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**Value, satisfaction and loyalty in padel consumption: Analysis of the relational component of the service in expectations and perceived quality**

Dissertação elaborada com vista à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Gestão do Desporto

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## **Resumo**

O desenvolvimento da investigação sobre a qualidade da interação entre os clientes e os colaboradores, enquanto determinante da qualidade percebida dos serviços desportivos, é importante para compreender o seu impacto na satisfação e lealdade dos consumidores. Este estudo utilizou o American Customer Service Index (ACSI) para analisar o valor percebido, a satisfação e a lealdade dos clientes de clubes de padel, com base nas suas expectativas e na qualidade percebida da interação com os colaboradores.

Conduzido em seis clubes de padel em Lisboa, Portugal, este estudo aplicou 254 questionários a clientes, analisados através de modelos de equações estruturais.

Os resultados confirmam a relevância do modelo para estudar a lealdade dos clientes em clubes desportivos e sustentam a influência direta das expectativas e da qualidade percebida na lealdade. As conclusões destacam a importância de gerir as expectativas dos clientes, considerando os aspetos psicológicos das interações entre clientes e colaboradores, como a empatia e a simpatia. Os resultados sublinham a necessidade de investir em recursos humanos e nas suas competências relacionais com os consumidores desportivos.

**Palavras-chave:** ACSI, clube desportivo, consumidor desportivo, expectativas, gestão desportiva, interação cliente-colaborador, lealdade, padel, qualidade percebida, recursos humanos, satisfação, valor percebido.

## **Abstract**

The development of research on the quality of customer-staff interaction, as a determinant of the perceived quality of sport services, is important for understanding its impact on consumer satisfaction and loyalty. This study used the American Customer Service Index to analyse the perceived value, satisfaction and loyalty of padel club customers based on their expectations and perceived quality of interaction with staff.

Conducted in six padel clubs in Lisbon, Portugal, this study applied 254 questionnaires to customers and analysed them using structural equation modelling.

The results confirm the model's relevance for studying customer loyalty in sport clubs and support the direct influence of expectations and perceived quality on loyalty. The findings highlight the importance of managing customers' expectations, which should account for the psychological aspects of customers-staff interactions, such as empathy and kindness. The findings stress the need for investing in human resources and their relational skills with sport consumers.

**Keywords:** ACSI, customer-staff interaction, expectations, human resources, loyalty, padel, perceived quality, perceived value, satisfaction, sport club, sport consumer, sport management.

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## 1. Introduction

The intensification of competitiveness among sport service organizations implies additional demands from customers in relation to the provision of service quality. Consumers are increasingly less tolerant of offering low-quality services, pushing organizations to raise their standards in the search for a better positioning against the competition (Moreira and Silva, 2016). In the world of sport services, as the costs associated with attracting new customers are significant, the challenge arising from customer abandonment must be a management concern, which highlights the importance of organizations understanding the factors that drive customer loyalty (Moura e Sá and Cunha, 2019). From this perspective, consumer satisfaction and loyalty are among the most important objectives pursued by any organization, dedicating its attention and resources to this end (El-Adly, 2019). In turn, the influence of satisfaction and service quality on consumer loyalty of sport services has been shown to be positive in the literature (Lee *et al.*, 2018).

Service quality is seen as a subjective phenomenon; for example, according to Parasuraman *et al.* (1985), it is the difference between customers' perceptions and their expectations in relation to the services they experience, and as viewed by Chakrabarty *et al.* (2008), it is the organization's ability to meet the needs of its consumers. Consequently, the more positively customers perceive the quality of service provided by a given organization, the greater their level of satisfaction will be, and the more beneficial the impact generated on the organizational image by its customer base will be, increasing the probability of them continuing to purchase sport services offered by this same organization (Dam and Dam, 2021). Thus, service quality is seen as a fundamental requirement and assumes vital importance for organizations, channelling their efforts to preserve or achieve competitive advantage in relation to other competitors (Osarenkhoe

*et al.*, 2017). Subsequently, improving the quality of services emerges as one of the fundamental conditions for organizations to exceed their consumers' expectations and ensure their satisfaction (Günel and Duyan, 2020), aiming to establish and strengthen a sustainable and lasting bond with their target market (Tan *et al.*, 2017).

Driven by the need to face competitive challenges and maintain the sustainability of operations, according to Alguacil *et al.* (2020), sport managers are more willing to acquire skills that enable the design of strategies and practices aiming for more optimized resource management. As the perceived quality of the service is highlighted in the literature as an essential foundation for the satisfaction and loyalty of customers of sport services (e.g. Biscaia *et al.*, 2023; Ferreira-Barbosa *et al.*, 2023), to guarantee their satisfaction and solidify their trust in the provider of these services, the manager must prioritize and guarantee service excellence (Osarenkhoe *et al.*, 2017). However, to ensure business success, it is imperative to analyse in depth the characteristics of the services provided that have the most impact on this perception, providing managers with tools that will enable them to design strategies that enhance the satisfaction of customers' aspirations (Ferreira-Barbosa *et al.*, 2023). According to Behnam *et al.* (2021), one of the procedures that organization managers must adopt to enhance the development of service quality emanates from interactions with customers. The significant and positive effect of collaborator interactions on consumer satisfaction is highlighted in the results of the study by Foroughi, Iranmanesh, *et al.* (2019); specifically, when these interactions exceed customers' expectations, generating delight, they also significantly influence their behavioural intentions. The argument of Behnam *et al.* (2021) and Foroughi, Iranmanesh, *et al.* (2019) is corroborated by the findings of Ferreira-Barbosa *et al.* (2023), who, in the context of the quality of sport services provided by fitness centres, developed a systematic review of the literature on which determinants have the greatest potential to influence

