

Dimensions and outcomes of experiential quality in the fitness industry: the case of Turkey

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Abstract

Purpose – The user experience during the use of activities and services is a fundamental aspect for sports managers and can provide a competitive advantage. The purpose of this study was to identify the dimensions of experiential quality and the relationship of this construct with customer trust and customer satisfaction in achieving behavioral intention.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a convenience sampling technique, a total of 322 gym users in Turkey participated. A two-step approach was used to test both the model and the research hypotheses [confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM)].

Findings – The interaction quality, physical environmental quality, outcome quality and enjoyment quality were positively related to experiential quality. Similarly, the experiential quality was positively related to customer satisfaction and customer trust. Finally, customer satisfaction was related to behavioral intentions.

Originality/value – This study provides empirical evidence about the importance of experiential quality to gain a competitive advantage in the context of fitness centers.

Keywords Experiential quality, Customer satisfaction, Customer trust, Behavioral intention, Fitness industry, Fitness services

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent years, the fitness industry has been one of the fastest-growing industries. According to a report by [Deloitte \(2019\)](#), in the last decade the number of gym members increased by 72%, while the report published in 2022 indicated an increase of 2% in the number of members compared to the previous year, as well as a 0.2% increase in the number of clubs in the same period ([Deloitte, 2021](#)). Due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the post-pandemic period involving multiple restrictions and limitations, in addition to high



uncertainty, the number of gym members dropped significantly. However, apart from this exception, the rate of growth has remained constant over the years.

Despite this progress, competition in the fitness industry is intensifying every day, making it more difficult to obtain a competitive advantage. There are two main factors which make this competition difficult. Firstly, the increase in the number of fitness centers in a region provides an alternative convenience for members to cross over between different fitness centers (Sevilmiş *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, choices, especially like digital exercise and fitness technology developing after the COVID-19 pandemic, have emerged in the fitness industry. These developments have led gym members to choose the digital fitness experience more than ever before (Sevilmiş and Şirin, 2022). Research shows that fitness centers have a high rate of abandoned memberships (Bedford, 2008; Gallardo *et al.*, 2016; Gjestvang *et al.*, 2020).

The rate of members who continue their membership in the fitness center for more than one year varies between 30% and 60% (MacIntosh and Law, 2015). A different study shows that 63% of new members terminate their membership earlier than 12 months (Sperandei *et al.*, 2016). Research results show that people who continue their membership for more than six months show greater commitment to the fitness club (Clavel San Emeterio *et al.*, 2019; Middelkamp *et al.*, 2016; Pridgeon and Grogan, 2012).

It has been determined that there are various factors that cause individuals to leave their fitness center membership (Yi *et al.*, 2021). Age, gender, location of the fitness center, accessibility and seasonal reasons are some of these (Cepeda *et al.*, 2018; Marques *et al.*, 2016; Sperandei *et al.*, 2016; Yi *et al.*, 2021). Pridgeon and Grogan (2012) see loss of social support as an important reason to abandon a fitness membership. An inference from all these studies is that the biggest concern of fitness businesses is the lack of a customer retention strategy (Giudicati *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, fitness clubs need to focus on strategies to avoid losing customers. Previous studies have obtained many different results regarding not losing fitness members. Çevik and Sevilmiş (2022) revealed the effect of the sense of community on behavioral intention. Giudicati *et al.* (2013) found that experience and socialization are key factors in customer loyalty and defection decisions. In the study conducted by Sevilmiş *et al.* (2023) it was determined that the renewal of fitness members' membership is related to factors such as physical environment, communication and accessibility.

From this point of view, it can be said that experience dimensions such as communication, sociability, access and physical environment are important criteria for fitness members to sustain their participation in fitness centers or to renew their membership (Eskiler and Safak, 2022; Sevilmiş *et al.*, 2023). In line with this information, we can say that experiences affect participation and continuity in sports programs or services and make positive contributions to the loyalty of members. In summary, dimensions such as physical environmental quality (Çevik and Şimşek, 2020), interaction quality (Eskiler and Safak, 2022), access quality (Wu and Cheng, 2018), outcome quality (García-Pascual *et al.*, 2023) and enjoyment quality have important effects on the development of experience quality.

The reason for adopting these dimensions is that the service obtained by members during their time spent in a fitness center may be represented by perceived quality and hedonic acquisitions under the headings of physical environment, interaction, access, enjoyment and outcome quality (Eskiler and Safak, 2022; García-Pascual *et al.*, 2023; Kuuru and Närvänen, 2019; Mao *et al.*, 2023; Yamaguchi and Yoshida, 2022). Several studies showing similar characteristic features in sport (Wu and Ai, 2016; Wu *et al.*, 2016; Wu and Li, 2017; Wu *et al.*, 2018a, b) and research investigating experiential quality in the context of sport (Çevik and Şimşek, 2020; Eskiler and Safak, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021) focused on these five dimensions for measurement of experiential quality.

Studies in different sectors have reported that experiential quality affects satisfaction (Rehman *et al.*, 2023; Saut and Bie, 2022; Wu *et al.*, 2018b), customer trust (Wu *et al.*, 2018a) and behavioral intentions. In the context of sport, Çevik and Şimşek (2020) identified the effect of

experiential quality perceptions of World Motocross Championship viewers on satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Wang *et al.* (2021) identified the effect of experiential quality on satisfaction and trust among sports tourists. However, little is known about the impact of experiential quality on post-consumption outcomes for fitness members. When the studies conducted so far are analyzed, Eskiler and Safak (2022) found that perceptions of experiential quality in fitness members have a determining effect on commitment. Post-consumption constructs such as satisfaction, customer trust, perceived value and behavioral intention have been frequently researched to understand and improve customer behavior in order to ensure business continuity in the fitness industry (García-Fernández *et al.*, 2018; Şirin *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, there is no model in the fitness literature that shows the effect of experiential quality on satisfaction and customer trust. The introduction of such a model will make a significant contribution to fitness operators in reducing the serious problem of customers terminating their memberships. Therefore, this study aims to identify the dimensions of experiential quality for fitness members and examine the relationships between experiential quality, satisfaction, customer trust and behavioral intentions.

