Beyond chemistry. Emotional competence in personalized fitness services

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Purpose: This paper investigates how employees' emotional competences affect customers' responses in the context of emotional-driven and personalized services. Specifically, it proposes a model to analyze the influence of employees' emotional competence on rapport, trust and loyalty towards the service employee and the company.

Design/methodology/approach: The empirical context to validate the proposed theory is the fitness realm. The sample comprises of 296 clients from fitness personal training services. Data collection was carried out by means of personal surveys in three relevant fitness clubs in the city of Barcelona (Spain). The study uses partial least squares to test and validate the proposed theoretical model.

Findings: Employee emotional competence directly affects personal loyalty, trust towards the service employee and rapport. However, higher levels of emotional skills are not significantly associated with loyalty towards the company. The results also suggest that trust significantly enhances loyalty. Interestingly, high levels of rapport between the trainer and the employee could even damage the level of loyalty towards the company.

Originality/Value: Prior research documents that emotional intelligence enhances diverse positive customer outcomes, especially in emotionally charged interactions. Nonetheless, few studies have focused on analyzing how customers' perceptions about services employees' emotional skills are determining their attitudes and behavioral intentions. This study provides evidence on employee's influences on consumer behaviors and outcomes, with a specific focus on employee emotional competence. It also sheds light on the unintuitive impact of customer employee rapport on loyalty towards the company.

Keywords: Emotional competence; employees' behavior; rapport; trust; loyalty; fitness services.

Article classification: Research paper

Beyond chemistry. The role of employee emotional competence in personalized services

1. Introduction

Karen wants to sign up in a gym for some fitness activities and she is looking for a personal trainer to help her in achieving few pre-planned goals. To what extent the emotional competence of the trainer can help her to achieve her goals?

Given that service differentiation becomes increasingly challenging in the age of multi-channel businesses, the role of emotions is gaining attention as a central element in understanding the consumption experience in services industries (Koenig-Lewis and Palmer, 2014). Employee emotional competence (EEC) refers to the employee's ability to display emotionally competent behavior with customers. As customers are heterogeneous, an employee is emotionally competent when able to embrace individual consumer's feelings through a vicarious process. This convergence is what activates a positive relationship experience (Zablah *et al.*, 2017). Since Mattila and Enz (2002) the customer's mood state and the displayed emotions during the service encounter were shown to be strongly correlated with the customer's evaluation of the service encounter. When emotions play this significant role in the assessment of a service, it is critical for employees to address customers' emotional needs and to improve the consumption experience.

In the emotional intelligence realm, several studies have explored the role of emotional skills in relationship outcomes, service evaluations or job performance (Mulki *et al*., 2015). For example, Kernbach and Schutte (2005) showed that higher emotional intelligence led to greater reported satisfaction with the service transaction while Weng (2008) found that emotional intelligent physicians were more likely to create trust-based relationships with their patients. Similarly, Hur *et al*. (2015) found that employee's emotional regulation strategies at work affect customer satisfaction. Kearney *et al*. (2017) recently showed that emotional intelligence in front-line services employees is positively correlated with different customer-oriented

citizenship behaviours. Some of these studies report conflicting results too, showing non-significant relationships between employees emotional skills and important customer outcomes (Giardini and Frese, 2008; Kim *et al*., 2014). A recent research by Delcourt *et al*. (2016) suggested that "*employee behaviors can vary across encounters, implying that service firms should be more concerned with employee emotional competenc*e" (Delcourt *et al*., 2016, p. 11). It follows that rather, than focusing on company's image as a whole, services companies should focus on assessing and possibly improve individual employees' emotional abilities. Because these evaluations are the primary determinants of customer's experience, services companies should pay attention to employee emotional competence or "*the actual display of emotionally competent behaviors by employees in each encounter*" (Delcourt *et al*., 2016, p. 11), and not to the potential to display these skills. Building on these ideas, this study explores i) the influence of employee emotional competence on rapport, trust towards the service employee, loyalty to the service company and loyalty towards the service employee, ii) the different relationships between rapport, trust and customer loyalty and iii) the influence that loyalty towards a service employee may have on the loyalty towards the service company. The study contributes to previous literature in three ways. First, it provides evidence on the direct influence of emotional abilities on different manifestations of relationship outcomes. Second, thus supporting the recent conceptualization and multidimensional structure of emotional competence suggested by recent researchers, it expands the investigation of the influence of emotions-related skills on customer-related outcomes and behaviors in emotionally-driven services characterized by personalization and positive emotions, like the personal training services. Finally, it provides an answer as to whether personal loyalty should be discouraged in this type of services by analyzing if loyalty towards a service employee influences the loyalty towards the service company.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Employee influences on consumer behaviors and outcomes