consumer satisfaction; in particular, the quality of collaborators (namely, instructors and reception staff) takes an outstanding second place among the nine dimensions of service quality with the greatest effect on customer satisfaction, and subsequently, on customer loyalty. Ferreira-Barbosa *et al.* (2023) further reinforce that customer expectations can be met, and even exceeded, as long as the attributes of the team of employees are subject to persistent improvement by management, which encompasses professional training, but also friendliness, involvement, and the distinction of individualized treatment, since the attention given by collaborators is highly valued by consumers of sport services. In turn, the results of the study by García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, Fernández-Gavira, *et al.* (2018) developed in the context of low-cost gyms suggest that, even in this business model, improving the perception of quality should constitute a strategic management objective; the authors advocate that, to this end, the quality of interaction with customers must be one of the priorities of efforts in quality management, given its strong relationship with quality in general, and simultaneously, the fragility of low prices to sustain a competitive advantage compared to competitors, as a factor disconnected from the quality of the sport service. Additionally, other studies express evidence about the high importance of the relational component in the perception of the quality of the sport service, highlighting as examples: the study by Moura e Sá and Cunha (2019), on the factors of customer satisfaction and loyalty in swimming pools, underlines the relational dimension, concluding that the quality of interaction with instructors has a powerful effect on customer satisfaction; in turn, the conclusions of Castillo-Rodríguez *et al.* (2019) point to the supremacy of interaction with coaches among five dimensions to evaluate the quality of services in three sport centres, and emphasise the importance of establishing relational bonds between clients and coaches; finally, Eskiler and Safak (2022) stress the

high positive weight of the relationship between the employee and the consumer in the quality of the fitness services consumer experience, which, in turn, impacts loyalty.

Globally, in recent times, padel has had a notable rise, being among the fastest growing and most popular sports (Rodríguez-Cayetano *et al.*, 2023). In 2008, for the first time, Portugal hosted the European Padel Championship, and since then, a very significant growth in this sport has been observed (Portuguese Padel Federation [FPP], 2021). According to data patented by the FPP (2023), between 2013 and 2022, the number of affiliated clubs increased from 18 to 229, and the number of affiliated practitioners grew from 524 to 8655, representing an increase of 1172% and 1551%, respectively. In total, the number of individuals who practice padel in Portugal is estimated at around 100 thousand (FPP, 2021).

This study used the American Customer Service Index model (ACSI: Fornell *et al.*, 1996), widely recognized as a valuable tool for evaluating the antecedents of customer satisfaction, resulting from the consumption experience of a product/service offered by organizations that operate in the most diverse sectors of economic activity (Morgeson *et al.*, 2023), as well as the effect of satisfaction on customer loyalty.

Recently, Costa *et al.* (2024) and Mascarenhas *et al.* (2024) applied the ACSI model to the Portuguese sport context, within the scope of golf and rugby services, respectively, recommending the full application of ACSI, i.e. the integration of perceived value (antecedent factor of satisfaction), as well as complaints (consequent factor of satisfaction). Both studies presented new relationships to be observed in the ACSI configuration, i.e. the direct influence of expectations on loyalty (Mascarenhas *et al.*, 2024) and perceived quality on loyalty (Costa *et al.*, 2024), as well as the negative effect of expectations on customer satisfaction (Costa *et al.*, 2024; Mascarenhas *et al.*, 2024). Concomitantly, the systematic review developed by Ferreira-Barbosa *et al.* (2023)

recommends the development of research on the quality of customer-collaborator interaction, as a determinant of the perceived quality of sport services, in order to better understand its impact on consumer satisfaction and loyalty of these services.

Following the above, the general objective of this study was to analyse the perceived value, satisfaction and loyalty of padel club customers based on their expectations and perceived quality of interaction with collaborators/staff. To this end, the following relationships were examined: (i) the influence of expectations (on the customer-collaborator interaction) on the perceived quality of this interaction; and the effect of expectations and perceived quality (ii) on the perceived value of the service, (iii) on satisfaction with the service, and (iv) on loyalty to padel clubs.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI)**

The theoretical framework of this study is provided by the ACSI model. According to Fornell *et al.* (1996), measuring the quality of products/services is indispensable for a deep understanding of competitiveness among companies. Thus, objecting the determination of the importance of the quality of products/services transacted in a consumer-centric and increasingly global competitive economy (Fornell *et al.*, 2020), the authors developed the theoretical ACSI model, which “measures the quality of goods and services as experienced by the customers that consume them” (Fornell *et al.*, 1996, p. 7). Consequently, consumers’ perceptions concerning experiences with firms substantiate the foundation of the ACSI model.

ACSI is a causal model, meaning it is structured following a cause-and-effect system, centralized in general consumer satisfaction, which is evaluated as a function of its antecedents encompassing expectations, perceived quality and perceived value, in

order to maximize explanation of those satisfaction drivers so that consumer loyalty [i.e. determinant of overall customer satisfaction (Aryani and Siallagan, 2021)] can be incremented by managers (Morgeson *et al.*, 2023). In its original version, the ACSI model also contemplates customer complaints as a consequence of customer satisfaction (Fornell *et al.*, 1996), and thus, both customer complaints and customer loyalty are prospected as future consumer behaviours (Fornell *et al.*, 2020).

Hult *et al.* (2017) highlight the ACSI model as a valuable tool for assessing consumer satisfaction; these authors argue that the success of marketing efforts is heavily conditioned by managers' ability in understanding how customers actually perceive products/services offered by companies and how these perceptions are driven, i.e. managers should consistently know what clients think and why. The research developed by Hult *et al.* (2017), who applied a survey based on the ACSI model to consumers and conducted interviews with managers, show that, in general, the latter do not rigorously understand the perspective of the first regarding companies' products/services, nor the justification for consumers hold such a perception. These results indicate severe failures at the level of information management effectiveness collected from clients, and consequently, constrain success in designing and implementing marketing strategies.

Following the propositions affirmed by the ACSI model (Fornell *et al.*, 1996), and since then, of the evidence provided by its broad application in the most varied sectors of economic activity (Morgeson *et al.*, 2023), and given the new relations demonstrated in the studies developed in the context of Portuguese sport consumption (Costa *et al.*, 2024; Mascarenhas *et al.*, 2024), this study uses an adaptation of the model as illustrated by figure 1.