Literature review

Experiential quality

Experiential quality refers to how consumers emotionally perceive their experiences as a result of their interactions with the service area, service employees, other customers and other elements during consumption activities (Chang and Horng, 2010). Thus, experiential quality can be described as the emotional judgments of customers for the complete experience (Chang and Horng, 2010). The evaluation of experiential quality is holistic as opposed to attribute-based. The evaluation process is strongly related to the significance that the consumer attributes to the situation, i.e. it examines the emotional impact of the consumer experience. Assessment of service quality focuses on the consumer's cognitive and attitudinal reflections of the functional and technical benefits of the outward service environment of a service provider. Experiential quality is subjective due to the nature of the measure and experience is linked to the internal feelings of a visitor during consumption (Chen and Chen, 2010). Evaluation of experiential quality is integrated, rather than based on quality. The evaluation process is strongly related to the importance the consumer attributes to the situation; in other words, it investigates the emotional effect of the consumer experience (Chen and Chen, 2010). For an assessment of experiential quality, not only the way the service is presented, but also the way the customer is affected by every stage of the service, which encompasses the whole process before, during and after service delivery, is a factor in the development of experience.

In the context of sports, Yoshida (2017, p. 430) described it as "sport consumers' evaluation of the overall excellence or superiority of the whole experience based on their direct and indirect interactions with a sport organization and other consumers across multiple touchpoints, including sports, service, social, and communication encounters". Emotions and feelings play a part in the evaluation of experiential quality (Yazıcı *et al.*, 2017). Consumers search for positive hedonic feelings during the process of consumption (Zhong and Mitchell, 2010), while marketers arouse positive hedonic feelings through experiential marketing (Shaw and Ivens, 2002). Here, there are two different points to be summarized between service quality and experiential quality. Emotions and feelings play roles in the assessment of experiential quality (Çevik and Şimşek, 2020) and experiential quality represents the psychological outcome due to participation. Service performance is about the assessment of service quality. In short, service quality in fitness examines the performance of the fitness service, while experiential quality examines the experience provided by the fitness service to every fitness member and decides whether this is adequate or not (Eskiler and Safak, 2022; Yoshida, 2017).

Experiential quality emphasizes the inner world of the individual through subjective judgment (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). This component of experiential quality may vary based on the active and passive participant characteristics of the sports consumer, because active and passive sports participation involve distinct mental features (Perić, 2010). While a sports participant attaches more value to stimuli comprising experiential quality like the physical environment, they may attach less value to stimuli like enjoyment (Hallmann *et al.*, 2021). In the fitness context, studies have approached experiential quality as follows. First, García-Pascual *et al.* (2023) identified four subdimensions of experiential quality (peace of mind, moments of truth, outcome, product experience) in a scale adapted to the context of fitness centers. Experiential quality in fitness centers is based on the quality of the facility and equipment, productivity of the process, the personalization of staff and smiling service. Kuuru and Närvänen (2019) noted the importance of interaction for experience in a study in the context of fitness. Eskiler and Safak (2022) considered the outcome quality and communication quality (customer-employee, customer-customer) aspects of experiential quality in a study completed with gym members. Interactions between people providing and receiving service and outcomes obtained from fitness services were evaluated as dimensions of experiential quality. In turn, Yoshida (2017) suggested using the parameters of core product quality, social network quality and relationship investment quality. However, this model proposed by Yoshida (2017) has not been tested in the context of fitness services.

The reason for the use of five different dimensions here or the reason for not adding an additional dimension is that in both the sports and fitness literature, it can be said that the service experience is based on the quality of the facilities and equipment, the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes, the personalized and friendly service of the staff, the outcomes and interactions (Eskiler and Safak, 2022; García-Pascual *et al.*, 2023; Kuuru and Närvänen, 2019; Sevilmiş and Doğan, 2023; Yoshida, 2017).

When all this research is considered, one aspect of experience is related to the true operation of a product or service. A second aspect may be said to comprise emotional clues perceived by the senses and spread by objects or people in the surroundings (Fernandes and Cruz, 2016; Walls *et al.*, 2011; Yoshida, 2017). From this research, it may be said that experiential quality has both functional and affective aspects.

Experiential quality is crucial in comprehending consumer perceptions, attitudes and actions (Chang and Horng, 2010), and in this sense, the evaluation of experiential perceptions is crucial for all sectors, including the fitness industry. Equally focused on the fitness industry, various studies adapted the subdimensions of interaction quality, physical environmental quality, outcome quality, access quality and enjoyment quality (De Rojas and Camarero, 2008; Wu *et al.*, 2018a, b; Kao *et al.*, 2008; Sevilmiş and Doğan, 2023).

Based on all these inferences, experiences of gym members related to interaction quality, physical environmental quality, outcome quality, access quality and enjoyment quality develop during the membership process and comprise the experiential quality of the individual (Sevilmiş and Doğan, 2023). For example, after any member enters a gym, they benefit from the expertise of trainers and communicate; thus, interaction becomes part of the experience. At the same time, experience in gyms associated with these five dimensions is shaped in this way.

Physical environmental quality is represented by the visible physical facilities like equipment and buildings provided to gym members (Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown, 2019). In the fitness literature, physical environment was emphasized to be an element determining the quality of the service experience (Sevilmiş and Doğan, 2023). To assess the service experienced in fitness businesses, it is probable that clues related to the facility are used (García-Pascual *et al.*, 2023). At the same time, tangible evidence plays an important role in shaping the experience of the gym user (Jeon *et al.*, 2021; Pizzo *et al.*, 2020). Interaction quality, which is used to quantify experiential quality, relates to the manner in which a service is

