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EXAMINING THE PURCHASING BEHAVIOUR
OF SPECIFIC MEDICAL SERVICES WITHIN A PRIVATE
PHYSIOTHERAPY CLINIC

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Abstract:
The modern man is increasingly concerned about his health, allocating time and money for this purpose. An important aspect for a potential client-patient is the choice of a medical center that meets their needs, which in a marketing approach represents the identification of a medical services offer suitable for their own desires. The satisfaction level of a client-patient is correlated with the extent to which the purchased medical service contributes to reducing the intensity of their ailments or resolving them. The objective pursued within the research presented in this article is to understand the behaviour of purchasing medical services. The research results highlight the most important aspects in shaping the decision-making of client-patients within a private medical center in Constanța. These findings can be used by the center's management as proposals for organizing future activities with the aim of increasing customer satisfaction.

Keywords: buying behaviour, medical services, marketing research.

1. Introduction

The Romanian medical services market has undergone significant changes since 1990, with the transition to a market economy model. The medical services offer provided by the medical units from the public sector has increasingly seen the gradual emergence of more private medical centers of which their offer, sometimes more diverse and better adapted to patient needs, attract more attention and interest

of the clients.

Simultaneously, people's behaviour frequently undergoes changes regarding their attitude towards health. They are increasingly concerned with maintaining a good health condition and preventing potential health problems rather than simply treating them.

This study comprises a theoretical part focused on presenting the particularities of services and marketing activities within this sector. The case study, based on direct research at the microeconomic level, aims to identify the main aspects of the buying behaviour of clients at a medical center in Constanța. In order to achieve this goal, the research is directed towards identifying the information methods used, as well as the factors that may influence the decision to become a client-patient of the studied clinic. The study evaluates the importance attributed by clients to specific aspects/characteristics of the clinic's activity, explores the main motivations for choosing to become client-patients of the clinic, measures the importance given by respondents to each factor when recommending the clinic to others, and establishes the profile of the clients-patients of the clinic. The research results can serve as proposals for improving the offering of medical services for the analyzed center.

2. Theoretical background

In economic theory, the concept of services refers to a variety of activities results do not acquire a standalone material existence. For the structure of an economy, services represent the tertiary sector. International statistics show that in the current economy, often referred to as the "service economy" by some experts, the tertiary sector concentrates the highest proportion of the employed population and makes the largest contribution to GDP creation (Ioncică, 2003).

Services, like products, have the capacity to satisfy human needs. In this context, Professor Kotler emphasizes that the offer should not be limited to physical products alone but should have a broader vision, including services, which he defines as "activities and benefits offered for a fee, which are essentially intangible and do not result in the possession of a good" (Kotler et al., 2015, p.6).

A specific aspect of the marketing approach is that, in defining services, the focus is on the advantages and satisfaction they offer to customers. Compared to products, services have specific characteristics that determine certain market peculiarities. Services are characterized by the following aspects: they are intangible (they cannot be perceived by the senses before sale—sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch—so the customer cannot make an objective assessment); they are inseparable (services can only be provided in the presence of the provider and the client, and the moment of production coincides with that of consumption); they have a non-material or perishable nature (services do not have a physical existence, cannot be stored, creating difficulties in correlating demand with supply); they exhibit variability (the quality level of services is influenced by the provider, as well as aspects related to the place, time, and conditions in which they are provided) (Kotler et al., 2015, p.219). Due to these characteristics, it is considered that services marketing is more challenging to conceive and manage compared to product marketing (Ristea et al., 2018).

Health or medical services are defined as the "utility obtained by the consumer as a result of interrelated activities based on the provider-client relationship and resulting in physical, mental, and social well-being" (Cetină et al., 2009, p.288). Medical services are diverse and can be grouped according to various criteria.

The medical services market is dynamic, influenced by a large number of factors. Additionally, the medical services market is under the influence of public health policies, and their actions have a greater impact on supply than on demand (Tănăsescu et al., 2010).