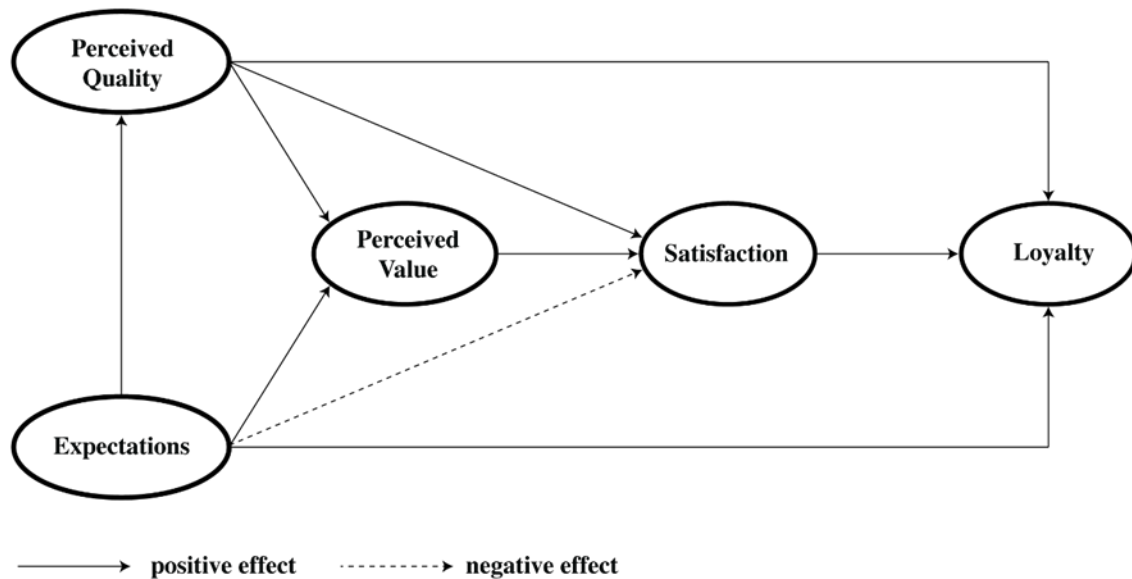


Figure 1. ACSI model (Fornell *et al.*, 1996) adapted from Costa *et al.* (2024) and Mascarenhas *et al.* (2024)

## 2.2 Perceived Quality

In the pursuit of customers' satisfaction and their loyalty, as claimed by Dam and Dam (2021), service companies, who nowadays live in extremely competitive environments, are endlessly worried about service supply of superior quality coupled with the spread of an excellent brand image in the mind of their consumers. Consequently, the literature has devoted much attention to the measurement of the relationship between service quality and consumer satisfaction (Dimaro, 2023).

In light of the constructs based on the ACSI model (Fornell *et al.*, 1996), Hult *et al.* (2017) define the perceived quality as “a measure of the customer's evaluation via recent consumption experience of the quality of a company's products or services” (p. 40). In this perspective, perceived quality always involves a customer's judgment of value after experiencing a product or service provided by an organization. As noted by Dimaro (2023), the literature in the field of marketing management attributes enormous relevance to service quality, establishing its definition in customer assessment in terms of the

relative superiority or inferiority of a given service. The results of the study by Hult *et al.* (2017) highlight a robust and positive effect of perceived quality, both on consumer satisfaction and perceived value. In turn, the findings obtained by Dam and Dam (2021) demonstrate that the perceived quality is also positively related to customer loyalty, as evidenced by Costa *et al.* (2024), in the context of consumption of Portuguese golf services, and by Castillo-Rodriguez *et al.* (2019), whose study evaluates the perceived quality of activities provided by Spanish sport centres.

According to Dimaro (2023), the perceived quality of the service is the result of the two-factor join, namely, core (i.e. what is the service provided by the company?) and relational (i.e. how does the company provides that service?) aspects, which are considered in the literature as the elementary bases of services. In this framework, the perceived quality of the service can derive from the influence of a wide range of factors. For example, contextualized in sport services, the study by Castillo-Rodriguez *et al.* (2019) considers two orders of factors, namely, the tangible (e.g. infrastructure of the organization) and intangible (e.g. behaviour of employees) characteristics of the service, and the perceived quality is examined through five dimensions, i.e. sport installations, activity space, locker rooms, programs of activity, and trainers.

As part of the intangible factors, in the field of ethical service branding, the findings of the study by Markovic *et al.* (2018) highlight the fundamental role of employees in service companies, namely, their empathy, accentuating employees as their main stakeholders, not only for the responsibility they have in service performance, but also for their determining function in interaction with the customers, which gives them the ability to build/destroy the image and reputation of the organization during these interactions; according to these authors, hiring qualified employees, with high standards of ethics and empathy, along with a constant investment in their training, is crucial in

service firms, as these characteristics exert significant influence on consumer propensity to develop positive emotions which are needed for the establishment of affective and lasting ties with the organization. Additionally, the perceived quality literature in the specific context of sport service (e.g. (Behnam *et al.*, 2021; Eskiler and Safak, 2022; Ferreira-Barbosa *et al.*, 2023; Foroughi, Iranmanesh, *et al.*, 2019; García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, Fernández-Gavira, *et al.*, 2018; Moura e Sá and Cunha, 2019) has highlighted the supreme importance of the relational dimension, which is focused on the human element, generally referring to the skills and behaviour of organizational employees assessed in the client-collaborator interaction. As noted by Günel and Duyan (2020), who studied the influence of perceived quality on athlete satisfaction, employee performance is an essential element in the quality of service offered by sport organizations for its high contribution in emotional satisfaction generated by experience of sport service consumption; the authors conclude that sport organizations cannot neglect coaches' in-service training, but rather improve their knowledge and skills because they are the ones who develop and implement the sport training programs.

