



THE ROLE OF MARKETING IN THE MANAGEMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES: THE CASE OF THE MADALENA CLINIC GROUP

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The main objective of this study was to analyse the role of internal marketing in managing health services in the Clinicas de Santa Madalena (CSM) group.

Theoretical Framework: Internal marketing is a management strategy aimed at motivating and involving employees, aiming to improve the performance and quality of services, which positively impacts customer satisfaction.

Method: It uses a qualitative methodology based on a case study and semi-structured interviews at six clinics in the Santa Madalena group.

Results and Discussion: The main results indicated that: i) information campaigns, promotion of oral health programmes and the creation of positive experiences are common internal marketing practices; ii) training actions, internal communication, and the involvement of professionals contribute to the integration and retention of employees; iii) team motivation and integration are critical factors for the quality of the services provided; and iv) dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, trust, courtesy, competence and tangible elements influence patients' perception of quality.

Conclusion: The study recommends further research into internal marketing in the health sector, with collaboration between academia and companies.

Keywords: Case Study, Internal Marketing, Services Marketing, Quality, Health Services.

O PAPEL DO MARKETING NA GESTÃO DE SERVIÇOS DE SAÚDE: O CASO DO GRUPO DA CLÍNICA SANTA MADALENA

RESUMO

Objetivo: Este estudo teve como principal objetivo analisar o papel do marketing interno na gestão dos serviços de saúde no grupo Clínicas de Santa Madalena (CSM).

Referencial Teórico: O marketing interno é uma estratégia de gestão voltada para motivar e envolver os colaboradores, visando melhorar o desempenho e a qualidade dos serviços, o que impacta positivamente a satisfação dos clientes..

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Método: Utiliza uma metodologia qualitativa baseada em um estudo de caso e entrevistas semiestruturadas em seis clínicas do grupo Santa Madalena.

Resultados e Discussão: Os principais resultados indicaram que: i) campanhas informativas, promoção de programas de saúde oral e a criação de experiências positivas são práticas comuns de marketing interno; ii) ações de formação, comunicação interna e envolvimento dos profissionais contribuem para a integração e retenção dos colaboradores; iii) a motivação e integração das equipes são fatores críticos para a qualidade dos serviços prestados; e iv) dimensões como confiabilidade, capacidade de resposta, confiança, cortesia, competência e elementos tangíveis influenciam a percepção da qualidade pelos pacientes.

Conclusão: O estudo recomenda mais estudos sobre o marketing interno no setor de saúde, com colaboração entre a academia e as empresas.

Palavras-chave: Estudo de Caso, Marketing Interno, Marketing de Serviços, Qualidade, Serviços de Saúde.

EL PAPEL DEL MARKETING EN LA GESTIÓN DE LOS SERVICIOS SANITARIOS: EL CASO DEL GRUPO CLÍNICO MADALENA

RESUMEN

Objetivo: El objetivo principal de este estudio fue analizar el papel del marketing interno en la gestión de los servicios de salud del grupo Clínicas de Santa Madalena (CSM).

Marco Teórico: El marketing interno es una estrategia de gestión dirigida a motivar e implicar a los empleados, con el objetivo de mejorar el rendimiento y la calidad de los servicios, lo que repercute positivamente en la satisfacción de los clientes.

Método: Se utiliza una metodología cualitativa basada en un estudio de caso y entrevistas semiestruturadas en seis clínicas del grupo Santa Madalena.

Resultados y discusión: Los principales resultados indicaron que: i) las campañas de información, la promoción de programas de salud bucodental y la creación de experiencias positivas son prácticas comunes de marketing interno; ii) las acciones de formación, la comunicación interna y la implicación de los profesionales contribuyen a la integración y retención de los empleados; iii) la motivación y la integración del equipo son factores críticos para la calidad de los servicios prestados; y iv) dimensiones como la fiabilidad, la capacidad de respuesta, la confianza, la cortesía, la competencia y los elementos tangibles influyen en la percepción de la calidad por parte de los pacientes.

Conclusión: El estudio recomienda seguir investigando el marketing interno en el sector sanitario, con la colaboración entre el mundo académico y las empresas.

Palabras clave: Estudio de Caso, Marketing Interno, Marketing de Servicios, Calidad, Servicios Sanitarios.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The health sector, which is becoming increasingly relevant in various social, cultural and political dimensions, has undergone significant transformations, especially with the growth of private initiatives and technological innovation. In Portugal, this economic development was



marked by a reduction in government participation and an increase in private presence, boosting competitiveness and innovation in the sector (Black & Gallan, 2015).

However, there is a need to identify the clinical circumstance and the financial availability of the user, taking into account the different levels of the existing health system in order to differentiate the supply of services (Rudnicka et al., 2020). Growing economic activity in the health sector by private initiatives promotes the increase of competitiveness of the sector through increased market opportunities, in particular in technological innovation (Rohmah, 2022). Authors such as Sandri and Widodo 2020 point out that the increase in the supply and availability of information in digital media results in the need to improve the level of services provided, given the demands of the markets, with effects on quality standards and the identification of new marketing strategies. In this sense, success and organizational sustainability in the health sector imply the increase of customer-oriented competitive advantages. This approach identifies the need to develop and value the relationship between organizations and customers, with marketing tools applied in the services playing a key role in identifying alternatives that increase satisfaction and the perception of excellence in the services provided in order to ensure customer retention and the exploitation of new opportunities.

The analysis of internal marketing in the context of health service management is an emerging and still incipient area of study, requiring in-depth research to understand its impact and relevance in this crucial sector (James, 2019; Goula et al., 2022). Recent studies conducted by several authors, such as Rodrigues and Sousa (2024) and Japutra et al (2024) highlight the importance of investigating the role of internal marketing in job satisfaction, talent retention, and organizational development in different business contexts. However, there is a significant gap in relation to the application of these concepts in the health services sector (Fernandez et al., 2024). This is a unique sector, characterized by its operational, cultural and management particularities, which can influence the effectiveness and relevance of internal marketing strategies (Serafim et al., 2024). Existing literature on this subject is scarce and underdeveloped, focusing mainly on theoretical approaches. In addition, there is a need to identify the clinical circumstance and the financial availability of the user, taking into account the different levels of the existing health system in order to differentiate the supply of services (Rudnicka et al., 2020). Growing economic activity in the health sector, by private initiatives, promotes the increase of competitiveness of the sector through increased market opportunities, in particular in the field of technological innovation (Rohmah, 2022). Authors as Sandri and Widodo 2020 point out that the increase in the supply and availability of information in digital media results in the need to improve the level of services provided, given the demands of the markets, with



effects on quality standards and the identification of new marketing strategies. In this sense, success and organizational sustainability in the health sector imply the increase of customer-oriented competitive advantages. This approach identifies the need to develop and value the relationship between organizations and customers, with marketing tools applied in the services playing a key role in identifying alternatives that increase satisfaction and the perception of excellence in the services provided in order to ensure customer retention and the exploitation of new opportunities.

Internal marketing, while emerging and little explored in the healthcare sector, is essential for job satisfaction, talent retention and organizational development. However, its implementation in the health sector still faces challenges, such as the complexity of managing multiple internal audiences and the difficulty of measuring long-term outcomes. There is a significant gap in the literature on this topic, especially in the context of health. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how internal marketing influences the perception of quality by patients, through a qualitative research in six dental clinics of the Santa Madalena group. The main issues explore the relationship between internal marketing and the quality dimensions of health services and how these dimensions affect patient perception.

