

**A Cultural Examination of Exercise Commitment and Brand Equity in U.S. and South Korean Fitness Clubs**

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The fitness club industry extends back to health reforms and physical culture of the 19th century (Tharrett & Peterson, 2008). Today, the fitness industry is largely a commercial endeavor. Since the 1970s, the pursuit of fitness has progressed into a multi-billion dollar industry in the United States (Maguire, 2001). Fitness marketing-related research has received a limited amount of attention despite the current emphasis on obesity and the global growth of health clubs. Due to the abundance of products and services in the marketplace for fitness consumers, the ability of fitness brands to provide consumers with a point of differentiation is paramount. Research in the area of branding may assist practitioners in developing marketing strategies that result in loyal consumers and strong brand equity within the health club sector of the sport industry.

With a few exceptions (i.e., Williams & Pedersen, 2012), a significant amount of fitness related brand equity research has been conducted outside of the U.S. As a result, a gap in the literature exists in regard to a comparison of the brand association factors held by fitness consumer across nations. A thorough understanding of the thoughts, ideas, and beliefs of consumers, often referred to as brand associations, can assist fitness club managers in building strong brand equity in the U.S. and abroad (Alexandris et al., 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Williams & Pedersen, 2012). Previous health club related brand equity research has modified existing brand equity models intended for spectator sport for use in a health club context (e.g. Alexandris et al., 2008; Williams, 2010). Specifically, using Ross' (2006) spectator sport brand equity model as the framework, Alexandris and colleagues (2008) found a relationship between brand associations and brand loyalty within European health clubs. In the same vein, Williams (2010) extended this conceptualization and tested the relationship between brand association and brand loyalty in a U.S. health club and uncovered four additional brand associations dimensions pertinent to U.S. health club brands. However, more research is needed related to the applicability of the previously proposed brand association constructs in an international health club environment.

Previous research has suggested that creating strong, unique, and favorable associations may aid sport organizations in fostering commitment and loyalty (Keller, 1993; Gladden & Funk, 1999; Ross, 2006), and in turn allow them to create effective marketing strategies around these associations (Williams & Pedersen, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare the brand associations held by U.S. and Korean fitness club members, and examine how these brand association factors relate to previously proposed brand equity consequences (i.e., brand loyalty and exercise commitment).

The data were collected from members of multipurpose fitness clubs that were 18 years of age or older in the U.S. and South Korea. The total sample size for this study was 367 (American=148, Korean= 219). A paper-and-pencil based survey was utilized and the survey instrument contained a total of 82 items measuring brand association, service quality, exercise commitment, and brand loyalty. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Descriptive statistics were used to provide general information of the sample. A multi-group confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to examine the validity and reliability of the conceptual fitness brand association model proposed by Williams (2010) across U.S. and Korean respondents groups. Secondly, multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to test the relationship between the proposed brand association factors and the proposed consequences of brand equity (i.e., exercise commitment and brand loyalty).

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The results from the multi-group confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated that measurement invariance was confirmed between American and Korean respondents group. There was no statistically significant difference between the unconstrained model ( $\chi^2 = 4018.725$ ,  $df = 2338$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.719$ ,  $CFI = .904$ ,  $RMSEA = .044$ ,  $SRMR = .0519$ ) and the constrained model (i.e., measurement weights, structural covariance, measurement residuals). Next, in regard to the relationship between brand associations and exercise commitment, the results from the multiple linear regression analysis indicated that escape ( $\beta = .168$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and price ( $\beta = .223$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were significant predictors for exercise commitment in the American sample. In contrast, escape ( $\beta = .223$ ,  $p < .05$ ), pride ( $\beta = .191$ ,  $p < .05$ ), management ( $\beta = -.195$ ,  $p < .05$ ), product delivery ( $\beta = .323$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and price ( $\beta = .164$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were found to be salient predictors of exercise commitment in the Korean sample. In regard to brand loyalty, logo ( $\beta = .165$ ,  $p < .05$ ), price ( $\beta = .267$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and location ( $\beta = .315$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were found to be significant factors in the American sample. Escape ( $\beta = .152$ ,  $p < .05$ ), place ( $\beta = .251$ ,  $p < .05$ ), product delivery ( $\beta = .187$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and price ( $\beta = .181$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were the significant predictors of brand loyalty in the Korean sample.

The results suggest that cultural differences do exist in both the predictors of exercise commitment and brand loyalty between the American and Korean sample utilized. While escape and price were predictors of exercise commitment in both cultures, pride and product delivery were also important to the Korean sample. In addition, logo, price, and location were significant predictors of brand loyalty to a fitness club with the American sample, while escape, place, product delivery, and price were important for the Korean sample. This suggests that in order to develop consumers who are committed to exercise, Korean fitness club managers may need to provide a more in-depth service experience to deliver the expected value on the price those consumers pay and to build loyalty towards the club. In addition, the results of this study point to the need to continue to examine brand associations that foster exercise commitment and brand loyalty in other cultures in order to cultivate service based brand equity.