



## THE SENSE OF BELONGING IN THE VALUE CO-CREATION IN SPORTS SERVICES: EVIDENCE FROM THE FITNESS BUSINESS

*O SENSO DE PERTENCIMENTO NA COCRIAÇÃO DE VALOR NOS  
SERVIÇOS ESPORTIVOS: EVIDÊNCIAS DO FITNESS BUSINESS* 

*EL SENTIDO DE PERTENENCIA EN LA COCREACIÓN DE VALOR EN  
LOS SERVICIOS DEPORTIVOS: EVIDENCIAS DEL FITNESS  
BUSINESS* 

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**Abstract:** The fitness customer experience journey is observed in this exploratory research, in which 15 consumers from two service-oriented gyms, not members of chains, one in Alphaville (Barueri/SP) and the other in Savassi (Belo Horizonte/MG), participated in semi-structured interviews. From more than 3 hours of recording and a hundred pages of transcription, it was possible to propose a conceptual model of how the tangible, technical service and belonging dimensions intertwine each other, allowing the gym customer to co-create value in their experience of usage. It was concluded that 1) services also have a tangible dimension; 2) despite all the academic-technical staff preparation, users want to co-produce their experiences; 3) the feeling of belonging, in addition to engaging in the value co-creation, is a dimension that can alleviate any discomfort arising from experiences in the other dimensions. The user's self-efficacy can moderate the importance of belonging.

**Keywords:** S-D logic. Value co-creation. Belonging. Fitness business. Service marketing.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The journey of the customer experiences in the complex decision to continuously consume services, such as sports services, begins long before their first contact with the company when the commercial offer is proposed at the front desk and interweaves a higher level of situational involvement of the consumer (CHIU; WON; BAE, 2019; LOPES *et al.*, 2020). The trail of experiences begins with the needs and desires designed by the future consumer and how the services surveyed can respond to their pains and desires (MUNAIER; COSTA, 2021). Clients of spaces dedicated to physical activity (PA), also known as “gyms” in Brazil, have the same experience. Given the gyms’ institutional and promotional content, they seek to intertwine the promises of the company’s delivery to their pursuits and goals (LEE *et al.*, 2018; MUNAIER, 2021b; VAN ESCH *et al.*, 2019). Their age, lifestyle, occupation, self-image, and other aspects impact their consumer decisions (MUNAIER *et al.*, 2021b).

Once registered, the customer (here called “user”) will validate or not the company value proposition in its advertising and made by its commercial team in the service usage experiences (CARLSON *et al.*, 2019; CHIU; WON; BAE, 2019; LEE *et al.*, 2018). Different dimensions of rewards (quality, benefits, value, utility) and sacrifices (price, time, psychological or social sacrifices) will determine their perception of value and permanence in this consumption (IKEDA; VELUDO-DE-OLIVEIRA, 2005; MUNAIER; COSTA, 2021).

However, more than identifying value, the 21st-century consumer exhibits more proactive behaviors. They want to “co-create” value in their individuality of use, adjusting and transforming it (LUSCH; VARGO, 2006). This behavior is because, although provided in identical ways for two or more people, the experiences of use are not identical for each of them, as well as their previous experiences, desires, goals, and ambitions (GALLARZA *et al.*, 2017). In marketing studies, understanding these transformations in consumption habits gave rise to the New Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) (LUSCH; VARGO; O’BRIEN, 2007; VARGO; LUSCH, 2017).

S-D Logic has been responsible for developing relationship strategies in several services and the relationships between service providers and their consumers (HOLLEBEEK; SRIVASTAVA; CHEN, 2019). Including in sports management. For example, Munaier (2021b) brought the importance of the sense of belonging and co-creation in the relations between soccer clubs and their fans. It was identified that: 1) the greater the sense of belonging, the greater the desire to co-create value; and 2) the greater the fan participation in the club decision-making processes, the greater their engagement in the acquisition of other fans participating in the campaigns (MUNAIER, 2021).

However, in the sports management of fitness services (FBS), the production of research using S-D Logic seems to have been incipient. Understanding how consumers co-create value in their FBS experience is critical to a market that trades US\$2.1 billion/year monthly payments in Brazil and sells US\$ 87.2 billion/year globally (IHRSA, 2018). Therefore, this article seeks to advance the literature on sports management, particularly in the fitness and well-being market.

This article seeks to answer two research questions (RQ). RQ 1) How can the customer transform the dimensions of experienced fitness services (FBS)? RQ 2) When making use and possible transformations, does the customer perceive a co-creation of value?

This article identified three dimensions of the experience in which the FBS user interacts and transforms: the tangible dimension, the services themselves, and the sense of belonging. The greater the sense of belonging, the greater the co-created value, which reduces the damage of an eventual unsuccessful experience in another dimension. Still, people with greater self-efficacy may give less importance to the perception of belonging on the sense of belonging.