Particular aspects are also found in services marketing in general, as well as in medical services marketing. In this case, marketing concerns regarding the supply focus on increasing, diversifying, and modernizing medical services, while specific demand aspects are centered on increasing the level of satisfaction perceived by clients. In this context, it is considered that marketing activities aim to offer services that have the capacity to satisfy customer needs and provide expected benefits. The concept of benefits brought by services "is central and links marketing activity to consumer motivation theory" (Datculescu, 2006, p.58). Therefore, the elements of the marketing mix must be carefully managed considering their impact on the formation and manifestation of consumer behaviour (Cătoiu et al., 2004).

Through the entire marketing activity, the goal is to develop sustainable and advantageous relationships between providers and beneficiaries of medical services.

3. Research methodology

The presented case study is based on a field research conducted from 29.03.2023 until 31.05.2023, using the Google Forms platform. As a tool for collecting direct information, it was used a questionnaire, which included closed, simple, and multiple-choice questions, as well as filter and control questions (Jupp, 2010). The research sample consisted of 138 individuals, patients of the clinic. For the processing of the resulted quantitative data, specific statistical and mathematical methods were applied in line with marketing research practices (Jugănaru, 1998).

4. Findings

In the first part, the questionnaire includes questions aimed to identify the information methods used and the factors that may influence the decision to become a client-patient of the studied clinic.

The graphical representation in Figure 1 highlights that patients used multiple sources of information, assigning varying degrees of importance to them. Thus, the majority of respondents (102, representing a share of 73.9%) obtained information about the clinic from people in their immediate circle of acquaintances (relatives, friends). Additionally, 17.4% (24 respondents) mentioned that they also received information from a specialist doctor. It is evident that respondents sought clear, certified information, which came from trusted individuals (relatives or acquaintances who were patients of the clinic) and from recommendations received from competent individuals (specialist doctors). For 13% (18 respondents), information about the studied clinic came from Facebook and other social media platforms. Similarly, 8.7% (12 respondents each) obtained information from their family doctor and the clinic's website. Radio advertising campaigns (conducted by the medical clinic) served as an information source for only 4.3%, or 6 respondents.
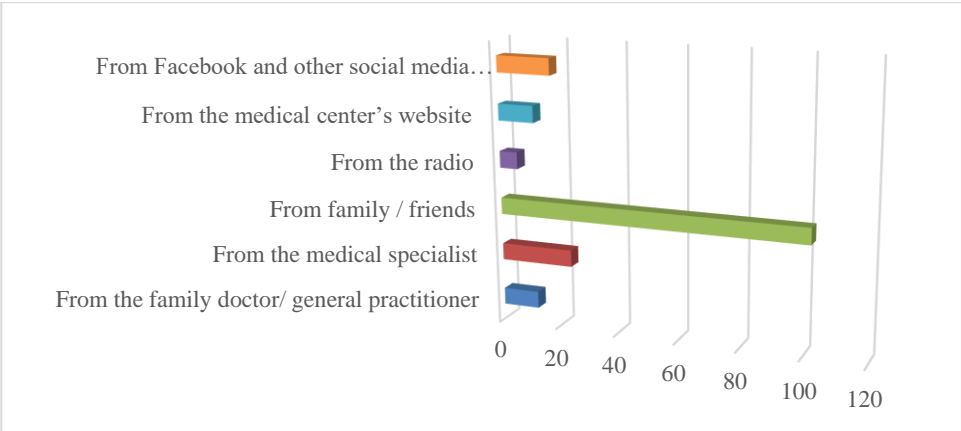
Figure 1. The graphical representation of responses regarding the identification of information sources about the studied medical center
Source: personal research

