

Title

Exploring the role of music on young health and fitness club member loyalty: an empirical study

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Biography

Dr John Oliver is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing and Marketing Consultant at Bournemouth University. He is active in academic and practitioner based research and publishes in the areas of relationship marketing, marketing strategy, action learning and customer service, particularly in the Health and Fitness industry. He is a member of the Academy of Marketing and the Centre for Organisational Effectiveness and has been a Visiting Scholar in Relationship Marketing at the University of the South Pacific.

Abstract

Purpose

The importance of music in the advertising industry has been long established and is well known to induce consumer emotion, enjoyment, attention and recall. This research developed this positive association theme by investigating whether the type of music played in studio classes would have any impact on the loyalty attitudes of young health and fitness club members toward classes and their service provider.

Methodology

This study was exploratory in nature and thus employed a qualitative research methodology where 18 in-depth interviews were conducted. A non-probability, judgment sample of 16-24 year old health and fitness club members who had a particular interest in studio classes was conducted.

Findings

The findings indicated that young health and fitness club members were music conscious and that current studio class music was considered by respondents to be standardized. Furthermore, incorporating different music genres in classes can act as a point of consumer differentiation between service providers, therefore, resulting in higher levels of customer loyalty.

Research limitations/Implications

As the research is based on a non-probability sample, the findings of this paper need to be considered with caution. However, the research may provide some insight or inspiration for future researchers to develop, and or, replicate the findings in order to produce generalizations on the role that music in studio classes can play in developing young consumer loyalty.

Originality

This paper takes the mutually exclusive bodies of literature in music and advertising, and customer loyalty and examines them together in a way that seeks to gain insight into loyalty in young consumers. As a result this paper is unique in this sense.

Key Words : Customer loyalty, health and fitness club, music, young consumers, case study

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Introduction

The issue of customer loyalty is often seen as an emotive subject. Marketing practitioners often consider the matter in superficial terms and are content to focus on repeat customer purchase as a means to deliver bottom line returns. The academic community on the other hand, considers customer loyalty as a complex and multi-faceted subject matter, so much so, that the topic has generated a rather fragmented, ambiguous and hotly contested debate. This issue is also further compounded when the subject of loyalty in youth markets is raised. For example, research by Hillsdon (2001) into the UK Health and Fitness Industry identified the severity of the problem of customer loyalty in young customers. The findings of the research indicated that 16-24 year old members had the lowest year on year loyalty rate (48%) when compared to any other age group. The causes of this lack of loyalty were said to be situationally driven, that is; moving to university or starting a job in a new location. Whilst health and fitness club providers may be unable to control these events, the question for many of them is whether or not to include this mobile age group in loyalty initiatives and programmes.

The aim of this paper is to present the findings of empirical research concerning the loyalty of young health and fitness club members. This particular project was one of several research initiatives conducted as part of an ongoing action research programme which investigated member loyalty with one of the UK's leading health and fitness service providers.

More specifically, this research was undertaken to explore the potential for using different music genres in studio classes as a means to increase loyalty among young members.

The use of music to influence consumers has been investigated in service environments and in advertising where it is known to produce emotion, involvement, attention, likeability and brand recall. There have also been several studies that have demonstrated that music plays a central role in the lives of developing young people. This small scale, and exploratory research, sought to conjoin the domains of customer loyalty with music in advertising in an attempt to understand whether the type of music played in studio classes could affect the loyalty of young health and fitness club members.

