

Service convenience, perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty: A study of consumers from low-cost fitness centers in Spain

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Abstract:

The fitness sector is a growing industry worldwide. Its continued implementation of business models makes it an attractive market to study. Precisely, the low-cost model has become popular in countries such as Spain for which the study of variables that could influence one of the biggest problems in this industry, customer loyalty is of interest to investigators. Therefore, this work has as its objective to analyze possible differences between service convenience, perceived value, and satisfaction with the characteristics of clients of low-cost fitness center, and to determine if there is a relationship with client loyalty. The sample consisted of 763 clients (381 women and 382 men). A questionnaire to measure the service convenience, perceived value, satisfaction, and future behavior intentions or loyalty was adopted. Scales from similar studies were implemented these being valid and reliable instruments. The study offers a descriptive results, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, t-Student, ANOVA, and multiple linear regression. Results demonstrate significant differences with service convenience for gender, age, and length of time it takes to commute to the fitness center. Furthermore, there was a positive relationship among all variables, with loyalty resulting as the strongest relationship followed by satisfaction then service convenience. The findings of this study brings an understanding regarding the reality of the low-cost fitness center consumer which could possibly be extrapolated to other countries with an emerging fitness industry.

Key words: - Service convenience, perceived value, satisfaction, loyalty, fitness industry, low-cost.

Introduction

The practice of physical activity in fitness centers continues to grow. According to the Eurobarometer of Sport (European Commission, 2014) there was an increment of two points between 2009 and 2013 in Europe. According to this report, 10% of Spaniards resort to fitness centers, an increase of six points from 2009 through 2013. Likewise, the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, IHRSA (2016) also have data positioning Spain as a country with increased practiced of physical activity in this type of sporting facility, in addition to an increase of facilities and financial growth in this industry worldwide. Specifically in this market the new business model low-cost is characterized by fitness centers providing the latest fitness equipment and between two and five rooms with directed physical activity/class. Furthermore, the price for membership fee is below the national median placing the cost at nineteen ninety-nine euros plus tax, a cost that is below the national median for this service (Valcarce, López, & García, 2016).

According to Valls (2010), the incorporation of these business models with a lower cost supposes a change in the marketing paradigm where clients express the offer they want, the format, and the price they are willing to pay. For this reason, the low-cost enterprise must identify their segment of the population and adapt their offer to what this market is willing to pay. The number of low-cost centers has increased by 17.5% between the years 2014 and 2015 (Valcarce et al., 2016). However, because of its recent incorporation, the profile of the client is unknown as well as the perception of decisive variables leading to a new purchase of sport service (García-Fernández, Fernández-Gavira, & Bernal-García, 2014a).

In this regard, the novelty of these sport organizations incorporated in the market creates a need for research in its models of management, commercialization and possible improvements. A bibliographical review of studies related to the management and marketing of fitness centers, García-Fernández, Bernal-García, Fernández-Gavira, and Vélez-Colón (2014b) brought attention to the lack of scientific study in this sector. In their study a revision from the year 1980 through 2013 by way of references from data bases, a total of 87 articles were chosen demonstrating an exponential growth in publications of studies related to this sector when compared to previous years. Similar, there has been an increment in articles during the last decade published in articles indexed in Journal Citation Reports, which suggest an increase of interest in the scientific community

and for certain an increase in practitioners worldwide (IHRSA, 2016).

