

# Customers' loyalty to Greek athletic centers during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

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**Abstract:** *The appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic caused great difficulties and changed the way businesses operate. All industries have been affected, with the consequences that will follow after the end of the consecutive lockdown to be the most important issue. The sports services market is one of the sectors that have been greatly affected as its operation is performed mainly with a physical presence. Exercise is part of people's daily lives. Therefore, the disruption of the exercise program of athletes in combination with the change of lifestyle due to the restriction of movement and social interactions raises the chances of influencing their daily habits. With an emphasis on the market situation in the post-COVID-19 era, this research focuses on measuring the loyalty of athletes to the companies in which they were customers before the pandemic lockdowns in combination with the factors that affect it. The aim is to find out if loyalty has been affected as well as at what levels it is. Utilizing the data, industry professionals can modify the operation of their businesses with less financial risk by emphasizing services and trends that are in direct demand. The research was conducted in a sample of 200 participants in Greece during the second pandemic lockdown from October to December 2020. The results reveal that loyalty has been maintained at a high level towards sports companies and on the contrary there are indications of the reluctance of the sports public to purchase new athletic services.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, loyalty, customer satisfaction, consumer behavior, athletic centers

## 1. Introduction:

As is well known the virus COVID-19 has changed the world market. Since March 2020, the conditions under which companies operate have taken an unprecedented form with professionals themselves facing difficulties every day. One of the sectors that have been affected is that of sports entrepreneurship. Since COVID-19 was detected for the first time in 2019, in China, Yuhuan territory, has spread worldwide affecting the lifestyle of people in every part of the world. The World Health Organization on January 2020 announced details about the massive outbreak of the new Coronavirus COVID-19 as a global threat for public health. Two months later the virus was declared a pandemic with the Countries one after other to enforce lockdown for civilians and markets (WHO.com 2020 ). The first lockdown of 2020 was applied from March to May in Greece (Hellenic ministry of foreign affairs 2020). Due to the situation, the sports companies were not allowed to operate during the best economic period, ie the spring months till July. This created economic problems in the industry. From the end of October, according to the instructions of the World Health Organization, the Greek government implemented a lockdown again and the athletic centers closed for a second time. Every activity including health centers stopped their operations and services. This situation of limited activity has negatively affected the active lifestyle of people of all ages (Hofmann et al 2019). This immediate increase of sedentary life started to reveal dangers for the future of the sports industry. Until the second Greek lockdown, the visits of the trainees to the athletic centers were made with appointments of limited individuals. As a result, a sports company limited the customers that can simultaneously serve lowering its daily financial turnover. This also results in customer dissatisfaction and it is suspected to affect the influence of loyalty shown by the customers to an athletic center. Due to the limited number of customers that can be served and the disorder in sports routine, there is a possibility that the loyalty of the members of the athletic centers will be affected as well as the contract renewals.

According to Statista(2020), the athletic centers' operations in Europe constitute a market of 31,53 billion euros in total funds and is the second-largest when in revenue behind North America. As it is the main concern of fitness professionals to open their enterprises as soon as the lockdown ends we have to study this phenomenon of possible lack of loyalty and the conditions of customer return to the athletic centers. Factors that affect loyalty may have been negatively affected because of the pandemic lockdown and as an outcome, this may affect the whole industry.

## 2. Review of literature:

Building and maintaining brand loyalty has been the most difficult challenge for the sports business since the day started to operate. To increase the loyalty of the customers to a brand, the managers need to emphasize the priority of maintaining and increasing the number of customers. To achieve this it is needed high loyalty to the company with elements of commitment. The

service quality must be the best, based on the customers' needs to improve their levels. This conventional approach emphasizes service quality, customer loyalty, customer loyalty intention, and customer satisfaction.