Thus, the manuscript is organized as follows: in Section 2, the theoretical framework and model to be tested will be presented. Section 3 brings the method and, in Section 4, the results and discussions of the interviews. Finally, Section 5 brings the conclusion, suggestions for further research, and the limitations of this study.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 CO-CREATION OF VALUE IN USER EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE-DOMINANT LOGIC (S-D LOGIC)

This article is positioned within the S-D Logic theoretical lens, which proposes the consumer role and experiences using the product or service (LUSCH; VARGO, 2006). The realization of value, among all the sacrifices and rewards of this service, lies in its individualized use, providing the user with the co-creation of value in an interactive context of different dimensions of costs and benefits (MACDONALD; KLEINALTENKAMP; WILSON, 2016). The process of value co-construction occurs in this interaction between the user and their desire to co-create their lived experiences (LUSCH; VARGO; O'BRIEN, 2007; RIBEIRO; COSTA; FREIRE, 2021).

Las Casas (2015) defines value-oriented marketing as the harmony between all business activities to propose value to the customer. In the balance between cost and benefit, the customer does not always weigh his decision more for the purely monetary aspects (LAS CASAS, 2015; VAN ESCH *et al.*, 2019). Customers seek more than low prices, and FBS companies need to find the best strategies to help them co-create value, and usage is at the core (MUNAIER; COSTA, 2021). Lee *et al.* (2018) showed that in addition to affordability, attitude and subjective norm of value co-creation positively impact consumer behavior. In addition, value co-creation behavior positively affects customer loyalty in FBS (LEE *et al.*, 2018).

### 2.2 SERVICES

This manuscript is based on the definition of services as the skills and expertise applications through actions, processes, and performances to benefit others or themselves (VARGO; LUSCH, 2008). In the services provided by customer-oriented companies (B2C), the engagement and participation of users in their experiences generate satisfaction and emotion, leading to loyalty (PANSARI; KUMAR, 2017). In

addition to the experiences lived with the company's employees, a customer-client interaction (C2C) contributes to evaluations and interactions with other users or potential customers (LIN; WONG, 2020). Ultimately, the service provider's goal is to deserve the vote of confidence given by the customer at the time of (re)purchase (CHIU; WON; BAE, 2019; LEE *et al.*, 2018; MUNAIER; COSTA, 2021).

Adapting to FBS the concepts proposed by Corrêa and Gianesi (1995), this service can be analyzed according to the six main topics, which are: 1) what is tangible: quality of equipment and/ or appearance, facilities, and apps; 2) consistency with previous experience in the gym, the lack of variability of experience in the service experienced in the different opening hours; 3) capability and technical knowledge on the part of the company's employees, here called Physical Education Professionals (PEP), to prescribe PA training routines and meet the technical needs of consumers; 4) speed of service: the readiness of the company and its PEP to provide the service, especially in the waiting time (real or perceived) of PA routine changes; 5) credibility or security, which means low-risk perception; and 6) flexibility, being able to adjust and adapt the operation due to changes in customer needs, their goals, desires, experiences, and availability of time.

### 2.3 BELONGING

Researching a sense of belonging is one of the most challenging tasks for Social Sciences scholars (MASLOW, 1970). In consumer societies, the desire to belong can be a form of social inclusion. The desire to belong to a particular group is a characteristic of society, with its symbology of differentiation, status, belonging, and individual gratification (HEMAIS; CASOTTI; ROCHA, 2013; RADONS *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, the approach to belonging also occurs in the field of affectivity (MASLOW, 1970). The feeling of belonging as a motivating element for consumers' permanence, development, and retention is proven precisely in developing a dialogical space and a sense of acceptance (LIN; WONG, 2020; MAGNI; PEZZI; VRONTIS, 2020). Chiu, Won, and Bae (2019) argued that customer value co-creation behavior is essential to the gym's service environment. Customers who actively participate in building services are more likely to feel that they belong to the organization (CHIU; WON; BAE, 2019).

This article seeks to advance the feeling of belonging beyond the individual's desire to participate in value co-creation. It is about the feeling of being welcomed by others. At the center, the desire to be part, be accepted and have their space in relationships with others. Within consumption, the individuals seek this feeling of themselves (of deserving) and them to the other (of acceptance) (LIN; WONG, 2020). From the service providers' point of view, the feeling of welcome experienced by the client can be consolidated through the dialogical relationship of the individual with the PEP that serves them. However, in ongoing services in an environment where other consumers also interact, the triadic relationship between individual-employees-other customers (GALLARZA *et al.*, 2017) can be the dimension of belonging in its completeness. This triadic relationship has already been the subject of research in the tourism research field, and its impact on consumer loyalty has been identified by Sarkar and Banerjee (2021).

On the other hand, recent research on the interaction between people in FBS brings the moderating effect of self-efficacy in relationships between users (WINDASARI; LIN; KATO-LIN, 2021). Self-efficacy can be defined as individuals' perception of their ability to organize and implement specific actions that lead to certain results (ALVES; MAINARDES, 2017). According to Windasari, Lin, and Kato-Lin (2021), high levels of self-efficacy reduce the impact of human relationships on individuals' experiences in using FBS, from the premise that they know what they want and how they want their experiences, requiring less attention from the supplier and other users.