provided (Glaveli *et al.*, 2021). Service experience may be affected by the interest and sincerity of the staff and a range of factors (Jeon *et al.*, 2021). Interaction quality is related to the interpersonal interactions between gym members and employees in the process of providing fitness services and this comprises an important element of the experience of this fitness service (Pizzo *et al.*, 2020; Sevilmiş and Doğan, 2023). Studies in the field of fitness focus on human interactions between mainly fitness trainers and customers to shape the general customer experience (Glaveli *et al.*, 2021; Jeon *et al.*, 2021). Outcome quality emphasizes the results obtained from the fitness service (Foroughi *et al.*, 2019). Gym members select rational actions based on assessment of outcomes and expectations (Eskiler and Safak, 2022). Gym members especially become members for the outcome experiences they will obtain (García-Pascual *et al.*, 2023). As a result, fitness service experience is evaluated based on technical quality features, stated differently what they will obtain from the service, a component of experiential quality (Sevilmiş and Doğan, 2023). Access quality represents the ease of access to the business offering fitness services (Wu and Ai, 2016). In sports and fitness research, when assessing experiential quality, it appears the consumer's indirect encounters with the business are important in conceptualizing the experience. Transport is one of these factors (Sevilmiş and Doğan, 2023). Enjoyment quality is the extent to which a quality experience makes prospective customers feel comfortable, happy, satisfied or even ecstatic. Considered in this context, enjoyment quality may be said to be the nature of the fitness industry (Sevilmiş and Doğan, 2023), because features like fun comprise the essence of sports services (Cole and Chancellor, 2009; Kao *et al.*, 2008; Teques *et al.*, 2020; Yazıcı *et al.*, 2017). All of these factors are used to assess the experiential quality of sports services in general and fitness services in particular (Çevik and Şimşek, 2020; Eskiler and Safak, 2022; García-Pascual *et al.*, 2023; Jeon *et al.*, 2021; Pizzo *et al.*, 2020; Yoshida, 2017).

For all of the above and based on the literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. Interaction quality has a positive effect on experiential quality.
- H2. Physical environmental quality has a positive effect on experiential quality.
- H3. Outcome quality has a positive effect on experiential quality.
- H4. Access quality has a positive effect on experiential quality.
- H5. Enjoyment quality has a positive effect on experiential quality.

The relationship between experiential quality and customer satisfaction

Consumers create positive ratings based on their own personal experiences (Saut and Bie, 2022). The quality rating of consumers is a significant determinant of customer satisfaction (Eskiler and Altunışık, 2021). Many industrial studies revealed that experiential quality affects satisfaction (Chang *et al.*, 2022; Saut and Bie, 2022; Wu and Li, 2017). Other models examined this link (Çevik and Şimşek, 2020; Wu and Ai, 2016; Wu and Cheng, 2018), despite the lack of research about the effect of experiential quality on satisfaction in the context of sports (Çevik and Şimşek, 2020; Wu and Ai, 2016; Wu and Cheng, 2018). Therefore, and based on the limited available research, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H6. Experiential quality has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

The relationship between experiential quality and customer trust

Consumer trust is defined as belief in behavior related to the capacity of the product or service provider to sustain the long-term interests of consumers (Andaleeb and Anwar, 1996). Consumer trust is the belief that a product or service provider has the ability to pursue the long-term interests of its customers (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). It comprises

components like commitment to problem-solving, fulfillment of obligations and quality of services offered. Confidence is viewed as the capacity to provide comfort, experience and constant communication in order to establish excellent future connections (Lestariningsih *et al.*, 2018). Trust is a prerequisite for building and maintaining long-term connections between firms and consumers, particularly in the context of service marketing, according to the academic literature (Burrmann *et al.*, 2020). Many researchers reported the effect of quality on trust when examining studies from various sectors (Uzir *et al.*, 2021). The relationship between service quality dimensions (instructor listening, communication and social skills) and client trust in fitness services was found to be favorable (Glaveli *et al.*, 2021). Yet, there appears to be no study on the relationship between experiential quality and trust in the fitness business. Based on the available data, the hypothesis proposed in this research is as follows:

H7. Experiential quality has a positive effect on customer trust.

The relationship between customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions

Warshaw and Davis (1985, p. 214) defined behavioral intention as “the extent to which an individual consciously intends to perform or refrain from performing a specific future behavior” (Fernández-Martínez *et al.*, 2020). There are many studies in the fitness sector that have explored the influence of customer satisfaction on behavioral intention. This assumes it to be a fundamental aspect since a satisfied customer will be more likely to have a positive perception of the organization and demonstrate loyalty to that entity (García-Fernández *et al.*, 2018), in addition to recommending the service to potential customers (Howat *et al.*, 2002). Several studies in the context of fitness (low-cost fitness centers, CrossFit centers, instructor fitness classes and virtual fitness classes, among others) showed a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and behavioral intention (Baena-Arroyo *et al.*, 2020; Çevik and Sevilmiş, 2022; García-Fernández *et al.*, 2018, 2020; Sevilmiş *et al.*, 2022a, b). Based on the available research, we propose the following hypothesis:

H8. Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on behavioral intentions.

The relationship between customer trust and behavioral intentions

In marketing, trust is defined as the beliefs formed from consumers’ perceptions of particular traits (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). The assumption that the seller will honor its commitments is reflected in trust and is crucial for the development of long-term partnerships and reduces the probability of customer uncertainty.

Behavioral intention depends on the extent to which consumers believe a business will prioritize their interests over the business’ interests in the event of unforeseen problems with a product purchase (Glaveli *et al.*, 2021). Thus, there is a connection between customer trust and behavioral intention (Koh and Hur, 2019). Panigrahi *et al.* (2018) discovered a positive correlation between customer trust and behavioral intent. In their study of the service industry, Wang *et al.* (2015) showed a positive correlation between customer trust and behavioral intention. In spite of this data, research investigating the crucial role of customer trust in behavioral intention in the setting of fitness has been relatively ignored. Based on the available research, we propose the following hypothesis:

H9. Trust has a positive effect on behavioral intention.

Figure 1 shows the proposed model.

