

BRAND MARKETING VIA FACEBOOK: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE MARKETING MIX, CONSUMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY, AND PURCHASE INTENTION IN THE FITNESS INDUSTRY

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Due to the rising number of fitness club brands and lack of consumption, there has been a call to improve the industry's consumer-targeted business practices. In accordance, this research examined the relationship between marketing mix-related social media communications, brand equity, and purchase intention in a fitness setting. After being exposed to marketing mix-related Facebook posts for a simulated fitness club brand, a total of 393 respondents answered questions regarding social media communications, brand equity, and purchase intention. Results of structural equation modeling indicated that the hypothesized positive relationships between marketing mix-related social media communications and brand equity, and brand equity and purchase intention were supported. Results not only have implications for social media marketing and fitness marketing, but also for consumer-based brand equity and marketing-mix-related consumer behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms such as Facebook are often considered a marketing tool for businesses to communicate with consumers and potential customers (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlstrom, 2012). Unlike traditional media, social media provides distinct advantages for service-related businesses through the ability to foster direct communication with large amounts of consumers (Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011). The widespread usage of social media is convincing as research has indicated that nearly 75% of Internet users in the United States use social media (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Schäfer, 2012) with as many as two billion users worldwide (Barker, Barker, Bormann, & Neher, 2017). To that end, social media such as Facebook provides a unique and strategic means for organizations such as fitness clubs to cultivate relationships with consumers and build a strong consumer base.

Facebook is the most popular social media account, with more than one billion daily users (Barker et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, Facebook has emerged as an important platform for

successful marketing mix efforts by fitness-related organizations (Bayne & Cianfrone, 2013; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). Due to the widespread use of social media within the fitness (i.e., participatory sport) industry, scholars and industry professionals have indicated there is a need for further social media marketing-related research (Brody et al., 2010; Wallace et al., 2011). In light of these recommendations, the current study examined Facebook messages of fitness clubs used for marketing-related purposes.

Although previous literature has illustrated the importance of the marketing mix in terms of creating brand equity (Keller, 1993; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000), there have been limited examinations of this relationship within the social media setting (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Mangold & Faulds, 2009) and/or fitness industry (e.g., Westerbeek & Shilbury, 1999; Williams et al., 2014). Furthermore, none of the existing research has examined the relationship among social media-related marketing mix efforts, brand equity, and purchase intention simultaneous. Therefore, the present study was designed to fill gaps in the literature to better understand the development of consumer-based brand equity as it relates to the fitness club via marketing mix efforts in a social media environment. Moreover, this research appears

to be an important endeavor in the fitness club industry that struggles to attract a consistent consumer base.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Media

Most of the research regarding social media marketing and branding to date (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) has been limited to describing social media marketing activities and provided general suggestions. Due in part to its large membership and reach, Facebook has often been used by organizations to enhance brand efforts and image communication (Wallace et al., 2011). Facebook research also appears as an important line of inquiry for the fitness sector (e.g., Pronschinske et al., 2012) and other business-related sectors (e.g., Kim & Ko, 2010).

The Internet and social media applications such as Facebook have emerged as important marketing tools for the fitness-related entities (Conrad & Allen, 2013). For example, Scholl, Leen, Alexander, Pike, and Johansen (2012) indicated that recreation centers should use Facebook to market and promote their services. Similarly, Bayne and Cianfrone (2013) found that Facebook marketing was effective in increasing awareness for recreation-related events. When included as part of an organization's marketing mix, social media such as Facebook can be used as an effective communication to build relationships with fitness and/or participatory sport consumers (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Furthermore, Facebook may be a viable platform for successful marketing mix efforts by fitness and/or sport organizations (Bayne & Cianfrone, 2013).

The Marketing Mix and Brand Equity

The marketing mix provides a framework for evaluating the scope of marketing activities for firms. Similar to other conceptualizations, McCarthy's (1960) marketing mix (i.e., product, price, place, and promotion) was developed with product goods in mind. Due to the unique nature of the services industry, however, Booms and Bitner (1981) added the following dimensions to McCarthy's original

four: participants, physical evidence, and service process. Together, these service-related marketing mix dimensions encapsulate the variables controlled by organizations located in the service industry that have a direct impact on consumers and the development of brand equity (Berry, 2000).