### 3 METHOD

This article adopted a qualitative exploratory procedure (CRESWELL, 2007) to identify how FBS users intertwine their experiences through the dimensions proposed in the conceptual map. According to Nogueira-Martins and Bógus (2004), the interview allows corrections, clarifications, and adaptations that make it effective in obtaining the desired information. Although they cannot be generalized, qualitative research aim to offer paths and identify possible phenomena (YIN, 2015). Specific topics related to the literature that supports this article were addressed. The interviewees were offered the possibility of bringing elements not previously established for important finds.

A script conducted the semi-structured interviews with 15 clients from two different gyms: one in Alphaville, Barueri/SP, and another in Savassi, Belo Horizonte/MG, from February to June 2019. For all respondents, an Informed Consent Form (ICF) prepared for the research was read, guaranteeing anonymity and the possibility of interrupting the interview when they decided to do so.

The neighborhoods chosen in these cities have a common characteristic: a resident's elitist profile, but not necessarily of the local workers. Both gyms operate in the "mall-of-services" model, charging over R\$ 200.00 per month, and offering state-of-the-art technological facilities. These companies are not part of the gym chains.

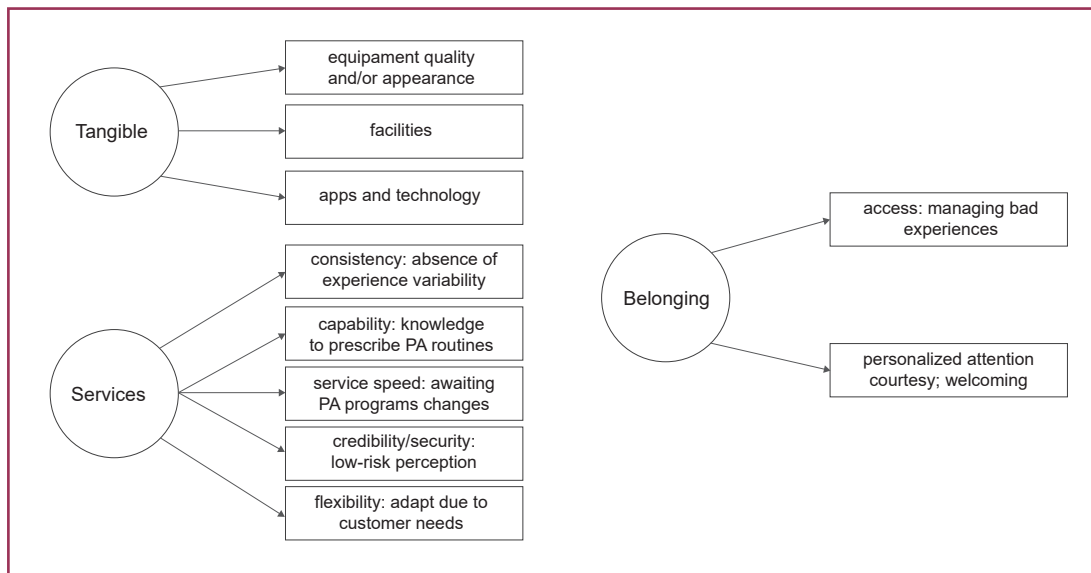
Women corresponded to approximately 54% of the respondents, and the mean age was 37.5 years old ( $SD=8.8$ ). 60% of the respondents said they had a monthly income equal to or greater than 10 Brazilian minimum wages during the survey. Being regulars at gyms that work seven days a week, these respondents said they attend five times a week on average ( $SD=0.8$ ). The interviewees answered a closed questionnaire before the beginning of the interview (Table 1, present in the article repository). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed, adding up to more than three hours of content, resulting in approximately one hundred pages of transcription.

#### 3.1 CONCEPTUAL MAP

Given the literature consulted, it was possible to develop a conceptual map of the dimensions examined in this article through semi-structured interviews. The starting point is Corrêa and Ganesi (1995), with the main components in evaluating services: what is tangible in service, consistency, capabilities, service speed, credibility, and

flexibility. In addition, from the understanding of the sense of building belonging, the themes “access to people who manage unsuccessful experiences” and “personalized attention”, “courtesy” and “sense of welcome” were added. The conceptual map is seen in Figure 1, and all topics were covered in the interviews.

Figure 1 - Conceptual Map.



Source: Prepared by the authors, adapted from Corrêa and Gianesi (1995)

## 4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### 4.1 TANGIBLE ELEMENTS OF THE SERVICE

The tangible gym’s elements serve as a necessary “setting” where user experiences will be staged. The elements in theater play help build the audiences’ multiple sensations. The chandelier in Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera* or Yorick’s skull in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* are tangible elements of the sensory experience proposed by the theater. However, unlike a conventional stage piece, where the audience watches from a specific physical distance, the gym user participates in the show. They touch the chandelier, and they “talk” to the skull.

At first, the architectural infrastructure is focused: on the facilities, the proportion between the spaces, the circulation of light and air, and the changing rooms: the facilities do not go unnoticed by users, who report experiences with clear affective connotations in their words:

C13: One thing I noticed and that I really liked here: I really like it to be a little darker here. At the other gym, I thought everything was obvious. I’ve always liked a more intimate atmosphere and feel more comfortable in the gym because it’s darker here.