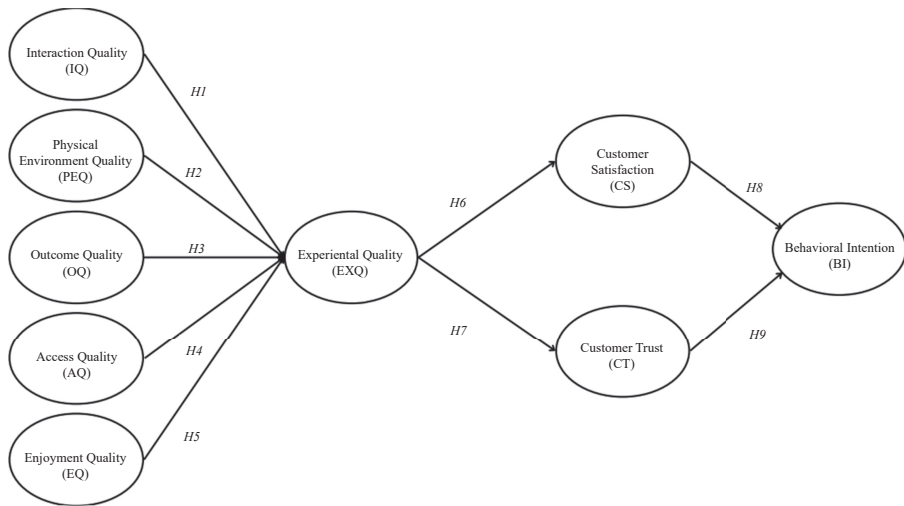


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

Source(s): Created by author

Methodology

Turkey's fitness market

With the developments in the European fitness industry, the fitness industry in Turkey continues to grow (Şirin *et al.*, 2023). Turkey is assessed as an attractive market with the momentum gained in recent years especially and is predicted to sustain its growth potential (Çevik and Sevilmiş, 2022). According to Deloitte's report (2019), 3.4% of Turkish's population are gym members and it is one of the countries with the highest growth potential (Eskiler and Altunışık, 2021). The number of gym memberships in Turkey is increasing with each passing year (1,830,000 in 2017; 1,950,000 in 2018; 2,100,000 in 2019) (Deloitte, 2019; Sevilmiş *et al.*, 2022a, b). The latest data show there are 2,555 gyms in Turkey (Yildiz *et al.*, 2021). In spite of growth, the deficiency of research supporting the effect of perceived experiential quality on customer satisfaction, customer trust and behavioral intentions among gym members is notable. Completion of this research will guide an understanding of experience perceptions of gym members in a country with a developing fitness industry.

In spite of the increasing number of gyms and members in the world and in Turkey (Sevilmiş and Şirin, 2022; Yıldiz *et al.*, 2021), gyms in Turkey are faced with several problems in relation to sustainability (Eskiler and Altunışık, 2021; León-Quismondo *et al.*, 2020). According to Deloitte (2020), gym monthly membership income is falling due to the continuous expansion policies of gyms (Deloitte, 2020). At the same time, after the pandemic in Turkey, as in the rest of the world, economic problems have made membership cessation, already a serious problem for gyms, an even bigger problem (Deloitte, 2021). This situation triggers even greater financial problems than gyms were already experiencing (Kaplan *et al.*, 2023). Thus, it can be said that gyms are in a difficult competitive position and have financial problems. Due to these disadvantages, retaining members and focusing on factors affecting loyalty may prevent membership cessation behavior and reduce financial effects (Çevik and Sevilmiş, 2022). Undoubtedly, a positive experience in interactions or with the physical environment could influence gym members sustaining their memberships (Sevilmiş *et al.*, 2023). In this context, it is possible for gyms located in Turkey to overcome their problems by improving the experience processes in the gyms (Eskiler and Altunışık, 2021; Sevilmiş and Doğan, 2023).

Sample and data collection

In the research, a model investigating the effect of customer experiential quality perceptions on customer satisfaction, customer trust and behavioral intentions was tested in the context of fitness services. In this context, the following questions were asked: Do the experience perceptions of gym members affect customer satisfaction and customer trust? Do satisfaction and customer trust perceptions of gym members affect behavioral intentions? The procedures stated below were followed with the aim of realizing the purpose of the research.

The research was applied to customers of five sports centers in the center of Istanbul that offer sports and fitness services. Istanbul is one of Turkey’s 81 provinces. It is the most populous province in a country with land in both Asia and Europe. Before collecting the research data, permission was granted by the sports center’s management. Volunteer gym members were given information about the purpose of the research and told that research data would only be used for scientific purposes. Research data were collected in September and October 2022. The data were collected by the researcher with the face-to-face interview method before or after training. The convenience sampling technique was used because it is rapid, economic and members were easily accessible as a part of the sample. Five questions were asked about the personal information of gym members (sex, marital status, education, income status, duration of membership). A total of 33 items were used to learn perceptions related to the dependent and independent variables. Participating in the study were 322 members (190 men, 59%; 132 women, 41%) of five sports facilities offering similar sports and fitness services (including cardio, group and strength training), with at least 3,000 members and more than 20 personnel. The sociodemographic information of the participants can be found in [Table 1](#).

Measures

The study questionnaire consisted of two sections. In the first section of the questionnaire, personal information for participants was requested. The second section of this investigation comprised surveys which assess the perceptions of the participants about the following factors: experiential quality (interaction quality, physical environmental quality, outcome quality, access quality, experiential quality), satisfaction, customer trust and behavioral intention. In order to collect the data, the researchers conducted a comprehensive literature review and then modified the scale components to meet the emphasis and scope of this study.

Variables	Groups	N	%
Sex	Female	132	41.0
	Male	190	59.0
Marital status	Single	219	68.0
	Married	103	18.2
Income	20,000 and below (low)	66	20.5
	20,001 and over (high)	256	79.5
Education	High-school	52	16.2
	Undergraduate	231	71.7
	Postgraduate	39	12.1
Membership duration	Up to 12 months	67	20.8
	13–18 months	81	25.2
	19–24 months	62	19.2
	More than 24 months	112	34.8

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 1.
Personal
characteristics

Experiential quality was adapted from studies such as those by De Rojas and Camarero (2008), Eskiler and Safak (2022), Kao *et al.* (2008), Saut and Bie (2022), Wu *et al.* (2018a, b). Satisfaction was adapted from studies in the field of fitness including those by Foroughi *et al.* (2019), García-Fernández *et al.* (2020), customer trust from studies by Glaveli *et al.* (2021), Koh and Hur (2019) and Şirin *et al.* (2023) and behavioral intention from studies by Çevik and Sevilmiş (2022), Sevilmiş *et al.* (2022a, b) and García-Fernández *et al.* (2018).

