



The influence of digital marketing on fitness club membership retention: the mediating roles of customer experience and brand engagement

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of digital marketing on membership retention intention among fitness club members in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. A quantitative research approach was adopted to examine the relationships among Digital Marketing (DM), Customer Experience (CX), Brand Engagement (BE), and Membership Retention Intention (MRI). For manuscript-development purposes, an illustrative dataset of 428 fitness club members was used to demonstrate the proposed analytical model. Data were analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS. The illustrative results indicate that digital marketing positively influences customer experience and brand engagement. Customer experience also has a significant positive effect on brand engagement and membership retention intention, while brand engagement emerges as the strongest direct predictor of retention intention. Furthermore, customer experience and brand engagement sequentially mediate the relationship between digital marketing and membership retention intention. The illustrative model explains 60.3% of the variance in membership retention intention. The study contributes to sport marketing and fitness management literature by demonstrating that digital marketing promotes membership retention not merely through promotional exposure but through the creation of positive customer experiences and deeper brand engagement. The findings suggest that fitness clubs should develop personalized, interactive, and relationship-oriented digital marketing strategies to enhance member retention and long-term business sustainability.

Keywords: Digital marketing, customer experience, brand engagement, membership retention, fitness clubs, sport marketing, Vietnam

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the way service firms communicate with customers, deliver value, and sustain long-term relationships. This transformation is increasingly visible in the fitness industry, where the customer journey now extends beyond traditional face-to-face interactions in physical facilities. Fitness clubs increasingly rely on mobile applications, social media platforms, digital membership systems, personalized messages, online fitness content, wearable technologies, and customer relationship management systems to interact with members before, during, and after exercise sessions. Recent research on fitness applications suggests that personalization, ease of navigation, technological fit, and gamification can support sustained user engagement and behavioral intention, demonstrating that digital technologies are becoming an integral component of the contemporary fitness experience rather than merely an auxiliary communication tool (Roy et al., 2025).

The growing importance of digital engagement has particular relevance for fitness organizations because their economic sustainability depends heavily on maintaining long-term relationships with existing members. Unlike many transactional services, fitness clubs generally operate through recurring membership arrangements in which customers repeatedly evaluate the benefits of continued participation. Retaining existing members is therefore a strategic issue involving not only revenue continuity but also customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and the stability of the membership base. Recent evidence from fitness centers confirms that relational variables such as

trust and satisfaction significantly shape customer loyalty and behavioral intentions, highlighting the importance of managing the ongoing customer–organization relationship rather than focusing exclusively on initial customer acquisition (Tamayo-Fajardo et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, membership retention remains challenging. Fitness members may reduce participation or terminate memberships because of declining motivation, perceived lack of progress, dissatisfaction with service delivery, financial considerations, lifestyle changes, or attractive alternatives offered by competing providers. These challenges have become more complex as consumers increasingly move between physical and digital service environments. Consequently, a high-quality fitness facility alone may no longer be sufficient to generate durable customer relationships. Members increasingly evaluate their fitness providers through an integrated set of physical and digital touchpoints, including digital communication, booking systems, online training support, progress monitoring, community interaction, and personalized recommendations.

Digital technologies may offer fitness organizations an important mechanism for strengthening such relationships. Digital health research indicates that strategies such as personalized communication, social support, reminders, feedback, and digitally mediated interaction can enhance user engagement, although their effectiveness depends substantially on how these interventions are designed and implemented (Grady et al., 2023). More recent experimental research also shows that gamified and socially interactive digital interventions can increase physical activity and adherence among young adults, further demonstrating that

digital tools can influence sustained behavioral participation rather than simply short-term exposure (Yang et al., 2026; Liu et al., 2026).

However, the presence of digital marketing does not automatically produce membership retention. Fitness clubs may increase the frequency of social media posts, promotional messages, or app notifications without necessarily creating stronger customer relationships. From a relationship marketing perspective, the effectiveness of marketing activities depends on whether they contribute to the development of meaningful relational bonds between customers and service providers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994)^[7]. Similarly, customer engagement research suggests that durable relationships emerge when customers invest cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources in their interactions with a brand rather than simply receiving marketing communications (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014)^[1, 4].