Patricia Totaro ([www.patriciatotaro.com.br](http://www.patriciatotaro.com.br)) argues that the planning of the changing rooms is calculated based on the customs and habits of the region. There is also the appropriate size, which considers the total area of the gym and the number of guests, and the ideal air conditioning and ventilation concerning the location of the gym locker room.

C10: The locker room with private stalls. I came here, and I spread my creams, shampoos... I take a shower, turn my phone on, and listen to my music. Guys, it's like my house that I love so much.

The perception of the customer's absorption capacity in the physical space is an element valued by the client.

C14: The number of people in a gym, I think, is critical. I don't dare work out at [a Brazilian low-cost gym chain]. The line that was there yesterday... there must have been about 50 people in line to get into the gym.

The equipment, its ergonomics, technology, and maintenance significantly weigh the customer's perception of the value of FBS. The supply market in the sector is composed of national and international brands. With the consolidation of the Internet of Things (IoT), connected equipment applications have brought interactivity and gamification over the past decade. Pairing with smartphones and tablets can reply to emails, view posts from your social networks through the dashboard, and decide what experience they want (their favorite videos and shows in streaming). Customers transform and co-create value in the use of this equipment and technologies.

C1: High-level devices actually have this connectivity; that's an innovation. Especially for me. I do indoor bike classes, and I noticed a lot of innovation in terms of bike classes. In-app training, now, they're delivering training videos...

C5: Netflix saves me because the treadmill is so boring; you keep looking at the wall; you don't see anything. So, I think that's fantastic. You have streaming to entertain you. And the equipment is perfect.

C10: I put the video right on the treadmill screen. I love music videos from the '80s. Sometimes I put a selection on YouTube and think, 'I'm just going to walk 20 minutes, but oh no, I love this song.' When I realized I was there for 50 minutes.

A point of contact observed between the dimension of the tangible elements and the dimension of the experience of technical services is when the technology is integrated, connecting the equipment to the customer's training program, allowing them to make the evolution tangible.

C3: Technology is a great differential. I think one of our biggest concerns is evolution. Without evolution, you take a step back. Will you schedule your gym training on paper? However, how can you ensure your progress if you are not scheduling or registering your training?

The negligence regarding the use of equipment and technologies and their maintenance is observed by customers, producing negative perceptions regarding their experiences of use. Once again, they are points of contact between the tangible dimensions and the experiences of the technical service.

C8: I like to see the equipment well used. I say, 'look: this padding is not good, you better take a look there'; 'here, I don't think this machine is lubricated'... So, it's all about the details, and I like them.

C9: The treadmill has a lot of features. No PEP helped me, so I went to the company's website and downloaded the manual. I found that there are some programs for squats and various exercises. So, I'm sure all this equipment can do much more than we see, but the PEP...

## 4.2 TECHNICAL SERVICE EXPERIENCES

### 4.2.1 Consistency

In this research, the heterogeneity of the FBS where the interviews were conducted was observed. Using the metaphor of the theater, not only the actors (here, the PEP) interpret differently (what can be seen in the customers' speech), giving the impression that there are different gyms within the same gym, depending on whom the client interacts with and in what time they attend, but the same PEP has different performances, depending on the day.

C4: I see a lot of tension, but it depends on the day of the PEP. There are days when they are very considerate; there are days when they are not very careful with us.

C5: Well, I've been attending gyms for a long time, and what I could see is that for some time, with the emergence of the personal trainer, the performance of regular PEP bodybuilding, in my perception of use, has dropped a bit in quality.

### 4.2.2 Capability

Law No. 9,696/98 requires that Brazilian FBS companies offer their services with the PEP presence and supervision. The curriculum sits a four-year bachelor's degree in Physical Education, with a deep immersion in various fields of human knowledge (USP/EEFE, 2022; UFRGS/ESEFID, 2022). No entering into the merit of multiple technics and the Physical Education scientific knowledge application, the eyes of the user, the technical capability seems to be better employed when the PEP presence provides the stimulus and excellent PA programs according to the consumers' specific needs.

C10: I come from another gym. When I moved here, a PEP encouraged me to try a bike lesson, which I was afraid of. I thought I'd never be able to. Honestly, in the first class, I sat in the back, well-hidden so no one could see me, and he immediately said, 'no one leaves unless they have completed 6 miles.' I thought, 'never'. And suddenly, you start doing it on Tuesday, Thursday... It's good when you finish class, and you say, 'look, I did it'.

The PEP technical capabilities must be available to the individual who takes this service. PEP skills must be aligned with the needs, dreams, and desires of the AF client. And thoughtful. In this perceived concurrency between co-production and consumption, customers will value their experience. In particular, if the client feels heard, a participant in the co-production of the journey.

C5: You talk to the PEP, tell him what you want to do. When he prepares the routine, there are different things from what you agreed with him. So, I passed on the information, and he lost it?

