Fitness Coach Personal Brand as the Mediator between Brand Image and Purchase Intention in Fitness Clubs

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The purpose of this study was to explore the relevance between fitness club brand image and the purchase willingness of members; and to verify whether the fitness coach's personal brand has an intermediary effect between the two. Members of fitness clubs were selected as the research objects with a total of 363 questionnaires distributed on the Internet via purposive sampling. The data were analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics including confirmatory factor analysis and the structural equation model. The results of this study found that there is a significant positive impact between fitness club brand image, the fitness coach's personal brand and the willingness of members to purchase. In addition, the fitness coach's personal brand plays an intermediary role in the fitness club brand image and member purchase willingness. The research conclusion is that the primary factor in fitness club member future course purchase, is the fitness coach. Further, good brand image helps to shape the coach's distinctive and professional knowledge and enhances the willingness of members to continue to purchase courses from a fitness club brand.
Key words: brand image, purchase intention, fitness coach personal brand, purchase willingness.

1. Introduction

In recent years, public awareness of leisure and health has gradually improved with increasing attention paid to sports, leisure and quality of life and accordingly, the proportion of the population who participate regularly in sports has increased. According to a survey conducted by the Taiwan Trends Institute in 2018, the total expenditure on sports consumption in Taiwan was 126.22 billion NTD. The expenditure on "participatory sports" was about 28.76 billion NTD and the "sports course fee" and "admission/ membership/venue fee" was about 19.05 billion NTD, accounting for 66% of sports consumption expenditures. Stadium expenditure for sports and fitness centers and fitness clubs increases annually and the rise in enthusiasm for the fitness movement has attracted members of the public willing to invest money in sports. Sports venue operators (gym, clubs, sports venues) should advantage their own brands by investing in brand image as an emerging industry issue crucial to enhanced consumer identity and future purchase intention.

A brand is a type of identification mark, a spiritual symbol, a value concept and is the core embodiment of product quality. A brand conceptualizes the commitment of sellers to provide consistency and specific product characteristics, in provision of benefits and services to consumers (Philip Kotler, 1999). Richardson et al., (1994) believed that brand image is an important basis for consumers to evaluate a product. The higher the evaluation of the product, the better the recognition of the product's cognitive quality, which in turn affects the behavioral intention of subsequent purchase. Brand image is conceptually then defined in this study as a consumer's association, cognition and belief in the brand through a series of memories (P Kotler et al., 2016). Good brand image can create more value for companies in the long-term and is an essential element of marketing (Wang et al., 2019) and as such, a fitness club brand should be influenced by
fitness club member feedback and evaluation data with respect to brand and actual and intended purchase behavior.

A personal brand represents product and owner respectively and is essential to business marketing and success, requiring professional skill and a distinctive edge to ensure perceived market value (Arruda, 2003). To represent an individual, company, product or range into a brand is not a simple transition and most importantly, it is necessary to understand the characteristics, advantages, skills, values and enthusiasm of the individual brand target such that these characteristics differentiate it from competitors. Philbrick & Cleveland, (2015) note that personal brand shaping is based on the process of upgrading and transforming professional capability as successful marketing. This fact is substantiated in the fitness industry where, according to the "2018 Fitness Coach Career Development Research Report", more than 50% of members who join a fitness club because of the trainers. Potential members make choices in the hope that the respective coach’s professional knowledge, technical guidance and companionship can effectively and quickly help them improve. The fitness coach not only represents his own personal brand but as a fitness mentor and team member of the fitness club and the communication and trust between the two parties is very important (Chang et al., 2019).

The establishment of personal brand then needs to ensure distinctive characteristics that highlight self-worth. With recognition and affirmation of consumers comes higher the purchasing tendency and increased consumer perceived comfort with brand reliability. This research then investigates the creation of personal value and gym member willingness to continue to purchase courses. Willingness to purchase in this research is defined as the potential for consumer purchase of a specific product, as dependent on whether the perception of benefit value meets the individual consumer needs, which is then described as purchase intention (Kwon & Schumann, 2001; Schiffman et al., 2000). When consumers have high regard for a product or brand, the relative purchase intention will also improve and follow-up purchase behavior is subject to individual subjective perception (Tsai & Chen, 2018). Therefore, when fitness club members believe that the overall equipment and environment of the club and the professional
competence coaches match their needs, the chance of re-consuming or purchasing coaching courses in the future will increase.

