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RELEVANCE OF SERVICE QUALITY ATTRIBUTES IN FITNESS CENTRES IN RIO DE JANEIRO: COMPARING STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract: *The article aims to compare the perceptions of three groups of stakeholders regarding the relevance of specific attributes of service quality in fitness centres in Rio de Janeiro. The approach was qualitative, of the survey type, with stratified sampling and application of a single instrument formed of 34 specific attributes of the quality of services in fitness centres. To identify differences in the relevance of each attribute for clients, managers and instructors, variance analysis was performed through the Kruskal-Wallis test. IBM SPSS v 25 for Windows was used for statistical treatment. The study was carried out with 657 clients, 123 managers and 180 instructors in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The scale with 34 items presented a global and group Cronbach alpha that validated the instrument's internal consistency, confirming that its items measure the same construct. There were differences in the relevance attributed by the three groups in 32,4% of the attributes, showing non-alignment in the perceptions of those who deliver, manage and consume services in those fitness centres. It was not possible to compare the results obtained with previous studies due to the non-existence of research focusing on different stakeholders' perceptions of the attributes of service quality in companies in this business segment, revealing that the topic is a new perspective in assessing the quality of services in fitness environments.*

Keywords: *Relevance; Stakeholders; Service quality; Fitness centres; Attributes Perception.*

1. Introduction

Introduction should provide a review of recent literature and sufficient background information to allow the results of the paper to be understood and evaluated. It should clearly explain the nature of the problem, previous work, purpose and contribution of the paper.

One of the characteristics of post-industrial society is the predominance of service

provision as a driver of the economy. The service sector has become essential for the economies of many countries with the corresponding viability of producing manufactured goods, since these give rise to different service requirements, which besides generating wealth have an impact on employment rates (Grönroos, 2007; Farias, 2019)

In Brazil, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE reports

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that between 1996 and 1999 services accounted for 60% of GDP, rising to 75,8% in the first quarter of 2018 (IBGE, 2017).

In addition, 1.332.260 companies are registered as providing services, employing approximately 70% of the country's workforce, and in this context, services provided to families, including leisure, health and entertainment activities, account for the greatest number of firms, 415.176 (31,2%), and come second in terms of employment, with a total of 2.904.000 workers, equivalent to 22,3% (IBGE, 2017).

The steady development of technology has made people's lives easier, but simultaneously creates conditions for negative changes in their life-style, characterised now by hyperkinesia and leading to complications and diminished quality of life for modern man with impacts on health. Regular exercise is presented as a solution to this contemporary problem, inasmuch as it represents a primary, i.e., preventive intervention (Pereira et al., 2012; Gonzalo Silvestre et al., 2016; Niemelä et al., 2019).

Among the solutions to this problem, which is now one of public health, there is evidence of the exponential growth of services provided in this area (Afthinos et al., 2005; Breesch et al., 2007; Cheng, 2013; Vos&Scheerder, 2015; Freitas &Lacerda, 2018), creating what Saba (2006) called the fitness industry, including academies, studios, health centres, gymnasia and others, here designated as fitness centres, whose service provision is that of oriented physical exercise of different forms, aiming to change behaviour and lifestyles (Aguiar, 2007; Pereira Filho et al., 2013; Yildiz & Kara, 2012).

The demand for these services has increased at a rate of 9,7% in relation to the 2015-2016 period (from 31 to 34 thousand centres) and 21,5% and in the number of clients (7,9 to 9,6 million), with Brazil occupying the second position in the number of fitness centres per inhabitant, with a continuity rate

of only 3,97%. That is, many more people are outside those centres than inside, despite the clear demand for improved quality of life and well-being in the country (IHRSA, 2018).

For that reason, various studies related to the quality of services in general and also in fitness-related businesses are unanimous in saying their assessment is a differentiated process, due to the intangibility of services and the interactions between the stakeholders involved (Cruz, & Mendes, 2019; Maças Nunes et al., 2010; Grönroos, 2007; Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Coulthard, 2004; Ko & Pastore, 2005; Quaresma, 2008; Farias et al., 2018).

This growth has led to their consumers' increasing demand for quality, leading companies and managers to seek continuous improvement in the production/delivery process (Pedro, Mendes, & Lourenço, 2018; Faria, & Mendes, 2013), so as to satisfy customers and gain their loyalty, making the supply of quality services an imperative in fitness businesses. This increased quality has become determinant for business sustainability (Santos et al., 2020).

However, even if service quality is centred on the beneficiary's perspective, assessment of that quality must consider multidimensional factors forming it at the exact moment of delivery, called "the moment of truth" by Carlzon (1991).

Besides containing particularities for each particular consumption relationship, these factors can be perceived in a differentiated way, according to the different stakeholders and their respective roles in that relation, as proposed by Freeman (1984) in Stakeholder Theory.

Freeman and McVea (2001) claim that organisations deal with different groups of stakeholders, often with different objectives, sometimes even opposing ones, not always equally important, and so with different expectations and demands in relation to various aspects, as stated by Wartik (1994) and Mainardes et al. (2011).

Therefore, in designing a company's service quality policy it is necessary to understand those differences in perspectives, considering the different involvement of stakeholders in the same consumption relationship (Mendes, & Dias, 2018).

Despite that importance, there is a shortage of literature dealing with the relationship between those perceptions, both in service companies in general and in fitness companies in particular, preventing managers' decision-making from being based on those perceptions.

In this context, this research aims to compare the perceptions of three groups of stakeholders, concerning the relevance of service quality attributes in fitness centres in Rio de Janeiro.

The study is justified by Brazil being the second country in the world regarding the number of fitness centres per inhabitant, behind only the USA, and Rio de Janeiro is among the 3 cities with the greatest number of these companies operating in the country (IHRSA, 2018).

In addition, the research is relevant by providing data to support more assertive managerial decision-making, in that knowing the importance given to a set of specific attributes by the different groups of stakeholders makes it possible to direct actions, decisions and investment able to cause positive impacts on service quality, customer and collaborator satisfaction and resource optimization, leading to profitability and business prosperity.

The article is organised by presenting a literature review addressing the quality of services in fitness centres and the instruments of assessment adopted in different contexts, followed by addressing the stakeholders involved in consumption relations in those companies, presenting the theoretical model supporting the research with three distinct groups of actors and their roles. Then the data-collecting methodology and statistical treatment are described, followed by the results and their discussion

in relation to the available literature, their theoretical and managerial contributions, the conclusions of the study and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Grounding

2.1. Quality of Services in Fitness Centres: Assessment and Instruments

Quality is a characteristic of a good or service, and Quaresma (2008), Ferraz et al. (2018), Dias et al. (2019) and Farias (2019) state that each person has their own concept or particular capacity to evaluate that quality, differing only in the rigour and parameters adopted in doing so.

