

SHAPING PRESENTATION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY LIFE: GYM BUNNIES AND MUSCLEMEN

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Abstract

Gym attendance has become an important part of many consumers' lives. Despite the significance of the topic, there has been no attempt to create a robust theory of consumer choice. In this paper, we present a framework for on going decision-making based on a thorough review of the literature and in-depth interviews with frequent and infrequent attendees. The model's strength lies in its ability: 1] to identify key variables including self concept, motivation, long term goal-setting and situation specific attitudes and, 2] to suggest relationships between these variables and how they are linked to a feedback loop that impacts upon gym attendance over time. Future research directions include greater clarification of the relationships between the variables and exploration of the impact of individual difference variables such as personality and perceptions of self-efficacy on choice.

Introduction

Attending the gym is a popular past-time. In the 1999-2000 period, 55% of the Australian population participated in sport and physical activity (ABS 2000). Of all physical exercise undertaken, 10.5% is categorised as gym type activity (ABS 2000). Understanding why people attend the gym is important to a variety of stakeholders, including gym managers, as well as government policy makers, competing exercise services and marketing managers of related products (eg. sports shoe manufacturers). Despite the significance of the topic, there has been no attempt to create a robust theory of consumer choice. This paper is an important first step in rectifying this situation. It presents a model of consumer choice that highlights the role of three variables given precedence in the literature: 1] self-concept, 2] motivation and 3] attitudes to situation specific factors.

Self-concept

Self-concept can be most simply understood as the perception or image that a person holds of himself or herself (Mehta 1999). Within the context of the gym, many commentators have stressed the importance of the physical dimension of self-concept (eg Herren, 2001; Kennedy 2000; Loland 2000; McDermott 2000; Maguire and Mansfield 1998). Women are observed as equating their self-worth with their physical appearance (Herren 2001). Similarly male bodybuilders experience greater self-confidence when they perceive their body as attractive (Wiegers 1998). Harter (1988 cited in Daley and Parfitt 1996b, p 1080) proposes that "physical appearance/attractiveness dominates self-esteem throughout lifespan". The causal links between exercise, self-concept and self-esteem, however, are not well-established.

Maguire and Mansfield (1998) posit that both men and women use fitness activities as a means of controlling their physical appearance and health but the choice of exercise is, to some extent, gender-dependent. Men, according to Maguire and Mansfield (1998, p 112), use weight training to build "strong, muscular bodies in the gym", while women "dominate the aerobics

class to sculpt slim, lithe, 'feminine' bodies". When both men and women participate in aerobics, they seem to aspire to different goals: women see aerobics as a means to reduce or prevent increases in body weight while men exercise to increase body size (Loland 2000). Even when women use weight training in the gym they do not or cannot reject the conventional ideals of feminine beauty: they take care not to become "too bulky", wanting to "stay within the bounds of femininity" (Maguire and Mansfield 1998, p 113). Gender appropriate behaviour is largely shaped by socio-cultural images of the ideal masculine or feminine body (Kennedy 2000; Loland 2000; Maguire and Mansfield 1998) and fuelled by media depiction of these stereotypical masculine or feminine ideal body images (Herren 2001; Kennedy 2000; Laverie 1998; Wiegers 1998).

Motivation

Motivation for initial participation versus continued participation provides the first step to understanding why some people persevere with gym attendance while others drop out or attend infrequently. Initial participation in fitness activities is related to motives associated with affiliation, novelty seeking, weight control, achievement, self-control, self-confidence and stress relief (Celsi Rose & Leigh 1993; Granzin & Olsen 1989; Shepard 1985; all cited in Laverie 1998). Laverie (1998), in a study of aerobics participants, reported that while people may have had similar reasons for initial participation, they held quite different motives for continued involvement. These included enjoyment; psychological well being; self-identity; a means of staying fit and slim; and "addiction".