Nevertheless, in general, published work tends to examine perceived quality and satisfaction (i.e. Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsobatzoudis, & Grouios, 2004; Avourdiadou & García, 2014; Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014; Gálvez-Ruiz, Boletó-Rosado, & Romero-Galisteo, 2015; García, Bernal, Lara, & Galán, 2013; García, Cepeda, & Martín, 2012; Hsueh & Su, 2013; Murray & Howat, 2002; Pedragosa & Correia, 2009; Theodorakis, Howat, Ko, & Avourdiadou, 2014; Tsitskari, Antoniadis, & Costa, 2014; Vila, Sánchez, & Manassero, 2009), in human resources (i.e. Alves, Franco, Castañer, Camerino, Rodrigues, & Hileno, 2015; García, Fernández, Pereira, & Carvalho, 2014; Huddleston, Fry, & Brown, 2012; Maconachie & Sappey, 2013; Rosado, Araújo, Mesquita, Correia, Mendes, & Guillén, 2014) or new trends such as social media (García-Fernández, Fernández-Gavira, Durán-Muñoz, & Vélez-Colón, 2015; García, Gálvez, Vélez, & Bernal, 2015). Although the majority of work is oriented towards answers regarding reduced customer loyalty in fitness centers (García-Fernández et al., 2014b), there is a lack of research in low-cost fitness centers (García-Fernández et al., 2014a), with regards to other variables that could influence customer loyalty. Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze for differences between service convenience, perceived value, and satisfaction with characteristics of clients of low-cost fitness centers, and to examine if there is a relationship with client loyalty.

Service convenience, perceived value, and satisfaction

Among the variables demonstrated to have a relationship with future behavior intentions and client loyalty is found service convenience, perceived value, and satisfaction. Precisely, Chang and Polonsky (2012) identified in the fitness sector service convenience as a factor upon which client satisfaction can depend, followed by the future intention to continue with the center. Conceptually, the service convenience delimits the sacrifice or psychological stress related to the purchase or utilization of a service (Berry, Seiders, & Grewal, 2002), and different types (Seiders, Voss, Godfrey, & Grewal, 2007). Seiders et al. (2007) identified five types of service convenience: the convenience of the decision related to the initial decision to consume a service, availability and quality of the information regarding the provider of service; benefits of convenience, implied by time and necessary effort to experiment the basics of the service has to offer; the convenience of the transaction as it relates to time and effort it takes to fulfill the transaction; convenience after the services have been received implied by the time and effort necessary to reinitiate contact with an organization after receiving the benefits. According to this concept, it can be understood that the service convenience could take away value from service through non-monetary sacrifices understood as time and effort as perceived by the client with regards to the purchase and utilization of a service (Berry et al., 2002). This negative function brings attention to the client's subjective factors from which benefits are subtracted from perceived value of service, and consequently client loyalty. In this case, the client is not always looking for a low price by value for the money spent. In any case, non-monetary sacrifices related to service could be strong determinants for the consumer (Berry et al., 2002).

Furthermore, Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) discuss the vast number of organizations who do not take into account this type of sacrifice, but establish an important evaluation of the value of service where psychological sacrifices could be accounted for the time spent in choosing which services to consume, and wait time. A similar situation like the one just mentioned could occur in a fitness center. For this reason, the time spent getting from work or home to the fitness center, accessibility of the center, access or communication with public transportation, private parking and the importance or need of the client to be physically active could be considered a non-monetary sacrifice. Many of those who do not continue to use fitness centers sum up their reason to lack of time for physical activity (Nuviala, Grao-Cruces, Teva-Villén, Pérez-Turpin, Pérez-Ordás, & Tamayo-Fajardo, 2013), by which without a doubt, not only could the price by detracting value from the client's perception but other components could have a repercussion on client loyalty (Chang & Polonsky, 2012).

In the case of perceived value, although there exist a complex conceptual understanding (Gallarza & Gil, 2006), there is a consensus that value is "the global evaluation of consumer with regard to the utility of a product base upon the perception of what is given and what is received" (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14). Due to the importance this variable is acquiring, García-Fernández, Grimaldi-Puyana, Gómez, and Bernal-García (2016) affirm a growth in the number of publications in context of sport organizations although deficient when it comes to fitness centers. A sample of the work of addressing sporting organizations includes the research of Calabuig, Burillo, Crespo, Mundina, and Gallardo (2010) and more recently the study of Calabuig, Prado-Gascó, Crespo, Núñez-Pomar, and Añó (2015). Likewise, there is also the work conducted by Theodorakis et al. (2014) with Greek centers and Murray and Howat (2002) in Australia, but these are still insufficient. Its importance lies on the existing loyalty (Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000), proving itself in public sporting centers (Calabuig, Núñez-Pomar, Prado-Gascó, & Añó, 2014), and in Australian fitness centers (Murray & Howat, 2002).