Cognition, emotions and behavior are the key elements of consumer relationship experiences (Payne *et al.*, 2008). Specifically, social psychology has investigated the central role of emotions to the quality and range of everyday human experiences (Dolan, 2002). Conceptual marketing models concur that emotional attachments enact behavioral actions and are a cornerstone to achieve pleasurable experiences (Schmitt, 1999; Carù and Cova, 2003).

Employees' emotional competence refers to employees' behaviors that show emotional competence (Giardini and Frese, 2008). The concept of emotional competence stems from the emotional intelligence construct. According to Mayer and Salovey (1997) emotionally intelligent individuals are those who have abilities to perceive accurately, appraise, express, understand, use and regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Nevertheless, emotional competence differentiates from emotional intelligence in that, while emotional intelligence focuses on an individual's potential to behave in an emotionally competence way, emotional competence involves actual displays of those emotional behaviors (Delcourt *et al*., 2016; Kim and Liu, 2017; Olamilekan and Dastane, 2014; Prentice, 2016). Besides, while emotional intelligence refers to a stable ability within an employee, emotional competence captures fluctuating behaviors that can vary according to the employee's personality or emotional state. Finally, emotional intelligence has traditionally been analyzed from the employees' and supervisors' perspective. However, when analyzing actual competent emotional behaviors, customers' perceptions should be considered as the most reliable source of information (Delcourt *et al*., 2013). As suggested by Giardini and Frese (2008), employee emotional competence can be understood as the manifestation of actual (work-related) skills based on emotional intelligence. Our study operationalizes perceived emotional competence as a multidimensional heterogeneous construct that arises from customers' evaluations.

Specifically, while emotional intelligence dimensions include intrapersonal skills that are difficult for customers to assess, emotional competence dimensions focus on observable behaviors that customers can actually perceive and evaluate.

The first dimension of emotional competence refers to the employee's ability to perceive customers' emotions. These perceptual abilities insure smoother interpersonal connections and allow employees to monitor customers' potential displeasures states (Weng, 2008). This includes nonverbal perceptions of emotions, physical states, feelings or thoughts (Mayer and Geher, 1996).

The second dimension is the individual's ability to understand others' emotions. According to Pera and Viglia (2016), decoding the customer's affect dimension allows individuals to experience a vicarious role taking process. Consequently, when service employees are capable of understanding and interpreting their customers' emotions, they are more efficient in undertaking actions to address those emotions and to satisfy their customers' needs. As suggested by Giardini and Frese (2006), understanding others emotions is a central aspect of emotional competence in service encounters since it is a prerequisite for choosing the optimal strategy for dealing with customers' feelings.

Finally, the last dimension involves the individual's ability in regulating others' emotions. This dimension captures the employee's actual performance in managing the customers' emotions in service encounters. Being able to regulate others' emotions in services encounters may be critical because it will help the employee to alter the affective state of the customers by: eliciting strong positive reactions; reducing negative affections such as anxiety or perceived risk; suppressing emotions; or deciding not to respond to those emotions (Lopes, *et al.*, 2005).

