

3-21-2024

## Strategies for Member Retention in Boutique Fitness Clubs

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# Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Jaime A. Kelly

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Walden University  
2024

Abstract

Strategies for Member Retention in Boutique Fitness Clubs

by

Jaime A. Kelly

MS, Walden University, 2017

BS, Columbia Southern University, 2014

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

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April 2024

## Abstract

In a saturated market with numerous fitness centers competing for attention, it can be challenging for boutique fitness clubs to stand out and retain loyal customers. The lack of effective strategies for member retention is a critical concern, given that sustained membership constitutes the primary revenue stream for boutique fitness club managers. Grounded in the composite conceptual framework of competitive advantage strategy and blue ocean theories, the purpose of this multiple-case study was to examine the strategies that boutique fitness club managers use for member retention. The participants were three boutique fitness club managers who had successfully implemented retention strategies in the U.S. state of Wyoming. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and reviewing websites and social media. Through thematic analysis, four overarching themes were identified: (a) engagement with members, (b) employee differentiation, (c) loyalty programs, and (d) facility conditions. A key recommendation is for boutique fitness club managers to proactively foster a sense of community through targeted engagement initiatives such as loyalty programs. The implications for social change include the potential for increased personal growth and wellness within the local community and workforce.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

In this study, I explored customer retention strategies implemented by managers of boutique fitness clubs. Such clubs are characterized as specialized fitness facilities renowned for providing tailored workout experiences that concentrate on distinct exercise modalities or training techniques. The participants, all of whom were boutique fitness club managers, outlined strategies they had used to retain customers in their fitness clubs. The results of this study reveal the most effective strategies for customer retention and may assist managers of boutique fitness clubs in developing strategies to ensure that customers stay loyal and retained within their fitness clubs. Implementing these strategies could ensure positive outcomes for both managers and customers, ensuring steady or increased revenue and the overall health and fitness of the club's members.

### **Background of the Problem**

Data from the International Health, Racquet, and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA, 2019) show continued growth in the U.S. health club industry as of 2019. There has been a greater interest in emerging fitness clubs in recent years because the population has been more focused on health and fitness as they age, allowing the fitness industry to continue and maintain growth (Roth, 2019). In 2018, health club membership topped 183,000,000 users around the globe (IHRSA, 2019). Industry revenue totaled an estimated \$94,000,000,000 in 2018; the club count exceeded 210,000 facilities, and leading markets continued to show growth in the Americas and Europe (IHRSA, 2019).

However, as the fitness industry grows, a current challenge is understanding how to retain fitness club members. To stay competitive, a significant focus should include retaining customers through motivation and participation (Schroeder et al., 2017). Understanding the customers' expectations of their fitness gym could be vital to retaining them. The strategies managers implement for customer retention could lead to a competitive advantage and increased revenue. Therefore, the overall objective of this study was to determine what strategies boutique fitness clubs implement for member retention.

### **Problem and Purpose**

It is challenging for companies to retain customers when operating in saturated markets (Höppner et al., 2020). The dropout rate at gyms within the U.S. is high, and more than 80% of fitness patrons leave the gym within 1 year of enrollment (Oliveira et al., 2021). The general business problem was that a loss in gym memberships affects annual revenue in fitness clubs. The specific business problem was that some boutique fitness club managers lack effective strategies for member retention.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to determine the effective strategies boutique fitness club managers use for member retention. The target population consisted of fitness club managers from three boutique fitness clubs in the U.S. state of Wyoming. The sample was three club managers who had successfully implemented strategies for member retention by keeping their members past 1 year of enrollment.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population of interest in this doctoral research study comprised boutique fitness club owners in Wyoming. Within the framework of multiple-case study research, it is customary to include from three to 10 participants who possess substantial knowledge of the research problem (Yin, 2018). By carefully selecting the units of observation and analysis, researchers can significantly enhance the data quality, thereby enriching its depth and richness (Roy et al., 2015). To ensure high-quality data acquisition, using purposeful sampling as a qualitative research technique is indispensable because it allows the researcher to intentionally select participants with expertise and experiences pertinent to the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015; Yin, 2018).

Consequently, to address the research inquiry effectively, I employed purposeful sampling in selecting three boutique fitness club managers from Wyoming who had successfully implemented strategies aimed at member retention. These managers were recruited from distinct boutique fitness clubs operating in the area. Empirical data presented by Afiuc and Bonsu (2016) reveal a significant failure rate, approximately 20%, among small businesses in the United States within their inaugural year of operation. Therefore, the selected managers needed a minimum operational tenure of 1 year to ensure the inclusion of establishments with a proven track record of resilience. Thus, the eligibility criteria for participation were that individuals hold managerial

positions at boutique fitness clubs, possess clubs that have operated successfully for at least 1 year, and have experience implementing effective member retention strategies.

In qualitative research, data saturation assumes a critical role in ensuring the validity and accuracy of the findings (Guest et al., 2020). Data saturation is typically employed as a criterion for determining the sample size, indicating the point at which additional data collection ceases to yield new insights and when information redundancy becomes evident (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To maximize the likelihood of reaching data saturation, I employed methodological triangulation as recommended by Natow (2020). To explore this approach, I utilized a couple of data collection methods, including interviews and document reviews, to comprehensively explore the phenomenon under investigation. Through this comprehensive data collection approach, I achieved data saturation, bolstering the validity of the research findings.

### **Nature of the Study**

The three research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed. I chose qualitative methodology for this study. Researchers implementing a qualitative approach involving interviews use open-ended questions to obtain in-depth data regarding participants' experiences (Barnham, 2015). Qualitative methodology aligned with the study's purpose because it allowed me to ask open-ended questions to explore the strategies some boutique fitness club managers use to increase member retention. A quantitative researcher uses numerical analysis to examine specific constructs to test hypotheses about the relationships between variables (Murshed & Zhang, 2016). The

quantitative methodology was not appropriate for this study because its purpose required neither examining relationships between independent and dependent variables nor using numerical analysis to examine specific constructs to test hypotheses. Mixed-methods researchers incorporate elements from both qualitative and quantitative methods (Fitzgerald et al., 2015). A mixed-methods study was not suitable because I did not need to incorporate a quantitative component to address the research question.

I reviewed three qualitative designs for a qualitative study on member retention: phenomenology, ethnography, and case study. Phenomenological researchers use in-depth interviews to understand better the personal meanings of individuals' experiences and their interpretation of the world (Gill, 2014). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for my study because the purpose was not to explore the personal meanings of participants' experiences to identify and explore managers' retention strategies. In ethnography, researchers observe a specific group of people in the field over a period of time (Torres, 2016). The ethnography design was not applicable, considering the purpose of my study was to identify and explore strategies that managers currently use rather than observing a specific group culture of people over a period of time. Case study researchers explore elements of a situation with one or more participants and data types (Yin, 2018). Single-case studies represent a critical or unique case used in single organizations (Yin, 2018). I chose not to conduct a single-case study because the study intended to replicate the effective strategies of successful boutique managers across cases in different organizations. The multiple-case design considers two or more cases and compares the

findings across cases. I, therefore, chose to conduct a multiple-case study to determine and compare the effective strategies successful boutique managers use for member retention.

### **Research Question**

What effective strategies do boutique fitness club managers use for member retention?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What strategies did you use to retain members?
2. How did you determine what strategies were effective for member retention?
3. What strategies did you find most useful in retaining members?
4. What strategies did you find least helpful in retaining members?
5. How did your strategies in retaining your members differ from those you used to obtain members?
6. What key obstacles did you face when implementing strategies for member retention?
7. How did you address the key obstacles you faced when implementing your strategies?
8. What additional information would you like to add that pertains to the development, implementation, and improvements to strategies you use in retaining members?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I based the study's composite conceptual framework on two theories: Porter's (1985) competitive advantage theory, also known as competitive advantage strategy, and

Kim and Mauborgne's (2005) blue ocean theory, also known as blue ocean strategy.

Porter (2008) used the competitive advantage theory to explain how competitive advantage grows out of the value the organization creates for buyers and exceeds the firm's cost of creating what buyers are willing to pay. The competitive advantage theory is based on three approaches to generic strategy that organizational leaders can follow: cost leadership, differentiation strategy, and focus strategy. Porter claimed that specializing in one strategic approach is best. As applied to this study, the competitive advantage theory was used to describe the strategies boutique fitness managers used to develop successful competitive strategies that led to a strategic advantage in a growing industry to increase the retention of members and create a profit.

Kim and Mauborgne's (2005) blue ocean strategy focuses on creating a new market and reducing the threat of competition by simultaneously pursuing differentiation and low cost. In contrast, "red oceans" produce goods similar to their competitors and struggle with market rivals (Bretcu, 2018). A firm's existing capabilities enable managers to decide whether their firms are suitable for the blue ocean strategy or should compete in the red ocean (Rafique et al., 2015). Blue oceans are all those industries that are not in existence today and where demand is created, not fought over (Agnihotri, 2016). The growing demand for customers in today's global marketplace encourages companies to begin operations or diversify into the market to meet customer requirements.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that if industry leaders focus on targeting current customers rather than trying to gain new customers, they will successfully create blue



oceans (Agnihotri, 2016). Boutique fitness managers might use the blue ocean strategy to compete with larger fitness clubs to retain customers by creating demand from an untapped market. The composite conceptual framework of Porter's (1985) competitive advantage theory and Kim and Mauborgne's (2005) blue ocean theory could assist in identifying and understanding the strategies boutique fitness club managers develop and implement to break away from their competition and generate a greater value for the firm by making products and services more desirable through the implementation of either cost leadership strategies, differentiation strategies, or focus strategies to increase member retention.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Customer loyalty:* A customer's desire to return to an establishment or continue to consume a product or service supplied by an organization (Ismail & Yunan, 2016).

*Customer perceived value:* The customer's assessment of the exchange of time, money, or energy compared to the services or items received (Hapsari et al., 2016).

*Customer satisfaction:* The result of a customer's evaluation of whether the performance of a product or service meets or exceeds their expectations (Prayag et al., 2019).

*Service quality:* A metric that consists of five dimensions: (a) reliability (how accurately and dependably the firm performs the services it promised), (b) tangibility (what facilities, staff, and equipment the firm possesses), (c) responsiveness (how quickly they provide their service and responsiveness), (d) empathy (how much-individualized

attention staff convey to the customer), and (e) assurance (how well the employees know the industry and apply their knowledge to gain the trust of the customers; Herstein et al., 2018).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are thoughts believed to be true by the researcher but cannot be verified (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The participants of this study were three boutique fitness club managers in Wyoming. My first assumption was that participants would answer the interview questions accurately and honestly. My second assumption was that the data collection methods of interviews and a review of company documents would provide enough data to answer the research question. Furthermore, I assumed that the participants would have the experience to provide valuable information on successful strategies concerning customer retention.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations are possible weaknesses the researcher cannot control (Horga et al., 2014). A limitation of the study was that the club managers may not have remembered all of the strategies they used for member retention. Another limitation was the time limit to participate in the interview and the member checking process. Furthermore, the participants may not have disclosed their successful strategies for fear of competition.

## **Delimitations**

Delimitations are the study's boundaries that indicate the broadness of the study's transferability (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The scope of this study reflects only the strategies of boutique fitness club managers who had successfully implemented strategies for member retention by keeping their members past 1 year of initial enrollment. This scope excludes those who may have different experiences or strategies within the first year, thereby narrowing the scope of the research to a specific subset of practitioners within the boutique fitness industry.

## **Significance of the Study**

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

Customer retention is costly for a firm and may fail due to a lack of guidance or actionable strategies (King et al., 2016). In the service industry, customers represent a revenue stream and are the key to long-term profitability for many companies (King et al., 2016). Furthermore, competitive advantage grows from the value the organization creates for buyers and exceeds the firm's cost of creating what buyers are willing to pay (Porter, 2008). Identifying successful strategies boutique fitness managers use for retention may create a competitive advantage and increase revenue and long-term profitability. The use of these strategies may help boutique fitness clubs build a viable business model to enhance their competitive position through differentiation, focus, or cost leadership.

## **Implications for Social Change**

The percentage of U.S. adults aged 20 and over with obesity in 2016 was 39.8% (Thompson, 2017). Fitness club memberships can be perceived as a vital expense as health campaigns continue to spread awareness of the health benefits (Roth, 2019). The implications for positive social change consist of creating healthier communities. Boutique fitness clubs that remain competitive and maintain customer retention by providing fitness services are directly linked to healthier communities in the U.S. Furthermore, growing demand for results-driven gyms that can help individuals achieve fitness goals is expected to continue to drive business growth and promote the development of individual worth (Kercher et al., 2021). Business growth in this sector may bring new job opportunities to local communities, increasing tax revenues and benefiting citizens.

## **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to determine the effective strategies boutique fitness club managers use for member retention. This literature review aims to provide published research and documentation on boutique fitness club managers' effective strategies for member retention. Scheerder et al. (2020) estimated that future growth in the European fitness industry will be 4.6% annually, increasing the number of competitors. Similarly, Štajer et al. (2022) asserted that the fitness industry grows annually worldwide. Therefore, understanding these fitness clubs' offerings may help

leaders decide what strategies to implement to influence customers to renew their memberships.

Similarly, Farida and Setiawan (2022) asserted that organizations that adeptly execute a well-aligned business strategy are poised to contend effectively with other rivals. This ability guarantees the organization's long-term survival over a substantial period. The majority of the publication dates in the literature review are within 5 years of my study completion. The references comprise 117 peer-reviewed articles, books, and book chapters to support the study, with 72% of these sources published within 5 years of my 2024 anticipated graduation date (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Literature Review Sources*

Characteristic	No.	%
Published within 5 years of 2024	83	72
Published more than 5 years of 2024	34	28
Peer-reviewed source published within 5 years of 2024	83	72
Total peer-reviewed source published more than 5 years of 2024	23	28
Total no. of sources used	117	

The literature review conducted for this doctoral research encompassed an examination of relevant sources, including published books, government websites, and peer-reviewed journal articles. To access a comprehensive range of scholarly material, I searched various Walden University Library databases and search engines, such as Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, SAGE Premier, Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. Notably, all the articles accessed for this review were derived from peer-reviewed journals. Peer-reviewed journals ensure the credibility and rigor of the sources (Kharasch et al., 2021). Keyword searches were conducted utilizing terms such as *competitive advantage theory*, *customer retention*, *blue ocean*, *customer satisfaction*, *customer loyalty*, *differentiation*, *cost leadership*, *customer value*, *service quality*, *fitness industry*, *service industry*, *boutique fitness clubs*, and *innovation*. This systematic approach to the literature review facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the relevant scholarly material and contributed to the establishment of a strong theoretical foundation for the research.

## **Organization of the Literature Review**

In this literature review, I provide an overview of two theories: Porter's (1985) competitive advantage theory, also known as competitive advantage strategy, and Kim and Mauborgne's (2005) blue ocean theory, also known as blue ocean strategy. These theories highlight the importance of using a differentiation strategy and/or a cost leadership strategy approach to create value for the customer. Although both theories consider the two variables of differentiation and cost leadership, it is unclear whether using an “either/or” approach or an “and, and” approach is best for customer retention in boutique fitness clubs.