### **2.3 Expectations**

Consumer's expectations refer to the quality of the service or product that is anticipated by the consumer, which are influenced by both past experience of service/product consumption and forecasting on how service/product will be provided (Fornell *et al.*, 2020; Morgeson *et al.*, 2023). In service quality theorizing, several authors converge in identifying factors affecting consumer expectations (e.g. Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985), among which the following: (i) the previous customer experiences, given that they allow for quality anticipation of an analogous experience; (ii) the social pressure and opinion of other clients who influence consumer perception of what constitutes quality service; and (iii) the marketing strategies that shape consumer expectations. Thus, there

is a need to enhance the knowledge about the consumer for which the service/product will be planned, once consumers base their expectations on individual perception on what the consumption of the service/product was and what it should have been (Lee *et al.*, 2018).

Several studies support that higher expectations regarding overall service quality induce greater perceived service value and promote higher service satisfaction (e.g. (Dimaro, 2023; Hult *et al.*, 2017)). Specifying employee-level analysis, and given the relationship between perception of relational service quality and loyalty (Biscaia *et al.*, 2023), the study of the contribution of expectations in this topic becomes crucial. For example, the study by Leung *et al.* (2020) found that the induction of a communal relationship expectation between staff and clients of a fitness centre led to a greater predisposition of the latter to sharing information about the club on social media compared to the induction of an expectation-based relationship of employee talent and skills. However, despite the fundamental role assumed by consumer expectations management on service/product quality in the company-client relationship, it is important that this management is consistent with the reality of the organizational context, ensuring its feasibility (Fornell *et al.*, 2020).

If on the one hand, expectations have been positively related to satisfaction (e.g. Morgeson *et al.*, 2023), on the other, there is evidence on the negative influence of expectations on consumer satisfaction. For example, as stressed by Habel *et al.* (2016), the gap between expectations and the perceived quality decreases as expectations are lower, which generates an increase in satisfaction. Also, in the context of sport clubs, the negative influence of expectations on sport consumer satisfaction has been demonstrated (Costa *et al.*, 2024; Mascarenhas *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, Mascarenhas *et al.* (2024) highlight the importance of sport service consumers' expectations as the results of their

study point to the strong effect of expectations on the service of sport clubs on customers' loyalty.

## 2.4 Perceived Value

In the ACSI model (Fornell *et al.*, 2020), the perceived value is recognised as an antecedent of consumer satisfaction, and it is defined as the measure of “the level of perceived quality relative to the price paid, and the price paid relative to the perceived quality of the good or service” (p. 11); consequently, as explained by the authors, given the ratio established to measure perceived value with respect to perceived quality as well as the last one relative to the first, the ACSI model also predicts a positive association between these two variables. In addition, as referred by Morgeson *et al.* (2023), the degree of importance of value for money (i.e. price) for the consumer tends to decline as more amount of the product/service is acquired. Although, on the contrary, as argued by El-Adly (2019), in many studies developed in the context of service consumption, perceived value is evaluated as a one-dimensional construction, focusing strictly on the exchange between the money spent value and the service consumption experience.

Empirically, the perceived value has been highlighted as a predictor of sport consumption behaviour (e.g. Baek *et al.*, 2020; García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, Fernández-Gavira, *et al.*, 2018; García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, Pitts, *et al.*, 2018; Tian *et al.*, 2021), which has even been validated by the results of the meta-analytic review developed by Biscaia *et al.* (2023) in the specific context of sport spectators. As evidenced in the literature review produced by Zauner *et al.* (2015), understanding the perceived value of the consumer is crucial to business management and marketing, for its great ability to sustain a competitive advantage among key competitors. In the specific context of sport consumption, the positive and direct impact of perceived value on consumers' satisfaction has been evidenced, not only in low-cost business models (e.g. García-

Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, Fernández-Gavira, *et al.*, 2018), in which the price assumes a supremacy among other sport service characteristics, as in other general supply of sport services (e.g. García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, Pitts, *et al.*, 2018). In the study by Choi *et al.* (2018), contextualized in virtual golf consumption, a strong significant relationship between the perceived value and consumer satisfaction was also emphasized. In addition, as recommended by Costa *et al.* (2024) and Mascarenhas *et al.* (2024), research in the topic of satisfaction and loyalty in sport club consumption, through the use of the ACSI model, must contemplate the perceived value analysis as a driver of satisfaction and by extension, future intentions of sport consumers.

## **2.5 Consumer Satisfaction and Loyalty**

Several studies applied in diverse trade sectors have verified that consumer satisfaction promotes their loyalty to service/product (e.g. Fornell *et al.*, 2020), including the sport sector (e.g. Loranca-Valle *et al.*, 2021). Thus, ensuring customer satisfaction is one of the requirements for effective and sustainable quality management (Ahrholdt *et al.*, 2019; Bahrami *et al.*, 2021; Kim and Zhang, 2019). Analysis of consumer satisfaction and their determinants allows managers to identify disability areas in service delivery, as well as optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of the applied resources to achieve the satisfaction and loyalty of their consumers (Hult *et al.*, 2017).

Conceptually, consumer satisfaction is presented as a result of a cognitive process in which consumers compare their initial expectative to perceived value after consumption experience (Ahrholdt *et al.*, 2019); in turn, loyalty is understood as the intent to acquire products or services of the same organization again in the future, and/or the intent to recommend service/product to others (Khan *et al.*, 2015). In particular, loyalty is composed of behavioural and attitudinal dimensions (Khan *et al.*, 2015; Saini and Singh, 2020), which contemplate consumer behaviours and actions (i.e. repurchasing or

reusing a product/service), and the recommendation of service/product to others, given the customer-formed opinion of it, respectively. In this framework, it is advantageous to analyse the two dimensions of loyalty (Foroughi, Iranmanesh, *et al.*, 2019), and even its interaction (Saini and Singh, 2020), such that the information produced on consumer loyalty can be used for promote a long-lasting company-consumer relationship, anticipating future customer actions (Behnam *et al.*, 2021). In this sequence, it is possible to extrapolate a greater competitive advantage of the company that provides a sense of satisfaction to consumers by overcoming competitors' supply through realizing the target segment expectations and increasing perceived value, and consequently, leading to purchase and repurchase attitudes, and recommendation of the organization's products/services.

