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Sheng Yen Lee,

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Analysis of Relationship Marketing Factors for Sports Centers with Mixed Methods Research

Abstract

Purpose

This paper studies the effects of relationship marketing factors of sports centers on commitment to relationship and intention to recommend.

Design/methodology/approach

A statistical survey was used for quantitative research, and in-depth interviews, for qualitative research, according to the mixed methods research.

Findings

The results of the quantitative research show that the relationship marketing factors of bonding, facility, and price positively influence commitment to relationship. Expertise and facility positively influence intention to recommend. Finally, commitment to relationship positively influences intention to recommend.

Practical implications

Sports centers could build relationships based on polite and hospitable service, and host monthly events for building rapport among members. Instructors' expertise promotes bonding and serves as the most essential factor for intention to recommend. Sports centers must adequately introduce promotions related to rational consumption and specialized promotion. Centers that are managed too carelessly or frugally will have a highly negative impact on customer relationship and intention to recommend.

Originality/value

This study aims to empirically analyze customer needs by comparing the results of in-depth interviews with customers based on the results of quantitative studies through mixed methods research. It determines the relationships between the aforementioned variables, providing practical implications through analysis of the customers' subjective consciousness by focusing on sports facilities in order to secure competitive advantage, and thus, overcome financial difficulties.

Keywords: Sports center, relationship marketing factors, commitment to relationship, intention to recommend, sports facility management, mixed methods research

Article Classification: Practitioner Paper

Introduction

In a survey conducted in the early 2000s by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in Korea to investigate overall participation in sports, 33.6% of the respondents stated that, among other types of sports facilities, the sports center was most required (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2003; Seok, 2007; Lee, 2010). However, as the number of sports centers has increased sharply due to growing demand from the early 2000s, an increasing number of them have also been suffering from financial problems brought on by intense competition (Kim *et al.*, 2010). According to the 2014 sports industry statistics from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, there are 92,293 nationwide sports businesses, an increase of 1,800 businesses compared to 2013. Among these, sports facility businesses comprised of 34,942 (37.9%) of the businesses in 2014; 35,314 (39%), in 2013; and 35,412 (42%), in 2012. However, recently the number of sports facility businesses has reduced significantly, although the overall sports industry has been showing an increasing trend (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2015; Lee, 2017).

Like other service sectors, the market for commercial sports centers needs to provide higher professional and quality services for increased customer satisfaction, since customer needs should never be ignored. Sports center managers or service providers have implemented piecemeal business and marketing strategies, making it even more difficult to survive competition. To survive in this competitive market, these managers must adopt a differentiated and viable marketing strategy (An, 2000; Seol, 2013).

For sport centers to secure an edge in a competitive market with poor economic prospects, they must move away from the marketing practice of attracting more consumers. They must shift their marketing paradigm toward retaining existing clients, strengthening relationships with them in order to maintain and boost revenue. Hence, relationship marketing has now attracted more attention. This form of marketing is markedly different from existing ordinary transaction marketing strategies—it considers clients as partners for future revenue generation through long-term relationships (Yang *et al.*, 2009; Choi, 2007; Berry, 1995).

Relationship marketing strengthens existing attachment relationships. One concept that describes the level of those relationships is commitment to relationship, defined in extant literature in various ways (Yoon and

Kim, 2008). As a basic human psychological propensity, it refers to the level of psychological attachment; it is a tacit oath made by service providers and users to maintain their relationships (Dwyer and Oh, 1987; Gruen *et al.*, 2000; O'Reilly, 1986; Huang, 2015). Anderson and Weitz (1992) also stated that commitment to relationship advances a stable relationship and a willingness to risk short-term losses to maintain it. It accompanies an assurance for a sustainable relationship based on its stability. Meanwhile, according to Morgan and Hunt (1994), through commitment to relationship, service providers make efforts to maintain a binding will toward consumers, whereas consumers express a binding will toward providers. Consequently, this study examines the level of commitment to relationship as an important factor of business performance with valuable implications.

