Signaling Body Inclusion: An Experimental Study of Weight-Loss and Health Messaging in Physical Activity

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Physical activity participation is an important component of a healthy lifestyle (Poitras et al., 2016). Unfortunately, more than 80% of US adults and adolescents do not get enough cardiovascular and strength-building physical activity to meet governmental recommendations (“Physical Activity | Healthy People 2020,” 2017). Therefore, understanding individuals’ motivations to participate in sport and physical activity are important, particularly with regard those facing strong barriers to their inclusion. The current study focuses on individuals in larger bodies, who face high levels of stigma and discrimination in fitness and exercise spaces (e.g., Dimmock, Hallett, & Grove, 2009) and, therefore, are likely to avoid physical activity altogether (Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008). Drawing on Signaling Theory (Spence, 1974), the current study uses an experimental design to explore effects of varied marketing messages on the perceived fit and participation intentions of individuals in larger bodies in sport and physical activity. It is argued, consistent with previous literature (e.g., Cunningham & Woods, 2011), that advertisements focused on health and wellness, rather than weight loss, will lead to increased perceptions of fit and intentions to participate.

Theoretical Framework

Weight stigma and exercise avoidance.
The positive health effects of physical activity participation exist for everyone, irrespective of body weight (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011). However, given general cultural assumptions regarding the incompatibility of fatness and exercise, those in larger bodies face high levels of discrimination and prejudice. As such, many individuals in larger bodies report feelings of anxiety in physical activity spaces, which then negatively affects exercise levels (Sicilia, Sáenz-Alvarez, González-Cubre, & Ferriz, 2016). Unfortunately, fears of stigmatization are not unfounded, as fitness center employees often have strong implicit weight biases (Dimmock et al., 2009) and physical education teachers exhibit anti-fat attitudes (Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005). Not surprisingly, then, those in larger bodies often avoid physical activity spaces (Packer, 1989; Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008). This is particularly true for individuals who have internalized predominant cultural ideology surrounding weight and, therefore, attribute their own body fat levels to personal failures (Vartanian & Novak, 2011). As such, several studies have found that body weight stigma and discrimination experiences are negatively related to an individual’s physical and psychological health (Hunger & Major, 2015; Hunger, Major, Blodorn, & Miller, 2015).

Signaling theory
The current study is grounded in signaling theory, which generally suggests that individuals perceive subtle messages (i.e., signals) from organizations which influence their views or opinions of that organization (Spence, 1973). This theory suggests that parties in any transaction have asymmetric, or incomplete, information about each other and therefore rely on subtle cues to form judgments. For example, potential employees may assess intentional and unintentional signals sent by an organization, prior to applying for or accepting a position there (Celani & Singh, 2011). Such signals include important information about organizational values, diversity, expectations, and more. Signaling theory has since been used in a number of contexts, including sport and physical activity. Lee and Cunningham (2015), for example, found that individuals were more likely to apply for jobs at organizations in which they perceived inclusive signals. Further, Cunningham and Woods (2011), found that gyms which emphasized health and wellness in their marketing were preferred over those emphasizing weight loss. It is also important to note that, signals can be sent in a variety of ways, including marketing messages, staff representation, and various organizational artifacts (e.g., Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Shami, Ehrlich, Gay, & Hancock, 2009). For the current study, we focus on written text and imagery used in advertisements.

Given the preceding, it is hypothesized that for those in larger bodies, health-focused advertising will be more effective than weight-loss focused efforts at engendering perceptions of fit and increasing intentions to participate in
physical activity (H1). It is further hypothesized that inclusive signals will be associated with both outcomes in fitness centers and in recreational sport leagues (H2). Finally, it is expected that these relationships will occur when signals are written or image-based (H3).

Method
A 2 (Message: Health vs. Weight Loss) x 2 (Context: Fitness Center vs. Sport League) x 2 (Signal type: Text vs. Image) balanced factorial experiment will be used to explore each of these hypotheses. Participants will be recruited online (N = 400) and must self-identify as being “overweight, obese, or fat.” After this screening process, participants will be exposed to one of eight randomly assigned conditions, in which they will view an advertisement for a physical activity. After viewing the advertisement, participants will rate their perceived fit with the organization and intentions to purchase or join. Advertisements will include common information about the organization, including name, offerings, and pricing. However, one experimental manipulation will include written text emphasizing either health or weight loss. Another layer of manipulation will offer varied contexts, such that ads will promote either a fitness center or recreational sport league. Finally, images in some ads will depict either a thin/muscular individual or a larger (i.e., “overweight”) person participating in the activity.

Expected Findings and Discussion
Previous work has suggested that advertisements with more inclusive, health-based messages are effective at encouraging perceptions of fit and purchase intentions in physical activity (Cunningham & Woods, 2011). Consistent with these findings, it is expected that larger-bodied individuals will respond more positively to health-based advertisements. It is expected that this relationship will occur in both sport and fitness contexts, and with both written and visual signals. Given the economic and health implications of increasing participation in physical activity for those in larger bodies who otherwise may avoid physical activity, the current study offers valuable contribution to the field. That is, findings from the current study may suggest more effective strategies for marketing physical activity spaces to those in larger bodies, which may, in turn, encourage participation.