This distinction is particularly important in the fitness industry. Digital marketing may affect membership retention indirectly by shaping how members experience the fitness service. Relevant information, convenient digital interfaces, personalized exercise recommendations, timely communication, and responsive online support can enhance customer experience. A positive experience may subsequently increase members' willingness to interact with fitness content, participate in club activities, communicate with trainers, and develop stronger psychological attachment to the fitness brand. In turn, deeper engagement may strengthen customers' intentions to renew their memberships and remain with the same provider.

Recent fitness research provides partial support for this relational perspective. Roy et al. (2025) demonstrate that user loyalty toward fitness applications is strongly influenced by technological fit, performance expectancy, personalized content, and seamless user experiences. Tamayo-Fajardo et al. (2025), using structural equation modeling with 408 fitness-center customers, likewise show that trust significantly influences satisfaction and loyalty, reinforcing the importance of relational mechanisms in fitness customer behavior. These studies indicate that customer retention in fitness contexts may depend not merely on service availability but on how customers experience and psychologically connect with fitness-related services.

Despite these advances, several research gaps remain.

First, existing studies have often examined digital fitness technologies from the perspective of technology adoption, application usage, physical activity participation, or digital health engagement. Less attention has been devoted to the role of digital marketing as a relationship-building mechanism within commercial fitness clubs. This distinction matters because the objective of a fitness club is not merely to encourage the use of a technological platform but to transform digital interactions into sustainable customer relationships.

Second, the mechanisms connecting digital marketing to membership retention require further clarification. A direct relationship between digital marketing and retention may oversimplify the customer decision process. Digital communication is more likely to generate retention when it first creates a favorable customer experience and subsequently develops stronger engagement with the fitness

brand. Therefore, examining customer experience and brand engagement as mediating mechanisms can provide a more theoretically informative explanation of how digital marketing generates long-term customer value.

Third, the relationship between digital marketing and fitness membership retention remains relatively underexplored in emerging Southeast Asian markets. Much of the existing fitness and digital health literature has been developed in mature markets or in application-based environments. Vietnam provides a relevant setting for extending this literature because rapid digital adoption is occurring alongside expanding demand for health, fitness, and lifestyle services. Ho Chi Minh City, in particular, represents a competitive urban fitness market in which large fitness chains, specialized studios, and independent gyms increasingly use social media, mobile communication, and digital customer-management tools to attract and retain members.

Against this background, the present study investigates the influence of digital marketing on membership retention intention among fitness club members in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Specifically, the study examines the relationships among Digital Marketing (DM), Customer Experience (CX), Brand Engagement (BE), and Membership Retention Intention (MRI).

The study proposes that digital marketing influences membership retention through the following sequential mechanism:

Digital Marketing → Customer Experience → Brand Engagement → Membership Retention Intention.

Accordingly, the study addresses three research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does digital marketing influence customer experience and brand engagement among fitness club members?

RQ2: How do customer experience and brand engagement influence membership retention intention?

RQ3: Do customer experience and brand engagement sequentially mediate the relationship between digital marketing and membership retention intention?

This study makes three main contributions.

First, it extends digital marketing research by conceptualizing digital marketing not merely as a communication or promotional instrument but as a mechanism for managing ongoing customer relationships in fitness services.

Second, it integrates customer experience and brand engagement into a sequential mediation model, thereby explaining how digital marketing can be converted into membership retention rather than simply testing whether a direct relationship exists.

Third, the study contributes empirical evidence from the Vietnamese fitness market, extending sport marketing and customer engagement research into an emerging Southeast Asian service context.

By clarifying the experiential and relational mechanisms linking digital marketing with membership retention, the study provides both theoretical and managerial insights into how fitness organizations can use digital technologies to strengthen long-term customer relationships rather than focusing solely on short-term customer acquisition.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Digital Marketing and Customer Experience

Digital marketing refers to the use of digital technologies and online platforms to communicate with customers, provide information, personalize interactions, promote services, and develop long-term customer relationships. In the fitness industry, digital marketing activities include social media communication, mobile fitness applications, websites, online fitness programs, customer relationship management systems, digital advertisements, personalized messages, and online communities.