A total of 33 items were used for the research, including 3 items pertaining to interaction quality, 4 items pertaining to physical environmental quality, 4 items pertaining to outcome quality, 4 items pertaining to access quality, 4 items pertaining to enjoyment quality, 3 items pertaining to experiential quality, 4 items pertaining to customer trust, 3 items pertaining to customer satisfaction and 3 items pertaining to behavioral intention. A 5-point Likert scale was employed for each variable (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The items were initially translated into Turkish. Four experts with a strong command of English who conduct research in the fields of fitness in sport and customer behavior evaluated the items for relevance and legibility. The back translation technique was used to translate the items from Turkish to English (Banville *et al.*, 2000). The translator and researchers then compared the translated documents to the originals. Minor modifications were made to the final Turkish form of the questionnaire so that it could be applied to the relevant sector. It was administered in Turkish to the participants.

Data analysis

For the analysis of the data, IBM SPSS and AMOS Graphics (version 21) software packages were used. To carry out statistical analysis of the data collected, first, the descriptive statistics for the sociodemographic variables of the sample were calculated. Next, the psychometric properties of the questionnaire were analyzed, though a descriptive analysis of the items (means and standard deviation) was previously carried out. In addition, the existence of outliers was evaluated using the Mahalanobis squared distance (Marôco, 2010) and the normality of the data with the coefficients of skewness and univariate kurtosis. A standard two-step approach was used in the present study (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed applying a maximum likelihood (ML) estimation method to verify that the measurement model fit the parameters indicated by the literature through the following indices: χ^2 /degree of freedom ratio (<3; Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and the incremental fit index (IFI) (>0.90; Marôco and Garcia-Marques, 2006), the parsimony comparative of fit index (PCFI > 0.60; Hair *et al.*, 2014) and the root mean square of approximation (RMSEA < 0.08; Hu and Bentler, 1999). Additionally, the factor loadings of the items, the reliability of the scale and convergent and discriminant validity were analyzed (Barclay *et al.*, 1995). Lastly, structural equation modeling (SEM) in Amos 21.0 was applied to test the hypotheses proposed in the study.

Results

There were no missing values and preliminary analysis found that skewness and kurtosis (lower than 3; Finney and DiStefano, 2006) values suggested that all the variables had a relatively normal distribution. A summary of the descriptive analyses is reported in Table 2. In the original measurement model, the fit indices were within acceptable ranges despite the fact that upon inspection of the model the existence of high modification indices between two pairs of items was detected (PEQ3-PEQ4 = 30.33 and CT3-CT4 = 20.63): $\chi^2(102) = 1055.050$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.29$; CFI = 0.927; TLI = 0.916; IFI = 0.928; PCFI = 0.806; RMSEA = 0.065 (CI = 0.059, 0.070).

Construct	Item	Statement	M	SD	Sk/ Ku	λ	CR	AVE	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$	α
Interaction quality (IQ)	IQ1	The communication of the fitness center staff was excellent	4.16	0.94	0.95/ 0.25	0.82	0.86	0.67	0.82	0.85
	IQ2	The fitness center staff showed me special attention	4.12	1.00	0.87/ 0.10	0.77				
	IQ3	The trainers' communication was excellent	4.21	0.89	0.86/ 0.06	0.86				
Physical environmental Quality (PEQ)	PEQ1	The locker rooms were adequate	3.68	1.17	0.60/ 0.50	0.78	0.90	0.67	0.81	0.89
	PEQ2	Exercise equipment was adequate	3.67	1.18	0.52/ 0.66	0.86				
	PEQ3	Exercise equipment was modern	3.75	1.11	0.54/ 0.52	0.86				
	PEQ4	The fitness center design was excellent	3.76	1.06	0.32/ 0.94	0.79				
Outcome quality (OQ)	OQ1	After working out in this fitness center, I felt that I was doing something good for myself	4.43	0.80	1.16/ 0.23	0.81	0.89	0.67	0.82	0.88
	OQ2	I felt healthier after doing sports in this fitness center	4.48	0.81	1.45/ 1.31	0.82				
	OQ3	After doing sports in this fitness center, I thought I had fulfilled the purpose of my participation	4.35	0.89	1.35/ 1.34	0.83				
	OQ4	I thought that doing sports in this fitness center brought positive changes to my life	4.53	0.79	1.77/ 2.94	0.79				
Access quality (AQ)	AQ1	The fitness center was easily accessible	4.21	1.01	1.16/ 0.53	0.66	0.85	0.58	0.76	0.83
	AQ2	The fitness center had adequate parking facilities	3.96	1.15	0.96/ 0.10	0.68				
	AQ3	The fitness center was located close to public transport	4.20	1.05	1.29/ 1.01	0.89				
	AQ4	This fitness center was centrally located	4.19	1.00	1.20/ 0.99	0.79				

(continued)

Table 2.
Results of the
descriptive analysis,
standardized factor
loadings, composite
reliability and average
variance extracted