Commitment to relationship positively affects the steady revenue stream of sports centers. This claim is supported by studies that show its positive impact on sales increase and performance of service enterprises, including hotels, travel agencies, restaurant headquarters and franchises, hairdressing shops, and veterinary clinics (Kim, 2004; Lee, 2008; Cote and Latham, 2006; Harrison-Walker, 2001). Although researchers have explored marketing variables and commitment to relationship in various sectors, few have considered it with regard to sports centers.

Another factor that deserves attention regarding sports center marketing strategies is intention to recommend—a word-of-mouth mode of communication, separate from customer satisfaction. It constitutes informal communication that delivers the overall evaluation of personal experience. This type of communication can affect consumers' purchasing attitudes, and thus, considerably influence their purchasing decisions. As intention to recommend is a process of providing real consumer experience in person, it exerts a powerful influence on others (Seo, 2006; Sung *et al.*, 2002; Hwang and Kim, 1995).

There have been various studies on both relationship marketing for and selection attributes of sports centers that affect customer relationship. However, qualitative researches on variables that affect customer relationship, with respect to these centers, based on in-depth interviews, have been negligible. Therefore, to survive recession and competition, it is vital to clarify the relations between relationship marketing, commitment to relationship, and intention to recommend for stronger customer ties. We thus empirically analyze customer needs by comparing the results of in-depth customer interviews based on the results of quantitative studies, through mixed methods research. We determine the relationships between the aforementioned variables in order to provide practical implications and overcome financial difficulties. Hence, with respect to securing competitive advantages, we analyze the subjective consciousness of customers who use sports facilities.

To achieve the purpose of the present study, the following research hypotheses and corresponding models were set up (Figure 1):

Hypothesis 1: The relationship marketing factors of sports centers positively influence commitment to relationship.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship marketing factors of sports centers positively influence intention to recommend.

Hypothesis 3: Commitment to relationship positively influences intention to recommend.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Research Method

Research design

We conducted a statistical survey for quantitative research and in-depth interviews for qualitative research based on the mixed methods research.

The research subjects for the quantitative analysis were consumers who used commercial sports centers. The sample includes 390 people who used five commercial sports centers in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, from September 1, 2016 to October 31, 2016, based on the convenience sampling method. Among the 390 sampled subjects, 377 copies of the questionnaire were finally selected. Thirteen copies that contained insincere responses or judgment errors were excluded.

For the qualitative analysis, in-depth interviews were conducted six times, once every week, from May 10, 2017 to June 14, 2017. Eight participants were selected for the interviews—five users who participated in sports at the centers, one instructor who worked at a center, and two sports business managers.

We presented in-depth discussions that focus on practical contents in order to solve our research objectives. We then compared them to the statistical results from the quantitative analysis of and findings from interviews (Lee *et al.*, 2013).

Quantitative research method

Participants and sampling method

Consumers using the services of commercial sports centers were selected as the target population of this study. Three hundred and ninety individuals who frequented five commercial sports centers in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, from September 1, 2016 to October 31, 2016, were extracted by convenience sampling and administered a survey. Among the sample, 13 did not provide valid answers or made errors in the questionnaire, resulting in a total sample of 377. Table 1 presents the general characteristics of the participants.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Survey description

To fulfill the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was employed as a research tool. Each question was rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 for “strongly disagree” to 5 for “strongly agree.” A detailed description of the research tool is as follows. First, regarding relationship marketing, 14 questions on bonding (3), employee expertise (4), physical facility (4), and price (3), originally used by Choi (2007) in an analysis of commercial sports center relationship marketing causality model, were modified and employed in this study. Second, for commitment to relationship, the study modified and used five questions—three from Yang *et al.*'s (2009) study on the effects of commercial sports centers' relationship marketing factors on customer satisfaction, commitment to relationship, and intention of repurchase; two from Lee's (2006) study on the effects of public sports center users' lifestyle, customer satisfaction, and commitment on customer loyalty. Third, for intention to recommend, three questions were employed—two questions from Oh's (2008) study on the effects of commercial sports centers' service quality on the intention of repurchase and recommendation, and one from Kim's (2007) study on the effects of public sports facilities' service quality on consumers' intention to repurchase and recommend. These methods were then modified and supplemented to better serve the purpose of this study.