2.2. Rapport

The concept of rapport involves customers' perceptions on the interactions between contact employees and themselves. Some authors have referred to rapport as the client's perception that the personal relationship between the company and the client have "chemistry", leading to a sense of genuine interpersonal sensitivity (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), and to a state of positive mutual attention (Nadler, 2004). This dimension looks at the personal dimension by unclosing the personal bond. Complementary to this, in the context of service interactions, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) defined rapport as a customer's perception of having an enjoyable relationship with a service employee. Thus, a second complementary dimension of rapport stems from the achieved personal bond between the service employee and the client (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). When a personal connection is born in a service interaction, the customer feels a strong affiliation with the other part based on ties like mutual caring, common grounding or personal identification.

Previous research suggests that emotionally intelligent people are able to show interpersonal abilities that facilitate social success (McQueen, 2004). Employees who possess and display these skills can enhance customers' perceived rapport by easily form connecting relationships with their customers. According to Delcourt *et al.* (2013), when employees interact with customers, they tend to investigate their own emotional state with the purpose of creating an affective bond between the employer and the customer. Employees who are more intelligent and competent in perceiving, understanding and regulating their customers' emotions are more effective in creating affective climates and smooth interactions during service encounters. Empirical studies have also found that greater emotional intelligence and competence have a positive association with successful interactions and rapport (Kim *et al.*, 2014; Lopes *et al.*, 2003). Importantly, employee emotional competence was recently shown to be a key moderator of employee technical competence, showing that the cognitive component alone is not sufficient for the activation of beneficial relationships (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017).

In sum, by enabling personal trainers to fully deploy their social and communication abilities, employees' emotional competence should encourage customers' perceived rapport. Coherently with this, it is proposed that:

H1. Customer-perceived employee emotional competence positively influences rapport in personal training services

2.3. Customer trust

The concept of trust has received considerable attention in marketing research during the last decades. According to Moorman *et al*. (1992), trust can be understood as an individual's willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence. Morgan and Hunt (1994) support this theorization by suggesting that trust exists when one party has confidence in the partner's reliability and integrity. In the context of services, Sirdesmukh *et al*. (2002) define trust as the expectation held by the consumer that the service provider can be relied on promise delivering. Because of the intangible nature of services, customers cannot exactly predict *ex-ante* what to expect from a service, thus increasing perceived risk (Murray and Schlacter, 1990).

Previous research suggest that in services contexts characterized by high perceived risk, uncertainty or lack of knowledge or information, customers may have an inherent need to trust the service provider (Coulter and Coulter, 2002). In personal training services, it is expected that trust may play a critical role in shaping the customer's experience because of different reasons. First, personal training services are based on continued personal interactions between the service provider and the customer. Second, these relationships are normally long-term focused, they can not be inspected in advance and the service outcome can not be immediately observed and evaluated by the customer. Finally, in this type of interactions, the primary object

of trust is the individual service provider, and, to a lower extent, the whole company or brand. For these reasons, customers must trust the expertise of the personal trainer for the success of the service delivery and personal trainers must undertake strategies to entrust their clients during the service encounters.

Trust directly depends on employee interpersonal behaviors, such as self-disclosure (Macintosh, 2009a; 2009b) or benevolence (Sirdeshmukh *et al*., 2002). Previous studies argue that individuals with higher degree of ECs are also more likely to achieve trustful relationships with their counterparts (Chun *et al*., 2010). Individuals with higher emotional abilities will be more likely to recognize others' feelings and emotions and use this information to promoting trustworthy and constructive relations (Mayer *et al*., 2008). According to Jones and George (1998), positive emotions lay in the development of trust, which is characterized by mutual identification and shared value in a relationship. Previous empirical research has also shown a positive relationship between emotional abilities and trust (Kim *et al*., 2014; Weng, 2008). According to this discussion it is hypothesized that:

H2. Customer-perceived employee emotional competence positively influences trust in personal training services

Rapport has also been identified as an antecedent of trust (Nadler, 2004). When individuals demonstrate interpersonal care and concern in relationships, mutual beneficial agreements based on trust are constructed (Macintosh, 2009a). For example, when an employee expresses a genuine concern for his/her customers, believes in the civic virtue of such relationships and makes emotional investments in them, he or she will be creating an effective climate to enhance affective trust (Kim *et al*., 2014). Previous empirical studies also show

support for the positive relationship between rapport and trust (Macintosh, 2009b). Therefore, on the basis of the above, it is hypothesized that:

H3. Customer-perceived rapport positively influences trust in personal training services

2.4. Customer Loyalty

According to Zeithaml *et al*. (1996), customer loyalty is understood as the customer's intention to repurchase the company's products or services (Zeitahml *et al*., 1996). In the context of personal and professional services, the object of customer loyalty may be either the service firm or a particular service employee (Bove and Johnson, 2006). The first involves customers' attitudinal and behavioural loyalty to the service provider relative to other competitors that offer the same or similar services. The second, personal loyalty, is the customer's attitudinal and behavioural loyalty to a particular service employee within the firm or field. This paper addresses its attention to both objects of customer loyalty in services contexts by emphasizing that strong social bonds between the customer and the company can be enhanced by developing interpersonal loyalty between the services employee and the customer (Guenzi and Pelloni, 2004). Customers' relationships with the staff can be of outmost importance in creating a direct loyalty to a specific personal trainer and to the company. In this type of services companies, the quality of the relationship between the customers and the employees can contribute to the customer's overall perception of the company's service quality.

Emotional competences can help services employees to nurture positive relational emotions. According to Kim *et al*. (2014), positive emotions may be correlated with the parts' desires for maintaining a relationship. Literature on emotional intelligence also posits that highly emotionally competent employees will be more proficient in managing relationships and building networks (Mayer and Salovey 1997). According to Delcourt *et al*. (2013), emotional

skills affects loyalty based on the norm of reciprocity. When interacting with a highly emotionally employee, the customer will recognize the benefits derived from such interaction and will fell indebted to such employee. To reciprocate with what received, the customers will exhibit more loyalty towards the service provider. Therefore, the following hypothesis are proposed:

H4. Customer-perceived employee emotional competence positively influences customer loyalty in personal training services toward a) the service employee and b) the company

2.5. The influence of rapport and trust in customer loyalty

Rapport and trust have been central constructs in marketing to explain customer loyalty. On the one hand, rapport strengthens the relationship between the customer and the service provider (Azab and Clark, 2017) and between the customer and the service employee (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). Accordingly, previous research portrays that interpersonal relationship is a key component in services (Barnes, 1997; Guenzi and Pelloni, 2004).

To emphasize the key role of relationships, it has been proposed and empirically validated that, when an employee leaves the organizations, some customers with strong relational ties will also leave to follow the employee (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). As explained by Palmatier *et al*. (2007), some portion of a customer's reported loyalty to the firm may actually be employee-owned loyalty, or fealty directed specifically toward an individual person independent of his or her affiliation with the company. On the other hand, trust promotes customer empowerment, encourages positive word of mouth and discourages switching behaviors (Kantsperger and Kuntz, 2010), thus influencing positively loyalty toward the firm (Bock *et al*., 2016). A customer who trusts his or her service employee is more likely to stay in and be committed to the relationship. Following previous research, it is expected that rapport

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and trust to be drivers of loyalty in the context of personal training. Little research have specifically analyze these paths by differentiating between the loyalty towards the service provider (company) and towards the service employee. Therefore, uncovering this gap it is hypothesized that:

H5. Customer-perceived rapport positively influences customer loyalty in personal training services toward a) the service employee and b) the company

H6. Customer trust positively influences customer loyalty in personal training services toward a) the service employee and b) the company

According to Bove and Johnson (2006), loyalty toward a specific employee may also be beneficial toward the company. Thus, if customers develop a positive attitude towards the service employee, they will be more likely to transfer this affect to the company, expressing favorable behavioral responses. However, other researchers suggest that strong relationships with the employee may not truly generate loyalty towards the company (Bendapudi and Leone, 2002). If the employee is transferred or leaves the organization, the customer may opt for a service provider change to follow this former service employee. Thus, personal loyalty may make customer retention vulnerable.