The determinants of customer retention in the context of boutique fitness clubs are customer value, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, customer relationships, and service quality. These themes emerged from the analysis of relevant literature. Xu et al. (2021) supported the significance of customer retention in the fitness industry, emphasizing the strong influence of service quality on retention outcomes. Thus, comprehending customer retention is crucial in determining the most suitable strategy for effectively retaining customers, whether it be differentiation or cost leadership. I used the identified themes to structure the discussion on customer retention within boutique fitness clubs, providing a framework for understanding and exploring the factors contributing to retaining customers in this context.

### **Competitive Advantage Theory Conceptual Framework**

Leaders widely embrace Porter's (1985) competitive advantage theory as a dominant framework for sustaining their competitive advantage. Initially proposed by Porter in 1985, this theory has received substantial research attention and is acknowledged as a highly effective approach in the business strategy literature (Block et al., 2015). By leveraging Porter's framework, organizational leaders can strategically position themselves in the market and gain a competitive edge over their rivals by developing approximate generic strategies (Gnizy, 2020). The extensive research and recognition of Porter's competitive advantage theory underscores its significance as a strategic tool for firms seeking to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage.

Competitive advantage emerges from the ability of a firm's leaders to create value for their buyers that surpasses the cost incurred in its creation. Porter (1985) identified two fundamental competitive advantages: cost leadership and differentiation. However, these strategies target specific customer groups or industry segments, necessitating the development of three distinct and mutually exclusive generic strategies within Porter's competitive advantage theory: cost leadership, differentiation, and focus (Hales & McLarney, 2017). Cost leadership entails minimizing costs to offer services at a competitive, low price point. At the same time, differentiation focuses on creating unique products or services that enable a firm to command higher prices. In contrast, the focus strategy involves offering specialized services to a targeted market.



Generic strategies are important to gain a competitive advantage (Okatahi et al., 2021). Similarly, Hales and McLarney (2017) underscored the significance of Porter's (1985) competitive advantage theory, emphasizing the essential nature of these three generic strategies in achieving a sustainable competitive position. It is crucial for firm leaders to select and commit to one of these strategies to avoid being "caught in the middle." Being caught in the middle would leave the firm at a disadvantage, lacking a distinct competitive edge compared to cost leaders, differentiators, or focusers. Therefore, by deliberately selecting and effectively implementing one of these strategies, firm leaders can enhance their competitive position in the market and achieve long-term success.

### **Blue Ocean Strategy Conceptual Framework**

The second component of the conceptual framework is the blue ocean strategy. The business market can be divided into two distinct realms: red oceans and blue oceans. Red oceans encompass the existing market space, characterized by fierce business competition, often resulting in intense rivalry and limited growth opportunities (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). The term "red ocean" originates from the cut-throat nature of competition in these industries, where businesses vie for a larger share of the existing demand through a value/cost trade-off approach. This strategy has been a prevailing paradigm for more than 2 decades. However, as red oceans become increasingly crowded, their growth potential diminishes (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Enterprises adhering to the red ocean approach primarily concentrate on establishing a market stance

capable of outperforming competitors. In contrast, proponents of the blue ocean strategy pursue an alternative route known as value innovation, which centers on enhancing value generation for purchasers and the organization (Devi et al., 2021).

Although red oceans consist of businesses competing harder for a smaller market share, blue oceans leave many opportunities for company leaders to expand through innovation and grab a more significant market share to increase profits and growth. Furthermore, empirical research establishes a strong correlation between adopting the blue ocean strategy and bolstering sustainable competitive advantage among studied firms through innovation. Researchers Massoudi and Ahmed (2021) recommended that company leaders prioritize the innovation indicator, fostering unique brands and uncompetitive markets, amplifying market shares.

Similarly, in service industries, Kankam-Kwarteng et al. (2022) asserted the critical significance of directing attention toward brand innovation and refining service packages. This contention underscores the imperative for firms to curate novel service bundles. However, concurrent with this endeavor, it remains paramount for organizations to guarantee the adept training of their personnel concerning the intricacies of their services, thereby ensuring a seamless alignment with the tenets of brand innovation. This view resonates within the broader discourse on service industry evolution, where the orchestration of service package innovation and the cultivation of employee expertise are pivotal determinants in fostering sustainable brand development (Kankam-Kwarteng et al., 2022). The sentiment that employee expertise is critical in innovation is supported by

other researchers, such as Ziyae et al. (2022), who stated that management and expertise are vital to innovation. Likewise, Li et al. (2021) posited that human capital forms the cornerstone of innovation in service industries, encompassing the intellectual capacity and skills of the workforce. This essential asset spurs creative ideas and ensures their successful execution, thus driving service businesses' progress and competitive advantage. Therefore, if firm leaders align their activities with differentiation through innovation, they will move their firms out of those red oceans and into blue oceans where competition is irrelevant.

The blue ocean theory is based on value innovation where differentiation and low cost are achieved simultaneously and when utility and cost are aligned (Hajar et al., 2021; Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Kim and Mauborgne (2005) identified a four field of action structure using differentiation and low cost simultaneously: reduce, eliminate, create, and raise to create value. Blue oceans are considered an unknown and nonexistent market space (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Blue oceans are the untapped market space that can be an opener for growth. In an empirical investigation focused on higher education, distinct cohorts of students were subjected to divergent pedagogical interventions, with one subset receiving comprehensive instruction in the blue ocean strategy framework while the other cohort did not (Aguirre Fernández Bravo & Guindal Pintado, 2020). The ensuing analysis revealed that the cohort exposed to the strategic training exhibited a heightened propensity to engender value within prospective business enterprises, consequently manifesting a heightened proclivity for triumph in future entrepreneurial

undertakings, juxtaposing to their non-trained counterparts. Therefore, creating value is important in blue oceans. The logic of blue oceans is market-creating innovation with value, which cuts out competitors and does not dispute the market while creating a new source of demand (Vieira & Ferreira, 2018). Henceforth, suppose firm leaders use differentiation and low cost simultaneously. In that case, they can keep their cost of differentiation down and provide a product or service at a lower cost to the customer, potentially leading to customer retention.

### **Strategies for the Sustainability of Businesses**

Although Porter's competitive advantage theory has garnered success among business leaders, ongoing discussions persist among researchers regarding the effectiveness of solely executing one of the three generic strategies: differentiation, cost leadership, or focus. Băcanu (2020) studied the Romanian economy and found that Porter's generic strategies, emphasizing either differentiation or cost leadership, might have been achievable during a prior phase of the economy, characterized by a greater prevalence of state ownership compared to the present. Nevertheless, formulating a strategy centered on differentiation or low cost seems to lack feasibility in the current context. Similarly, Leny and Hilda (2021) found that concurrently utilizing all three subaspects of Porter's competitive advantage theory resulted in a notably elevated net profit margin. Individually, the implementation of differentiation strategies demonstrated a higher net profit margin.

In contrast, cost leadership and focus strategies did not exhibit a discernible impact on the net profit margin. Other scholars have argued for the merits of a hybrid theory that combines differentiation and cost leadership, suggesting that this approach can create a stronger competitive advantage by generating customer value. Researchers supported this notion by demonstrating that integrating differentiation and low prices in a hybrid strategy can lead to profitability in untapped market spaces called blue oceans (Agnihotri, 2016).

Similarly, Veliyath and Fitzgerald (2000) found evidence that combining differentiation and cost leadership can lead to superior performance and sustained competitive advantage. To further enhance the applicability of the competitive advantage theory in the contemporary business landscape, scholars such as Salavou (2015) have proposed the necessity of revising and rebalancing the theory and adapting it to address the prevailing challenges businesses encounter effectively. In a later study conducted by Salavou and Manolopoulos (2021), the researchers suggested that leaders of social businesses should pick either purely social approaches or mixed strategies to stand out and succeed in competitive markets. This helps them do good while also competing effectively with others. Adding to the discussion, Dannenbaum et al. (2020) suggested that business leaders achieve positive outcomes when they adopt a hybrid strategy not just to react to competition but also to stand out by introducing completely new value offerings and helping them succeed amidst growing competition. Therefore, in addition to exploring a hybrid approach, business leaders should consider other strategies that

contribute to business sustainability, regardless of whether the focus lies on differentiation, cost leadership, focus, or a combination of these strategies.

Although Porter's competitive advantage theory has been widely embraced, there are calls for incorporating a hybrid approach and revising the theory to better align with modern business challenges. Vieira and Ferreira (2020) found that most private fitness centers adopted a combination of strategies, while some also adopted a middle-of-the-road approach. Few centers strictly adhered to a single strategy. These outcomes also indicate that certain strategies yield improved results across specific indicators, though none of the strategies used by private fitness centers deliver consistent positive outcomes. Regardless of the chosen strategy, these businesses faced challenging financial circumstances.

Further, Vieira and Ferreira (2020) underscored the need for private fitness centers to reconsider and modify underperforming strategies. This implies the need to formulate novel strategies, such as the blue ocean strategy, prioritizing innovation and value creation. This approach focuses on rendering competition irrelevant by generating heightened value for customers and the company, thereby accessing untapped market segments. Combining differentiation and cost leadership strategies and considering other strategic combinations can enable firms to create customer value and gain a competitive advantage in dynamic markets.

Despite many topologies, other researchers propose that Porter's competitive advantage theory provides the most competitive and dominant business strategies

(Salavou, 2015). In the competitive advantage theory, firm leaders can create more value for a customer at a higher cost or create reasonable value at a lower price. Firm leaders need to choose between the two. However, Kim and Mauborgne (2005), founders of the blue ocean strategy, posited that value comes from simultaneously pursuing differentiation and low-cost strategies and is based on a reconstructionist view. While Porter's (1985) competitive advantage theory has shown excellent results, when the strategies stand alone, using the two strategies of cost and differentiation simultaneously described in blue ocean theory to create value may have advantages, keeping competition irrelevant. Therefore, further examination is needed to understand whether leaders of firms need to simply adapt one strategy over the other in an (either-or) strategy or use both strategies simultaneously in an (and-and) strategy to see which creates more value for a customer, thus leading to customer retention.

### ***Differentiation Strategy***

Differentiation is a strategy to gain loyal customers and set prices on goods or services. Differentiation distinguishes two or more things or people, and a marketing strategy distinguishes its products or services (Mishra & Dahr, 2020). The differentiation strategy happens when firms create a unique product or service for the customer (Salavou, 2015). Organizational culture, flexibility, structure, and organizational size emerge as pivotal factors for fostering innovation. Therefore, effective innovation strategies should prioritize these aspects (Hamid et al., 2022). The insights from these researchers provide indispensable direction for leaders within service organizations

striving to enhance their innovation endeavors, consequently fortifying their competitive standing. As the global business landscape intensifies in competitiveness, innovation has become an essential catalyst for growth and accomplishment. It is widely acknowledged that differentiation can substantially elevate buyer value and provide enterprises with the means to transcend the confines of rivalry, ultimately forging novel market spaces (Kim & Mauborgne, 1997, 1999).

The strategic practice of service or product differentiation empowers business leaders to command higher prices by enhancing perceived value and reducing price sensitivity. Porter (1985) asserted that differentiation nurtures brand loyalty, lessening the influence of competitive rivalry and price fluctuations. Quoquab et al. (2018) found that switching costs, acting as a quasi-moderator, impact brand loyalty. Intriguingly, customer satisfaction resulting from service differentiation held more sway in service switching than cost-related factors.

Adding to this discourse, Fook and Dastane (2021) illuminated the importance of loyalty programs in customer retention. This resonates with Ricadonna et al. (2021), whose study highlighted trust, brand image, and customer loyalty as pivotal factors affecting customer retention. Similarly, Vučković (2022) declared that repurchasing behavior is based on timely interventions. Specifically, Vučković's findings underscore the efficacy of initiating contact with users within a 30-day window following the culmination of their membership period; of particular significance is the observable trend among users who were the subject of telephonic outreach and subsequently affirmed their



intent to recommence their ticket procurement. Vučković suggested that sports center administrators should be poised to advocate for formulating and implementing a comprehensive customer loyalty program. As asserted by Porter (1985), differentiation fosters brand loyalty and diminishes price sensitivity.

Similarly, switching costs and satisfaction intertwine in service switching (Quoquab et al., 2018). Loyalty programs stand as a linchpin in customer engagement (Fook & Dastane, 2021). Trust, brand image, and loyalty converge to bolster retention (Ricadonna et al., 2021). These research strands weave a complex narrative of differentiation's impact, resonating across industries and dimensions of customer relationships.

Afiuc and Bonsu (2016) argued that loyal customers are not adversely affected when organizations differentiate their products or services and introduce price increases. Furthermore, the researchers highlighted the role of differentiation in influencing customer behavior, loyalty, and price sensitivity. Differentiation creates value and reduces customers' sensitivity to price as they perceive unique and higher-quality offerings. Customer satisfaction resulting from service differentiation substantially influences service switching more than cost-related factors. By differentiating their products or services effectively, firms can charge higher prices without negatively impacting loyal customers. Understanding the relationship between differentiation, pricing, and customer satisfaction is crucial for firms seeking to set higher prices and enhance customer loyalty. By creating unique value through differentiation, firms can command higher prices,

compete with superior quality, and increase customer satisfaction. This, in turn, strengthens the likelihood of customer loyalty to the brand.

### ***Cost Leadership Strategy***

The cost leadership strategy offers distinct advantages in comparison to the differentiation strategy. The concept of competitive advantage is a critical concern for businesses worldwide due to its significance in enhancing profitability and productivity. As a result, organizations are compelled to dedicate extensive efforts and adopt relevant strategies to attain this competitive edge (Obeidat et al., 2021). Consequently, an alternative approach like cost leadership becomes crucial for companies lacking the necessary capital. Specifically, the low-cost strategy entails delivering value to consumers like other offerings but at a reduced expense (Porter, 1985). This approach revolves around skillfully pricing products and services to establish an optimal price range that resonates with consumers.

Supporting the rationale behind cost leadership, Hurley et al. (2020) delved into fitness centers, investigating the impact of pricing on re-engagement intentions. The findings revealed that individuals exhibit stronger re-engagement intentions, with frequent attendees being more sensitive to pricing influences. This research underscores the potency of cost leadership in shaping consumer behaviors, demonstrating its role in fostering customer loyalty and retention.

Contrary to misconceptions, the cost leadership strategy does not entail offering substandard products at lower prices. Instead, it necessitates meticulous implementation

to evade failure. In support of this, Block et al. (2015) discovered that necessity-based start-ups, characterized by limited capital and resource requirements, are more inclined to adopt a cost leadership strategy rather than differentiation. Similarly, Firoz Suleman et al. (2019) suggested that a cost leadership strategy can lead to exceptional performance. However, pursuing a differentiation strategy may prove more advantageous for pure online firms. The evidence unequivocally demonstrates that the cost leadership strategy does not involve compromising product quality. Instead, it necessitates meticulous implementation and cost efficiency to avert failure. The ease of implementation and lower costs associated with the cost leadership strategy make it an appealing option for numerous businesses. Nonetheless, the advantages of a cost leadership strategy may vary based on the industry and the specific context of the firm.

