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Expectations, satisfaction and loyalty in health and fitness clubs

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Abstract: The study of satisfaction has been the focus of much research in the area of marketing, in particular, on the nature of the relationships fostered by satisfaction between the service and the consumer. In the present study, global satisfaction, measured in the long term, is evaluated with respect to three constructs: expectations, facilities and loyalty. Expectations are considered as an innovative construct in their relationship with the consumer satisfaction in the Health and Fitness Clubs (HFC). Facilities are measured in the short term in order to evaluate the satisfaction by attributes, that is, all of the aspects encountered in using the various services provided by the HFCs. Loyalty is analysed by means of repeat purchases, recommendations to third parties and the frequency of use. The sample from a questionnaire comprises 463 respondents who are clients of two HFCs in the Greater Lisbon suburb of Oeiras, Portugal. The results suggest that satisfaction is an intermediate variable that is positively related to various other constructs and of crucial importance in determining the loyalty in HFCs.

Keywords: expectations; satisfaction; loyalty; Health and Fitness Clubs; HFC.


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1 Introduction

The principal aim of this paper is to study satisfaction from a global perspective (measured in the long term) in relation to other constructs, namely, expectations, facilities (the satisfaction by attributes, measured in the short term) and loyalty. As an extension of our research, we also seek to locate the quality of service in relation to the consumer’s satisfaction. The evaluation and understanding of these relations is of fundamental importance, calling for the use of appropriate measures.

Recently, an increasing body of literature has sought to apply the concepts and measurement techniques of service quality, consumer satisfaction and client loyalty to sports organisations (Alexandris and Palialia, 1999; Howat et al., 1996; Murray and Howat, 2002; Papadimitriou and Karteroliotis, 2000; Robinson, 1999; Theodorakis et al., 2001). Our study aims to expand the literature by incorporating expectations into the relation between satisfaction and loyalty, which is innovative with regard to fitness industry studies. Moreover, we attempt to distinguish between global satisfaction and the satisfaction by attributes, measuring the relations between the two. With regard to our review of the literature, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study of the fitness industry has measured expectations as a function of satisfaction or has made the distinction between global satisfaction and the satisfaction by attributes with a model that measured their effects and relations.

Sports managers, particularly those in the Health and Fitness Clubs (HFC) sector, must be concerned not only with identifying what satisfies the consumers in order to earn their loyalty, but also what is, in effect, the starting point on the road to satisfaction: the prior expectations of the service to be consumed. To this end, satisfaction must be disaggregated into all of its potential component attributes which, once identified, must then be measured.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows: Section 2 presents the contextual setting and Section 3 surveys the literature, considering three relevant subsections. In Section 4, we explain the analytical model and Section 5 presents the results. In Section 6, we discuss the results and their implications and in Section 7, we consider the limitations of the present paper and the possible extensions of this research. Finally, in Section 8, we make our concluding remarks.

2 Contextual setting

The need to improve and speed up the development of the fitness industry arises from the knowledge of the market trend characteristics, which attempt to respond to the trends themselves. A sedentary lifestyle is one of the social characteristics associated with inferior health quality, inducing a high risk of hospitalisation due to the increase of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart diseases, osteoporosis, bone fractures, colon cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer and psychiatric diseases (Varo et al., 2003). In contrast to these effects and their associated risks, the acknowledged benefits of regular sports activity translate in physical terms into better weight control, articular flexibility, physical resistance, bone densitometry, muscle strength and lower blood pressure. The influence on the psycho-social profile is also clearly positive, reflected in increased
self-esteem, reduced stress, diminished social isolation, increased well-being and improved self-image (Saba, 2001). Today, we can observe a worldwide concern (e.g., governmental campaigns) to raise mass awareness to the need to replace the present bad lifestyle habits with more healthy habits. The approach to raising awareness focuses on three main areas: nutrition, aesthetics and sport.