This paper claims that loyalty towards the service individual is likely to have a direct impact on the loyalty towards the company, since consistent empirical research evidences the existence of this relationship (Bove and Johnson, 2006). It is coherently hypothesized that:

H7. Customer loyalty towards the service employee positively influences customer loyalty towards the company in personal training services

Fig. 1 displays the conceptual model of the study. It hypothesizes that rapport with a service employee plays a pivotal mediating role between employee emotional competence and trust, loyalty to the company and loyalty to the employee in personal training services.

(INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE)

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

This study focuses on clients of personal training services in health clubs in the city of Barcelona. Personal training is a type of high-contact service characterized by customization, personalization and a high affective state. Besides, the fitness industry is a fast increasing industry worldwide that has been growing during the last years. In the US, since 2008, membership has grown by 18.6%, while the total number of consumers has increased by 19.2% (IHRSA, 2016). In Spain, a Deloitte's study in collaboration with Europe Active (2016) reveals that the industry has been growing in the last three years after the financial crisis. Spain is the fourth market in Europe in terms of size, with 4.9 million customers for a total business figure of 2,130,000,000 euros. Within the fitness industry, personal trainers occupy a boundary-spanning position characterized by the emotional labor role of customer service (Wharton, 1999). They perform an emotional labor that combines both technical skills in fitness program designs with relational abilities. This highly interactive service requires that the client and the trainer collaborate in the design and delivery of the training program to co-produce value. Because the results of the personal training service are only visible in the long term, the quality of the interaction may even outweigh the quality of the service. Consequently, it is expected that the emotional and technical competence of personal trainers are influential in the clients' evaluations and behaviors.

The study collected data from a sample of customers of personal training services from three important fitness clubs in the city of Barcelona. These questionnaires were discussed personally with customers that were using professional fitness trainers at that time. A research assistant saved all the collected responses in a tablet. Participation was voluntary. The initial sample consisted of 332 questionnaires. However, 36 questionnaires were excluded because of incomplete information, leaving the final dataset with 296 entries. The data collection was conducted between April and June 2016.

3.2. Research questionnaire and variables measurement

The variables included in the conceptual model were operationalized with 7-point multi-item Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) validated by previous studies (for more details, see Appendix A). Respondents completed the survey in reference to their habitual personal trainer.

employee emotional competence was measured by adapting Delcourt's *et al*. (2016) measurement instrument to the context of fitness professional services. This instrument consists of three dimensions. The first dimension, Employee's Perception of Customer Emotions (EPCE), includes four items where employee's actual performance in accurately observing customers' emotions is assessed. The second dimension, Employee Understand of Customer Emotions (EUCE), includes three items by which the trainer's actual performance in understanding the customer's emotions is measured. Finally, the third dimension, Employees' Regulation of Customer Emotion (ERCE), is composed by four items and measures the trainer's performance in managing the customer emotions. Following Delcourt *et al*. (2016), employee emotional competence is modeled as a second-order formative measure with formative first-

order dimensions and reflective indicators. According to these authors, this variable is a multidimensional construct where every dimension has a specific content domain and may behave independently. The assumption here is that these dimensions are not necessarily referring to the same underlying construct. For instance, while one employee can score high in perceiving the customer's emotions, this service staff may not be able to efficiently regulate those emotions for improving customer experience.

Following Gremler and Gwinner (2000), perceived rapport was conceived as second-order reflective composed by two dimensions. First, Personal Connection (PCON) scale includes three items that capture the bond between the employee and the client, representing a feeling of affiliation. Second, Enjoyable Interaction (ENJIN) also includes three items, reflecting the customer's affective assessment of the actual interaction with the personal trainer.

To measure customer loyalty towards the personal trainer and the fitness club, the study used the scale developed by Zeithaml *et al*. (1996). Specifically, four items measured customers' loyalty towards the personal trainer and four items composed the scale to measure its loyalty towards the fitness club. Trust was measured with items from Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Dagger and O'Brien (2010).

The study also introduces some control variables, the length of the relationships, the clients' personal expertise with fitness activities and the perceived technical competence of the personal trainer. The length of the relationship was measured with the number of months that the customers has been client to his her personal trainer. Clients' personal experience with fitness activities was measured by asking the respondents to categorize themselves in terms of highly experienced users, moderately experience users, and lowly experienced users. Finally, the perceived technical performance of the trainer was measured through four items derived from Price *et al*., (1995).