For marketing science, loyalty is a multidimensional concept that acts as a criterion by the receiver of information to evaluate the system by which it communicates with the transmitter or the elements that are relevant to the information received. Customers' Loyalty has many benefits to companies such as instant profit, a decrease of marketing expenses, and an increase in customer growth (Blut et al., 2014). Is the factor that leads customers in staying more time with a company, business, or brand and purchasing more services (Evanschitzky et al. 2012). The continuation of the relationship between the brand and its customers can be defined as customer loyalty (Ltifi & Gharbi, 2012). Organizations benefit from a loyal customer because it is easier to serve them as they need less support and they know well the service they purchase (Burke 2015). Loyal customers operate competitively on behalf of an organization against other market rivals and price fluctuations and at the same time act as brand ambassadors (Lawfer, 2014). Loyalty to the brand is one of its most important characteristics. (Ok,Choi and Hyun 2011). It is defined as the perceived belief that a brand has the ability, dedication, and will to fulfill on its part, its commitments to its customers (Baek et al 2010). It represents the characteristics of influence exerted in the past by a company through marketing techniques to its customers in such a way as to attract even more and keep them loyal above. (Ghorban and Tahernejad 2012). It has been found that the loyalty developed in the brand minimizes risk, creates confidence and trust with its customers (Jin, Line & Merkebu 2016). It also has a potential future influence on the formation of consumers ' opinions about a brand and its choices. (Erdem and Swait 2004).

Brand loyalty is a factor that reduces a consumer's sensitivity towards price and increases their susceptibility to making a purchase. (Pecot et al 2018). It guarantees a long-term plan to offer products and services to consumers and to develop satisfaction, loyalty to the commitment, and continuous commitment. (Ghorban and Tahernejad 2012). Customers with high loyalty provide the organization's management with high honesty feedback which can help the function of improvement of the organization's products and services (Blut et al., 2014). When someone buys again something from an enterprise he bought before confirms the definition of customer loyalty. (Eid, 2011). On the other side behavioral Loyalty is a long-last relationship between customers and an organization (Ltifi & Gharbi, 2012).

Customer satisfaction is a person's feelings of joy or disappointment that result when comparing a product or service that meets the expectations (Kotler & Keller, 2016). It reduces the possibility of a customer to share a negative word of mouth (Zeithaml, V.A., and Bitner, M.J. (2003). Oliver (2010) defines satisfaction as the evaluation of a service/product after its consumption and of whether the good or service provided met the expectation of the customer. A factor with great importance in customer satisfaction that leads to future successful outcomes for an organization is the quality of service (Abbasi et al., 2010). Namkung and Jang (2007) and Suhartanto et al. (2018) argue that product quality, value, and service are the main elements of customer satisfaction. Also, the accuracy of billing, the billing timeline, the competitive pricing policy, the service quality of customers, a good value of products/services, the billing clarity, and service speed are all factors that affect customer satisfaction (Angelova and Zekiri 2011)

Service is defined as activities with an economic return that create value for customers (Lovelock, 2000) and their quality appears to be one of the main factors that can maintain a company's customers (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman, 1996). The meaning of service quality is linked to the meaning of customer satisfaction and is based on the theory of expectancy-disconfirmation (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The theory's conceptualization frame appears to be appropriate for the improvement of the service quality policy of organizations (Iacobucci et al., 1995). We understand that from this perspective service quality transforms and affects the variable of customer satisfaction. Also as we try to combine and compare the relationship between the variable of this research Ko et al (2010) argues that service quality appears to show an increase of spectators' involvement and Alexandris et al (2017) and Foroughi, Shah, Ramayah and Iranmanesh, (2019) argue that service quality increases consumer loyalty also. A service of high quality with a focus on customer satisfaction with an organization improving services and goods leads to a successful relationship with the customer (Rego et al., 2013). Customer satisfaction is evaluated by the customers as performance service attributes which in short terms influence their overall service experience (Torres, 2014).

