



Identifying Effective Indicators on Correcting Mental Pattern of Hesitant Customers of Fitness Clubs

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the factors influencing the modification of hesitant customers' mental models in sports clubs. The research employed a qualitative approach, and data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Data were collected through interviews, and the study's validity and reliability were confirmed based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In total, 13 interviews were conducted with experts, including university professors, managers, and coaches of sports clubs, continuing until theoretical saturation and data adequacy were achieved. The collected data were then analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding. The findings revealed 56 basic themes, which were organized into 14 structured themes and 5 overarching themes. The structured themes included specialized knowledge, adaptation, synergy, environmental management, customer management, task organization, customer acquisition, communication and follow-up, accountability, design and development, quality enhancement, neuromarketing, mental model recognition, and advertising. The overarching themes encompassed expertise, management, communication, services, and marketing. To modify the mental models of hesitant sports club customers, it is essential to focus on the identified indicators, thereby creating conditions that encourage these customers to engage with sports clubs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations have recognized that loyal customers not only find it easier to use their services but also share positive experiences with potential customers, thereby creating a favorable image of the organization in the minds of others (Power, 2008, p. 222). Among the key aspects of customers' mental models is their decision-making style, which refers to the cognitive orientation involved in the purchasing process and is observable in many consumer choices. However, many organizations tend to overlook hesitant customers and focus primarily on loyal ones. From this perspective, an entrepreneurial approach can be effective in attracting loyal customers from within this very group of hesitant buyers (Soltani & Mohammadian, 2015, p. 339).

Customers' mental models provide a foundation for predicting their behavior toward a system and the actions they ultimately take. These models are shaped by prior experiences and interactions with organizations (Volkamer & Renaud, 2013, p. 52). Understanding consumer behavior, particularly in the fitness industry, is a critical factor in improving the performance of fitness clubs, retaining more members, and enhancing overall customer satisfaction (Gonçalves, Correia, & Diniz, 2012, p. 28; Kölbl et al., 2022, p. 18). Findings from Kölbl et al. (2022) indicate that the club environment, available facilities, and membership pricing are among the most influential factors affecting customer satisfaction. Notably, the price-to-quality ratio of membership fees has been identified as a key driver of member satisfaction.

Another study by Soltani and Mohammadian (2015, p. 339) analyzed factors influencing customers' decision-making when choosing a fitness club. Their results revealed that product, promotion, price, and location are ranked in order of importance. Similarly, Dorai and Varshney (2012, p. 403) proposed a conceptual link between value and satisfaction, noting that both constructs emerge through customers' cognitive evaluation processes.

Despite the rapid growth of the fitness market as a significant economic sector, reports indicate a decline in the number of permanent gym members (Talley, 2008). This trend underscores the necessity for a deeper investigation into the factors associated

with customer satisfaction and loyalty within the industry.

With increasing competition in both the number and quality of fitness clubs, identifying the factors that contribute to member retention or early dropout has become critically important. Additionally, attracting hesitant customers to these clubs requires a deeper analysis of their behavior and motivations. In this context, examining members' weekly usage frequency, as a key indicator, appears instrumental in better understanding their decision-making related to retention (Kopanidis, 2023, p. 10; Ferrand, 2010, p. 83). In a study titled "A Micro-Level Perspective on Understanding Membership and Active Participation in Sports Clubs," Kopanidis (2023) demonstrated that shared values, excitement, sense of belonging, enjoyment of activities, physical fitness levels, and expectations from coaches and others are primary predictors of member attraction and retention.

Members' expectations, which are shaped by their needs, desires, motivations, and past experiences, can be influenced through media communication, pricing, and brand image. Clubs that deliver services not only meeting but exceeding these expectations are more likely to enhance member retention and foster a more positive mental model of the club (Talley, 2008, p. 50). Customer satisfaction, defined as an emotional response to services, plays a fundamental role in strengthening the relationship between members and clubs. According to Kölbl et al. (2022, p. 18), satisfaction is a holistic concept developed over time, providing valuable insights into customer behavior, their willingness to reuse services, and even repurchase decisions. Studies by Bodet (2006, p. 149) further indicate a direct relationship between member satisfaction and retention.