3.3. Common method bias assessment

Since single informants respond on the independent and dependent variables, common method bias was assessed through procedural and statistical techniques (Podsakoff *et al*., 2003). First, the study ensured respondents on the confidentiality and anonymity of the information, reducing the possibility that clients responded artificially or dishonestly (Podsakoff *et al*., 2003). Second, the questionnaire clarified that there were no correct or incorrect answers, and that the survey focused just on respondents' perceptions. Third, the design of the questionnaire presented the items in such an order to avoid that respondents could infer cause-effect relationships among the constructs. Fourth, exploratory factor analysis was carried out in order to establish the data factorial structure. This analysis revealed the existence of multiple different factors, without a single factor accumulating the majority of the explained variance. Fifth, a Harman test was performed with EQS 6.1. This test confirmed that the goodness of fit of a model where all the items loaded on a unique factor was substantially reduced in comparison to the fit of a model where every item loaded on its corresponding latent variable (Pavlou *et al*., 2007). Therefore, common method bias does not seem to be a problem in this research.

4. Analysis and results

To test the hypotheses, this study employed partial least squares (PLS) regressions with the SMART-PLS 3.2 software. In comparison to traditional covariance-based structural equation modelling, PLS is a distribution-independent method that has fewer constraints and statistical assumptions. Besides, this methodology is appropriate when the interest of the study focuses on prediction and theory development rather than on theory confirmation (Reinartz *et al*., 2009). Thus, PLS is specially advised for early stages of theoretical development, when models are completed with new measures and structural paths, when the measures are not well formed, and the phenomenon under research is new or changing (Roldan and Sánchez-Franco,

2012). To our knowledge, few studies have analysed the influence of employee emotional competence on customers' attitudes and behaviours, and only one study has designed and implemented a comprehensive measure for this construct (Delcourt *et al*., 2016). Besides, PLS presents advantages over traditional structural modelling when formative variables like employee emotional competence are included in the model (Ringle *et al*., 2009).

4.1 Analysis of the measurement model

The first step of the PLS methodology analysis involves estimating the measurement model. To estimate models with second-order constructs in PLS, a two-step approach method must be implemented according to Wetzels *et al*. (2009). Thus, in an initial estimation, first-order constructs are included in the model. This estimation conducts to the latent variable scores to be used in the estimation of the second-order factor model.

In this initial estimation, reliability and validity of the first-order constructs was assessed. This analysis revealed that all items' outer loadings on their respective latent variables were above the critical threshold of 0.7 (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). Moreover, all the constructs were internally consistent and met the convergent validity criteria. Finally, the existence of discriminant validity was verified by comparing the constructs' AVE values with the squared correlation between any pair of constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and by examining the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratios between the constructs (Henseler *et al*., 2015). Discriminant validity was verified following these criteria.

The estimation of the initial first-order model provided the latent variable scores to be employed in estimating the second-order constructs. The results of the second estimation are shown in Table 1. For the reflective constructs, indicators presented individual reliability and the constructs met composite reliability and convergent validity criteria. Discriminant validity was also confirmed by using the same methods employed in the first estimation (table 2). For

formative dimensions, validity is determined by the significance and strength of the weight from every formative indicator in the composite latent construct (MacKenzie, *et al*., 2005). As table 1 reveals, the weights of the three formative dimensions of employee emotional competence suggest that each dimension is an important formative dimensions of this construct, with weights ranging from 0.343 to 0.540.

(INSERT TABLE 1 HERE)

(INSERT TABLE 2 HERE)

4.2 Analysis of the structural model

To assess the significance of the path coefficients, a bootstrapping procedure with 5.000 subsamples was employed. This bootstrapping procedure is a nonparametric technique of resampling commonly used in PLS (Hair *et al*., 2011). The results of the structural estimation reveal that all the factorial loadings are significant at 1%. The model explains 26.7% of rapport, 44.0% of trust, 64.4% of customers' loyalty towards the personal trainer, and 59.8% of the loyalty towards the fitness club variance. The predictive relevance of the model was also confirmed through the Stone-Geisser test. Table 3 presents the results of the structural model.