The study will be carried out in six dental clinics belonging to the Santa Madalena group, a private reference organization in the dental health sector. The methodology used will be of a qualitative nature, based on the research strategy of the case study. The results of the study will be analyzed in the light of the existing literature, in order to identify patterns and some trends that may be indispensable for the development of scientific knowledge and applied to internal marketing in the management of oral health services.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing is now playing an important role in the lives of organizations and has undergone major changes over time, which is why today marketing has several ramifications, from internal marketing or endomarketing to guerrilla marketing, to digital marketing. Since its inception, the function of marketing has been associated with all organizations (Graham, 1993). As such, there are several definitions of marketing in the literature.

Second Vazifehdust et al. (2011) and Al Badi (2019); the concept of marketing comes from the range of activities promoted by the organizations, in which it was necessary to carry out a review of various functions, as well as the definition of strategies and market approaches, in order to ensure the adaptation of companies' practices to contemporary realities. In this sense,



Svensson (2001); believes that marketing is the set of techniques and resources that the company has at its disposal to develop, among its target audience, practices favorable to the achievement of organizational goals. In a complementary manner Tadjewski (2009); it adds that marketing not only involves advertising or selling a product, but also involves developing and managing the product that will meet the needs of its audience, whose orientation makes it possible for the product to be available in the right place and at the right price, so that it is accessible to all consumers. Second Vazifehdust et al. (2011) the company must meet the customer's needs in order to gain financial value, coupled with value creation from key customers. Kotler and Keller (2016) highlight the importance of marketing as a human activity that meets the needs of consumers.

On the other Naim (2022) points out that marketing should be understood as a management function whose practices should be applied outside the operational contexts of organizations. However, today, given the constant social changes, the evolution of marketing concepts in order to keep up with market trends and needs has allowed us to observe the development of the concept from marketing 1.0 to marketing 5.0. Initially, 1.0 marketing focused on product, sales management, and promotion, contributing to the emergence of potential mass markets. However, this approach led to the creation of more basic products specifically designed for the mass market (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). The origin of marketing 2.0 coincides with the information age from 1990 until 2010, and has therefore focused on the most intelligent and emotional consumer-oriented information technologies (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018).

Since the 1990s, the development of new technologies has led to an increasingly demanding change in consumer behavior. Second Palmatier and Crecelius (2019) customers became more informed at this point, influenced by the first computers using the Internet. Marketing 3.0 emerged as of 2010, and is focused on customer satisfaction and information technologies. This is a marketing concept based on the mission, vision and values of the company (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017) and Warrink (2018). Still at this stage, Dash et al. (2021) highlight the importance of consumers according to their human condition, considering their mentality and compassion. Subsequently, marketing 4.0 recognizes the importance of product development and affirmation in digital resources. Later on, the concept of marketing 5.0 emerged, and this approach amplified the use of new technologies to help professionals in the field optimize communication channels to establish a stronger connection with the public, reinforcing the relevance of the use of technological means as a means to achieve a certain purpose (Sima 2021; Alanazi, 2022).



Over the years, the evolution of organizations has followed social needs and trends according to different global contexts. It is therefore important that, today, these communication tools serve to support organizations in gathering information in order to share knowledge through new content (Kotler et al., 2022). Second Horng et al. (2022) today we are living in a new world, where the internet is an important tool in this context of the shift to the digital age (Mehta, 2022).

In the 1970s, the concept of marketing adapted to corporate strategy and long-term planning, and in the following decade gained new prominence (Webster & Lusch, 2013). As such, in 1985, the AMA (American Marketing Association) presented a new definition of marketing highlighting "the process of planning and designing the product, fixing the price, promoting and distributing ideas, goods and services (the 4P's of marketing), so as to create interactions that satisfy the goals of individuals and organizations". This definition reflects the concern to ensure value creation for buyers in the trading process. Thus, the success of organizations results from the achievement of objectives such as maximizing sales or profits, resulting from the satisfaction of consumers' needs and desires (Goi 2009; Gordon et al. 2013).

Subsequently, in the 1990s, we witnessed the excessive use of quantitative research in the areas of marketing, with emphasis on relationship marketing, strategic marketing, quality of services, study of brands, customer orientation (Grönroos, 1994). In this season Kotler (2000) and Kotler and Keller (2012) they highlight the creation of the term societal marketing, which refers to the organization's activities to identify the main needs and other interests and desires of the target audience, with the aim of providing a higher, effective and efficient level of satisfaction with regard to competition, while preserving and improving the conditions of satisfaction of the consumer and society at large. The purpose of marketing would thus be to respond to three decisive aspects of the life of **organizations**. As such, between the 1960s and the 1990s, marketing underwent a process of evolution and progress, as researchers identify that the predominant paradigm referred to the marketing management model. From the point of view Kotler (2000) marketing aimed at customer satisfaction with the aim of making a profit (Kotler & Keller, 2012), can also be envisioned as a tool developed for the primary purpose of winning, retaining the customer and providing value (Kotler & Lee, 2005).

Likewise, Gundlach (2007); and Gundlach and Wilkie (2009); they share the idea that marketing represents a strategy designed to be carried out with a view to setting prices, promoting and distributing ideas, products and services, with the aim of meeting the objectives of individuals and organizations. Gundlach (2015) points out that marketing is the epicenter of the organization and, in an era in which customer contact is the priority, there is a greater



investment in these strategic activities linked to innovation in new technologies. In this way, marketing represents a fundamental dynamic in terms of the success of any company in the long term, since it allows to know and bring together customers, to know the competition as well as the market.

2.1 INTERNAL MARKETING AND HEALTH SERVICES

The concept of marketing has increased its relevance within large and small companies independently of their business activities, so health institutions and units are no exception. In this context, internal marketing in the health sector results from the uniqueness inherent to the needs of customers/users, implying the reinforcement of the provision of care. The development of activities in the health organizations, make it possible to bring health services closer to the communities, covering a large part of the medical specialties. In order for a marketing strategy to succeed, the internal and external actors of organizations must be considered in accordance with the organizational objectives (Iliopoulos and Priporas, 2011). The practice of marketing practices in the health area allows the development of tools so that the objectives can be achieved in order to consolidate the success. In this sector, the main objectives are the acquisition of new customers and patients, their loyalty, educating the population about treatments and the dissemination of new practices and procedures. Today, the diversity of existing services is geared to customer needs, but the complexity of processes required can often compromise service efficiency.

Nevertheless, the development of marketing activities could be a cross-cutting approach to the core business of organizations, demonstrating its importance in the management processes of an institution. In view of the cross-cutting nature of marketing activities, it is necessary to develop a communication strategy which enables a broad range of customers to be reached (Gordon et al., 2019). Thus, the reaction of users is a fundamental element in the analysis of the success of marketing strategies, since health is not a tangible product, making the object of communication or sale difficult. However, the marketing strategies adopted by clinics, hospitals and health units demonstrate visible and assertive communication, through the promotion of services in magazines, internet or on their premises. Health insurance for all social classes is also being developed, demonstrating by a large number of employees the use of quality marketing practices and the progress of their services.

Currently, most healthcare professionals use marketing practices in communicating with customers/users in order to establish new business partners with the aim of improving the



quality of healthcare. In this sense, it is essential to increase the coverage of the user's needs, according to the type of service required and the medical specialty concerned. Given the breadth of health users, it is necessary to identify the value of each client, making it possible to disseminate not only the image of the institution, but also to capture the perception of users with regard to health institutions, promoting confidence and the quality of the service offered (Iliopoulos & Priporas, 2011).

