FOR THE HEALTH OF IT: ADVERTISEMENT MESSAGE AND ATTRACTION TO FITNESS CLUBS

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine how the advertisement focus influences attitudes toward and intentions to join a fitness club. Students (N = 200) from a public university in the Southwest participated in an experimental study in which a fitness club’s advertisement varied based on the focus (health-oriented or appearance-oriented). Structural equation modeling showed that perceptions that the club focused on health and wellness were positively associated with perceived fit with the club. There was no association between an appearance focus and perceived fit. Finally, fit with the club was positively associated with intentions to join. Results of the study highlight the need for broad, inclusive advertisements to attract people to fitness clubs.

Understanding people’s motivation to be physically active is critically important for a host of reasons. From a health and well-being perspective, research has consistently demonstrated that being physically active is associated with a bevy of health and psychological benefits, including a decreased risk of Type II diabetes, heart disease, and certain forms of cancer; enhanced cognitive functioning; and improved overall quality of life (Henderson, 2009; Kahn et al., 2002; Lox, Martin Ginnis, & Petruzzello, 2010). Despite these positive effects, research also shows that adults in the United States generally live sedentary lives, failing to obtain the recommended levels of physical activity per week (USDHHS, 2006). Consistent with this trend, researchers have also found that people generally have negative attitudes toward exercise and other forms of physical activity (Lox et al., 2010).

From a different perspective, health professionals also benefit from knowing how to attract consumers to their facilities. According to Chelladurai (2009), fitness organizations are primarily concerned with offering services for customers (a) who seek to improve their health and fitness, (b) who engage in physical activity because of its intrinsic pleasure, or (c) a combination thereof. They do so by providing services to meet the consumers’ need for skill development, pursuit of excellence, sustenance, or rehabilitative needs. Though industry estimates suggest that sizeable proportion of people in the United States (15.6%), Canada (14.6%), and Australia (9.0%) are members of fitness clubs (McNeil, 2006; see also MacIntosh & Doherty, 2010), club members frequently do not maintain consistent participation patterns. Furthermore, as club dues represent a portion of people’s discretionary monies, they might cease their membership during difficult economic times (Petrecca, 2008). This was illustrated in 2008, when fitness club memberships dropped 3% in the midst of the economic recession (Petrecca, 2008).

Collectively, this literature points to the primacy of understanding people’s motivation to be physically active, and more specifically, what attracts them to fitness clubs. Such was the purpose of this study. Specifically, in drawing from signaling theory (Rynes, 1991; Spence, 1974), we argue that the people will develop impressions of a fitness club’s organizational culture based on the club’s advertisements. One’s perceived fit with the club culture is then expected to predict whether she or he intends to join that club. We tested these possibilities through an experimental design. In the following space, we provide an overview of the theoretical framework and present specific hypotheses.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to signaling theory (Rynes, 1991; Spence, 1974), when people do not have sufficient information about an organization, they will use external cues to form their judgments. These cues can be word-of-mouth information, brochures, advertisements, commercials, and the like. They will then use this information to form opinions and...
perspectives about the particular organization, even if they have never had first-hand experience within that entity. As an example from the organizational behavior literature, Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, and Edwards (2000) found that job applicants formed ideas about prospective companies’ cultures based on those entities’ external communications, such as website content and recruiting materials. In a similar way, Williams and Bauer (1994) observed that applicants form impressions about the diversity and inclusion of an organization based on the information conveyed through formal policies and website images.

These findings are also relevant to the current discussion of fitness clubs, as potential fitness consumers are likely to draw inferences concerning the club based on the information provided to them. Berry and Howe (2002) suggested that clubs are likely to convey one of two images: a focus on health and wellness or a focus on appearance. Thus, they are likely to espouse these values in their external communications, including advertisements and other promotional materials. From signaling theory perspective, consumers will then use these messages and cues to form their beliefs about the club.

But, what effect will these varying messages have on consumers and their attitudes? Sport organization’s advertisements often place an emphasis on looks and appearance, particularly among women (Cunningham, Fink, & Kenix, 2008), and some researchers have advocated health professionals placing a greater emphasis on how exercise can impact one’s appearance (Dishman, 2001). Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence that fitness clubs might be better served concentrating on health and wellness. Hanlon, Morris, and Nabbs (2010), for instance, found that people were attracted to their fitness clubs because of the psychological, health, and physical fitness benefits realized from such membership. Furthermore, a health and fitness focus is likely to attract consumers who have an internal drive to be physically active, and as a consequence, habituate their exercise regime (Ingledew, Markland, & Madley, 1998). This stands in contrast to when people focus solely on how exercise affects their body, in which case they are less likely to adopt an exercise program or adhere to it (Markland & Ingledew, 2007). Collectively, these findings are consistent with Stice, Shaw, and Marti’s (2006) meta-analysis of obesity prevention programs, as the authors found that programs focusing on collective health were more effective than those programs that focused solely on weight loss. Therefore, based on this literature, we predicted that a club’s perceived focus on health and wellness, but not appearance, will be positively associated with perceived fit with the club (Hypothesis 1).