During the decision-making process to become a client-patient of the medical clinic, several aspects contributed significantly (as indicated through the graphical representation of responses in Figure No.2).
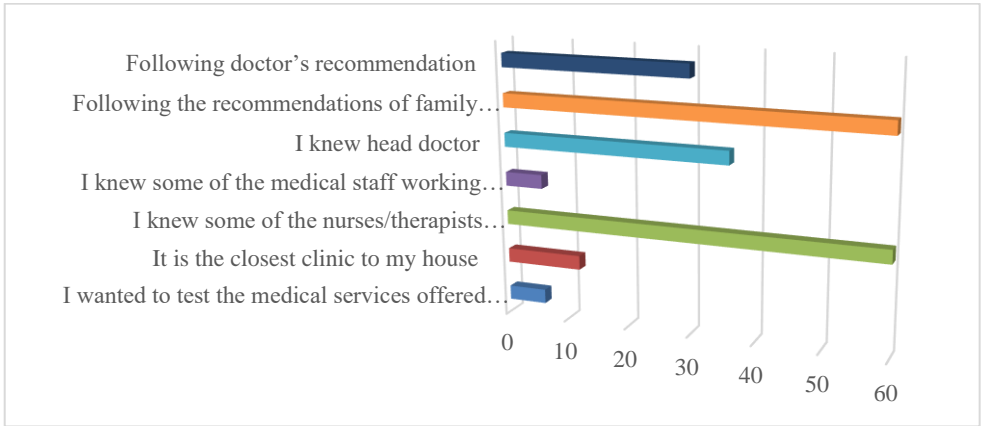
Figure 2. The graphical representation of responses regarding the aspects that led to the decision to become a patient of the medical clinic
Source: personal research

First and foremost, it is noteworthy that two aspects, namely recommendations from people in their immediate circle of acquaintances (relatives, friends) and knowing at the personal level the medical staff working in the clinic, have the greatest impact on the decision to become a patient of the clinic. A total of 60 respondents, representing 43.5% of the sample, indicated the impact of each of these two aspects. In descending order, two other aspects had influences of similar intensity in the decision-making process of becoming clients-patients of the clinic: 36 respondents (26.1%) knew the clinic's medical manager, and 30 respondents (21.7%) followed the recommendations of the specialist doctor. There were also 12 respondents

(6.6%) who became clients because the clinic was close to their residence, and another 6 respondents (3.3%) mentioned that they wanted to test the services of the studied clinic.

For a more detailed understanding of the behaviour of clients-patients for the medical services, the research aimed to assess the importance attributed by them to specific aspects/characteristics of the clinic's activity. The graphical representation of responses can be found in Figure No.3.
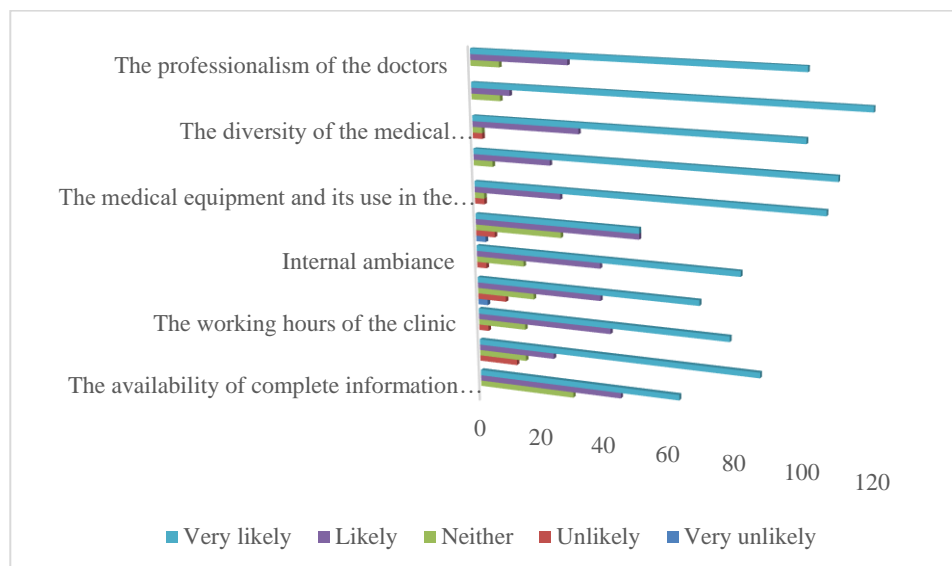

Figure 3. The graphical representation of responses regarding the importance that client-patients attribute to specific aspects of the clinic's activity/offer
Source: personal research