These days, the management of health facilities requires an increase in standards of quality of service, ensuring their provision in an efficient and agile manner, promoting transparent communication with their users. In addition, there are also the challenges of boosting communication that outsources the values and mission of health units, through more simple and effective interaction reaching the various users (Goula et al., 2022). Second Mahbob et al. (2019) strategic communication is a form of strategic action and very important for organizational development, as it is considered one of the main contributors to organizational efficiency.

2.2 QUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF HEALTH SERVICES

With regard to the assessment of healthcare, accreditation has become a registered trademark for healthcare quality worldwide. According to the Directorate General for Health (DGS), accreditation is a process of self-assessment and external peer audit, used by health organizations to accurately assess their performance level against pre-established standards and to implement means of improvement continuously (Silva et al., 2023).

According to data provided by the World Health Organization, the Portuguese health system (SNSP) is highly dependent on the hospital sector, and demand is very high in relation to the European average. However, there is a huge increase in the shortage of professionals from various specialties until 2020 (Oliveira ,2019).

The provision of health needs. The shortage that we see is intrinsically linked to the increase in the average age of the population, creating a growing demand for health services. This phenomenon, in turn, intensifies with the aging of the health professionals themselves, forming a cycle that reflects directly on the supply and quality of services. Working conditions, which are often precarious, aggravate this alarming situation. Lack of adequate infrastructure, coupled with overburdened responsibilities, leads to a significant decrease in the quality of care. The World Health Organization (WHO) stresses the importance of the collaboration of suitably



prepared professionals to maintain a high standard in health services (Brückmann et al., 2019; Ali et al., 2022; Lyu et al., 2022).

In this context, effective management of human resources becomes crucial (Lyu et al., 2022). Investing in the ongoing training and training of health professionals is a key preventive measure in view of the aging population and the labor force. By ensuring that there is a skilled and motivated staff, it is possible to ensure the continuity and improvement of health services, thus promoting the well-being of society as a whole (Kabwama et al. 2022; Kruk et al. 2022).

The Institute of Medicine in the USA considers that the concept of quality in the health sector lies in the possibility of individuals or populations achieving the desired health results. This approach highlights the importance of the quality of services provided in health facilities, resulting from the relationship between the service provider and users (Lima, 2020).

According to the Directorate-General for Health (2023), this national strategy has improved the health context of the citizen as a user of the health system, as well as the health professional, as responsible for carrying out their technical tasks in a safe, qualified way and with access to continuous training in the performance of their professional activities.

According to the academic community, there are several pillars underpinning the functioning of services in the various health sectors, both in the Directorate General for Health (2023) and in the private sector, under which strategic objectives are defined with the purpose of achieving excellence in care provision. However, users' perception of the provision of such care requires not only an analysis of the results obtained and the processes in place, but also their individual interpretation of access to existing care, effectiveness, efficiency, equity and rapidity of the level of service. These aspects are fundamental in the formulation and identification of quality parameters measured in the health services analysis (DGS, 2023).

The search for professional excellence and resource efficiency is crucial for the World Health Organization (WHO) in the provision of health services. Professional excellence involves constantly updating and improving the skills of professionals, ensuring quality care and safety for patients. Resource management effectiveness is essential in a global landscape of increasing demands for health services, requiring smart allocation and sustainable practices. From a risk minimization perspective for users, it is a priority, involving the implementation of strict protocols and safety standards. Transparency and clear information help build trust between health professionals and patients. User satisfaction and positive perception reflect not only the quality of care, but also influence adherence to preventive practices and treatments. Thus, the WHO seeks to promote global health by prioritizing safety, satisfaction and positive



perception of users, contributing to a more efficient and patient-centered health system worldwide (Wenham & Davies, 2023).

The strategic objectives set out in the National Health Plan (2015 - 2020) were to highlight efficiency, effectiveness, safety, equity, sustainability, user orientation and respect. However, the development of the political, economic and social environment has promoted the inclusion of customer satisfaction and the improvement of health conditions (High Commissioner for Health, 2015).

Increasing the competitiveness of the markets and the need to improve existing services has meant promoting performance indicators linked to the level of service provided. This approach, it enhances the competitive advantage of organizations, as well as increases the responsibility to ensure productivity, training human resources, updating, model review, data analysis to reinforce the importance of continuous improvement. Likewise, quality management in the health sector is a key theme in identifying potential risks associated with existing processes, which consequently increases the level of customer satisfaction and enhances customer loyalty through value creation (Kychko et al., 2021).

According to the ISO standards applied in health care units, the implementation of a robust quality system requires convergence in the perception of the purposes associated with this model by the various stakeholders. In this case, the perception of individuals as to the importance of a product/service in the exercise of their functions is the result of integrated work on the part of the business structures which must promote the training, motivation and compensation of employees (Cabero et al., 2018; Hannigan et al., 2019). According to the same authors, in order for a product to be able to improve, it is essential to consider the importance of the degree of consumer satisfaction and experience, since a customer's dissatisfaction may imply several risks to the organization's short/medium term strategy.

This is the result of better informed and informed users regarding the functionalities of products and the quality/service level standard they want to be met (Sangher et al., 2017). Thus, ensuring quality assurance in the provision of health services requires the certification of organizations, and this process originates in several reference and normative standards assigned to ISO standards, particularly the ISO 9000 standard, under which the formalities of the standard are reflected in any service, changing only its application, and can be extended to all Health Units, as well as only to one particular service Cabero et al. (2018) and Rogala and Wawak (2021). To this end, certification must be accompanied either by the Department of Quality in Health (DQS) or by supervision by the Directorate-General for Health, in accordance with current procedures (Letvak and Rhew, 2015).



2.3 INTERNAL MARKETING AND QUALITY IN HEALTH SERVICES

Taking into account the literature described above, internal marketing activities function as a management tool whose objective is to converge the interests and needs of the organization with its customers in order to increase their motivation to achieve the existing strategic objectives (Azêdo & Alves, 2013, 2014).

Economic globalization has boosted the competitiveness of health facilities, not only in terms of the required quality standards, but also as an essential prerequisite for the survival of companies operating in the health sector (Vieira et al., 2006). As a reflection, there is a significant development in the healthcare provided, and this progress results from the increase in education and demand of users Barbosa da Paz and Braga Pucci Vale (2022). The promotion of activities in health institutions therefore requires the development of strategies to meet the needs of their customers, i.e. to ensure the implementation of marketing in health units (Rocheta, 2018; Santos et al., 2018).

As internal marketing activities are also geared towards influencing employee satisfaction, it is necessary to identify an organizational strategy oriented towards internal customers (Azêdo & Alves, 2013). In addition, the increase in the quality of the service provided, resulting from patient perception, is a key factor in the action of health units, but also in relation to the scientific field (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2016). In this way, it is possible to promote monitoring with regard to the provision of high-quality health services, through a detailed assessment of the effectiveness of the services provided in order to implement immediate corrective measures to improve the impact of health facilities (Matlala et al., 2021).