Literature Review

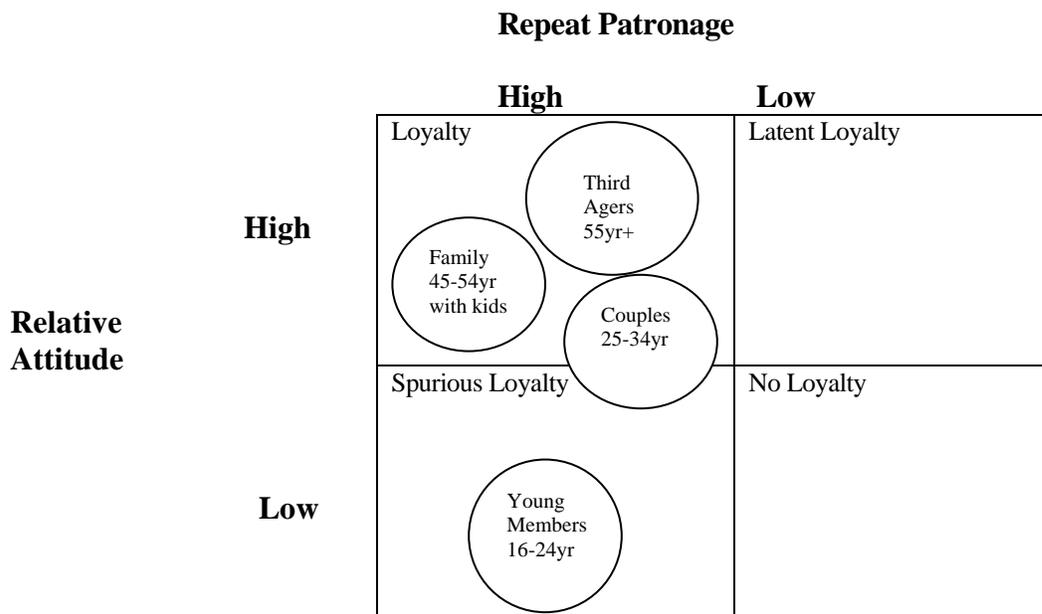
The question of customer loyalty has been extensively investigated in academic literature, and yet, a unanimous answer has failed to materialise. In its most profound form Rowley and Dawes (2000) argued that the idea of customer loyalty should be consigned to the history books in a postmodern world. They argued that customers tended to be more calculative and transactional in their dealings with service providers and that engaging in repeat purchase or entering into a long-term exchange relationship was not in their interests. In contrast to this postmodern perspective, the majority of customer loyalty literature presents three significant bodies of debate that considers customer loyalty as being; 'attitudinally' based (Hallowell, 1996; Gronroos, 2000; and Butcher, Sparks, O'Callaghan, 2001); or as being 'behavioural' in nature (Bitner, 1990, Sheth, 1994; and Yoon and Kim,

2000). The third school of thought seeks some form of mediation between these bi-polar views and argues that customer loyalty should be considered as a combination of attitudinal and behavioural customer traits (Dick and Basu, 1994; O'Malley, 1998; and Lee and Feick, 2001). The problems associated with defining customer loyalty in such a fiercely debated battleground, would therefore, appear to be a complex. From a managerial perspective, these conflicting views have given rise to the consideration of the difficulties in managing different types of customers. Dick and Basu (1994) point out that managing customer loyalty in an ever more complex and competitive environment is an increasingly difficult managerial function. In their critique of customer loyalty literature, they state that the behavioural approach to loyalty is found wanting when it comes to explaining how loyalty is developed or modified by events and service interactions. They go on to develop the attitudinal school of thought suggesting that a customer's attitude toward a service provider needs to be considered in the context of other comparable service provider alternatives, in this way, the customer's attitude is considered 'relative' to other competitive consumer choices. As such, any consideration of relative attitude is likely to provide a stronger indication of repeat purchase than the attitude toward a health and fitness provider determined in isolation.

Consequently, they proposed a two dimensional attitudinal scale of 'relative attitude' combined with 'repeat patronage'. In Figure 1 below, this matrix has been used to position the different member groups identified by Hillsdon (2001), and present them in terms of their relative customer loyalty profiles. The young members aged 16-24 years were considered as Spurious Loyals because whilst they frequented their health and fitness club,

they paid subscriptions on a monthly basis and engaged in repeated comparisons of the competitive offers of alternative service providers. At the other end of the loyalty spectrum, the third agers, members aged over 55 years, and those family members aged 45-54 who paid subscriptions annually and were considered loyal due to a high relative attitude toward their service provider and repeated patronage, culminating in annual retention rates of 70% and 60% respectively.

Figure 1: Fitness Industry Association: Relative Attitude-Behaviour of members



Understanding and presenting relative customer loyalty profiles has considerable consequences for practitioners in so far as they must now consider that their customer base will be made up of a range of customers all having varying degrees of loyalty and where, potentially, different customer loyalty strategies might have to be employed. The question that this research sought to investigate was whether or not the type of music played in studio classes could change young member's relative attitude and behaviour,

and subsequently, influence their level of loyalty toward their existing service provider. A review of the music in advertising literature indicates that this may well be possible. For example, Sweeney and Wyber (2002) found that certain demographic groups could be deterred or attracted to service providers through the use of music particularly when considering that a young person's teenage years were their most music conscious lifestage (Branthwaite and Ware, 1997). Yet as previously stated, young customers tend to be the most disloyal health and fitness club members in the UK. The potential links between music and loyalty toward a health club can also be inferred from research into music and customer behaviour. A range of empirical studies have found that using music in service settings has been found to act as a major determinant in producing customer emotion (Herrington and Capella, 1994) and customer enjoyment (Herrington, 1996). Further research findings from using music in advertising messages has also found that it can induce customer pleasure and arousal effects (Morris and Pai, 1997), customer attention (Branthwaite and Ware, 1997), brand likeability and perception (Stafford, 1983; De Pelsmacker, Geuens, Vermeir, 2004; Zhu and Meyers-Levy, 2005), product placement (Daugherty and Gangadharbatla, 2005) and brand message recall (Roehm, 2001) and brand recall in children (Maher, Hu, Kolbe, 2006).