During the processing of the responses, we used a five-level Semantic Differential scale (ratings ranging from "To a very large extent" (value 5) to "To a very small extent" (1)). The values obtained are presented in a descending order to observe more clearly the perceived importance by respondents for each of the characteristics examined in the clinic's services offer. The resulting scores are as follows: 4.96 for the equipment with medical apparatus and its use in providing medical services; 4.78 for the professionalism of auxiliary medical staff; 4.73 for the quality of service/medical procedures; 4.65 for the professionalism of doctors; 4.65 for the diversity of services/medical procedures offered; 4.43 for the interior ambiance; 4.34 for flexibility in scheduling consultations/procedures; 4.31 for the clinic's operating hours; 4.02 for the availability of complete information about the clinic's activity; 4.02 for the perceived fees. Additionally, the values obtained for all ten characteristics examined in the research fall between 4 and 5, indicating that the importance attributed by respondents varies from "To a large extent" to "To a very large extent."

The next step in the research on the behaviour of clients-patients for the medical services was to identify the main motivations for choosing to become clients-patients of the specific studied clinic.

On one hand, motivations are correlated to the main health issues faced by clients-patients, and the research results allowed us to identify and prioritize these motivations.
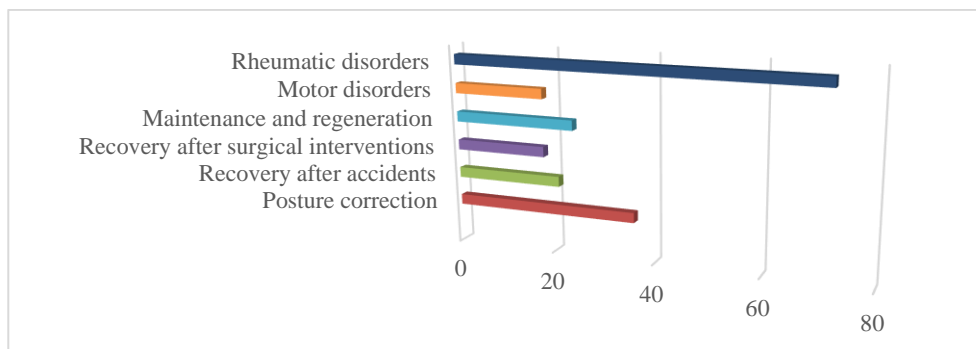

Figure 4. The graphical representation of the main types of conditions that respondents suffer from and for which they chose to seek treatment at the studied clinic
Source: personal research

It can be observed (from Figure No. 4) that more than half of the respondents mentioned that they are treated for rheumatic conditions within the clinic (with a share of 52.2%). This is followed by posture correction (26.1%), maintenance and regeneration (17.4%), and a smaller proportion (13%) for those treated for motor disorders and recovery after surgical interventions. On the other hand, the motivations for choosing the studied clinic are related to the level of satisfaction or contentment of the respondents regarding the medical services offered. To gather information about this, we formulated several questions to:

- identify the frequency with which patients visit the clinic, depending on the conditions they have (Figure No. 5).

- measure the extent to which they would recommend the clinic's services to others (Figure No. 6).

- understand the factors that influence their decision to recommend the clinic to others and the importance of these factors (Figure No. 7).