We also suspected that perceived fit with the club’s culture would be positively associated with intentions to join. This prediction is based in large part on the similarity-attraction paradigm (Schneider, 1987). According to this theory, people are likely to be attracted to organizations when they perceive that the dominant values in the organization are congruent with their own. This has been extensively tested and supported in the organizational behavior literature; for instance, Dineen, Ash, and Noe (2002) found that job applicants were attracted to organizations that they believed had a desirable workplace culture. The findings are applicable to the current study as well, as consumers who perceive congruence between their exercise goals and those of the fitness club (as determined by the advertisement) should have greater intentions to join. As such, we hypothesized that perceived fit with the fitness club will be positively associated with intentions to join (Hypothesis 2).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were students (N = 200) enrolled in physical activity classes at a large, public university in the Southwest United States. The sample consisted of 42 women (21.0%), 155 men (77.5%), and three persons who did not list their sex (1.5%). In terms of race, participants were mostly White (n = 153, 76.5%), followed by Hispanic (n = 21, 10.5%), Asian American (n = 11, 5.5%), African American (n = 5, 2.5%), persons who listed “other” (n = 5, 2.5%), and persons who did not list their race (n = 5, 2.5%). The mean age was 20.54 years (SD = 2.96). On average, participants exercised 3.5 days out of the week (SD = 1.45).

PROCEDURES

We tested the hypotheses through a 2 (promotion message: health and wellness v. appearance) × 2 (promotion model gender) experiment. We randomly assigned participants 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!”

MEASURES
Participants completed a questionnaire after reviewing the advertisement. It contained items measuring perceptions of the fitness club, perceived fit, and intentions to join, as well as demographic information and exercise patterns (as previously provided).

We used two items to measure perceptions that the fitness club focused on health and wellness: ‘based on this advertisement, Synergy Fitness seems to emphasize wellness’ and ‘based on this advertisement, Synergy Fitness seems to emphasize lifelong fitness.’ Similarly, the perceived focus on appearance was measured with two items: ‘based on this advertisement, Synergy Fitness seems to emphasize looks’ and ‘based on this advertisement, Synergy Fitness seems to emphasize physical appearance.’ Both instruments were measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scales demonstrated acceptable reliability: perceived health and wellness focus ($\alpha = .89$); perceived appearance focus ($\alpha = .94$).

Fit with 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 ($\alpha = .82$).

Finally, 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
Structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS 16.0 was used to test the hypotheses. This analysis is preferable to multiple regression analyses because of the improved statistical estimation associated with the former technique (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006; Kelloway, 1998). All multi-item variables were treated as latent factors, and the exogenous factors were allowed to correlate with one another. The use of two indicators per latent factor is acceptable (Bollen, 1989; Kelloway, 1998). We also included the gender of the model in the advertisement and the number of days the participants exercised as controls. Following Marsh, Wen, and Hau’s (2004) recommendations, we also tested for the potential interaction between the exogenous variables by forming latent interactions. We tested both partially and fully mediated models. Finally, we used the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and confirmatory fit index (CFI) to assess model fit, with values less than .08 and greater than .90 considered indicative of close fit, respectively (Hair et al., 2006).

Results of the SEM indicated that the fully mediated model was a close fit to the data: $\chi^2 (n = 200, df = 39) = 83.59, p < .001; \chi^2 / df = 2.14; \text{RMSEA (90% CI = .05, .09)} = .07, \text{p close} = .03; \text{CFI} = .96$. The partially mediated was also a good fit to the data: $(n = 200, df = 36) = 81.79, p < .001; \chi^2 / df = 2.27; \text{RMSEA (90% CI = .06, .10)} = .08, \text{p close} = .02; \text{CFI} = .96$. The chi-square difference test indicated that the two models did not significantly differ from one another: $\Delta \chi^2 (n = 200, \Delta df = 3) = 1.80, p > .05$. Given that the fully mediated model is the more parsimonious of the two, we interpret this model in testing the hypotheses. The model explained 33% of the variance in perceived fit with the club and 13% of the variance in intentions to join.

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1,

| Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations |
|-----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Item                        | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6    |
| 1. Model gender             | ---  |      |      |      |      |      |
| 2. Exercise                 | .04  | ---  |      |      |      |      |
| 3. Health and wellness focus| .06  | -.04 | ---  |      |      |      |
| 4. Appearance focus         | -.06 | .04  | -.44*| ---  |      |      |
| 5. Perceived fit            | -.03 | .10  | .45**| -.12 | ---  |      |
| 6. Join intentions          | .07  | .10  | .17* | .03  | .36**| ---  |
| M                           | .50  | 3.51 | 4.73 | 5.31 | 4.81 | .43  |
| SD                          | .50  | 1.45 | 1.60 | 1.41 | 1.19 | .50  |

Notes. *p < .05. **p < .001.
Hypothesis 1 predicted that a club’s perceived focus on health and wellness, but not appearance, would be positively associated with perceived fit with the club. This hypothesis was supported, as a health and wellness focus was positively associated with perceived fit ($\beta = .56$, $p < .001$), while an appearance focus was not ($\beta = .06$, $p = .43$). The health and wellness-by-appearance interaction was not significant either ($\beta = .11$, $p = .15$).