Construct	Item	Statement	M	SD	Sk/ Ku	λ	CR	AVE	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$	α
Enjoyment quality (EQ)	EQ1	I had a good time in this fitness center	4.51	0.71	1.34/ 1.10	0.86	0.91	0.72	0.84	0.91
	EQ2	I had fun in this fitness center	4.51	0.73	1.55/ 2.35	0.85				
	EQ3	I enjoyed this fitness center	4.55	0.71	1.38/ 0.77	0.83				
	EQ4	I'm motivated in this fitness center	4.58	0.70	1.59/ 1.73	0.84				
Experiential quality (EXQ)	EXQ1	I had a unique experience when I visited this fitness center	4.16	1.05	1.01/ 0.02	0.77	0.83	0.62	0.78	0.82
	EXQ2	I thought the opportunities of this fitness center were superior to other fitness centers	3.68	1.25	0.56/ 0.71	0.74				
	EXQ3	Membership of this fitness center was a good experience for me	4.19	0.93	0.85/ 0.29	0.83				
Customer trust (CT)	CT1	I trust this fitness center	4.45	0.79	1.54/ 2.37	0.75	0.89	0.67	0.80	0.89
	CT2	This fitness center is sincere in its promises	4.42	0.80	1.31/ 1.27	0.84				
	CT3	This fitness center is honest and sincere with me	4.49	0.75	1.47/ 1.86	0.84				
	CT4	This fitness center treats me fairly	4.49	0.77	1.50/ 1.85	0.84				
Customer satisfaction (CS)	CS1	I am satisfied with the programmes and services of this fitness center	4.24	0.95	1.10/ 0.50	0.79	0.84	0.64	0.80	0.84
	CS2	I am satisfied with my decision to become a member of this fitness center	4.31	0.91	1.18/ 0.64	0.81				
	CS3	This fitness center always meets my expectations	3.97	1.09	0.76/ 0.24	0.80				

Table 2.

(continued)

Construct	Item	Statement	M	SD	Sk/ Ku	λ	CR	AVE	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$	α
Behavioral intention (BI)	BI1	I make positive comments about the programmes and services of this fitness center to my environment	4.22	0.94	1.07/ 0.44	0.87	0.92	0.74	0.82	0.91
	BI2	If asked, I recommend this fitness center	4.17	1.01	1.09/ 0.40	0.90				
	BI3	Even if my membership expires, I would be a member of this fitness center again	4.16	1.11	1.24/ 0.71	0.89				
	BI4	I will continue to participate in the programmes and services of this fitness center	4.39	0.93	1.58/ 1.99	0.76				

Note(s): M = median, SD = standard deviation, Sk = skewness, Ku = kurtosis, λ = standardized factor loadings, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted and α = Cronbach's alpha

Source(s): Created by authors

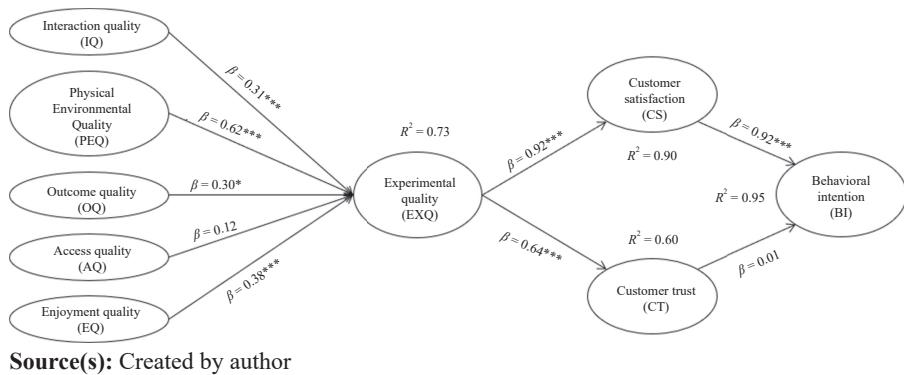
Table 2.

However, the factor loadings for all items in the measuring range from 0.66 to 0.90, exceeding the 0.50 threshold suggested by [Hair et al. \(2010\)](#), provided evidence that each item appropriately captured the respective factor.

To evaluate the reliability and validity of each variable, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were employed, which meet the key assumptions in multidimensional scale better than Cronbach's α ([Teo and Fan, 2013](#)). In addition, factor loadings for underlying constructs were also assessed. As shown in [Table 2](#), CR was greater than 0.80 and AVE was above the recommended 0.50 level (ranging from 0.58 to 0.74). Therefore, the convergent validity was satisfactory. Lastly, the square root of AVE values was greater than the correlations construct, confirming discriminant validity ([Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)).

The results of hypothesis testing are summarized in [Figure 2](#). Based on the analysis, it can be decided whether to support or reject each of the hypotheses. Six of the nine hypotheses were supported with a significance of $p < 0.001$ (***) and one more hypothesis with a significance of $p < 0.05$ (*). Conversely, two hypotheses were rejected ($H_4: p = 0.30$; $H_9: p = 0.826$). In the first part of the model, the strongest effect on experiential quality was found for H_2 ($\beta = 0.62$), which means that the most important determinant of experiential quality is the physical environment. According to [Cheung and Woo \(2016\)](#), all tangible and intangible elements inside and outside the fitness center are included in the concept of physical environment, including temperature, lighting, scent, noise, atmosphere and music. Physical environment is also an important element of service setting that affects overall perceptions of experiential quality ([Fernandes and Cruz, 2016](#)). The enjoyment quality also had a significant effect on the experiential quality, as well as interaction quality and outcome quality, which were the two variables with the least effect. Access quality had a very slight and insignificant effect ($\beta = 0.12$). In the second part of the model, the experiential quality had a strong effect on consumer trust ($\beta = 0.64$) and a very strong effect on client satisfaction ($\beta = 0.92$), with

Figure 2.
Result model with path coefficients



explanatory percentages of 60% and 90%, respectively. However, customer trust is not an antecedent of behavioral intention, contrary to customer satisfaction which showed a very strong effect ($\beta = 0.92$). The structural model provided adequate fit to the data: $\chi^2(77) = 1729.460$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 3.57$; CFI = 0.915; TLI = 0.911; IFI = 0.917; PCFI = 0.780; RMSEA = 0.081 (CI = 0.077, 0.083).

Discussion

In this study, a theoretically developed model that can contribute to the long-term sustainability of fitness centers and help them achieve a competitive advantage was evaluated. The study demonstrates that the amount of experiential quality perceived by fitness center members has a direct effect on customer satisfaction and trust. In addition, the study examined the relationship between customer satisfaction, customer trust and behavioral intention.

When the research hypotheses are examined, a positive and statistically significant relationship is found between interaction quality, physical environmental quality, outcome quality, enjoyment quality and experiential quality, but not between access quality and experiential quality. The first, second, third and fifth hypotheses were accepted based on these findings, whereas the fourth hypothesis was rejected.