Customers who are satisfied with a club's services are more likely to maintain their established relationship with the organization. This satisfaction not only increases members' willingness to stay but also plays a crucial role in encouraging frequent visits, repeated service use, and recommendations to others (Vázquez & Foxall, 2006, p. 79). Member satisfaction significantly influences their intention to sustain engagement with the club and reduces membership dropout rates (Kölbl et al., 2022, p. 18). Additionally, Tian et al.

(2021) emphasized that the perceived value of club services directly affects members' sports participation and overall satisfaction.

Service quality is one of the most critical factors influencing member satisfaction and retention. Keshavarz, Farahani, and Qomi (2023, p. 3755) demonstrated that within the perception dimension, politeness and trust hold the highest priority, while in the expectations dimension, reliability is considered the most important factor. The study by Shahriari et al. (2022), which identified environmental, social, and aesthetic factors, is directly relevant to our research in pinpointing key indicators for refining the mental models of hesitant fitness club customers. Notably, Shahriari and colleagues emphasize that improving environmental factors is a fundamental pillar in attracting members and ensuring the success of fitness clubs, which can directly influence customer mindset and reduce their hesitations. Therefore, our study, considering the significance of these factors in attracting and retaining hesitant customers, aims to contribute to the development and refinement of their mental models, ultimately enhancing member loyalty and retention within fitness clubs.

Advertising is also a fundamental component in attracting customers and shaping their behavioral intentions. Parvizi et al. (2022) reported that electronic advertising and word-of-mouth have respective impacts of 0.712 and 0.203 on the behavioral intentions of customers in sports complexes in Tehran. Their study also confirmed the mediating role of expectation disconfirmation in the relationship between advertising and customers' behavioral intentions. Furthermore, Sreedharan et al. (2022) emphasized that obtaining user feedback and adapting services based on their needs can foster greater satisfaction and a more positive customer mindset.

Researchers and practitioners have shown significant interest in examining the concept of loyalty, primarily due to its positive outcomes such as increased customer profitability through repeat purchases, the dissemination of positive brand-related content, and a greater willingness to pay premium prices for products. The importance of maintaining loyalty is especially pronounced in fields like sports, where performance outcomes are often uncertain (Kosciolek, 2019, p. 67). Loyalty is developed through a three-stage process: cognitive (related to brand performance), affective (related to emotional attachment to the brand), and behavioral

(related to repeat purchasing) (Back & Parks, 2003, p. 23). In this context, Trkulja et al. (2023, p. 37) investigated the impact of sports fan engagement on trust, satisfaction, and loyalty within social media networks of sports clubs, finding that fan identification with the club's brand and their motivations play a fundamental role in determining the level of engagement.

Customer loyalty can be divided into two dimensions: attitudinal and behavioral. Attitudinal loyalty refers to the psychological commitment a customer has toward a product, whereas behavioral loyalty pertains to various forms of customer interaction with the brand. Specifically, customers who exhibit a stronger identification with the club and receive external motivations for engaging with the club's social media demonstrate higher levels of trust, satisfaction, and loyalty (Trkulja et al., 2023, p. 37).

In the context of sports club marketing, fan loyalty attitudes influence behaviors such as attendance at games, watching matches through media channels, using club symbols and colors, and participating in related discussions (Gray, 2012, p. 37). Business success is attributed primarily to two key factors: marketing and innovation, both aimed at satisfying current and future customers (Dargi & Salari, 2011, p. 233). In today's complex and challenging market environment, fostering close relationships with customers is essential for survival and competitive advantage.

Understanding customers' mindsets, including their expectations, emotions, and desires, constitutes a fundamental basis of marketing. These principles focus on influencing consumers' thoughts and reactions (Kotler & Armstrong, 2011). However, the behavior of hesitant consumers—who are skeptical toward recommendations and claims—poses a challenge to traditional marketing approaches. Evidence suggests that hesitant consumers are more likely to change their attitudes when confronted with strong evidence and credible information (Albayrak et al., 2012, p. 27).

