The Influence of Advertisement Focus and Gender on Attraction to a Fitness Club

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Regular physical activity is associated with a host of positive health and psychological benefits, including decreased risk of Type II diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers; improved cognitive functioning; and better health-related quality of life (for overviews, see Henderson, 2009; Kahn et al., 2002; Lox, Martin Ginnis, & Petruzzello, 2010). Nevertheless, research suggests that adults in the United States are remarkably sedentary and do not obtain the recommended levels of physical activity per week (USDHHS, 2006). Further exacerbating the issue is the fact that people generally have negative attitudes toward exercise and other forms of physical activity (Lox et al., 2010). These challenges point to the primacy of developing innovative, effective promotional materials that encourage people to be physically active, such as by exercising at a fitness club (see also Irwin, Sutton, & McCarthy, 2002). Indeed, the promotional materials often provide consumers with initial perceptions concerning an organization, thereby serving as the basis by which they construe their images of that entity.

The purpose of this study is to examine three factors that potentially shape people’s reactions to such materials: advertisement focus, consumer gender, and model gender. To do so, we draw from signaling theory (Rynes, 1991; Spence, 1974) and body image literature to predict that (a) consumers will be more attracted to organizations focusing on health and wellness as opposed to appearance, (b) these effects will be stronger for women than they will be for men, and (c) the advertisement focus, consumer gender, and model gender will all interact to predict attitudes toward the fitness club. An overview of the theoretical framework and the specific hypotheses are presented below.

Theoretical Framework

Signaling theory (Rynes, 1991; Spence, 1974) provides an ideal framework for understanding why promotion materials influence people’s attraction to the fitness club. According to this perspective, when people lack sufficient infor-
mation to make important decisions, they will make inferences based on the material available to them. These materials might include, for instance, websites, social networks, news clippings, advertisements, and the like. They will then use these cues to form opinions and beliefs about the entity in question. For instance, organizational behavior research has shown that job applicants form ideas about a prospective company's culture based on that entity's external communications, such as website content and recruiting brochures (Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000). Similarly, Williams and Bauer (1994) observed that applicants assume everyone in the organization values equality if diversity is depicted in website images and policies. Supportive of signaling theory's main tenets, these studies are illustrative of the manner in which people form ideas about and perceptions of organizations by drawing from various external cues.

These findings have particular relevance to the current study, as potential consumers are likely to draw inferences about their "fit" at the fitness club based on that club's promotional materials. By "fit," we are referring to the degree to which a person's values, attitudes, and exercise goals match those presumed to be held by the club. Fitness clubs' promotional materials are likely to emphasize the manner in which physical activity positively impacts one's (a) health and wellness, or (b) appearance (Berry & Howe, 2002). In the former example, clubs might emphasize lifelong fitness, improvement over dominance, and the wellness of the entire person. On the other hand, in the latter example, there is an emphasis on appearance, and there is a greater emphasis on how people look than on their overall health. In drawing from signaling theory, consumers are likely to use these messages to form their own beliefs about the fitness club.

While some researchers have advocated a greater emphasis on appearance (Dishman, 2001), there is considerable evidence to suggest that organizations might be better served by concentrating on health and wellness. For instance, Hanlon, Morris, and Nabbs (2010) found that women were attracted to their fitness clubs because of the psychological, health, and physical fitness benefits of the exercise. Furthermore, a health and fitness focus is likely to attract people who are internally motivated to exercise, and as a result, habituate their exercise regimen (Inglewed, Markland, & Medley, 1998). On the other hand, people who focus solely on exercise's effects on their body are less likely to adopt an exercise program or adhere to it (Markland & Inglewed, 2007). These findings are congruent with Stice, Shaw, and Marti's (2006) meta-analysis of obesity prevention programs, as the authors found that programs focusing on collective health resulted in more weight loss than did those programs that focused solely on weight loss. Collectively, this literature suggests:

**Hypothesis 1:** Consumer attitudes toward a fitness club are likely to be more positive for clubs focusing on
health and wellness than for clubs focusing on appearance.