Hypothesis 2 was also supported. Perceived fit with the fitness club was significantly associated with join intentions ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$).

**DISCUSSION**

Given the low physical activity patterns among adults in the United States (USDHHS, 2006) and declining fitness club participation (Petrecca, 2008), understanding what motivates people to be physically active is of paramount importance. This is particularly the case when considering the many benefits associated with regular physical activity (Henderson, 2009; Kahn et al., 2002; Lox et al., 2010). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how different messages commonly conveyed by fitness clubs influence potential consumers’ perceived fit with the club’s culture and their intentions to join that entity.

Results from our study suggest that although fitness clubs commonly emphasize how exercise potentially impacts one’s appearance (Berry & Howe, 2002), this practice has limited effectiveness. On the other hand, the emphasis on health and wellness was strongly associated with consumer beliefs that their values matched those of the fitness club. Put another way, participants in our study had more positive attitudes toward the fitness club when they believed the club emphasized being physically active for health-related benefits rather than being active to improve one’s appearance. These findings complement related studies that have also illustrated the positive effects of emphasizing health and wellness in health-related efforts (Stice et al., 2006). Furthermore, Dishman (2001) previously questioned the effectiveness of health and wellness focused promotion, as the “relative importance among population segments” (p. 294) was largely unknown. Our research helps to address this gap in the literature by demonstrating that, at least with respect to people’s attitudes toward fitness clubs, a health and wellness focus does have positive effects.

Also consistent with our predictions, perceived fit with the club’s culture was positively associated with join intentions. These findings are consistent with the attraction-selection-attrition paradigm (Schneider, 1987) and suggest that people are attracted to places (i.e., fitness clubs) where they perceive goal congruity (see also Dineen et al., 2002). The theory also predicts that after the initial attraction and selection into the organization, people are likely to remain in that entity when their goal congruity
beliefs are confirmed; on the other hand, when they find that their values do not match the organization, they leave. Cunningham and Sagas (2006) found evidence to support this in their study of collegiate basketball coaches, as person-organization fit was negatively associated with intentions to leave the workplace. This literature also informs the current study, as the “actual” organizational culture will need to match that conveyed through external communications in order for persons to remain in the fitness organization.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

From a practical perspective, fitness club managers should emphasize the health and wellness benefits of physical activity. This should be reflected in the culture of the workplace, the activities held, and the external communications. As previously noted, it is important to systemically integrate this approach in order to both attract and retain consumers (see also Ingledeew et al., 1998). In a related way, the findings also have potential implications for other media efforts. For instance, Dove hand and body lotions had a successful advertisement campaign in 2004 called Campaign for Real Women. The advertisements had women from all races, ages, and body types, thereby promoting “real women with real bodies and real curves” (as cited in Cunningham, 2007, p. 170). In this way, Dove eschewed from the traditional use of hyper-sexualized models to broaden their emphasis and reach. Similar to this approach, health and fitness promotion experts should potentially seek to move away from focusing solely on appearance and broaden their reach by emphasizing the health and wellness benefits of exercise and physical activity for all people.

Though the study has several strengths, there are potential limitations. Most notably, because we used a fictitious fitness club in our experiment, we could also only measure intentions to join. While intentions are the most proximal antecedent of actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the relationship is not a perfect one; thus, we cannot know whether people would actually join the club or if they would remain in it. Longitudinal research in field settings could address this shortcoming. Second, some might view the student sample as a limitation; however, students purchase club memberships just like other consumers and are generally more physically active than their older counterparts (Lox et al., 2010). Thus, these concerns are likely unfounded. Finally, the sample in the study consisted of mostly men. This was representative of the classes in which the participants were enrolled, and preliminary analyses indicated that participant gender did not influence the pattern of results. Nevertheless, future researchers should seek more gender-diverse samples.

Finally, there are several avenues for future research. As previously noted, there is need for longitudinal research in field settings. Furthermore, researchers should examine the influence of a health and wellness focus in other, related contexts, such as the promotion of general physical activity, participation in recreational sport leagues, and the like. Finally, it is possible that personal characteristics, such as the reason for exercising or one’s social physique anxiety, could influence the relationship between club focus on perceived fit with the culture. Future research is needed to examine these possibilities. Indeed, given the high sedentary rates among adults today, any and all efforts to improve the understanding of how, when, and why people are physically active will be beneficial.

REFERENCES


