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## Creating a Loyal Clientele: The Role of Service Environment in Health and Fitness Facilities

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## Creating a Loyal Clientele: The Role of Service Environment in Health and Fitness Facilities

### Abstract

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### Keywords

fitness centres; service environment; fitness professionals; customer satisfaction; customer loyalty

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Creating a Loyal Clientele: The Role of Service Environment in Health and Fitness Facilities

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## Abstract

India's fitness service market in the year 2020 was worth US \$ 2.6 billion while the fitness product market was worth US \$ 3.7 billion and was anticipated to increase by 8.9% CAGR by 2026. Many people now actively participate in sports and attend fitness facilities due to the increased attention being paid to personal health. The factors affecting customer demand for fitness centres have not received much attention. To do so is the purpose of this paper. This study utilized the quantitative survey method of quantitative design to collect responses from fitness centre customers. Online and offline survey questionnaires were used to collect data from respondents who had fitness centre membership in various Indian cities. 267 responses were collected from the exiting members of 9 fitness centre chains located in three Tier I and five Tier II cities in India. The questionnaire items measured the fitness centre environment, competency of fitness professionals, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty, and were adopted from the scales used in prior studies with minor modifications. Our results indicate that both the fitness centre professionals and the fitness centre environment significantly influence customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Our findings will help fitness providers attract and maintain customers by providing a value-added environment and employing competent fitness professionals.

**Keywords:** Fitness centres, Service environment, Fitness professionals, Customer satisfaction, Customer loyalty

## 1. Introduction

Physical activities have been found to help relieve and improve the quality of life which has been adversely impacted by modern-day sedentary lifestyles increasing various lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases and poor muscular-skeletal health (Brand Connect, 2022). In the year 2019, the market size of the global fitness industry was valued at US \$ 96.7 billion (Gough, 2021). Increased income, lifestyle diseases and knowledge about healthy lifestyles have prompted an exponential increase in fitness centres in India (Sportz Business, 2020). India's fitness service market in the year 2020 was worth US \$ 2.6 billion while the fitness product market was worth US \$ 3.7 billion and was anticipated to grow at 8.9% CAGR by 2026 to touch a value of US \$7.13 billion (Amos, 2021). According to

industry studies conducted by FICCI, E&Y, Redseer Consulting and Global Wellness Institute, there are six million active users in India, spending around \$400 per year towards fitness services (Vora, 2019). Besides renowned fitness centres of Indian origin such as Chisel, Fitness One, Fluid, Neo Fitness, Nitro Fitness, Ozone Fitness & Spa, Reebok Crossfit, Solaris Fitness, Talwalkar's Fitness etc., many international fitness chains such as Plus Fitness from Australia, Snap Fitness, Anytime Fitness, Gold's Gym, Crossfit from United States, Fitness First from United Kingdom and Celebrity Fitness from Indonesia have also made inroads to the Indian market (Brand Yuva, 2020).

Prior research on fitness centres identified the factors influencing customer choice (Jang & Choi, 2018; Sun, 2021), suggested ways of improving their brand image (Alguacil, et al., 2021, pp. 1–19), studied business models and marketing of fitness centres

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(León-Quismondo, et al., 2020; Pedragosa, 2021, pp. 25–31; Tsitskari et al., 2021), reported on the creativity and innovative techniques used (Byrge, 2021) and studied customer perception about fitness centres (Bharathi & Dinesh, 2018). Jang and Choi (2018), pointed out that the regulating variables like gadgets, ambience, convenience and subscription cost affect the selection of a fitness centre. Chiu et al. (2019), studied the impact of the co-creation of customer value on client happiness and their propensity to return to fitness centres. Baena-Arroyo, et al. (2020), examined the convenience of service and customer experience between real-world and online fitness classes and analysed customer loyalty. Research on the factors affecting customer satisfaction and loyalty with fitness centres however has not received much attention. This paper investigates the effect of fitness centre professionals and their environment on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Satisfaction & loyalty

To develop customer connections, an organization must put up a lot of effort. (Attri & Bhagwat, 2023; Pandey et al., 2021). A systematic way to do so (thereby developing an inelastic demand) is to proactively devise and implement a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) strategy (Peppers, et al., 1999) which entails the following four steps:

- identify the customers
- differentiate the customers
- interact with the customers
- customize the product/service to achieve customer satisfaction (Edvardsson, et al., 2000)