In the sport sector, consumer satisfaction and loyalty have also been studied, and the first has been evidenced as a strong antecedent of the second (Loranca-Valle *et al.*, 2021). It should also be noted that this relationship has been verified in several sport consumption settings (e.g. fitness: García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, Fernández-Gavira, *et al.*, 2018; Jeon *et al.*, 2021), rugby: Mascarenhas *et al.*, 2024, golf: Lee *et al.*, 2018, events: Biscaia *et al.*, 2023).

Considering the foregoing, this study proposes the following hypotheses as illustrated in figure 1:

H1: Expectations are positively associated with perceived quality;

H2: Expectations are positively associated with perceived value;

H3: Perceived quality is positively associated with perceived value;

H4: Expectations are negatively associated with satisfaction;

H5: Perceived quality is positively associated with satisfaction;

H6: Perceived value is positively associated with satisfaction;

H7: Satisfaction is positively associated with loyalty;

H8: Perceived quality is positively associated with loyalty;

H9: Expectations are positively associated with loyalty.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Sampling**

This study was carried out in six padel clubs located in the district of Lisbon, Portugal. After obtaining authorization from the clubs, questionnaires were administered to club customers over 18 years of age, on paper and in online format (through Microsoft Forms), in the period between January 13 and February 16, 2024. A total of 265 questionnaires were collected, and after detection and elimination of multivariate outliers through Mahalanobis distance calculation, 254 were considered for analysis.

The sociodemographic profile of the sample (Table 1) shows that the majority of padel club customers are male, aged between 26 and 55 years old, employed and with a university degree. With regard to sport practice, 42.5% of respondents have been playing padel for more than 3 years, and 45.7% attend the padel club once a week.

**Table 1***Sample: Sociodemographic and Sport Consumption Characteristics (n=254)*

	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	184	72.4
Female	70	27.6
<b>Age (years)</b>		
18-25	23	9.0
26-35	46	18.1
36-45	79	31.1
46-55	84	33.1
> 55	22	8.7
<b>Level of education</b>		
Graduated	194	76.4
High school	60	23.6
<b>Occupation</b>		
Employed	235	92.5
Student	10	3.9
Unemployed	6	2.4
Retired	3	1.2
<b>Sport practice (padel)</b>		
Less than 1 year	57	22.4
[1 – 3 years]	89	35.1
More than 3 years	108	42.5
<b>Attendance frequency (padel club)</b>		
1 time/week	116	45.7
2 times/week	86	33.8
3 or more times/week	52	20.5

### 3.2 Instrument

The questionnaire applied in this study was adapted from the instrument used by Costa *et al.* (2024) and Mascarenhas *et al.* (2024) who studied the relationship between expectations, perceived quality, satisfaction and customer loyalty at golf courses and rugby clubs, respectively. The questionnaire was adjusted to the specific padel context with the intervention of four padel experts (club managers and federated coaches). The

instrument was made available in two versions - Portuguese and English - after translation by a bilingual professional.

The questionnaire measured five dimensions: (1) Expectations about the padel club's service quality and respective (2) Perceived quality, with five items each; (3) Loyalty to the padel club, with six items; (4) Perceived value of the quality/price relationship of the service provided by the padel club, with three items; and (5) General satisfaction, with 1 single item. For all dimensions, a 5-point Likert scale was used, in which values ranged from 1 = Totally disagree to 5 = Totally agree. The questionnaire was constructed so that the presentation of variables was random to minimize common method bias (Kock *et al.*, 2021). The final part of the questionnaire included the sociodemographic and sport consumption questions section.

### **3.3 Data Analysis and Processing**

Structural equation analysis (SEM) was performed using the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) of R software (R Core Team, 2023). The estimation method used was robust maximum likelihood since no severe violations of the sample's normal distribution were recorded (Table 2), meeting the criteria of asymmetry and kurtosis ( $< 3$ ) (Kline, 2016).

**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics of the Items and Standardized Factor Loading*

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>sk</b>	<b>ku</b>	<b><math>\lambda</math></b>
<b>Expectations</b>					
The rules of the padel club and etiquette must be respected.	4.70	0.53	-1.59	1.59	0.55
Club employees/staff must be experienced and qualified.	4.34	0.82	-1.08	0.65	0.62
Club employees/staff must be friendly.	4.75	0.50	-1.85	2.59	0.75
Club employees/staff must be sensitive to customer needs.	4.59	0.61	-1.19	0.34	0.77
Club employees/staff must be presentable and easily recognisable.	4.32	0.79	-1.01	0.67	0.73
<b>Perceived quality</b>					
The rules of the padel club and etiquette are respected.	4.40	0.68	-0.83	0.13	0.67
Club employees/staff are experienced and qualified.	4.30	0.71	-0.76	0.58	0.82
Club employees/staff are friendly.	4.63	0.58	-1.44	1.67	0.70
Club employees/staff are sensitive to customer needs.	4.48	0.68	-1.07	0.51	0.72
Club employees/staff are presentable and easily recognisable.	4.12	0.82	-0.52	-0.59	0.72
<b>Perceived value</b>					
Given the price I pay for the services provided by the padel club, the quality of service is very good.	4.15	0.82	-0.75	0.24	0.83
Given the quality of services provided by the padel club, I pay a very good price.	3.94	0.90	-0.40	-0.57	0.88
The service provided by the padel club has a good quality/price ratio.	4.02	0.80	-0.49	-0.25	0.86
<b>Satisfaction</b>					
Regarding your entire experience as a padel club customer, rate your satisfaction.	4.31	0.67	-0.68	0.38	
<b>Loyalty</b>					
I will report the positive aspects about this club to others.	4.48	0.62	-0.75	-0.44	0.76
I will recommend this padel club to anyone who seeks my advice.	4.39	0.73	-0.94	0.12	0.86
I will encourage my family and friends to play padel at this club.	4.33	0.78	-0.79	-0.41	0.85
I will always consider this padel club as my first option for any padel activity.	3.84	1.08	-0.67	-0.22	0.74
In the coming years I will continue to be a customer of this club.	4.35	0.82	-1.11	0.47	0.85
Regardless of the price, I will continue to play padel at this club.	3.09	1.21	-0.17	-0.83	0.57

Note. M – mean; SD - standard deviation; sk – skewness; ku – kurtosis.