Brito and Lencastre (2014) argue that even with the difficulty in measuring due to the subjectivity intrinsic to quality, it is essential for this to be approached and measured, leading to the creation of indicators allowing management of that quality. Otherwise, it is impossible to have control over what is delivered and create improvement.

Lopes (2014) and Campos (2015) state that firstly, improvement has always been sought in societies, and secondly, that the speed and complexity with which this has occurred in recent decades warrants special attention, regarding both the pace and complexity.

Rosa (2016) and Farias (2019) add to this by saying that irrespective of the conceptual variations, the search for improvement has always been part of the productive environment throughout the history of man and his work, in any period and whatever the way of producing goods or services. The attempt to "do better what is already being done" is inherent to mankind, as even when it is a question of producing "things", serving needs is the beginning and end of everything, and so production does not occur by chance, i.e., production aims to meet specific, individual or collective demands.

In the services provided by fitness centres, in the growing and continuous search for competitiveness and differentiation in this

competitive field, various strategies are adopted to capture, retain and obtain the loyalty of customers, aiming for survival and business prosperity (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2007; Moxham & Wiseman, 2009; Freitas & Lacerda, 2018).

There is evidence that the general quality of a service is formed of a “cognitive construct”, based on assessment of performance in relation to an expectation which is the “general impression”, formed by the customer, which can be positive or negative regarding the company and the services involved in the consumption relationship (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014).

Therefore, building strategies and suitable indicators to measure the quality of services, through customer satisfaction, requires managing that quality in the light of specific parameters that can ensure reliability, while knowing that this is not easy due precisely to fitness centres being characterised as a service-intensive business (Cheng, 2013; Freitas & Lacerda, 2018; Farias, 2019).

Obviously, in managing those centres it is not enough to capture customers and provide them with the basics. It is necessary to go further, study behaviours, needs, interests and desires to create pleasure, and so managers must develop expertise and effective tools to identify, accurately and assertively, what should be maintained and what should be improved, to ensure consequent business prosperity (Pereira Filho et al., 2013; Freitas & Lacerda, 2018; Farias et al., 2018).

Providing quality services is meeting consumers' expectations; in accordance, they perceive the investment as worthwhile, and for that reason, knowing their demands is essential for their expectations to be met, and if possible, exceeded, forming competitive differentials in their view (Grönroos, 2007; Campos, 2007; Yildiz, 2011; Sayers, 2012; Pereira Filho et al., 2013; Farias, 2019).

In relation to the connection between service quality and customer satisfaction, various

authors (Kyle et al., 2010; Yoshida & James, 2010; Clemes et al., 2011; Lee & Kim, 2011; Barreto et al., 2012; Theodorakis et al., 2013) have considered a hierarchical relation between them, where the former precedes the latter, i.e., positive perceptions of the quality of a service imply the satisfaction of whoever consumes it, thereby building a relationship of loyalty.

Cunha (2016), corroborated by Calesco and Both (2019), reports that to deal with clients in fitness centres, scales to assess service quality have been developed over time, representing the growing concern about the health of businesses, today part of a highly competitive scenario, leading to the understanding that in consumers' eyes each fitness centre is “just one more option”, since their range of choice has extended greatly.

Linhares and Freitas (2011), Zequinão and Cardoso (2013), Modesto et al., (2016), Motta and Moraes (2017) and Carneiro (2017) emphasize the importance of keeping the focus on both processes of service production and improvement, and on innovations and market trends, producing innovative “experiences” directed to attracting potential clients and retaining and gaining the loyalty of regular ones, who nowadays have greater power of choice given the multiplicity of provision.

Lovelock et al., (2006), Alexandris et al., (2008), Barreto et al., (2012), Pereira Filho et al., (2013), Kotler and Armstrong (2015), Gonçalves and Diniz (2015) and Cordeiro, Carvalho and Gonçalves (2016) state that today, due to the similarity of fitness centres' provision, managers should concentrate on differentiation in the service given and on providing pleasant, innovative experiences that make sense to consumers. Not acting in this way has been the cause of customers leaving in great numbers, which is the greatest challenge for their managers today, since rates of dissatisfaction with service delivery are something that make it difficult for businesses to survive.

Barreto et al.,(2010) and Motta and Moraes (2017) conclude that completely specific and assertive actions can and must be taken by those firms’ managers in order to give them the necessary quality; this means identifying specific attributes that can be measured.

However, Tibola et al. (2011), Freitas and Lacerda (2018) and Farias (2019) find a shortage of studies on identifying attributes of quality specifically in fitness centres, suggesting that the actions and decision-making of these companies’ managers may be removed from customers’ reality, opening up the possibility of dissatisfaction.

This is corroborated by Lovelock et al. (2006) and Lopes (2014), who conclude that choosing the most appropriate attributes for each type of service requires careful analysis of the needs and expectations of those who seek these services, considering that their assessment will be made by comparing what they expected and what they actually received, creating their perception of quality.

In fact, many studies have measured the quality of services, expressed by clients’ satisfaction with fitness centres, but in many of them the instruments were generic, such as SERVQUAL proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), which risked using aspects that were not always appropriate for the business in its specificities.

In addition, by being based on the conceptual model named Gaps Theory, this process leads the assessment process to polarized results, inasmuch as both

assessments (ideal and real) made after service provision, create records of the expectations “induced” by experience with the services themselves, when really this measure should be taken before using the service, and objective assessment only afterwards (Pereira Filho et al., 2013).

Despite the relevant contribution made by this model, which presented the need to measure service quality from the point of view of beneficiaries, its limitations make its adoption in fitness centres inconsistent, in that besides adopting the concept of “ideal company” as the parameter of reference, it is unable to provide assessment of the specific attributes of this business.

On this matter, Silva (2016) and Farias (2019) claim that from the evidence of the strength of this business sector, it becomes necessary for these companies’ managers to adopt as a strategy the continuous search for systems able to improve management of their customers’ satisfaction, with the background always being full service, and if possible, exceeding their needs and expectations.

Evidences concerning the quality of services provided to consumers by fitness centres is not recent and can be traced through Table 1, which presents a chronological trajectory of authors, scales developed, countries where they carried out research and the dimensions over which attributes were distributed, always focusing on assessing the quality of services provided by fitness centres.