When motivation is ascribed an intrinsic value, it is often explained in terms of enjoyment (eg "aerobics is fun", or "I do it for me, inside, not outside") (Laverie, 1998, pp 286 & 290). As an extrinsic value, motivation is often associated with rewards (eg praise from gym staff and others; benefits (eg social, physical, psychological); vanity or narcissism; and access to a particular type of gym equipment (Drummond and Lenex 1997; Laverie 1998; Sullivan 1986). Loland (2000) distinguished between the instrumental and intrinsic values of motivation. Motivation is said to be instrumental when it is outcome focused - "one works out [at the gym] to improve bodily look or to feel better" (Loland 2000, p 120).

Attitudes to Situation Specific Factors

Researchers have argued that whether consumption is experienced as threatening, interesting or unusual depends on consumers' sensitivity to situational factors (eg. Cowley and Caldwell 1999). It follows that consumption experiences will be influenced by attitudes to a number of situation specific factors each time a consumer visits the gym. These factors fall into three broad categories:

1] Personal: needs, levels of motivation, competency - a concept closely linked to self-efficacy or a belief in one's ability to accomplish set goals (Bandura 1977 cited in Robbins et al 1994), time commitments (family, work, competing leisure activities), mood, health, energy levels etc (eg Hultsman 1995; Wankel and Thompson 1977).

2] Interpersonal:

- Social support such as feedback on performance, help with self-monitoring of performance, (eg Laverie 1998; Unger and Johnson 1995, Weber and Wertheim 1989; Yeung and Hemsley 1997b), and attitudes of significant others to gym attendance (Leslie, Owen, Salmon, Bauman, Sallis and Lo 1999)

- Social comparison - The social context at the gym provides an opportunity for performance comparisons that may act as a motivational drive for some participants (Laverie 1998; Maguire and Mansfield 1998). Social comparison is inhibitive to other participants who fear embarrassment caused by low performance or who are less tolerant to exercising in a setting where the clothes worn reveal too much of the body (Eklund and Bianco 2000; James 2000). (Laverie 1998). Laverie (1998) stressed that people should be in classes with others of similar abilities and recommended a uniform class for beginners.
- Belongingness - has been linked to continued participation (Spink and Carron 1994). Kowal and Fortier (2000) also found that perception of a physical activity context that emphasizes personal improvement or mastery of tasks may enhance feelings of connectedness with others. However, while group processes may contribute to a sense of cohesion, they may also serve to alienate newcomers who are often relegated to the out-group (Maguire and Mansfield 1998).

3] Product: reputation of the gym, price, location, ambience, choice of activities, levels and types of classes, equipment, quality of instruction etc (eg Drummond and Lenex 1997; Laverie 1998).

Method

In-depth interviews were conducted with eight individuals (5 women and 3 men) four of whom attended the gym more often than four times a week, "frequents" (F's), and four of whom attended the gym between one to four times a week, "infrequents" (IF's). The interviews were unstructured to allow subjects to describe their own experiences fully (Laverie, 1998). They were also recorded and transcribed in full to aid the processing and analysis of the data. Check-coding, a technique proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), was employed to improve data reliability and definitional clarity - final intercoder reliability reached 94% for concurrence or coding of the transcripts. In order to ensure theoretical validity both researchers checked for consistency between the findings and prior theory as well as for rival explanations. These techniques, along with peer auditing to limit instances of interviewer biases and external checking of interview framework wording to reduce risks of response biases (eg social desirability), were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the data and subsequent analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Self-concept as related to a discrepancy between the actual and ideal self appears to be a primary motivator for initial gym attendance as well as an ongoing motivational drive for continued participation. However, the frequency of usage seems to be associated with differences in the perception of where consumers are positioned in relation to the 'ideal'. The 'frequents' seem to experience a lower degree of discrepancy than the 'infrequents'. For example, Joanne's (F) statement, "sometimes you're just stuck with the shape you are and you've got to accept", is contrasted with Hayley's (IF) wish for her 'ideal' body shape: "curvy, bigger boobs, taller and flatter tummy". The ideal self-concept is described within the framework of what is socio-culturally accepted as the ideal masculine or feminine body. Tara, for example, stated: "I wish I wasn't so caught up in what we're told is the 'ideal' because I want to be this incredibly trim, taut and terrific person". The notion of the 'ideal' body image propagated by the media influenced some participants strongly. Tara's and Hayley's insights

revealed the pervasiveness of media influences: "I've been brought up and brain washed by the perfect image that I've bought because of society at the moment."