Avourdiadou and Theodorakis (2014), Mohd and Mohd (2017) and García-Fernández (2018a,b), reported that a positive perception of service quality at a fitness centre influences customer satisfaction and loyalty. Anon (2019) reported that customer satisfaction increases the likelihood that they will make another purchase and the number of times they attend the fitness centre. However, a competitive environment resulting in commoditization or low differentiation, availability of substitutes and low switching cost affects the satisfaction-loyalty relationship (Sharma & Sharma, 2015) and a slight decrease in satisfaction might cause a significant decline in client loyalty (Thomas and W.Earl Sasser, 1995). Berry et al. (2002a, pp. 85–89) pointed out that unhappiness with any one aspect of the service provider would negatively impact

customer loyalty and they may not recommend it to others. Thus, we propose:

**H1. Customer satisfaction (CS) impacts customer loyalty (CL)**

### 2.2. Environmental factors

An organization's image positively influences customer purchase intentions. While interacting with organizations, the customer consciously or unconsciously filters experiences, either rational/calculative or emotional. Marketers opine that the firm must orchestrate customers' experiences by providing stimuli to catch their attention. Stimuli experienced by sensory organs can be functional (the technical quality of service), and mechanical (emitted by things, i.e., the brand) (Bitner, 1990, 1995).

The organization's physical environment, determined by layout and design, provides space for interactivity, socialization, and communication (Kent, 2007). Yagil (2013) highlighted that brand name and physical layout enhance the emotional experience thereby increasing purchase intention and customer satisfaction. Customers' feelings and purchasing inclinations are greatly influenced by their perceptions of a retail environment (Andreu, et al., 2006). Music, colour and graphics also positively affect the mood and emotions (Bitner, 1995). However, customers might ignore stimuli, so attracting customer attention can be very tricky (Berndt, et al., 2004).

The fitness centre environment is determined by the placement of equipment, spaciousness of the workout area, availability of washrooms, changing rooms, shower facilities, designated area for yoga/meditation/aerobics, and steam/sauna facilities, all providing signals of superior quality to the prospective customer (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2007). These parameters can enhance customer satisfaction which might lead to generating favourable WOM. Afsanepurak et al. (2012), in a Saudi Arabian study on public versus private fitness centres, concluded that customer satisfaction was greater with the private fitness facilities owing to better equipment and facilities. We created the following hypotheses to see if the fitness centre's environment affects customer happiness and loyalty:

**H2. The fitness centre environment (FCEn) positively impacts customer satisfaction (CS)**

**H3. The fitness centre environment (FCEn) positively impacts customer loyalty (CL)**

### 2.3. Fitness centre professionals

Gibson, et al. (2018) reported that fitness specialists are responsible for analysing, recommending, and creating workout plans while helping both healthy individuals and those facing health challenges to improve their quality of life and enhance their physical fitness.

Yee, et al. (2010) stated that to attain and maintain competitive advantage, companies must manage customer experiences. Sarpong (2016) argued that moments of truth arise as a result of specific challenges experienced throughout the provision of services, which in turn generate customer experiences leading to affective/emotional commitments. Bitner and Brown (2000) argued that service employees must generate and nurture emotional commitment (trust, rapport, and reciprocity) during customer interactions which in addition to increasing client pleasure, also promotes and maintains client relationships in the future. The provision of high-quality services to customers plays a key role in drawing clients to the business and lays the foundation for their happiness and loyalty (Sarpong, 2016; Shostack, 1985; Swarnalatha & Prasanna, 2012).

Peppers, et al. (1999) observed that interactions between customers and employees during a moment of truth, which may either be good or bad, play a vital role in generating customer satisfaction. Positive moments of truth are generated when psychological autonomy with employees leads to the development of honesty thereby enhancing the interpersonal relations between customer and service provider (Chiu, et al., 2015; Gupta, 2019). Positive interactions build a solid foundation for customer relationships, increasing the probability that they will last. Negative interactions, on the other hand, lead to the loss of trust, while a combination of positive and negative interactions might make the customer confused and more open to the appeal of rivals (Ferrand, et al., 2010). An unmanaged moment of misery may lead to service regression and mediocrity. In addition, service recovery (i.e., actions in case of service failures) is also very important in a moment of truth which may lead to long-term customer relationships (Bitner, 1990).

Employee empowerment is key in effectively handling a negative moment and is quite effective in organizations (Aibrecht & Zemke, 1985). An empowered employee can transmute a negative moment into an organization's advantage by effectively solving the causal problem, forming a positive image for the customer, which in turn leads to success (Terzoglou, et al., 2012). Khan and Garg

(2015), found that personality, grooming, and employee appearance results in higher customer satisfaction. Research by the Customer Think Corporation (2006) on more than 15 industries found that excellent goods and services and effective communications with people and systems were more significant than lower prices or the cost of ownership. The staff's knowledge, qualifications, concern for customers' needs, and individualized attention go a long way toward fomenting customer satisfaction (Hellier, et al., 2003). Thompson (2006, pp. 1–18) argued that service providers must continuously minimize gaps between customer expectation(s) and experience since such gaps can lead to customer dissatisfaction.