Selecting an appropriate strategy, whether cost leadership or differentiation, depends on several factors, including the type of industry in which the firm operates (Dannenbaum et al., 2020). While cost leadership can be advantageous for start-ups and certain contexts, businesses must maintain product quality and avoid substandard offerings (Block et al., 2015). Additionally, differentiation strategies may be more suitable for pure online firms seeking to stand out in a competitive digital marketplace (Firoz Suleman et al., 2019).

Although Porter's competitive advantage theory suggests using differentiation or cost leadership to gain a competitive advantage through a value-cost trade-off, Kim and Mauborgne's (2005) blue ocean strategy takes a different perspective and argues that

firms can use a differentiation strategy while lowering costs by opening up new market space. Blue ocean entrants design new products and services to increase perceived value while reducing costs and targeting customers who play in the red ocean (Devi et al., 2021).

In contrast to using differentiation and low cost simultaneously, Porter (2008) suggested that leaders using a differentiation strategy alone can increase the price because of the value created and decreasing price sensitivity. Still, this strategy leaves firms operating in red oceans against their competition. Using differentiation and low cost can be a barrier to new entrants and give firms a better market share (Chibuzor et al., 2018). Suppose firms can lower their price and differentiate their products or services. They will then create and capture new demand and break the value-cost trade-off, leading to customer retention and moving firms into the blue ocean where competition is irrelevant. It may be beneficial for managers to develop strategies that either follow an “either/or” approach, as the competitive advantage theory suggests, or an “and, and” approach, as the blue ocean strategy offers, to create customer value, leading to customer retention. Furthermore, managers must identify which strategy to use based on their capital. If a firm does not have the capital to pursue a differentiation strategy, then a cost leadership strategy may be more suitable to use over the more costly differentiation strategy.

### ***Focus Strategy***

Firms that want to focus on a target market segment should incorporate the focus strategy to keep current customers. The focus strategy has two different variants: cost

focus and differentiation focus. The firm must either use a cost focus within a targeted segment or a differentiation focus within a target segment. The target segments must have buyers with unique needs, or the delivery or production system must differ from other industry segments (Porter, 2008). In both cases, the firm must understand its target market better.

Targeting market segments is crucial, considering the organizational logic of customer base segmentation (Zureck, 2015). Regardless of the chosen targeting model, firm leaders must adjust to market transformations, such as new technologies, new entrants, and evolving customer preferences (Zureck, 2015). Boutique fitness clubs specializing in unique workout offerings have a distinct advantage in focusing on targeted segments through differentiation strategies or cost focus. By understanding their target segment and employing a targeted strategy, these clubs can retain current customers by providing a unique service or competitive prices. Hence, comprehending the factors that create customer value and satisfaction within the fitness industry is vital for enhancing member retention through differentiation and cost leadership.

### **Customer Retention**

Pursuing effective customer retention strategies in business practice is considered crucial, aiming to attract new customers and cultivate ongoing patronage. Nevertheless, a prevalent pitfall involves investing in extravagant features without distinguishing between customer attraction and retention. Loyal repeat customers significantly contribute to revenue, underlining the need for managerial attention to attributes

conducive to customer retention (Capuano et al., 2021). To adeptly navigate this challenge and foster lasting customer relationships, business leaders can engage in meticulous planning and personalized service provisioning guided by recorded member preferences (Tsitskari et al., 2017). Management leadership necessitates diverse skills, encompassing relational marketing, quality service delivery, asset management, customer enrollment, and retention strategies. The phenomenon of customer churn, where customers prefer providers with superior products and competitive advantages (Sabbeh, 2018), underscores the need to comprehend retention determinants. Understanding retention motivations within fitness clubs aids robust strategy formulation, heightening service quality to elevate retention while curbing attrition and reinforcing the significance of solid customer relationships and consistent value delivery in fostering loyalty.

### ***Customer Retention in Fitness Clubs***

Boutique fitness club leaders differentiate themselves from big box gyms by focusing on group exercise and specializing in specific fitness areas within smaller-sized facilities ranging from 800 to 3,500 square ft (74 to 325 square m; IHRSA, 2019). They offer an intimate social environment, cross-functional training, results-driven small-group sessions, and personalized coaching regimens. These clubs cater to individuals' lifestyles and fitness goals, providing a unique experience compared to larger gyms. Retention strategies for boutique fitness clubs differ from those of their big-box counterparts, particularly when targeting the millennial demographic, which is crucial for health clubs (IHRSA, 2019). As core users, millennials are drawn to specific fitness settings like yoga,

HIIT, and kickboxing and are more likely to remain members and spend additional money if offered the desired services. Notably, boutique fitness club members are the least likely to be classified as infrequent users (IHRSA, 2019). With an emphasis on delivering cherished services, boutique fitness clubs must offer products and experiences that cultivate customer loyalty. This allegiance of customers subsequently translates into regular attendance and, consequently, contributes to the sustenance of customer retention (Yi et al., 2020).

Boutique fitness club leaders have the flexibility to price their services based on market demand and their unique offerings (IHRSA, 2019). Due to their distinctive and specialized approach, these club leaders may charge higher prices. In its 2019 global report, the IHRSA (2019) highlighted that higher-earning households comprise a significant portion of boutique club members. However, the report showed that it is crucial to consider the inactivity rates among individuals in the lowest income bracket, which are significantly higher compared to the highest income segment. Promoting small group training at a lower cost can effectively capture a larger market share and maintain customer loyalty among lower-income patrons.

Customer retention is crucial for firms in the fitness industry, as it impacts profitability and sustainability. The academic and professional field shows significant interest in understanding factors contributing to member retention in fitness clubs due to their impact on business profitability (Gonçalves, 2018). MacIntosh and Law (2015) highlighted that the average retention rate in the fitness industry ranges from 40% to

50%, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a solid customer base. Retaining existing customers is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones (MacIntosh & Law, 2015). In a competitive industry with low switching costs, it becomes essential for fitness clubs to focus on customer retention (Chibuzor et al., 2018). By understanding the factors that contribute to customer retention, managers can develop effective strategies to improve profitability and sustain their businesses (Mandal, 2016).

Furthermore, when considering the intention/exit discrepancy, fitness center managers must avoid assuming that individuals' intentions inevitably translate into customer departures. Abundant possibilities exist for managers to influence customers' decisions and alter their intentions, effectively fostering customer retention within their facilities (De Mesquita et al., 2023). Given the significance of customer retention in the fitness industry, further examination into the factors that influence customer retention and strategies for improving retention rates is necessary for the long-term success of fitness clubs.

Customer retention within the fitness industry is a complex interplay of various factors. Mandal (2016) recognized two pivotal variables - service quality and customer relationships - as key determinants of customer retention, particularly in the service sector. This sentiment is echoed by Weinstein (2020), who accentuated the indispensability of robust customer relationships for both business performance and retention rates. A comprehensive grasp of the significance of service quality, customer



relationships, and customer experience is vital for fitness managers aspiring to enhance customer retention and sustain competitiveness.

In this context, Ghadiri et al. (2021) added depth to the understanding of customer retention. The researchers articulated that customer retention pivots around five fundamental factors, as follows:

- customer relationship quality, customer experience quality, reputation, price, perceived value, and satisfaction;
- overall service quality, secondary services, and ethical climate;
- training type and schedule, location and accessibility, and social responsibility;
- interior design and equipment; and
- manager communication and trainer's competencies.

Within fitness clubs, customer retention is not solely driven by one aspect but rather by a synthesis of factors. For instance, Gonçalves (2018) highlighted customer well-being, facilities and equipment, and expectations as pivotal variables influencing member retention. Cultivating a positive and supportive environment aligned with customer expectations is crucial for sustaining customer relationships. This sentiment finds resonance in the study of Yusof et al. (2018), who accentuated the multifaceted nature of service quality across dimensions in forging customer satisfaction and fostering membership renewal. Furthermore, Esentaş et al. (2020) scored the significance of how service quality impacts customer preferences and satisfaction levels. To thrive in the

competitive fitness landscape, industry leaders should strategically integrate the insights from these studies. Enhancing service quality, fostering strong customer relationships, and delivering exceptional customer experiences are pillars of effective customer retention strategies.

### ***Customer Loyalty***

Loyalty and retention are pivotal for organizations seeking a competitive edge (Kangu et al., 2017). Customer loyalty's worth as a valuable intangible asset, vital for persistent competitive advantage and superior performance, is emphasized by Hajar et al. (2020). Demonstrating the financial importance of loyalty, Singh and Singh (2016) revealed that a modest group of loyal customers, even at 20%, could contribute substantially, up to 80%, of an organization's revenue. Accentuating the necessity of retaining profitable and loyal consumers, Kangu et al. (2017) highlighted its contribution to nurturing competitive advantage. Fostering a competitive edge significantly reinforces customer loyalty in the context of fitness clubs. Behnam et al. (2021) found that the relationship between customer knowledge management and consumer loyalty was scrutinized, unveiling the intricate nexus involving perceived service quality and psychological engagement. The findings strongly validate the robust correlation between customer knowledge management and consumer loyalty. Particularly notable is customer knowledge management's capability to enhance perceived service quality, catalyzing heightened psychological engagement between consumers and their respective sports clubs.

## *Value*

Enhancing flexibility significantly impacts the augmentation of customer retention. Therefore, to cultivate customer retention, it becomes imperative to elevate customer value (Dewobroto et al., 2021). Numerous researchers have shown that customer value is a key factor in fostering customer loyalty (Hidayat & Amalia, 2023; Paulose & Shakeel, 2022). By offering products or services that meet customer demands and provide benefits, firms can create value for customers. Therefore, fitness club leaders who prioritize creating value for customers are likelier to retain them as loyal patrons.

A value proposition is crucial for leaders to maintain competitiveness (Porter, 1985). By adopting a differentiation or low-cost strategy, firms can gain a competitive advantage and create value. The price of products or services plays a significant role in creating value (Porter, 1985). Creating value can involve offering lower costs than competitors while offering similar benefits or unique services that justify a higher price. In the realm of boutique fitness clubs, the adoption of attractive pricing models, regular equipment updates, and the periodic revitalization and maintenance of amenities surfaced as the primary strategies for augmenting member retention rates (Tsitskari & Batrakoulis, 2021). When renewing fitness center memberships, the most crucial factor was the price (Sevilmiş et al., 2023). Hence, the pricing strategy directly influences customer repurchase behavior, and fitness clubs can create value by effectively pricing their products, potentially increasing customer perceived value and encouraging repurchase. A value proposition, therefore, is vital for boutique fitness clubs to remain competitive.

Understanding the target market and implementing an effective pricing strategy that aligns with customer perceptions will be crucial for customer retention and repurchase behavior.

The indicated researchers highlight diverse methods for customer value creation beyond pricing. Vieira and Ferreira (2018) demonstrated that service quality attributes, such as member courtesy, willingness to assist, facility upkeep, cleanliness, and staff expertise, yield value surpassing that of lower-priced fitness clubs. Concurrently, studies by Fernández-Martínez et al. (2020), García-Pascual et al. (2020), and Nazari (2022) underscored the relationship between service quality and perceived value. This relationship, in turn, significantly impacts customer satisfaction and loyalty, highlighting its paramount importance in retaining customers within sports and fitness centers (Min, 2022). Notably, service quality attributes and cost efficiency are two distinct avenues for value creation. However, both pathways converge in potential to serve as precursors to customer retention.

**Value Cocreation.** Value cocreation forms the cornerstone of value generation and fulfillment for customers and organizations, constituting a pivotal source of differentiation. Researchers have demonstrated that co-creation practices instigate a transformative leap in value generation, thereby fostering enhanced customer retention rates (Worlu & Sunny, 2021). Furthermore, Tran and Vu (2021) underscored that vulnerable service consumers, who lack direct control and are reliant on external factors for value creation, are significantly impacted by cocreation behaviors.

In a parallel context, fitness clubs are finding success by implementing deposit contracts through social media platforms. This approach not only increases buyers' purchase intentions but also enhances their sense of behavior control (Fogel & Ustoyev, 2021). The fitness industry leverages social media as a potent value driver, relying on transparent and persuasive messaging to maintain customer interest (Melendez Araya et al., 2022). An emerging trend, "#fitspiration," involves the use of platforms like Instagram to disseminate fitness-related content, with empirical evidence demonstrating a positive link between exposure to this hashtag and individuals' engagement in workout activities (DiBisceglie & Arigo, 2021; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021).

Moreover, the pandemic prompted influencers to pivot to live content, effectively addressing disruptions and sustaining engagement and retention (Godefroy, 2020). Social media platforms foster a sense of belonging, motivation, and connectivity among diverse demographic segments, ultimately boosting customer satisfaction and retention within fitness clubs (Carter & Alexander, 2020; Geravandi, 2021). Notably, user-generated content aids in customer acquisition while maintaining a strong social media presence instills accountability and empowerment, shaping positive attitudes toward fitness (Štajer et al., 2022; You & Joshi, 2020).

In the dynamic landscape of the fitness industry, the role of social media is undeniable in driving value. Transparent and engaging communication on these platforms is crucial for sustaining customer interest. Recent research highlights how influencers' adaptation to live content during the pandemic underscored the pivotal nature of online

presence. Furthermore, social media's capacity to foster community, motivation, and engagement across various demographics solidifies its role in enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty, emphasizing the potent fusion of digital connectivity and value creation in the realm of fitness.

Furthermore, Cannon et al. (2021) demonstrated that customer retention strategies backed by verifiable disclosures, such as social media, yielded greater effectiveness. Such disclosures fostered credibility, reinforcing the trust between customers and the business. Raiol's study (2020) accentuated the significance of brand positioning through advertising campaigns, social media, and digital marketing for enhancing customer retention and diminishing attrition within fitness gyms. Additionally, Raiol's findings emphasized the pivotal role of a dedicated client communication channel that furnishes comprehensive details about the gym's offerings, further fortifying customer retention. Collaborative engagement, credibility-building through transparent disclosures, strategic brand positioning, and effective communication channels are the cornerstones of fostering customer retention within the fitness industry. The convergence of these findings accentuates the multi-faceted approach required to secure lasting customer relationships in this dynamic and competitive landscape.

### ***Customer Relationship Management***

Building strong customer relationships is crucial for retaining clients in the fitness industry. In fitness, customer relationships, product quality, and marketing all impact satisfaction and loyalty, which in turn affect how long customers stay, and according to

Ramovš and Milfelner (2023), there is a positive relationship between satisfaction and organizational reputation. To achieve satisfaction, companies need to focus on making customers happy (Weinstein, 2020). Prioritizing human interaction with customers surpasses the mere conveyance of pertinent information. This approach empowers individuals and substantially influences customer retention outcomes (Kataria et al., 2023). Good customer relationships not only keep clients but also help the business overall. This aligns with a core principle in marketing: understanding what customers want. Mandal (2016) also pointed out that customer relationships directly impact how long they stick around, so investing in relationships helps businesses know what matters to clients and keeps them around.