Finally, satisfaction has been the most studied variable with regards to consumer perception (i.e. Bodet, 2006; García et al., 2012; Tsitskari & Tsitskari, 2013). In this sense, Alexandris et al. (2004) concluded that satisfaction of the fitness center client struggles with quality and loyalty. Similarly and recently, Theodorakis et al. (2014) and Avourdiadou and Theodorakis (2014) affirm that satisfaction has a direct relationship with behavior intentions and therefore a greater client satisfaction and greater probability for the client to demonstrate loyalty with the sporting organization.

Material & methods

Participants

The convenience sample is composed of 763 clients from three low-cost fitness center in the city of Seville (Spain) (381 women and 382 men) with ages ranging between 16 and 75 ($M = 30.68$; $SD = 10.83$). The majority of the sample had been members less than 6 months (50.9%; $n = 383$) and 50.2% ($n = 393$) and attended more than four days per week 81.5% ($n = 637$) with a travel time of 15 minutes.

Procedure

All nine low-cost fitness centers in Seville were contacted (population more than 800,000). The objectives of the study, the instrument, and the practical implications were explained to the management of the centers. Finally, three fitness centers chose to participate. Data collection took place after obtaining permission from the administration of each participating center. Participants gave their consent. Voluntary participation and confidentiality of their responses was assured. A surveyor was present to assist the participants through the questionnaire process, explain the objectives of the study to each participant, and clarify any questions. The data collection took place during all hours of operation during a two-week time frame. Participants took approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Instruments

Service convenience was evaluated by means of a 15 item scale (Chang & Polonsky, 2012) oriented towards the types of conveniences established by Berry et al. (2002) (decisions, access, transaction, benefits, and post benefits), and offers appropriate psychometric properties (Seiders et al., 2007; Colwell, Aung, Kanetkar, & Holden, 2008). To measure perceived value, a four item scale proposed by Zeithaml (1988) and adapted to studies of management and sport marketing by Theodorakis et al. (2014). To measure satisfaction a four item scale by Oliver (1997) was implemented, usefulness of sport services by Avourdiadou and Theodorakis (2014). Loyalty was evaluated through four items proposed by Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996), used in studies of sport management by Calabuig et al. (2015) and Theodorakis et al. (2014). All items were evaluated with a seven-point Likers scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*.

Data analysis

Two factor analysis procedures were carried out, for which the total sample was randomly divided into two halves. With the first half ($N_1 = 379$), an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted utilizing principal components extraction and Oblimin oblique rotation to identify the factorial structure of the model composed by the four scales previously mentioned. Beforehand, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlett Test of Sphericity was done. The internal consistency of the different scales was evaluated by Cronbach's alfa (α coefficient). The second subsample ($N_2 = 384$) was analyzed with a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test for the adjustment of the structure obtained in the first half. Normality of the data was tested by using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. We analyze the significant differences between client characteristics and the variables of service convenience, value, satisfaction, and future intentions. To address gender and commute time a t test of Student was conducted, statistical test robust to the violation of normality (Montilla, 2010), and for the age variable an analysis of variance (ANOVA). Finally, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to test for loyalty through service convenience, value, and satisfaction.

Results

The exploratory factor analysis was used to extract principle components for the oblimin oblique rotations. The KMO found value was .96 and the Bartlett Test of Sphericity reached a statistical significant value of $p < .01$ [$\chi^2(351) = 8553.37$]. Both analysis indicated that the item factorization was adequate. The solution yielded a four-factor solution based on the selection of factorial weight higher than .40 (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006), which account for 70.82% of total variance explained. For this, seven items of the service convenience scale were eliminated (SC1, SC3, SC4, SC5, SC7, SC11 and SC15). The internal consistency revealed alpha values of .91 for service convenience and value respectively, .94 for satisfaction, and .93 for future intentions. The measure model showed an adequate fit to the data [$\chi^2(161) = 488.92$ ($p < .001$); $\chi^2/gl = 3.03$; CFI = .95; TLI = .94; NFI = .93; RMSEA = .073 (CI = .066, .080)].