Table 1. Authors, countries studied and dimensions of the instrument

| Authors/Countries | Dimensions |
|---|--|
| 1. Chelladurai, et al. (1987) - Canada | 1) professional services; 2) consumer services; 3) peripheral services; 4) premises and equipment; 5) secondary services. |
| 2. Parasuraman et al. (1988) – SERVQUAL - USA | 1) tangibles; 2) empathy; 3) security; 4) responsibility; 5) reliability. |
| 3. McKay & Crompton (1990) – REQUAL - USA | 1) guarantee; 2) reliability; 3) response capacity; 4) tangibles. |
| 4. Kim & Kim (1995) – QUESC – South Korea | 1) collaborator attitude; 2) trust in the collaborator; 3) environment; 4) social opportunity; 5) information available; 6) programmes supplied; 7) price; 8) privilege; 9) lack of bureaucracy; 10) convenience; 11) stimulation; 12) personal considerations |

Table 1. Authors, countries studied and dimensions of the instrument (continued)

| Authors/Countries | Dimensions |
|--|--|
| 5. McDonald et al. (1995) – TeamQual – USA | 1) tangibility; 2) reliability; 3) response capacity; 4) guarantee; 5) empathy. |
| 6. Howat et al. (1996) – CERM-CSQ– Australia | 1) essential services; 2) staff and 3) peripheral services. |
| 7. Triado et al. (1999) - Spain | 1) human resources; 2) communication; 3) quality of the premises; 4) social surroundings; 5) value for money. |
| 8. Theodorakis (2001) – SportServ - Greece | 1) tangibles; 2) response capacity; 3) access; 4) security; 5) reliability. |
| 9. Chang & Cheladurai (2003) – SQFS – Portugal | 1) service climate; 2) management commitment; 3) programmes; 4) inter-personal relations; 5) task interaction; 6) physical environments; 7) other clients and 9) recovery and perception of service quality. |
| 10. Alexandris & Palialia (2004) – Greece | 1) perceived result; 2) response capacity; 3) tangibles; 4) reliability; 5) staff. |
| 11. Lam et al. (2005) – SQAS – USA | 1) team; 2) programmes; 3) changing rooms; 4) exercise facilities; 5) entertainment facilities. |
| 12. Nóvoa (2007) – Portugal | 1) interaction quality; 2) quality of premises; 3) quality of results; 4) satisfaction; 5) psychological involvement; 6) communication. |
| 13. Theodorakis et al. (2010) – Greece | 1) quality of interaction; 2) quality of premises; 3) quality of the result. |
| 14. Linhares & Freitas (2011) – Brazil | 1) bathrooms; 2) devices/accessories; 3) exercise area; 4) teachers; 5) general premises; 6) receipt/payment; 7) employee service; 8) façade and external area; 9) other aspects. |
| 15. Ko et al. (2011) – SEQSS – USA | 1) quality of the game; 2) added value to the service; 3) quality of interaction; 4) benefit obtained; 5) quality of the physical environment. |
| 16. Barreto et al. (2012) - Brazil | 1) tangibility; 2) responsibility; 3) reliability; 4) empathy; 5) guarantee. |
| 17. Zequinão & Cardoso (2013) – QSCSEF - Brazil | 1) perceived quality; 2) expectations before using the services; 3) problems |
| 18. Pereira Filho et al. (2013) – Brazil | 1) physical structure and convenience; 2) instructors and training programmes; 3) comfort and equipment; 4) price, complaints and emergency; 5) administrative employees and appearance; 6) location |
| 19. Ruiz et al. (2015) – CECASDESP breaf - Spain | 1) premises; 2) sports areas; 3) changing rooms; 4) activity programmes; 5) teacher/instructor. |
| 20. Nuviala et al. (2015) - Spain | 1) perceived quality; 2) satisfaction; 3) value of the service |
| 21. Cunha (2016) – Portugal | 1) quality of relations; 2) quality of client interaction; 3) quality of premises; 4) quality of results; 5) satisfaction. |
| 22. Vieira & Ferreira (2017) – Portugal | 1) employees' competences; 2) premises; 3) essential services; 4) complementary services. |
| 23. Freitas & Lacerda (2018) - Brazil | 1) training facilities and price; 2) employees; 3) layout and premises; 4) environmental conditions and cleanliness |
| 24. Calesco & Both (2019) – QUASPA - Brazil | 1) environment; 2) management; 3) marketing |
| 25. Dias et al. (2019) - Portugal | 1) service climate; 2) management commitment; 3) programmes; 4) interpersonal relations; 5) task interaction; 6) physical environments; 7) other clients, and 9) recovery and perception of service quality. |

In all studies, the choice of attributes and respective dimensions considered exclusively the perspective of satisfaction

with use (by consumers), although there are obviously other stakeholders involved in this production, therefore revealing a gap in

capturing perceptions.

The fact of having differentiated roles in the service production/consumption process implies the possibility of different perspectives of the quality of those services and their respective attributes, which are converted into performance indicators.

Therefore, this research aims to compare the perceptions of clients, instructors and managers of fitness centres in Rio de Janeiro, regarding the importance they give to a set of specific attributes related to the quality of services provided.

2.2. Stakeholders in Service Provision in Fitness Centres

2.2.1 Principal Insights of Stakeholder Theory

The theoretical model named Stakeholder Theory originates in the proposal by Freeman (1984), and according to Freeman and McVea (2001), the first appearance of the term stakeholder as an integral element of administration studies was the result of an internal document produced by the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) in 1963, where the proposal was to expand the notion that shareholders were not the only group that company management needed to consider in their decisions.

Of a more sociological nature, considering personal interactions as an assumption of organisations' existence, the expression has come to represent a synonym of "all the groups without which a company would cease to exist", i.e., recognition that an organisation is not formed only by its managers and that they should therefore delineate an alternative form of strategic management as a response to increased productivity, and should consider other actors involved in a company's production (Parmar et al., 2010).

From this perspective, stakeholders represent different roles, among them shareholders,

employees, clients, suppliers, lenders and the society benefiting from what the company produces (Mendes, 2014). In their decisions, managers should understand and consider those actors' concerns, and based on that knowledge develop objectives they will support, with stakeholders being any group or individual affecting or being affected by the reach of the company objectives. This definition is widely accepted and adopted in the sphere of studies on business management (Freeman, 1984).

This conception of the different participants involved in a company's production, whether goods or services, implies recognition that these people affect or are affected by the strategic results obtained, having a direct impact on the organisation's survival, competitiveness and profitability (Mendes, & Martinez Parra, 2000).