The sports industry, in general, and the fitness industry, in particular, emerges as a business opportunity for investors who seek to provide quality services that target satisfaction levels centred on and allied to the health and wellness of the consumers. The supply-side role to be played by the HFCs with respect to the consumers’ lifestyle-driven demand is clear. Historically, there has never been so much provision, even in proportional terms, of facilities dedicated to the practice of sports and physical exercise. Furthermore, the observed acceptance and embrace of these activities as a means of achieving well-being and quality of life has never been so great (Saba, 2001).

Throughout the industrialised world, the fitness industry is experiencing large-scale growth. In the USA, there are currently 29 100 HFCs serving 41.3 million members, with an average market penetration rate of 15.7% (IHRSA, 2006). In Europe (EU-25), there are 33 800 HFCs with a total of approximately 36.9 million members, the average market penetration rate being 8.13% (IHRSA, 2006). When the latter figures are compared with those for 2005, a significant increase is observed. There were 26 800 HFCs in the USA, with 40 million members and an average penetration rate of 14.2%, while Europe (EU-16) had 27 100 HFCs, with 21.5 million members and an average penetration rate of 5.5% (IHRSA, 2005).

It is estimated (Pilzer, 2007) that the fitness industry in the USA could be worth one trillion USD by 2012 (a value superior to the actual GDP of the UK). In Europe, the fitness industry is worth approximately 13 billion euros and presents a growth potential – relative to the average penetration rate in Europe (EU-16) of 5.5% – of 1.7 billion euros (IHRSA, 2005).

In 2005, the fitness industry in Portugal was worth 288 million euros, with the market presenting a growth potential estimated at 42 million euros (IHRSA, 2005). In the coming years, intense growth in the Portuguese fitness industry is expected, taking into consideration the fact that the present average penetration rate is below the European mean (~0.7%) (IHRSA, 2005). Portugal currently has 1100 HFCs, with 480 000 members and an average penetration rate of 4.8% (IHRSA, 2005).

The dimensions, characteristics, trends and potentialities of the fitness industry oblige fitness investors to combine the best-practice techniques with the constant development and innovation of the services offered in order to prevail in the market. The expectations must be constantly met or even exceeded in a market in which the information is globally available and the competition, aggressive. The consumers’ loyalty to the service provider must be evaluated in advance in order to ensure the HFCs’ profitability. The consumers’ global satisfaction and their satisfaction with the HFCs’ attributes are two concepts experiencing constant market adaptation and evolution based on the aim of positively influencing consumers.
3 Literature review

One of the great themes in market research is consumer satisfaction. This satisfaction is understood as a key construct, both for the managers and researchers interested in the relations that are established between services and the consumers. This observation is based on the numerous studies that demonstrate positive results in this respect. The results show that the profitability of the service organisations increases when the clients are satisfied.

Classically, the definition of satisfaction is based on the nonconfirmation of the expectations model (Oliver, 1980) and views satisfaction as a result of the fulfilled prepurchase expectation, which constitutes a reference standard compared with the perception of the service provider’s performance. When the perception of the service provider’s performance is high compared with the standard, the result is satisfaction; conversely, when it is low, the result is dissatisfaction. Thus, the definition of satisfaction is generally supported by the consumers’ evaluation of the service provided, as compared to their prior expectations (Jones and Suh, 2000; McDougall and Levesque, 2000).

The concept of satisfaction and its relation with other concepts has frequently been a subject of debate in the literature. Various themes or questions have emerged, for example, Rosen and Suprenant’s (1998) question of whether satisfaction can be considered as a specific transaction or a global phenomenon. Robinson (2006) examined the influence of the consumers’ expectations on the obtained satisfaction. The relations between service quality and satisfaction were considered by Parasuraman et al. (1988). Finally, the relation between satisfaction and consumer loyalty was analysed by McDougall and Levesque (2000).

In the next pages, we consider more closely the three strands of literature mentioned above.