From this perspective, and according to the scientific development observed, the assessment of the quality of health services can take different approaches using one or both of the SERVQUAL, SERVPERF or both models (Sydorov et al., 2020; Andrade et al., 2022). The authors Nemati et al. (2020) and Sharifi et al. (2021), refer to a new, more comprehensive conceptual model for monitoring the quality of services provided, in particular in hospitals, HEALTHQUAL. According to this model, HEALTHQUAL considered five dimensions: Improvement in relation to the provision of services; Tangible quality elements; Quality and efficiency elements; Quality and safety elements; Quality and empathy elements. The HEALTHQUAL model from a health service quality perspective allows achieving objectives related to the quality of health services provided by professionals (Khouj & Raza, 2024). The HEALTHQUAL scale is an adaptation of the SERVQUAL scale to the context of use in health units to measure the quality perceptions of users and hospital administrators (Barrios-Ipenza et



al., 2020). The HEALTHQUAL scale second (Allahham et al., 2022) addresses the dimensions of quality of service. For (Carrillat et al., 2007) the characteristics of quality are an ambiguous, gradual and very subjective concept, despite the effort of some scientists to look for ways to evaluate and improve existing methods in various areas (Rodrigues et al., 2011). There are many definitions of service quality depending on the research method used (Czajkowska and Ingaldi, 2021) however, according to the literature review it is not possible to indicate a specific scale to adequately measure the quality of a service provided in the area of health.

3 ANALYSIS MODEL

In order to address both the general research problem and each of the two specific research questions, it will be necessary to develop a model on which to base data collection and analysis. Figures 1, 2 and 3 summarize the theoretical reasoning of the two components of this model, each of which relates to the respective research issue.

Figure 1

Analysis Model

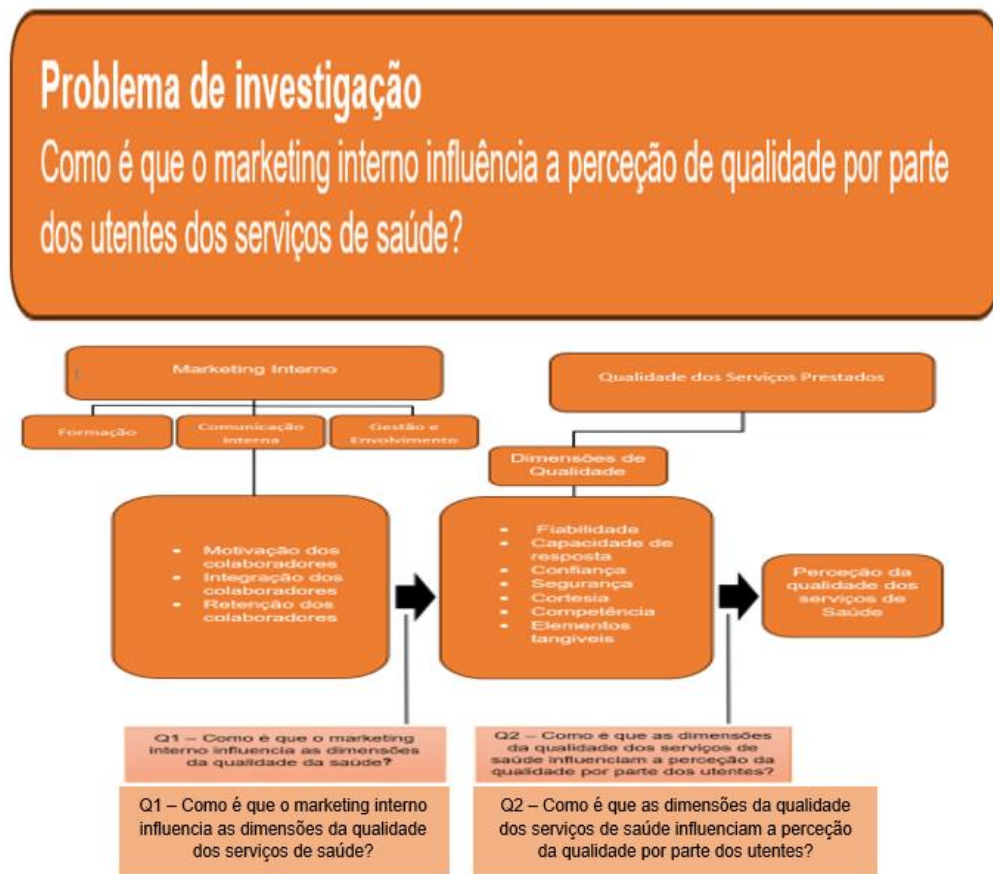




Figure 2

Model Description (1)

Dimensões	Variáveis	Definições	Referências
Marketing Interno	Formação	A oferta de oportunidades de formação e desenvolvimento dos colaboradores permite-lhes bons níveis de desempenho no trabalho e ajuda no desenvolvimento de uma identidade corporativa.	Ahmed e Rafiq (2003) Bohnenberger et al. (2019) Brückmann et al. (2019) Cabero et al. (2018) Grönroos (2000) Hannigan et al. (2019) Hasan (2023) Lings e Greenley (2005) Rafiq e Ahmed (2000)
	Comunicação Interna	Refere-se ao mecanismo e ferramentas usadas para criar e conservar as relações dentro da organização.	Bruin et al. (2021) Fortuna (2018) Goula et al. (2022) Inkotte (2000) Martins (2016) Musa et al. (2021) Qiu, Boukis e Storey (2021) Rafiq e Ahmed (1993)
	Gestão e Envolvimento	Define-se pelo envolvimento das equipas seniores e de gestão na liderança e cultura organizacional.	Berry, Hensel e Burke (1976) Hidayat (2019) Huang (2020) Órfão (2010) Qaisar (2021) Qiu, Boukis e Storey (2021) Sanches (2017)

Figure 3

Model Description (2)

Dimensões	Variáveis	Definições	Referências
Qualidade dos Serviços Prestados	Segurança	A qualidade é percebida em função da garantia que os clientes obtêm de que o serviço é prestado.	Armstrong et al. (2021) Mattala et al. (2021) Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988) Wibowo (2022)
	Competências	Foco nas competências técnicas e conhecimentos dos profissionais.	Nicholas et al. (2022) Kaurav e Chowdhary (2015) Oliveira et al. (2020) Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988)
	Capacidade de resposta	Tem a ver com a disponibilidade dos colaboradores em prestarem apoio aos clientes e a capacidade de responderem rapidamente às suas necessidades.	Oliveira (2019) Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988)
	Cortesia	Baseia-se no atendimento, na forma como o cliente é abordado e na capacidade do prestador de serviço o tratar bem e lhe oferecer atendimento personalizado.	Moreira Mero et al. (2021) Naini et al. (2022) Nemteanu et al. (2021) Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988)
	Confiança	Relaciona-se com a consistência na performance do serviço prestado e com a resposta em tempo útil.	Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988)
	Fiabilidade	A qualidade depende do desempenho do serviço com exatidão e é verificada ao longo do tempo.	Lima (2020) Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988) Rabiul et al. (2022) Silva et al. (2023) Zocca et al. (2023)
	Elementos tangíveis	Aspeto físico das instalações, dos equipamentos, do pessoal e do material escrito.	Kaur et al. (2022) Kotler et al. (2022) Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988) Sima (2021)



3.1 CASE STUDY

According to the Yin (2001) the choice of a case study should be considered when the focus of the study is intended to answer "how?" and "why?" and when there are contextual conditions relevant to the study in question. Thus, the success of a case-based investigation must take into account the definition of a clear and objective research issue, the identification of study-oriented propositions, the definition of units of analysis and criteria for the interpretation of the results obtained (Gomes, 2010).

According to Ediputra and Amalyah (2022) this relevant research strategy can be used to conduct qualitative research in the areas of social sciences and humanities, allowing the researcher to analyze in depth the phenomenon under study and thus to have a holistic view on the real events of current phenomena (Suravi, 2023). From this perspective, the present work is part of a research strategy of case study according to two fundamental questions (So, 2011):

Q1. How does internal marketing influence the quality dimensions of health services?