In fitness, staff–customer relationships are vital. Trust between them leads to happy customers who stay loyal. Understanding what traits in fitness staff build trust and loyalty is crucial. Researchers emphasized the importance of positive experiences and good communication through customer relationship management for business success (Hawkins & Hoon, 2020; Pashaie et al., 2022). This matches Larsson and Broström's (2020) findings, which highlighted themes like proactive retention, innovation, and value creation, all aided by customer relationship management. Hawkins and Hoon also asserted that listening to customer feedback, empathy, and care is crucial for this process. Likewise, Chikako and Hamu (2021) showed that building trust comes from understanding and personalized attention, which mirrors the heart of customer relationship management. The fitness industry's growth depends on solid customer

relationships, which aligns with a focus on customer preferences and customer relationship management practices for satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. Scholarly work and theories emphasize these points, stressing the importance of focusing on customer relationships to ensure long-term success.

**Employee Differentiation.** Manager knowledge plays a pivotal role in differentiating a business from its competition. This differentiation becomes particularly crucial for small enterprises, as their progression and expansion heavily rely on internal capabilities, emphasizing managers' or owners' expertise and competencies (Rusu, 2021). This approach guarantees that the growth of these entities is deeply anchored in their intrinsic strengths, specifically within the knowledge and skills possessed by their managerial or ownership personnel (Rusu, 2021).

In tandem, employee differentiation wields considerable influence over customer relationships, as the proficiency and capabilities of employees constitute intangible assets pivotal to the operations of service companies. These employees' expertise and skills form the bedrock of service delivery, holding a crucial role in shaping customer experiences and perceptions. Some managers have articulated that service quality emanates not from machines but from the staff, elevating instructors' contributions as a key differentiation factor (León-Quismondo et al., 2020). Ghahroudi et al. (2018) maintained that the intangible qualities of employees' knowledge and skillsets hold paramount importance, underscoring the necessity for businesses to uphold and nurture these attributes.



In contrast to Ghahroudi's findings, Glaveli et al. (2021) posited that employees' technical skills do not directly impact customer satisfaction or trust in the fitness industry. Instead, Glaveli et al. emphasized the significance of practical communication skills in fostering customer satisfaction and trust. Their study highlighted that the quality of interaction facilitated by good communication skills tailored to empathy emerged as a significant antecedent to customer satisfaction and trust, allowing for a better understanding of customer needs. Notably, communication skills become essential for customers who are inexperienced and require assistance with working out programs and equipment. By focusing on empathetic and informative communication, fitness club employees may foster trust and understanding with customers if they address members' specific needs and ensure positive interaction.

### *Service Quality*

Turning attention to another significant determinant, service quality emerges as a pivotal factor that notably influences customer retention. Firms should aim to achieve a service offering that effectively resonates with their customer demographic (Priilaid et al., 2020). Service quality within the fitness industry encompasses a multifaceted construct marked by elevated customer expectations and specific requisites (Tsitskari et al., 2017).

This paradigm is expounded by Herstein et al. (2018), who delineated a quintet of pivotal dimensions characterizing service quality within fitness clubs: reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance. These dimensions collectively encompass the fitness establishment's adeptness in the accurate and consistent delivery of

pledged services, the caliber of facilities, personnel, and equipment, the timeliness of service provision, the bestowal of personalized attention, and the staff's acumen in industry knowledge and cultivating customer trust.

Very similarly, Ferreira (2023) delved into the multifaceted determinants of customer satisfaction in fitness center service-oriented enterprises. Facility quality, instructor expertise, reception staff efficacy, pricing structures, supplementary services, service recovery effectiveness, service assurance, online marketing impact, and customer relationship dynamics emerged as significant contributors to customer satisfaction.

Similarly, within the sports industry, Rühley et al. (2020) emphasized that sports commitment is closely tied to core service aspects, staff competence, facility quality, management effectiveness, and participant interactions. In line with this, Nursanti and Ndayisenga (2021) suggested that staff, programs, facilities, exercise rooms, and equipment collectively constitute the spectrum of service quality in fitness clubs. The synergy between these research findings fosters loyalty and sustained involvement, thereby reinforcing customer allegiance and retention through the delivery of exceptional services.

Within the context of fitness centers' clientele, these dimensions highlight the pivotal role of physical attributes, the consistency of service provision, the ability of fitness center staff to instill confidence and trust, and the individualized attention to the club's members as essential components of service quality (Peitzika et al., 2020). This

comprehensive approach to service quality enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty, establishing a firm foundation for long-term engagement and retention.

Service quality in the fitness industry is complex, as customers have high expectations and specific demands (Tsitskari et al., 2017). Herstein et al. (2018) identified five dimensions of service quality in fitness clubs: reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance. These dimensions encompass the accurate and dependable delivery of services, the quality of facilities and equipment, the promptness of service, individualized attention, and the ability of employees to build trust through their industry knowledge. As the fitness industry continues to evolve, the upcoming acts of service quality play a pivotal role in motivating customers, enhancing customer retention, enabling differentiation from competitors, and adapting to emerging trends. By consistently delivering exceptional service experiences, fitness clubs can foster strong customer motivation, cultivate long-term customer loyalty, differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace, and effectively respond to fitness enthusiasts' evolving demands and preferences.

**Effect of Service Quality on Customer Motivation.** There are many reasons individuals become members of a fitness club. Some individuals want to improve their health. Others feel a sense of belongingness; some become members because they want to look better, because of the health benefits they receive, or because it may be cheaper than buying individual equipment for their home. All of these reasons reflect individual needs. To facilitate those needs, fitness club managers need to develop strategies to

understand the motives of their members to cater to their individual needs to keep them coming back.

Gibson (2004) examined the three prominent motivational theories in the sport and recreation industry: Murray's theory of needs (1938), Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943), and Berlyne's optimum stimulation level theory (1960). Murray (1938) proposed that individuals have psychogenic needs, such as achievement, recognition, and exhibition, which significantly influence their actions and decision-making. This aligns with Porter's competitive advantage theory, emphasizing the significance of understanding customer needs and providing unique value propositions to gain a competitive edge in the market. Applying Murray's theory, boutique fitness club managers can recognize the importance of addressing their members' psychogenic needs, such as achievement and recognition. By offering tailored and challenging workout programs that allow members to track their progress and receive recognition for their accomplishments, boutique fitness clubs can enhance members' motivation and commitment to their fitness journey.

Likewise, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory presents a hierarchical structure of human needs, starting from basic physiological needs and progressing to self-actualization. While Porter's competitive advantage theory primarily focuses on achieving differentiation and cost leadership, Maslow's theory takes a broader perspective, considering emotional and psychological aspects that may be crucial in shaping customer preferences and fostering customer loyalty. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory becomes

valuable in understanding the diverse range of needs that boutique fitness club members may have. Smith et al. (2021) found that a considerable portion of the sedentary individuals (approximately 75%) enrolled in their trial disclosed having existing health conditions. From the researchers' findings, they asserted that family physicians and other healthcare providers could play a pivotal role in encouraging the utilization of recreation-like facilities among their inactive patients. This scenario aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, particularly physiological and safety needs. Individuals with health conditions may prioritize their basic physiological well-being and seek safety in suitable physical activities under healthcare professionals' guidance. Beyond meeting basic physiological needs, such as fitness and health improvement, boutique clubs can strive to create an environment that fosters a sense of belonging and self-actualization. This may involve promoting a positive and supportive community among members and encouraging self-discovery and personal growth through fitness activities.

Furthermore, Berlyne's (1960) optimum stimulation level theory posits that individuals seek an optimal level of stimulation or novelty in their experiences. This concept relates to the blue ocean strategy, which encourages businesses to create uncontested market spaces by offering innovative and novel solutions. Berlyne's theory and the blue ocean strategy recognize the importance of providing unique and stimulating experiences to attract and retain customers. In line with Berlyne's optimum stimulation level theory, boutique fitness clubs can focus on delivering novel and stimulating fitness experiences to attract and retain their members. By offering unique and varied workout

classes, incorporating innovative training techniques, and continually updating their fitness programs, boutique clubs can keep their members engaged and motivated to participate regularly.

Integrating these insights into strategic decision-making enhances businesses' ability to cater effectively to customer needs, fostering long-term loyalty and retention in a competitive landscape. Addressing customer needs and enhancing external stimuli become paramount for motivating fitness club members and encouraging repeat patronage. Value creation, customer satisfaction, and service quality are crucial for customer retention. Huang and Lin (2020) highlighted that an individual's emotional well-being is linked to their perceived service quality. By considering insights from Murray, Maslow, and Berlyne's theories, businesses can craft strategies that attract and retain customers, leading to sustainable success.

**Effects of Service Quality on Customer Retention (Loyalty).** Extensive research indicates a strong relationship between service quality and customer retention within the fitness industry and low cost within the service industry (Mishra & Dahr, 2020; Porter, 1985; Quoquab et al., 2018). Achieving customer satisfaction through service quality leads to higher customer retention (Ghahroudi et al., 2018). Health and fitness managers should prioritize service quality to increase customer numbers, satisfaction, and loyalty (Yusof et al., 2018). Maintaining a high level of service quality that meets or exceeds the needs of fitness club members is crucial for customer satisfaction and retention in the fitness industry. Ferreira (2023) affirmed the pivotal role

of service quality in enhancing customer satisfaction and influencing customers' future intentions toward the brand, fostering loyalty, and promoting customer retention. In essence, favorable perceptions of service quality form the bedrock for customer satisfaction, subsequently nurturing loyalty and retention, thus standing as a vital pillar for the continued sustainability of these enterprises.

In a study undertaken by Pradeep et al. (2020), the researchers aimed to examine the nexus among service quality, satisfaction, and retention. The investigation revealed that the service quality of fitness establishments yielded substantial insights. Notably, over 70% of customers exhibited satisfaction or moderate satisfaction levels with their existing services. This observation remarkably corresponds to a notably elevated Service Quality Index score, aligning closely with highly contented patrons. The discernible correlation underscores the pivotal role of service quality in engendering customer satisfaction and underscores their joint significance as influential determinants for customer retention. Maintaining a high level of service quality that meets or exceeds the needs of fitness club members is crucial for customer satisfaction and retention in the fitness industry.

**Service Quality Differentiation.** There are many differentiating products or services, but choosing the correct variable to differentiate depends on the industry. Miragaia et al. (2016) suggested that it was crucial to differentiate from the competition to satisfy customers. They found that differentiation was essential for satisfaction concerning the service quality of facilities and equipment in a fitness club. Saini and

Singh (2020) asserted that managers should differentiate their services to create a positive attitude that will lead to loyalty and customer retention. The competition increases when many competitors are within a specific market, and their products are not differentiated. Therefore, these vendors should maintain or improve their quality of service (Sabbeh, 2018). Similarly, Ghahroudi et al. (2018) claimed that products are more tangible and can be easily differentiated from services. However, when the product cannot be distinctive from competitors' products, differentiating services and bringing quality to them can create a competitive advantage.

The challenge of differentiation in the fitness center landscape is apparent due to the prevalent similarity in offerings. However, this presents a compelling opportunity to gain a competitive edge by emphasizing quality (Moxham & Wiseman, 2023). This notion is reinforced by research indicating that consistent enhancements and upgrades to fitness center equipment quality can positively influence repurchase intentions (Yusof et al., 2018). By excelling in service quality through product/service differentiation to create customer value, firms can foster customer satisfaction and encourage repurchase (Sevilmiş et al., 2022). Specifically, perceived quality significantly influences each facet of perceived value, underscoring the importance of continuous efforts to enhance service quality and upgrade equipment. These endeavors attract new customers by offering value, cultivating repeat business, and fostering customer loyalty within the fitness industry.

**Service Quality Trends in the Fitness Industry.** Technology's profound influence on the fitness industry has sparked a drive for competitiveness and enriched



customer experiences within various clubs. According to Kercher et al. (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the integration of technology for remote workouts and home-based progress tracking, which has led to the rise of home gyms, wearable technology, and outdoor workouts, all of which are intertwined with the pandemic's transformative impact on fitness. People have creatively sustained their fitness routines at home or outdoors, leveraging wearable tech to monitor their progress (Kercher et al., 2022). Notably, fitness trackers gained significant traction and positively contributed to member experiences (Kelly et al., 2021). Globally, enduring fitness trends encompass HIIT, wearable technology, bodyweight training, and certified fitness professionals (Thompson, 2017).

In contrast, the fitness trends in Southern Europe diverge. Top trends in the region comprise personal training, licensure for fitness professionals, exercise as medicine, employing certified fitness professionals, functional fitness training, small group training, high-intensity interval training, fitness programs for older adults, post-rehabilitation classes, and bodyweight training (Batrakoulis et al., 2023). Notably, wearable fitness technology holds a different significance in this area globally (Batrakoulis et al., 2023). Therefore, technology's imprint on the fitness industry's evolution is evident through intensified competitiveness and elevated customer experiences catalyzed by the pandemic. Home gyms, wearable tech, and outdoor workouts have surged due to the pandemic's transformative effects. Fitness trackers have become prominent, enhancing member experiences. While global fitness trends emphasize HIIT, wearable tech, and

more, Southern Europe's focus shifts towards diverse fitness offerings, with wearable fitness technology playing a less central role.

Strategic management is crucial for effectively implementing these technology innovations (Pizzo et al., 2021). Managers can adapt and incorporate them more effectively by engaging with customers and understanding their perceptions of these technologies. Therefore, strategic management is vital in implementing technology innovations and meeting consumer demands. Fitness club managers should continually explore opportunities to integrate technology and adapt to evolving consumer expectations, thus creating value for their members. In addition to technological advancements, cohesion, and social community are essential.

Gjestvang et al. (2023) underscored that fitness clubs prioritizing cohesion and a social community tend to cultivate more active and motivated members. This involves not only individual workouts but also collaborative exercise endeavors. Establishing a supervised group exercise milieu with social support, overseen by qualified instructors within a secure setting, can significantly enhance members' motivation, commitment, and exercise consistency. Therefore, a robust social connection among participants amplifies the probability of adherence and commitment.

### ***Customer Satisfaction***

Customer satisfaction can be linked to customer retention. The customer is the most critical person in any business; without the customer, the business would not exist. Satisfied customers are a company's relationship capital. Acquiring companies will pay

for the plant, equipment, brand name, and current customer base (Mandal, 2016). However, acquiring new customers is costly because of the need to invest time, energy, and resources in developing relationships (Mandal, 2016). Chen and Liu (2019) recognized a strong relationship between customer satisfaction and retention; however, a firm's competitive status moderated the direct effect of customer satisfaction on retention.

Furthermore, Garcia-Pascual et al. (2023) emphasized the significant mediating role of satisfaction in the relationship between service encounters and customers' future commitment and intentions. Moreover, their research highlights that satisfaction with sports services strongly predicts customers' future intentions. Notably, content patrons tend to share their experiences with about six individuals, whereas dissatisfied customers might recount negative experiences to as many as ten people (García-Pascual et al., 2020). Jenneboer et al. (2022) identified the need for companies to foster satisfaction, trust, and commitment among customers. The researchers also found numerous articles highlighting the connection between positive customer experiences and satisfaction, underscoring the importance of crafting satisfying interactions to enhance customer loyalty.