Hillman and Keim (2001) state that companies whose management prioritizes maintaining good relations with stakeholders perform better than those who do not do so, and consequently, relations with stakeholders can and should be administered so that they are a source of competitive advantage. Even if this means a certain relation of dependence on these stakeholders, firms do not depend equally on all of them the whole time and so not all will have the same degree of influence (Mendes, 2019). The more essential and valued the participation of a group of stakeholders, the more influence it will have on the firm's commitments, decisions and actions.

Fassin (2008, 2009) describes the success of Stakeholder Theory, both in the literature on business management and on business practice, largely due to the model's inherent simplicity, despite that simplicity and clarity having caused debate in the scientific literature.

Although different researchers define stakeholders in different ways, they generally reflect the same principle to a greater or lesser extent, concurring on the idea that the company should consider the

needs, interests and influences of different groups that have an impact on, or can be impacted on by its interests, policies and operations (Frederick, Post & St. Davis, 1992; Mainardi et al., 2011).

In this context, it is relevant to find out the expectations of the different stakeholders involved in fitness companies' service provision, in order to ascertain whether their perceptions of the relevance of specific attributes agree, since the company has a single function-objective.

2.2.2 Stakeholders in Fitness Companies' Service Provision

Concerning an organisation's performance, one way of conceptualizing this is as the "difference between the value created by using productive goods and the value these goods' owners expect to obtain" (Ortner, 2000).

We can therefore state that a company's level of performance, whether it produces goods or services, is constructed collectively, i.e., by all those involved in that production, and that performance is measured according to the greater or lesser degree of synergy in the triad formed by managers, collaborators and clients (Garbi, 2002; Drucker, 2010; Farias, 2019).

Moriones and Cerio (2001) and Nóvoa (2007) corroborate this statement, concerning the importance of collaborators in building the quality of services, by saying that business management results from the synergistic and interdependent interaction between people, resources, processes and results. However, when aiming for improvement in firms' results, this must originate in people, consequently creating conditions so that the resources, processes and results are better in quantity and quality.

In the fitness centre context, it is relevant and essential to consider the perception of collaborators (in this case instructors) as effective service providers, in defining the attributes favouring the assessment of

service quality, as they are directly linked to service production and in a position to identify variables that detract from quality.

The direct beneficiaries of those services, given the diversity of supply, are increasingly selective, critical and particular in their choices, and so we have information about a society characterised predominantly as a consumer of services, which represents a significant proportion of the wealth produced. It is therefore essential to consider the perception of fitness centre clients regarding specific attributes to assess quality, as they are the main focus of that production and are in a position to define relevant aspects of the quality of what they consume (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Tontini&Sant'Ana, 2007; Quaresma, 2008; Tontini&Picolo, 2010; Sayers, 2012; Soita, 2012; Pereira Filho et al., 2013; Kotler & Armstrong, 2015; Farias, 2019).

Furthermore, in fitness centre managers, we find the link between objective service delivery (instructors) and their consumers. Their role is connected not only to leading teams of collaborators but also to creating conditions for the instructors-clients relationship to have a high standard of quality, so that their teams can produce satisfied clients (Farias, 2019).

Given these interdependent roles in the process of producing and consuming services provided in fitness centres, knowing the differentiated perceptions of the relevance given to a set of service quality attributes provides knowledge of agreement and divergences among those perceptions, and will help decision-making in those companies.

3. Material and Methods

This research adopts a qualitative approach, of an applied nature, with the objectives being exploratory and descriptive and the procedure followed being the survey (Cervo et al., 2007; Silveira & Córdova, 2009; 2009; Gil, 2019).

The sample selected was stratified (Thomas et al., 2009) by defining three distinct groups of subjects, submitted to a single instrument.

Aiming to identify differences between the relevance of each attribute/item for the three groups of subjects (client/manager/instructor), a variance analysis/Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare the 34 variables. Statistical treatment of the data collected was through IBM SPSS v 25 for Windows. The exploratory study was carried out with the collaboration of 960 individuals connected to fitness centre activities, 657 being clients (68,4% of the sample), 123 managers (12,8%) and 180 instructors (18,8%), in a total of 865 fitness centres registered in the sector (CONFEF/CREFs system) in the city of Rio de Janeiro, considering that each centre had at least one manager participating in the research, in the period of February – May 2017.

3.1. Instrument

A self-filling questionnaire was adopted, including 34 items, distributed over 6 dimensions, which represent quality attributes specific to fitness centers, as proposed by Pereira Filho et al. (2013), defined according to the following criteria: (a) similarity, (b) completeness, (c) juxtaposition, (d) agglutination, (e) specificity and (f) presence, as in previous empirical studies.

In fact, the data collecting instrument was organized into two different sections: (i) characterization of the interviewees, and (ii) relevance evaluation of service quality attributes. Table 2 describes the distribution of attributes across the 6 dimensions.

Table 2. Distribution of attributes by dimensions

| Dimension | Numbering of Items | N |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| D1. physical structures / convenience | 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 17, 18 | 9 |
| D2. instructors / training programmes | 11, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 32 | 8 |
| D3. comfort / equipment | 5, 6, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16 | 7 |
| D4. prices / complaints / emergencies | 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33 | 7 |
| D5. staff / appearance / image | 27, 34 | 2 |
| D6. location / urban mobility | 12 | 1 |

N = n° items/dimension

In order to ensure a good applicability of the instrument, it was subjected to a testing procedure along 2 steps, namely: (1) Content Evaluation; (2) Test of Clarity.

In the Content Assessment step, a conventional Delphi Technique was adopted, with a panel of experts on the field, aiming at obtaining productive and reliable results. The evaluation was conducted by 10 (ten) researchers (2 with a master degree, and 8 with a PhD degree), working in areas related to business management, and quality of services, meeting the numerical requirement foreseen by Grisham (2009).

The numerical scale adopted ranges from 0 to 10 to assess the items, with: 0 = not at all

valid; from 1 to 4 = not very valid; from 5 to 7 = moderately valid; from 8 to 10 = valid. Questions with average scores below 7 would be withdrawn from the instrument and those scoring 7 or more with the evaluators' suggestions would be altered to meet requirements.

Values above 8 were obtained in all items (8,7 < 9,8 and SD=0,55), with all of them being classified as "valid", with no need for their content to be altered.

The application of the Clarity Test, as proposed by Zequinão and Cardoso (2013) (step 2), aimed at eliminating inadequacies in the items in terms of intelligibility, in order to ensure that differences between

answers would be the result of respondents' perceptions and viewpoints, and not of interpretative aspects of the items.

