How Consumer Engagement Influences Consumer Extra-Role Behaviors

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Scholars have identified numerous health problems caused by inactive lifestyles, including physical (Dietz, 1998), psychological, and societal aspects (Pingitore et al., 1994). Regular exercise can remedy these health problems, and the benefits of exercise are well documented (Bouchard et al., 1994). With the pronounced importance of exercise, the fitness industry continues to grow. However, currently, the fitness business faces significant challenges including saturated market environment (i.e., more than 35,000 fitness centers exist; IHRSA, 2013) and staying ahead of emerging alternative activities and technologies (e.g., own home fitness equipment and/or fitness DVD). In acknowledgement of these challenges, numerous scholars have highlighted the importance of relationship marketing and strategies since the early 1990s. However, relationship marketing has some limitations (Vivek et al., 2012). Prior relationship marketing focused on business-to-customer (B2C) interactions. In the past decade, however, numerous scholars have emphasized the importance of customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions (Libai et al., 2010). In particular, due to technological developments (e.g., social media), customers have become more active in interacting with other customers (Henning-Thurau et al., 2010). Customers were more likely to trust the information from extra-role behavior (e.g., communication with actual consumers) because the information providers generally do not receive benefits in exchange of their efforts (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). Prior research, however, did not address how managers can improve consumers’ extra-role behavior per se.

Recently, the concept of engagement has gotten tremendous interest from scholars in a variety of academic fields (e.g., organization behavior, education, and service). Scholars found that engagement is closely related with extra-role behavior (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009). For example, the highly engaged employees tried to find more effective ways to add value to the organization (Catteeuw et al., 2007) and the engaged students tend to show class support activity (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009). Although numerous scholars had stressed the important role of engagement, only little empirical research has been conducted to understand consumer engagement, particularly in the fitness industry. Therefore, the purpose of current research is develop a research model to examine the theoretical relationship between customer engagement and engagement behavior.

Theoretical Background

The concept of engagement was introduced by Kahn (1990) in the organizational behavior industry. Kahn (1990) defines employee engagement as “the harnessing of the organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). By focusing on engagement in sport, the researchers defined the consumer engagement as “the consumers’ psychological state that is explained by the degree of enthusiasm and absorption in consumption process and emotional attachment toward an object of engagement.”

In addition, customer engagement behavior is defined as a “customer’s behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (Van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 254). Prior research indicated that highly engaged customers are more likely to show cooperation behavior (e.g., help management), prosocial behavior (e.g., word of mouth), and performance tolerance (e.g., fan loyalty; Yoshida et al., 2014). Based on prior research, current research examined four different consumer behaviors (i.e., communication with other customers, communication with the organization, cooperative behavior, and membership retention) as the consumer engagement behavior.
Against this background, the present study is intended to provide academics and practitioners with a better understanding of consumer behavior in the context of the fitness industry by examining the relationship between consumer engagement and engagement behavior.

Method and Results

Participants were between ages 18-60 (n=456), and were recruited among from fitness centers in the Southeastern United States. In order to measure consumers’ engagement, the researchers adopted the Scale of Consumer Engagement in Fitness (SCEF; Kim & Ko, 2015). In addition, to measure the consumer engagement behavior, current research modified and used three items from Swanson et al. (2003: communication with other consumers), three from Bettencourt (1997: suggestion for the organization), three from Bettencourt (1997: cooperative behavior) and four items from Bagozzi et al., (2004: membership renewal intention).

Reliability tests and a confirmatory factor analysis were performed to establish the reliability and validity of the measurement scale. The measurement model yielded an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 392.35$ df = 181, $\chi^2/df = 2.17; \text{SRMR} = .039; \text{RMSEA} = .051; \text{NFI} = .96; \text{CFI} = .98; \text{TLI} = .97$). Cronbach’s alpha estimates ranged from .87 (absorption) to .96 (communication with organization). AVE values ranged from .72 (cooperative behavior) to .89 (communication with organization). The results indicated that the items were highly reliable in measuring the constructs. An SEM test was conducted using AMOS to examine the structural relationships between consumer engagement and engagement behaviors. All of the hypothesized paths were significant in the hypothesized directions. In fitness industry, consumer engagement significantly influence communication with other consumers ($\beta = .77$); communication with organization ($\beta = .41$); cooperative behavior ($\beta = .67$); and membership retention ($\beta = .44$).

Current research identified the theoretical relationship between consumer engagement and consumer engagement behaviors in the fitness industry. To examine this relationship, the predictive capacity of consumer engagement was assessed using intentions of four consumer engagement behaviors (i.e., communication with other consumers, communication with organization, cooperative behavior, and membership renewal intention). The results indicated that consumer engagement significantly influenced all four engagement behaviors. The results confirmed proposed hypotheses that consumers who are engaged in physical activity show engagement behavior.

Implications

We hope that this research will contribute to better understanding fitness industry. This study showed that when consumers are engaged in physical activity, they are more willing to show engagement behaviors including in-role behavior (i.e., membership retention) and extra-role behavior. In particular, consumers’ extra-role behaviors significantly influence other consumers’ consumption behavior, which is conventionally beyond the control of managers. In sum, these findings demonstrate the value of establishing consumer engagement, which justifies the considerable efforts to build and maintain strong consumer engagement from the manager’s standpoint.