(INSERT TABLE 3 HERE)

According to the results of the structural model, employee emotional competence has a positive and significant influence on rapport (β=0.390; t=6.353), supporting hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 is also supported in that employee emotional competence has a positive and significant influence on customers' trust toward the service employee (β=0.272; t=4.498). Besides, findings suggest that rapport is a predictor of trust (β=0.353; t=6.246), in agreement with hypotheses 3. Focusing on the influence of employee emotional competence on customer

loyalty, this contsruct is significantly related to loyalty to the employee (β=0.218; t=4.096), but not to the company (β=0.098; t=0.057). While these findings support hypothesis 4a, hypothesis 4b does not find empirical evidence. Focusing on the other antecedents of customer loyalty, trust explains both customer loyalty to the employee (β=0.490; t=8.552) and to the company (β=0.232; t=3.053). Finally, rapport has a marginal impact on personal loyalty and, contrary to our expectations, a negative and significant impact on loyalty to the company (β=-0.176; t=3.482). These results support hypotheses 5a, 6a and 6b, while hypothesis 5b is not supported. Finally, results suggest that loyalty towards the employee also elicits loyalty towards the company (β=0.373; t=5.909), thus providing empirical evidence for hypothesis 7.

5. Conclusions, limitations and further research

In markets characterized by high emotional attachments, the relationship between customers and employees goes beyond cognition, with employee emotional competence that was shown to be a key moderator of employee technical competence (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017). The fitness industry is a clear example of what can be termed "emotional market". Perceiving, understanding and regulating customers' emotions is of paramount importance to sustain trainees' long-term goals (Barlow and Maul, 2000)

This paper portrays that interpersonal abilities create an affective bond that turns into customer trust and personal rapport. An interesting aspect in these environments is testing if the beneficial effects coming from employee emotional competence will result in higher loyalty just toward that specific employee, or toward the company as a whole. Through a unique sample coming from three fitness clubs in Barcelona, the empirical analysis suggests that employee emotional competence is positive related to loyalty to the employee. On the contrary, the effects on the loyalty toward the company are less clear. Specifically, a strong rapport between employee and customer might even backfire when it comes to assess company's loyalty. One possible explanation for such a finding could be that, given the strong personal aspect of these

relationships, customers may desire moving with the trainer and walk away from the company. Indeed, higher levels of personal rapport are significantly and directly related to personal loyalty. Since the magnitude of such effect is not substantially large, it seems plausible that other personal and situational variables may finally determine customers' decisions to move with his/her personal trainer. In any case, at least in this context, there is no relationship between the customer-employee connection and the customer intention to remain loyal to the company.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study responds to unexplored questions regarding the role of employee emotional competence in highly emotionally-driven services. While the role of customer emotions has been receiving considerable attention in the service and marketing literature (Weng, 2008; Giardini and Frese, 2008), to our best knowledge there are no studies integrating employee emotional competence with key different types of customer responses.

Employee emotional competence significantly and directly influences paramount service encounters such as personal rapport or trust. When employees display emotional abilities in services interactions, customers will be more likely to perceive a genuine sense of interpersonal connection and affection from the employee, to better evaluate the service consumption experience, and to develop trust-based relationships with the service employee. Since trust towards the service employee positively influence customers' loyalty towards the services company and towards the service employee, our results are suggesting that this variable mediates the influence of emotional abilities on customers' behavioral intentions. That is, the influence of employee emotional competence on behavioral loyalty is partially explained by the creation of trustful relationships between the counterparts. However, contrary to Delcourt's *et al.* (2013) findings, rapport did not exert a significant positive influence in loyalty towards the company. Overall, the different links from emotional competence to these variables would be indicating that while rapport is salient in interpersonal services, in some specific contexts it may not directly influence customers' behavioral intentions. In the context of personal training,