Survey reliability and validity

The validity of the research tool was tested according to advice from experts. Exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and reliability tests were conducted. Exploratory factor analysis of the relationship marketing questionnaire found that all questions—except for question 4 on employee expertise—recorded normal factor loading values. Confirmatory factor analysis found no abnormalities as well. On the reliability test, we acquired the Cronbach's α values, which were within the normal range, from .784 to .848. The results of the validity and reliability tests are shown in Tables 2 and 3 and Figure 2.

[Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here]

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Subsequently, as commitment to relationship and intention to recommend are single factors, exploratory factor analysis and reliability tests were performed. The results show no issue in factor loading values and in reliability—both factors recorded .835 and .843 reliability, respectively. Table 4 shows the results of the reliability tests.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Data processing

Data were processed in SPSS 21.0 and Amos 21.0. The research model was tested through frequency, exploratory factor, and confirmatory factor analyses, as well as Cronbach's α , correlation analysis, and structural equation modeling tests. The significance level for all the tests was set at $p < .05$.

Qualitative research method

Research participants

For qualitative analysis, six in-depth interviews were conducted, once every Wednesday, from May 10, 2017 to June 14, 2017. Eight participants were selected for the interviews—five users who participated in sports at the sports centers, one instructor who worked at a sports center, and two sports business managers. Table 5 shows the general characteristics of the interviewees for qualitative research.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

In-depth interviews for qualitative research

In-depth interviews were conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews. Variables for quantitative research were categorized and written in the form of questions for research participants. Six interviews were conducted, once every Wednesday, from May 10, 2017 to June 14, 2017. Each interview session lasted 30 minutes for each individual. All contents of the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants.

Authenticity and ethicality of qualitative research data

Confirmation of the participants is an important ethical issue in the study, and thus, the results of the analysis were shared with the participants. To secure ethicality, the objectives, and as how the results would be used, were clearly explained to the participants. The research was conducted only after obtaining consent for participation. Lastly, the interviews were signed to ensure they remained anonymous, thus protecting the privacy of the participants (Lee et al, 2013; Kim, 2016).

Results***Quantitative research results****Correlation analysis among variables*

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine auto-correlation and correlation among the variables used in this study. The results show that correlation values were all below .8, indicating no issue regarding auto-correlation. Table 6 shows the results of the correlation analysis.

[Insert Table 6 about here]

Research model goodness-of-fit test and hypotheses testing

To test the goodness of fit of the research model, a structural equation modeling test was performed. As presented in Table 7, the model was proven to have an adequate goodness of fit with Q at 1.96, root mean square residual (RMR) at .040, comparative fit index (CFI) at .960, normed fit index (NFI) at .922, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) at .050.

The causality relationship between variables in the research model was tested, and thus, the path coefficient between bonding and commitment to relationship was .390 (CR=5.202***), between employee expertise and commitment to relationship was .123 (CR=1.772), between facility and commitment to relationship was .196 (CR=2.858**), and between price and commitment to relationship was .293 (CR = 3.642***). Meanwhile, the path coefficient between bonding and intention to recommend was .027 (CR=.355), between employee expertise and intention to recommend was .171 (CR=2.579**), between facility and intention to recommend was .238 (CR=3.536***), between price and intention to recommend was .126(CR=1.599), and between commitment to relationship and intention to recommend was .490(CR=4.852***). Table 7 shows the results of statistical significance testing.

[Insert Table 7 about here]

Qualitative research results

Based on the content that affects customer relationships at sports centers, this study categorized the variables into four types, which is similar to the quantitative research on relationship marketing. Categorization for the interviews in the qualitative research was carried out based on an in-depth analysis of 17 items in the measurement tool (Lee et al, 2013; Kim, 2016) used to measure relationship marketing, with the author and two professors of sports marketing. Table 8 shows the categorization for qualitative interviews of the sub-factors of relationship marketing in sports centers.

[Insert Table 8 about here]

Bonding

The most important factor to facilitate customer relationships in sports centers is various forms of activities carried out by sports centers, such as “events for building rapport among customers,” “anniversary events for customers,” “comfortable relationship with staff,” “kind and hospitable service,” “efforts to obtain customer information,” “constant sharing of information,” and “smooth communication with customers.”