Q2. How do the dimensions of the quality of health services influence the perception of quality by users?

In this sense, and taking into account the selected topic, objectives, research issues and literature review, a qualitative exploratory investigation was carried out using a case study, six Santa Madalena clinics as the subject of study. Using this methodology, a strategy to assess or describe different situations was possible, using a method that promotes understanding and careful interpretation of complexity for a given case of study (Santos, 2011).

Although this study was not considered a strategy for multiple case studies, it has as its object the study six dental clinics of the Santa Madalena Clinic group, whose objective is to provide an analysis of the context and processes that support the theoretical issues under study. In this context, it is intended to make an analytical generalization, by using a previously developed theory as a conceptual model, so that it is possible to make a comparison of empirical results according to the subject under study (So, 2011).

3.2 DATA COLLECTION

The present investigation followed a case study protocol, by which a formal document was used which includes the procedures, strategy, tools and general rules adopted in the course of the investigation (Yin, 2001). In this sense, the adoption of procedures for data collection has enabled credible sources of information to be identified, interviews to be prepared and



carried out, and relevant internal documents to be analyzed in the framework of the ongoing investigation.

The diversity of data sources was aimed at increasing the validity of research Yin (2001) Therefore, three strategies were used to analyze the data collected, such as: research questions; identify alternative descriptions and develop a structure of theoretical contents to describe the case study in six clinics of the Santa Madalena group. In addition, the semi-structured interview technique was used since it benefits not only the description of social phenomena, but also their understanding (Roca et al., 2021).

The transcript of the interviews will be made through exhaustive notes, with the use of recording them after the consent of the interviewees. Some introductory guidelines will be considered in the conduct of the interviews by the investigator, through the use of appropriate language, clarification of the objectives and the nature of the interview, in foreseen periods of forty minutes.

The research methodology of the present study is a process for collecting and selecting the research strategy, which determines the choice of data collection techniques (Batista et al., 2021). According to Yin (2001) a case study results from the analysis of various pieces of evidence, including documentation, records, interviews, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Also according to the author, case studies can be exploratory or descriptive causal. The investigation is an exploratory case study, since the investigator is intended to highlight the elements that make it possible to diagnose a case with prospects of naturalistic generalization, making it possible to describe a phenomenon within its real context. Documentary analysis will be carried out by collecting documentation from archives in the organization, as well as analysis of activity reports, consultation of the official website of the unit of analysis and other information deemed relevant for the investigation. In this area, 32 semi-structured interviews (Table 1) were conducted in 6 dental medical clinics of the Santa Madalena group, which formed our sample of a total of 19, in the study period, of which 2 were more exploratory in nature on the subject and design of the study.

Table 1

Interviewees

Interviewees	Role	Date of the interview	Interview duration
E1	Director General	05/06/2023	50 min
E2	Clinical Director	15/06/2023	41 min
E3	Clinical Director	15/06/2023	43 min
E4	Clinical Director	27/06/2023	44 min



E5	Clinical Director	16/07/2023	39 min
E6	Clinical Director	07/09/2023	40 min
E7	Clinical Director	24/09/2023	42 min
E8	Physician	08/06/2023	41 min
E9	Physician	29/06/2023	38 min
E10	Physician	08/06/2023	39 min
E11	Physician	25/07/2023	43 min
E12	Physician	25/06/2023	39 min
E13	Physician	29/07/2023	40 min
E14	Physician	29/07/2023	42 min
E15	Physician	05/09/2023	39 min
E16	Physician	10/09/2023	43 min
E17	Physician	10/09/2023	39 min
E18	Physician	20/09/2023	36 min
E19	Physician	26/09/2023	38 min
E20	Receiver	05/10/2023	37 min
E21	Receiver	05/10/2023	39 min
E22	Receiver	09/10/2023	35 min
E23	Receiver	04/10/2023	36 min
E24	Receiver	04/10/2023	39 min
E25	Receiver	08/10/2023	38 min
E26	Manager	05/06/2023	40 min
E27	Manager	05/06/2023	39 min
E28	Manager	08/06/2023	41 min
E29	Manager	15/06/2023	43 min
E30	Manager	17/06/2023	42 min
E31	Manager	17/06/2023	44 min
E32	Marketing Director	12/07/2023	54 min

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the content of the interviews, they were transcribed into Word files from the audio recordings, directly without using any transcription software, avoiding post-clearance corrections due to possible omissions or inaccuracies that always occur with the use of applications. Subsequently, content analysis tables were drawn up using record units: Semantic writing and context units: Segment question answer. In drawing up the tables, the various categories were also taken into account; Sub-categories; Indicators/Descriptions; Frequencies and Units of Recording. As regards the treatment of data obtained through interviews, a content analysis was carried out in accordance with Bardin (1977). As for the documentary analysis, some documents were selected made available by the group's marketing department, Clínica Santa Madalena.



4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1 ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

The analysis of the content of the interview carried out with the General Director of the group, Clínica Santa Madalena, reveals a set of crucial information about various operational aspects and patient satisfaction. The analysis was carried out with a focus on the semantic units of registration, delineated as question-answer segments, allowing a global view of the subjects covered.

One of the main challenges faced by some Santa Madalena Clinics concerns the physical structure, highlighting the limitations imposed by the size and physical layout of the facilities. The Director mentioned the lack of preparation of physical structures, which limits the capacity to respond to urgent situations. This comment emphasizes the need to adapt and prepare facilities to ensure an effective response at critical times:

We have physical dimensions and structures that are not always ready to respond to urgent situations. (DG)

As regards the quality of service provided, patients were very satisfied with the services offered by the clinics:

Our patients are very satisfied with the various services provided from reception to medical acts. (DG)

The competence, reliability and friendliness of professionals, from doctors to the reception team, were highlighted as key factors for high patient satisfaction. In addition, patient satisfaction is assessed through specific questionnaires, allowing for a deeper understanding of their perceptions and experiences.

An interesting observation was the opinion of the Director General on the ability of patients to properly assess the quality of the services provided. It highlighted the perceptions of patients themselves, indicating that they have a clear and accurate idea of the quality of services, from appointment to medical care:

I think that our patients have a very specific notion of properly evaluating the quality of our services. (DG)

The analysis also focused on the equivalence between the effective quality and that perceived by the patients, revealing that, in the opinion of the interviewee, there is no significant difference between the two. This suggests that patients rely on the effective quality of services, which is reflected in their perception:



4.2 ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS WITH CLINICAL DIRECTORS

The detailed analysis of the interview conducted with the Clinical Directors of the Santa Madalena Clinical Group reveals a series of crucial challenges, strategies and perceptions related to the provision of medical services and patient satisfaction. This study focused on semantic record units, delimited by question-answer segments, providing a comprehensive and structured view of the issues discussed.

One of the main challenges of the clinics is the maintenance of high levels of patient satisfaction, with a view to their loyalty and attracting new patients. The Clinical Directors underlined the importance of maintaining the quality of services, from reception to medical procedure, as a way to maintain these levels of satisfaction:

Keep our patients' satisfaction levels high, with this loyalty and at the same time capture more first times always with quality of service. DC Odivelas
To continue to serve our patients well from care at the reception to the medical act DC Conde Redondo
We always respond with a high quality to our patients' problems. DC Park of Nations

Human resources management (HR) has also been identified as a challenge, and maintaining staff motivation is identified as crucial. In addition, questions related to the size and physical structures of clinics, such as limited spaces and rooms, that affect emergency response and capacity of care were mentioned.