The perception of fairness also positively influences contentment with complaint management, resulting in decreased intentions to switch and reduced customer attrition (De Mesquita et al., 2023). Within the realm of the service industry, it is of paramount importance for businesses to effectively manage customer complaints. Service recovery hinges on the promptness with which complaints are addressed and the provision of

suitable compensation, as these factors collectively contribute to cultivating enhanced customer relationships (Gao et al., 2022). Additionally, the severity of failures is directly linked to increased intention to switch and customer attrition (De Mesquita et al., 2023). Thus, prioritizing the cultivation of satisfied members in fitness organizations fosters robust service loyalty and effectively mitigates attrition rates. While customer satisfaction influences retention, it can be a stand-alone factor without moderating elements. Therefore, managers should scrutinize these moderating elements that lead to customer satisfaction, creating a direct link to customer retention.

**Measurement of Customer Satisfaction.** Customer satisfaction is a way for fitness managers to evaluate their strategies for the retention of their customers. Although many tools measure customer satisfaction, each industry is different. Therefore, the tools to measure customer satisfaction should be tailored to the specific industry. Customer satisfaction is vital in the fitness industry, where customers consume products and services. Torkzadeh et al. (2022) found that customer satisfaction was highly significant in their hypothesized factor for retention. To retain their customer, fitness club managers should ensure that they understand the consumption and how it affects their customers to adapt to their expectations to increase retention rates.

Measuring customer satisfaction includes a direct and indirect approach (Woodruff & Gardial, 1996). The direct approach uses customer surveys to gather customer opinions of the products and services offered. In contrast, the indirect approach analyzes inferential factors and concludes from facts, not customer's views, by making

inferences (Mayntz et al., 1985). Using a direct method, therefore, may produce better results in measuring customer satisfaction.

Many direct methods using customer opinions have been used to measure customer satisfaction, but there is minimal research on methods used in fitness club settings. The SERVQUAL method is based on the consumer's evaluation of service quality, the more widely used research method to measure customer satisfaction in different service industries. Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed the SERVQUAL method, consisting of a 22-item questionnaire to assess customer perceptions of service quality. This comprehensive tool encompasses five dimensions instrumental in predicting overall service quality. These dimensions include tangibles, which consider the physical aspects of service delivery; reliability, which evaluates the consistency and dependability of service provision; responsiveness, which measures the promptness and willingness of service providers to assist customers; assurance, which examines the competence, courtesy, and credibility of service personnel; and empathy, which gauges the extent to which service providers understand and cater to the individual needs of customers. Employing the SERVQUAL methodology provides fitness club managers with a framework to enact remedial measures for services that fall below the expected standard (Silva et al., 2023). The SERVQUAL framework has been widely adopted and validated across various industries to assess and improve service quality.

Similar to the SERVQUAL method, the service industry has also used the Center for Environmental and Recreation Management-Customer Service Quality (CERM-CSQ)

scale. Howat et al. (1996) developed the CERM-CSQ scale, which has the four dimensions of (a) core services, (b) staff, (c) quality, (d) general facility, and secondary services. Gocłowska et al. (2019) asserted that the Customer Satisfaction Index is the best way to measure customer satisfaction with the 7P theory for services, which includes (a) product, (b) place, (c) price, (d) promotion, (e) physical evidence, (f) people, and (g) processes. These methods are based on a direct approach and measure customer satisfaction from the customer's relevant opinions of the services. Thus, managers who engage with customers to ensure that they provide a product or service that meets the customers' expectations, adapts to their expectations and makes decisions that contribute to the quality of the products or services could increase customer satisfaction.

### **Literature Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to examine strategies boutique fitness club managers use for member retention. Current literature revolving around boutique fitness clubs is that of the hotel sector and small service industry. Since boutique fitness clubs are moving away from that sector, it is essential to understand strategies to keep individuals loyal. Many fitness club leaders use strategies that focus on service quality and their service policies, interactive and knowledgeable employees, attractive prices and offers, and members' participation in creating value.

Providing fitness patrons with differentiation services or products and how they price their products can attract customers and keep them loyal. Furthermore, as identified in the literature, these strategies lead to customer value and satisfaction, leading to

customer retention. While most boutique fitness clubs have little capital and operate in a niche market, it was beneficial to determine if successful strategies implemented by managers are focused on the antecedents that lead to customer retention through a differentiated or cost leadership strategy as identified by Porter's competitive advantage theory (1985), or both as seen in Kim and Mauborgne's (2005) blue ocean strategy. Both these theories suggest an appropriate framework, but it was necessary to examine which works best for customer retention in boutique fitness clubs.

### **Transition**

Section 1 included the foundation of the study, the background of the problem, the problem statement, the purpose statement, the nature of the study, and why the qualitative method and multiple-case study design were chosen for the study. Additionally, Section 1 included the research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations of the study, and the significance of the study. Furthermore, Section 1 encompassed an exhaustive review of the professional and academic literature where themes such as customer value, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, customer relationships, and service quality related to customer and member retention emerged. I conclude this section with a transition to Section 2.

Section 2 comprises the restated purpose statement, the role of the researcher, the selected participants, a comprehensive description of the research methodology, design, the population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments and technique, data organization technique, data analysis, and reliability and validity of the study.

Section 3 encompasses the study's objective, outcomes, a comprehensive analysis of the evidence, and substantiation for the study's assertions. The presentation of the findings delves into the practical implications of the study results for effective strategies for customer retention. The section culminates with a contemplation of the research process and my derived conclusions.



## Section 2: The Project

### **Purpose Statement**

It is challenging for companies to retain customers when operating in saturated markets (Höppner et al., 2020). The dropout rate at gyms is high, and more than 80% of fitness patrons leave the gym within 1 year of enrollment (Oliveira et al., 2021). The general business problem was that a loss in gym memberships impacts annual revenue in fitness clubs. The specific business problem was that some boutique fitness club managers lack effective strategies for member retention.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to determine the effective strategies boutique fitness club managers use for member retention. The target population consisted of fitness club managers from three boutique fitness clubs in the U.S. state of Wyoming. The sample was three club managers who had successfully implemented strategies for member retention by keeping their members past 1 year of enrollment.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the qualitative researcher is to have complete control over how they will conduct the research process, including how they will choose their participants, interact with their participants, conduct the research, and organize and analyze findings while conducting the research in a systematic pattern (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The researcher must be transparent with the research participants and protect the confidentiality and privacy of vulnerable participants (Bracken-Roche et al., 2017). In addition, individual biases can misrepresent the actual experiences of participants in

qualitative research projects (Wadams & Park, 2018). Therefore, bracketing researchers' experiences and having a diverse peer review can mitigate bias.

Although I have lived in the sample population area and have attended many different fitness clubs within the area, I did not have any relationship with the research participants as I have yet to attend any of the boutique fitness clubs from which I selected the participants. Qualitative researchers may depend on personal experience and feelings, which might bias the research (Elo et al., 2014). To mitigate the bias associated with data collection and analysis, the researcher must avoid viewing data from a personal perspective (Chong & Yeo, 2015). During data collection and analysis, I used member checking to be aware of any personal perspective to identify and negate any bias. Member checking ensures credibility and validity through participants' examination of the researcher's summary and interpretation of the data (Simpson & Quigley, 2016).

The implementation of interview protocols is crucial to mitigate bias and ensure a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. One effective strategy is to probe for diverse perspectives by encouraging participants to provide detailed explanations and diverse viewpoints through open-ended follow-up questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Open-ended questions allow a deeper exploration of the nuances and complexities within participants' narratives, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). By actively probing for diverse perspectives, the researcher can uncover additional insights, alternative viewpoints, and unique experiences that may have otherwise remained unexplored. This

approach promotes inclusivity and allows for a richer and more nuanced analysis of the data, contributing to the overall validity and credibility of the study.

Additionally, allowing participants to share their perspectives non-directively empowers them to express their thoughts and feelings freely, enabling a more authentic representation of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Overall, implementing interview protocols that probe for diverse perspectives enhances the rigor and depth of qualitative research, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and contributing to the overall quality of the study.

As the researcher of this study, it was my utmost commitment to uphold the ethical standards outlined in the *Belmont Report* protocol and the guidelines set by Walden University's Institutional Review Board. I adhered to the fundamental principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, as emphasized in the *Belmont Report* and scholarly literature (Bromley et al., 2015; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Before commencing this study involving human participants, I sought and obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board. Doing so ensured that the study would be conducted in a manner that prioritized the participants' well-being, rights, and privacy.

I implemented comprehensive measures throughout the study to safeguard participant privacy and confidentiality. These included assigning unique identifiers or pseudonyms to replace personally identifiable information and removing any direct identifiers, such as names or contact information, from the data as soon as possible to

ensure anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, providing a clear and detailed explanation of the research purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits, utilizing the standardized informed consent form provided by Walden University. Moreover, all data collection, use, and storage aspects were carried out securely and anonymously.

I stored the research data on a removable hard drive, securely kept in a locked safe within my home and accessible only to me. Regular reassessment and updates to the research protocols should be conducted to ensure ongoing compliance with ethical guidelines and evolving regulations as a continuous commitment to upholding ethical conduct and maintaining the integrity of the research process (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). By adhering to the principles outlined in the *Belmont Report*, this study protected participants' rights and welfare, promoting ethical research practices and preserving the research's credibility and validity.

In qualitative studies, information can be collected through many means, including observations, interviews, documents, and records (Cornelius, 2014). The primary means of data collection for this study was through interviews. I used semistructured interviews to collect data through videoconferencing. One of the standard methods for interviewing participants is to do so in their environment, which is quite common in collecting data for qualitative studies (Yin, 2016). However, advances in information and communication technologies offer new opportunities for interviewing

research participants. Researchers have found that videoconferencing, such as Skype, showed participants built a rapport more quickly and were more responsive than face-to-face participants (Tuttas, 2015). When using Zoom, another videoconferencing platform, the audio and video content of the meeting itself is only stored if the user has proactively selected this option via the user settings. This offers a secure environment for its users and suggests that videoconferencing may serve as a highly suitable platform for collecting qualitative interview data (Archibald et al., 2019).

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were boutique fitness club managers with a minimum of 1 year of experience. These managers operate their clubs in the U. S. state of Wyoming. The managers of these boutique fitness clubs had successfully implemented strategies for member retention. The purposeful sampling technique is widely used in qualitative research and was used in this research to select participants. Using purposeful sampling allows a researcher to choose participants with knowledge and experience on the phenomenon of interest who can communicate those experiences for the researcher to achieve a depth of understanding (Palinkas et al., 2015).

In addition to the aforementioned criteria for participant selection, initial contact was made through professional networks and associations related to the fitness industry, such as local fitness club owner associations or professional conferences. Additionally, an internet search was used to identify boutique fitness clubs within the selected area that

have been in business for over a year. This approach allows for targeted outreach to potential participants who meet the specified criteria.

A formal introduction to the study and its objectives were provided to the identified boutique fitness club managers. This was done through personalized emails, clearly outlining the purpose and significance of the research, as well as emphasizing the potential benefits of their participation. Building a solid rationale for their involvement helped foster their interest and motivation to participate in the study. Furthermore, establishing rapport and trust with the participants was crucial in gaining cooperation. This was achieved by demonstrating respect for their expertise and experiences, actively listening to their perspectives, and being responsive to their concerns or questions. Creating an open and non-judgmental environment for communication encourages managers to freely share their insights and experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

Last, maintaining clear and ongoing communication with the participants throughout the research process was essential. Regular updates on the study's progress and expressions of appreciation for their contributions helped sustain their engagement and commitment to the research. By implementing these strategies, I establish a working relationship with the boutique fitness club managers, fostering their willingness to participate in the study and contributing to the richness and depth of data collected.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

The three methods researchers can use are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). In qualitative research, the researcher uses open-ended questions to gain a more in-depth understanding of phenomena in their natural setting (Yin, 2018). Yin (2017) identified four elements of a qualitative study: (a) the willingness to go in-depth with research to attain a deeper understanding of the participants in their setting; (b) the ability to give a detailed depiction of the phenomenon that is occurring through exploration; (c) the ability to discover and address indefinable phenomena such as thinking, beliefs, and reasoning; and (d) the desire to build up an investigative phenomenon. Guercini (2014) noted that in qualitative research, the researcher gains the advantage of using context-specific knowledge rather than context-independent knowledge in the data analysis process. After consideration, I decided the qualitative approach was the most appropriate to identify strategies boutique fitness club managers use for member retention through a deep understanding of the phenomena that occur when implementing strategies that lead to customer retention using context-specific knowledge versus context-independent knowledge through data analysis.

Quantitative and mixed-methods methodologies were not appropriate for my study. Quantitative researchers can use a hypothesis to validate studies (Bryman, 2017). Furthermore, in quantitative studies, researchers collect data through surveys to test hypotheses (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). In my research, I did not test a hypothesis,

nor did I use surveys to test the hypothesis and make inferences from the data presented. Mixed-methods research combines characteristics from both qualitative and quantitative designs (Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai, 2015). Mixed-methods researchers also address more complicated research questions for a deeper theoretical understanding (Hyett et al., 2014). Considering I did not use any quantitative research methods through testing of hypothesis and mixed methods, the quantitative research method did not work best for this study.

### **Research Design**

I reviewed three qualitative designs for a qualitative study on member retention: phenomenology, ethnography, and case study. Phenomenological researchers use in-depth interviews to understand better the personal meanings of individuals' experiences and their interpretation of the world (Gill, 2014). Phenomenological researchers explore the meaning of lived experiences with a small group of research participants (Willis et al., 2016). I did not use the phenomenological design because the participant's interpretation would not answer the research question on retention.

The ethnographic design is a qualitative approach commonly used when exploring culture in a real-life setting (Fusch et al., 2017). The ethnographic design would not be applicable considering the purpose of my study is to identify and explore strategies for retention that boutique fitness club managers are currently using within their fitness clubs rather than observe a specific group culture of people over a period of time. The



ethnographic design was not appropriate for this study because my intention was not to study a cultural group.

I chose the case study to research member retention in boutique fitness clubs. Möller and Parvinen (2015) asserted that the case study is one of the preferred designs to examine qualitative studies on customer retention. With a case study, a researcher has the luxury of collecting data through interviews, observation, document review, and/or image review (Yin, 2018). Single-case studies represent a critical case or a unique case and are used in single organizations (Yin, 2018). I chose not to conduct a single-case study because the intent of the study was to replicate cases in different organizations with multiple boutique fitness managers and not just in a single unit.