### 3.Methodology:

The questionnaire contained two sample control questions, a demographics chart, and 5 variables to measure. The variables are the COVID-19 lifestyle consequences, loyalty, service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty intention. The COVID-19 variable was measured based on the questionnaire suggested by Kumari, Ranjan, Vikram, Kaur, Sahu, Dwivedi, Baitha, Goel (2020), loyalty and loyalty intention were measured based on the questionnaire suggested by Zeithaml et al. (1996), service quality was measured based on the questionnaire suggested by Oliver, R. L. (1997) and customer satisfaction was measured based on the questionnaire suggested by Cronin & Taylor (1992), Similar measures have been used by researchers of the sports industry (Alexandris et al., 2004; Bodet,2008). The SPSS statistics was used to export the data.

Table 1

Source	Variable name	Measure	Type of variable
Kumari,Ranjan, Vikram,Kaur,Sahu, Dwivedi, Baitha, Goel (2020)	COVID-19 lifestyle consequences	5-point Likert scale type questions	Lifestyle Consequences
Zeithaml et al. (1996)	Loyalty	6-point Likert scale type questions	Loyalty to Health clubs
Oliver (1997).	Service Quality	9-point Likert scale type questions	Service quality of Health clubs
Cronin, Taylor (1992)	Customer Satisfaction	9-point Likert scale type questions	Health clubs customer satisfaction
Zeithaml et al. (1996)	Loyalty Intention	9-point Likert scale type questions	Loyalty intention of customers to Health clubs

#### Phase 1

To assure that the sample had no issues with the interface of the questionnaire, pilot testing was used to check the validity of the questionnaire (Saunders S., Munro D. 2000). The subsequent version of the questionnaire was pretested in October 2020, on 10 participants of different demographical characteristics as age, gender, and education. We tried to assess the participants' perception and acceptability of the questionnaire. The participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire and comment upon their judgment on each item. All the items were modified to be understood better by the participants. This process led to the generation of 39 items before the final questionnaire was distributed.

#### Phase 2

The questionnaire was distributed to 200 individuals in Greece, aged 19 years and above, who were customers of an athletic center before the pandemic lockdown. The questionnaire was distributed as a google form through the mail and the gathering of the data lasted from October to December in 2020, during the second pandemic lockdown in Greece.

Due to the limited time of duration of the second Greek lockdown and the need for participants, the non-probability sampling technique of purposeful sampling was applied. To assure that the statistical results of this study are accurate, we applied purposeful sampling which is the technique of selecting high-rich information from participants, selected by factors as age, gender, status, work experience related to the subject of study (Coyne 1997). We did not attempt to use the technique of convenience sampling, gathering data by asking friends or family because this method has been proved to result in low quality and inaccurate data (Johnson R. Burke, Onwuegbuzie 2004). Due to this reason, purposeful sampling was essential to obtain the data needed to design an accurate survey to study the factors that affect customers' loyalty to Greek athletic centers.

To accomplish the purpose of the present study, based on the literature, the following research hypotheses were set up:

- H1. The service quality of health clubs influences customer loyalty.
- H2. The service quality of health clubs influences the intention of loyalty
- H3. Satisfaction influences the customer loyalty of health clubs
- H4. Covid-19 lifestyle affects loyalty to health clubs

#### Reliability analysis:

The reliability and validity of the methodology were applied during the statistical analysis were maintained as previous researchers conducted researches with similar objectives. The design of the questions and the layout of the online form of its is based on validated questionnaires from previous researchers also. To validate the factors of the measurement model we applied a factor analysis and the sampling adequacy was tested with a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test. We assured that the factor model is appropriate and its adequacy is over 0.5, referring to the satisfaction factor. Barlett's Test was used to measure an equal variance among the parts of the questionnaire and what is the level of significance. We tested the internal cohesion of the questionnaire's elements and ensure their relativity with the group questions using the method of reliability alpha analysis. ( Howitt,

Cramer,2005). The results of a reliability alpha analysis should be over 0.7 to be considered as a significant element of convergent validity. (Bagozzi R., Yi Y. 1988) .