Based on the findings of this diverse range of research, it could be concluded that using different music genres in studio classes, that are targeted specifically at young members, could result in a stimulating environment where young members are attentive, involved, have higher levels of satisfaction and could ultimately produce a higher relative attitude and behaviour profile.

Research Methodology

The research design for this project remained consistent with the aim of exploring the issue of whether targeted music in studio classes could change young health and fitness club member's relative attitude and behaviour toward their club. More specifically, the following research objectives were formulated; to identify the current role of music in studio classes; to explore young member's view of the music offering used in studio classes; to explore young member attitudes toward introducing studio classes by different music genres.

As a result, a qualitative methodology employing in-depth interviews was used. Whilst the methodological criticisms of the qualitative approach centre around researcher subjectivity, impressionism, bias and the often idiosyncratic descriptions of respondent statements, there is much support from authors (Mariampolski, 1999; Silverman, 2000; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2000) who argue that this methodology and method are well established and widely used vehicles in management research. They are also particularly useful tools for researchers who want the opportunity to probe, explore and seek new insights into management problems.

A non-probability, judgement sample was used, where only two criteria for respondent selection were used. Firstly, that respondents should regularly attend studio classes, in order that they could give their impressions of the current role that music plays in their exercise regime. Secondly, that respondents were aged between 16-24 years in order to address the concerns raised about their loyalty (Hillsdon, 2001).

A total of 18 in-depth interviews, lasting between 20 and 35 minutes were conducted with respondents at one service provider in the South of England. Respondents were recruited after studio classes, with interviews conducted at the club. As with many in-depth interviews, the questioning was semi-structured and attempted to ascertain respondents relative attitude and behaviour toward the existing service provider and its competitors.

The questions relating to understanding attitude focused on;

- the likeability and enjoyment of the current studio classes
- identifying specific factors that lead to a positive or negative attitude
- the likeability and enjoyment of the music currently played in studio classes
- the recall of different music genres played in studio classes

The questions relating to understanding behaviour focused on;

- whether or not they would change their studio class as a result of more likeable music being played
- whether or not this change in music would result in a change in their attitude to the current service provider
- whether or not they would move to a competitor who provided studio classes with different music genres
- the extent of any membership termination costs

Data Analysis

The approaches suggested by Bell (1993); and Miles and Huberman (1994) for the analysis of qualitative data generated from in-depth interviews were adopted. Bell (1993) states that the value of producing full transcripts of interviews are questionable in terms of the time taken to produce these documents in relation to the outcomes received, whilst Miles and Huberman (1993, p.246) suggest data reduction can successfully be undertaken in a humanistic way by the "*noting of patterns and themes*" that are collated and analysed in the matrix format that is included in each of the findings chapters. This approach proved particularly useful in terms of time management, and keeping focus, when listening to tape recordings of the conversations with respondents. The data from interviews were read, re-read and then read gain in order to identify common and divergent themes in a process of data reduction that Hammersley and Atkinson (1994, p.10) state helps "*sharpens, sorts, focuses discards and organises data in such a way that final conclusions can be drawn*". Once these themes had been identified, a range of coloured pens were used to highlight the most important points in relation to the respondents attitude and behaviour toward the service provider. The final part of the data analysis process involved linking the data to the research questions and objectives and then reflecting on how this compared and contrasted to the concepts identified in the Literature Review.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the findings suggested that young members views of the current genre of music used in classes was ‘standardized’ and reflected the clubs desire to provide an environment that focused purely on the exercise regime. The majority of respondents seemed to feel that the music did not play a very big part in differentiating studio classes, even though they believed that the type and age of members who attended studio classes varied during the day and evening.

Interestingly, respondents felt that they had largely been ignored by the management of the club, who instead, focused on meeting the needs of older members. As a result, they felt that any initiative that catered for the needs of young members would be considered as a positive step in improving their attitude toward the club.

Respondents also felt that any attempt to differentiate studio classes through music genre would be met with an encouraging response from young members. It would also result in a more enjoyable exercise experience, leading to greater levels of satisfaction, a more positive attitude toward the club and an increase in their attendance at studio classes. In short, segmenting studio classes by age, and differentiating them by music genre would ultimately move young members from being spurious, to loyal members. The findings of the specific research objectives are as follows.