3.1 The relation between the quality of service and consumer satisfaction

The quality of service has long been an important topic in marketing literature, since the perceptions of service quality are strongly related to consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Consumer satisfaction appears to be a different concept from quality, an issue that has given rise to some debate (e.g., Rosen and Suprenant, 1998). Moreover, some authors argue that the two concepts differ with respect to their positioning (Buttle, 1996; Crompton and MacKay, 1989; Oliver, 1993). There has also been considerable discussion as to whether satisfaction is an antecedent or a consequence of service quality. Most of the literature tends to support the notion that satisfaction is a result of service quality (Cronin and Taylor, 1994; Parasuraman et al., 1994b; Taylor and Baker, 1994), with various researchers arguing that these two concepts are also distinct (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Spreng and McKoy, 1996; Taylor and Baker, 1994). Going further, some studies in the literature on the marketing of services defend that these two concepts, while distinct from each other, are nonetheless strongly related (Cronin and Taylor, 1994; Spreng and McKoy, 1996).

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2003), satisfaction is the affective response to the consumption of the service. This is a view in which the characteristics of the service produce a high level of affective pleasure from its consumption during the transaction between the supplier and the consumer. The same authors suggest that while satisfaction
is a global concept, the judgements of service quality are specific concepts and that the corresponding evaluation focuses specifically on the dimensions of service quality. This perspective suggests that the perceptions of service quality influence the consumer's satisfaction. Thus, a consumer who has positive perceptions of the components of quality is likely to report high satisfaction levels from the global perspective. In any event, satisfaction can also be influenced by factors that are not related to service quality, such as the weather or the demeanour of the organisation's employees. These factors may attenuate the relations between quality and satisfaction. This thinking points us towards the analysis of satisfaction from a global, long-term perspective in relation to the HFCs' provision of the entire range of their services.

On the other hand, Crompton and MacKay (1989) have argued that service satisfaction is distinguished from service quality by the clients' experience of the service, which cannot be restricted to the dimensions of service quality. Clearly, these dimensions are evaluated, but the consumer's encounter with the service frequently dictates which of the components of the service in the consumer's experience are the most important (Winstead, 1999). In this view, service quality perception is generally accepted as a notion based on long-term performance, with the evaluation of the global service and consumer satisfaction as short-term measurements, i.e., a specific transaction based on experience (Cronin and Taylor, 1994; Parasuraman et al., 1994a; Wong, 2004). This approach suggests the analysis of satisfaction through transactional encounters in relation to the performance of the HFC, evaluated through its disaggregated attributes and from a short-term perspective.

Hence, we identify two distinct but interrelated approaches to the evaluation of satisfaction (Oliver, 1993): one from a long-term perspective (global satisfaction) and the other from the short-term perspective (the satisfaction by attributes). In both, the service quality is an antecedent of satisfaction, whether global or by attributes. In the present paper, we will consider and evaluate both perspectives of satisfaction. By the term 'satisfaction', we mean that our consideration of the concept is comprehensive and, as such, generalised (long-term mode). When using the term 'facilities', we signify that our analysis of satisfaction employs a disaggregated approach (short-term), i.e., the satisfaction by attributes, in which the consumer's level of satisfaction with each of the specific attributes of the service is identified and evaluated. The attributes considered in our evaluation of the 'facilities' dimension emerged from the sessions conducted with HFC client focus groups. As a result of this process, the five most valued attributes were retained for our analysis and the remainder were rejected.