We have difficulty in giving answers to patients because we only have 4 offices and in emergency situations it is even worse. The space in the waiting room is also reduced DC Colombo
(...) we have the capacity to respond to emergencies and wider spaces. DC Alvalade

With regard to the quality of service provided, respondents underlined the overall satisfaction of patients, pointing out that customers are satisfied in all areas and often return to use the services.

Our satisfaction surveys show that they are satisfied with the quality of service provided in all areas involved. DC Odivelas
Yes, sir. The quality of the facilities and service we provide to the patient is above average (...) DC Loures
Yes, they always come back because they value our work. DC Conde Redondo
They are because they are again looking for our services and thank DC Park of Nations



The quality of the facilities, the competence of the professionals and the friendliness of the staff were identified as determining factors for this satisfaction. Evaluation of the services provided, carried out through satisfaction surveys, revealed positive levels of patient feedback. However, Clinical Directors also recognized the subjectivity of these evaluations, noting that patients' emotions can influence their perceptions and evaluations:

Our satisfaction surveys show that they are satisfied with the quality of service provided in all areas involved. DC Odivelas
Anonymous questionnaires evaluating the quality of services are carried out. DC Loures.
As I have already mentioned, our satisfaction surveys are a tool for assessing the quality of our services... DC Colombo
... newer patients sometimes have very subjective expectations. DC Colombo
Patients do not always have an accurate perception of the quality, dedication and competence of physicians and other collaborators. DC Alvalade
I can't tell you exactly, because it depends on every patient DC Park Nations

In the context of internal marketing, the influence of the behavior and attitude of employees on the quality of care was highlighted:

Our attitudes of any employee and their behaviors are fundamental to influence what our patients think and this is reflected in the level of quality of care. DC Odivelas
(...) if there are any contributors who say or do something positive or negative can lead to the consultation less positive or more positive situation. DC Loures
(...) knowing how to listen carefully to the complaints of our patients, allow them to feel good. DC Colombo
A correct professional conduct is the mirror of any operation of any DC Alvalade group

Motivation and commitment management strategies, including effective communication, training and involvement in decision-making, have been identified as important for maintaining a cohesive and productive team.

We talked to each other. From reception to medical care. DC Odivelas.
Talk to our employees and engage them on issues that may have gone less on a day-to-day basis. DC Conde Redondo
But we have an internal policy at the level of various formations. DC Odivelas
We are also motivated to attend short training and more specialized postgraduate courses in DC Alvalade
We feel involved and we are aware of what is happening in the decisions and information of our manager. DC Colombo
There are also meetings and other contacts between management and management and their staff, and that is a very good thing. DC Alvalade



This scenario was corroborated by doctors at the different clinics, pointing to the pressing need for additional resources to cope with the growing demand, notably in emergencies. In addition, limited physical space presents itself as a challenging factor, affecting not only the capacity to care, but also the agility in responding to the emerging needs of patients:

More space - cabinets. M 2 Odivelas
Responsiveness because we only have 4 cabinets, and sometimes they're not enough. M1 Colombo
Responsiveness to many patients in emergency situations is a major challenge facing us because we have few offices. M2 Colombo

In the field of communication and education, the complexity of conveying the importance of oral health care to patients has arisen. The difficulty in raising awareness and educating patients effectively about this importance demonstrates the need for improvement in this area, emphasizing the importance of clear and accessible communication in the doctor-patient interaction.

In turn, high demand for services leads to difficulties in responding quickly and efficiently to patient requests. This scenario is aggravated by the high expectations and requirements, sometimes unreasonable, of patients and constitutes an additional challenge in the provision of medical care:

Respond quickly to the increase in demand. M2 Loures
The responsiveness to many patients in emergency situations and the schedules of patients arriving late to appointments. M2 Alvalade
Responsiveness / Schedule availability. M1 Conde Redondo
We're able to attend to our patients, especially in emergency situations. M2 Conde Redondo

Despite these challenges, there was widespread satisfaction among patients with the services provided at the Santa Madalena Clinics. Patient loyalty, expressed through frequent returns and recommendations to third parties, highlights the perceived quality of care provided, underlining the importance of interpersonal relationships, care effectiveness and trust between medical staff and patients:

In general, yes, because there is a great team effort for this. M1 Odivelas
They're satisfied that they like our services. M2 Odivelas
Yeah, because they come back again, recommend it to other people. M1 Loures
They are, because they come back again and also recommend other patients. M2 Loures



Yes, because they come back almost always and pass the message on to family and friends. M1 Colombo
Yeah, they come back almost every time. M2 Colombo
Yes, because they go back to the appointments because they felt well treated. M1 Alvalade
Yeah, they come back because they have good medical teams. M2 Alvalade
Yes, just see them happy. M2 Conde Redondo
... i think they are generally satisfied with our service. M1 Parque das Nações

The evaluation of the services, carried out through direct communication, satisfaction surveys and positive comments, provides valuable feedback on the perceived quality of medical services:

Most of us are told at the end when they have already been met that they were very pleased. M1 Odivelas
It's hard to answer, but I think it is because of the way they manifest themselves during and after treatment. M1 Colombo
Many of them tell us directly that they liked it very much. M2 Colombo

However, it is important to note that excessive patient expectations can sometimes distort this assessment, stressing the need to effectively manage these expectations to ensure a fairer and more realistic assessment of the services offered.

With the aim of improving service delivery and internal management, it is strongly suggested to continuously invest in training, in improving internal communication, in team integration activities and in technological upgrading. These elements contribute to the creation of a more efficient environment, enhancing the ability of medical staff to deliver quality services and provide a positive patient experience:

We're also very involved in what's going on at the clinic. M1 Loures
(...) the fact that we are constantly involved in matters of the management of the clinic. M2 Loures
(...) we are involved in issues of management of the clinic. M2 Alvalade
Internal training. M1 Conde Redondo
We are aware of what is happening at various levels and this motivates us immensely. M2 Parque das Nações
... is providing better space conditions. M1 Loures
(...) every month we have meetings with our manager of the clinic and on a day to day basis we are aware of what is happening in the sense of better attending to our patients. M1 Colombo
We have a medical director who motivates us immensely, who cares about us, who helps us a lot. M1 Alvalade
Internal training and good communication, sometimes even informal. M1 Conde Redondo



The challenges faced by the Santa Madalena Clinics are diverse and include issues related to appointment booking, appointment management, patient complaints and overall patient satisfaction:

Today, due to the rotation of the clinical body, we are faced with the discontent of patients with the changes in the dates/times of the consultations. R Odivelas
Schedules for appointments (due to the size of the clinic). R Loures
Manage complaints because the waiting room and here in the care there is little space. R Parque das Nações
As a receptionist, I have difficulty managing some urgent appointments because we have few offices. R Colombo
In the context of reception it is difficult to manage the agendas of doctors. R Alvalade
Very demanding patients. Turnover of doctors. Deselecting queries. R Conde Redondo

The rotation of doctors and the cancelation of appointments contribute to the dissatisfaction of patients, especially with regard to the frequent changes in dates and times. The difficulty of managing doctors' diaries due to the size of some clinics is also a challenge, affecting the management of appointments and the satisfaction of urgent needs.

The quality of the service provided is perceived positively by patients, as evidenced by the increase in demand and the loyalty of old patients. Patient satisfaction is intrinsically linked to the friendliness, effectiveness and speed of the receptionists, as well as the quality of the medical service provided.