C9: Sometimes not! The professional should always help me understand what I want and help me achieve this result. Even if he thinks otherwise because he has the experience, he needs to understand that I don't want it. I want something else for me because it's my goal, what fits into my routine, life, and well-being.



### 4.2.3 Speed

In addition to understanding the speed of service providers in the FBS market, it is necessary to distinguish between the companies' delivery proposals. There are the so-called low-cost gyms (GARCÍA-FERNÁNDEZ *et al.*, 2018), which offer excellent infrastructure, new equipment, and clean locker rooms. Only in Brazil this model complies with the legal obligation of a PEP in all scheduled operations. However, they do not promise proactive supervision with scheduled training changes or are concerned about their customers' motivation. In a large gym chain of this model, there is a manifesto on the wall that says: "We are not here to flatter you".

In the gyms where the interviews were recorded, they were positioned by a proactive approach, and their institutional communication declares that their PEPs have skills and desire to prescribe and supervise the PA program, its validity, and the need for changes. Good or bad experiences in this area are fundamental to co-creating value in the use of experience.

C1: There is no closer monitoring, a 'light' [help in the execution], which sometimes we need a push to continue and be doing, there isn't. It's up to you. You even have this guidance that every two months, you come back and stuff, adjust the workout. But if you don't come back, life goes on, anyway.

The heterogeneity of the service impacts the speed of service, characteristic of item 4.2.1, consistency. According to the period of the day, fitness services deliveries may have different speeds due to the volume of customers per professional difference in each hour or the professional profile employed in each operation's period. When the same delivery speed is observed regardless of the day, time, or professional, it is inferable that the company found its best ratio of professionals by time and day. Or, if the experience is terrible at any time, it can be deduced that the company is not concerned about the speed of service.

C5: This program change is always traumatic for me. The PEP does not meet the deadline. I tried it in the evening and tried it in the morning. My perception is that there is a high demand for PEP. It bothers me deeply. 'Your show is ready tomorrow.' I'm going, and it's not... I've been waiting a week, so it bothers me a lot.

### 4.2.4 Credibility or security

The presence of the Physical Education bachelor in the spaces dedicated to PA, supervising it, is mandatory in Brazil. In most countries, this college degree is not an obligation. Reduced training programs or only course certificates, many of them taken online, are sufficient to qualify those who will work in the FBS segment worldwide (MUNAIER, 2019).

Facing this legal condition and given the depth of the PEP academic training (USP/EEFE, 2022; UFRGS/ESEFID, 2022), it is expected that every Brazilian FBS has a perception of value linked to the feeling of low risk in doing PA oriented by this support.

C6: I see this a lot in the cycling class, for example. Many PEPs dedicated themselves to instructing. It's not just going there, going out there and

cycling. I have a PEP that is very concerned about everyone being in the same training.

However, this perception of credibility or security is also at the mercy of each user, in their particular experience of use, their filters and metrics, as well as their points of comparison.

C1: For me, the service is the attention that the PEP gives you, not only at the beginning of a workout when you enter the gym, but it's the follow-up to see if you're doing the right exercise.

C8: You go to the doctor and tell him what you feel; he'll examine you and prescribe meds and everything. The PEP should ask what you want from the gym; most of the time, that's not how it works.

#### 4.2.5 Flexibility

For this theme, it is necessary to understand the formation of the bachelor's degree in Physical Education, enabling FBS to provide technical experience to the consumer. In addition to the specific disciplines of the program, such as sports physiology, anatomy, biology, biochemistry, and all the fundamentals of Physical Education and Sport, bachelor's programs address "service marketing" with relative superficiality. Observing the curriculum of the University of São Paulo, a discipline on "fundamentals of administration" is identified in the first semester, and, in the 4th semester, "psychological dimensions of Physical Education and Sports" (USP/EEFE, 2022). In consultation with the curriculum of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, some disciplines bring social studies (UFRGS/ESEFID, 2022). However, no disciplines that deal with consumption behaviors and the transformations that S-D Logic has been identified in marketing research in the last 20 years have not been identified by title and description.

A reflection that is proposed from this small cutout: how well-prepared service providers are, in their academic background, to intertwine their in-depth technical knowledge – crucial to their technical capacity and credibility –, to impact the need of each client, making scientific literature, not a hindrance, but a flexible service tool to the characteristics of ordinary clients (not only biological but psychological and social aspects), not athletes, in the development of programs?

C9: I've had a lot of difficulties here. I don't finish all my training routines. They don't understand that my daily routine is tiresome... I want to come to the gym in the morning, but I don't want to run out here, and I don't want to leave here in the mood for sleep.

#### 4.3 BELONGING

Although the term "access" has its original definition of access to facilities and opening hours (CORRÊA; GIANESI, 1995), this article chose to give "access" a more affective connotation, as an element of belonging, since having access to people may be necessary for the development of relationships, feeling of being part, being recognized as a member, of being welcomed (HEMAIS *et al.*, 2013; MASLOW, 1970; MUNAIER; LAS CASAS, 2019).

C2: I think of the whole team, from the reception to the director, they're all sensational. The service here is spectacular; I have nothing to complain about.