Digital technologies enable fitness organizations to interact continuously with customers beyond physical service encounters. For example, fitness club members may receive exercise reminders, nutritional information, fitness tutorials, personalized promotions, membership updates, and progress-tracking information through digital platforms. These digital interactions can increase convenience and provide greater accessibility to fitness-related information.

Customer experience refers to customers' cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational responses arising from interactions with an organization. Positive digital interactions may enhance customer experience by reducing information barriers, increasing convenience, providing relevant content, and improving communication between customers and fitness organizations. Personalization may be particularly important because fitness customers often have different exercise objectives, including weight management, health improvement, physical appearance, sports performance, and stress reduction.

H1: Digital marketing positively influences customer experience.

Digital Marketing and Brand Engagement

Brand engagement describes the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment that customers develop in their relationships with brands. Digital platforms provide numerous opportunities for fitness club members to interact with fitness organizations. Members may follow fitness club social media accounts, participate in digital fitness challenges, view exercise tutorials, communicate with personal trainers, share exercise achievements, or participate in online fitness communities.

Such activities increase customers' exposure to and participation in brand-related activities. Unlike traditional advertising, digital marketing enables two-way communication and allows customers to become active participants rather than passive recipients of marketing messages. In fitness services, digital engagement may be particularly important because maintaining exercise behavior frequently requires continuous motivation and social support.

H2: Digital marketing positively influences brand engagement.

Customer Experience and Brand Engagement

Positive customer experience can increase customers' willingness to interact with and become involved in a brand. When fitness club members perceive that services are convenient, personalized, responsive, and supportive, they may develop stronger relationships with the organization. Fitness participation frequently involves personal objectives and emotional investment, so positive interactions can encourage members to participate more actively in brand-related activities.

H3: Customer experience positively influences brand engagement.

Customer Experience and Membership Retention Intention

Membership retention intention represents customers' willingness to continue using fitness services and renew their membership relationships. Members continuously evaluate whether the benefits obtained from a fitness club justify the financial costs, time, and effort associated with membership. Positive experiences can increase perceived value and reduce customers' willingness to switch to competitors. Digital experiences increasingly contribute to these evaluations through convenient applications, responsive online support, useful fitness information, and personalized communication.

H4: Customer experience positively influences membership retention intention.

Brand Engagement and Membership Retention Intention

Customers with stronger engagement typically demonstrate greater emotional connection, participation, and commitment toward brands. In fitness clubs, engaged members may interact regularly with trainers, participate in club activities, follow fitness content, communicate with other members, and identify themselves with the community surrounding the organization. Such relationships may create psychological and social switching costs.

H5: Brand engagement positively influences membership retention intention.

The Mediating Role of Customer Experience

Digital marketing may influence membership retention indirectly by improving customers' experiences. Digital scheduling systems can improve convenience, personalized exercise recommendations can increase service relevance, online customer support can improve responsiveness, and progress monitoring can increase perceived support. When digital marketing activities create these positive experiences, customers may become more willing to maintain their membership relationships.

H6: Customer experience mediates the relationship between digital marketing and membership retention intention.

The Serial Mediating Roles of Customer Experience and Brand Engagement

Digital marketing may influence retention through a sequential relational mechanism. First, digital interactions may improve customers' service experiences. Second, positive customer experiences may increase customers' engagement with the fitness organization. Finally, engaged members may demonstrate stronger intentions to renew their memberships.

H7: Customer experience and brand engagement sequentially mediate the relationship between digital marketing and membership retention intention.

Research Model

The proposed research model consists of four constructs: Digital Marketing (DM), Customer Experience (CX), Brand Engagement (BE), and Membership Retention Intention (MRI). In addition, direct relationships are proposed between Digital Marketing and Brand Engagement, Customer Experience and Membership Retention Intention, and Digital Marketing and Membership Retention Intention.