- establish the level of satisfaction of clients-patients indirectly by identifying and measuring the intensity of changes/improvements in the clinic's activity (Figure No. 8)
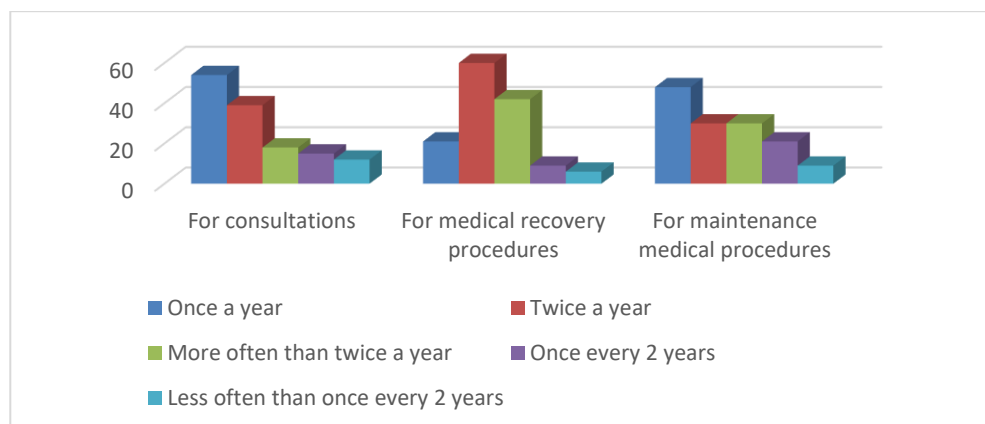
Figure 5. The graphical representation of the frequency with which patients visit the clinic, categorized by types of conditions.
Source: personal research

From Figure 5 it can be observed the fact that the frequency is different for each type of the studied disorders.

For consultations, 39.13% of clients-patients visit once a year, 28.26% come twice a year, 13.04% come more than twice a year, 10.87% once every two years, and 8.7% less often than once every two years.

As for medical recovery procedures, 43.47% of clients-patients come twice a year, 23% come more than twice a year, 15.22% come once a year, while 6.52% come once every two years, and 3.27% less often than once every two years.

For maintenance medical procedures, 37.48% of clients-patients come once a year, 21.74% twice a year, and another 21.74% come more than twice a year, 15.22% come once every two years, and 6.51% come less often than once every two years.
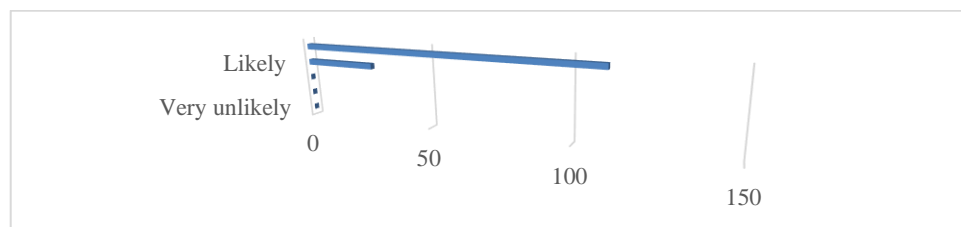
Figure 6. The graphical representation of responses regarding the intention to recommend the medical services of the clinic to other individuals.
Source: personal research

It's worth noting, from Figure 6, the fact that all respondents mentioned that they would recommend the clinic to others, indirectly indicating their satisfaction regarding the services provided by the clinic. The recommendation would be made "to a very large extent" by 80.4% of respondents and "to a large extent" by 19.6%.
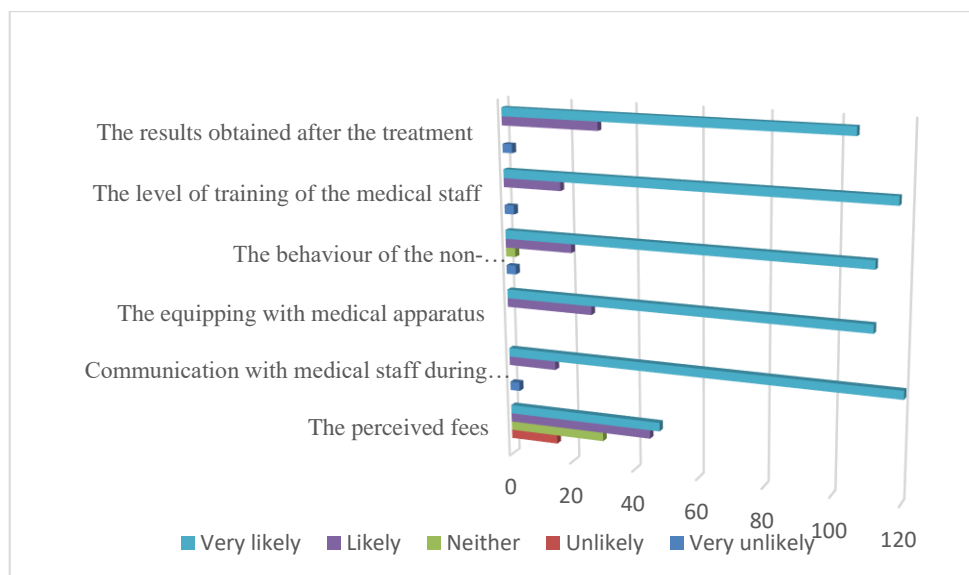
Figure 7. The graphical representation of responses regarding the awareness of factors influencing the decision to recommend the clinic to others and the importance assigned to these factors.
Source: personal research

