributed and 315 were completed and able to be used. *Service quality* was measured using the Brady and Cronin's (2001) scale, adjusted by Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsobatzoudis and Grouios (2004) in a Greek population of fitness centers' participants. *Satisfaction* was measured using a six-item scale proposed by Oliver (1997) while for *Psychological commitment* the three out of the four items forming the scale created by Scanlan, Simons, Carpenter, Schmidt and Keeler's (1993) was used. Alpha coefficients for all scales indicated their reliability. Linear Regression analysis through the stepwise method was performed in order to study whether: i) Service quality may predict satisfaction, ii) Satisfaction may predict psychological commitment and iii) Service quality may directly predict psychological commitment. The dimension "Employees" derived to be the key for the achievement of satisfaction and psychological commitment of Cyprian fitness centres members. Staff's recruitment and training strategies appear to be of great importance in order to succeed customer retention.

**Key Words:** fitness centre, member, service quality, satisfaction, psychological commitment.

### Introduction

Psychological commitment, a major theme in marketing research, has become a serious concern for managers, especially in the services marketing industry. This concern has mainly been due to intense competition and the focus on the relationship between consumers and organizations, which is the core of the relationship marketing approach (Bodet, 2008).

Under a strong internal competition among themselves and non-profit organizations, health fitness clubs should develop sound operating and management processes in order to enhance service quality (Lam, Zhang & Jensen, 2005) and create possibilities for satisfaction and customer commitment. Fitness service agencies can benefit from having satisfied and committed clients, since they appear to play an essential role in achieving important organizational goals, including the generation of revenue, the development of positive reputation, networking and community development and promotion of life quality (Jung, 2007; Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004). Developing and maintaining customer satisfaction and commitment brings a sustainable competitive advantage (Alexandris, Dimitriadis & Kasiara, 2001).

Customer retention is one of the most important issues facing leisure managers, as this requires detailed knowledge of behavioral aspects of customers' decision-making process (Alexandris & Palialia, 1999). For this, it is particularly important to measure consumers' perceptions of services quality and satisfaction, in order to determine users experiences and sentiments, which is essential when implementing any type of system aiming to improve process efficiency and efficacy and securing customer loyalty (Larson & Steinman, 2009; Nuviala, Grao-Cruces, Perez-Turpin & Nuviala, 2012; Tsitskari, Tsiotras & Tsiotras, 2006). Gaining new customers is generally calculated as being at least five or six times greater than the cost of keeping existing ones. An organization's existing customer base becomes a key strategic asset (Bodet, 2008; Hurley, 2004), as it is widely accepted among practitioners that it is easier to lose a customer than to win one. Especially in the fitness industry that suffers worldwide by a considerable dropout rate (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014; Buckworth & Dismhan, 2002). Chaet (1994) argued that a fitness centre is doing well if it has an attrition rate of only 11-16%.

He added that the cost of membership retention can only be as little as a half the cost spent in order for the club to attract new members.

According to Nuviala and his cooperates (2012) and Fridberg (2010), though, involvement in the training for fitness has increased the last few years, while young Europeans are becoming more likely to become members of fitness centers than their older counterparts (European Commission, 2010). Nowadays, 40.000 sports and fitness facilities in Europe attract 40 million customers (European Health & Fitness Association, 2012). In Greece, for example, the market size reaches €180million, while member penetration rate is calculated to be as low as 3.21% (International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, 2013). The IHRSA's report (2013) also refers to Cyprus as an emerging market in the fitness industry. This indicates that Cypriot fitness agencies are a growing business that both demands the acquisition of new members and, most importantly, needs to satisfy and retain the existing ones

Having in mind the benefits that the field has to offer in both the physiological and psychological health of the participants (Vlachopoulos & Karageorgis, 2005) of all ages (Goulimaris, Mavridis, Genti & Rokka, 2014; Matsouka, Kabitsis, Harahousou & Trigonis, 2003), and the competitiveness of the fitness environment, managers have recognized the importance of developing effect market strategies (Lee, Kim, Ko & Sagas, 2011) and innovative services. Research from the exercise and recreation management has shown that service quality and customer satisfaction are key drivers of a customer's commitment and loyalty (Ferrand, Robinson & Valette-Florence, 2010; Kyle, Theodorakis, Karageorgiou & Lafazani, 2010; Murray & Howat, 2002). Such evidence appear in Greek fitness centres as well (Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsorbatzoudis & Grouios, 2004; Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014; Tsitskari & Tsakiraki, 2013), offering the sector's management with useful information of how to deal with its members. In Cyprus, though, not such recording appears a fact quite peculiar taking into account the importance of the sector and its emerging capacity (IHRSA, 2013).