One of the earliest known attempts to measure customer-based brand equity was proposed by Martin and Brown (1990) who conceptualized brand equity with five dimensions, including perceived quality, perceived value, image, trustworthiness, and commitment. In an effort to improve upon this initial brand equity measurement, Lassar, Mittal, and Sharma (1995) developed their measurement to assess individual dimensions of brand equity, thus enabling companies to more easily evaluate their marketing programs. Lassar et al. (1995) utilized performance, social image, value, trustworthiness, and commitment as dimensions in their customer-based brand equity model.

The current study adopted Lassar et al.'s (1995) brand equity model due to the following reasons: (a) Lassar et al.'s (1995) measurement appears to fit well due to its lack of inclusion of behavioral dimensions such as loyalty that occur in other frameworks (e.g., Aaker, 1991) and (b) Lassar et al. (1995) used relatively abstract association dimensions that capture a large range of brands, which may be useful due to the differences that exist between fitness clubs and their marketing efforts. Lassar et al. (1995) included a five-dimension brand equity model including performance, social image, value, trustworthiness, and commitment. The current study utilized prospects and a simulated brand, so two of the five dimensions were not included in the model (i.e., performance and trustworthiness).

Fitness branding

Based on existing consumer-based brand equity (i.e., Keller, 1993; Ross, 2006), Alexandris, Douka, Papadopoulos, and Kaltsatou (2008) measured brand associations in an international fitness setting in order to examine brand associations and their influence on brand loyalty. Their results suggested that the dimensions used were appropriate modifications for examining brand associations

in participatory sport. Moreover, the results of their study are practically applicable for fitness club managers in terms of strategies for developing and fostering brand names in the fitness industry. However, Alexandris et al. (2008) limited their inquiry to brand associations within the minds of consumers, and therefore does not examine the organization-induced component of sport brand equity proposed by Ross (2006). Bodet, Meurgey, and Lacassagne (2009) also examined the branding efforts of international fitness brands and found there was a significant difference between the way a fitness club brand wishes to be perceived and its actual social representation. However, the authors focused on only one French fitness club and focused mostly on the perceived brand image of the fitness club.

Expanding on the work of Alexandris et al. (2008), Williams and Pedersen (2012) suggested that direct experiences (i.e., service quality and exercise commitment) act as antecedents of brand associations held in the minds of fitness consumers (i.e., product delivery, socialization, location, value/price, popularity, escape, logo, nostalgia, pride, and management). Results indicated that service quality dimensions had a significant relationship with nine of the ten brand association dimensions (i.e., all except socialization). The research represents one of the first empirical inquiries testing the sport brand equity model proposed by Ross (2006). However, Williams and Pedersen only examined the experience-induced components with regard to the fitness industry. The current study aimed to extend the literature by examining the organization-induced components (i.e., the marketing mix) in an online fitness setting. Therefore, we posit that a relationship exists between the marketing mix-based social media communications and brand equity.

H₁: There is a positive relationship between consumers' attitude toward organization-generated social media communications and perceived social image brand equity.

H₂: There is a positive relationship between consumers' attitude toward organization-generated social media communications and perceived value brand equity.

H₃: There is a positive relationship between consumers' attitude toward organization-generated social media communications and perceived commitment image brand equity.

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is often represented by a consumer's plan to buy a specific brand or a decision making process in which a consumer has developed a willingness to act toward a brand (Wells, Valacich, & Hess, 2011). Brand-related marketing research has indicated that a high level of brand equity drives purchase intention (Yoo et al., 2000). Early brand equity research suggested that positive customer perceptions of a brand are associated with stronger purchase intention (Aaker, 1991). Similarly, Keller and Lehmann (2003) indicated that a consumer's positive attitude toward a brand impacts purchase intention. Unsurprisingly, empirical research has shown that building brand equity can bring advantages such as consumer brand preference and consumer purchase intention (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995).

Purchase intention should be important to fitness clubs for several reasons. First, the literature suggests that purchase intention is a key dimension of consumers and successful organizations in general (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995). Second, attracting members is a major issue facing the fitness club industry (Tharrett & Peterson, 2012). Fitness clubs are only attracting around 16% of market (Steiman, 2014).