C3: I think the service starts when you enter the gym. So, the environment, the 'good morning' of the reception, the other employees giving you that attention in a group class causes this integration. So, I think all these factors end up being reconciled by a differentiated service.

C4: Everyone is willing to welcome you, increase the level of friendship to make the atmosphere pleasant.

C6: I think it starts at the front desk; even the cleaners call you by name. So, it's something that you feel welcome and part of, like you belong to the group.

C10: I come from a gym full of 'groups'. There is a huge cafeteria, and the tables are quite different. You finish your training, and you belong at this table... Not here. And this thing about PEP just being on the side of the cute one, it's different here. They're very attentive to the elderly; caring, very affectionate to the elderly.

Communication is a strong link between the gym and the client, and the communication circular can even give the customer a sense of inclusion or exclusion. Communication is of fundamental importance to gyms, strengthening or weakening the consumer's perception of its uniqueness.

C8: It happens: the front desk has information, and the PEP does not. The opposite is also true: the coach has, and the reception does not; so, they're not prepared or fully involved in the information.

C5: They changed the system, and not all PEP were prepared to help us through this new application. So, you say, 'I need to talk to the PEP.' 'Oh, send a message through the app'. He doesn't respond to the message. So, you talk to the PEP, and he says, 'I saw the message, but I didn't answer.' So, wait a minute: you have the communication channel, he saw the message but did not respond?

To be included is to be remembered. One of the gym's systematic communication strategies is to contact customers with low attendance rates. The effectiveness of the interviewees is questioned, perhaps because of the low levels of personalized messages or how much change the individual's actions with little or no care. In addition, the strategy's effectiveness can be explained by the user's profile. It is worth remembering that Windasari *et al.* (2021) identified that the higher the level of self-efficacy of the individual, the less importance is given to the contacts made by the FBS provider.

C6: If you don't pass your code for a week, they'll send [a message], something will automatically appear in the system: 'you're not attending, come back'. Something like that you see, but you forget. I think it should be something much more personified. I think they must do something different to understand what happened to them [absent customers].

C1: I don't think it's important; I see it more as a personal commitment. I don't think this feedback about absence is essential.

C3: For me, it's irrelevant. I think the concern is with the services offered. If I'm paying, I should justify my investment, right?

In a study that analyzed the desire to re-consume products and services in loyalty programs of soccer clubs in facing fans' unsuccessful experiences, Munaier

and Las Casas (2019) demonstrated that negligence in the bad experiences of fans could cause a breach of confidence in the club's benefits program. Therefore, neglecting the bad experiences of customers, not opening communication channels to answer their questions, and having better interaction with the tangible and technical dimensions of the service can lead their customers to drop out.

C9: I felt lost because I didn't know how to use any technology, and I couldn't resolve my doubts with PEP. And I felt lost in the lack of communication. Other people who work with me gave up because they didn't like it, had no incentive, and left.

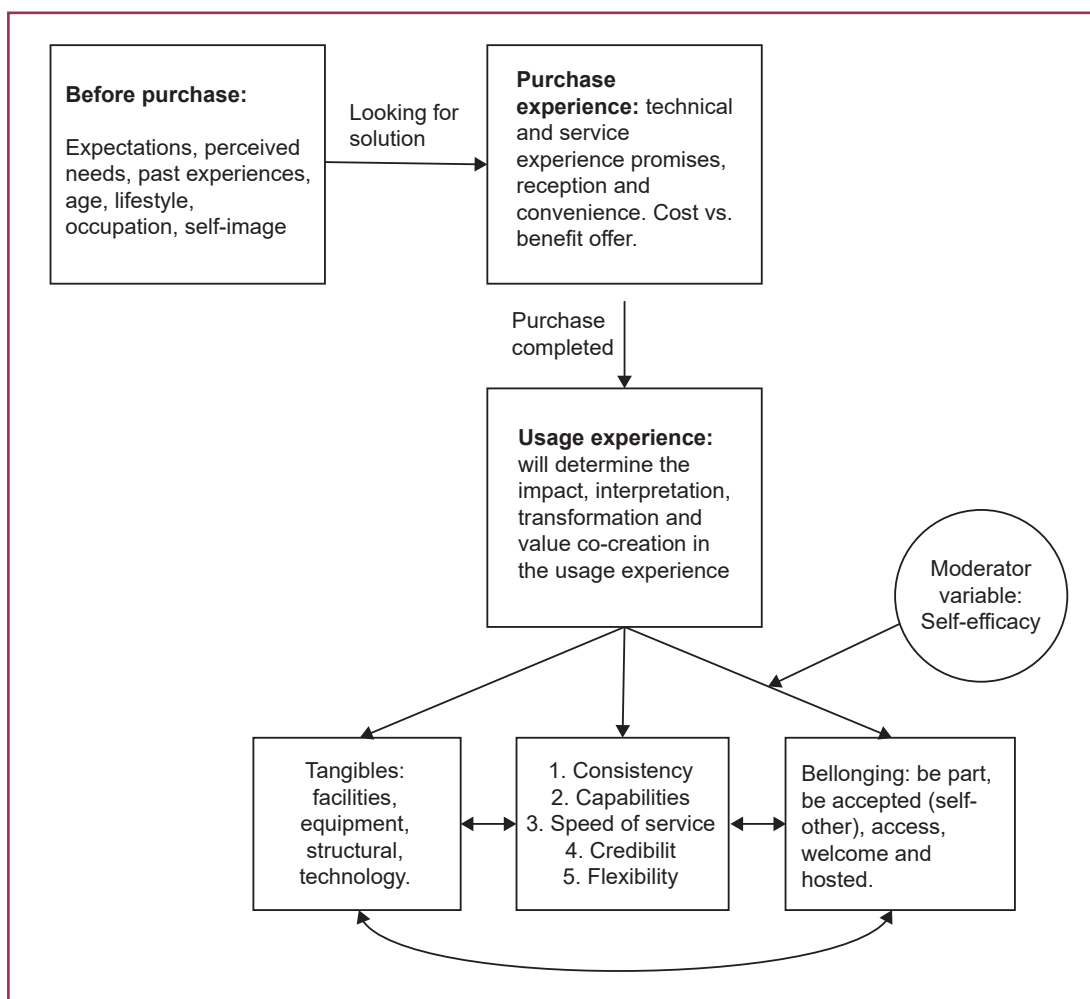
This research observed the strength of welcoming for value co-creation in the user experience. The interviewees' statements expressed their desire to remain in the company's consumption by the power of affection because they feel desired, recognized, and called by their names. In a triadic interaction between the client, the company's employees, and other customers, already observed by hospitality researchers (LIN; WONG, 2020), customers want opportunities to co-create value in their experiences.