Based on the above, in terms of business management, the brand image represents the sum of the competitiveness and influence of a company. For consumers, brand image is used to evaluate a certain item or product and this affects the reference basis of the consumer purchasing behavior. In recent years, research has confirmed the relationship between brand and purchase intention (Sallam & Algammash, 2016) and in particular, the image of the relevant brand spokesperson also influences consumer willingness to purchase (Ahmad et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2019; Tien, 2011). In previous research, individuals were less regarded as a tangible brand however, this research explores whether fitness club coach personal brand plays an intermediary role between brand image and consumer willingness to purchase.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Subjects
The participants in this study are the members of the Taichung City Fitness Club and snowball sampling was adopted from an online source with survey duration May 10, 2019 to June 10, 2019. From a total of 363 questionnaires issued, 348 questionnaires are valid, with a 96% effective recovery rate.

2.2 Research Tool
In addition to the basic personal data, a Five-Point Likert Scale was used in the questionnaire developed for this study. The scale of “brand image” used is as per measurement of the concept by Park et al., (1986) and Keller, (1993) with three factors extracted: functional, symbolic and experimental. The scale of “Personal Branding” refers to the measurement of the concept as proposed by Lin et al., (2014); McNally & Speak, (2002) and Chang et al., (2019), with six factors extracted: Self-Professional, Curse Guidance Ability, The Principle of doing things, The attitude towards the students, Personal Traits and Self-Promotion. The Consumer Purchase Intention measurement is
as proposed by Heskett et al., (1994).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Subject Data Analysis
The study subject features are as follows: male (52.0%); 20-29 years old (62.6%); average monthly income below 24,000 NTD (27.3%); participation in sports and fitness for more than one year less than two years (31.9%); coaching for less than half a year (67.2%).

3.2.2 Analysis of Reliability and Validity
According to the CFA, the overall scale of the fitness club member was in convergence validity and all facet factor load is above .50. The brand image factor load is between .54 ~ .86, the personal branding factor load is between .69 ~ .91 and the purchase intention factor load is between .80 ~ .92. In addition with regard to the reliability measurement of the overall scale, the project reliability is between .297 ~ .850; the composite reliability is .786 ~ .929 and the average variation extracted (AVE) of each facet is between .479 ~ .813.

According to Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998), the composition reliability (CR) must be above 0.7 and according to (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), the standard value of AVE must be greater than 0.5. After analysis, the values obtained were found to be above the standard and it can be determined that the overall scale of the fitness club members in this study has good reliability and validity. In terms of the overall model, RMSEA=.03, GFI=.95, NFI=.82, IFI=.98, TLI/NNFI=.98, CFI=.98, NFI=.95, CN=264, \( \chi^2/df=1.31 \). The overall behavioral pattern of this study is generally well-adapted, indicating that this model can be accepted, so the relationship and influence between the various facets can be further discussed.

3.2.3 Discriminant Validity
This study mainly uses the confidence interval method to test the discriminant validity
of the overall behavior pattern. Firstly, the correlation analysis was carried out using Pearson's Correlation. The results showed that there were significant correlations among the variables with the fitness club. The coefficient values ranged from .446 ~ .739, indicating that there was a positive correlation between the variables. According to (Torkzadeh et al., 2003), when the confidence interval test is used, the interval does not include 1, indicating that there is no correlation between the facets and the discriminant validity. In this study, the Bootstrap Test was used for repeated estimation (2000 times); the confidence level was below 95% and this was measured by the analytical error correction method and the percentile method. The upper boundary of the confidence interval in this study was between .57 ~ .83; the lower between .32 ~ .64, which shows that there is no complete correlation between the behavioral model facets, so each variable has different validity.

3.3 Behavior Pattern of Fitness Club Member

The normality test of this study found that the sample data were consistent in analysis of variance, but the c.r. of Multivariate kurtosis was 53.15, which did not meet the multivariate normal distribution. According to Kline’s (2005) rule of thumb, the sample data meets the multivariate test with a critical ratio of less than 10 (c.r.<10), which may cause an underestimation of the standard error (S.E) and an expansion of the chi-square value (χ2). Therefore, Kine's Bootsteap method can solve the problem of non-multiple normal distribution of sample data. The resampling method was used as the repeated sampling is continuously performed in the same set of samples, and does not require any theoretical assumptions. Therefore, this study uses the Bootstrap of Amos 21 to perform the adaptation test of the model and correct the chi-square value which may be excessively expanded under non-multiple normal conditions. Bollen & Stine's, (1992) Bootstrap methods was also used in this study.
Figure 1 above depicts how fitness club brand image has a positive impact on the respective fitness coach’s personal branding, path coefficient was .68 and the explanatory power was 46%. This result indicates that members agree with the planning for space utilization at the fitness club, that it meets individual needs and that the equipment is diversified and easy to use. The members believe that participation in fitness club physical activities can enhance quality of life and this type of social responsibility can increase public awareness and build club reputation and image (Almeida & Coelho, 2018). Brand image is a company signboard and the coach is a brand spokesperson who represents company image. Their service attitude and professional course guidance ability can be regarded as a guarantee of product quality. If there perception and reputation is low, then brand recognition will relatively low and consumer purchase probability will be reduced.