To identify the current role of music in studio classes

All the respondents agreed that music was played in studio classes in order to break the boredom of doing repetitive exercise, and to disassociate oneself from the pain of working out. They felt that the music was standardised so as not to put people off attending the class. These points were summed up by one respondent who said;

“...the instructors take the safe option, they play music that’s not too extreme. It’s usually a case of them playing what they enjoy, or what they think the class will enjoy.”

(Respondent 8, female, aged 18)

This finding tends to support the work of Herrington (1996) who recognized the importance of selecting music that reflects the tastes of targeted consumer segments in service environments. A case could, therefore, be made for young health club members to have segmented studio classes based on music genre, particularly as they are at a music conscious stage in their life.

To explore young member’s view of the music offering used in studio classes

The responses concerning the current music offering in studio classes varied from “*it makes you happy*” to “*well I haven’t disliked it*”. However, the overall impression of the respondents suggested that these members had a neutral attitude to the music being played. This opinion is best summed up by the following responses;

“I don’t really notice it, because it’s not my kind of music”.

(Respondent 1, Male, aged 24)

“ All the instructors seem to play the same music...I think they just have one tape”.

(Respondent 17, Female, aged 21)

Whilst most of the respondents noticed the music being played in studio classes, the overall feeling was that there was room for improvement and that there did not appear to be any differentiation in the music genre played in studio classes. Yet, as Dick and Basu (1994) argue that differentiation can lead to consumers developing a relative attitude between competitive alternatives, which in turn, could lead to greater levels of loyalty. Differentiating studio classes by music genre could, therefore, turn 16-24 year olds, from spurious to loyal members, through a process of attention, affecting mood, involvement, enjoyment and satisfaction.

These neutral responses indicate that the music currently played in studio classes was not really to their taste and may indeed result in them switching off during exercise, which goes against the body of literature (Herrington and Capella, 1994; Herrington, 1996; Branthwaite and Ware, 1997) on the positive effects that music can have in service settings. This attitude toward the music could, therefore, result in a neutral or negative attitude being developed toward the studio class and subsequently the service provider. A consequence of this may well be that members are less involved, less enthusiastic, less attentive in studio classes, resulting in a low relative attitude and a behaviour pattern that may ultimately result in termination of the relationship with their health club.

To explore young member attitudes toward introducing studio classes by different music genres.

When respondents were asked about the possibility of having studio classes segmented and differentiated by music genre, the answers were almost unanimously positive. Only one respondent considered the question in a more pragmatic sense, stating that;

“...the music would have to be right for the type of exercise.”

(Respondent 12, Male aged 19)

The remaining respondents thought that this would be a good idea, but for a reason tangential to the premise of this research. Respondents were more interested in meeting like minded people, developing new friendships and potential partners who were more likely to have more in common with them, simply because they enjoyed the same type of music. The studio class was, therefore, seen as a meeting place that provided an opportunity to develop new relationships. These responses implied that the respondents felt that music genre could be used to judge someone’s views, attitude and lifestyle, and that people with the same music taste were more likely to form successful peer groups. This attitude is succinctly summed up in the following response;

“I’d like to meet up with other people with the same interests as me...the classes would be more fun and be more sociable”.

(Respondent 12, Female, aged 20)

This finding supports the findings of previous research (Branthwaite and Ware, 1997) who argued that music can be used to attract customers , and encourage preference and repeat purchase (Sweeney and Wyber, 2002). Most of the respondents stated that differentiating studio classes by music genre could result in a stronger attitude toward their health club, and would encourage them to participate in more exercise classes.

Conclusions

Much of the existing knowledge on customer loyalty and music suggests that a provider could positively influence young consumer attitudes toward their service by having relevant and targeted music offerings. Allied to this, the above discussion has also identified young health and fitness club members as spurious rather than loyal consumers.

The findings of this exploratory research indicate that young health and fitness club members felt that they were being ignored by their service provider, who instead favoured meeting the needs of older members. As a result, young members felt isolated and suffered from a low relative attitude, whilst still maintaining patronage of their club in order to exercise and keep fit. The findings also indicated that young members were music conscious and felt that music could play a more central role in making studio classes more involving, enjoyable and sociable. The music genre played in studio classes could, therefore, be used as a segmentation tool and act as a point of consumer differentiation between service providers, therefore, resulting in a higher relative attitude for young members.

The outcome of introducing such an initiative could move young members from being spuriously loyal to loyal health and fitness club members. Yet a point of caution should be drawn from these exploratory findings. The young members questioned, obviously felt cut off from the rest of the members of their club, so any initiative targeted at them may well have produced the same positive feedback. Acting on the findings of an exploratory study can be risky, but in this case, the service provider involved decided that there was enough evidence in this research to suggest that there was an opportunity to differentiate themselves in the local market place by offering studio classes with an different music genre for young members.

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