We also expected that participant gender would moderate the aforementioned relationship. These differences are likely a function of perceptions of one’s body and how that influences physical activity behaviors. There is considerable research showing that women are more likely than men to express body image dissatisfaction (e.g., Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009; Jackson, 2002). These self-perceptions are important for a host of reasons, including their linkage with self-esteem (Miller & Downey, 1999), anxiety (Stice & Whitenton, 2002), depression (Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eiseinberg, 2006), and a variety of unhealthy behaviors (e.g., eating disorder; Polivy & Herman, 2002). Differences in how women and men see their body might also impact their preference for fitness clubs. Research suggests that people who are dissatisfied with their body generally express reluctance to take part in activities that emphasize the body and appearance (Spink, 1992). Furthermore, researchers have shown that when exercise programs focus on appearance (such as when a thin, toned exercise leader is shown in a video), women feel disconnected and intimidated (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995).

These findings have bearing on the current study, too. Specifically, because of the underlying differences in body image dissatisfaction, women, relative to men, might have more negative attitudes toward clubs with a focus on appearance. As such, we predicted:

Hypothesis 2: Women will be more attracted than men to a fitness club emphasizing health and wellness than they will to one focusing on appearance.

We further suspected that the gender of the person in the advertisement might also influence attitudes toward the club. Specifically, within an exercise context, people will often compare themselves to others of a similar gender—a process that can elicit social physique anxiety, weight dissatisfaction, and weight preoccupation (Martin Ginns, Prapavessis, & Haase, 2007; Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001). These relationships are likely to be particularly strengthened when there is a focus on appearance and weight as opposed to health and wellness. As such, we predicted:

Hypothesis 3: Model gender, consumer gender, and advertisement focus will interact to predict attitudes toward the fitness club.

Finally, attraction to a fitness club should result in intentions to join. This prediction is consistent with the similarity-attraction paradigm (Schneider, 1987), which holds that people are attracted to organizations where they perceive strong value congruence. Indeed, Dineen, Ash, and Noe (2002) illustrated that job applicants were attracted to organizations they perceived had a desirable workplace culture. From this perspective, people who perceive congru-
ence between their exercise goals and those of the fitness club (as determined by the advertisement) should have greater intentions to join. In drawing from this literature, we predicted:

Hypothesis 4: Consumer attitudes toward a fitness club will be positively associated with intentions to join the club.

Study overview
In summary, we predicted that consumers would be more attracted to fitness clubs that focused on health and wellness in their advertisements, as opposed to appearance (Hypothesis 1). We also suspected that this relationship would be stronger for women than for men (Hypothesis 2) and that a consumer gender-by model gender-by advertisement focus interaction would predict attitudes (Hypothesis 3). Finally, we hypothesized that attraction to the fitness club would be positively associated with intentions to join (Hypothesis 4). We examined these hypotheses by way of an experiment in which we asked college students to view fitness club brochures and to provide their reactions to the materials. This represents an ideal population because, though many students are physically active, their participation rates actually decline during their time in college (Calfas, Sallis, Lovato, & Campbell, 1994); furthermore, because their health behaviors are still developing, understanding factors that influence college students' physical activity participation can have lasting effects (Leenders, Sherman, & Ward, 2003). In the space below, we present our methods and data analytical approach.

METHOD
Participants
Data were collected from 111 undergraduate students at a public university in the Southwest United States. The sample consisted of 47 women (42.3%), 63 men (56.8%), and one person who did not provide gender information; 76 Whites (68.5%), 16 African Americans (14.4%), 10 Hispanics (9.0%), 5 Asians (4.5%), 1 Native American (.9%), 1 person who listed “other” (.9%), and 2 people who did not provide their race. The average age was 21.85 years (SD = 3.66), and the participants exercised an average of 4 days per week (SD = 1.46).

Procedures and Materials
We tested the hypotheses through a 2 (promotion message: health and wellness v. appearance) × 2 (promotion model gender) × 2 (consumer gender) experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, in which they received an advertisement for a new fitness club in town. They were asked to review the advertisement and then respond to a questionnaire measuring their attitudes toward the fitness club and the likelihood they would join.