“It makes me feel good whenever the staff at the sports center remembers me and call me by name. This makes me think that I’ve built quite a close relationship with them. If I have a good rapport with

the staff, I don't necessarily want to move to a different sports center." – Sports center user A.

"I usually play golf, and I make it a point to attend the monthly golf tournaments for members if possible. This seems like a good chance for me to bond with many people. I can also check how much I've improved, so it also helps me keep up with my exercise." – Sports center user B.

"If I make friends while working out, I think I just register even if I can't make it to the sports center often because I'm busy. And come to think of it, I become close with other members of the sports center because I share a bond with those who learn from the same instructor. I'm definitely willing to recommend this sports center to my acquaintances." – Sports center user C.

"A lot of sports-related information on SNS [Social Network Service] sent by the sports center is not always helpful. And emails or messages that seem too commercial rather have a negative impact. But emails or gifts sent to me on my birthday or other anniversaries make me feel closer to the sports center as if working out at the center is a big part of my life." – Sports center user D.

"As the manager of the sports center, I care a lot about how to build stronger ties and better relationship with our customers. This is closely related to their reentrance. And once human relations are built among customers or between customers and instructors, it becomes more likely that the customers will continue to visit the sports center, which makes it more important than other factors. Thus, planning all kinds of contests like the monthly golf tournament for members is the most fundamental event for bonding." – Sports center manager G.

Based on the interviews above, sports centers could build relationships based on polite and hospitable service; monthly events, such as golf tournaments for building rapport among members; and bonding over the same instructor. As discovered in the interview with sports center manager G, holding monthly sports events is an essential factor for building relationships with customers and between instructors and customers. This factor may also help increase intention to recommend, as mentioned in the interview with sports center user C. However, emails or messages that seem too commercial have a negative impact according to sports center user D, which suggests that it is necessary to carefully maintain relationships with members using SNS.

Expertise

Expertise of services provided by sports centers for customers is classified into two types: 1) expertise of sports instructors who provide sports contents and directly instruct customers, and 2) expertise of staff that provide general services. In particular, since it is difficult to explore customer behavior toward expertise of sports instructors with a tool that measures general service quality, close observations are needed through direct interviews with customers.

Expertise is classified into "expertise of instructors," "expertise of staff," "knowledge and experience in the relevant tasks," and "prompt problem-solving skills."

"I play golf, and I think the instructor's abilities are really important in golf. The sports center is quite a distance away from my house, but my friend strongly recommended this golf instructor, so I keep coming here to learn golf despite all the inconveniences." – Sports center user B.

"I think golf is one sport that is most difficult to learn. I have 20 years of experience, but still, it's really hard to play very well, and I always feel that it's difficult to master completely. I've taken lessons with multiple instructors, but it's still hard to meet a good one. I come to this sports center because it's close to my house, but I just practice by myself without taking lessons. If I find any instructor who can give me proper lessons, I'll definitely go there right away." – Sports center user E.

"Since we can get a lot of information about sports these days on the Internet or in the media, I think I have more knowledge about sports. But as I learn from the instructors at the sports center, I sometimes think that they lack theoretical expertise even though they have excellent practical skills. This often makes me reluctant to come to the center. So I stopped working out in some cases because of that." – Sports center user D.

"I don't think I consider the expertise of other staff aside from the instructors at the sports center. As long as I can get proper instruction, I don't care much about lack of facilities or unprofessional staff." – Sports center user C.

“I think the prompt response of the staff is most important. For example, when there’s something wrong with the teeing ground or sporting equipment, taking prompt measures or repairing it quickly will improve the overall image of the sports center.” – Sports center user A.