The internal reliability of the model was assessed with the coefficient  $\omega$ , according to the criterion  $\omega > 0.7$ , and guaranteed by eliminating all items with a factorial load  $<$

0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2021; Kline, 2016). Convergent validity was measured using the average variance extracted (AVE), according to the criterion  $AVE > 0.5$  (Hair *et al.*, 2021; Kline, 2016), and divergent validity was assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait correlation ratio (HTMT) with the HTMT criterion  $< 0.90$  (Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

The indicators used to evaluate the fit of the model were the comparative-of-fit-index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), whose criteria are (Hair *et al.*, 2021):  $CFI > 0.90$ ,  $TLI > 0.90$ ,  $RMSEA < 0.08$  and  $SRMR < 0.08$ . The covariance relationship between the two items that measured expectations regarding the topic of friendliness of the padel club staff was also identified according to an analogous procedure from the study by Costa *et al.* (2024).

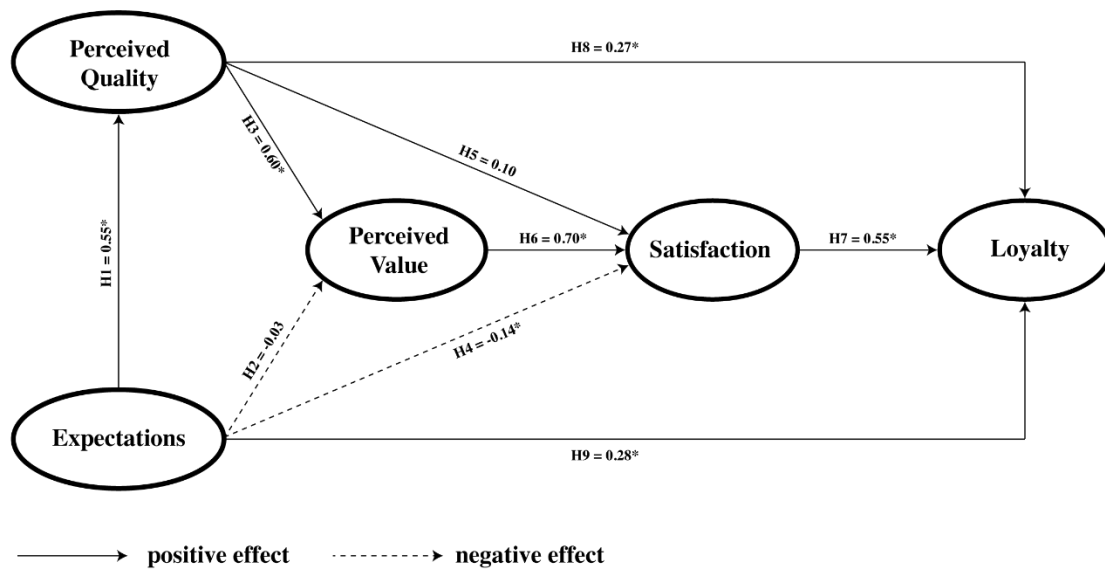
#### 4. Results

The model meets the criteria of reliability, convergent and divergent validity (Table 3). Also, the model has an acceptable suitability ( $\chi^2(161) = 411.303$ ;  $CFI = 0.93$ ;  $TLI = 0.91$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.074$ ;  $SRMR = 0.065$ ). The explanatory capacity of the model is 69% for padel customer loyalty and 53% for padel customer satisfaction ( $R^2 = 0.69$  e  $R^2 = 0.53$ , respectively).

**Table 3**  
*Reliability ( $\omega$ ), Convergent Validity (AVE) and Divergent Validity (HTMT)*

	$\omega$	AVE	HTMT			
			Expectations	Perceived quality	Perceived Value	Loyalty
Expectations	0.81	0.5	-			
Perceived quality	0.86	0.5	0.53	-		
Perceived Value	0.89	0.7	0.27	0.56	-	
Loyalty	0.88	0.6	0.49	0.63	0.86	-

The results validate hypotheses H1, H3, H4, H6, H7, H8, H9 but do not confirm hypotheses H2 and H5 (Figure 2). Thus, customer expectations directly and positively influence the perceived quality and their loyalty to the padel club, negatively influencing their satisfaction. In turn, perceived quality directly and positively influences both perceived value and loyalty. It is important to highlight that the relationships with perceived value, namely between satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.70$ ) and between perceived quality ( $\beta = 0.60$ ), i.e. hypotheses H6 e H3, respectively, are those that have the greatest power of influence, whose results are considered as strong effects (Hair et al., 2021).



Note. \* significant for  $p < 0.05$ .

Figure 2. Results of the hypothesized model.

As shown in table 4, while the results do not validate the direct effect of expectations on perceived value, the indirect effect of expectations on perceived value mediated by perceived quality is confirmed. Analogously, the direct effect of perceived quality on satisfaction is not verified, but the indirect effect mediated by perceived value is supported.

**Table 4**  
*Hypothesis Testing and Path Coefficients*

	$\beta$	Sig.	Decision
H1: Expectations → Perceived quality	0.55	0.000	Supported
H2: Expectations → Perceived value	-0.03	0.789	Not supported
H3: Perceived quality → Perceived value	0.60	0.000	Supported
H4: Expectations → Satisfaction	-0.14	0.042	Supported
H5: Perceived quality → Satisfaction	0.10	0.276	Not supported
H6: Perceived value → Satisfaction	0.70	0.000	Supported
H7: Satisfaction → Loyalty	0.55	0.000	Supported
H8: Perceived quality → Loyalty	0.27	0.007	Supported
H9: Expectations → Loyalty	0.28	0.001	Supported
<b>Indirect effects</b>			
Expectations → Perceived quality → Perceived value	0.33	0.000	Supported
Perceived quality → Perceived value → Satisfaction	0.42	0.000	Supported

## 5. Discussion

The adaptation of the ACSI to study the perceived value, satisfaction and loyalty of consumers of padel clubs met the specification of the analysis of consumers' expectations and perceived quality in relation to the quality of interaction with the team of collaborators / staff, ensuring greater knowledge about the human element and its influence on the quality of sport service. The model studied had a good explanatory capacity for customer loyalty, corroborating its applicability to sport consumption (Costa *et al.*, 2024; Mascarenhas *et al.*, 2024).