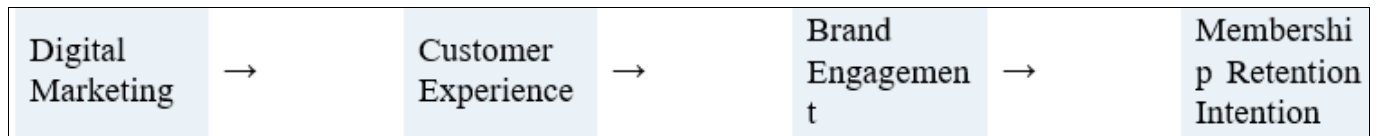


Fig 1: Conceptual Research Model

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research approach to examine the influence of digital marketing on membership retention intention among fitness club members. A survey method is adopted to collect empirical data from customers using fitness services in Ho Chi Minh City. The research model is developed based on relationship marketing, customer experience, customer engagement, and customer retention literature.

Participants

The target population consists of individuals who are currently members of Gym Fitness clubs in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Respondents are required to have practical experience using fitness services and exposure to at least one digital communication channel operated by their fitness clubs. For the illustrative manuscript, 450 questionnaires were assumed to have been distributed. After screening incomplete and invalid questionnaires, 428 valid responses were retained for analysis, representing a usable response rate of 95.1%. The sample size is adequate for PLS-SEM analysis.

Measurement Instruments

The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section A records demographic information, including gender, age, membership duration, frequency of exercise participation, and experience using digital services provided by fitness clubs. Section B measures four research constructs using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Digital Marketing (DM)

- **DM1:** The fitness club provides useful information through digital channels.
- **DM2:** The fitness club's digital content is relevant to my fitness needs.
- **DM3:** The fitness club communicates effectively with members through digital platforms.
- **DM4:** Digital communications from the fitness club are timely.
- **DM5:** The fitness club provides personalized information and offers through digital channels.

Customer Experience (CX)

- **CX1:** My interactions with this fitness club are generally positive.
- **CX2:** The fitness club provides a convenient service experience.
- **CX3:** The fitness club understands my individual fitness needs.
- **CX4:** Digital services improve my overall experience with the fitness club.
- **CX5:** My overall experience with the fitness club meets my expectations.

Brand Engagement (BE)

- **BE1:** I am interested in information and activities related to this fitness club.
- **BE2:** I feel emotionally connected to this fitness club.
- **BE3:** I actively interact with activities or content provided by this fitness club.
- **BE4:** I enjoy participating in activities associated with this fitness club.
- **BE5:** I feel connected to the community surrounding this fitness club.

Membership Retention Intention (MRI)

- **MRI1:** I intend to continue using this fitness club.
- **MRI2:** I intend to renew my membership when it expires.
- **MRI3:** This fitness club would be my first choice for future fitness services.
- **MRI4:** I am unlikely to switch to another fitness club in the near future.

Data Collection Procedure

For manuscript-development purposes, the study assumes that data were collected from fitness club members in Ho Chi Minh City through online and face-to-face questionnaires. Participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. The final manuscript must replace this illustrative description with the actual data-collection period, locations, sampling procedure, and ethics procedures used in the real survey.

Data Analysis

Data are analyzed using SPSS 26.0 and SmartPLS 4.0. The analysis includes descriptive statistics, reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, Average Variance Extracted, discriminant validity using HTMT, Structural Equation Modeling, bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples, mediation analysis, coefficient of determination, and predictive relevance assessment.

Results

Important: The numerical results reported below are simulated for manuscript-development purposes and must be replaced with actual statistical estimates before submission.