Keller, Parameswaran, and Jacob (2011) suggested that social media should positively impact the purchase intention of consumers. Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, and Füller (2013) surveyed the users of a brand's Facebook page in order to analyze the influence of a brand's social media activities. Their findings suggest that engagement with a company's Facebook page has positive effects on consumer purchase intention. Similarly, Phan (2011) found a positive correlation between consumer "liking" luxury brands on social media and subsequent purchase intention.

Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) surveyed Facebook users to examine the brand consequences of social media communications. Results indicated that user-generated social media communication had a positive influence on both brand equity and brand attitude, whereas firm-created social media communication only affected brand attitude. Both brand equity and brand attitude had a positive influence on purchase intention. The current study expands this research by examining a service-based brand, as opposed to consumer-based goods. The following hypotheses were developed based on this conceptual framework (See Figure 1 for the proposed model).

- H₄:** There is a positive relationship between perceptions of social image brand equity and purchase intention.
- H₅:** There is a positive relationship between perceptions of value brand equity and purchase intention.
- H₆:** There is a positive relationship between perceptions of commitment brand equity and purchase intention.

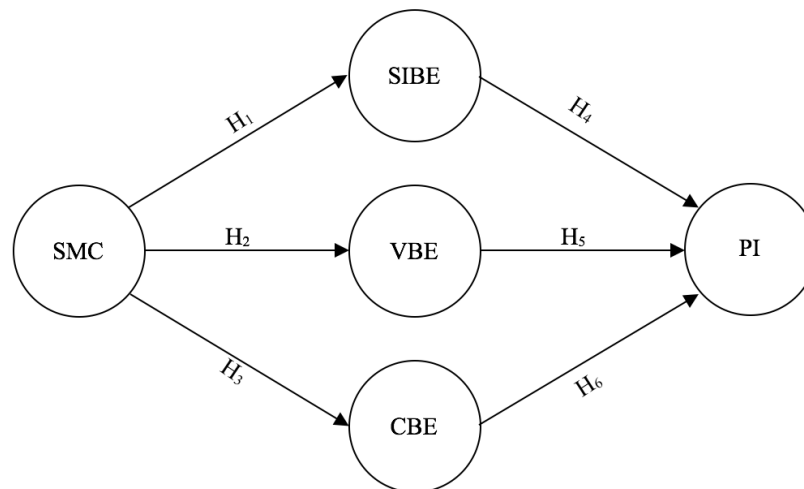
METHOD

Pretest

An initial pretest (i.e., qualitative content analysis) was conducted to examine the types of social media messages used by fitness clubs on Facebook. Facebook posts (*N* = 1,856) were placed into seven marketing mix categories (i.e., product, price, place, promotion, people, physical evidence, and process) by two trained coders who used a codebook to guide them through the categorization process. Each Facebook message was coded for the following variables: coder, company, and type of message. A total of 150 messages were examined for all but one fitness club, which had only 56 total Facebook posts. For message categorization, coders achieved reliable results with Cohen’s kappa scores (*k* = 0.817) that indicated an acceptable level of intercoder reliability (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014).

The *product* dimension was overwhelmingly the most popular category (889 messages, 47.9%). The second most common category was *people* (289 messages, 15.57%). *Promotion* was the third most common type of message (181 messages, 9.8%). The fourth most common category was *physical evidence* (151

**FIGURE 1:
Proposed Conceptual Model**



Note. SMC: Social Media Communications, SIBE: Social Image Brand Equity, VBE: Value Brand Equity, CBE: Commitment Brand Equity, PI: Purchase Intention

messages, 8.13%). *Other* messages were the fifth most common (117 messages, 6.3%). The sixth most popular type of message was *process*-related (104 messages, 5.6%). The seventh most common category was *place* (70 messages, 3.8%). Lastly, *price* messages were the least common type of messages (55 messages, 3%).

Sample

The data for the current study were collected using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and Qualtrics Survey Software. Unlike previous fitness branding research that used fitness club members as subjects (e.g., Williams, Pedersen, & Walsh, 2012), the current study targeted individuals who were considered fitness club prospects so that they would not have preconceived feelings for the brand and instead focused on the Facebook post content. In order to identify the desired sample size, a power analysis was performed using the G*Power (Field, 2005). The test was conducted using a specified power of .95, significance level of .05, and medium effect size ($f = 0.25$) based on Cohen's (1992) recommendations. Seven groups of participants were presented with a specific marketing mix-related social media communication (e.g., Facebook messages focused on the price dimension, place dimension, promotion dimension, etc.). The eighth group of participants was presented with a combination of one Facebook posts for each of the seven types of social media messages in order to examine participant results for a variety of Facebook posts.