The attitudes of employees and their relationship with customers are key drivers for satisfaction and loyalty (Brooks, 2000). Research indicates that employee behaviour affects customer satisfaction and organizational performance (Zehra & Ali, 2017). With wide-ranging training programmes and a heightened emphasis on customer care, the role of fitness professionals has evolved (Abdullah et al., 2021). Fitness centres recruit professionals who have undergone formal training and have obtained certification and accreditation from recognised bodies (Ong, 2015). The growing popularity of new activities such as outdoor exercises, cross-fit, Zumba, and athletic contests such as triathlons and other non-gym-based exercises, coupled with emphasis on correct nutrition requires fitness professionals to be updated and knowledgeable (Fahrner & Schüttoff, 2020; Yumasheva et al., 2019). Fitness professionals therefore need to be competent to adopt the technological advances in their field and also be observant of changing customer preferences so that they can deliver quality services and be one step ahead of their competition (Abdullah, et al., 2021).

With increased employee competencies the quality of activities in the organization improves which enhances customer experience and customer loyalty (Afsanepurak, et al., 2012). The knowledge, experience and attitude of employees influence customer satisfaction and ultimately customer loyalty (Howat, 2007, pp. 309–312; Abdullah et al., 2021 emphasized the importance of knowledge, skills, and attitude of fitness professionals, but did not investigate whether it led to customer satisfaction/loyalty. Nathan et al. (2022) found that the personality of fitness trainers significantly impacts the intention to exercise by members, and this relationship was mediated by the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the fitness professional; although they did not investigate the influence of fitness trainers on customer contentment

and loyalty. [García-Fernández \(2018a,b\)](#) found a significant difference in customer perception about employee quality and equipment in private fitness centres vis-à-vis public fitness centres, resulting in the private fitness centres being rated higher. However, they did not link these parameters to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, we constructed the following hypotheses:

**H4. Competency of Fitness Professionals (CFP) positively impacts Customer Satisfaction (CS)**

**H5. Competency of Fitness Professionals (CFP) positively impacts Customer Loyalty (CL)**

Based on the literature and the hypotheses developed thereof, we conceptualized that customer satisfaction is the prerequisite for customer loyalty. According to the literature review, our model states that the competency of fitness professionals (CFP) and the fitness centre environment (FCEn) leads to customer satisfaction as well as customer loyalty (CL). [Fig. 1](#) depicts the conceptual model to test our hypotheses.

### 3. Research design

This study utilized the quantitative survey method of quantitative design to collect responses from fitness centre customers. Online and offline survey questionnaires were used to collect data from respondents who had fitness centre membership in various Indian cities. We emailed 1450 questionnaires and 233 responses were received. An additional 98 responses were collected through physical mode from the exiting members of 9 fitness centre chains located in three Tier I and five Tier II cities in India. A total of 331 replies were received, of which 267 were deemed appropriate, and 64 were rejected

due to missing information. The questionnaire items measured the fitness centre environment, competency of fitness professionals, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty, and were adopted from the scales used in prior studies with minor modifications ([Table 1](#)). Before administering the questionnaire, in 2021, we conducted a pilot study on a sample of 65 fitness centre members. [Table 1](#) presents the statements used in the questionnaire for various constructs.

### 4. Data analysis & results

#### 4.1. Demographic details

[Table 2](#) presents the demographic details of the respondents.

#### 4.2. Confirmatory factor analysis

To examine the reliability and validity of the constructs specified in the study model, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. The P value is 0.718 ( $>0.05$ ), demonstrating that the model fits the data well. The proposed conceptual model with five constructs reflected a good model fit ( $\chi^2 = 0.131$ ; GFI = 0.998; AGFI = 0.984; NFI = 0.999; CFI = 1.0, and RMSEA = 0.00) (See [Table 3](#)).