The fitness coach's personal brand has a positive impact on the purchase intention of the member (.82) with explanatory power of 56% which means members are quite satisfied with the fitness trainer content and service attitude and agree that the coach
instructed on the use and operation of the equipment in a simple and clear manner. The enthusiasm and positive image of the coach also gave greater positive energy to fitness club members and this translation to purchase intention. Chang et al., (2019) found that the image of the brand spokesperson and the practicality of the product are highly valued by consumers and that individual image and word of mouth also affects consumer brand attachment and has a close relationship to purchase willingness (Sciarrino & Roberts, 2018). The major finding is that fitness coach professional knowledge, instructional ability and conversation in all aspects was considered by members in the context of their willingness to continue to purchase future courses.

Sports fitness club brand image has no significant influence on purchase intention (-.11) and this indicates that, if the brand image needs to influence the purchase intention, the fitness club needs to leverage fitness coach personal branding due to its mediation effect. The personal charm, professionalism and service attitude of the fitness coach is the key factor for influencing future member purchase intention. Chien & Hung (2018) state that only actual service quality can establish a good relationship with consumers and broaden customer base. Brand spokesperson professionalism, reliability and positive image can enhance product recognition, build consumer product confidence and effectively increase purchase willingness (Lan & Chu, 2018). The conclusion then is that the fitness club coach is the brand spokesperson, exerting personal fitness professionalism, style characteristics and personal charm to enhance the relevant fitness club brand image, enhance consumer purchase willingness to purchase and generate positive market effects.

Freitas & Lacerda, (2019) concur that fitness club marketing strategy and brand image is crucial however fitness coach/trainer professional ability and service attitude are more important incentive factors in determining future purchase intention. In addition, the coach plays an essential role in facilitating sports-related industry management and effectiveness (Moura e Sá & Cunha, 2019). These study results indicate that the fitness coach/trainer can be a conduit between a fitness club and members with their professional knowledge and communication essential component factors that influence
member future purchase intention through positive feedback and course evaluation.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Brand Image can effectively influence the coach personal branding
This study found that fitness club brand image has a significant positive impact on fitness coach personal brand image. Further, it was found that fitness club members think that the spacial planning of the fitness club suits individual needs; that the training equipment provided is quite diverse and that the staff or more specifically the fitness coach/trainer can guide and solve the problems encountered by members, affording them recognition and creating a positive service impression.

4.2 Personal Branding Can Effectively Influence the Willingness of Member to Purchase
The study finding is that fitness coach personal branding has a significant positive impact on fitness club member purchase willingness of members which indicates that fitness coach personal professionalism, instructional ability, way of doing, personality traits and self-improvement motivation are recognized by members as essential attributes in a fitness trainer/coach; and that the presence of these attributes enhance member willingness to continue to participate in fitness activities and purchase courses.

4.3 Mediation Effect of Personal Brand of Fitness Coach
This study found that fitness coach personal branding has a full intermediary effect between fitness club brand image and members willingness to purchase. This means that when fitness club members choose to purchase; the fitness coach/trainer is an important consideration in course purpose due to their personal professional brand’s influence on both fitness club brand identity and environmental design; it is a conclusion then, that the personal charm, professionalism and identity of the fitness coach are the factors that affect fitness club member purchase intention.
5. Recommendation

5.1 Encourage Coaches to Participate in Empowerment Studies
According to the factors of personal brand of fitness coach investigated in this study, the influence coefficient of self-improvement and attitude towards the trainer/coach is the highest and indicates that fitness club member pays the most attention to their relative improvement in relation to their coach/trainer’s service delivery. Therefore, fitness clubs should participate in a fitness-related study such as this research to enhance professional knowledge and encourage coaches to continue to improve the relevant fitness club regime. Additionally, coaches/trainers must be encourage to continually renew relevant licenses and build problem-solving skills in dealing with members, thereby improving the effectiveness of personal brand and helping to establish a professional image.

5.2 Formulate Relevant Incentives
This study found that the fitness coach's personal brand has a complete intermediary effect between club brand image and fitness club member purchase willingness. It can be seen that the coach/trainer is an important asset to a club and therefore, fitness clubs should provide career advice and related welfare programs and incentives and further training schemes, communicating with regular internal meetings to create a healthy working environment and increase coach identity and club loyalty, thereby reducing turnover rate and creating a win-win.
REFERENCES