Consistent with earlier research on exercise and fitness (eg Loland 2000; McDermott 2000; Maguire and Mansfield 1998), it also became apparent that even when all gym attendees professed a desire to alter their physical self in terms of fitness or toning, men and women appeared to have different end goals. The women aspired to lose or maintain their body weight in various areas, such as their hips, thighs, and buttocks. The men, on the other hand, were focused on building bigger and better defined muscles; eg "a bigger chest, a six-pack stomach and big arms". Socio-cultural influences on the motivation to achieve an 'ideal' physical appearance seem to be moderated by personal experience with weight control and by other motives such as health benefits, stress reduction, and intrinsic satisfaction. Arguably, the gym participants in the study are interested in becoming fit and healthy as much as in improving their looks.

In terms of intrinsic, extrinsic and instrumental motivational influences, there was a spread across both groups of participants. Hayley (IF) stated that she "enjoys aerobics because they are fun" and Joanne (F) professed that she "feels relaxed at the gym because she enjoys what she does". Kate (IF) and Cecilia (F) commented on the benefits of stress reduction, fitness and toning as extrinsic motivations for their participation. Paul (IF) and Tara (F) were both outcome-focused in their reasons for exercising. Notwithstanding the validity of these observations, there does appear to be a tendency for the 'frequents' in this study to hold a stronger motivation to use the gym than the 'infrequents'. The frequent group (Cecilia, Joanne, Scott and Tara) identified strongly with their gym role, made time to go to the gym, enjoyed being at the gym, experienced a high level of perceived competence, generally stayed longer than one hour and felt as if they had missed out if they had to cancel a session. In contrast, the infrequent group (Paul, Dave, Hayley and Kate) allocated a very small part of their identity to their gym role, went to the gym because of membership investments, found it difficult to justify spending time at the gym when they had other commitments, experienced a somewhat lower level of perceived competence, stayed generally 45 minutes to 1 hour (with the exception of Hayley who spent 1-2 hours), and felt guilty if they had to cancel a session.

Self-persuasion strategies were used by all participants. 'Frequents' tended to engage more actively in self-persuasion than 'infrequents'. Scott (F) used self-monitoring and long-term goal-setting as part of his motivational drive, and Tara (F) talked of competing against herself. 'Infrequents', with the exception of Paul who saw his weight training as a contest with himself, showed weak evidence of self-persuasion. Hayley (IF), for instance, admitted that she found it hard to motivate herself to keep going. These results are consistent with empirical data in which self-persuasion was seen to be linked to higher rates of exercise adherence (Wankel and Thompson 1977). Positive feedback from others encouraged all interviewees to persist in their exercise efforts. 'Infrequents', however, showed a greater need for feedback from a personal trainer. Paul (IF) found that his "personal trainer cheers him up, motivates and encourages him" and Hayley (IF) stated: "when you don't see result straight away you get disillusioned ... because I didn't have a personal trainer." Feedback may provide the necessary incentives to encourage adherence, as advocated by Weber and Wertheim (1989), and may serve as a kind of less powerful substitute for self-persuasion strategies.

Social comparison was found to be facilitative rather than inhibitive. Moreover, the product factors appeared to attenuate any potential inhibitive effects of social comparison on participants' attitude so that the consumption experience could remain relatively pleasurable. For instance, Kate (IF) was satisfied with her gym because it was a 'T-shirt gym', it was located close to her place of work and it offered her enough choices so that she could avoid activities that may cause discomfort or embarrassment. In terms of facilitative social comparison, 'infrequents' appeared to derive greater benefit from exercising in the presence