Following the convenience criterion, 15 subjects were selected from each sample group, in 15 different fitness centres, giving a total of 45 people called to verify the clarity and intelligibility of the instrument.

In this test, the assessors indicated on a 10-point Likert-type scale ("0 = "not at all clear" to 10 = "perfectly clear") their perceptions about the clarity of the items in the instrument. Questions scoring 0 - 4 would be eliminated; 5 - 7 reformulated to meet the requirements, and 8 - 10 kept without alterations.

In the manager group, the instrument was found to be suitable, with 95% clarity ($SD=0,74$), and therefore above the threshold values (Zequinão and Cardoso, 2013).

In the instructor group, the instrument was well understood, with 95% clarity ($SD=0,74$), and therefore above the threshold values according to Zequinão and Cardoso (2013).

In the client group, the instrument was found to be understandable with a 92% degree of clarity ($SD=0,63$), so also above the threshold values according to Zequinão and Cardoso (2013).

After these testing procedures, the instrument was applied to the three groups of stakeholders who had to indicate their evaluation, on a Likert-type scale (1 - 7), concerning the relevance of each service quality attribute in fitness centers. The choice of a 7-point scale was chosen by allowing respondents to discriminate subtler differences between the options without generating insecurity or difficulties in their choices (Thomas et al., 2009).

The application of the instrument in each fitness center participating in the investigation, began with a previous presentation of the research (including objectives, instrument, ethical precepts and

application strategies); the data collection was scheduled to days and times that were convenient and did not interfere with consumers training routines, or managers/instructors work. Data collection was conducted by one of the researchers and three other Physical Education professionals previously trained for the application of the instrument.

3.2. Sampling procedures

The first stage of sampling was definition of the fitness centres to be studied, a preliminary condition in selecting subjects.

Among a total of 865 companies, duly registered and in regular condition with the professional class body, a 25% random sample was selected (216 companies), to which an invitation was sent to participate in the research. In addition to a general explanation about the research and its objectives, anonymity was guaranteed, as well as the availability of the researcher to meet requirements about place and time to approach managers, instructors and clients in these companies.

Likewise, in all sample groups, people were chosen by the criterion of simple random sampling. At the 90% confidence level, the maximum sample error is about 7.4% for the managers group, 6.4% for the instructors group, and 3.2% for the clients group.

Managers

To integrate the sample, these professionals should exercise exclusively business management functions, regardless of positions; managers had to be involved in decision making processes within the company, and in responsibilities to develop, enable and control the strategies adopted in planning and oriented to toward positive results for the business. They should also be duly registered and in regular status with the class body, in addition to the full exercise of this function for a period longer than 90

days, ensuring that they are not in an experience contract phase.

Among the 216 managers, 134 participated, equivalent to a 62% rate of acceptance. After analysis of the completed instruments returned, 8,2%(11) were excluded, due to being incomplete or with mistakes in completion, leaving 123 valid instruments, corresponding to 91,8%.

Instructors

This group included professionals graduated in Physical Education, duly registered in the professional body, without exercising management functions in the company, in full professional practice, formally linked to the company, for a period longer than 90 days, in compliance with Brazilian labor legislation.

A total of 186 instructors participated, completing and returning the questionnaire. A total of 164 valid responses were retained, corresponding to an effectiveness rate of 87.7%, with 22 excluded due to incompleteness or filling errors.

Clients

This group included 709 adults, regardless of sex and age, regular consumers of services in fitness centers, regardless of the type and how many modalities, with a formal consumption relationship for a minimum period of 6 months, equivalent to what Saba (2006) conceptualized as loyalty to the company and physical exercise practices.

After filling procedures and returning the instruments, 52 of the questionnaires were excluded due to incomplete/incorrect filling, and thus resulting in 657 valid responses, with an effectiveness around 92.7%.

The application of the instrument in each fitness center participant, began with a previous presentation of the research (including objectives, instrument, ethical precepts and application strategies); the data collection was scheduled to days and times that were convenient and did not interfere

with consumers training routines, or managers/instructors work. Data collection was conducted by one of the researchers and three other Physical Education professionals previously trained for the application of the instrument.

3.3. Statistical Analysis

procedeu-se uma análise das diferenças entre relevâncias de cada atributo para cada grupo, por meio de testes não paramétricos, mais especificamente o Teste Kruskal-Wallis, para comparações inter-grupos das 34 variáveis.

In the data analysis process, descriptive statistics were first adopted to characterize the respondents. In order to meet the objective of identifying differences between the three groups of stakeholders, regarding the relevance of service quality attributes, the Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test was applied for inter-group comparisons between the 34 variables.

4. Data Analysis and Results

Firstly, the internal consistency of the instrument adopted in the research (34 items) was verified. The scale showed a global Cronbach's alpha value around 0.795; concerning groups Cronbach's alpha values were 0.792 for customers, 0.825 for managers, and 0.782 for instructors. These values confirmed the good or substantial internal consistency of the instrument, according to Landis and Koch (1977), allowing to affirm that the items adopted measure the same construct (perception of the attributes relevance in the quality of services in fitness centers).

Analyzing the consistency of the distribution of the items by dimension (only in dimensions with more than one item, this is from D1 to D5), the values of Cronbach's alpha revealed an internal consistency between substantial (0.61 to 0.80) and reasonable (0.21 to 0.40) according to Landis and Koch (1977), as can be seen in

Table 3.

Below, Table 4 gives the Cronbach alpha values for each dimension, for each group of stakeholders, showing discrete differences between the three groups.

In addition to these results, we compared the averages behavior of the relevances computed for the three groups of stakeholders along the several dimensions, as depicted in figure 1.