The current study targeted individuals over 18 years old that live in the United States with no prior knowledge of the fitness club brand presented in the social media communication stimuli, which helped participants be relatively free of biases and opinions of the brand (Hoyer & Brown, 1990). The sample, which was collected using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), consisted of 393 ($N = 393$) participants. The study was launched using MTurk in early 2016 and was open for one week. Upon satisfactorily completing the survey, participations were paid \$0.50. Demographic information of the sample indicated that 43.5% of the respondents were

female, and 56.5% were male. The age group with the most respondents included participants between the ages of 27 and 35 years old (46.1%). The most prevalent participant ethnicity was Caucasian (42.8%) followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (20.1%), and Hispanic or Latino (14%). Nearly half of the participants had an undergraduate degree (47.1%) and almost one-quarter held a Master's degree (24.4%). The most common household income range was from \$20,000 to \$39,999 (32.8%).

Procedures

Social media messages (i.e., Facebook posts) for each marketing mix element (i.e., product, price, place, promotion, people, physical evidence, and process) were presented at the beginning of the questionnaire on Qualtrics (linked from MTurk), and participants were instructed to review the posts before they completed the questionnaire. The same social media usage, demographic, brand equity, and purchase intention questions were presented to each participant. The only difference among participant groups was the type of marketing mix-related social media messages presented before participants responded to the questionnaire. Participants were able to view the Facebook posts as they completed the questionnaire using the scroll function on Qualtrics.

Measurement

A comprehensive review of literature was utilized to develop measurement items that include a total of 16 items under three constructs (i.e., marketing mix-related social media communications, brand equity, and purchase intention). Three items adopted from Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) were used to measure social media communication, and 10 items from Lassar et al.'s (1995) were used to assess brand equity. Specifically, the number of items associated with the three dimensions are as follows: social image (four items), value (three items), and commitment (three items). Lastly, three items were borrowed from Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014), which have been used to measure purchase intention in a brand equity-related Facebook context. All items were measured on a seven-point Likert

scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

RESULTS

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Based on the results of the one-way between subjects ANOVA there was not a significant effect of exposure to the various marketing mix element-related Facebook stimuli on brand equity at the $p < .05$ level for any of the eight conditions $F(7, 385) = 0.860, p = .539$. Specifically, there was not a significant effect for any of the brand equity measures based on marketing mix stimuli: social image $F(7, 385) = 0.679, p = .690$, value $F(7, 385) = 1.95, p = .061$, commitment $F(7, 385) = 1.00, p = .428$. Additionally, we found there was not an effect of exposure to the various marketing mix element-related Facebook stimuli on social media communication responses at the $p < .05$ level for any of the eight conditions $F(7, 385) = 0.659, p = .706$.

Measurement Model

Prior to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), several assumptions were examined. In the data set, all skewness (-.112 to -.720) and kurtosis (-.083 to -.565) values were within the acceptable threshold (Hair 2010). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics. No multicollinearity issue was detected via examination of variance inflation factor scores (3.198 to 5.223). In regard to the correlations between variables, Table 2 summarizes the items used in the current study. The boxplot test revealed that there was no extreme score in the data set. Therefore, it was appropriate to proceed to conduct a CFA.

Following Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) two-step modeling, a CFA using maximum likelihood estimation was employed to assess the measurement model. The fit indices suggested that the model showed an acceptable fit for the data ($\chi^2 = 224.171; \chi^2/df = 2.385; CFI = .978; TLI = .971; RMSEA = .059$). All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant and above the threshold of .70 (Hair

TABLE 1:
Descriptive Statistics for Social Media, Brand Equity, and Purchase Intention Items

Dimensions	Items	Mean	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis	α	C.R.	AVE
Social media communication	3	5.17	1.29	-0.75	0.19	.860	.860	.673
Social image brand equity	4	5.04	1.36	-0.53	-0.12	.914	.915	.730
Value brand equity	3	4.96	1.29	-0.28	-0.26	.873	.875	.700
Commitment brand equity	3	5.14	1.26	-0.55	-0.03	.882	.882	.714
Purchase intention	3	4.83	1.50	-0.57	-0.22	.914	.916	.783

Note. S.D.: Standard Deviation, α : Cronbach’s Alpha, C.R.: Construct Reliability, AVE: Average Variance Extracted.