Based on the interviews above, service quality of sports centers is quite different from service attributes of hotels, restaurants, or hair salons that provide general services. According to sports center user C, as long as the user is properly instructed at the sports center, there is nothing wrong with lack of general expertise of staff aside from the instructors. Moreover, B and E also mentioned that, for sports that are relatively difficult to learn, such as golf, they are willing to cope with traveling a long distance from home as far as they can learn properly. They also mentioned that they would consider moving to a different sports center with a better golf instructor. This implies that recruiting good instructors in a sports center is an essential factor. The fact that good relationships are built by good instructors, and that members, such as B, would willingly travel long distances to receive instruction from a recommended instructor, show that the expertise of instructors promotes bonding. It serves as the most essential factor for intention to recommend. It seems that experienced participants in sports lay more stress on the expertise of instructors based on their multiple unsuccessful attempts at taking good lessons. Moreover, sports that are difficult to play well or learn properly tend to lay more stress on instructors as well.

Price

Contents related to price of sports centers are “adequacy of price compared with facilities,” “adequacy of price compared with service,” and “price promotions and events.” Currently, there is more supply of sports centers than demand. In this situation, price policies are relatively important. There is a need for various forms of pricing and promotions that consider consumer needs.

“I’m using this sports center at quite a reasonable price. This center is actually quite expensive, but I’m using it at half price because it’s in partnership with my company. I make the payment to my company instead so that regular members cannot find out how much we pay, I think.” – Sports center user C.

“I think it’s a good idea to offer additional discounts to members doing multiple sports at once. But it’s a shame that my center has no such system.” – Sports center user D.

“I usually work out early in the morning because of my studies, and there aren’t a lot of people during those hours. I think holding an early-bird promotional event can be a good idea to attract more members. It will also be a great benefit for me if I can use it at a more reasonable price.” – Sports center user A.

“Some programs include charge for facility use and the lesson fee, but while some sports need lessons, others don’t. So I think it’s rational for both customers and sports centers to come up with pricing policies for different needs.” – Sports center user B.

“I think the most challenging thing about running a sports center is to set prices and hold promotional events of discounts. Since there are too many competitors around, I consider both promotion for rational consumption and specialized promotion. Rational promotion indicates pricing considering various needs in the consumers’ perspective, while specialized promotion is about implementing our own specialized strategy instead of considering the prices of our competitors, making an attempt at a differentiated operating method by offering higher-quality lessons and sports that are not offered by other centers. It’s necessary to adequately mix the two methods, and setting prices always puts me in a dilemma.” – Sports center manager H.

“I use this center to take lessons even though it’s quite a distance from my house, because I was recommended to learn from this golf instructor. So, I don’t care much about the cost for practicing. I’m also participating in the intensive program that is most expensive, so I don’t think I’ll switch sport centers because of pricing.” – Sports center user B.

Based on the interviews above, we find that sports centers must adequately apply promotion related to rational consumption and specialized promotion, as mentioned by sports center manager H. It is necessary to formulate prices considering the diverse needs of customers from the perspective of rational consumption. At the same time, these centers must also incorporate specialized promotions that offer special, high-quality lessons,

rather than considering competitor prices and developing sports items not offered by other centers. As mentioned by B, taking lessons and using the most expensive program at a center that is far from home just because a certain golf instructor was recommended has no relation to rational consumption. However, B's satisfaction with the recommended instructor indicates that it has a considerable effect on commitment to relationship with sports center instructors and intention to recommend. Therefore, sports managers must consider the needs of various customers related to rational consumption, and develop specialized programs to wisely implement pricing policies.

Facility

Contents related to sports facilities are "safety of facilities," "latest facilities," "scale of facilities," and "convenience of facilities such as parking, rest, restaurants, and cafeteria."

"I think everyone prefers the latest equipment and clean facilities. As manager of a sports center, I constantly inspect the equipment for defects even if I can't bring in the latest equipment all the time, and try to prevent all inconveniences for customers by repairing broken equipment as quickly as possible. If such equipment or goods are left unrepaired for a long time, I think it would be bad for the image of our sports center." – Sports center manager G.

"I love that our sports center has a famous coffee shop franchise to begin with. After working out at the center, I enjoy a nice cup of coffee in a pleasant mood with those I work out with. It's one of the things that make me happy in life. I think a decent cafeteria and coffee shop are essential for a sports center." – Sports center user D.