Based on the obtained information, we determined the importance attributed by respondents to each factor when recommending the clinic to others. For this purpose, we used the same model - a 5-level Semantic Differential scale. The calculated scores for each aspect are presented in a descending order: 4.8 for the equipping with medical apparatus; 4.8 for communication with medical staff during the provision of medical services; 4.78 for the level of training of the medical staff; 4.71 for the behaviour of the non-medical/reception staff; 4.69 for the results obtained following the treatment; and 3.91 for the perceived fees. It can be observed that to a very large extent, four of the analyzed factors are present in the recommendation of the clinic, with only the service fees being recommended to a large extent.
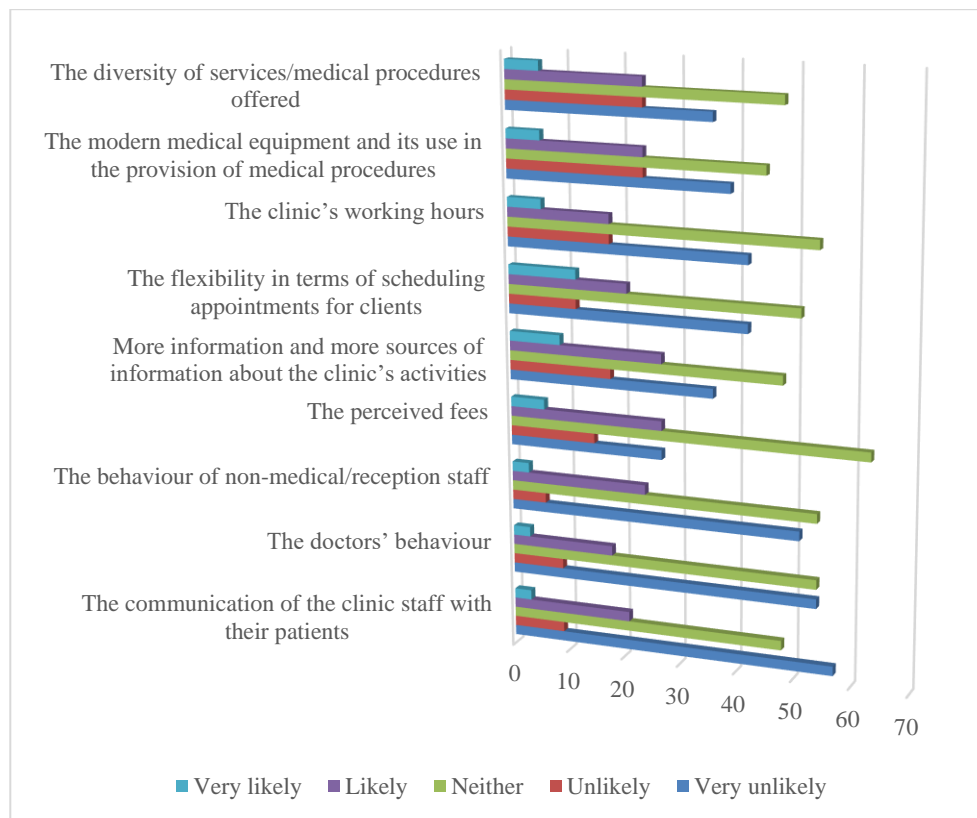
Figure 8. The graphical representation of responses regarding the identification and measurement of the intensity of implementing changes/improvements in the clinic's activity
Source: personal research

We have processed the recorded responses for each aspect using the 5-level Semantic Differential scale to measure the opinions/suggestions of clients-patients regarding the implementation of changes/improvements within the clinic's activity. The calculated scores are presented in a descending order to highlight and prioritize the alterations in the researched aspects, namely 3.31 for the equipment with medical apparatus, 2.89 for the behaviour of medical/non-medical staff, 2.63 for the perceived fees, 2.56 for the diversity of services/medical procedures offered, 2.48 for the clinic's operating hours, 2.43 for the doctors' behaviour, and 2.3 for the communication of clinic staff with patients.