TABLE 2:
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Social media communication	5.17	1.12	1				
2. Social image brand equity	5.00	1.22	0.80*	1			
3. Value brand equity	4.96	1.15	0.74*	0.77*	1		
4. Commitment brand equity	5.14	1.13	0.79*	0.86*	0.78*	1	
5. Purchase intention	4.83	1.39	0.75*	0.85*	0.80*	0.82*	1

Note. N = 393. * $p < .05$.

et al., 2010), ranging from .779 (organization-generated social media communications item 1) to .894 (purchase intention item 1). Factor reliability was also assessed with evaluation of Cronbach’s alpha, (α), composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). Results indicated that all α , CR, and AVE values exceeded the suggested criterion of .70 and .50, respectively (See Table 1). Factor loading measurements can be found in Table 3.

Structural Model

Prior to estimating the structural model, overall model fit of the model was examined. Results indicated that the model satisfactorily fit the data ($\chi^2 = 276.451$; $\chi^2/df = 2.821$; CFI = .969; TLI = .962; RMSEA = .068). With respect to the hypotheses, organization-generated social media communications positively impacted social image ($\beta = .965$, $p < .05$), providing support for Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2, which predicted a positive relationship between

organization-generated social media communications and value, was supported ($\beta = .901$, $p < .05$). SEM results also indicated there was a positive association of organization-generated social media communications with commitment ($\beta = .965$, $p < .05$), providing support for Hypothesis 3. Results also revealed that the influence of social image ($\beta = .488$, $p < .05$), value ($\beta = .327$, $p < .05$), and commitment ($\beta = .156$, $p < .05$) on purchase intention was positive and statistically significant, respectively, providing support for hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 (see Figure 2 for path estimates of the structural model).

DISCUSSION

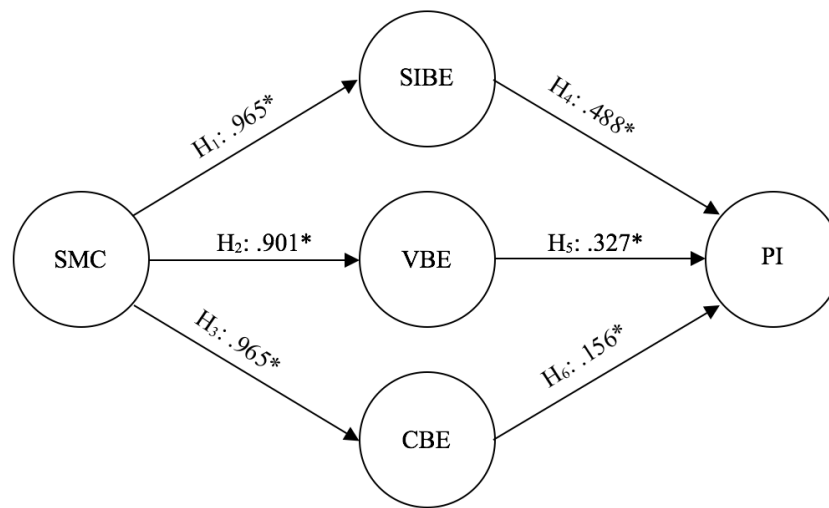
Previous research has suggested that a positive relationship exists between the marketing mix and consumer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993; Stahl et al., 2012; Yoo et al., 2000), and our results support this relationship in a social media and fitness setting. The current study