Consumer hesitation comprises two dimensions: distrust, which refers to a lack of trust in brand claims, and rejection, which relates to the perceived dishonesty of these claims (Albayrak et al., 2012, p. 27). Such consumers typically exhibit a high propensity for questioning and scrutinizing, and their distrust of information sources leads them to interpret brand actions differently (Theofilou & Jerofejeva, 2011, p. 56). Nevertheless, most studies

have focused on general consumer behavior, with limited attention given specifically to hesitant customers. This gap in the literature highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing customer hesitation and their decision-making processes.

One of the key challenges faced by fitness clubs is managing customer hesitation regarding continued engagement with the club. Clubs can utilize targeted surveys and analyses to assess customers' mindsets and identify the factors contributing to their doubts. Additionally, a more precise evaluation of elements such as advertising quality and the relationship between advertising and purchase intention among sensitive customers—

those who react differently to the quality and price of club services or products and whose purchasing decisions are influenced by these factors—is essential (Obermiller et al., 2005, p. 7).

Fitness clubs should strive to establish a positive image by providing credible evidence and addressing customers' mental reservations. This study, by identifying factors influencing the mental models of hesitant customers, can offer valuable guidance for club managers and sports marketing policymakers. The findings suggest that managers can enhance their marketing strategies and service delivery, ultimately improving advertising effectiveness and customer satisfaction.

2. Methodology

The research employed a qualitative approach using thematic analysis. Participants included 13 individuals comprising university faculty members specializing in sports management with teaching and research experience, as well as managers and coaches of sports clubs who were interviewed. The sample was selected purposively using theoretical sampling based on judgment criteria. The sample size was determined according to theoretical saturation of the study's extracted components.

The validity and reliability of the study were confirmed through criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ensure validity, the findings were presented to the participants, who reviewed the theoretical framework and provided feedback. This process involved obtaining diverse inputs from faculty members and club managers regarding the accuracy, comprehensiveness, and correctness of the results. Participants emphasized the alignment of the findings with field realities and existing theories in sports marketing, expressing their views on the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Their feedback contributed to refining and strengthening the study's concepts and indicators. Consequently, the results

achieved the necessary validity and reliability based on these validations and final adjustments.

At the conclusion of the study, the findings were reviewed by the involved faculty members, and suggestions for revising or modifying the final theory were documented. Data reliability was further ensured by transparently demonstrating the researchers' decision-making process and providing all raw data, codes, categories, the analytical process, initial objectives, and research questions to the faculty members. An expert reviewer carefully verified the accuracy of all research steps.

For test-retest reliability, several interviews were randomly selected from the conducted interviews. Each interview was coded twice within a short, specified interval, and the assigned codes were compared. In this study, three interviews were chosen, and one of the researchers conducted coding twice with a one-month interval. To calculate inter-coder reliability, a sports management expert involved in the research process and familiar with the study was invited as a research collaborator for coding. Necessary training and coding techniques were transferred to the collaborator. Subsequently, the researchers and the collaborator jointly coded

two sample interviews, and inter-coder agreement was calculated.

As shown in Table 1, a total of 40 codes were recorded across the three interviews, with 17 codes matching between coders. Therefore, the inter-

coder reliability for the interviews in this study was calculated at 86%. Given that this value exceeds the acceptable threshold of 60%, the coding reliability is confirmed, indicating that the reliability of the current interview analysis is satisfactory.

Table 1- Reliability calculation

Percentage of agreement	Agreement number	Number of codes	Interview number
0/83	5	12	M3
0/93	7	15	M6
0/94	8	17	M11
0/91	20	44	Total

Based on the table above, the intra-subject agreement rate is 0.91, which is appropriate.

3. Findings of the Research

The participants in this study comprised 13 experts, including sports management professors, managers and specialists from the Ministry of Sports and its affiliated departments, as well as

managers of sports clubs. All had practical or research experience in the field of marketing. Table 2 details the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of research participants