The reliability test of the research tools that were used in the survey was done by using Cronbach's alpha index. The reliability value of an index should be above 0,60 to be As a research tool to be reliable (Nunnally, 1978). In the table we observe that the following data were found to be reliable: the Service quality with 4 questions scored a = 0,962 and is considered to be the most reliable research tool, then the Customer satisfaction with 3 questions marked very strong reliability with a = 0,952, Loyalty with 3 questions marked very consistent reliability with a = 0,921 and loyalty intention with 16 questions scored very strong reliability with a = 0,917. Finally, COVID-19 lifestyle consequences with 9 questions scored strong reliability with a = 0.325 is considered unreliable, as they recorded a final result below 0,60.

Table 2

Variable name	Items	Cronbach's a	Cronbach based on standardized items
COVID-19 lifestyle consequences	9	0,325	0,334
Loyalty	9	0,921	0,924
Service quality	4	0,962	0,963
Customer satisfaction	3	0,952	0,952
Loyalty intention	3	0,917	0,923

#### 4. Results:

100% of the respondents were active members of a gym before the outbreak of the pandemic with 34% of them for more than three years. The participants in the research were 52% women and 48% men with 42% of the total age group 19-29 years. 73% declare themselves unmarried with the majority of 90% having studied in higher education. 59% state that their income is below 700 euros per month with 62% being students and the remaining 38% civil servants or private or business people. Regarding the favorite exercise program, the opinions differ with a small difference being observed in the room weights with a percentage of 39.5% in contrast to the other two answers which range around 30%. Most with a rate of 24 to 34% visit the gym 3-4 times a week with 31.5 and 37, 5% to state that they exercise for a half to one hour at a time. 53.5% report that there have been no changes in diet in terms of fruits and vegetables while on the contrary there is a small increase of 29.5% in the consumption of junk food themselves. The rate of consumption of dietary supplements remained the same as before the pandemic (75%) as well as the support of the social environment to his sports habits (68%). The interest of the respondents to exercise in 43% remained the same while the 43, 5% states that it increased from slightly to significantly. Participation in exercise activities seems to have decreased by 62%. The sleeping hours of the respondents seem to have remained the same with a percentage of 43% while 27, 5% stated that they increased with the quality of sleep remaining the same and on the contrary, a 25% stated that it decreased. As for stress levels, it seems that they have increased considerably by at least 55% in positive responses.

For reasons of personal preference, the respondents chose the gym where they trained as they feel happy compared to other choices with a percentage of over 60%. Compared to the gyms in their area, they consider it better with a percentage of over 70% and were interested in its services from the beginning compared to the rest with a percentage of at least 60%. The majority is interested in renewing their subscription to the same company in the future with 70% answering positively but do not seem willing to pay for the purchase of more services in it as about 70% answer negatively. The promotion of the company in the form of advice to other people seeking sports services is positive with a percentage of 70% as the positive word of mouth is at the same levels. The measurement of loyalty in this particular gym seems to be positive with a small difference as 56% state that they have it as a first choice, 22% state that they neither agree nor disagree and 17.5% disagree. The majority believe that the sports companies they visit offer excellent services with 75% stating that the level of programs is very high. Also, the members of the athletic centers consider that their companies provide high-quality services in various ways and not only with sports at a rate of more than 55%. 75% are satisfied with the corresponding percentage declaring that they are emotionally happy in the form in which they receive the services for which they paid. The majority consider that the sports companies they visit offer excellent services with 75% stating that the level of programs is very high. Also, the members of the athletic centers consider that their companies provide high-quality services in various ways and not only with sports at a rate of more than 55%. 75% are satisfied with the corresponding percentage declaring that they are emotionally happy in the form in which they receive the services for which they paid. The majority believe that the sports companies they visit offer excellent services with 75% stating that the level of programs is very high. Also, the members of the athletic centers consider that their companies provide high-quality services in

various ways and not only with sports at a rate of more than 55%. 75% are satisfied with the corresponding percentage declaring that they are emotionally happy in the form in which they receive the services for which they paid.

The satisfaction of the already registered members remains positive with only 11% expressing their dissatisfaction and 8% remaining neutral. 79% are willing to make positive comments to third parties about the services of a gym with the corresponding percentage (68.5%) proposing to their friends to become members of the same sports center. Finally, 32% of respondents express their opposition to the possible renewal of their membership in this sports center.