**TABLE 3:
Item Factor Loadings**

Factor	Item	λ
SMC1	The social media communications for the fitness club meets my expectations.	.779
SMC2	The social media communications for the fitness club are very attractive.	.865
SMC3	The social media communications for the fitness club perform well, when compared with the social media communications of other fitness clubs.	.814
SIBE1	This brand of fitness club fits my personality.	.856
SIBE2	I would be proud to own a membership to this fitness club brand.	.874
SIBE3	This brand of fitness club will be well regarded by my friends.	.834
SIBE4	In its status and style, this fitness club brand matches my personality.	.854
VBE1	This fitness club brand is well priced.	.786
VBE2	Considering what I would pay for membership to this fitness club brand, I will get much more than my money’s worth.	.872
VBE3	I consider this fitness club brand to be a bargain because of the benefits I receive.	.849
CBE1	After using this fitness club brand, I am very likely to grow fond of it.	.845
CBE2	For this fitness club brand, I have positive personal feelings.	.860
CBE3	With time, I will develop a warm feeling toward this brand of fitness club.	.829
PI1	I would buy this fitness club membership rather than any other fitness club memberships available.	.894
PI2	I am willing to recommend that others buy this fitness club membership.	.884
PI3	I intend to purchase this fitness club membership in the future.	.877

Note. $N = 393$, λ : Factor Loading, SMC: Social Media Communications, SIBE: Social Image Brand Equity, VBE: Value Brand Equity, CBE: Commitment Brand Equity, PI: Purchase Intention

FIGURE 2:
Structural Equation Model



Note. SMC: Social Media Communications, SIBE: Social Image Brand Equity, VBE: Value Brand Equity, CBE: Commitment Brand Equity, PI: Purchase Intention. $*p < .05$.

also found support for the relationship between brand equity and purchase intention for fitness club prospects, which is in line with existing marketing and social media-related research (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014). In regard to fitness-related consumer-based brand equity research, several studies have indicated that experiences such as service quality (Alexandris et al., 2008) and exercise commitment (Williams et al., 2012) act as antecedents of brand associations of fitness clubs, which can lead to the development of brand loyalty. However, such research has been limited to existing members of fitness clubs. The current study provides one of the first examinations of fitness club prospects, which was done by using a fictitious brand in order to isolate the impact of exposure to the marketing mix-related Facebook posts.

Social Media Communications and Brand Equity

Hypothesis 1 stated there is a positive relationship between consumers' attitude toward organization-generated social media communications and perceived social image brand equity, and our findings support this claim with a positive and significant relationship. The social image construct employed in the current study was defined as

the consumer's view of the esteem in which the consumer's social group holds the brand (Lassar et al., 1995). The social image construct is similar to user imagery, which Aaker (1996) defined as the set of characteristics associated with a typical user of a brand. Therefore, the ability of an organization to control the presented social imagery via Facebook posts that embrace the social aspects of a fitness club may lead to the development of perceived social image-based brand equity for fitness club prospects. In addition, the social image construct may be analogous to usage imagery, which is defined as the way in which the product is to be used (Keller, 1993).

The results also provide support for Hypothesis 2, which suggested there would be a positive relationship between consumers' attitude toward organization-generated social media communications and perceived social image brand equity. Based on the marketing mix-related Facebook posts presented, participants may have perceived that the fitness club was valuable. However, the value-related items employed in the current study focused on the price and benefits received for the fitness club brand. While it was possible for individuals to feel that the benefits they would receive from the fitness club were valuable, not all participants saw price-specific Facebook

posts, which limits this finding. Existing research such as Williams et al. (2014) found that price significantly predicted brand awareness and brand associations, but they did not examine online price-related messages. Nevertheless, the results of the present study providing support for Hypothesis 2 may be linked to the perceived nature of value brand equity and should be taken prudently.

Hypothesis 3 suggested there would be a positive relationship between consumers' attitude toward organization-generated social media communications and perceived commitment brand equity. Our results provide positive and significant support for this claim. Other fitness-related branding research such as Williams and Pedersen (2012) found that exercise commitment was a direct experience that contributed to the development of brand associations in the minds of health club members. The current study used a fictitious brand to isolate the exposure of marketing mix-related Facebook messages, and our results suggest that it was possible for the fitness club to develop a perceived level of commitment among prospects via organization-generated social media communications. Since it was impossible for the participants to have positive feelings towards the brand before being exposed to the marketing mix-related Facebook messages, this level of commitment appears to be perceptual rather than behavioral, which is in line with the commitment construct adopted from Lassar et al. (1995). In fact, it could be posited that the prospects' commitment was directed toward the service (i.e., exercise) as opposed to the fictitious brand.