#### 4.3. Validity and reliability

We investigated the convergent validity and the discriminant validity of the scale items to confirm that they are assessing the theoretical concept ([Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2006](#)). Convergent validity is verified by the AVE values which were  $\geq 0.5$  ([Parasuraman, et al., 2005](#)). The AVE values were also

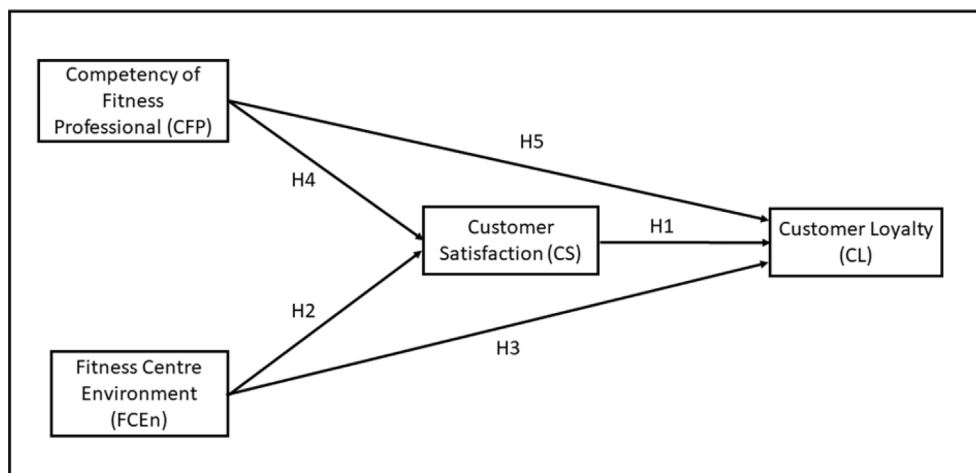


Fig. 1. Proposed Model. Source: Designed by authors.

Table 1. Statements for research constructs.

Attribute	Items
<b>Competency of Fitness Professionals (CFP)</b> adopted from (Ahmad, et al., 2016; Dad et al., 2018; Lotz, 2009; Nkaabu et al., 2017) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fitness Professionals deal with my inquiries and complaints courteously.</li> <li>2. Fitness Professionals are competent to help me make decisions.</li> <li>3. Fitness Professionals devote time to me.</li> <li>4. Fitness Professionals provides information about new fitness regimes.</li> <li>5. Fitness Professionals are knowledgeable about my fitness needs.</li> <li>6. Fitness Professionals demonstrate adequate knowledge and skills about the services provided.</li> <li>7. Fitness Professionals help me reach my fitness goals</li> </ol>	7
<b>Fitness Centre Environment (FCEn)</b> adopted by (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Fornell & Larcker, 1981) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It has motivating posters on the wall.</li> <li>2. It has soothing background music.</li> <li>3. It has wall mirrors to view my workout progress.</li> <li>4. It has a television(s) to display fitness exercises.</li> <li>5. It has good lighting and ambience.</li> <li>6. Its interiors are clean and hygienic.</li> <li>7. It has a spacious layout of equipment.</li> </ol>	7
<b>Customer Satisfaction (CS)</b> adopted from (Al-alak & Alnawas, 2010; Liao & Chuang, 2004; Lotz, 2009; Wang et al., 2017) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I feel extremely positive about the fitness centre.</li> <li>2. In comparison to other fitness centres, I'm quite happy with this one.</li> <li>3. I'm inspired to visit the fitness centre.</li> <li>4. I'm glad I chose to join this gym.</li> <li>5. The level of service at this gym fits my standards.</li> </ol>	5
<b>Customer Loyalty (CL)</b> adopted from (Ahmad, et al., 2016; Dagger et al., 2007; Lee & Sergueeva, 2017; Turley & Milliman, 2000) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I'll keep coming to this gym in the coming year.</li> <li>2. I will suggest this fitness centre to others.</li> <li>3. I'll stay a member even if the gym increases the cost of my fitness plan</li> <li>4. Even if another gym has comparable services, I would still choose this one.</li> <li>5. I speak about this fitness centre to others during my casual discussions on fitness</li> </ol>	5

Table 2. Demographic details of the respondents.

Gender	Age	Marital Status	Annual Income (in Rupees)
Males (52.5%)	Less than 20 (21.5%)	Married (42%)	Less than 5 Lacs (38%)
Females (47.5%)	21-30 (40%)	Unmarried (58%)	5Lacs – 10 Lacs (27%)
	31-40 (14%)		10 Lacs – 15 Lacs (20%)
	41-50 (15.5%)		More than 15 Lacs (15%)
	More than 50 (9%)		

tested by observing the factor loadings. Convergent validity was established with loading values of items  $\geq 0.7$  (Lockwood, et al., 2020) (Table 4).

Table 3. Model fit summary.