C10: Of all the ones I've been to, I thought I'd never find any better gym than [GYM'S BRAND]. The other was really excellent, but this gym is superior in welcoming. Because it's no use being a mega gym, mega devices, that beautiful space, that wonderful studio, but you don't feel wanted, people don't know your name, you come and go as if... Here you have an experience of belonging. I see myself here for many, many years, God willing.

#### 4.4 CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF FBS VALUE CO-CREATION

From the content analysis of the in-depth interviews, relating it to the literature on service marketing and value co-creation in S-D Logic, it was possible to propose a conceptual model (Fig. 2). This conceptual model is an advanced proposal for the consulted literature and management of FBS. Three dimensions of services are observed: the tangible dimension, the technical services dimension, and the belonging dimension. After making the purchasing decision, the interaction with these dimensions is where the user sees himself impacted, interprets, and transforms his experiences, co-creating value and strengthening (weakening) his decision to remain in consumption.

Figure 2 - Conceptual model of FBS value co-creation.



Source: Proposed by the authors.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS, SUGGESTIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

It was possible to answer the RQs proposed in this article. This work advances the understanding that services have a tangible dimension, rejecting the recurring idea that services are intangible. Vargo and Lusch (2017) proposed that, in addition to existing, the tangible dimension is essential for the value co-creation in the user experience. The way consumers use the facilities, “spreading their creams in the locker room and listening to their music as if they were at home”, brings a practical application of value the co-creation. In addition, infrastructure and technologies (IoT) allow consumers to choose their TV shows or videos while using the tangible dimension of the service, co-creating value.

It is essential to observe the progress of the proposed literature based on the findings of this article: the importance given to the process of co-creation of the experiences lived by the consumer of the FBS imposes a novel approach to the intertwining of technical knowledge versus the expectations and desires of the client. Despite recognizing the skills and academic training of the technical professional, clients want to participate in the choice of exercises and routines. This participation seems to impact the value extracted from this service directly. Thus, it is not enough to

have practical knowledge in the provision of services. There must be active listening: the customer wants to be heard.

The company and its staff must be oriented towards co-creating value for such transformations to happen. The company's policy should be focused on their clients' dialogical and triadic relationships. Thus, this article aims to insert FBS as a validated field to observe the triadic self-others relationship (GALLARZA *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, an inference that arises from the research results is that the PEP should put their technical knowledge at the service of customers, allowing them to co-create their experiences. Technical knowledge, if placed as a barrier, could inhibit co-creation.

Finally, this article advances the literature on the importance of belonging to the co-creation of value in the user experience. In addition to the B2C relationship, or the company's employee-client connection, customer-customer interaction is also observed. It is about the welcoming feeling and feeling of being part, recognized, and deserving to be there.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the use of the client can transform these three dimensions of FBS, and, in doing so, there is a perceived co-creation of value by the client, answering the proposed research questions.

## 5.1 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The experience in specialized care is crucial for value co-creation in FBS. PEPs perform best when actively participating in customer experience management. It was identified as very important to balance the number of clients per professional at all hours of gym operation for greater consistency in the provision of services. An inference of this work is the importance of flexibility in the design of training programs. Reflection on the rigidity of prescription training seems crucial. Is it possible to contemplate the excellent training science focused on the wishes and desires of customers? For a better user experience, the findings of this article demonstrate that it is necessary to build this path, where the client's routine, lifestyle, and profile are considered in developing their PA program. In addition, routine changes should not be neglected or elaborated without the necessary care.