Brand Equity and Purchase Intention

Hypothesis 4 stated there is a positive relationship between perceptions of social image brand equity and purchase intention, and the results provide positive and significant support for our claim. Based on these results, social imagery – which is defined as the consumer's view of the esteem in which the consumer's social group holds the brand (Lassar et al., 1995) – is an important consideration for a prospective member when choosing which fitness club to join. Moreover, in line with the positive and significant relationship found in the results of the current

study between social image and purchase intention, it is likely that the social image of a fitness club plays a role in the decision making process when fitness club prospects are choosing which club to join. For example, potential consumers may perceive a certain social image by the Facebook posts of a fitness club that is desirable to their ideal social group. Thus, based on our results, individuals are likely to exhibit an intent to purchase when there is a social image connection between fitness club and potential consumer occurs.

In regard to Hypothesis 5, which stated there is a positive relationship between perceived value brand equity and purchase intention, our findings indicated positive and significant support for this claim. Aaker (1991) stated that the underlying value of a brand is the set of associations that represent the bases for purchase decisions. Therefore, in regard to the current study, when prospective members believed there was value-driven equity in the brand, they were more likely to indicate they would make a purchase from the fitness club. Aaker (1996) suggested that generating value is one of the most important indicators of success for a brand. Likewise, the positive and significant relationship between value and purchase intention found in the present study suggests that if a prospective consumer perceives the fitness club to have value-driven equity, they are more likely to purchase a membership from that fitness club, thus exhibiting success of the brand.

Our findings also support Hypothesis 6, which stated there is a positive relationship between perceived commitment brand equity and purchase intention. The commitment construct utilized was defined as “the relative strength of a consumer's positive feelings toward the brand,” (Lassar et al., 1995, p. 13). Because it was impossible for the sample to have prior experience and/or knowledge with the brand, these results may be based on individuals having a commitment to the product itself (i.e., fitness/exercise), not the fitness club brand. Existing fitness-related branding research such as Williams and Pedersen (2012) has suggested that familiarity with exercise and a commitment to participating in exercise may be a brand association predictor regardless of the brand.

Therefore, participants in the current study may have been basing this purchase decision on how committed they are to the actual product (i.e., fitness/exercise), instead of the fitness club brand delivering the product.

Managerial Insights

Collectively, the results of this study provide insights on the relationship among social media communications, consumer-based brand equity, and purchase intention that may be useful to practitioners. For example, fitness club marketers should be aware of the positive relationship between social media communications and perceived social image brand equity. Specifically, the inclusion of Facebook posts that highlight the typical user of the fitness club and/or the specific services offered by the club (e.g., personal training, weight lifting, exercise classes, etc.) may assist in the development of brand equity for fitness club prospects. The fitness club industry is highly competitive and many clubs have very similar brand offerings. Therefore, the implementation of image-based Facebook posts may be a compelling way for fitness clubs to successfully separate themselves in terms of social image from the competition and assemble a more centralized marketing focus on Facebook that connects with potential consumers.

The results of the current study also suggest that perceived social image-based brand equity may be linked to an intent to purchase among potential consumers. Therefore, it is recommended that fitness club marketers use Facebook posts that accurately represent the image their club. For example, an upscale fitness club (e.g., Equinox) will have a different social image than a traditional weight lifting fitness club (e.g., Gold's Gym). Prospective members will likely choose to join a fitness club brand with a social image that best fits the consumer and the social group that the consumer aligns with or desires to align with. Instead of utilizing broad and general marketing posts on Facebook, we advocate that fitness club marketers provide specific image-based posts related to their club offerings and

atmosphere in order to attract potential consumers that will be likely to join their club.

Future Research

Based on the findings of the current study, we feel there are several areas of research that should be completed. The current study included price-related Facebook posts as stimuli for some participants and found a positive relationship between satisfaction of those posts and perceived brand equity. Future research should directly examine the relationship between price-related Facebook posts and value-related brand equity. In doing so, this may provide an opportunity to better understand the relationship between price-related social media efforts (e.g., sales, discounts, etc.) and perceived brand equity among consumers.

The present study used a simulated brand and resulted in perceptual responses, so future research should address the relationship between variables (e.g., commitment brand equity and purchase intention) by using an actual brand that prospective consumers are familiar with so that the potential commitment to the individual brand is realistic. Furthermore, Facebook is just one of many social media platforms used by businesses such as fitness clubs, so examining other social media platforms is an important next step in better understanding the relationship among social media communications, brand equity, and purchase intention.

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