Results of the descriptive analysis showed high scores. By scales, the mean value of service convenience was of 7.86, 7.71 for value, 8.10 for satisfaction, and 8.13 for future intentions. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($p = 0.00$) demonstrated that the data does not present a normal distribution.

Later significant differences of the variables from the questionnaire was proven with regards to gender, age, and commute time to the fitness center (Table 1). With regards to gender, women had a higher score making all variables significant ($p < .001$). Measures of age revealed that those within the 41 through 50 years responded more positively to the questions, although in reference to the different variables, the differences were significant ($p < .05$) only in relation to service convenience. Lastly, commute time was better scored in groups who indicated less than 15 minutes to arrive to the fitness center. In this case the differences among the groups were significant when it came to the variables service convenience ($p < .001$) and satisfaction ($p < .05$).

Table 1. Differences according to sociodemographic characteristics of clients of low-cost fitness centers.

	Service convenience		Value		Satisfaction		Future intentions	
	<i>M</i> ± <i>DT</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i> ± <i>DT</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i> ± <i>DT</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i> ± <i>DT</i>	<i>F</i>
Gender								
Male	7.69±1.10	4.42***	7.53±1.17	4.74***	7.94±1.17	4.15***	7.92±1.25	5.12***
Woman	8.03±0.99		7.90±0.99		8.26±0.97		8.34±0.94	
Age								
Less than 20 years	7.86±1.04	2.94*	7.75±0.99	1.59	8.22±0.87	1.84	8.15±0.85	1.10
Between 21 and 30 years	7.74±1.07		7.60±1.13		8.09±1.08		8.12±1.10	
Between 31 and 40 years	7.83±1.14		7.77±1.10		7.94±1.25		8.01±1.37	
Between 41 and 50 years	8.17±0.92		7.89±1.12		8.27±1.06		8.29±1.16	
More than 50 years	8.03±0.95		7.85±1.08		8.19±0.95		8.29±0.87	
Commute time								
Less than 15 min	7.92±1.06	3.79***	7.74±1.11	1.58	8.13±1.10	2.01*	8.16±1.15	1.87
More than 15 min	7.51±0.99		7.57±1.01		7.91±1.01		7.95±1.00	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Finally, to measure the predictive value of the service convenience, perceived value, and satisfaction of users of sport services with regards to loyalty, a successive multiple linear regression analysis was conducted (Table 2), loyalty as the dependent variable and as independent variable was service convenience, value, and satisfaction. Correlations among variables situated between .756 y .869. The results demonstrated the variable to present the strongest significant and positive predictor of client loyalty was related to satisfaction ($\beta = .640$), followed by service convenience ($\beta = .189$), and value ($\beta = .105$). The model explained 77.9% of the variance (Table 2).

Table 2. Relationship between future intention and satisfaction, convenience of service and value.

	Non standardize coefficients B	Standardize coefficients Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.	D-W
(Constant)	.330	.162				
Satisfaction	.660	.033	.640	19.75	.000	2.15
Service convenience	.206	.032	.189	6.36	.000	
Value	.108	.034	.105	3.18	.000	

$F(1, 702) = 10.13$; $p < .001$; $R^2 = 0.780$; R^2 adjustment = 0.779; D-W = 2.12

Discussion

According to IHRSA (2016), Spain boast of a top fitness industry due to the number of sporting centers, number of clients and annual invoicing. Therefore, due to the interest of loyalty in these sporting organizations (García-Fernández et al., 2014b), it is important in mature industries, the study of variables that could affect client loyalty, in order to extrapolate the results to countries with emerging fitness markets. Therefore, the objectives of this investigation were to analyze for possible difference between service convenience, perceived value, and satisfaction with sociodemographic characteristics of low-cost fitness centers, and to analyze the relationship of these variables with loyalty.