These values indicate that, on average, respondents considered that for some tracked aspects, no changes should be made, while for others, slight improvements would be necessary.

Towards the end of the questionnaire, we formulated a few questions to establish the profile of clients-patients of the clinic.

Therefore, we determined the percentage of the members that took part in the survey who were patients of the clinic for the first time.
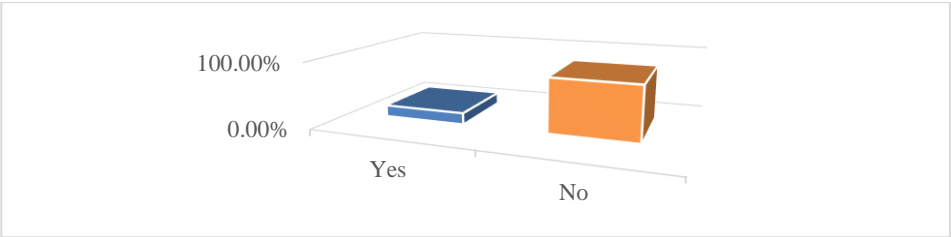
Figure 9. The graphical representation of respondents based on the criteria of whether they were first-time patients at the clinic
Source: personal research

We have established the structure of the questionnaire based on the age of the participants.
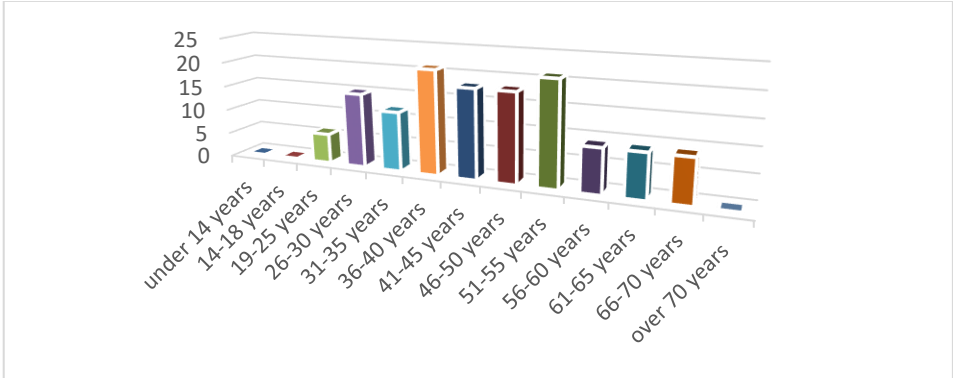

Figure 10. The graphical representation of respondents' structure by age category
Source: personal research

The clients-patients of the analyzed clinic belong to various age groups, with the main segments being those in the age groups of 36-40 years and 51-55 years (they hold the largest share, at 15%), followed by those in the age groups of 41-45 years and 46-50 years (each holding a share of 13%). The age group 26-30 years holds a share of 11%, while those aged 31-35 years make up 9%. It can be observed, based on age criteria, that the majority of the clinic's clients are represented by the active population.
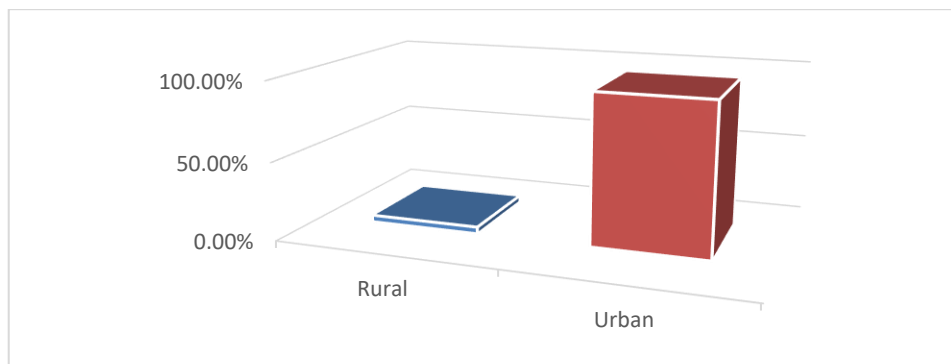
Figure 11. The graphical representation of respondents' structure by residential environment
Source: personal research