Field of Study	degree of education	Years of service	Job	gender	Row
Sport Management	PhD	Years 10	University faculty	Man	1
Sport Management	PhD	Years 12	University faculty	Man	2
Sport Management	PhD	9 Years	University faculty	Man	3
Sport Management	PhD	15 Years	University faculty	Female	4
Sport Management	PhD	12 Years	Sports club manager	Man	5
Sport Management	Masters	8 Years	Sports club manager	Man	6
Sport Management	PhD	9 Years	Expert of Ministry of Sports	Man	7
Sport Management	PhD	16 Years	Director of Sports Department	Man	8
Sport Management	Masters	5 Years	Sports club manager	Man	9
Sport Management	PhD	-	Sports management researcher	Man	10
Sport Management	PhD	3 Years	Board of Directors of Sports Industry Association	Man	11
Sport Management	Masters	7 Years	Sports club manager	Female	12
Sport Management	Masters	9 Years	Sports club manager	Female	13

The research findings, which were extracted from the interviews with the participants, were organized into a conceptual framework and model after a three-stage coding process. These findings can be seen in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Sample interview and extracted mes

Extractive mes	text of interview
Increasing desired quality level of sports services clubs Inducing value of services provided to customers existence of advertising banners and teasers around club Creating loyalty in club customers using advertising infrastructure	Sports clubs should do ir best to make customers loyal. This can improve ir mentality. One of most important activities in this field can be improving quality level of sports services. This creates value for customers. Also, clubs can improve ir advertising infrastructure by using advertising banners and teasers to attract and attract customers.

Table 4. results of interview coding

Basic mes	Organized topics	Overarching mes
Dedicating time to learn professional knowledge of attracting customers Having a complete mastery of affairs and knowledge processes in sports marketing Having information literacy of sports club managers Gaining knowledge about ways to attract attention of hesitant customers	Professional knowledge	Expertise
Ability to adapt hesitant customers to club environment Playing a role in strengning relationships between trainers and clients Compatibility of marketing programs with different mindsets of customers	adaptation	
Having expertise of using customers in development of services with common interests Specialized knowledge of developing sports service packages in direction of co-creation Sufficient expertise in formulating value-creating written missions clubs	Synergistic	
ability to provide specialized sports programs in clubs Providing conditions to use scientific experiences of trainers Safety management of sports environment to control incidents	Environmental management	
Familiarity with social psychology and personality of customers Ability to organize existing customers in form of different groups Having necessary information to understand general issues of athletes Mastery of customer recognition methods and marketing activities	Customer management	Management
Appropriate structuring of value-creating areas for customers Organizing duties and activities of coaches in clubs Managing and organizing customer ideas, suggestions and criticisms Establishing positive and constructive communication with customers Organizing feedback space for clients and trainers	Organizing affairs	
Receive relevant information from club customers Designing new sports services to attract customers Ability to effectively communicate between coaches and potential clients Having a club system with online communication systems	Attract customers	
ability to communicate technical skills of experienced trainers with customers ability to communicate effectively between club management and customers existence of a system for tracking sports activities by customers	Communication and follow-up	
existence of an effective accountability system for clubs Creating mutual respect in interactions with customers Adhering to club's obligations to customers Responsibility for providing quality services to customers	Responsibility	Connections

Formation of new sports service development groups	Design and development	Services
Designing sports services based on needs assessment		
Development of sports services based on customer feedback		
Development of discount packages to attract hesitant customers		
Identifying sensitivity of customers to service quality	quality improvement	
Focusing on quality of services according to mentality of customers		
Increasing desired quality level of sports services clubs		
Inducing value of services provided to customers		
manager guarantees quality of services provided in club	Neurological marketing	Marketing
guarantee of club to emphasize preservation of health of athletes		
Creating happy programs in club environment		
Proper lighting of club and use of happy colors		
presence of suitable welfare services in club such as buffet and...	Knowing mentality	
presence of friends in club environment		
Segmentation club customers based on ir mentalities		
Efforts to induce brand of club in minds of customers		
Creating attractive appearance of club to attract mentality	Advertising	
Continuous study of business environment and mentality of leaders		
Creating an enjoyable environment to influence mindset of customers		
use of human resources in direction of recommended advertising		
existence of advertising banners and teasers around club		
Creating loyalty in club customers using advertising infrastructure		
Influencing customers' behavioral intentions to join club		

Based on the findings of the above table, the basic themes that were identified in the previous stage; this time, they were categorized in the form of organized themes, which the findings of this section showed that 14 organized themes are considered as effective indicators for modifying the mental model of hesitant customers of sports clubs. These themes include specialized knowledge, adaptation, synergy, environmental management, customer management, organizing affairs, attracting customers, communication and follow-up, responsibility, design and development, quality improvement, neuromarketing, understanding the mentality, and advertising. Also, based on the findings, the overarching themes include expertise, management, communication, services, and marketing. Now that all the indicators have been categorized into relevant themes, they are presented in the form of the final research model.