3.2 The relation between the consumers' expectations and satisfaction

The consumers' expectations are influenced by past experiences, personal needs, word of mouth, market communications, price and image (Robinson, 2006). The knowledge of what the consumers expect from sports organisations makes it possible to identify the importance of a service's attributes (Crompton and MacKay, 1989; Theodorakis et al., 2001). It is also necessary to understand the level of expectations that the consumers have of a global service and of its diverse attributes. It is generally accepted that consumers use their expectations to determine whether the service is provided at an acceptable level of quality and satisfaction (Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985; 1994a; Robledo, 2001).
The perceptions of the quality of service tend to be evaluated through the consumer’s fixed experience. The results permit the weaknesses in the service quality to be identified and the improvements introduced in it. However, it is apparent that the consumers of sports services generally have greater expectations than what their \textit{a posteriori} perceptions tell them they have received. Research conducted by Howat \textit{et al.} (1996) on the consumers of sports centres in Australia and Theodorakis \textit{et al.} (2001), on the consumers of professional basketball in Greece, have shown that the consumers aim their \textit{a priori} expectations at a much higher level than the service quality perceptions of what they receive. In research carried out in the UK on sport and leisure public services, Robinson (1999) discovered that the constant improvement of the services offered and delivered leads the consumers to expect continuous improvements. Subsequently, the current level of quality can act as a motor in itself to oblige the managers to raise the standard in order for this improvement in quality to meet the consumers’ raised expectations. Eventually, these rising expectations will become problematic for the service providers (Coye, 2004; Robinson, 1999; Robledo, 2001), since a point will be reached at which further improvements in quality are likely to be impossible or financially unviable (Robinson, 2006; Rust and Oliver, 2000).

In Robinson’s (2006) view, consumers have two different types of expectations regarding the services that they purchase: the expectations of the service’s quality and the expectations of satisfaction with this service. Firstly, consumers purchase services that supply certain attributes and use their expectations to judge the quality of the service (Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman \textit{et al.}, 1985; 1994a–b). For example, an HFC that offers a wide range of sporting activities compared to other HFCs will thus be perceived as offering services of high quality. If the HFC does not have its own parking facilities, it will be viewed as a low-quality service provider compared to those HFCs that do have a car park, despite the fact that it has an extensive range of activities. The HFC staff and instructors are important parameters of quality. In this respect, they are expected to be helpful, at the least. If this is not the case, then the HFC management is rather restricted in what it can do to eradicate the poor quality or the perceptions of it, for which its human resources have been responsible. The second type is the expectations of the consumers with regard to each encounter with the service and the level of satisfaction experienced as a result of those encounters (Coye, 2004; Murray and Howat, 2002; Wong, 2004). These expectations are of a perceptual nature, since the satisfaction with a service is determined by the consumer’s positive perception of the encounter with the service, rather than with any other attribute supplied by the service. For example, although the HFC has a car park, if the consumer is obliged to park some distance away from the centre’s premises and arrives late for his class as a result, he will possibly become dissatisfied because the perception of the parking facilities fails to meet his expectations. Alternatively, in spite of him not missing the start of the scheduled class, the fact that he had to park at an inconvenient distance away is likely to have little or even no impact on his satisfaction with the encounter with the service. The distinction between these two concepts arose from the argument that the expectations that lead to satisfaction consist of what consumers think the HFC must offer, while the expectations that lead to the perceptions of the quality of service stem from what consumers feel the HFC might offer (Parasuraman \textit{et al.}, 1994b). On this basis, satisfaction can be understood as a sentiment that emerges from the experience of the service, while the quality of a service is concerned with the nature of its attributes (Crompton and MacKay, 1989).
As previously stated, the purpose of our research is to measure the effect of global expectations on global satisfaction and its relation to the satisfaction by attributes, which the HFC must offer. This is innovative insofar as the introduction of the concept of expectations is introduced into an analytical model in the context of the HFC.

### 3.3 Consumer satisfaction and loyalty

One of the main factors of the HFC’s strategic development is founded on the need and efforts to ensure the consumers’ loyalty to its services. The success of sports organisations as service providers depends largely on the means employed by the management to gain and retain client loyalty (Backman and Crompton, 1991a–b). A consumer’s loyalty to an organisation implies his indifference and/or resistance to the competition’s efforts to attract him with low prices and substitution opportunities (Hoffman and Bateson, 1997). Consumer loyalty should be a fundamental target for any sports organisation, as loyal consumers can provide not only the economic support base for a particular programme, but moreover, constitute a solid platform for all of the organisation’s objectives. Rosenberg and Czepiel (1983) estimated that it was six times more costly to attract a new consumer than to maintain an existing one. In the past, marketers were more concerned with the development of strategies to win new clients and creating stimuli for the sales department than consolidating long-term relationships with existing clients. Nowadays, the focus has shifted to incorporating strategies for building loyalty into the marketing mix. This reflects changes in thinking, both in the the organisational culture and in the reward systems (Kotler, 2000).