In relation to customers' expectations regarding the quality of interaction with staff members, the results confirm its positive influence: on perceived quality (H1),

corroborating other studies (e.g. Dimaro, 2023); and loyalty (H9), strengthening the new relationship in ACSI advanced by Mascarenhas *et al.* (2024) in the context of sport consumption; these authors identify the strong direct and positive effect of expectations on loyalty, although the result obtained in the present study only confirms a weak to moderate relationship. The results also support the negative influence of expectations on satisfaction (H4), corroborating studies on customers of sport clubs (Costa *et al.*, 2024; Mascarenhas *et al.*, 2024), for whom high expectations that are far from the reality of the service lead to decreased satisfaction (Aryani and Siallagan, 2021). Contrary to what was proposed, the direct and positive effect of expectations on the consumer's perceived value (H2) was not validated, converging with the results of other studies (e.g. Hult *et al.*, 2017; Zhou *et al.*, 2023). However, the indirect effect of expectations on perceived value through perceived quality was verified, as in the study by Zhou *et al.* (2023); these authors suggest that the increase in value, achieved through the perception of greater quality in the service, is based on the fulfilment of psychological expectations for the provided tourist service. This suggestion is appropriate in substantiating the results of the present study, given the perceived quality of interaction with staff is influenced by emotional expectations (e.g., friendliness, compassion, fun) adjacent to the service provided by collaborators (Jeong *et al.*, 2019).

Regarding the perceived quality of interaction with staff, the results confirm its direct influence: on perceived value (H3), as reported by García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, Fernández-Gavira, *et al.* (2018), for whom the perceived quality of the interaction is one of the determinants of the service value perceived by fitness club customers; and also on loyalty (H8), which not only strengthens the evidence that attests to perceived quality as one of the antecedents of loyalty towards sport organizations (Loranca-Valle *et al.*, 2021), but also the recommendation by Costa *et al.* (2024) regarding the inclusion of this

relationship in the ACSI model. Contrary to the hypothesized proposal, and the evidence from other studies on sport consumers (e.g. Ferreira-Barbosa *et al.*, 2023; Günel and Duyan, 2020; Vegara-Ferri *et al.*, 2020) the effect of perceived quality on satisfaction is not confirmed (H5), although its indirect effect through the mediation of perceived value is verified. Foroughi, Mohammad Shah, *et al.* (2019) suggest that the quality of the service underlying sports facilities is perceived as minimum requirements of the sport service and, therefore, does not influence spectators' positive emotions nor, consequently, their behavioural intentions. If the result of this study is interpreted in the same direction, i.e. if customers' perception of a good interaction with staff is something acquired/inevitable, the quality of staff perceived by consumers can only positively influence their satisfaction with the experience in general to the extent that it adds value to the sport consumption experience.

Finally, the influence of perceived value on satisfaction (H6) and the latter on loyalty (H7) is also confirmed by this study, validating the importance of knowing the value that customers affect to the sport consumption experience and monitoring their satisfaction with it to reinforce their loyalty (e.g. Bahrami *et al.*, 2021; Foroughi, Iranmanesh, *et al.*, 2019; Vegara-Ferri *et al.*, 2020).

Future studies that use ACSI to analyse the quality of customer-staff interaction should apply the respective model taking into account all factors resulting from satisfaction (Fornell *et al.*, 1996), including the extent of complaints. This recommendation follows the findings of the research developed by Aryani and Siallagan (2021), which studies the relationship between the frequency of complaints and customer expectations, emphasizing that the customers who complain the most are those who have higher expectations for quality of the service; the authors accentuate the need to view complaints as sources of information that promote greater knowledge of service

weaknesses, and whose use can be decisive in planning strategies aimed at customer satisfaction and retention. Also, future studies contextualized in sport consumption should apply the design of the ACSI model analysed in this study in order to strengthen its updating, considering: the direct relationships between expectations, perceived quality and loyalty, as well as the negative influence of expectations on satisfaction. Additionally, the updated ACSI model could be tested in other contexts, namely, in non-sport service consumption contexts.

Castillo-Rodriguez *et al.* (2019) distinguish the quality of client-coach interaction as the perceived quality category of service with strongest correlation with customer loyalty. Thus, to ensure a deeper analysis on service quality with respect to client-collaborator interaction, future research should disaggregate the relational component to a more exact measurement of customer interaction with the coach, on the one hand, and the interaction of the client with the remaining staff, on the other.

The results of this study substantiate the applicability of the ACSI adapted model to the context of sport clubs, providing valuable information to the management of services offered by padel clubs regarding the quality of interaction with their employees/staff. In this regard, it is important to highlight the organizational advantage provided by the acquisition of knowledge capable of promoting the alignment of management strategies with the reality of the service perceived by its clients. So, starting from what customers think, feel, and value regarding the services offered by sport organizations, it is possible to counteract managers' optimistic view of customer perceptions regarding service quality, and consequently, develop a quality management of the more fine-tuned service to demand needs/wishes (Hult *et al.*, 2017).

Additionally, clients' psychological expectations for staff/employee interaction such as sympathy, compassion, fun (Ferreira-Barbosa *et al.*, 2023; Jeong *et al.*, 2019) also

need to be anticipated to improve perceived quality of the service, and for adding value to it. Thus, considering the findings of this study that reflect the strong relationship between perceived value and satisfaction, club managers should prioritize the development of strategic actions capable of increasing the value of sport service from the perspective of their customers.

