Perceived Emotional Labor, Member Satisfaction, and Member Loyalty Intention in Fitness Organizations

Ye Hoon Lee, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies
Seong-Hee Park, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies
Bøyun Woo, Endicott College

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During the past decades, the pursuit of fitness has developed into a multi-billion dollar industry with solid growth (IHRSA, 2018). As the fitness industry has continued to grow, the industry has become highly competitive and as a result, many fitness organizations have suffered from a low member retention rate (Maguire, 2001). As the success of the fitness organizations heavily depends on the retention of the paying members, it is important to study what keeps the members satisfied and remain loyal to the fitness organizations (McIntosh & Law, 2015). One of the important factors impacting the members’ satisfaction and loyalty can be emotional labor, defined as the employee’s regulation of both feelings and expressions of emotions to achieve organizational goals (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor is particularly relevant in the current fitness club industry as consolidation of clubs and the expansion of local, regional, and national franchises have meant that prospective members choose between clubs offering much the same equipment, classes, and amenities (Maguire, 2001). Indeed, ample empirical evidence has shown that emotional labor was closely associated with organizational outcomes such as perceived service quality and customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in service domains (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009). However, despite the obvious evidence regarding the important consequences of emotional labor, there has been little research exploring the role of emotional labor in sport marketing literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between the three emotional labor strategies perceived by members, member satisfaction, and member loyalty intention among fitness members.

The participants were 148 fitness members in one fitness organization located in Southeast area in the United States. Participants completed the modified questionnaires including 15 items measuring three emotional labor strategies, member satisfaction, and member loyalty intention. The analyses included confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to verify the factor structure of the scales employed and structural equation model (SEM) procedures to test both the direct and indirect relationships in the model.

The results of CFA showed a good overall fit of the measurement model, $\chi^2/df = 124.71/80 = 1.56$, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .062, 90% CI RMSEA [.039, .082]. Further, the result of SEM showed a good fit, $\chi^2/df = 128.24/83 = 1.55$, RMSEA = .064, 90% CI RMSEA [.041, .084], CFI = .97, TLI = .96, SRMR = .05. Specifically, perceived surface acting ($\beta = -.01; p > .05$) and perceived deep acting ($\beta = .09; p > .01$) were not significantly associated with member satisfaction whereas perceived genuine expression was positively associated with member satisfaction ($\beta = .88; p < .001$). Additionally, member satisfaction was positively associated with member loyalty intention ($\beta = .82; p < .001$). For the mediation analysis, member satisfaction mediated the relationship between perceived genuine expression and member loyalty intention ($\beta = .64 p < .01$).

This study contributes to sport marketing literature by addressing a factor that has seldom been examined previously by showing that emotional labor is an important construct in the member satisfaction and member loyalty process. Further, this study contributes to emotional labor research by investigating the interpersonal effects of emotional labor on customer outcomes.