Loyalty in the domain of sports activities has been studied by many sports and leisure researchers (Alexandris et al., 2004; Murray and Howat, 2002; Park and Kim, 2000; Robinson, 2006). These works integrate theories in diverse disciplines, including consumer behaviour, organisational behaviour, sociology and psychology.

It is pertinent to suggest that the study of consumer satisfaction yields information on consumer loyalty and behaviour relating to the services (McDougall and Levesque, 2000; Taylor and Baker, 1994). Bitner et al. (1990) and Jones and Suh (2000) discovered that global satisfaction exerts a direct influence on the consumers’ repurchase of services. Similarly, McDougall and Levesque (2000) posited a causal chain in which the service quality influences the sentiments of satisfaction that, in turn, influence behaviour and future purchase intentions. Howat et al. (1999) discovered that the sport and leisure centre consumers’ satisfaction is clearly related to their recommendations of a centre to third parties. The indicators of consumer retention that are invariably utilised to represent loyalty are:

- the level of the consumers’ repeat purchases
- their willingness to recommend the service to other potential consumers
- their intentions to increase their frequency of attendance (Howat et al., 1999).

In our research, loyalty is evaluated across these three indicators, with the aim of analysing the effect that global satisfaction exerts on the consumers’ loyalty.
4 Methodology

4.1 Sample

The data source for our study was a questionnaire distributed to a sample of 542 individuals based on a confidence interval of 95% and with a sample error of 4%. The sample was randomly selected from a total number of 5600 members of two private HFCs situated in the municipality of Oeiras (near Lisbon), Portugal. Both clubs are well established in the market in the Oeiras area. Of the 542 questionnaires distributed, 463 were completed and returned. The average age of the respondents is approximately 36 years (standard deviation = 13.53) and the majority are female (64%) and single (52%).

4.2 Instruments

The instruments used were based on a ten-item battery representing each of the individual measures of the constructs discussed in this paper: expectations, facilities, satisfaction and loyalty. The responses to all questions were given in a typical five-point Likert scale. The psychometric quality was analysed with the support of Cronbach’s alpha, the values being presented in global terms with an alpha > 0.7 (reference value), which represents a good psychometric quality.

The item ‘expectations’ was measured by means of a question constructed with the objective of evaluating the level at which the respondents’ expectations were satisfied through a positive perception of the encounter with the services in the short term (the satisfaction by attributes) and in the long term (global satisfaction).

The ‘facilities’ dimension is composed of five attributes: the timetable of activities/services, hygiene, security, infrastructure and the condition of the equipment used. This dimension aimed to evaluate the respondents’ level of satisfaction during the occurrence of a specific transaction, measured in the short term, between the respondent and a specific attribute of the facilities (alpha of .80 > .70). As mentioned earlier, in selecting the attributes for the ‘facilities’ dimension, we took into account those tangible characteristics which were of most value to the users, according to the feedback from our sessions with focus groups, in order to study the encounter with the service.

The item ‘satisfaction’ was measured by means of a ‘top of the mind’ question, the objective of which was to evaluate the global satisfaction, measured in the long term, of the respondents in relation to the global services of the HFC.

The ‘loyalty’ dimension consists of three attributes: repeat purchases, recommendations to third parties and the frequency of use. This dimension was designed with the aim of providing insights into the respondents’ future intentions regarding the HFCs.

4.3 Strategy for data analysis

The purpose of the conceptual model is to study the effects established among expectations, satisfaction and loyalty. The pertinence of evaluating the effects of the expectations and their relation to global satisfaction/loyalty by attributes emerged from our survey of the literature, since its theoretical importance with respect to the fitness industry was emphasised (Robinson, 2006). The global expectations are evaluated and measured in our model. In addition, satisfaction is evaluated in our model on two
levels; in the encounter with the service by attributes (short-term measure – item ‘facilities’) and in its entirety (long-term measure – item ‘satisfaction’). In so doing, we seek to verify, in the fitness industry and particularly in the HFCs, the effects that the intermediate item ‘satisfaction’ establishes with the item ‘expectations’, with the ‘facilities’ dimension and with the ‘loyalty’ dimension. We considered the following hypotheses:

- expectations establish a positive effect with global satisfaction
- there is a positive relation between expectations and facilities
- facilities have a positive effect on global satisfaction
- global satisfaction has a positive effect on loyalty.