Table 3. Cronbach alpha for the dimensions with more than one item

| Dimension | Nº. items | Cronbach α |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| D1. Physical Structure / Convenience | 9 | 0.645 |
| D2. Instructors / Training Prog. | 8 | 0.423 |
| D3. Comfort / Equipment | 7 | 0.297 |
| D4. Prices / Complaints / Emergencies | 7 | 0.553 |
| D5. Staff / Appearance / Image | 2 | 0.449 |

Table 4. Cronbach alpha/ dimension with more than one item / group of subjects

| Dimension | α Managers | α Instructors | α Clients |
|---|-------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| D1. Physical structure / Convenience | 0.628 | 0.712 | 0.658 |
| D2. Instructors / Training Programmes | 0.433 | 0.436 | 0.328 |
| D3. Comfort / Equipment | 0.274 | 0.425 | 0.304 |
| D4. Prices / Complaints / Emergencies | 0.535 | 0.585 | 0.541 |
| D5. Administrative Employees / Appearance | 0.413 | 0.341 | 0.540 |

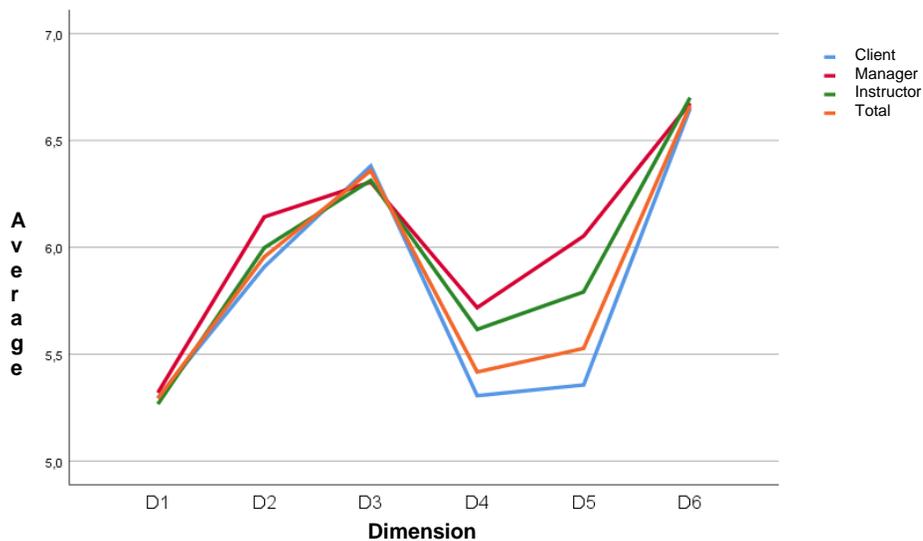


Figure 1. Average relevance per dimension and stakeholder group

When observing the graphical trajectory of each dimension, the similarity concerning the shape of the three curves stands out, enhancing the existence of a consensus tendency between the three groups, with regard to the relevance attributed to each

dimension of the instrument, and highlighting the existence of a hierarchy between them.

The dimension with the lowest average relevance is “physical structure/ convenience” (D1) and the dimension with

the highest average relevance per item is “urban location/mobility” (D6).

In fact, regarding the average values of the relevances attributed to the different dimensions, by the three groups of

stakeholders, it was possible to observe the existence of a hierarchy in decreasing order: D6> D3> D2> D5> D4> D1, as described in table 5.

Table 5. Average relevance of the items in each dimension in descending order

| Dimension | Clients | Managers | Instructors |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | M ± SD | M ± SD | M ± SD |
| D6 Location/urban mobility | 6.65 ± 0.81 | 6.67 ± 0.82 | 6.66 ± 0.80 |
| D3 Comfort/Equipment | 6.38 ± 0.41 | 6.31 ± 0.48 | 6.36 ± 0.43 |
| D2 Instructors/Training Programmes | 5.91 ± 0.65 | 6.14 ± 0.61 | 5.96 ± 0.64 |
| D5 Administrative Employees/Appearance | 5.36 ± 1.30 | 6.05 ± 1.07 | 5.53 ± 1.28 |
| D4 Prices/Complaints/Emergencies | 5.31 ± 0.84 | 5.72 ± 0.83 | 5.42 ± 0.84 |
| D1 Physical Structure/Convenience | 5.30 ± 0.83 | 5.32 ± 0.94 | 5.29 ± 0.85 |

(M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation)

Next, and considering the purpose of the research which was to compare the perceptions about the relevance of the 34 indicators of service quality, between the three groups of stakeholders, we found that among the 34 items, in 17 (50%) the median of the three groups was equal to 7, with at least half of the respondents in each group

giving maximum relevance to the items: R1, R5, R6, R7, R8, R12, R13, R14, R15, R19, R20, R21, R22, R24, R28, R32, showing the existence of dissonances between the perceptions of the three groups of stakeholders in relation to quality attributes, as can be seen in figure 2.

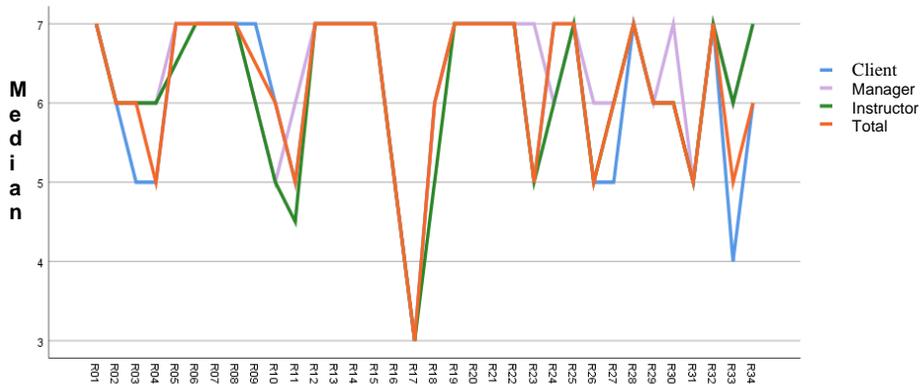


Figure 2. Average relevance per item and stakeholder group

Considering these results, we decided to verify the potential existence of statistical significant differences between the degrees of relevance attributed by the three groups of stakeholders, through the Kruskal-Wallis multiple comparison test; results are summarized in table 6.

It was evident that there were no significant statistical differences concerning the relevance assessment performed by the three groups in relation to 23 of the attributes (67.6%) while, in the remaining 11 (32.4%), the relevances were differentiated, as described in the right column of table 6,

making clear the misalignment in the perceptions of attributes relevance between those who deliver, those who manage and

those who consume the services in the surveyed fitness centers.