The new patients (1x) have also been many, which leads me to believe that we have been well referenced. R Odivelas
Yes, we're looking more and more for new patients, we're recommended. R Parque das Nações
And the patients who have been with us for years are "loyal", which demonstrates the good work that, together, we have done. R Odivelas

Patient assessment of services is done through satisfaction surveys and direct communication with receptionists, influencing the perception of quality of care and medical consultations:

Through our satisfaction surveys, they say they liked our services very much. R Colombo
At the counter, we are told that they liked our services and then many are asking us for satisfaction surveys. R Alvalade
Many on the way out tell me that they were very well attended by the doctor. R Colombo



However, there is a discrepancy between the actual quality of the services and the perception of the patients, which is often influenced by the purpose of the consultation and the difficulties faced, such as the small waiting room and the problems outside the reception area:

Yes and no. Yes, when the purpose of the consultation goes against what they conceived and does not always happen. R Odivelas
I think that yes, many want to be attended to quickly and it is not always possible. R Colombo
Some dissatisfaction regarding the waiting time to get appointment. R. Conde Redondo
At the reception level we have little space and some patients feel impatient to be standing. R Colombo

Internal marketing plays a crucial role in managing the motivation and commitment of workers and is influenced by the attitude and behavior of receptionists. The need for wage improvements, the promotion of training and adequate working conditions are aspects mentioned by the receptionists as important for their performance and satisfaction in the workplace:

Frankly, the company itself should be more concerned about this factor, because we are the driving force. I do not believe that we are properly rewarded in monetary terms for the hard work that we do every day. R Odivelas
At the clinic level, we promote some post-work meetings; there is always someone who brings a cake, some cookies to the cup. Overall, the good environment helps in this direction. R Odivelas
It is improving our facilities and providing better working conditions and also the fact that we are trained in the area of care. R Loures
Promotes training at the service level. R Colombo
It is improving our facilities and providing better working conditions and also the fact that we are trained in the area of care. R Loures

Finally, the importance of listening more to workers is underlined, recognizing that the internal perspective can contribute significantly to a more detailed and enriching understanding of the functioning of clinics.

This detailed analysis provides valuable information to guide future strategies aimed at improving service, management of appointments and patient satisfaction at Santa Madalena clinics. The word cloud is presented regarding the analysis of the interviews with the receptionists of the six clinics, according to Figure 7.



paid to patients' expectations. However, there were some discrepancies between patient perception and the reality of the treatments, which highlights the importance of clear and effective communication on the procedures carried out:

*In my opinion, I believe so. Generally speaking, our patients are satisfied with the treatments carried out and with our care (doctor, care and reception). G Odivelas
In general, they are very satisfied. G Alvalade*

Correct assessment of patient satisfaction was also a topic under discussion, especially with regard to patients' ignorance of the work involved in clinical processes. This directly influences the perception and assessment of the services provided.

The management of the motivation and involvement of employees was considered a fundamental part of the success of the clinic. Strategies such as offering training, sharing patient feedback and promoting a balanced working environment were mentioned as initiatives to increase staff motivation and efficiency:

*I share with the team the responses in our patients to the satisfaction survey and how they are doing a great job. G Odivelas
I wonder if they intend to have training in some area, that they don't feel so comfortable. G Odivelas
... access to various training courses. G Loures
We try to involve them in technical training. G Colombo
Access to training and social environments also increase our motivation and perform well. G Alvalade
(...) to be aware of management decisions and also to be informed of what is going on in our clinic. G Colombo
... that we are all informed of the most complicated situations that may arise. G Alvalade
(...) Being always present to attend to your personal life issues, for example. G Conde Redondo*

Finally, the conclusions of the interviews highlighted the importance of offering good physical conditions, investing in cutting-edge technology and ensuring a healthy balance between the professional and personal lives of employees. These aspects have been recognized as essential to ensure the proper functioning of clinics and the satisfaction of patients and staff.

This in-depth analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by the Santa Madalena Clinics, as well as provides valuable information to improve the quality of services and the working environment in the clinics. In Figure 8 it is possible to observe the word cloud resulting from the analysis of the interviews with the CSM managers.



Figure 8

Word Cloud - Manager Interview - CSM



4.6 ANALYSIS OF THE DIRECTOR OF MARKETING INTERVIEW

During the interview with the Director of Marketing of the Santa Madalena Clinics, several challenges and aspects relevant to the quality of the services offered by the clinics were identified.

One of the main challenges addressed was the limitation of the physical space of some clinics to meet urgent cases, which can have an impact on the rapid response to critical situations:

We have physical dimensions and structures that are not always ready to respond to urgent situations. Mrk

As regards the quality of service, the overall satisfaction of patients with a low number of complaints was highlighted. This positive result was attributed to the good care in reception and the trust established between patients and doctors, which was also reflected in the satisfaction surveys:

*(...) to complaints that are very few in that we act whenever possible to meet the needs and expectations of patients. Mrk
At the level of care at receptions, we have had good comments for the sympathy and referral of patients to consultations. Mrk*



(...) and inside the cabinets they feel confident because many of them already know the doctors. Mrk

The correct evaluation of the services provided by the patients was evidenced by the consistency in the demonstration of satisfaction. Direct feedback from patients was also referred to as a rewarding means of recognition, reflecting the influence of the behavior and attitude of contributors on patient satisfaction:

(...) they say that they were very well attended and there have also been customers who take a liking to the doctors and receptionists. It is a recognition that is very gratifying to us. Mrk

Yes, yes, that is a reality and for that reason our objective is to provide our employees with training and awareness-raising activities. Mrk

The management of the motivation and commitment of the employees was addressed through strategies such as internal training, flexibility of schedules and the implementation of an internal communication system, with the aim of ensuring the permanence of the employees and the maintenance of a committed and connected working environment:

In the business plan, we always include several short and medium-term in-house training actions for all employees. Mrk

We try, through the managers of our clinics, to ensure flexible and shift times in order to have permanent staff. Mrk

We also created an internal system of communication through a direct mobile network with the area of marketing, and for this reason we are always involved in the day after day in what happens in the clinics. Mrk

Finally, the importance of protocols established with several institutions was highlighted as a way to extend the reach of clinics, offering discounts on treatments and establishing strategic partnerships for awareness actions and information on oral health.

These results of the analysis reflect not only the challenges faced by the Santa Madalena Clinics, but also the strategies adopted to guarantee the quality of the services provided, the satisfaction of patients and the motivation of employees according to Figure 9, referring to the interview held to the marketing director of the CSM.