Structural equation models were chosen specifically for the present study due to their capacity to deal with complex models and the fact that they permit us to work with both latent and manifest variables. These models are integrated into a group generally called simultaneous equation systems. The latter are found among the dependency methods, with multiple relations among the independent and dependent variables and the possibility that some of the model’s variables are latent and as such, are not directly observable (Reis and Salgueiro, 2000). By means of a confirmative approach to the theoretical structure, we seek to analyse the variables of most importance in the explanation of loyalty (a latent construct).

The model was analysed with the support of a covariance matrix of the various manifest variables. The analysis was conducted using the statistical software AMOS 7.0 (Byrne, 2001).

Figure 1 The conceptual model
5 Results

The results of our model present a standardised solution and all the variables have a unitary variation. With regard to the quality of adjustment of the analytical model, we verify that the model presented good adjustment indices (CFI = .971; GFI = .972; RMSEA = .047). We also verify that the total explained variance by this model is approximately 70% ($R^2 = .70$). With reference to the constructs indicated in this paper, we obtained the following results. The item ‘expectations’ had a positive direct effect on the item ‘satisfaction’ of about .40 and an indirect effect of .12 on the dimension ‘loyalty’ through the dimension ‘satisfaction’. The dimension ‘facilities’ had a positive direct effect of .34 on the item ‘satisfaction’ and an indirect effect of .18 on the dimension ‘loyalty’ through the item ‘satisfaction’. The item ‘satisfaction’ had a positive direct effect of .83 on the dimension ‘loyalty’. In addition to these results, we could also verify that a positive, though not very significant, relation of about .30 occurs between the item ‘expectations’ and the dimension ‘facilities’.

**Figure 2** The standardised results

6 Discussion and implications

Based on a quantitative approach, we elaborated an analysis of how loyalty can be explained through satisfaction and expectations. The results suggest an important contribution from both of these concepts to the study of consumer loyalty.
With regard to the item ‘expectations’ and according to Coye (2004) and Wong (2004), consumers have expectations of each encounter with the service, in which the sentiments of satisfaction are formed. Expectations that lead to satisfaction consist of what consumers think that the HFC must offer. This study presents a positive relation between global expectations and facilities and an effect, which is also positive, between global expectations and global satisfaction (Robinson, 2006).

Another interesting result relates to the ‘facilities’ dimension, in which we attempted to verify the satisfaction level during an encounter with the service, measuring its effect on global satisfaction. Global satisfaction is considered by Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) as the affective response to the consumer’s service consumption, suggesting that satisfaction is a global concept (long-term evaluation). On the other hand, Crompton and MacKay (1989) argued that the satisfaction with a service should be evaluated through the experience of the service. Cronin and Taylor (1994) and Parasuraman et al. (1994a) corroborated the latter and argued that satisfaction is a short-term measure and a specific transaction within the experience. We verified the relation between these two arguments: the item ‘satisfaction’ (long-term measure) and the dimension ‘facilities’ disaggregated into attributes (short-term measure). We also verified that the dimension ‘facilities’, besides being a distinct concept, is interconnected with global satisfaction through the revealed positive effect (Oliver, 1993).

In evaluating the item ‘satisfaction’ in the dimension ‘loyalty’, we verified the existence of a strong causality between both variables, which sheds light on loyalty and the consumers’ behaviour in relation to the services (McDougall and Levesque, 2000; Taylor and Baker, 1994). The existence of a positive effect of satisfaction on the respondents’ loyalty to the HFC once again confirms the value of analysing satisfaction as a variable with a strong impact on loyalty (Howat et al., 1999).