Regression analysis - Case 1 :

Taking as a dependent variable " COVID lifestyle " it was found that the other extradited variables can affect it in a percentage of 1,3% for this case. R Square =0,13 .According to Anova's findings, the model is statistically significant with F = 0,627 and Sig 0.000. Loyalty Intention was found to affect positively the dependent variable. The Beta statistics of the independent variables Loyalty, Service Quality, and Satisfaction were found to affect negatively the dependent variable COVID lifestyle. Based on the Sig Statistics, the association between the dependent and the independent variables is statistically significant.

Table 3

	<b>B</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig</b>
(Constant)	3,087		27,251	0,000
Loyalty	-0,002	-0,006	-0,042	0,966
Service quality	-0,012	-0,060	-0,395	0,693
Satisfaction	-0,020	-0,099	-0,518	0,605
Loyalty intention	0,012	0,057	0,316	0,752

a. Dependent Variable: COVID lifestyle

Regression analysis - Case 2 :

Taking as a dependent variable " Loyalty " it was found that the other extradited variables can affect it in a percentage of 75,7%, for this case. R Square = 0,757 .According to Anova's findings, the model is statistically significant with F = 151,864 and Sig 0.000. Service quality and Loyalty Intention were found to affect positively the dependent variable. The Beta statistics of the independent variables COVID lifestyle and Satisfaction were found to affect negatively the dependent variable Loyalty. Based on the Sig Statistics, the association between the dependent and the independent variables is statistically significant.

Table 4

	<b>B</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig</b>
(Constant)	0,862		2,170	0,031
COVID lifestyle	-0,005	-0,002	-0,042	0,966
Service quality	0,223	0,335	4,668	0,000
Satisfaction	-0,059	-0,088	-0,928	0,355
Loyalty Intention	0,453	0,664	8,841	0,000

a. Dependent Variable: Loyalty

Regression analysis - Case 3 :

Taking as a dependent variable " Service Quality " it was found that the other extradited variables can affect it in percentage 78,2% for this case. R Square = 0,782 .According to Anova's findings, the model is statistically significant with F = 175,166 and Sig 0.000. Loyalty and Satisfaction were found to affect positively the dependent variable. The Beta statistics of the independent variables COVID lifestyle and Loyalty Intention were found to affect negatively the dependent variable Service Quality. Based on the Sig Statistics, the association between the dependent and the independent variables is statistically significant.

Table 5

	<b>B</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig</b>
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(Constant)	-0,044		-0,078	0,938
COVID lifestyle	-0,065	-0,013	-0,395	0,693
Loyalty	0,451	0,300	4,668	0,000
Satisfaction	0,757	0,744	10,336	0,000
Loyalty Intention	-0,132	-0,128	-1,533	0,127
a. Dependent Variable: Service Quality				

## Regression analysis - Case 4 :

Taking as a dependent variable " Satisfaction " it was found that the other extradited variables can affect it in percentage 86,1%, for this case. R Square 0,861. According to Anova's findings, the model is statistically significant with  $F = 301,823$  and Sig 0.000. Service quality and Loyalty Intention were found to affect positively the dependent variable. The Beta statistics of the independent variables COVID lifestyle and Loyalty were found to affect negatively the dependent variable Satisfaction. Based on the Sig Statistics, the association between the dependent and the independent variables is statistically significant.

Table 6

	<b>B</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig</b>
(Constant)	0,693		1,552	0,122
COVID lifestyle	-0,067	-0,014	-0,518	0,605
Loyalty	-0,074	-0,050	-0,928	0,355
Service quality	0,467	0,475	10,336	0,000
Loyalty Intention	0,555	0,550	10,096	0,000
a. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction				

## Regression analysis - Case 5 :

Taking as a dependent variable " Loyalty Intention " it was found that the other extradited variables can affect it in percentage 84,2% for this case. R Square = 0,842 .According to Anova's findings, the model is statistically significant with  $F = 260,748$  and Sig 0.000. COVID lifestyle, Loyalty, and Satisfaction were found to affect positively the dependent variable. The Beta statistics of the independent variable Service quality were found to affect negatively the dependent variable of Loyalty Intention. Based on the Sig Statistics, the association between the dependent and the independent variables is statistically significant.