Although both Cypriots and Greeks speak the same language and have many common customs and traditions, as long as the same religion, it would be a great mistake to take for granted that their evaluations of service quality, as well as their satisfaction and loyalty to the fitness sector would be the same. As Nakata and Sivakumar (2001) stated, national culture includes all patterns of thinking, feeling and acting, that are rooted in shared beliefs, values and customs. Prior research clearly supports that different cultures have dissimilar perceptions of service quality (Bang, Raymond, Taylor & Moon, 2005; Guesalaga & Pitta, 2014).

For almost 20 years, researchers from the sport domain have shown that service quality and customer satisfaction are key drivers of customers' commitment and loyalty (Alexandris et al., 2004; Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014; Clemes, Brush & Collins, 2011; and others). However, they have also presented conflicting results on the impact of service quality and satisfaction on loyalty (Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000; Howat, Crilley & MacGrath, 2008; Lee et al., 2011). As not such research seems to have ever taken place in the Cyprian fitness clubs, both in the marketing literature and in practice, this study's aim was to examine the patterns of service quality and satisfaction that may be used as safe predictors of members' psychological commitment to the growing Cyprian fitness industry.

### **Service Quality, Satisfaction and Loyalty.**

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) defined perceived service quality as "*a global judgment or attitude relating to the superiority of a service*" (p. 16). They noted that the evaluation of the quality of a service is a result of the degree and direction of discrepancy between consumers' perceptions and their expectations. In the marketing literature, numerous studies examined the theoretical and practical relationships between service quality and other consumer behaviors, such as satisfaction, value, purchase/revisit intentions, and others (Alexandris et al., 2004; Theodorakis & Alexandris, 2008; Nuviala et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2011; and others).

The measurement of service quality in sport and leisure services was and still is a controversial issue (Theodorakis, Howat, Ko & Avourdiadou, 2014; Williams, 1998). Early service quality scales included the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL instrument of Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml (1988), the three-dimension model of Brady and Cronin (2001) and Gronroos's (1984; 2005) two-dimensional one. Literature concluded that service quality scales for research in sport and fitness contexts should better include both relational and physical quality dimensions, as well as outcomes (Theodorakis et al., 2014; Alexandris et al., 2004; Clemes et al., 2011; Li & Petrick, 2010). The tangible aspects of a service provider (i.e. the servicescape) are very important for the members of health and fitness centres as they often spend relatively lengthy periods of time in them. Even more important is the role of relational quality of a fitness provider, as customers highly rely on staff expertise and behavior for their psychological and physiological well-being (Theodorakis et al., 2014; Alexandris et al., 2004; Howat et al., 2008).

Customers evaluate the product/service against their needs and expectations. The outcome may be either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Beard and Ragheb (1980) defined leisure satisfaction as the formation of a positive perception or feeling resulting from an individual's choice to participate in leisure activities. According to Gerson (1999), a sport centre's customer is satisfied when his/her needs, real or perceived, are met or exceeded.

For this, an issue that has attracted significant attention is the conceptualization of service quality against customer satisfaction. Service satisfaction is pertinent more to the psychological outcomes deriving from a specific service experience, whereas perceived service quality represents a more formed positive or negative attitude towards various service related attributes (Crompton & McKay, 1989; Lewis & Booms, 1983). This argument suggests that while it is possible for an organization to control quality, customer satisfaction is not entirely under its control (Alexandris & Palialia, 1999). The truth is that the level of customer satisfaction is depended on service quality and other variables that may affect a user/customer, such as the climate, his/her mood, the nature of the social groups participating, and others (Crompton & McKay, 1989).

Brady and Cronin's (2001) multi-dimensional conceptualization of service quality may help to identify the important factors influencing commitment (Howat & Assakes, 2013; Ko & Pastore, 2005) and as a result loyalty, as psychological commitment has been suggested as one of the constructs representing the attitudinal component of loyalty (Alexandris et al., 2004; Pritchard, Howat & Havitz, 1992). Following the aspect of Cronin & Taylor (1992) satisfaction may have a stronger and more consistent effect on aspects of attitudinal loyalty, such as psychological commitment.