Figure 4-3 Factors affecting correction of mental pattern of hesitant customers of sports clubs

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to identify the key factors influencing the modification of the mental models of hesitant customers in sports clubs. Based on the findings, the overarching themes include expertise, management, communication, services, and marketing. The following discussion elaborates on the identified indicators.

The results revealed that marketing is one of the most critical factors affecting the modification of hesitant customers' mental models in sports clubs. Among the fundamental principles of successful marketing is neuromarketing. To reshape the mental models of hesitant customers, it is essential for managers to guarantee the quality of services offered at the club and emphasize the club's commitment to preserving athletes' health. In addition to these assurances, club managers should strive to foster customer engagement by implementing joyful programs within the club environment, ensuring adequate lighting, utilizing vibrant colors, and providing appropriate welfare services such as cafeterias.

Understanding customer mentality is a key component of marketing. Accordingly, segmenting club customers based on their mental models and targeting efforts to embed the club's brand in customers' minds is crucial. Since each customer has distinct criteria, it is not feasible to evaluate all customers from a uniform perspective. However, creating an appealing club appearance, continuously studying the business environment and customer mentalities, and designing an enjoyable atmosphere can effectively influence customers' mental models. Advertising is another vital element that should be strategically employed in marketing.

The findings of this study align with those of Poursoltani et al. (2019) and Kotler & Armstrong (2011). Moreover, Parvizi et al. (2022) demonstrated that electronic advertising significantly impacts customers' behavioral intentions. Therefore, advertisements should be designed to reduce customers' hesitation about joining sports clubs. Recommended strategies include leveraging human resources as advertising ambassadors, utilizing banners and promotional

teasers around the club, and fostering customer loyalty through robust advertising infrastructure. These approaches can substantially influence the behavioral intentions of hesitant customers to join the club.

Another significant factor identified in this research is management. Customer acquisition expertise is closely linked to specialized knowledge and adaptability. When sports club managers possess professional knowledge—such as dedicating time to learn customer acquisition techniques and demonstrating mastery over marketing processes—they can more effectively attract hesitant customers. Satisfied members not only remain loyal but also contribute to attracting new members (Talley, 2008). Satisfaction reflects a positive relationship between expectations and member retention (Kölbl et al., 2022). Organizations recognize that loyal consumers use services more frequently, advocate positively to potential customers, and maintain favorable mental models of the organization (Power, 2008). Consequently, organizations strive to convert hesitant customers into loyal ones (Soltani & Mohammadian, 2015).

In addition to these factors, the information literacy of sports club managers and their knowledge of strategies to capture hesitant customers' attention are crucial. Another key indicator is adaptability, which involves aligning hesitant customers with the club environment, enhancing relationships between coaches and customers, and tailoring marketing programs to diverse mental models. This adaptability helps resolve customers' indecision regarding club selection and facilitates their integration into the club.

Synergy is another component related to expertise, encompassing specialized skills in involving customers in service development with mutual benefits, expertise in developing sports service packages for co-creation, and sufficient knowledge to formulate documented, value-creating club missions. Such synergy can align

customers with club strategies and help achieve shared goals.

Rahmati and Radfar (2020), in their study on identifying mental models of co-creation in the tourism industry using Q methodology, identified three distinct mental models among participants: service development, customer value, and organization. These findings further support the significance of understanding diverse mental models in strategic planning and service delivery.

The results indicated that management is one of the most critical factors influencing the modification of hesitant customers' mental models in sports clubs. According to the findings, management encompasses several dimensions, one of which is environmental management. This aspect enables club managers to effectively deliver specialized sports programs, facilitate the application of coaches' scientific expertise, and ensure the safety management of the sports environment to prevent accidents, thereby creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere for customers.