In the first hypothesis, interaction quality was identified to be a crucial aspect of fitness members' perceptions of experiential quality. Members of a fitness facility want more service for the money they spend. Similarly, members of the fitness center dislike disruptions in communication regarding all processes occurring in the facility, which reduces uncertainty. A prior study demonstrated that human interactions have a significant impact on the customer's perception of service quality (Glaveli *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, there are studies indicating that the quality of interaction positively affects the quality of experience (Wu *et al.*, 2018a, b). Linked to these results, the result emerged that fitness businesses may enhance the experience of consumers by managing human interaction elements.

In the second hypothesis, the quality of the physical environment is an essential factor in fitness members' evaluations of experiential quality. This finding indicates that fitness club members value the environment in which the service is offered. For this reason, fitness firms should provide consumers with a service environment that has been carefully planned down to the last detail. Many studies identified the impact of the physical environment in determining experiential perceptions (Fernandes and Cruz, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2021; Wu and Ai, 2016).

This study indicated that outcome quality affects experiential quality positively. Members of fitness facilities place a premium on fitness services that are tailored to their demands. This finding demonstrates the influence of what the consumer acquires on experiential perceptions. There are further studies with results that parallel our findings (Wu and Ai, 2016). In this study, no positive effect was found between access quality and experiential quality. Similar findings emerged in industries such as tourism (Wu *et al.*, 2018a, b), and these findings are consistent with our own. In addition, Wu and Ai (2016) discovered a positive relationship between access quality and experiential quality in their research about golf tourists. On the basis of the fitness industry, it appears that access quality has no effect on experiential quality.

Finally, enjoyment quality was identified to have a high impact on experiential quality. This result demonstrates the effect of consumer entertainment on experiential perceptions. There are studies with findings that parallel our research.

Research demonstrated that experiential quality has a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction. The sixth hypothesis was accepted. In the context of fitness, satisfaction is a function of pre-service expectations and post-service experiences. The positive experiential perceptions of fitness club members are likely to impact customer satisfaction in this instance. The results of studies investigating the relationship between experiential quality and satisfaction are consistent with our findings (Fernandes and Cruz, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2021; Wu and Ai, 2016).

In the course of the research, experiential quality had a significant and positive effect on customer trust. The seventh hypothesis was confirmed. The excellence of services provided in the context of the factors that comprise the perception of experiential quality, the ability of a service provider to fulfill its promises, and the performance of a certain task expected from a center may influence the members' perceptions of trust. Similar studies focusing on experiential quality and customer confidence have yielded results consistent with ours (Chang *et al.*, 2013; Wu *et al.*, 2018a). Consequently, this study's findings support those of similar studies and contribute to the literature.

Within the scope of the research, customer satisfaction was identified to have a positive impact on behavioral intentions. This indicates that the eighth hypothesis is accepted. The impact of satisfaction in affecting behavioral intentions was established in numerous studies within the context of fitness management (Çevik and Sevilmiş, 2022; Sevilmiş *et al.*, 2022a, b). Within the scope of the research, no positive effect was identified between customer trust and behavioral intentions. At this point, it appears customer trust was not sufficient to create behavioral intentions. When some research in the literature is investigated, loyalty emerges as a significant factor in the development of behavioral intentions (Şirin *et al.*, 2023). When assessed within the context of our research, customer trust alone did not impact behavioral intentions by ensuring loyalty. Some research in the service sector found results parallel to our research (Endah *et al.*, 2017), while some did not (Wu *et al.*, 2018a, b).

Wu *et al.* (2018a, b) discovered a positive relationship between the trust perceptions and behavioral intentions of cruise passengers. This study does not have parallel features to our research. Endah *et al.* (2017) could not identify a positive relationship between customer trust and behavioral intentions. The lack of detection of the impact of trust perceptions of consumers in fitness businesses on behavioral intentions in this research illustrates its contribution to the limited number of studies related to fitness centers in the literature.

Finally, the results of this study contribute to the literature by showing that experiential quality is antecedent for post-consumption constructs like satisfaction and customer trust. At the same time, along with identifying the effect of customer satisfaction on behavioral intentions, it contributes to the fitness literature by showing that customer trust had no effect on behavioral intentions.

Customers whose satisfaction and trust are created through experiential perceptions will demonstrate behaviors such as recommending the product to others and repurchasing it. This study reveals that a fitness center's trustworthiness and customer satisfaction can be enhanced by increasing consumer perceptions of experiential quality. Thus, it is believed that fitness centers can gain a competitive advantage and reach a wider range of prospective customers by providing their members with a high-quality experience and promoting their satisfaction and trust.

Practical implications

In addition to its contribution to the existing literature, this study provides fitness club managers with vital information. By recognizing and emphasizing the effect of experiential quality on post-consumption behavior, fitness club managers can strengthen their competitive position against rival fitness clubs. In particular, the data suggest that fitness managers should prioritize strategies such as interaction quality, physical environmental quality, outcome quality and enjoyment quality. Consequently, they may ensure customer satisfaction and confidence among fitness club members.

The findings indicate that interaction quality can be an effective means of enhancing experiential perceptions. Considering that views of interaction quality are significant determinants of members' perceptions of experiential quality, fitness center managers may prioritize elements of the fitness center that will enhance members' perceptions of interaction quality. In other words, they can improve components of service delivery during customer interactions. It is essential to prioritize interpersonal interaction because prior research demonstrates that the quality of interpersonal interactions has a significant impact on the customer's perception of service quality (Glaveli *et al.*, 2021; Morales and Ruiz-Alba, 2019).

Related fitness research emphasizes the importance of interactions in the success of service businesses. Considering that interactions in fitness businesses has both social and professional aspects (Glaveli *et al.*, 2021), fitness center managers can ensure that the coaches they employ have the necessary experience and certificates. At the same time, fitness center managers should not ignore the differentiating role of social communication skills, because in high-contact services such as fitness services, there is almost no sector that can replace the sincere relationships established between employees and customers (Eisingerich and Bell, 2008). For this reason, fitness center managers can differentiate the services offered by employing employees who are skilled in interactions and thus contribute to the formation of a satisfied customer profile.