Figure 10

Discussion of the results

Dimensões do modelo	Variáveis / Construtos	Discussão dos resultados		
		Verificação no Caso de acordo com a literatura	Na literatura, mas não verificado no Caso	Verificado no Caso e novo face à literatura
Marketing Interno	Formação	O caso revelou que a formação técnica e científica dos profissionais de saúde e de outros colaboradores elevaram o nível de desempenho das suas competências. Bohnenberger et al. (2019) Hasan (2023)	O caso não evidenciou a relevância da formação enquanto motivação dos colaboradores.	O Caso revelou que o investimento em formação, eventos temáticos e convívios melhoraram a retenção dos colaboradores.
	Comunicação interna	O caso revelou que a comunicação interna é uma ferramenta que cria relações e envolvimento dos colaboradores. Bruin et al. (2021) Gordon et al. (2019) Goula et al. (2022) Inkotte (2000) Musa et al. (2021)		O caso revelou que as práticas de comunicação interativas potenciaram a motivação e a integração dos colaboradores.
	Gestão e envolvimento	O caso revelou que as práticas de gestão criaram uma cultura organizacional de motivação e de pertença nos colaboradores. Bruin et al (2021) Hidayat (2019) Huang (2020) Qaisar (2021) Sanches (2017)		O caso revelou que existe um sentimento de pertença por parte dos colaboradores que permitiu constituir equipas coesas no funcionamento das clínicas.
Qualidade dos Serviços	Segurança	O caso revelou que os pacientes confiam e sentem-se seguros em relação aos serviços prestados. Existe uma garantia de qualidade percebida pelos pacientes. Armstrong et al. (2021) Mattala et al (2021) Parasuraman et al. (1985;1988) Zehir et al. (2011)		O caso revelou que os pacientes estão muito satisfeitos com a qualidade dos serviços prestados pelos profissionais.
	Competência	O caso revelou que as competências técnicas dos profissionais e a simpatia influenciaram a percepção da qualidade por parte dos pacientes. Fátima et al. (2019) Nicholas et al. (2022) Kaurav e Chowdhary (2015) Oliveira et al. (2020)		O caso revelou que a competência e a dedicação dos profissionais e de outros colaboradores são fundamentais na prestação de serviços de qualidade.
	Capacidade de resposta	O caso revelou que a competência e a dedicação dos profissionais e de outros colaboradores, influenciaram a capacidade de resposta e a qualidade dos serviços prestados aos pacientes. Oliveira (2019) Parasuraman et al. (1985;1988)	O caso não evidenciou dados suficientes sobre a capacidade de resposta dos profissionais em situações de atendimentos urgentes aos pacientes.	O caso revelou que a capacidade de resposta por parte dos profissionais e de outros colaboradores são fundamentais na prestação de serviços
	Cortesia	O caso revelou que a cortesia e as relações interativas contribuíram para elevar o grau de satisfação e de fidelização dos pacientes. Moreira Melo et al. ((2021) Naini et al. (2022)		O caso revelou que a cortesia moldou positivamente a percepção da qualidade por parte dos pacientes.
	Confiança	O caso revelou que existe um clima de confiança por parte dos pacientes em relação a procedimentos complexos e ao bom desempenho dos profissionais. Dhone e Sarwoko (2022) Iliopoulos e Priporas (2021) Parasuraman et al. (1985;1988)		O caso revelou que a confiança é uma dimensão com impacto positivo na percepção da qualidade pelos pacientes.
	Fiabilidade	O caso evidenciou que o desempenho e a competência dos profissionais e, de outros colaboradores influenciaram positivamente a percepção da qualidade dos serviços por parte dos pacientes. Fátima et al. (2019) Lima (2020) Silva et al. (2023) Zocca et al. (2023)		O caso revelou que a fiabilidade é uma dimensão crítica de sucesso e que influenciou a percepção da qualidade dos serviços prestados por parte dos pacientes.
	Elementos tangíveis		O caso não forneceu evidências suficientes sobre a falta de espaços de atendimentos urgentes e especializados aos pacientes por parte dos profissionais. Kaur et al. (2022) Kotler et al. (2022) Sima (2021)	O caso revelou que as dimensões reduzidas de algumas instalações, influenciaram a percepção da qualidade subjetiva por parte dos pacientes.



5 CONCLUSION

This exploratory study highlights the crucial role of internal marketing in the quality management of services in six Santa Madalena clinics, specializing in dental medicine. Focusing on dimensions such as motivation and employee integration, the study shows how these practices directly influence employee retention and patient-perceived quality. The motivation of the employees proved to be essential for raising the standards of quality and satisfaction of the patients. A motivated and integrated team promoted high-quality healthcare delivery, resulting in a turnover of more than 42 million euros in 2023. In addition, the in-house initiatives of the clinics, even if not explicitly confirmed, contributed to the retention of employees, creating a positive work culture that impacted the quality of service.

The interviews also highlighted the key role of quality dimensions in service perception, such as reliability, responsiveness, trust, courtesy and competence. These factors were essential to building the reputation of clinics, although challenges such as managing responsiveness in busy locations have been identified. Still, employees' dedication to maintaining high standards of service ensured a positive perception of quality, even in the face of operational limitations.

In conclusion, the study achieved the four objectives set, as detailed below:

1. **Identification of Internal Marketing Practices:** Several internal marketing practices have been identified in the CSM group, such as information campaigns, preventive health promotion, and use of social networks. Strategies such as loyalty programs, active patient feedback, local partnerships and employee well-being also positively influenced the perception of service quality;
2. **Understanding the Role of Internal Marketing:** Internal marketing played a crucial role in motivating, integrating and retaining employees, resulting in higher quality health services. This strengthened the organizational culture and increased the reputation and loyalty of patients at the Santa Madalena Clinics;
3. **Identification of Critical Factors of Success:** The motivation of the employees, integration of the teams and retention of human resources were critical factors that raised the quality of the services provided. The dedication of professionals and a demanding organizational culture have contributed to services of excellence;
4. **Analysis of Quality of Services Dimensions:** Internal marketing positively influenced the perception of quality of services by patients. Factors such as reliability, trust, courtesy, competence and technological innovation positively shaped this perception, strengthening the reputation of clinics and the loyalty of patients.



6 STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study deepened the dimensions of internal marketing and the quality of services provided in six private dental care clinics of the CSM group, but presents some limitations. Qualitative methodology based on a case study, while adequate, limits the generalization of results. The interviews, while illuminating, could have been more in-depth, and the use of quantitative methods could have provided statistical data that reinforced the qualitative findings.

Another limitation refers to respondents' sensitivity when discussing internal marketing practices and quality of services, which may have generated discomfort. In addition, the focus predominantly on the perspectives of clinical staff left out the direct view of patients, which could have provided a more complete understanding of the perception of quality of service. There is also the possibility of bias or subjectivity in the interviews, influencing the results. Considering that the study focused on six clinics out of a total of 19 in the MSM group, the findings may not be applicable to all healthcare settings, as factors such as patient size, location and demographics may impact internal marketing dynamics and quality perception. In summary, while the study brings valuable insights, the use of quantitative measures and a more diverse sample could broaden the scope and applicability of the results, allowing more robust conclusions and more practical recommendations for quality management in oral health care.

7 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INVESTIGATIONS

In addition to the limitations mentioned, we can conclude that the research carried out so far has allowed an in-depth view of the fundamental dimensions of internal marketing in the context of six health clinics, emphasizing its considerable influence on the perception of quality of service. However, in order to broaden and enrich the understanding of this complex interaction, a number of opportunities and directions for future research are outlined, aiming to overcome the identified limitations and explore areas not yet investigated. Despite the valuable knowledge provided by the interviews conducted, there is room for a more structured and detailed approach. The use of more comprehensive interview protocols, targeted at specific aspects of internal marketing, such as worker motivation, integration strategies and retention initiatives, could reveal more subtle nuances and perceptions, enriching the understanding of the topic. This combined approach would strengthen the strength and breadth of the findings by



providing a more robust assessment of the relationship between internal marketing strategies and quality of service outcomes.

Another aspect to explore in subsequent studies would be the inclusion of other data collection techniques, through surveys by questionnaires on other patient perspectives, which could provide valuable information on how internal marketing practices translate into perceived service quality by the external public. Finally, to improve our understanding of the interactions between internal marketing strategies and the perceived quality of health services, future research may adopt a multidimensional approach, namely to incorporate qualitative and quantitative methods, taking into account multiple perspectives and considering different contexts.

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