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Original article

IS IT ADVANTAGEOUS OR DISADVANTAGEOUS FOR THE BUSINESS THAT FITNESS CENTERS ARE NOT USED (UNDERUSED) BY THE MEMBERS?

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Abstract*

Aim. The aim of this study is conducted to determine whether there is a relationship between the number of use of facilities during their membership for individuals who become members of a fitness center for a period of one year, and the renewal when the membership is over.

Methods. The data of 337 members (39.47% female, 60.53% male) of a sports center in the province of Ankara working with a yearly membership system and functional in terms of fitness, with a mean age of 34.60±10.96 and for whom the yearly membership period had been completed, was used. The information of how many times the individuals who became members of the fitness center for a period of one year used the facility throughout their memberships were recorded in the entry-exit system. The information whether the same individuals did or did not renew their membership at the end of the membership period was also obtained, and the relationship between these data was investigated.

Results. Although the membership renewal rates of the members with low number of usage were low, no significant relation was found between number of usage by members and membership renewal ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusions. In this study, we looked at the relationship between the number of use of the fitness center and the membership renewal at the end of one year, but we found no statistically significant difference.

Keywords: Fitness, Member, Membership Renewal, Continuity in Sports

Introduction

The necessity of people to be physically active for healthy living is now a globally recognized reality, and this leads to an increase in the number of individuals participating in physical activity programs (Sperandei, Vieira & Reis, 2016). Individuals of all ages are involved in sports with various reasons. Sports facilities are constantly being opened with public and private resources to meet the increasing demand (Howat & Assaker, 2016; San Emeterio, Iglesias-Soler, Gallardo, Rodriguez-Canamero & Garcia-Unanue, 2016). Although individuals have many reasons to start physical activity, many prefer the easy way and become members of fitness centers. Particularly those who do not know how to start physical activity prefer to become members of a fitness center that offers many opportunities at the same time, instead of playing sports and exercising on

their own (Brown, Volberding, Baghurst, & Sellers, 2017). On the other hand, the diversity of activities offered at fitness centers also plays an important role in people's preferences (Crawford, Greenwell & Andrew, 2007). According to the Europe Active (2015) report, in 2014, the number of people who became members of fitness and wellness centers in European countries is 50.1 million, and the ratio of these people within the population is 7.4%. This figure has increased by 3.9% in 2015 and reached 52.4

million (www.europeactive.eu).

Fitness center operators are trying to provide their members with a wide range of exercise environments so that more members can use their facilities (Brown et al., 2017). Fitness centers need a certain number of members and are constantly in search of members. If more of these members can be found from existing members, the need for new members will be equally less. So it is just as important to retain existing members as much as to find new members. Retention of existing members is cheaper than finding new members (Bodet, 2008). Some studies have shown that it is 2.5 times cheaper to retain existing members (Hill & Green, 2012). However, the retention of existing members, that is, the renewal of membership at the end of the membership period, depends on the quality of the operation of the fitness center (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987). Regardless of the management model and type, the biggest problem that fitness center operators face is the lack of membership renewal. The issue that needs to be addressed in this context is establishing member loyalty (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014). Establishing member loyalty in a fitness center, resulting in renewal of membership will be beneficial for the profitability of the business. Because loyalty means buying a product over and over again. The renewal of membership is an indication that the business is managed successfully. Business profitability will

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come along with it (Ferrand, Robinson, & Valette-Florence, 2010). Of course, there are many factors that affect customer loyalty (service quality, expectation of members, etc.). These factors are still not clearly explained and may change constantly (Bodet, 2008). There are studies showing that service quality and member satisfaction are important factors in the increase of member loyalty and the renewal of membership (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014; Lee, Kim, Ko, & Sagas, 2011; Yu et al., 2014). Members who are less satisfied complain more and are less likely to renew their membership. On the contrary, satisfied customers complain less and are more likely to renew their membership (Lee et al., 2011). In the field of sports and recreation, studies done on quality of service focus more on customer satisfaction during service than on customer satisfaction after service (Howat & Assaker, 2016). This is also an indication of why members should go to the fitness center more often.