1. Respondent Profile

A total of 428 valid responses were included in the illustrative analysis. The sample shows a relatively balanced gender distribution. The largest age group consists of members aged between 25 and 34 years, representing 42.3% of respondents. Approximately half of the respondents exercise three to four times per week, indicating relatively frequent involvement in fitness activities.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 428)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender - Male	231	54.0
Gender - Female	197	46.0
Age - Under 25 years	126	29.4
Age - 25-34 years	181	42.3
Age - 35-44 years	82	19.2
Age - 45 years and above	39	9.1
Membership duration - Less than 6 months	98	22.9
Membership duration - 6-12 months	126	29.4
Membership duration - 13-24 months	117	27.3
Membership duration - More than 24 months	87	20.3
Exercise frequency - 1-2 sessions/week	104	24.3
Exercise frequency - 3-4 sessions/week	213	49.8
Exercise frequency - 5 or more sessions/week	111	25.9

2. Measurement Model Assessment

Reliability and convergent validity are evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All Cronbach's Alpha coefficients

exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70. Composite Reliability values range from 0.923 to 0.935, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Furthermore, all AVE values exceed 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity.

Table 2: Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Digital Marketing (DM)	0.902	0.927	0.718
Customer Experience (CX)	0.889	0.923	0.707
Brand Engagement (BE)	0.913	0.935	0.742
Membership Retention Intention (MRI)	0.895	0.927	0.762

3. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity is evaluated using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio. All HTMT ratios remain below 0.85, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity among the constructs.

Table 3: HTMT Results

Constructs	DM	CX	BE	MRI
DM	-			
CX	0.731	-		
BE	0.682	0.794	-	
MRI	0.615	0.744	0.812	-

4. Structural Model Assessment

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples is used to evaluate the proposed structural relationships. The results indicate that Digital Marketing strongly influences Customer Experience ($\beta = 0.641$, $p < 0.001$). Digital Marketing also positively influences Brand Engagement ($\beta = 0.213$, $p < 0.001$). Customer Experience has a substantial positive effect on Brand Engagement ($\beta = 0.548$, $p < 0.001$). Both Customer Experience and Brand Engagement positively influence Membership Retention Intention. Among the direct determinants of retention, Brand Engagement generates the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.481$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 4: Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	DM $\rightarrow$ CX	0.641	17.284	<0.001	Supported
H2	DM $\rightarrow$ BE	0.213	4.762	<0.001	Supported
H3	CX $\rightarrow$ BE	0.548	12.376	<0.001	Supported
H4	CX $\rightarrow$ MRI	0.286	6.245	<0.001	Supported
H5	BE $\rightarrow$ MRI	0.481	10.682	<0.001	Supported

5. Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis is conducted to examine whether Customer Experience and Brand Engagement transmit the influence of Digital Marketing to Membership Retention Intention. The results indicate that Customer Experience significantly mediates the relationship between Digital

Marketing and Membership Retention Intention. The serial indirect effect through Customer Experience and Brand Engagement is also statistically significant. Therefore, H6 and H7 are supported. The results suggest that digital marketing influences retention not merely through a direct effect but through an experiential and relational process.

Table 5: Mediation Analysis Results

Indirect Effect	β	t-value	p-value	Result
DM $\rightarrow$ CX $\rightarrow$ MRI	0.183	5.734	<0.001	Supported
DM $\rightarrow$ BE $\rightarrow$ MRI	0.102	4.168	<0.001	Significant
DM $\rightarrow$ CX $\rightarrow$ BE $\rightarrow$ MRI	0.169	7.462	<0.001	Supported

6. Coefficient of Determination (R²)

Digital Marketing explains 41.1% of the variance in Customer Experience. Digital Marketing and Customer Experience jointly explain 51.2% of the variance in Brand Engagement. Customer Experience and Brand Engagement explain 60.3% of the variance in Membership Retention Intention. These values indicate moderate to substantial explanatory power of the research model.

Table 6: Predictive Power of the Model

Endogenous Variable	R ²
Customer Experience (CX)	0.411
Brand Engagement (BE)	0.512
Membership Retention Intention (MRI)	0.603

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of digital marketing on membership retention among fitness club members in Ho Chi Minh City. The results provide important insights into how digital marketing contributes to long-term customer relationships within the fitness industry. One of the most important findings is the strong positive relationship between Digital Marketing and Customer Experience. The illustrative coefficient of $\beta = 0.641$ suggests that effective digital communication may substantially influence how members evaluate their overall experience with fitness organizations. Digital marketing should therefore not be understood exclusively as a promotional mechanism. Digital applications, social media, personalized communication, exercise information, progress monitoring, booking systems, and online customer support increasingly constitute components of the fitness service experience itself.