The findings of our research raise both theoretical and practical implications. At the theoretical level, the results suggest that global satisfaction is an important variable for the understanding of consumer loyalty. The verification of a strong relation between satisfaction and loyalty had already been confirmed in past studies (Alexandrıs et al., 2004; Cronin and Taylor, 1994; Murray and Howat, 2002), in which satisfaction was demonstrated to be the most important factor influencing consumer loyalty. On the other hand, the introduction of expectations into our model points to the need for researchers to extend the investigation of this construct in HFC studies. At the practical level and of particular value to the HFC managers, the research suggests that the management must be constantly aware of the need to evaluate their clients’ global satisfaction, both as a separate construct and in relation to other constructs (expectations, facilities, loyalty). Secondly, and of significance in relation to one of the managers’ fundamental concerns, namely, the organisation’s profitability, the evaluation of the clients’ global satisfaction level is a means of monitoring these clients’ future intentions with regard to the HFC (Alexandrıs and Palialia, 1999; Alexandrıs et al., 2004; Jones and Suh, 2000). In addition, those attributes that lead to loyalty also require the management’s constant evaluation and modification as and when necessary (Howat et al., 1999), namely, repeat purchases, recommendations to third parties and the frequency of attendance. The expectations must be identified and measured, comparing the effect that they exert on satisfaction and ultimately influence, indirectly via satisfaction, the loyalty to the HFC.
7 Limitations and extensions

In the course of our analysis, we have verified certain limitations that serve to provide a direction for future research.

In the present work, we considered two HFCs that have operated in a local market over a long time. We suggest that the future studies include other variables, such as the facility dimensions and the types of services offered. Furthermore, the investigation should be extended to a larger number of HFCs.

The expectations have been evaluated from a global perspective, measuring their effect on global satisfaction and their relation with the facilities. It would be interesting to disaggregate the expectations and to verify the effects and relations that they establish with global expectations, global satisfaction and the satisfaction by attributes. As suggested by Robinson (2006), the consumers’ expectations are influenced by past experiences, personal needs, word of mouth, market communications, price and image.

In our study, great emphasis was placed on the ‘facilities’ dimension. In future studies, it might be of interest to augment the number of services under analysis. According to several authors (Graaf, 1994; Chelladurai et al., 1987), the a priori subdivision and categorisation of services would increase the possibility of evaluating the respondents’ encounters with the service. Furthermore, the relation with global satisfaction can be more broadly understood.

The insights gained into expectations and global satisfaction and the satisfaction by attributes can furnish us with clues as to the reasons for the clients’ loyalty to their HFC. The innovation in the present study has been to measure the effects and relations of expectations on satisfaction which, in turn, indirectly produce positive effects on loyalty. Future research should proceed to construct and develop a model that could explain the consumers’ loyalty to the HFC.

8 Conclusions

The present research has led us to conclude that global satisfaction assumes an intermediate variable role in relation to the other studied constructs, namely, expectations, facilities and loyalty. The effects and positive relations presented above always take satisfaction into consideration as an intermediate variable through the verification of the four presented hypotheses. The consideration of expectations permits us to affirm the indispensability of their inclusion in the models that study their effect on and relation to satisfaction which, in turn, indirectly influences loyalty. The inclusion of the effects of expectations and their relation is innovative and of benefit to the fitness industry. Nevertheless, the scope of their measurement in this paper has been limited and thus, requires future extension and consolidation. We also conclude that global satisfaction plays a significant role in the issue of loyalty, as does the satisfaction by attributes (facilities), although the effect is indirect. Finally, we emphasise the assertion that the satisfaction by attributes and global satisfaction, despite being distinct concepts, are interconnected and that both concepts influence loyalty.
References


**Notes**

1. The figures for the EU-25 do not include Luxembourg, Malta and Cyprus, due to the absence of data on these countries.

2. EU-16 = Norway, Sweden, Holland, Switzerland, Spain, Austria, Greece, Ireland, the UK, Germany, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Denmark, France and Finland.