Many studies have been conducted on establishing loyalty of fitness members. In these studies, more emphasis has been placed on the personnel responsible for enrollment of members, and various studies have been made to train them to be more efficient. Another issue that needs to be emphasized is membership programs where all kinds of information of members are kept. Because, in these programs, a lot of information along with the facility usage habits of the members can be obtained, and thus various studies can be made for the continuity of the members. This can lead to much more efficient results than the personal prediction of the manager or sales staff (Chen, Lin, & Stotlar, 2006). Some of the studies have focused on the possibility of members leaving the membership, trying to predict this with the membership data before the members leaving their membership. While there are many reasons for leaving the membership, neither the price policy nor the satisfaction of the person during the membership can guarantee that the membership will be renewed (San Emeterio et al., 2016). On the other hand, many fitness centers tend to develop their service range to retain their members. In this context, not only the fitness area, but swimming, golf, tennis and other areas are included in the facility (Hill & Green, 2012). When the relationship between member satisfaction and gender difference was investigated, it was found that male and female members have different expectations (Lee et al., 2011).

It is far more difficult for a member to be persuaded to become a member again after quitting sports than preventing this outcome during the process of quitting (San Emeterio et al., 2016). For this reason, the determination of the frequency of members using the fitness center, tracking the time

passed since the last visit to the center and other similar parameters are important for the renewal of memberships. Secondary services offered at fitness centers (massage, cafeteria service, etc.) will also be a source of income for the center. However, in order to obtain a certain income from these places, it is also necessary that the customers come to the center more often and spend more time there (Hill & Green, 2012).

The idea that you are not getting your money's worth from a service purchased for a certain fee will make it difficult for the individual to repeat the same investment. Repeat purchase of a service by members is extremely important for sustainable profitability (Lee et al., 2011). Economic contributors of customer loyalty can be specified by the following items.

1. Reduction of marketing and operating costs,
2. Service prices to be held at certain levels without being reduced,
3. Increased repeat purchase of the service over time,
4. Reducing the cost of finding new customers (Lee et al., 2011).

In light of the information provided above, this study was conducted to determine whether there is a relationship between the number of use of the fitness center during the membership period and the renewal of membership for individuals who have become a member of a fitness center for a period of one year.

Methods

This study was conducted by using the information of members of a fitness center located in Ankara province, who have completed the period of use of the facility. The age and gender information of the members is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Average age of members

	N	Age	SD	%
Female	133	35.20	11.47	39.47%
Male	204	34.21	10.61	60.53%
Total	337	34.60	10.96	

The fitness center used in the research is a large-scale sports center which includes areas for fitness, cardio, group exercise programs, spinning, squash, basketball, swimming pool, spa, table tennis and cafeteria. All information used in the research was taken from the computer program of the fitness center. This is a program mandatory for all members using the facility, where entry-exit checks are made. A hand identification and recognition device is used for entering the facility. This device prevents the use of the facility by an individual in



the place of another member. Members who have completed their one-year membership until June 2017 are included in the study. Excel for Windows software was used for the analysis of all data. Descriptive statistics such as arithmetic mean and percentile were used in the analysis of the data about participants' use of the fitness center. The relationship between membership status and number of visits was tested by Chi-square correlation analysis.

Results

Usage numbers according to gender for members using the fitness center are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Fitness center general usage figures

	Least used	Most used	Average
Female	1	220	53.06
Male	1	230	61.64

It is seen that there are members who have enrolled in a one-year membership who use the facility only once. This situation has been encountered both in women and men. When we look at maximum number of uses, it is seen that the fitness center is used 220 times in women and 230 times in men.

The number of facility use by women according to age group is shown in table 3.

Table 3. Facility usage by age groups of female members

Age	Number of member	Average usage
< 20	5	3.76%
20 - 29	49	36.84%
30 - 39	35	26.32%
40 - 49	27	20.30%
50 ≤	17	12.78%

When the data are examined, it is seen that as the age increases, the number of fitness center usage also increases. Especially members 40 years old and above use the facility more frequently. The scarcity of facility usage under the age of twenty is also noteworthy. This situation may have resulted by the low number of users.