Table 6. Results of the test of equality of relevance/attribute in the three groups

| Item | Kruskal-Wallis Test | Result |
|---|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1) state of repair of physical premises | $\chi^2(2) = 16,634; p < 0,001$ | client/manager > instructor |
| 2) architecture of fitness centre environments | $\chi^2(2) = 17,401; p < 0,001$ | client > instructor/manager |
| 3) availability of parking | $\chi^2(2) = 8,983; p = 0,011$ | no differences |
| 4) number of changing rooms available | $\chi^2(2) = 1,760; p = 0,415$ | no differences |
| 5) variety and modernity of equipment | $\chi^2(2) = 2,952; p = 0,229$ | no differences |
| 6) amount of equipment available | $\chi^2(2) = 12,746; p = 0,002$ | instructor > client/manager |
| 7) layout of physical spaces | $\chi^2(2) = 7,172; p = 0,028$ | manager > client/instructor |
| 8) timetable of activities offered | $\chi^2(2) = 5,690; p = 0,058$ | no differences |
| 9) variety of activities offered | $\chi^2(2) = 5,218; p = 0,074$ | no differences |
| 10) extra services (canteen, personal trainer...) | $\chi^2(2) = 0,417; p = 0,812$ | no differences |
| 11) systematic functional assessment | $\chi^2(2) = 2,568; p = 0,277$ | no differences |
| 12) location of the fitness centre | $\chi^2(2) = 0,290; p = 0,865$ | no differences |
| 13) cleanliness of the premises | $\chi^2(2) = 6,105; p = 0,048$ | no differences |
| 14) ventilation of the premises | $\chi^2(2) = 5,673; p = 0,031$ | no differences |
| 15) illumination of the premises | $\chi^2(2) = 6,919; p < 0,041$ | no differences |
| 16) quality of music in classes / environments | $\chi^2(2) = 12,697; p = 0,002$ | client > instructor/manager |
| 17) access for people with limited mobility | $\chi^2(2) = 2,421; p = 0,298$ | no differences |
| 18) security system in the fitness centre | $\chi^2(2) = 4,654; p = 0,098$ | no differences |
| 19) specific training programmes | $\chi^2(2) = 1,651; p < 0,412$ | no differences |
| 20) instructors' quality of service | $\chi^2(2) = 1,577; p = 0,403$ | no differences |
| 21) instructors' qualifications | $\chi^2(2) = 2,649; p = 0,266$ | no differences |
| 22) information provided by instructors | $\chi^2(2) = 3,039; p = 0,268$ | no differences |
| 23) fitness centre's reputation in the market | $\chi^2(2) = 42,982; p < 0,001$ | Manager > client/instructor |
| 24) prices charged | $\chi^2(2) = 1,373; p = 0,503$ | no differences |
| 25) instructors' interest in clients' results | $\chi^2(2) = 3,430; p = 0,180$ | no differences |
| 26) number of instructors | $\chi^2(2) = 6,900; p = 0,032$ | manager/instructor > client |
| 27) administrative staff's service | $\chi^2(2) = 31,746; p < 0,001$ | manager/instructor > client |
| 28) attitude to clients' complaints | $\chi^2(2) = 6,171; p = 0,046$ | no differences |
| 29) staff's general appearance | $\chi^2(2) = 28,713; p < 0,001$ | manager/instructor > client |
| 30) capacity to cope with emergencies | $\chi^2(2) = 25,239; p < 0,001$ | manager > client/instructor |
| 31) agreements and partnerships to benefit clients | $\chi^2(2) = 1,585; p = 0,453$ | no differences |
| 32) achievement of expected results | $\chi^2(2) = 0,403; p = 0,817$ | no differences |
| 33) social interaction promoted by the fitness centre | $\chi^2(2) = 1,480; p = 0,510$ | no differences |
| 34) agility in information provided to clients | $\chi^2(2) = 28,520; p < 0,001$ | manager/instructor > client |

Chi-square: χ^2 (degrees of freedom); *p*-value: *p*

5. Discussion of the Results

In competitive contexts such as fitness services, identifying different stakeholders'

perceptions of the relevance of a specific set of service attributes has an undeniable impact on management of these businesses, especially in the Brazilian market, the

second biggest in the world regarding the number of fitness centres and in Rio de Janeiro, one of the three cities with most businesses of this type (IHRSA, 2018).

It is therefore possible to help management of the services themselves, managers' decision-making and also contribute decisively to effective definition of those services' production strategies, creating conditions for increased competitiveness and consequently business sustainability (Santos et al., 2012; Freitas & Lacerda, 2018).

Moreover, from the perspective of instructors, directly involved in the consumer-firm relationship, there must be alignment in the perceptions of relevance of service attributes in order to adjust the quality of delivery towards satisfying beneficiaries and gaining their loyalty, as all business efforts should converge on the client (Mariano, 2017; Freitas & Lacerda, 2018; Farias et al., 2018).

Especially in recent decades, the scientific literature has shown an abundance of research on the satisfaction, loyalty and disappearance of fitness service consumers in Brazil, in different states and in centres of different sizes and activities provided. At the same time, there is a clear shortage of studies aiming to identify attributes of those services that have a greater or lesser direct influence on perception of the quality of those services, above all in Rio de Janeiro.

Associated with this shortage is another even greater one, which is of studies comparing the perceptions of managers, instructors and clients' in relation to the relevance they attribute to specific items related to the quality of services in fitness centres, giving this research a relevant and innovative character.

The study sought to fill this gap in theory, contributing to enriching the literature by analysing differences between the perceptions of clients, managers and instructors in fitness centres in Rio de Janeiro as to the relevance of a set of attributes specific to those services.

In dimension 1 (D1) in the item "state of repair of the physical space" (R1), clients/managers give greater relevance, disagreeing with the study made by Freitas and Lacerda (2018), who report this item as being less important for clients surveyed in Brazilian centres, but confirming the studies by Yildiz, (2011), Nuviala, et al., (2013, 2015), Tsitskari et al.,(2014) and Howat and Assaker (2016) who find this is very important for fitness centre clients. The lesser relevance attributed by instructors may be due to them, wrongly, not feeling responsible for this aspect of their workplace, considering this the responsibility of maintenance and cleaning staff.

In the "architecture of the environment" (R2) attribute, we find greater relevance attributed by clients, conflicting with the results of Freitas and Lacerda (2018), but corroborating others of Yildiz (2011), Morales and Gálvez (2011) and Soita (2012), who report the attractiveness of the internal and external architecture as a highly relevant factor for clients.

In dimension 2 (D2), in the item "number of instructors available" (R26), managers and instructors attributed greater relevance to the item, corroborating Triado et al.,(1999) when they say that human resources in fitness centres have a real influence on client satisfaction, and among these, instructors have most direct interaction in service provision, not depending on their number but the attention they devote.

In dimension 3 (D3) in the item "amount of equipment available" (R6), instructors attributed greater relevance, corroborating the findings of Albayrak and Caber (2014), who find this item is of little relevance for clients, similarly to Nuviala et al. (2013, 2015) who state that the distribution of training equipment on fitness centre premises is more relevant than the quantity, but this needs to be projected for maximum use of the physical space, avoiding difficulties in moving about and accidents. It

is up to instructors to organise their guidance and instructions so as to optimize use of the equipment, which does not always happen, leading them to perceive a need for more equipment.