Another key dimension highlighted in the findings is customer management. The greater the managers' familiarity with social and personality psychology of customers, the more effectively they can influence customers' mental models. Consequently, managers must possess the capability to organize existing customers into distinct groups based on demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, and occupation. This requires comprehensive knowledge to understand the general concerns of athletes and proficiency in customer recognition methods and marketing activities.

Finally, managers must be adept at organizational management. Specifically, a well-structured framework should be established for value-creating domains tailored to customers. Only under such conditions will customers seek out value-creating clubs, aligning their selection criteria accordingly. Regarding the theme of customer value, these findings are consistent with those of Rahmati and Radfar (2020). Therefore, when tasks and activities of coaches are properly organized and

the management system effectively channels customer ideas, suggestions, and criticisms, a positive and constructive relationship with customers is fostered. Ultimately, this facilitates the organization of feedback loops between customers and coaches, enhancing the overall club environment.

Another key finding revealed that communication is one of the most significant factors influencing the modification of hesitant customers' mental models in sports clubs. Effective communication can enhance customer acquisition. Therefore, to attract hesitant customers, club managers should prioritize actions such as gathering relevant information from customers, designing innovative sports services to engage them, facilitating effective communication between coaches and potential customers, and implementing online communication systems within club management. These measures can significantly improve the quality of customer acquisition.

Communication also plays a vital role in customer satisfaction, as satisfied customers are more likely to maintain established relationships (Vásquez-Carrasco & Foxall, 2006). A related theme identified is communication and follow-up, which refers to the ability of experienced coaches to establish technical communication with customers, the effectiveness of communication between club management and customers, and the existence of systems for tracking customers' sports activities. Improving these aspects can enhance communication quality and attract potential customers to the club.

Furthermore, another theme associated with communication is accountability. It is essential for club managers to develop an effective responsiveness system and foster mutual respect in interactions with customers. When managers demonstrate responsibility towards customers in their duties, customers develop a stronger commitment to joining the club. Hence, managers must uphold the club's commitments to customers and take responsibility for delivering high-quality

services. These findings regarding communication align with those of Kaskyolig (2019).

According to the findings of the present study, another critical factor influencing the modification of hesitant customers' mental models in sports clubs is the quality of services. Fitness organizations that satisfy their members and provide services that meet or even exceed members' expectations can enhance member retention and positively shape customers' perceptions of the club (Talley, 2008). Services encompass both design and development components. Regarding these components, steps can be taken such as forming teams dedicated to developing innovative sports services, designing services based on needs assessments and customer feedback, and creating discount packages aimed at attracting hesitant customers. These initiatives increase the motivation of hesitant customers to join the club. These findings are consistent with those of Keshavarz, Farahani, and Qomi (2023), as well as Vázquez and Foxall (2006).

Improving service quality also represents an effective strategy for influencing the modification of hesitant customers' mental models. Therefore, managers should identify customers' sensitivity to service quality and focus on delivering services that align with customers' mentalities, thereby enhancing the desired level of service quality in sports clubs. One of the most important aspects in this regard is conveying the value of the services offered to customers. Hesitant customers often seek clear indicators when selecting a suitable club, and service quality serves as a critical signal that can encourage their commitment.

5. Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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In conclusion, it should be emphasized that customers' mental models are not limited solely to service quality but encompass multiple dimensions, including customer relationships with the club, management style, the extent of advertising, and other influential factors. Accordingly, it is recommended that sports clubs prioritize improving service quality, as it remains a fundamental pillar for securing customer satisfaction. However, based on the present study's findings, this recommendation should not be exclusively confined to service quality; rather, equal attention must be given to other dimensions of customer mentality, such as social relationships and managerial approaches.

Regarding the group identified as hesitant customers in this research, it is important to note that these individuals were not part of the expert panel. Although alternative methods, such as questionnaires, could have been employed to access this group and specifically gather their perspectives as a research sample, doing so might have enriched the findings and clarified the impact of various factors on customers' mental models. Additionally, some experienced club managers declined to cooperate with the research team, which may have affected the diversity and accuracy of the data.

Overall, if all the recommendations of this study are effectively implemented, it can be expected that customers' mental models towards sports clubs will be positively transformed, ultimately leading to the attraction and retention of loyal customers.

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