## Material & methods

### *Participants – Data Collection*

Three authorized fitness clubs were randomly selected in Limassol, Cyprus, and their managers were contacted and asked to participate in the research. One of the clubs directors kindly refused to do so. Members were approached as they were leaving the fitness center, after working out. In order to encourage participation, members were offered a cold beverage and were kindly asked to fill in a questionnaire. All questionnaires were distributed from Monday to Saturday, from 9-11 am, 2-4 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. The objective was to gather 70 members during each two hour time period.

Although the clubs' sample was a convenient rather than a randomly selected one, all authorized fitness centers in Cyprus present quite similar characteristics in terms of size, equipment, programs offered and membership terms. Four hundred and twenty questionnaires were distributed and 315 were completed and able to be used, giving a return rate of 75%. The samples demographic characteristics appear in Table 1.

### *Measures*

*Service quality*: was measured using the Brady and Cronin's (2001) scale, adjusted by Alexandris and his cooperates (2004) in a Greek population of fitness centers' participants, in order to evaluate the dimensions and sub-dimensions of: i) *Physical Environment Quality* with six items (e.g. "facilities are clean", "equipment is in good condition", etc), ii) *Interaction Quality* with three sub-scales and fourteen items: i) *Employees* (e.g. "employees are polite"), b) *Responsiveness* (e.g. "there is a quick response to members' requirements") and c) *Reliability* (e.g. "programs begin on time") and, finally, iii) *Outcome Quality*, with six items measuring the possible consequences of the member's participation. Members were asked to indicate the degree to which exercising in the fitness center helped them, for example, to "improve my health", "improve my psychological well-being". A 7-point Likert type scale was used for the evaluation of the fitness center's service quality, ranging from 1: 'strongly disagree' to 7: 'strongly agree'.

*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 dimensions 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 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 et al, 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 this fitness center?", "How dedicated are you to being a member of this fitness center?", "How hard would it be for you to quit being a member of this 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.

*Predictability of psychological commitment from service quality and satisfaction patterns*: was examined with the use of a multiple linear regression analysis and its stepwise method in order to determine an

equation that would explain the dependent variable, which is psychological commitment, using the evaluations provided by the independent variables, i.e. service quality (directly and indirectly) and satisfaction.

**Results**

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

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Age		Sex		Education	
< 19	8.9%	Males	46.3%	Secondary education	31.4%
20-29	39.4%	Females	53.7%	University	47.6%
30-39	32.7%			Master/PhD	20.3%
40-49	12.7%				
> 50	5.1%				
Marital status		Children			
Single	49.8%	With children	28.6%		
Married	37.5%	Without children	71.4%		
Divorced	7.9%				
In a serious relationship	4.4%				

Most respondents declared that they were members of (any) fitness center for 2 (20%) and 3 years (34.6%).

*Reliability analysis.* The values of alpha were calculated (Cronbach, 1951) to assess the internal consistency reliabilities. Alpha coefficients for all scales appear in Table 2.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and alpha coefficients for all scales.

Scales & sub-scales	Mean	St. Deviation	Cronbach $\alpha$
Service Quality			
Physical environment Quality	5.71	.61	.768
Interaction Quality			
Employees	6.57	.61	.913
Responsiveness	5.67	.69	.824
Reliability	5.75	.61	.710
Outcome Quality	6.47	.48	.803
Satisfaction			
Satisfaction	6.20	.67	.705
Non-satisfaction	4.68	.69	.806
Psychological commitment	5.25	.76	.872

*Regression analyses.*

Linear Regression analysis through the stepwise method was performed in order to study whether: i) Dimensions of service quality may predict satisfaction, ii) Satisfaction may predict psychological commitment and iii) Dimensions of service quality may directly predict psychological commitment.

i) For the needs of this analysis dimensions of service quality were the independent variables and satisfaction and non-satisfaction were the dependent ones. The results showed that only the dimension *Employees* could predict, though quite low (31.2%), *Satisfaction* ( $F_{(4,303)}=33.94, p<.01$ ) and the dimensions *Employees* and *Outcome Quality* could moderately predict (40%) *Non-satisfaction* ( $F_{(3,304)}=39.8, p<.01$ ) (Table 3).

ii) The analysis showed that the effect of *Satisfaction* and *Non-satisfaction* (independent variables) on *Psychological commitment* (dependent variable) was also low (31.2%). Actually, only *Satisfaction* may somehow predict the customers' psychological commitment ( $F_{(2,132)}=62.45, p<0.01$ ) (Table 3).

iii) Finally, the direct effect of *Service Quality* dimensions (independent variables) on *Psychological Commitment* (dependent variable), also showed that only the sub-scale *Employees* slightly (15.2%) predicts the fitness centres' customers commitment to them ( $F_{(1,303)}=47.45, p<0.1$ ) (Table 3).