The number of facility use by men according to age group is shown in table 4.

Table 4. Facility usage by age groups of male members

Age	Number of members	Average usage
< 20	14	6.86%
20 - 29	62	30.39%
30 - 39	76	37.25%
40 - 49	28	13.73%
50 ≤	24	11.76%

It can be said that just like women, as the age increases, the number of fitness center usage also increases for men. However, the number of use under the age of twenty is higher than other age groups. There is a similarity between the number of use of men and women at the age of forty and above. Between the ages of twenty and forty, the usage number of male members are more than that of female members.

The age averages of female members according to the number of fitness center use are shown in table 5.

Table 5. Average age of female members by usage number

Usage	Age average	Number of members
< 50	31.63	79 (59.40%)
50 - 99	41.82	33 (24.81%)
100 - 149	34.50	12 (9.02%)
150 ≤	43.22	9 (6.77%)

59.40% of female members visited the fitness center for less than 50 times in one year. This shows that they did not even come to the facility once a week on average during the year. 33.83% of the members used the facility between 50 and 150 times.

The age averages of male members according to the number of fitness center use are shown in table 6.

Table 6. Average age of male members by usage number

Usage	Age average	Number of members
< 50	33.44	104 (50.98%)
50 - 99	35.64	50 (24.51%)
100 - 149	32.28	29 (14.22%)
150 ≤	37.24	21 (10.29%)

50.98% of the male members visited the fitness center less than 50 times per year. Approximately half of the male members have not visited the facility once a week on average in a year. 38.73% of the members used the facility between 50 and 150 times. From here, it can be concluded that men use the fitness center more frequently than women. In general, if it is considered to be good for exercise to be performed 2 days a week, and very good if



performed 3 times a week, we can say that 71 members (21.07%) in total, both men and women, exercise regularly. The average usage rate of all male and female members during the one-year period was found to be 58.25.

At the end of the use of the fitness center, the total number of usage and the rate of membership renewal of the members are shown in table 7.

Table 7. Relationship between number of visits of members and status of membership renewal

Visit		Membership Renewal		
		No	Yes	Total
≤ 50	Number	115	71	186
	%	61,83	38,17	100
51-100	Number	42	39	81
	%	51,85	48,15	100
100 ≤	Number	40	30	70
	%	57,142	42,857	100
Total	Number	197	140	337
	%	58,46	41,54	100

Members were divided into three categories according to the number of visits. The relationship between membership renewal status and usage numbers was not statistically significant (pearson chi-square=2.38; p>0.05). The increase or decrease in the number of visits of participants, without regard to gender, did not affect the status of membership renewal.

Discussions

Dishman and colleagues in their study published in 1985 reported that 50% of those who started physical activity would quit sports within the first year (Dishman, Sallis & Orenstein, 1985). In their study, Sperandei and colleagues reported that the individual's likelihood of being an active member of a fitness center for 1.5 months is 76%. They reported the likelihood of remaining a member for over two months to be 54%, and the likelihood of continuing after one year to be only 3.7% (Sperandei et al., 2016). In their study, Garay and colleagues found that only about 30% of fitness center members continued to visit the center for more than five months (Garay, Sperandei, & Palma, 2014). In an environment where people are enrolling for membership but not attending, there is a low likelihood that they will renew their membership to the fitness center again at the end of the year. In our study, we can say that only 20% of the annual members are using the facility in an efficient manner.

In their study, San Emeterio and colleagues recorded that fitness center members use the facility

at an average of 5.6±5.0 times a month. They reported that at the end of the membership, the percentage of members who continued their membership by paying was 9.3%, and the increase in the duration of membership and member age lowered the possibility of leaving the membership. They found no significant relationship between gender and leaving membership. They stated that members who visit the facility more frequently and those who stayed longer during each visit were less likely to leave the membership. For this reason, it was proposed that facilities needed to develop activities to ensure members stay longer (San Emeterio et al., 2016). In our study, the monthly average was found to be 4.85. Although membership renewal rates were much higher in our study, there was no significant relationship between usage numbers of members and membership renewal.