Data saturation is a critical aspect of qualitative research, which occurs when the researcher cannot identify more themes or coding, and the information is repetitive (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Nelson, 2017). I needed a purposeful sample of three boutique fitness club managers to reach data saturation. Once there was repetition in the information data, saturation was reached. If saturation has occurred, then no further interviews are required (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Population and Sampling**

The population of focus for this study was boutique fitness club managers in the U.S. state of Wyoming. Within multiple-case study research, an adequate number of participants with knowledge of the research problem is usually between three and 10 (Yin, 2018). With appropriate decisions about units of observation and analysis,

researchers can improve data quality, enhancing richness and depth (Roy et al., 2015). To improve the quality of data, a qualitative researcher could use the purposeful sampling technique to select participants and collect data from the sample population (Yin, 2018). As such, I used purposeful sampling to ensure the selection of participants who can provide data to answer the research questions. Using purposeful sampling allows a researcher to select participants with knowledge and experience on the phenomenon of interest who can communicate those experiences for the researcher to achieve a depth of understanding (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The sample for this study consisted of three boutique fitness club managers in Wyoming who had successfully implemented strategies for member retention. All three managers came from different boutique fitness clubs. About 20% of U.S. small businesses are estimated to fail within the 1st year (Afiuc & Bonsu, 2016). Therefore, boutique fitness club managers chosen for this study must have operated their facilities for at least a year. The prerequisites for participants were the following: (a) hold a position as a manager at a boutique fitness club, (b) have a minimum of 1 year experience as a manager, (c) have experience in retention strategies, and (d) operate their clubs within the U.S. state of Wyoming.

Data saturation occurs when: (a) there is information redundancy, or (b) when no new themes or codes emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this case study, I collected data through methodological triangulation, where there are multiple data collection methods to increase the chances of data saturation. Data saturation in

qualitative research ensures the validity and accuracy of data. Researchers use data saturation to determine the sample size (Guest et al., 2020). While the sample size in this particular study was not needed, I followed the methodological triangulation protocol when conducting the research to ensure I reached data saturation.

Employing methodological triangulation can enhance the rigor and comprehensiveness of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To achieve this, I conducted semistructured interviews with boutique fitness club managers. These interviews provided valuable insights, experiences, and perceptions relevant to the case study, allowing for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Additionally, existing public data sources such as official websites, social media, online reviews, media articles and reviews, and fitness forums and communities were explored. These sources served as supplementary data, offering a broader context and enabling the validation of the study's findings.

Furthermore, social networking pages or online presence were analyzed to review relevant organizational information and customer feedback. This analysis provided additional insights and context, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the case study. By employing methodological triangulation through these multiple data collection methods, the research captured diverse perspectives, increased the reliability and validity of the findings, and ensured a more robust analysis of the phenomenon within the context of boutique fitness clubs.

## **Ethical Research**

Researchers are responsible for the welfare of their participants by following the principles of integrity, vulnerability, and dignity when they are in the data collection stage (Rendtorff, 2016). Yip et al. (2016) defined ethical research as respect for the persons participating in the study, avoiding harm, optimizing benefits, and applying justice to individuals and their societal level. Researchers should consider their safety to prevent participant harm (Isreb et al., 2020).

As the researcher of this study, I ensured that participants were not offered any monetary rewards, incentives, or gifts to maintain the integrity of the research process and avoid any potential bias. Per ethical guidelines, I provided each participant with an informed consent form encompassing the necessary components as suggested by Rowley (2012). This included providing detailed information about the research, confirming participants' understanding and agreement to the consent form, and obtaining explicit permission to proceed with the interview.

To obtain informed consent, participants received the consent form electronically through email. They were asked to carefully review the form, comprehend its contents, and explicitly indicate their consent, typically by responding with "I consent" or an equivalent phrase. This process allowed participants to clearly understand their rights, the research objectives, and the potential risks and benefits associated with their participation. It also ensured that their decision to participate in the study was voluntary and based on informed judgment.

At the beginning of each interview, I reiterated the key points covered in the consent form. This served as a reminder to participants about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential implications. It also allowed participants to seek any necessary clarifications, ask questions, or raise concerns before proceeding with the interview. By reiterating the consent form, I ensured that participants were fully informed and actively engaged in the research process, demonstrating respect for their autonomy and promoting transparency throughout the study.

Participants could withdraw from the study of their own accord at any time by providing me with a notice in person, over the phone, or by email. In addition, during data analysis and reporting, it is essential to maintain the confidentiality of participants (Ellis, 2019). I used a pseudonym for the name of the boutiques to ensure autonomy. I securely stored all data collected for 5 years to protect the confidentiality of the participants. After the 5-year mark, I will destroy the data using degaussing measures for electronic records. This ensures that all electronic data is irreversibly erased to maintain compliance with safeguarding the privacy and confidentiality of the information collected during the research. Before collecting data, I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (approval no. 10-02-23-045849). Institutional review boards ensure that researchers follow federal guidance to protect the rights and welfare of study participants (Phillips et al., 2017).

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Qualitative research has many different data sources, including interviews, participant observation, archival records, and documentation (Yin, 2018). I was the primary source for data collection; I used open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A), organizational documentation, and reflective journaling to collect data about the strategies boutique fitness club managers use for member retention. The interviews with the participants were conducted via videoconferencing. A semistructured interview protocol was central to the interviewing process (see Appendix B). Following the semistructured interview protocol, as outlined by Castillo-Montoya (2016), involved aligning interview questions with research objectives, fostering an inquiry-based conversation, deciphering participant feedback, and implementing the protocol effectively.

I reviewed documents by the organization. The use of documents in qualitative studies can provide valuable support for participants' responses and contribute to the establishment of historical data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In line with this, to enhance the validity and reliability of the interview findings, I employed a methodological approach known as triangulation by using company documents as additional sources of information. Social media platforms served as a valuable resource for accessing these documents.

Additionally, reflective journaling is a valuable method researchers employ to capture participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as highlighted by (Okoko et al.,

2023). Through the use of reflective journals, researchers have the opportunity to document and analyze the rich insights provided by participants. Additionally, Morselli (2018) emphasized the significance of the researcher's ability to interpret and reflect on participants' interview responses and conclusions in qualitative case study journaling. This process allows researchers to understand better the participants' experiences, perspectives, and the broader implications of their narratives.

When all data are collected, researchers must test the quality of the test instrument to enhance reliability (Gaus, 2017). Therefore, I used member checking and sent my interpretation of the data collected to the participants for review to ensure I understood their answers to the interview questions correctly and my interpretation of their online documents. By involving participants, the researcher can ensure that their perspectives are accurately represented and that the findings align with their lived experiences (Buys et al., 2022).

### **Data Collection Technique**

The purpose of this study was to examine strategies boutique fitness club managers use for member retention. Researchers conducting a qualitative case study should collect data from more than one source to improve the credibility of the findings (Yin, 2018). The data collection process for the multiple-case study consisted of conducting semistructured interviews via videoconferencing with participants in managerial positions in boutique fitness clubs, reviewing organization documents, and

engaging in member checking. I used the interview questions that are listed in Appendix A.

All data collection techniques have their advantages and disadvantages. Natural encounters occur during semistructured interviews, so the researcher obtains an in-depth encounter with the participant (Cairney & St. Denny, 2015). However, this data collection method can be time-consuming, costly, and vulnerable to bias (Maya-Jariego & Cachia, 2019). Unstructured interviews allow for open conversation. However, unstructured interviews risk not eliciting the themes closely related to the research question (Rabionet, 2009). I chose not to use an unstructured interview and used a semistructured interview technique because it worked best for the answers I wanted to elicit. Semistructured interviews allowed me to ask specific questions and let me hear participant's stories.

I used a tailored opening statement that introduced myself and reviewed confidentiality, the option to opt out, and the use of the results. Rabionet (2009) asserted that an opening statement allows the interviewer to establish a rapport and create an environment to elicit truthful answers from the interviewee. The data for this study included responses to open-ended questions from the semistructured interviews of each participating boutique fitness club manager. As the interviewer, I captured the interviews with the participants using an online recorder. Best practices during interviews also include using general themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I used an interview protocol (see Appendix B) to maintain a consistent process throughout each interview with



boutique fitness club managers. When needed, I asked participants follow-up questions to understand the participants' responses fully. To ensure I understood the participants correctly, I introduced member checking by allowing them to review the responses as I interpreted them.

Documents were also vital in collecting information; therefore, I obtained information from official websites, social media, online reviews, media articles and reviews, and fitness forums and communities. Social media posts play a significant role in the communication strategies of boutique fitness clubs, as managers frequently share updates, promotions, and engagement initiatives on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Analyzing these posts enabled me to gather valuable insights into the club's marketing strategies, member benefits, loyalty programs, and efforts to foster community engagement.

Furthermore, customer reviews and comments on social media platforms provided a rich source of information regarding members' experiences with the fitness club. By carefully analyzing these reviews, I gained valuable insights into member satisfaction, identified the club's key strengths and weaknesses, and understood which strategies resonated most effectively with members.

Online advertisements present another avenue for data collection, as fitness clubs often employ targeted advertising on social media platforms. Analyzing these advertisements provided me with valuable information about the club's promotional

strategies, pricing models, unique offerings, and incentives designed to enhance member retention.

### **Data Organization Technique**

In addition to collecting data, the researcher needs to organize the data during the collection and analysis processes. A popular method to assist in data collection is using qualitative data analysis software to generate codes, identify themes, mind maps, and process large volumes of data (Cypress, 2018). The data that I organized and used included audio recordings of interviews, transcripts, and organizational documents. I used NVivo as the data analysis software to aid with coding, sorting, and identifying themes from data. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software program that identifies themes and codes data (About NVivo, n.d.).

I ensured that the ethical protection of participants was adequate. Yin (2018) noted that the researcher should securely store all research records and then plan to destroy the record. I stored all data collected on a portable computer hard drive that I kept in a fireproof combination safe in my home until it met the 5-year requirement for destruction. At the 5-year mark, I will destroy the portable computer hard drive and shred any documentation.

### **Data Analysis**

Yin (2018) asserted that there are five steps to thematic analysis, which are (a) compiling the data, (b) disassembling the data, (c) reassembling the data, (d) interpreting the data, and (e) drawing conclusions about the data. Data compilation can include

participant responses to the interview questions, organizational documents, artifacts, and the organization's website content, which can offer a deeper look into the operations of a business while providing a form of communication to their stakeholders, customers, job seekers, employees, and providers about their products and services (Agrebi & Boncori, 2017). As such, I examined the organization's website, if applicable, and any social media presence. To compile the data, I used Microsoft Word to transcribe the interviews and compile the organization's online presence in a reflective journal.

Disassembling data is done through coding by taking meaningful data apart and putting it into meaningful groups taken from themes, concepts, or ideas that are connected (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Disassembling data addresses similarities and differences in the data collected. To address disassembling the data, I used words or phrases from the interview participants' narratives to describe the unit of data. I utilized NVivo, a software tool for compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and coding data (About NVivo, n.d.). NVivo enabled the identification and analysis of similar perspectives from the interviews, enhancing my ability to uncover patterns, themes, and relationships within the data. This software facilitated the organization and analysis of the research data, which allowed for a systematic exploration of key themes and patterns within the data set.

Reassembling the data means putting the data back together in a thematic hierarchy where the analytical thinking of the researchers is evidenced (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Reassembling the data included comparing the data in NVivo, establishing

intra-coder reliability, and conducting member-checking or participant validation.

Castleberry and Nolen (2018) asserted that member checking and inter-coding reliability are suitable when the researcher is working alone and are a convenient alternative. I was working alone in my research, so this method was appropriate to reassemble the data.

Interpreting data involves the researcher making analytical conclusions from the data presented as codes and themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). To interpret the data, I developed detailed themes by thoroughly analyzing participant interviews, organizational documents, artifacts, and transcripts in this case study. I used NVivo to show code clusters across the data.

Finally, as the researcher, I drew conclusions about the data. My process involved comparing and contrasting the themes that emerged from the data with the relevant theory of Kim and Mauborgne's (2005) blue ocean theory and Porter's (1985) competitive advantage theory. I aimed to validate and support the study's findings and identify any gaps or discrepancies by conducting a comprehensive literature review and aligning the key themes with the established theoretical framework. I ensured that my interpretations answered the overall research question: What strategies do boutique fitness club managers use for member retention? Answering the research questions brings clarity to the study and allows the researcher to include a discussion of the themes and global findings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

## **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity are two fundamental features in evaluating a measurement instrument in qualitative research. Dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability ensure reliability and validity in qualitative research (Maher et al., 2018).

### **Reliability**

Dependability is a specific measure of reliability. Reliability can reproduce a result consistently in time and space and is one of the main criteria for an instrument's dependability (Mohajan, 2017). Dependability is enhanced when expert panels review and support the data to improve dependability (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). I ensured dependability by reaching data saturation with the interview responses and organizational documents.

### **Validity**

Triangulation can combine collection sources of qualitative data, including interviews, questionnaires, observation, field notes, documents, etc., to improve study validity (Abdalla et al., 2018). Denzin's (1978) theory suggested there were four types of triangulations to include (a) data triangulation, (b) theoretical triangulation, (c) researcher triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation. For this study, I used methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation involves combining methods, such as interviews and observation, to better understand a given reality and complement document review (Abdalla et al., 2018). As such, I combined my videoconferencing interviews with open-ended questions, reviewed organizational records, and checked the

literature to develop comprehensive data sets. Validity refers to the property of an instrument to measure what it proposes (Mohajan, 2017). Credibility, conformability, and transferability in research ensure validity in research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Therefore, I focused on how I created validity through those three vessels.

### ***Credibility***

There are different ways to increase credibility within qualitative research. A researcher can use member checking of data interpretation, triangulation, and transcript review to enhance credibility. I used member checking and allowed the research participants to review my transcripts of their responses to interview questions and my interpretation of any organizational documents. The member checking process provided for verification of the findings and ensured completeness and reduction in my bias. Member checking checks the researcher's credibility by allowing the participants to review the researcher's results (Santos et al., 2017).

The seminal work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that dependability creates credibility. One criterion offered by Lincoln and Guba is triangulation to enhance the credibility of the data. Additionally, researchers who use methodological triangulation increase the reliability of their research (Ashour, 2018). As such, I used methodological triangulation by conducting interviews, reviewing organizational documentation, and member checking.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability occurs when other researchers can use and confirm previous research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). When the research findings reflect participants' opinions and experiences, it creates a neutral ground that eliminates researcher-biased interests or motivations and ensures confirmability (Kyngäs et al., 2020). To ensure confirmability, I followed the interview protocol and kept an audit trail of relevant documents related to the research that may be essential to other researchers. To complete an audit trail, researchers must keep consent forms, interview questions, and field notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, I kept an audit trail and reflective journal with all relevant information from the research so that future researchers may use it to confirm their findings.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability allows other firms to explore specific business problems. Transferability deals with how the research will be helpful to others with related research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Increased sample diversity and gathering different perspectives from different organizations increase the transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I therefore used three different research participants from three organizations to increase the diversity of the sample.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, I covered my role as the researcher and the participants used to examine the overall research question: What strategies do boutique fitness club managers

use for member retention? I identified the research method and design as a qualitative multiple-case study and the research participants as three boutique fitness club managers. Furthermore, I provided an overview of the ethical research, data collection instruments, techniques, and how I organized and analyzed the data in my research. Finally, I described how I would ensure the reliability and validity of my study.

In Section 3, I present my research findings and how they apply to professional practice. I recommend how boutique fitness club managers can improve retention rates, the implications for social change, and recommendations for future research. Last, I reflect on my experiences during the doctoral study process and any take-home messages to other researchers.



### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to determine the effective strategies boutique fitness club managers use for member retention. To address the study purpose, I interviewed three boutique fitness club managers in the U.S. state of Wyoming who had successfully implemented retention strategies. Data analysis yielded four overarching themes that encompass strategies that boutique fitness club managers use for member retention: (a) engagement with members, (b) employee differentiation, (c) loyalty programs, and (d) facilities.

When considering the two conceptual frameworks identified in Section 1 of this study, Porter's competitive advantage theory and Kim and Mauborgne's Blue Ocean theory, my findings align with Porter's competitive advantage theory following a focused "either-or" approach to differentiation and cost leadership as the theory suggests and not an "and-and" approach as the blue ocean strategy offers to create value for their customers, gaining the competitive advantage and leading to customer retention. To break it down even further, the strategies adopted by the three boutique fitness club managers include a focused differentiation strategy for gaining a competitive advantage through customer retention and not a combined differentiated/cost leadership strategy or hybrid. Section 3 covers the presentation of the findings, a discussion of applications for professional practice and implications for social change, recommendations for action and future research, my reflections, and a conclusion to the study.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

I created the interview questions listed in Appendix A. The questions were asked to three boutique fitness club managers in the U.S. state of Wyoming through semistructured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. Additionally, I reviewed the club's social media and website platforms, keeping a reflective journal on Microsoft Word. I then analyzed the data to answer the overarching research question: What effective strategies do boutique fitness club managers use for member retention? I used NVivo to analyze the interviews, summaries, and reflective journals. I identified four themes, ranked in descending order of importance: (a) engagement with members, (b) employee attributes, (c) loyalty programs, and (d) facility conditions. The four themes are encapsulated within the concept of service quality. Service quality consists of five dimensions: (a) reliability (how accurately and dependably the firm performs the services it promised), (b) tangibility (what facilities, staff, and equipment the firm possesses), (c) responsiveness (how quickly they provide their service and responsiveness), (d) empathy (how much individualized attention staff conveys to the customer), and (e) assurance (how well the employees know the industry and apply their knowledge to gain the trust of the customers; Herstein et al., 2018). Each of these themes contributes to the overall strategy adopted by boutique fitness club managers to enhance the quality of service and, consequently, retain members successfully.

Additionally, the three managers cater to specific target populations through unique and specialized offerings while using a focused strategy. Participant 1, Club 1

(P1C1), Participant 1, Club 2 (P1C2), and Participant 1, Club 3 (P1C3) have purposefully positioned themselves within the market to address the specific needs and preferences of their intended clientele in a focused niche. P1C2 recognizes the unique challenges of being a boutique fitness club in a small town and steers away from merely meeting “perceived” client needs. Similarly, P1C1 and P1C3 consistently uphold fidelity to their discipline and cater to a specific target market. P1C1 exclusively provides two distinct fitness activities tailored to individuals interested in those activities. P1C2 and P1C3 are focused on one discipline. However, P1C3 emphasizes that while actively seeking input from its members on how to serve them better, it is committed to its discipline, underscoring that not all feedback from its members is implemented. This approach acknowledges the challenge of satisfying every member's preference. However, by adhering to the core values of their discipline, P1C3 ensures that member retention remains a priority, understanding that staying true to their principles contributes to overall satisfaction within the community. The deliberate commitment of each of the three clubs' managers to providing a service to a specific target market aligns with Porter's focus strategy, as the fitness club managers strategically concentrate their offerings to cater precisely to a specialized niche. By focusing on a limited range of fitness activities, boutique fitness clubs distinguish themselves in the market, ensuring expertise and tailored services for their target clientele.

Furthermore, my analysis unveiled a pattern among the participant's responses, wherein each club exhibited a unique differentiation element within the identified themes.

Differentiation, in the context of this study, refers to the strategic process through which each fitness club strategically sets itself apart from others in the market by emphasizing and embodying distinct characteristics, offerings, or approaches within the overarching themes. This approach to differentiation is indicative of commitment among the boutique fitness club managers to carve out a unique identity within the competitive landscape, tailoring their services to meet the specific demands of their targeted clientele.

Last, the participants underscore a focus on service quality as a central concept of their competitive approach. While they may not tread into uncharted territories with groundbreaking services, their emphasis on delivering an exceptional fitness experience sets them apart. The boutique fitness club managers prioritize personalized attention, specialized classes, and a more intimate community atmosphere, all contributing to a service quality surpassing larger box gyms' standardized offerings. In this context, service quality becomes a differentiating factor, allowing these boutique fitness club managers to compete effectively by providing a unique, elevated, and customer-centric fitness experience that resonates with individuals seeking more than the conventional gym experience offered by their larger counterparts.

Compared to businesses operating in blue oceans, these boutique fitness club managers only introduce novel services or offerings entirely. Their competitive strategy revolves around providing superior and unique services compared to big-box gyms' expansive offerings. The study participants consistently emphasize the importance of delivering an elevated fitness experience, tailoring their services to cater to specific

needs, and cultivating community among members. Although they may not chart into blue oceans with unprecedented services, their commitment to delivering a superior and distinctive fitness experience positions them strategically in the competitive arena, aiming for customer loyalty in a market where differentiation is critical.

In examining the boutique fitness clubs, it is apparent that these establishments operate within a competitive landscape primarily influenced by larger box gyms. Interestingly, they also face similar competition from smaller boutique fitness clubs. P1C1 observes that larger gyms may lack a personal touch and tailors their strategies to address this gap. On the other hand, P1C2 recognizes the presence of others providing similar services in the area and addresses this competition by offering a unique training certification in their discipline. This underscores the dynamic strategies boutique fitness clubs employ to navigate competition and cater to the specific needs of their clientele.

The comprehensive analysis of boutique fitness club managers' strategies for member retention reveals a strategic alignment with Porter's focus differentiation strategy. Within the focus differentiation strategy, the firm seeks to provide a specific customer niche with products or services that better align with their preferences and requirements than competitors' offerings (Islami et al., 2020). Successful implementation requires targeting segments with unique buyer needs or distinguishing the delivery/production system from other industry segments (Porter, 2008). Focused differentiation involves creating a distinctive presence in a niche by offering exclusive products or services. Companies allocate resources to enhance the customer experience,

delivering unmatched value to secure loyalty and establish leadership within the chosen market segment (Porter, 2008). By cultivating caring, committed, and experienced employees who provide specialized offerings and create a unique atmosphere, as identified in the themes in Table 2, leaders position the fitness club as a focused and differentiated player in the market. This approach ensures that the club caters precisely to the needs of its targeted clientele, enhancing member retention and establishing a competitive advantage within the defined niche.

**Table 2***Themes and Codes Related to Strategies for Retaining Members*

Theme and Code	No. of coding references	Aggregate no. of coding references	No. of items coded	Aggregate no. of items coded
Engagement with members	0	57	0	9
Community involvement	4	4	3	3
Dedicated social media manager	1	1	1	1
Employee engagement with members	22	22	5	5
Online presence with offerings	1	1	1	1
Reliable schedule	1	1	1	1
Seeks customer feedback	4	4	4	4
Social media	11	11	8	8
Social media followers	2	2	2	2
Supportive of causes	1	1	1	1
Website establishment	1	1	1	1
Website search engine priority	3	3	3	3
Word of mouth	6	6	5	5
Employee attributes	0	46	0	8
Caring employees	1	1	1	1
Employee commitment	3	3	3	3
Employee experience level	12	12	7	7
Employee inspirational quotes	1	1	1	1
Employees offer certifications and workshops	2	2	1	1
Employees provide advanced training	3	3	3	3
Employees provide inspiration	2	2	1	1

Theme and Code	No. of coding references	Aggregate no. of coding references	No. of items coded	Aggregate no. of items coded
Employees provide motivation	2	2	1	1
Provides authentic experiences	2	2	2	2
Sense of community	10	10	5	5
Special offerings	3	3	3	3
Stays true to their offerings	5	5	5	5
Loyalty programs	0	8	0	4
Member discounted merchandise	2	2	2	2
Membership auto renewal	2	2	2	2
Membership discounts	3	3	3	3
Special pricing	1	1	1	1
Facility condition	0	4	0	4
Beautiful establishment	1	1	1	1
Facility cleanliness	3	3	3	3

Table 2 outlines the four themes identified through my analysis. Each of the four themes incorporates aspects of service quality, highlighting the integral connection between these themes and the concept of delivering high-quality services. The codes utilized under the four identified themes serve as the components in uncovering the overarching strategies employed by the three boutique fitness club managers for customer retention and how they distinguish the quality of their services.

### **Theme 1: Engagement With Members**

Engagement with boutique fitness club members through personal interactions as well as online interactions is the highest priority for all three boutique fitness managers. Recent studies have shown that within the sports industry, social media updates keep



individuals engaged (Wang, 2023). For P1C1, social media has become a platform to showcase the club's values, amplify positive testimonials, and engage with the community. The purpose-driven approach, encouraging participation in events for the broader community, is disseminated effectively through social media. Similarly, P1C2 and P1C3 do the same. P1C2 strategically shifted to online offerings during challenges such as COVID-19, using social media to promote and facilitate these offerings and maintain loyalty. Engaging with a consultant for search engine optimization, P1C2 seeks to improve online visibility, considering that many members discover the fitness boutique through Google or word of mouth. A dedicated social media manager contributes to a consistent posting schedule, reinforcing the sense of community emphasized through word of mouth.

Similarly, P1C3 stated that social media is leveraged to maintain open communication channels facilitating member engagement. The club is well-versed in understanding algorithms on social media platforms, ensuring a non-oversaturated content delivery. Departing from traditional methods, P1C3 has discontinued third-party collaborations, local business partnerships, and newspaper advertisements in favor of a more advantageous and targeted approach through social media. This shift is especially pertinent as younger demographics, their primary audience, are less likely to engage with print media. Instead of conventional posts, P1C3 has embraced social media "reels," finding them more effective in reaching and engaging with their members. To enhance their online presence, P1C3 invests in a dedicated website manager. P1C3 emphasizes the

importance of search engine visibility, prioritizes being easily "Googled," and aims to secure a top-ranking position to ensure visibility when individuals search for their specific discipline. All three club managers prioritize community building, using social media to showcase their values and amplify positive member experiences through engagement.

Lastly, transparent communication, proactive communications, and relationships are other shared aspects of member engagement. When asked, "What strategies do you use for member retention?" P1C1 mentioned prioritizing member engagement through a community-focused philosophy, relying on word of mouth and authentic member experiences. P1C1 states, "Any of us can have a Peloton bike at home, but is that really going to make us feel like we belong?" and "People want to belong to a community that they feel like is changing the world a little bit, you know, and that really keeps people engaged" Proactive interactions, such as quarterly testing nights, are organized where they have physical tests and then celebrate the member's victories, fostering ongoing engagement.

P1C2 similarly emphasizes staff trust and relationship-building, showcasing staff expertise and personalities. Financial constraints are overcome by leveraging word-of-mouth endorsements, highlighting the enduring effectiveness of positive member experiences. From the initial meeting with members, P1C2 actively engages with members, seeking insights into their awareness and perceptions and asking questions like "Where did you hear about us?" or "What is our reputation"? Furthermore, the P1C2 staff

consists of instructors who have been with the club for 2 or more years. P1C2 states, “People develop a relationship with them, and so these relationships grow.”

P1C3 employs a tailored community approach, fostering camaraderie and community within its smaller demographic. Transparent communication becomes a key element, distinguishing P1C3 from similar clubs. The club proactively engages members through a confidential questionnaire, aligning offerings with evolving member needs while staying true to discipline values. All three clubs prioritize engagement but in slightly different ways. P1C1 focuses on purpose-driven engagement, P1C2 on friendship-building, and P1C3 on a tailored community approach, providing diverse yet effective strategies to retain members.

## **Theme 2: Employee Attributes**

In a study conducted by León-Quismondo et al. (2020), the researchers found that managers of fitness centers say the quality of service is attributed not to the machines but to the staff. Consequently, the efforts of instructors are acknowledged as a differentiating factor. The three boutique fitness club managers differentiate employee attributes to ensure member retention. In a study conducted by Glaveli et al. (2023), the researchers revealed that a critical element of differentiation lies in fitness employees' communication and listening skills, alongside their social skills. Additionally, instructor technical skills are significant as a distinct factor influencing customer satisfaction and retention rates (Matute et al., 2018). Furthermore, differentiation becomes particularly crucial for small enterprises, as their progression and expansion heavily rely on internal

capabilities, specifically emphasizing the expertise and competencies of managers or owners (Rusu, 2021). This underscores the multifaceted nature of skills within the fitness industry and their impact on customer experiences and retention.

P1C1 strongly emphasizes staff's personal development and continually growing skills as a testament to the commitment required in the fitness industry. Leading by example, P1C1 acknowledges the importance of ongoing growth and development. Acknowledging their experience and honing the ability to embrace and overcome obstacles with some members reflects a commitment to adaptability and staff knowledge. P1C1 hires individuals who have been with the club for at least 3 years, representing longevity and commitment to the discipline. This approach aligns with P1C1's strategy of investing in individuals who understand and align with the club's culture, community, and mission, contributing to a supportive environment that fosters sustained member participation. Furthermore, the manager of P1C1 holds a significant position, actively participating in the State Commission and making valuable contributions to the regulatory framework of the discipline within their club. This involvement is emphasized on their website, where a dedicated "About Us" page serves as a showcase for the extensive expertise of the coach, with a particular focus on the manager's pivotal role in shaping the regulatory landscape of the sport.

Similarly, P1C2 distinguishes itself through craft-specific teaching, certification, and modules that align with the club's commitment to delivering genuine and accessible services. The emphasis on a well-trained staff is crucial for cultivating trust among

members. With ten teachers boasting at least 2 years of experience, P1C2 prioritizes relationship-building, creating a community where members trust both the space and the instructors. The manager has over 20 years of experience and holds academic degrees in their discipline. To corroborate this, their website features a special section highlighting their instructors' exceptional quality. Each instructor is individually showcased, with notable achievements such as being featured on renowned major news networks, prominent national newspapers, notable media outlets, and recognized music and culture magazines.

Notably, the instructors' commitment to excellence extends to their certifications, with many having studied abroad and holding specialized certifications, each boasting over 200 hours of practice, as noted on their website. This underscores the studio's commitment to providing a world-class experience through the expertise and accomplishments of its instructors. The wealth of academic knowledge and over 2 decades of practical experience that P1C2 brings to their role contributes to the club's credibility and expertise in the specialized fitness discipline. This commitment to staff expertise and the emphasis on craft-specific teaching align with the boutique fitness club's focus on delivering high-quality services to enhance member retention.