The interpretation of the results of this study should meet the specific context of the study, i.e. context of sport services, so that no generalist prepositions independent of the analysed context should not be inferred.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study applied the ACSI model to the context of sport clubs, integrating all antecedents of satisfaction contemplated in the original version of the model, namely the expectations, perceived quality and perceived value. The results not only corroborate the pertinence of the inclusion of all these factors determining satisfaction, but also substantiate the update of the original design of the ACSI model, supporting the direct influence of expectations and perceived quality on loyalty, and consequently, the importance of resulting analysis to increment the knowledge of sport services managers. Concomitantly, the results concerning the negative influence of expectations on satisfaction and to the positive but indirect influence of expectations on perceived value, suggest greater care in managing expectations, whose planning should include its psychological dimension (e.g. sympathy and empathy) on the interaction of customers with sport services employees/staff. Finally, this study adds evidence to the importance of sport service quality management, strengthening the need for a constant investment in the formation of club human resources, including their relational skills with sport service consumers.

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1 Questionnaire for members of padel clubs

O CinTurs - Universidade do Algarve (UALg) e a FMH - Universidade de Lisboa (ULisboa) estão a realizar o estudo “Satisfação e Lealdade no consumo de Padel”.

O objetivo desta investigação é compreender a sua satisfação e lealdade ao clube de padel através das suas expectativas, qualidade e valor percebidos do serviço prestado. Não existem respostas certas ou erradas, devendo responder às perguntas da forma mais honesta possível.

Os questionários são anónimos e toda a informação é confidencial. A participação neste estudo é voluntária. Todos os dados são recolhidos apenas para efeitos de registo e gestão do questionário estando garantida a confidencialidade do seu tratamento e a exclusiva utilização pela UALg/ULisboa, sendo o seu tratamento realizado nos termos e condições da Política de Proteção de Dados que se encontra acessível em [www.ualg.pt](http://www.ualg.pt).

Se necessitar de algum esclarecimento adicional é favor contactar pelo email [rimartins@ualg.pt](mailto:rimartins@ualg.pt).

### Informação sobre o consumo desportivo no clube de padel

1 - Há quanto tempo joga padel?

- Menos de 1 ano
- Entre 1 a 3 anos
- Mais de 3 anos

2 – De que clube de padel é cliente?

*Assinale apenas uma opção. Todas as questões que se seguem são relativas ao clube que selecionou.*

- Ginásio Clube Português
- Blue Padel Kourts
- Padel Factory
- Padel Tercena – GRT
- AZEN COOL PADEL
- COOL PADEL ERICEIRA

3 – Em média, por semana, quantas vezes frequenta o clube de padel?

- 1 vez p/semana
- 2 vezes p/semana
- 3 ou mais vezes p/semana

Enquanto cliente do clube de padel, irá comparar a sua expectativa (como espera que seja) com a sua avaliação (como realmente está a funcionar) relativamente aos vários serviços prestados pelo clube de padel.

Nas próximas questões encontrará frases semelhantes.

**4** - Em que medida concorda com as seguintes afirmações em relação às suas **expectativas** (como espera que seja)?

Assinale a sua resposta em cada uma das afirmações (1=discordo totalmente, 2=discordo, 3=nem concordo nem discordo, 4=concordo, 5=concordo totalmente).

	1	2	3	4	5
As normas do clube de padel e as regras de etiqueta devem ser respeitadas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Os colaboradores do clube devem ser experientes e qualificados	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Os colaboradores do clube devem ser cordiais	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Os colaboradores do clube devem ser sensíveis às necessidades dos clientes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Os colaboradores do clube devem estar apresentáveis e facilmente identificáveis	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**5** - Em que medida concorda com as seguintes afirmações em relação à sua **avaliação** (como realmente está a funcionar)?

Assinale a sua resposta em cada uma das afirmações (1=discordo totalmente, 2=discordo, 3=nem concordo nem discordo, 4=concordo, 5=concordo totalmente).

	1	2	3	4	5
As normas do clube de padel e as regras de etiqueta são respeitadas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Os colaboradores do clube são experientes e qualificados	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Os colaboradores do clube são cordiais	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Os colaboradores do clube são sensíveis às necessidades dos clientes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Os colaboradores do clube estão apresentáveis e facilmente identificáveis	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6 - Em que medida concorda com as seguintes afirmações?

Assinale a sua resposta em cada uma das afirmações (1=discordo totalmente, 2=discordo, 3=nem concordo nem discordo, 4=concordo, 5=concordo totalmente)

	1	2	3	4	5
Relatarei aspetos positivos sobre este clube a outras pessoas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recomendarei este clube de padel a qualquer pessoa que procure o meu conselho	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dado o preço que pago pelos serviços prestados pelo clube de padel, a qualidade do serviço é muito boa	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Encorajarei a minha família e amigos a jogar padel neste clube	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Considerarei sempre este clube de padel como primeira opção para qualquer atividade de padel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nos próximos anos continuarei a ser cliente deste clube	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dada a qualidade dos serviços prestados pelo clube de padel, o preço que pago é muito bom	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Independente do preço, continuarei a jogar padel neste clube	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
O serviço prestado pelo clube de padel tem uma boa relação qualidade/preço	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7 - Face a toda a sua experiência enquanto cliente do clube de padel, classifique a sua satisfação.

Assinale a sua resposta (1=muito insatisfeito, 2=insatisfeito, 3=nem insatisfeito nem satisfeito, 4=satisfeito, 5=muito satisfeito)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Muito Insatisfeito	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Muito Satisfeito

## Informação Sociodemográfica

### 8 - Género

- Feminino
- Masculino
- Outro

### 9 - Idade

\_\_\_\_\_

### 10 - Ocupação

- Empregado(a)
- Desempregado(a)
- Reformado(a)
- Doméstico(a)
- Estudante
- Outro \_\_\_\_\_

### 11 - Género

- Feminino
- Masculino
- Outro

### 12 - Escolaridade

- Ensino básico
- Ensino secundário
- Ensino superior

### 13 - Nacionalidade

- Portuguesa
- Outra \_\_\_\_\_

### 14 - País onde reside

- Portugal
- Outro \_\_\_\_\_

## 8.2 Article submission to scientific journal



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