Bağcı has conducted a study on the usage habits of fitness center members. As a result of the study, the most preferred day was reported to be Monday (17.67%), with the most preferred time interval being 17.00-20.00 (43.19%). The season where the fitness center was most frequently used was reported to be winter (31.68%) (Bağcı, 2017). With the extra activities to be performed according to similar habits identified in each fitness center, facility over-crowdedness can be decreased as well as increasing customer satisfaction. Facility over-crowdedness may be a problem for many people. For this reason, the use of other days and hours can be made more attractive either by the price policy or by different activities to reduce crowdedness.

A study conducted on people aged 60 and over revealed that the quality of service positively affected the satisfaction of members. It was stated that while service quality does not have a direct influence on the renewal of membership, the increase in customer satisfaction positively affects the renewal of memberships. A significant relationship was also found between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Yu et al., 2014). In this study, the fitness users with an age of sixty and above are only 6 people, and their average use is 102.33 times per year. This shows that people over a certain age have more commitment to sports, while on the other hand shows that they can allocate more time to sports.

In their study to investigate the effect of wellness centers on quality of life, Clark and colleagues found significant negative trends in the results of quality-of-life questionnaire surveys conducted at the beginning and end of their membership by those who used the center less frequently (once every 2 weeks). Clark and colleagues explained that the reason for this is that at the beginning of the membership, the idea that



the physical activity they are going to perform will positively affect their quality of life is dominant, and that at the end of the membership they are pessimistic due to the fact that they did not use the facility enough during their membership (Clark et al., 2013).

Zopiatis and colleagues conducted a study on members using the fitness centers of hotels. 20.6% of those participating in the study were between the ages of 18-30, 60.9% between the ages of 31-50 and 18.5% were over 50 years old. 53.3% of the participants were male and 46.7% were female. 9.5% of fitness center members used the center 1-2 times a week, while 53.50% used 3-4 times a week and 37% used the center 5 or more times a week. As a result of this study, it was concluded that customer satisfaction has a direct affect on the rate of membership renewal (Zopiatis, Theocharous, Constanti, & Tjiapouras, 2017). In the study conducted on fitness center members, Dölek (2017) reported that 24.40% of the members completed 1-10 trainings after their membership started, 37.70% had training on 11-50 days, 19.64% had training on 51-100 days, 8.93% on 101-150 days, 4.96% on 151-200 days and 4.37% had training on 201 or more days (Dölek, 2017). These ratios are in parallel with the current study.

In a study investigating the effect of customer satisfaction on loyalty, it was shown that experienced members might be more loyal compared to novice members, depending on customer satisfaction (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014). Since experience is established with continuity, we can say that those who regularly attend fitness centers will have a higher possibility of renewing their membership at the end of the year if their expectations are met. The increase in service quality of fitness centers is an important criterion both for acquiring new members and for the loyalty of current members (Hill & Green, 2012; Yildiz, 2011). In their study, Howat & Assaker (2016) found a strong relationship between member satisfaction and member loyalty (Howat & Assaker, 2016). In a study conducted on the members of a golf club, a positive relationship was found between member satisfaction and membership renewal. What stands out here is the difference between the expectation of male and female members and their criteria of customer satisfaction (Lee et al., 2011).

In this study, we found that membership renewal rate was 38.17% when the facility was used 50 or less time throughout the total membership, while membership renewal rate was 48.15% for those who benefited more from the facility (51-100 visits). Although there is no statistically significant difference, the difference supports our view that the number of uses may have an impact on membership renewal. On the other hand, as the number of use

increases, there is no proportionate increase in renewal rate. Of course, there are many reasons why a customer does not want to purchase a service again. However, in any circumstances, it is less likely that a service not used enough will be purchased again.

Conclusions

In this study, we looked at the relationship between the number of use of the fitness center and the membership renewal at the end of one year, but we found no statistically significant difference. We believe that the application of such studies to broader masses, and each fitness center making use of such data within its own operations will be important for the profitability of the business.

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