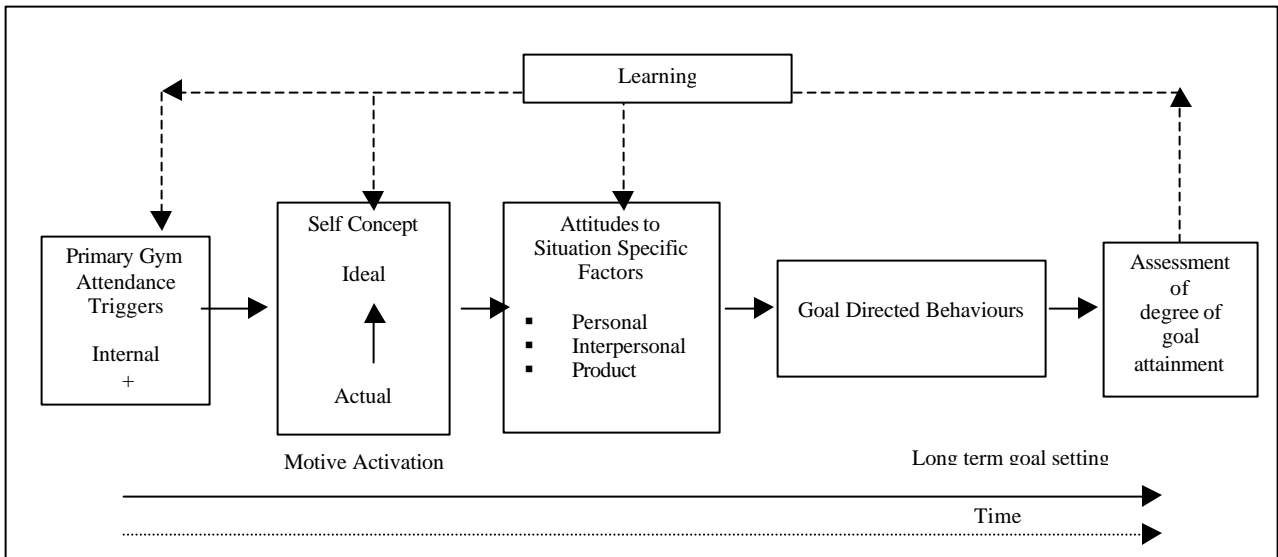
of others than ‘frequents’. Both Paul and Dave (IF’s) noticed the level the previous person had a machine set on and Hayley (IF) revealed that “if I see someone really fit next to me on the machine I try to match them for time limit”. In contrast Joanne (F) relied on self-referenced information rather than social comparison: “If I know I’m not doing well I’ll push myself harder but not because of someone else.” These observations, unlike the earlier findings reported by Ebbeck (1990), indicate that self-evaluation of performance is likely to be based on individual rather than gender differences.

The overall findings of differences between the frequent and infrequent groups suggest that personal factors (strength of motivation, goals, self-motivation strategies) and product factors are important determinants in the attendance behaviour of ‘frequents’, whereas interpersonal situation specific factors (social support, social comparison) are likely to be influential in eliciting a high level of responsiveness on the part of “infrequents”. Interestingly, belongingness was not found to have any real impact on the attitude of the participants, which is inconsistent with the results reported by Carron and his colleagues (1988 and 1994). It may be that comparisons between two groups of gym users rendered it difficult to identify specific group cohesiveness issues.

Model Development

The exploratory nature of this study makes any attempt to formulate a model that is workable, succinct yet comprehensive, a formidable task. Analysis of the findings against the backdrop of a comprehensive (not exhaustive) literature review has nevertheless enabled a foundation for a preliminary model to be presented in Figure 1. The model’s strengths lie in its ability to capture: 1] the many essential elements of self-concept, motivation and situation specific attitudes, and 2] the interrelationships between self-concept, motivation and situational specific factors, and how they act in a feedback manner to enhance or decrease the likelihood of gym attendance over time.

Figure 1
“Attending Gym: A Decision-Making Framework”



Directions for Future Research

The model provides an initial framework for identifying the processes that drive consumer choice in a gym setting. How these dynamic and complex relationships work at every stage of the consumption experience is not yet clear. One area for further research is to measure the impact of underlying personal influences at different stages of the experience. Yeung and Hemsley (1997b), for instance, found that high extraversion is linked to discontinuation of an aerobics program while high self-efficacy is a significant predictor of participation. A fuller understanding of individual differences can assist management with practical interventions, such as in designing programs for consumer segments (eg frequent vs infrequent gym users). Overcoming the limitations inherent in the present exploratory design and employing longitudinal studies should also strengthen the workability of the model.

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