All advertisements provided the name of the fitness club (Synergy Fitness), when it was opening (March 2009), the
price of membership (22.95/month), and the club amenities (luxurious locker rooms, numerous group fitness options, state of the art swimming pool, wide variety of fitness equipment options, and personal training). The advertisements differed by the model depicted (a woman or a man exercising) and the primary message. In the health and wellness advertisement, the following statements were highlighted: "become healthier," "learn fitness and nutrition strategies," and "acquire life-long wellness." In the appearance advertisement, the following statements were highlighted: "strong abs...less fat...build muscle!" and "look better instantly and achieve your best body ever!"

Participants completed a questionnaire after reviewing the advertisement. In drawing from the previous work related to fit with an organizations (Dineen et al., 2002), positive attitudes toward the club were measured with three items developed for the study: "The goals of this fitness club seem appropriate," "I think I would fit into the culture of this fitness club," and "This club seems to emphasize the right things." Responses were made on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability for the measure was high (α = .82). Intention to join the club was measured with a single item: "if given the chance, would you join Synergy Fitness." Response options included "no" and "yes."

RESULTS

Manipulation check

We first checked to ensure that the manipulation had the intended effects. Participants were asked to rate, on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), the degree to which the fitness club seemed to emphasize "wellness" and "physical appearance." An analysis of variance showed that ratings of a wellness focus were higher for persons who saw the health and wellness advertisements ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 1.11$) than for persons who saw the appearance advertisements ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.77$), $F(1, 109) = 49.71$, $p < .001$. Similarly, ratings of an appearance focus were higher for persons who saw the appearance advertisements ($M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.01$) than for persons who saw the health and wellness advertisements ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.53$), $F(1, 109) = 43.86$, $p < .001$. Thus, the manipulations were successful.

Descriptive statistics

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for women only, men only, and the entire sample are presented in Table 1. Results indicate that attitudes toward the club were significantly and positively associated with intentions to join the club, if given the opportunity. This was the case for the entire sample ($r = .49$), women only ($r = .49$) and men only ($r = .47$).
Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations for the Entire Sample, Women Only, and Men Only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Entire Sample (n = 111)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Women Only (n = 47)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Men Only (n = 63)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Participant gender</td>
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<td>2. Model gender</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>3. Advertisement focus</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Attitudes</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>.06 .04</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.19 .17</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Join intentions</td>
<td>-.07 .17 .05 .49*</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.31* .04 .49*</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.07 .03 .47*</td>
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</table>

| M                         | .57 .49 .50 5.11 .53   | ---        | .53 .57 5.33 .57    | ---        | .44 .46 4.98 .50 | ---        |
| SD                        | .50 .50 .50 1.16 .50   | ---        | .50 .50 1.02 .50    | ---        | .50 .50 1.24 .50 | ---        |

Note. *p < .05.
Advertising Focus

Hypothesis testing

The study hypotheses were tested through observed path analysis using AMOS 7.0 (Arbuckle, 2006), with moderation carried out by following Marsh, Wen, and Hau’s (2004) recommendations. We chose this approach to allow for simultaneous testing of hypotheses (MacCallum & Austin, 2000; for an empirical example, see Cunningham, Fink, & Kenix, 2008). Results are depicted in Figure 1. The model was a close fit to the data: $\chi^2 (n=111, df=7) = 1.38, p = .21$; confirmatory fit index (CFI) = .99; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .06 (90% CI = .00, .14), $p_{close} = .38$. $p<.05$.

Figure 1. Illustrative summary of path analysis.

Notes: $\chi^2 (n=111, df=7) = 1.38, p = .21$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .06 (90% CI = .00, .14), $p_{close} = .38$. $*p<.05$. 

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Figure 2. Illustrative summary of the consumer gender x advertisement focus interaction predicting attitudes toward the fitness club.