Table 3. Regression analyses for the prediction of all dependent variables from the independent ones.

Scale	Sub-scale	B	$\beta$	t	p
		Satisfaction			
	<i>Employees</i>	.310	.280	4.507	.000
		Non-satisfaction			
<i>Service quality</i>	<i>Employees</i>	.365	.322	5.38	.000
	<i>Outcome</i>	.337	.236	4.36	.000
		Psychological commitment			
<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>Satisfaction</i>	.409	.366	6.72	.000
		Psychological commitment			
<i>Service quality</i>	<i>Employee</i>	.453	.368	6.89	.000

a Cyprian population of exercise participants, although according to a recent report (IHRSA, 2013), Cyprus is one of Europe's most emerging markets in the fitness industry. Results showed that service quality, more specifically, dimension *Employees*, slightly predicts, directly and indirectly through customer satisfaction, psychological commitment. It is widely accepted that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction. This means that positive perceptions of service quality lead to stronger satisfaction, which in turn leads to customer commitment and, possible, to customer loyalty (Alexandris et al., 2004; Cronin & Taylor, 1992). However the concepts' interaction remains a controversial issue (Li & Petrick, 2002; Clemes et al., 2011; Theodorakis et al., 2014), while the patterns of quality that mostly affect this interaction are also an issue under dispute (Alexandris et al., 2004; Murray & Howat, 2002; Howat et al., 2008). This is probably due to the different companies and cultures examined, the use of different conceptual models, the number and different variables measuring the specific constructs.

All regression analyses resulted that *Employees* are the key point variable for the satisfaction, dissatisfaction and psychological commitment of the exercisers. As for the dissatisfaction factor, it also relates to the *Outcome* from membership. Fortunately, *Employees* and *Outcome Quality* were the dimensions that were most highly evaluated by the present study's participants (M=6.57, Sd=0.61 and M=6.47, Sd=0.48, respectively). Researchers have well documented the importance of the *Interaction* parameter in providing service quality in the fitness sector (Alexandris et al., 2004; Alexandris & Palialia, 1999; Bodet, 2008). Sport club membership is generally characterized by an important number of interactions or experiences with the organization. The creation of warm, friendly atmosphere in the facility and the classes should be a priority. Both the administrative staff and fitness professionals should contribute in this direction (Alexandris et al., 2001). Schmid (1994), for example, proposed that managers should spend some time walking around the facility, observing or even working at the "front line", in order to observe the employees-customers interactions. Through these hands-on experiences, they could better evaluate their employees' performance, appreciate any difficulties that both staff and customers may face and immediately take care of any problems arising. The above mentioned suggestions bring forward the important issue of staff recruitment, training and development.

Results also showed the one of the predictors of dissatisfaction is the dimension *Outcome*, a result quite logical taking into consideration that a member, who may not reach the outcome he/she wishes to achieve when choosing to exercise, will be disappointed and amotivated. Fitness centre managers and employees should absolutely take into consideration each and every members declared needs and motives when planning both the exercise program which he/she will follow, as long as the relationship marketing policies which will be applied. This leads us once again to the need for effective staff recruitment and training.

Although not included in the study's aims, the recording of the members demographics gave one first idea of the fitness centres' population in Cyprus. The results kind of agree with the ones previously published in the field of fitness centers (Alexandris et al., 2001; Afthinos, Theodorakis & Nassis, 2005; Bodet, 2006; MacIntosh & Doherty, 2007; Papadimitriou & Karteroliotis, 2000) as it was mostly consisted of single (49.8%), educated (67.9%) women (53.72%), aged between 20-39 years old (72.1%). According to Nuviala and his cooperates (2012) and Fridberg (2010), young Europeans are becoming more likely to become members of fitness centers than their older counterparts. If this is the case, Cyprian fitness centres are about to emerge even more in the near future, taking into consideration the young age of their existing participants. The key would be the pursuit and caring of their customers' satisfaction and loyalty.

## Conclusions

Although service quality is an antecedent that contributes to customer satisfaction and commitment, it is not the only one. Alexandris and Palialia (1999) for example noted motivation, attitude or perceived social competence as important such antecedents. Future research in fitness centres in Cyprus should absolutely introduce such parameters as long as involvement, recording of demographics and both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty patterns in order to better approach and understand the Cyprian fitness centre customer. Segmentation strategies should absolutely be also used to this direction.

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