it has been revealed that, while personal loyalty may positively drive loyalty towards the company, rapport can have a pernicious influence on loyalty to the company. In situations of high rapport, if the employee is fired, transferred or leaves the organization, the customer may opt for punishing the company, switch the service provider of follow the service employees to other organizations. Thus, higher levels of rapport may make customer retention vulnerable in this specific type of service interactions. Since the study suggests a significant direct relationship between rapport and personal loyalty, and between trust and personal loyalty, the findings indicate that rapport may have a direct and indirect influence on personal loyalty via trust. The construction of trustworthy relationships arises from accumulated knowledge regarding the other part's actuations (Johnson and Grayson, 2005). Hence, this result suggests that trust is the mechanism behind the client-employee connection that leads to loyalty, because confidence towards the service employee needs to be sufficiently established to ultimately reinforce personal loyalty. However, the conflicting results regarding the influence of rapport on loyalty requires additional research.

By adopting the employee emotional competence customer-approach recently suggested by Delcourt *et al.* (2016), this study also ties customers' perceptions of services employees' abilities with customers' attitudes and behavioral intentions. Previous studies primarily focused on examining the role of emotional abilities on customer outcomes, by analyzing self-reported scales or information supplied by supervisors. Because customer and employees do not use the same criteria in in evaluating employees' performance (Mattila and Enz, 2002), adopting customer-driven approaches should researchers may obtain a more accurate perspective in analyzing customers' experiences.

While implications are straightforward for personal trainers, in that possessing the ability to understand and moderate customers' emotions turns into high loyalty, the implications for companies are mixed. Similarly to the sharing economy realm (Pera and Viglia, 2016),

customers care about the human connection with the trainer but are less attached to the brand (i.e., the company). Besides, for services managers, our research offers a more comprehensive framework to understand how loyalty towards the services company is created. The study's results clarify how devoting resources to enhance the employee's emotional abilities may result in an improvement of the customer's experience. It also contributes to the development of an instrument to better monitor, understand, train and manage employees' emotional abilities. In addition, managers of this type of services should be aware that for a consistent proportion of customers loyalty to the company stems from the loyalty with the employee. Consequently, if customer loyalty to the service firm is based on elements that are inextricably tied to a specific employee, this form of loyalty would vanish whether person leaves the organization (Palmatier *et al.*, 2007). Thus, service organizations that simply track customers' loyalty without properly analysing the nature and origin of that loyalty may struggle to design effective customer loyalty programs. Given these findings, generous rewarding mechanisms should be exerted by companies to retain emotionally competent employees. This will help indirectly to achieve customer loyalty.

The study is not without limitations. First, this is an analysis investigating just the city of Barcelona. Although results are coming from three different independent companies, cultural factors might affect the external validity of these findings. A good avenue for future research is running a field experiment tracking real behaviours of customers. This would be an appropriate approach to overcome the limitations of this type of studies using one single informant. Second, the study focuses on analysing one specific type of service characterized by customization, high contact and strong emotional load. Future research should investigate how employee emotional competence affects customers' experiences in more standardized and impersonal services where emotional skills may play a different role. Third, future studies should include additional moderators. While in this study the length of the relationship or customers' degree of expertise

with the service domain had no direct effect on the dependent variables, these may moderate the influence between employee emotional competence and customers' responses (Coulter and Coulter, 2002; Dagger and O' Brien, 2010). Incorporating other variables related to the customer's personality (i.e. inter-personal self-consciousness) (Uhrich and Tombs, 2014), personal involvement with the service (Bloemer and de Ruyter, 1999), employee's technical performance (Leisen and Hayman, 2004) or assessing cross-cultural differences, may contribute to gain a better understanding on the model's relationships. Finally, as recently suggested by Kumar and Reinartz (2016), further research in the fitness industry should focus on exploring how value is really determined for a fitness customer. In a growing competitive sector where online presence through blogs and social networks provides a non-customized and cheaper service to price-sensitive clients, it should be interesting to ascertain whether emotional skills can add value to the customer, and offer tailored programmes to suit every customer needs.

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