P1C3 prioritizes its affiliation with a specialized academy as a key element in delivering value to its members. The affiliation elevates visibility and credibility, instills essential values, and provides physical benefits to P1C3 members. In analyzing P1C3's social media presence, a distinct emphasis on lineage stemming from their affiliation is

evident through numerous posts and reels featuring individuals proudly donning their discipline-specific uniforms, showcasing their proficiency levels in the respective disciplines. Notably, the affiliation of each practitioner is subtly highlighted, with instructors skillfully demonstrating their expertise through their techniques. The strategic alignment with a prominent professional affiliation involves a mentorship program that promotes skill development within the discipline. P1C2 mentioned that the rigorous training undergone by the manager and staff further enhances the overall retention strategy, ensuring alignment with the core values of the discipline and contributing to member satisfaction within the community. This differentiation is evident within the three boutique fitness clubs, as each has instructors with specific certifications and additional training to perform in their disciplines.

### **Theme 3: Loyalty Programs**

Specific managerial decisions were determinants for fitness centers' success and long-term sustainability, including implementing loyalty programs to increase customer satisfaction and raise retention (León-Quismondo et al., 2020). The managers of the three boutique fitness clubs strategically integrate loyalty programs into their respective pricing initiatives, fostering a sense of value and exclusivity for members.

P1C1's extension of grants to individuals with specific ailments and their caregivers is a powerful testament to the participant's commitment to fostering loyalty and inclusivity within its community. By alleviating financial burdens for individuals facing health challenges, P1C1 goes beyond traditional loyalty programs focused solely

on fitness benefits. P1C1 effectively presents the grant initiative on its social media platform through engaging posts that clarify the grant's details and emphasize the substantial benefits it offers to individuals struggling with specific health challenges—all underscored by the noteworthy aspect that this valuable resource is provided free of charge. This initiative profoundly connects members dealing with health issues, strengthening their loyalty to P1C1. Providing financial support demonstrates a genuine care for the well-being of its members, contributing to a sense of belonging and loyalty that extends beyond the fitness realm.

In the case of P1C2, exclusive discounts and memberships with unlimited weekly classes seamlessly align with the club's mission, creating a compelling narrative that resonates with its clientele. The automatic monthly renewal of memberships through a dedicated app reflects the manager's commitment to hassle-free experiences. At the same time, the requirement for direct communication on cancellation emphasizes a personalized connection with members. Additionally, while exploring P1C2's social media, I came across their expansion into a retail space, showcasing exclusive branded merchandise at discounted rates for members. This tangible extension of their loyalty strategy not only boosts the perceived value for members but also solidifies their crucial role in fulfilling P1C2's mission.

P1C3 critically examines a recent loyalty program—the punch card system. While aimed at providing flexibility for members with inconsistent schedules, challenges arose, leading to a decrease in member interaction. This challenges community-building, a vital

aspect of loyalty for P1C3. Acknowledging the importance of consistent member interaction, the participant plans to refine the punch card system for better outcomes, showcasing P1C3's commitment to adaptive loyalty strategies. This introspective approach ensures loyalty programs align to foster strong connections and a sense of community among members.

In the examined boutique fitness clubs, namely P1C1, P1C2, and P1C3, integration of loyalty programs into pricing initiatives is evident. P1C1 distinguishes them by extending grants to individuals with specific health challenges, showcasing a commitment beyond traditional fitness benefits, and fostering a profound connection with members. P1C2 focuses on exclusive discounts, hassle-free memberships, and retail space with branded merchandise to enhance perceived member value. Meanwhile, P1C3 critically evaluates a punch card loyalty program, acknowledging challenges and committing to refining strategies. Each club manager's approach reflects an understanding of loyalty programs, combining fitness benefits with personalized and inclusive initiatives leading to member retention.

#### **Theme 4: Facility Condition**

Ensuring a clean and eye-catching facility was important to all three managers. Researchers have shown that the facility's state, including cleanliness and overall look, differentiates fitness clubs to enhance customer satisfaction and lead to customer retention (León-Quismondo et al., 2020; Pradeep et al., 2020). P1C1 uses social media to convey pictures of a clean facility. P1C2 has social media reviews containing descriptors



such as a “beautiful space” and “a place that renews the spirit.” Additionally, P1C3 underscored their facility's cleanliness compared to competitors in their interview. This collective emphasis on facility condition, as shown through various social media and interviews, suggests facility condition is a positive aspect contributing to customer perception and satisfaction, leading to retention.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

In the course of conducting this qualitative multiple-case study, an in-depth analysis was performed to unveil the strategies employed by select boutique fitness club managers for member retention. The investigation involved interviews with three boutique fitness club managers in the U.S. state of Wyoming, all of whom had successfully implemented strategies to enhance customer retention. From the findings, a pattern emerged, emphasizing the role of a focused differentiation strategy to ensure member retention. By asking the interview questions and keeping a reflective journal of their online presence, I could discern that offering superior service quality through member engagement, employee attributes, loyalty programs, and facility conditions allowed for service differentiation from their competitors in a focused niche.

Existing scholarly research underscores the significance of service quality differentiation as a pivotal contributing factor to member retention (Ghahroudi et al., 2018; Miragaia et al., 2016; Saini & Singh, 2020). Moreover, opting for an exclusive focus on differentiation, rather than adopting an "and-and" strategy involving both differentiation and cost leadership, has been a deliberate choice in this study. This

decision is aimed at establishing a competitive advantage, specifically through the avenue of member retention. Managers of boutique fitness clubs may find the insights derived from this study beneficial for enhancing member retention.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The implications of the findings for social change in the context of boutique fitness club managers and fitness clubs are significant. Firstly, the emphasis on service quality and member engagement strategies uncovered in this study suggests that boutique fitness clubs, through adopting tailored retention strategies, contribute to fostering healthier and more connected communities. As these clubs prioritize community-building and authentic member experiences, individuals are more likely to engage in regular physical activities, leading to improved individual well-being and a healthier society overall. In research conducted on Titan Fitness Gym, Carter and Alexander (2020) found that the community model allowed for deeper, more meaningful relationships to develop among members and, in turn, motivated individuals to extend their health-promoting habits. Additionally, the close-knit atmosphere fostered trust where members looked to one another for social support in other aspects of their lives. This shift towards community-centric fitness practices aligns with broader goals of promoting wellness and encouraging a supportive environment for personal growth.

Secondly, the commitment to differentiation through service quality, as identified in the study, can influence organizational cultures within boutique fitness clubs. By recognizing the importance of unique offerings, employee attributes, and facility

conditions, these clubs may set new benchmarks for excellence in the fitness industry. This may inspire other health and fitness organizations to reevaluate their strategies and prioritize service quality for enhanced member satisfaction and retention. Within the fitness industry, a positive experience with the services often leads to customer satisfaction and future intentions (Baena-Arroyo et al., 2020). The ripple effect of such changes could contribute to a positive transformation in the overall fitness landscape, with an increased focus on personalized, high-quality services that cater to the diverse needs of individuals and communities. Ultimately, the implications of social change extend beyond the immediate context of boutique fitness clubs, potentially influencing the broader fitness industry towards a more member-centric and socially impactful framework.

### **Recommendations for Action**

This study offers valuable insights that can significantly benefit boutique fitness managers struggling with customer retention strategies. While the primary focus was on boutique fitness gyms, the applicability of these findings extends to larger box gyms and small businesses in the service industry when formulating retention strategies. The study's findings affirm that the interviewed managers have effective strategies to support their clubs in retaining members. To enhance service quality and differentiate themselves, I recommend boutique fitness managers place a strong emphasis on four key elements: (a) fostering member engagement, (b) cultivating desirable employee attributes, (c) implementing loyalty programs, and (d) maintaining optimal facility conditions. The

intended audience for these recommendations includes boutique fitness managers and, more broadly, stakeholders in the fitness industry.

This study is published in ProQuest for accessibility and dissemination of the study's results, which could be facilitated by publishing the study's results and recommendations in reputable fitness management journals and magazines to ensure visibility within the industry's literature. Additionally, actively participating in and presenting the study at prominent fitness conferences, both virtual and in-person, will allow for direct engagement with industry professionals, fostering discussions and knowledge sharing. Last, organizing targeted training programs or webinars dedicated to customer retention strategies, focusing on the study's insights, may provide a practical platform for boutique fitness managers to implement and discuss these findings. This may ensure widespread awareness and practical implementation of the identified strategies for enhanced customer value and experience.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

In furthering research on the strategies employed by boutique fitness club managers for member retention, it is imperative to address the identified limitations to enhance the depth and reliability of the findings. One key challenge is the potential lapse in participants' memory regarding their implemented strategies. Future studies should consider presenting participants with case study examples from diverse boutique fitness clubs to overcome this. By examining connections between these examples and the

participants' experiences, researchers can utilize an effective memory-jogging technique, encouraging a more detailed and accurate recall of their retention strategies.

Another limitation involves the constrained time available for interviews and member checking processes. To alleviate this, future research could incorporate follow-up interviews or post-interview questionnaires. These additional measures would allow participants to provide any overlooked information or details that might have been omitted during the initial interview due to time constraints. This approach ensures a more comprehensive exploration of the strategies employed for member retention, acknowledging the limitations posed by time sensitivity.

Addressing the fear of competition as a limitation requires a transparent approach. Future researchers should emphasize clear communication about the study's purpose and its implications for future research. Establishing confidentiality protocols can foster an environment of trust and confidence. This transparent communication is essential for encouraging participants to share their strategies without fear of negative consequences openly. Ultimately, these recommendations seek to refine the research methodology, ensuring that the study captures the complexities of boutique fitness club managers' strategies for member retention. By addressing memory limitations, time constraints, and competition concerns, future research can contribute solid insights into the boutique fitness industry, offering practical implications for both research and the fitness industry.

Additional research to gain insight into how boutique fitness club managers can employ successful retention strategies can benefit the fitness club industry and assist

other service industries struggling to retain their members. It represents a cross-organizational approach that could enhance member retention practices within various industries. This broader understanding and implementation of effective strategies can improve customer loyalty, engagement, and satisfaction, contributing to organizations' overall success and sustainability to gain a competitive advantage.

### **Reflections**

Embarking on this doctoral journey has been a meaningful learning experience, offering invaluable time management and dedication lessons. The presence of a student support system has played a pivotal role in achieving short-term objectives and navigating the path toward long-term goals. Initially motivated by the personal challenge of obtaining a doctorate in business administration, the journey has evolved into many insights gained from fellow students and respected professors.

This study has been eye-opening, showcasing how academic learning can seamlessly apply to practical business choices. It has brought to light a range of viewpoints and strategies leaders use in different organizations, emphasizing how these approaches can be relevant in various scenarios for problem-solving and achieving business success.

The experience necessitated the repression of personal biases, particularly in my limited familiarity with the fitness industry. I had to ensure that my management techniques and strategies were consistent with the integrity of the study I conducted.

Pursuing a doctoral degree in business administration has equipped me with different research techniques applicable across many fields of business. This new understanding enables me to dissect the strategies employed by business leaders to ensure organizational success. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to learn from a group of knowledgeable individuals within the doctoral setting, with special appreciation for Dr. Meridith Kathryn Wentz. Her leadership and guidance have influenced my approach to overcoming challenges and molded my leadership strategies. Her counsel throughout the process has provided a valuable lens through which I can now analyze business problems and successes with newfound insight. After earning my Doctor of Business Administration degree, I anticipate contributing to the understanding of effective leadership strategies and organizational success across varied domains. The journey has been demanding yet enriching, and I am eager to apply the knowledge I acquired to impact both academic and practical business realms positively.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the findings from this study aimed at identifying strategies employed by boutique fitness club managers for member retention, it is recommended that managers direct their efforts toward enhancing service quality with a specific emphasis on differentiation. Some boutique fitness clubs need more capital for extensive business investments than larger gym establishments with substantial financial resources. Adopting a cost leadership approach and cutting expenses on facilities and pricing alone may prove insufficient to retain members, as individuals seek a distinctive and unique

experience that larger gyms often struggle to provide. Additionally, members of boutique fitness clubs invest the highest amounts in monthly dues and on a per-visit basis, underscoring the premium these individuals attribute to a specialized and unique experience. In aggregate, the average fees paid by members across all boutique fitness clubs exceeded the average for members of health clubs in all facilities by approximately \$40 (IHRSA, 2020). Therefore, instead of focusing on how to keep the price of their services low or to cut costs within the facility, the managerial focus should center on elevating and differentiating service quality, emphasizing (a) engaging interactions with members, (b) cultivating favorable employee attributes, (c) implementing effective loyalty programs, and (d) maintaining optimal facility conditions by aligning with their members' distinct expectations, boutique fitness clubs can improve their competitive standing and cultivate enduring connections with their clientele, thereby facilitating the retention of members.



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### Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to retain members?
2. How did you determine what strategies were effective for member retention?
3. What strategies did you find most useful in retaining members?
4. What strategies did you find least helpful in retaining members?
5. How did your strategies in retaining your members differ from those you used to obtain members?
6. What key obstacles did you face when implementing strategies for member retention?
7. How did you address the key obstacles you faced when implementing your strategies?
8. What additional information would you like to add that pertains to the development, implementation, and improvements to strategies you use in retaining members?

## Appendix B. Interview Protocol

Step	Script/action
Introduce myself and convey the purpose of the study.	<p data-bbox="570 407 1421 443">My name is Jaime Kelly, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I appreciate their time and for allowing me to conduct the interview. The purpose of this study is to identify strategies boutique fitness club managers use to retain their members. These retention strategies can lead to individuals living a healthier lifestyle and lower health insurance costs, improving workplace productivity, and reducing absenteeism. By asking you some questions relevant to the strategies you use at your club, it may assist in identifying the best strategies for the purpose of this research.</p>
Get to know the participant and their background.	<p data-bbox="570 1010 1421 1045">Ask the following questions:</p> <ul data-bbox="618 1079 1421 1325" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="618 1079 1421 1115">• What is your current position at the fitness club?</li> <li data-bbox="618 1148 1421 1247">• How long have you worked as a manager at a boutique fitness club?</li> <li data-bbox="618 1281 1421 1325">• Do you own the fitness club or are you employed?</li> </ul>
Explain informed consent.	<p data-bbox="570 1352 1421 1787">You have already received and consent to the informed consent form via email. This form identifies the process for storing information contained in the interview process as well as identifies that you as a participant can opt out of the interview process at any time. Do you have any questions about the form? If you ever have any questions in the future, you may email me at my school email as indicated on the consent form and I will answer any questions that you may have.</p>

Step	Script/action
<p>Ask interview questions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What strategies did you use to retain members?</li> <li>• How did you determine what strategies were effective for member retention?</li> <li>• What strategies did you find most useful in retaining members?</li> <li>• What strategies did you find least helpful in retaining members?</li> <li>• How did your strategies in retaining your members differ from those you used to obtain members?</li> <li>• What key obstacles did you face when implementing strategies for member retention?</li> <li>• How did you address the key obstacles you faced when implementing your strategies?</li> <li>• What additional information would you like to add to that pertains to the development, implementation, and improvements to strategies you use in retaining members.</li> </ul>
<p>End the interview and convey what to expect.</p>	<p>Thank you very much for your time. From here I will transcribe our interview conversation and send to you for your review via email. This will give you an opportunity to make any corrections that have been made in the record and correct them as you deem necessary. Once you are finished with the review, please send the corrections back to me via email. Again, thank you for your time and it was a pleasure speaking with you.</p>