In the item “layout of spaces” (R7), the fact that managers attribute greater relevance is directly related to the above, since the organisation of equipment in fitness centres is a direct function of the relation between the amount available and their distribution over the space, facilitating use. It is up to managers of the premises to structure this, leading to the importance they give to this item, despite the lack of reference to this in the literature.

In the attribute of “quality of music in the environment” (R16), clients give this greater relevance, corroborating the findings of Moura et al. (2007), Silva and Gress (2012) and Winger and Pargman (2013) who conclude on a direct relation between quality of music, pleasure in doing and performance in exercises in fitness centres, considering this quality is particular and represents clients’ choices.

In dimension 4 (D4), managers give greater relevance to the attribute of “fitness centre’s reputation in the market” (R23). This result disagrees with the studies by Goslig and Lago (2006) which report the high relevance clients give to attributes connected to the brand in their consumption choices, a position also defended by Alves and Caetano (2015) in studies on marketing applied to fitness businesses.

In the item of “staff’s appearance” (R29), managers and instructors give greater relevance, this result going against those found by Akan (1995) in a study carried out with hotel services, where the item was highly relevant, as corroborated by Tibola et al., (2011) in a study made in fitness centres.

In the item of “capacity to cope with emergencies” (R30), managers give this greater relevance, explained by the fact they are responsible for allocating resources, infrastructure and the instructors’ technical

ability in fitness centres in the eyes of inspecting bodies, implying greater concern than among other stakeholders (CREFI, 2014). The lesser relevance attributed by instructors, besides being worrying, corroborates studies made by Souza et al. (2011) and (Dal-Bó, 2013), both in Brazil, in which instructors stated they had little ability to act in emergencies.

In dimension 5 (D5), the items of “administrative service...” (R27) and “agility/quality of the information provided” (R34), complementary in relation to administrative functions, was given greater relevance by managers and instructors. These data contradict specific studies on the topic that report the prevalence of an amateurish attitude in the administrative area of these companies, establishing a cause-effect relation with customer satisfaction, retention and loyalty (Freitas & De Bom, 2015; Lima et al., 2018).

6. Conclusions

The growing theoretical production on fitness services’ business management is undeniable, although in Brazil and Rio de Janeiro, this production is not in keeping with their position in the world and national scenario, respectively the country with the second largest number of centres in the world and one of the three cities with the largest number of firms in this segment (IHRSA, 2018).

In parallel to the exponential growth in the variety of services, the number of centres and business models in this segment, in many of them management activity is clearly unstable, leading to profitability that does not correspond to the position occupied in terms of number of centres.

Therefore, and considering that the quality of service provision is a determinant factor for those companies’ survival and prosperity, through exploratory research, this study achieved the aim of determining the degree of alignment of perceptions of relevance

between managers, instructors and clients, regarding a set of specific indicators, considering that although the focus of services is on the clients, the quality of that consumption relation depends on the other stakeholders involved. The results found make it clear there is only partial alignment of perceptions of the relevance of attributes, and so it is necessary to form guidelines allowing the companies studied to keep their focus on clients and their demands, as suggested by Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984).

6.1. Contributions to Theory

Results obtained allowed us to reinforce the validity of Freeman's assumption (1984), according to which there is an imperative need for company managers, to assume the responsibility of safeguarding the well-being of companies (as abstract entities) and, for that, it is necessary to know in detail and balance the demands of the multiple stakeholders involved to achieve this goal.

Windsor (1999) reinforces that idea by stating that these multiple interests, as prescribed by Stakeholder Theory, can and must be balanced in favour of business efficiency and effectiveness, even with the possibility of all parties obtaining mutual advantages.

In fact, evidences of a misalignment between the perceptions of the three groups of stakeholders shows that adopting a single perspective is not recommended in making managerial decisions. Such behaviour would lay only on a partial perspective of the attributes that influence the perceived quality of fitness services.

Inasmuch as 32,4% of the specific quality attributes present disagreement in the three stakeholder groups' perceptions of service provision in fitness centres, it is relevant to consider that this result contradicts the three fundamental factors supporting and characterising Stakeholder Theory, which are: "the organisation"; "other actors" and

"the nature of company-actor relations".

Therefore, and irrespective of the degree of importance attributed by each of them, their non-alignment can lead to managerial decisions that do not necessarily create customer satisfaction, business profitability and the satisfaction of all others involved, as proposed by Stakeholder Theory. This can lead to competitive fragility in a highly competitive market such as the fitness segment.

6.2. Implications for Management

The research provides important contributions for both managers and fitness professionals in general, above all regarding perception of the relevance of some aspects where there was non-alignment of perceptions in relation to clients.

As a contribution to managerial decision-making in fitness centres, the adoption of similar research is suggested, based on the importance attributed vs performance, in relation to the 34 attributes presented here. This will allow the manager to determine the company's performance in each attribute, besides aligning the perceptions of the different groups of stakeholders, and with that data, undertake actions to maintain strengths and improve weaknesses, guiding decisions in implementing a policy of service quality.

In addition, the study leads to proposing managerial action directed to sharing the results of all stakeholders' perceptions with the whole team, giving a global, unified vision of aspects that can have an impact on business results, in terms of attracting, satisfying and retaining clients and gaining their loyalty, with the consequent financial sustainability, created by a high level of commitment.

Another relevant proposition is that managers and instructors should pay greater attention to careful monitoring of physical spaces, the positioning and organisation of equipment and the general atmosphere in

these places, all highly relevant aspects for users.

A final suggestion as a managerial action is to invest in training instructors in the different aspects related to managing this type of business, going beyond the technical knowledge they use in their instruction. This would broaden their perception of the consumption relation and its dimensions besides objective provision to clients.

6.3. Limitations and Proposals for Future Research

We accept that due to being carried out in a large urban setting, with particular characteristics that may be different in other regions of the country, in smaller cities attributes may be perceived differently, leading to the understanding that the results presented here do not allow generalization, only being a reliable sample from the city of Rio de Janeiro.

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Furthermore, analysis of the relevance attributed by the three groups did not take gender and age-group into account, factors that could create different perceptions of the importance of these attributes.

Finally, and given the difficulty of finding similar studies in the literature carried out in Rio de Janeiro, further research is suggested in fitness centres of different sizes, in different geographical locations and with different client profiles, as a way to understand their situations and avoid generalizations that do not correspond to identical consumption of those services but have particularities that set them apart.

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