Table 7

	<b>B</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig</b>
(Constant)	-0,103		-0,217	0,829
COVID lifestyle	0,043	0,009	0,316	0,752
Loyalty	0,631	0,431	8,841	0,000
Service quality	-0,091	-0,093	-1,533	0,127
Satisfaction	0,619	0,624	10,096	0,000
a. Dependent Variable: Loyalty Intention				

A statistical positive coefficient interprets that the value of the independent variable tends to increase, the mean of the dependent variable tends to increase also. The negative coefficients that as the independent variable increases, the dependent variable instead tends to decrease. The hypothesis results based on Regression analysis are:

H1: Service quality variable affects positively the variable of Loyalty.

H2: Service quality variable affects negatively the variable of Loyalty Intention.

H3: The satisfaction variable affects negatively the variable of Loyalty.

H4: COVID lifestyle variable affects negatively the variable of Loyalty.

Correlation Bivariate analysis :

Table 8

		Correlations				
		COVID lifestyle	Loyalty	Service Quality	Satisfaction	Loyalty Intention
COVID lifestyle	Pearson Correlation	1	-0,083	-0,106	-0,106	-0,083
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0,243	0,133	0,135	0,243
Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	-0,083	1	0,780**	0,790**	0,850**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,243		0,000	0,000	0,000
Service Quality	Pearson Correlation	-0,106	0,780**	1	0,870**	0,784**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,133	0,000		0,000	0,000
Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	-0,106	0,790**	0,870**	1	0,882**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,135	0,000	0,000		0,000
Loyalty Intention	Pearson Correlation	-,083	0,850**	0,784**	0,882**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,243	0,000	0,000	0,000	
N		200	200	200	200	200

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The group of significant correlation between the variables consists of Loyalty, Service Quality, Satisfaction, and Loyalty Intention.

**5. Conclusion:**

We understand that loyalty is a factor according to which managers can plan the financial turnover in sports companies. The change of lifestyle and the disruption of the habits of the members of the athletic centers during the repeated lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic has caused intense concern for the economic future of the sports industry. From the results of the research we see that there are changes in the lifestyle of the members but not to such an extent that it affects their return to the athletic centers. We see that loyalty has been maintained at high levels even though their customers' exercise program was interrupted due to the pandemic. They seem to understand the condition of the pandemic lockdown. There is a will on the part of the practitioners to continue training in the same athletic centers even before the pandemic period. On the contrary, what we are seeing is a dissatisfaction with the purchase of other services offered by sports companies. While survey participants say that services are high quality in sports businesses, they are not willing to pay to try them. This may indicate a weakness in the systems for promoting, selling, and advertising these services through the companies themselves or success-failure in some types of services. It should be taken seriously by the managers so that the marketing plans are more accurate. We can not say for sure if this has been caused by the duration of the lockdown or if this dissatisfaction has existed before. However, due to the lockdown, the managers of the athletic centers need to know the emotional state of their members as this way they can improve the provision of services or plan their business plan differently for the new season. There is a high level of customer satisfaction and this is important for maintaining the viability of sports businesses. Contract renewals are mostly a positive scenario and but not necessarily confident with a small percentage to consider a change in athletic centers. We can assume that the loyalty that was formed to the companies before the pandemic lockdowns are the one that is responsible for maintaining the customer audience of the athletic centers. Either it was to a large extent or a small extent. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns affected the customers of sports companies and as a result, depending on their loyalty, will soon have to make big or small changes in the way they operate. The data provided by this research can be useful for researchers and professionals in the sports industry to study the economic and social consequences of the pandemic but also for a smooth restart of the operation of athletic centers.

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