Figure 3a: Female Model

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Hypothesis 2 predicted that consumer gender would moderate the relationship between promotion content and attitudes. The interaction was significant ($\beta = .43, p = .05$). Both women’s and men’s attitudes toward the club were more positive when viewing the health and wellness advertisement, but the improvements were stronger for men than for women (see Figure 2); thus, the hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis 3, which predicted a model gender x advertisement focus x consumer gender interaction, was supported ($\beta = -.45, p = .05$). The results are illustrated in Figure 2. Among both women and men, there was a positive relationship between a health and wellness focus and positive attitudes toward the club when the model was of similar gender. That relationship was not present when the model was the opposite gender.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 was supported, as positive attitudes toward the fitness club were positively associated with intentions to join if given the chance ($\beta = .48, p < .001$).

**DISCUSSION**

Given the high sedentary rates in the United States (USDHHS, 2006), considerable efforts health professionals and sport managers have made considerable efforts to increase people’s physical activity. Providing information about the benefits of engaging in physical activity, such as by exercising at a fitness club, represent one approach to increasing...
physical activity rates. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of advertisement message and consumer gender on attitudes toward and intentions to join a fitness club. Results of the study provided an interesting pattern, as the advertisement focus, the consumer's gender, and the gender of the model in the advertisement all interacted to predict attitudes.

Results of the study are congruent with signaling theory (Rynes, 1991; Spence, 1974) such that people's perceptions of the organization, which in this case was their perceived fit with the fitness club, were based on external communications with that club. This pattern is consistent with other research in this area, too (Cable et al., 2000; Williams & Bauer, 1994). These perceptions are important, as they are related to whether the participants intended to seek membership in the club.

These findings also highlight the need for sport marketers to specifically tailor the communication and branding efforts to fit their desired audience (see also Pedersen, Miloch, & Laucella, 2007; Wyner, 2002). That is, the attraction that consumers in our study felt toward the fitness club depended on a host of factors, so providing a single message for all potential consumers would be ill-advised and consumers might react to the advertisement with ambivalence. Instead, sport and fitness marketers and health promotion professionals can tailor their message to specifically suit their intended target market. For instance, fitness clubs seeking to attract women would do well to depict other women in the advertisement and focus on how exercising at the club can result in improved health and wellness. On the other hand, the same club would be ill-advised to have a woman in the advertisement while focusing on the appearance of the consumer. These examples illustrate the need for focused marketing and health promotion efforts.

Creating such messages is important, as the positive attitudes consumers had toward the organization was meaningfully related to intentions to join the club. These findings support the theoretical tenets found in the similarity-attraction paradigm (Schneider, 1987). That is, when people perceived congruence between their exercise goals and those of the fitness club, they were more likely to express an interest in joining the club. These findings are consistent with past research (Dineen et al., 2002), who also studied the impact of perceived fit with the workplace, and point to the importance of advertisement focus.

Limitations and future directions

Though there are several strengths to the study, there are also limitations. First, the age of our sample was relatively restricted. While there is good reason to focus on college-aged students (Calfas et al., 1994; Leenders et al., 2003), additional inquiry is needed with persons from varied age groups. Second, the fictitious nature of the study means that we could not assess the degree to which people would actually join the fitness club or engage in exercise. We do
note, however, that intentions are the most proximal antecedent of actual behaviors (Ajzen, 1991). Finally, we only focused on one salient demographic characteristic in the current study: gender. This decision was made because the theoretical framework and complexity of the design (a three-way interaction). We acknowledge, however, that other factors, such as race, might influence these patterns—a point upon which we elaborate further in the space below.

Given these findings, there are several avenues for additional inquiries. For example, future research is needed to identify other factors that influence people’s reactions to the advertisement message. Possibilities include one’s demographics (e.g., age, race), psychological characteristics (e.g., social physique anxiety), their past exercise experiences, or a combination thereof. As another possibility, future researchers could engage in field work in which actual fitness clubs’ advertisements are altered. Given the need for effective advertisement communications in encouraging physical activity, such research endeavors would likely prove beneficial.

REFERENCES


Hanlon, C., Morris, T., & Nabbs, S. (2010). Establishing a successful physical activity program to recruit


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