The present study offers various contributions. Past studies that have analyzed variables that could influence client loyalty using a simple consisting of clients from consolidated business models (i.e. Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014; Theodorakis et al., 2014), making this a pioneer investigation of an emerging business model worldwide (IHRSA, 2016). Furthermore, there are few studies that have analyzed service convenience of fitness center clients (Chang & Polonsky, 2012), due to a lack of work directly related to loyalty.

The results obtained demonstrate the simplicity of the five types of service convenience proposed by Seiders et al. (2007) with a unidimensional scale in fitness centers. This finding could be a result of the simplicity of sporting services analyzed in this study and the ease of access, manifested in a lessening of

psychological stress when a client chooses a service. Precisely the median scores were more elevated in the service convenience than in satisfaction, which indicates that the stress of election and therefore the perceived sacrifice is not elevated. This data test the results of a unidimensional scale which could cause the lessening of importance of other factors or dimensions of the non-monetary sacrifices indicated by Chang and Polonsky (2012). Likewise, the scales allowed for high trustworthiness in service convenience, value, satisfaction, and future intentions (Chang & Polonsky, 2012; Oliver, 1997; Zeithaml, 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1996), making it possible to obtain reliable results for planning in these emerging fitness center markets whose measurement model is adjusted as indicated by Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (2006).

During the analysis of the data, the researchers found client characteristics related to different perceptions of service convenience. Furthermore, there were significant differences with regards to gender, age, and commute time to the facility. Women answered more positively meaning they had a weaker perception of effort and time to visit a low-cost fitness center. With regards to age, there was a significant difference in those above 40 years of age as they perceived attending a fitness center a minor sacrifice. For this reason, administrators of these organizations should work on reducing these perceptions which influence service convenience. Moreover, a consumer was identified who on more than 80% of the time the commute was less than 15 minutes. This could indicate the attendance to a fitness center may be conditions to proximity from work, home, or access to parking facilities, all which facilitate access to physical activity practice. This aspect, having resulted in significant differences between both groups (time commuting to the fitness center), is very useful since in marketing campaigns owners should opt for implementing these features considering their perimeter for the commercialization of their product.

To address the scores of perceived value, satisfaction, and future intentions, the findings demonstrate significant difference in gender, as well as in the case of satisfaction of commute time to the facility. Women scored more positively in the three variables as established in other studies (García-Fernández et al., 2014a; García-Fernández et al., 2016), as well as those who had less than a 30 minute commute to the fitness center.

Finally, the results of this study identified the existence of a relationship between service convenience and loyalty (Chang & Polonsky, 2012), between perceived value and loyalty (Theodorakis et al., 2014), and between satisfaction and loyalty (Tsitskari & Tsitkari, 2013). Clearly, the variable with the strongest relationship was satisfaction followed by service convenience. These findings demonstrate the need to reduce the perception of non-monetary sacrifice of the sporting facility, as well as the increase in satisfaction, and perceived value, since by means of these variables client loyalty could be strengthened. However although these findings have a sense of innovation first due to the analysis of a type of client of an emerging business model, followed by the studying of variables less analyzed, makes this work nonexempt of limitations. First, the sample is not representative of the sector, but a sample of a similar comprehensive sport market. Furthermore, having analyzed certain dimensions of the client, other characteristic of the clients that could be of interest to the body of knowledge and for practical applications are brought to light. Finally, the reduction of the convenience scale allows for greater understanding of client perception in this variable, yet depending on the sector and the management model, client perceptions are also different.

These limitations help comprehend the complexity of an emerging business model in the sport sector and which brings about new research questions. Among these, future lines of investigation and an analysis specific of the characteristics of the client from a larger sample. Furthermore, a response to every dimensions proposed by Seiders et al. (2007), would help address more specifically consumer behavior, further capturing the attention of the client and developing loyalty.

Conflicts of interest

The authors of this study declare not to have any conflict of interest.

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