Indices	Value	Suggested value
Chi-Square Value	.131	–
DF	1	–
P Value	.718	>0.05 (Hair, et al., 1998)
Chi-Square value/DF	.131	<5.00 (Hair, et al., 1998)
GFI	.998	>.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999)
AGFI	.984	>.90 (Hair, et al., 2006)
NFI	.999	>.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999)
CFI	1.0	>.90 (Daire, et al., 2008)
RMSEA	.000	<.08 (Hair, et al., 2006)

Construct reliability was established with values of  $CR \geq 0.6$  (Parasuraman, et al., 2005). The values of 0.906 for Competency of Fitness Professional, 0.896 for Fitness Centre Environment, 0.859 for Customer Loyalty and 0.944 for Customer Satisfaction indicate Construct Reliability. The Cronbach Alpha values  $\geq 0.7$  established the reliability of the scale.

The square root of the AVE must be larger than the correlation between the two constructs as a requirement for discriminant validity (Daire, et al., 2008; Parasuraman et al., 2005). The diagonal values (in bold) in Table 5 are the square roots of the AVE which are greater than the correlations between the constructs establishing the discriminant validity.

Table 4. Calculation of the AVE and CR.

Construct	Number of Items	Factor Loading Range	Cronbach's Alpha	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Construct Reliability (CR)
Competency of Fitness Professional	7	0.670–0.808	0.798	0.582	0.906
Fitness Centre Environment	7	0.667–0.945	0.806	0.554	0.896
Customer Loyalty	5	0.693–0.859	0.781	0.552	0.859
Customer Satisfaction	5	0.800–0.947	0.902	0.773	0.944

Table 5. Discriminant validity.

Constructs	CFP	FCEn	CS	CL
CFP	0.763			
FCEn	0.661	0.744		
CS	0.540	0.651	0.879	
CL	0.423	0.707	0.650	0.743

#### 4.4. Test for hypotheses

As seen in Table 6, all p values for the five hypotheses are significant (less than 0.05); thus, we conclude that for fitness centres, customer satisfaction leads to customer loyalty. The fitness centre environment (FCEn) positively impacts customer satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.576$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and loyalty ( $\beta = 0.520$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The fitness competency of fitness professionals (CFP) also positively impacts customer satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.347$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and customer loyalty ( $\beta = 0.443$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Further, the fitness centre environment (FCEn) carries more weight than the competency of fitness professionals (CFP) and is responsible for a 51.9% variance in customer satisfaction ( $R^2 = 0.519$ ).

### 5. Discussion and managerial implications

A service encounter (Hair, et al., 1998) occurs when a customer has a direct organizational interaction, i.e., a moment of truth (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Organizations must closely monitor the results of every moment of truth, whether they are positive or negative since these serve as the basis on which future customer expectations are created. The macro components of market share are related to the micro features of customer service interactions and the organization's overall success; thus it should be the

organization's objective to have positive and productive service encounters (Hair, et al., 2006).

Our study addresses this gap in the literature for fitness centres and highlights the importance of the environment and the competency of fitness professionals in increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty.

### 6. Limitations and scope for future research

The present research investigated the influence of fitness professionals and the environment on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Fitness centres today are using technology for customer acquisition, servicing, and retention. A future study on the effect of technology on enhancing the competency of fitness professionals and the environment on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is suggested.

Factors such as the proximity of the fitness centre to home/workplace, and the annual membership fee could also govern patronizing a particular fitness centre. We did not include these parameters for our study, and future studies can be carried out by including these factors. Demographic variables such as gender and age might have a moderating effect on customer satisfaction. The interplay of these factors has not been studied in this research and can be done in the future.

With an increased emphasis on health and fitness, there has been an increase in the health and fitness service providers on the digital platform as well. Digital fitness providers such as Cult. Fit, HealthifyMe, mycrush. fit and Daliyburn, attract customers by offering convenient fitness options to accommodate diverse schedules (Soderlund & Julander, 2009). Finally, with more subscriptions to online

Table 6. Hypotheses results.

Hypotheses	Unstandardized co-efficient (B)	S.E. of B	Standardized co-efficient (Beta)	t value	P value	Decision for Hypotheses
H1: CS — > CL	.693	.100	.796	6.957	<.001**	Accepted
H2: FCEn — > CS	.619	.131	.576	4.711	<.001**	Accepted
H3: FCEn — > CL	.485	.104	.520	4.669	<.001**	Accepted
H4: CFP — > CS	.370	.131	.347	2.837	.005	Accepted
H5: CFP — > CL	.411	.091	.443	4.518	<.001**	Accepted

Note: \*\* denotes significance at 1%.



fitness apps, identifying the factors which lead to customer satisfaction would be an interesting area of study.

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