Regarding the place of residence, 132 individuals (95.7%) are from urban areas, and only 6 individuals (4.3%) come from rural areas.
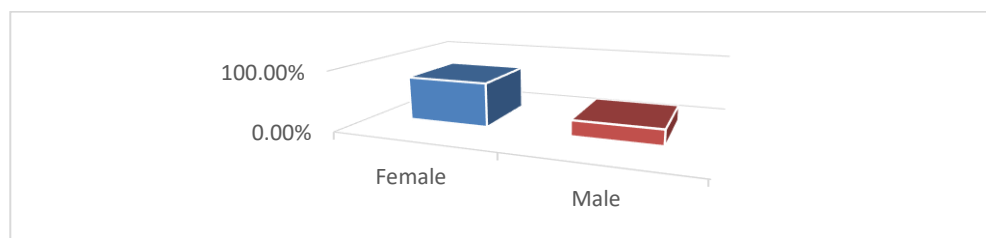

Figure 12. The graphical representation of the sample's structure by gender
Source: personal research

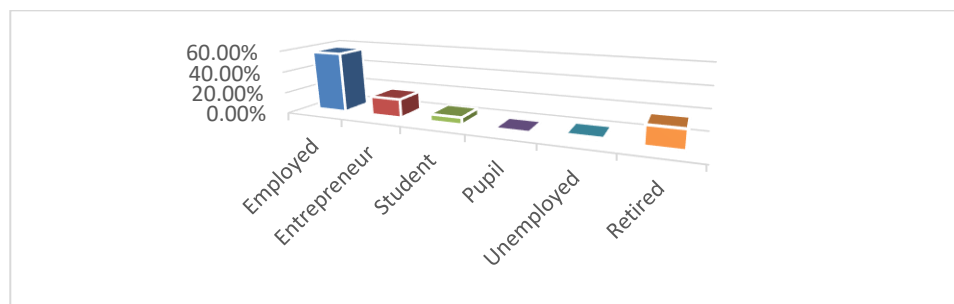The surveyed sample consisted of 102 female individuals (73.9%) and 36 male individuals (26.1%).

Figure 13. The graphical representation of respondents' structure by socio-professional status
Source: personal research

From the picture presented above. It can be observed that within the structure of the studied sample, the biggest share, respectively 56.5%, is held by the employed individuals. An equal share of 17.4% is held by the entrepreneurs and the retired, meanwhile the lowest percentages are represented by the students (6.5%) and the unemployed (2.2%).

5. Conclusions

The conducted research highlights significant aspects of the behaviour of clients-patients regarding the medical services offered by the analyzed center.

The high level of satisfaction is reflected through the large proportion of loyal clients of the center, as well as within the high confidence of new clients in choosing this medical facility.

The research results show, on one hand, the level of customer appreciation for each component of the medical service, the degree of demand for each type of medical services offered, and on the other hand, they present improvement proposals for these aspects expressed by the clients, providing valuable information for the future organization of the medical center's activities.

Additionally, the identification of customer profiles and their buying/consumption behaviour (also as a result of this research) can provide valuable information that the management of the center can use to correctly size and structure the offering of medical services, as well as how to configure the marketing mix.

Anticipating and continuously understanding changes in the buying behaviour of clients-patients and adapting the offer to these new trends represent a mode of action for the analyzed medical center to ensure the efficient conduct of economic and social activities.

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