The dimension of belonging was presented as a link that amalgamates the previous dimensions. Using the metaphor of the theater again, while the tangible elements are the scenery and the technical professionals are the actors, with well-defined and well-interpreted scripts, the atmosphere, communication, and access to the people who conduct the show make the client feel like a critical and desired part of the show. Being called by name, knowing and respecting needs, knowing whom to turn to in case of doubt and dissatisfaction, and being informed about everything that happens in the gym, are essential elements for fitness service takers.

Another possible management recommendation of this manuscript refers to the management of the welcoming environment for new customers. Researchers have already addressed the importance of hospitable and caring staff (LIN; WONG, 2020) and the dangers of neglecting the unsuccessful experiences of customers (MUNAIER; LAS CASAS, 2019). In addition to these recommendations, creating

customer interaction strategies in the acceptance dimension is essential. Internal campaigns on aesthetic judgments seem to be an appropriate path to be carried out by management.

Finally, a managerial implication is also present in constructing curricula for Physical Education courses. The law defines this professional's mandatory presence in customer service in Brazil. It is necessary to insert and/or increase the number of subjects focused on consumer behavior in the curricular grades of the bachelor's degree in Physical Education. Understanding the consumption, their nuances, what precedes consumer decisions, choices, discards, and what impacts the repurchase decision and loyalty (in addition to repurchase) can bring to the professional a better understanding of their challenge in winning the FBS consumer's heart (MUNAIER *et al.*, 2021a; MUNAIER; COSTA, 2021).

## 5.2 SUGGESTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This research was conducted in two service gyms, unlike low-cost or CrossFit gyms. Thus, it could be a suggestion for future research focused on the difference between them, using, for example, the findings of García-Fernández *et al.* (2018) and García-Fernández *et al.* (2020) as starting points. Yet another limitation is the profile of the gyms: they are installed in elite neighborhoods. It is possible to analyze the importance of value co-creation in these dimensions in gyms in lower-income neighborhoods. In addition, a quantitative approach could measure the importance of each dimension and confirm or refute them. Since this is a qualitative study, a limitation of the present study is a generalization, which is not possible. In addition, the content has not been treated using software, which can be seen as a limitation and an opportunity for future research. The analysis of the curricular grades of Physical Education colleges was made from only two, some of the most well evaluated. It is a limitation and a possibility for future research: how are the Physical Education schools dealing with S-D Logic in their curricula?

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**Resumo:** A jornada de experiências do cliente de fitness é observada nesta pesquisa exploratória, na qual 15 consumidores de duas academias orientadas para serviço, não membros de redes, sendo uma em Alphaville (Barueri/SP) e a outra na Savassi (Belo Horizonte/MG), participaram de entrevistas semiestruturadas. Das mais de três horas de gravação e uma centena de páginas de transcrição, foi possível propor um modelo conceitual de como o entrelaçamento das dimensões tangível, atendimento técnico e pertencimento permitem ao cliente a cocriação de valor na experiência de uso da academia. Concluiu-se que 1) os serviços também têm uma dimensão tangível; 2) apesar de toda a preparação acadêmico-tecnista da equipe, os usuários querem coproduzir suas experiências; 3) o sentimento de pertencimento, além de engajar na cocriação de valor, é uma dimensão que pode aliviar qualquer desconforto advindo das experiências nas outras dimensões. A importância do pertencimento pode ser moderada pela autoeficácia do usuário.

**Palavras-chave:** Lógica S-D. Cocriação de valor. Pertencimento. Fitness business. Marketing de serviços.

**Resumen:** La jornada de experiencias del cliente de fitness se observa en esta investigación exploratoria, donde 15 consumidores de dos gimnasios orientados al servicio, que no forman parte de cadenas, uno en Alphaville (Barueri/SP) y otro en Savassi (Belo Horizonte/MG), participaron en entrevistas semiestructuradas. Las más de tres horas de grabación y cien páginas de transcripción, se logró proponer un modelo conceptual de cómo el entrelazamiento de las dimensiones tangibles, servicio técnico y pertenencia permiten al cliente la cocreación de valor en la experiencia de uso del gimnasio. Se concluyó que 1) los servicios también tienen dimensión tangible; 2) a pesar de toda la experiencia académico-técnica del equipo, los usuarios quieren coproducir sus experiencias; 3) el sentimiento de pertenencia, además de involucrar en la cocreación de valor, es una dimensión que puede aliviar cualquier malestar proveniente de las experiencias en las otras dimensiones. La importancia de la pertenencia puede ser moderada por la autoeficacia del usuario.

**Palabras clave:** Lógica S-D. Cocreación de valor. Pertenencia. Fitness business. Marketing de servicios.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors declare that this work involves no conflict of interest.

### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

**Christian Gomes e Souza Munaier:** conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, research, methodology, project management, supervision, validation, writing – original draft, writing – revision and editing.

**Francisco Antonio Serralvo:** conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, research, methodology, project management, supervision, validation, writing – original draft, writing – revision and editing.

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### **EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

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