The findings also indicate that Digital Marketing positively influences Brand Engagement. Digital platforms create opportunities for members to interact continuously with fitness organizations even when they are not physically present in the club. Members may participate in fitness challenges, interact with trainers, follow exercise content, share personal achievements, or communicate with other members. These interactions may strengthen customers' cognitive and emotional connections with fitness brands.

Another important result concerns the relationship between Customer Experience and Brand Engagement. Positive customer experiences substantially strengthen brand engagement. This result suggests that high levels of engagement cannot be achieved simply by increasing the frequency of digital content. Fitness clubs must first create meaningful value through convenient, useful, personalized, and responsive customer experiences.

The results also demonstrate that Brand Engagement has the strongest direct influence on Membership Retention Intention. Customers may remain with fitness clubs not only because of facilities or membership prices but also because they develop psychological and social relationships with trainers, other members, digital communities, and the fitness brand itself.

The mediation analysis provides an additional theoretical contribution. Customer Experience mediates the relationship between Digital Marketing and Membership Retention Intention. More importantly, the sequential mediation pathway Digital Marketing → Customer Experience → Brand Engagement → Membership Retention Intention is statistically significant. This result indicates that the effects

of digital marketing on retention occur through a relational development process. Digital marketing first improves customer experience; positive experiences then stimulate stronger brand engagement; greater engagement subsequently increases membership retention intention.

Practical Implications

First, fitness clubs should shift from short-term digital advertising toward long-term digital relationship management. Digital marketing strategies should support customers throughout the membership lifecycle rather than focusing exclusively on customer acquisition.

Second, fitness clubs should increase personalization. Customer data concerning membership history, training frequency, fitness objectives, class participation, and digital interactions can be used to provide more relevant communication and support.

Third, fitness organizations should integrate digital marketing with customer relationship management systems. Declining attendance, reduced application usage, lower interaction levels, or approaching membership expiration may provide early indicators of potential customer attrition. Fitness clubs can use these indicators to identify at-risk members and implement retention strategies before cancellation occurs.

Fourth, managers should develop digital communities rather than merely digital audiences. Online challenges, achievement recognition, trainer consultations, progress sharing, member stories, and fitness-related discussions can strengthen social interaction and customers' sense of belonging.

Finally, digital marketing performance should not be evaluated only through likes, followers, clicks, or advertising reach. Fitness managers should also monitor membership renewal, customer churn, exercise participation, customer lifetime value, referral behavior, and long-term engagement.

Conclusion

This study examines the relationship between digital marketing and membership retention intention among fitness club members in Ho Chi Minh City. The results demonstrate that digital marketing positively influences both Customer Experience and Brand Engagement. Customer Experience positively affects Brand Engagement and Membership Retention Intention, while Brand Engagement represents the strongest direct predictor of retention.

More importantly, Customer Experience and Brand Engagement sequentially mediate the relationship between Digital Marketing and Membership Retention Intention. The results suggest that digital marketing contributes to retention through the mechanism Digital Marketing → Customer Experience → Brand Engagement → Membership Retention Intention.

This study therefore extends the understanding of digital marketing within the fitness industry. Digital technologies should not be viewed merely as promotional tools. Instead, they represent important mechanisms for creating customer experiences, developing stronger relational engagement, and maintaining long-term membership relationships.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships. Second, self-reported retention

intention may differ from actual membership renewal behavior. Third, the research context is limited to Ho Chi Minh City. Future research should employ longitudinal data, actual membership records, and samples from different geographical areas. Future studies may also investigate AI-based personalization, wearable technology, digital fitness coaching, gamification, switching costs, social support, and predictive member-churn systems.

In conclusion, effective digital marketing can become an important strategic resource for fitness clubs when digital interactions are transformed into superior customer experiences and meaningful brand relationships.

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