The results suggest that the quality of the physical environment may be an effective means of enhancing experiential perceptions. Considering that physical environment perceptions are significant determinants of members' perceptions of experiential quality, it is crucial for fitness center managers to systematically and collectively improve the quality of the physical environment through layout, air quality, lighting, thermal and acoustic factors. In this regard, fitness center managers might benefit from consulting the relevant experts in order to design the physical environment elements of fitness centers efficiently. They can also provide maximum criteria for lighting, music and other physical element components. Studies indicate that the perception of the physical environment has a significant impact on customer emotions and quality perceptions (Dang *et al.*, 2022).

The findings suggest that outcome quality may be an effective means of enhancing experiential perceptions. Opinions about outcome quality are major determinants of members' perceptions of experiential quality, so it is crucial for fitness center managers to improve factors that will increase the superiority of their service experience. When the fitness service is completed, the outcome elements, or what is left in the member's possession, have a significant impact on customer satisfaction (Foroughi *et al.*, 2019).

A fitness member's participation in a fitness program is based on reasons such as fulfilling sporting goals, improving skills, entertainment, health, competition and social opportunities (Foroughi *et al.*, 2019). If an activity fulfills at least one of the benefits that members value, participation is more likely to continue (Howat and Assaker, 2016). Therefore, fitness center managers can focus on strategies to maximize the benefits that participants expect from the activities in the fitness center. In this context, members' training plans can be constantly checked. It can be evaluated whether they have achieved their sportive goals. If these goals have not reached the targeted level, additional programs can be offered so that customers can achieve the benefits they expect from the activities in the fitness center.

The findings suggest that enjoyment quality may be an effective method for enhancing experiential perceptions. Since ideas about enjoyment quality are significant determinants of members' perceptions of experiential quality, it is crucial for fitness center managers to enhance the factors that contribute to an enjoyable fitness service. Consumer research acknowledges that consumers have a set of fundamental motivations and that different buying goals motivate them in different ways (Sevilmiş *et al.*, 2022a, b). Enhancing the fitness center's entertainment features will improve member's impressions of the experience, resulting in increased satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

Fitness members exercise because of the enjoyment they receive (Teques *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, fitness center managers can focus on creating an atmosphere where members can enjoy training or the fitness center itself.

Additionally, gym managers can contribute to the enjoyment experience of members by offering equipment that enables them to enjoy their workouts. For example, they may provide equipment allowing members to choose what TV or music channel they want to watch during their fitness training. In this context, equipment offering different entertainment choices may be chosen. At the same time, weight may be given to elements like the use of music for enjoyment, an important motivator of experience, an entertaining trainer or a fun start to training.

The findings indicate that perceptions of experiential quality may be an effective method for enhancing customer satisfaction and customer trust. Since the experiential quality is a significant determinant of satisfaction and customer trust, it is crucial for fitness center managers to focus on enhancing the perceived quality of experience (interaction, physical environment, enjoyment, outcome quality).

Finally, the findings show that customer satisfaction may be an effective method to develop behavioral intentions. Customer trust was determined not to be effective on the development of behavioral intentions. Considering that satisfaction perceptions are important determinants for the behavioral intentions of members, it is of great importance that gym managers develop components contributing to satisfaction with fitness services.

When the results of this study are evaluated as a whole, it is seen that experiential perceptions are important factors in customer trust and customer satisfaction. At the same time, customer satisfaction was found to be effective on behavioral intention. It is seen that experience quality and satisfaction are important factors in the formation of behavioral intentions of fitness members, in other words, in the formation of behavioral intentions of members, such as demanding the same product or service in the future, recommending it to their environment and having positive attitudes toward the business. The findings of this study support those of similar studies and contribute to the literature (Chen and Chen, 2010; Cole and Chancellor, 2009). In particular, the findings have shown in the context of the Turkish fitness industry, how different factors influence the experiential quality and consequently the loyalty of gym users. Turkish gym managers are therefore urged to carry out continuous evaluation and improvement processes on the analyzed variables, as this could improve the experience and loyalty of gym users and thus the sustainability of the sport facilities.

As a result, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature by testing the antecedents of experiential quality for variables such as satisfaction and customer trust in the context of fitness services. In addition, it has been revealed that members' behavioral intentions can be formed through experiential quality and satisfaction. In addition, the results obtained in the study provide a different perspective to the literature by furnishing concrete data on the use of experiential quality in the context of fitness consumers.

Limitations and future research

Although this research contributes to the management of fitness centers and fills a gap in the fitness literature, it has certain limitations. First, the proposed model was theoretically tested using data acquired from a single country (Turkey). The model may be tested in studies encompassing selected gym members in different countries using different sampling methods. Future research collecting data from different countries will assist in generalizing the findings of the present research.

Here, experiential quality was evaluated according to five factors. These five factors were based on items obtained from the literature. In the literature, the lack of a suitable scale to measure experiential quality is notable. A scale adapted by [García-Pascual et al. \(2023\)](#) is available. This scale was adapted from the tourism sector. As a result, there is a need for valid and reliable scales to be developed within the context of the fitness industry. At the same time, scales to be developed may identify different specific dimensions by paying attention to the nature of the fitness industry (like affective experience).

Research may be performed including the interactions between each subdimension of experiential quality (interaction, physical environment, outcomes, access and enjoyment) and customer satisfaction or customer trust. Hence, which dimension of experiential quality is more effective on customer satisfaction or customer trust will be tested. Research of such a model will contribute to the literature.

Additionally, significant differences may be observed between personal variables like visit frequency, membership duration and the sex of fitness participants with experience perceptions, satisfaction, trust and behavioral intentions. Future research will be important in terms of better understanding experiential quality by including these personal variables. Also, the addition of mediating effects to the research model is important in terms of more comprehensively explaining experiential quality. This study may be seen as a starting point for different research rather than the endpoint in the context of gym members.

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