"As a golf instructor, I think safety is the most important. I don't think many of my customers taking lessons are sensitive about the safety. The space between each practice bays is very narrow in our golf practice facility. If someone who is not golf instructor teaches acquaintance, I think there may be very dangerous situations. It's really important to make enough spaces between each practice bays to avoid accidents in golf practice facility." – Sports center instructor F.

"If there's anyone trying to open a sports center, I'd like to tell them to secure a parking space, and check whether they have the building structure to implement the sports they basically want to manage before they make a decision. I saw many managers facing a fiasco in running a sports center without securing a parking space. And suppose the ceilings are too low to have group exercises like aerobics. Customers might not feel comfortable in that case. Also, too many pillars in the building make the space stuffy, which is also something to think about." – Sports center manager H.

"My previous sports center was very big and had all the latest facilities, but the center was too frugal about heating and cooling, so they rarely turned on the air conditioner in summer and kept the indoor temperature too low in winter. That's why I had to move to a different, smaller sports center that's even slightly farther away from home. No matter how good the facilities are, I think how the center is operated is much more important. I definitely have no intention of recommending that sports center to anyone. It's too much." – Sports center user C.

Based on the interviews above, we find that the latest equipment, large size of the center, and overall facilities are important. However, how they are operated is of greater importance. It is vital, as suggested by G, to constantly check facilities for defects and immediately repair them to avoid causing customer inconvenience. Moreover, as mentioned by C, frugality in heating and cooling, irrespective of the center's size or number of up-to-date facilities, may drive customers away to competitors; it may have a negative effect on intention to recommend. Furthermore, aside from the basic facilities of sports centers, convenient parking is also an important factor, as mentioned by H. The interview with D on provisions for a coffee shop also points to the diversity of customer needs. Therefore, while the facilities themselves are important, how they are operated has greater importance according to the interview results. Frugal or careless management of the centers will negatively affect customer relationships and intention to recommend.

Discussion

This study tested the effects of the sub-elements of relationship marketing, such as bonding, service price, employee expertise, and satisfaction with facility, on commitment to relationship, which represents the sense of unity between sports centers and their clients, and on clients' intention to make a positive recommendation of

the centers. As commitment to relationship and intention to recommend can have considerable influences on the performance of sports centers, the two variables warrant attention.

This study was conducted in the form of integrated research to provide practical information for sports center managers by determining the causal relations and mutual effects between the factors of sports center relationship marketing, commitment to relationships, and positive intention to recommend. Integrated research consists of determining causal relations among variables through a quantitative survey with a questionnaire, and a detailed analysis of customer thoughts through interviews focusing on categorized factors of relationship marketing for in-depth exploration. This study is relevant to previous studies based on the quantitative research result. Specifically, the qualitative research conducted has further implications.

Among numerous elements of relationship marketing, bonding, facility, and price were found to have a positive effect on commitment to relationship, while expertise and facility had a positive influence on intention to recommend. Additionally, commitment to relationship positively affected intention to recommend.

Based on these results, the following discussion points are in order.

First, bonding, facility, and price were the relationship marketing elements to have a positive impact on commitment to relationship, with bonding having the strongest positive effect. Bonding is similar to terms such as sense of belonging or sense of relationship. In other words, it refers to how much an individual is linked to a certain group. Strong bonding can be interpreted as an individual developing a strong connection to a given sports center. Therefore, we may assume that a sense of belonging and connection to a sports center may have a positive influence on commitment to relationship. In this respect, it is necessary for sports center managers to employ more approaches toward bond building to achieve greater commitment to relationship with their clients.

We conducted interviews with research participants for analysis in order to present various bonding tactics. The analysis showed that users of sports centers develop bonds with kind and hospitable service; monthly events, such as golf tournaments, for building rapport among members; and small gatherings around instructors. Monthly events turned out to be the most important factor, as the close personal relationships built by such events contributed to positive intention to recommend the sports center to others.

Through these activities, sports centers can strengthen their bonds with customers, and these bonds, in turn, positively affect commitment to relationship, a tacit expression for continuing relationships (Baik *et al.*, 2015; Lee, 2015; Cho, 2014).

The study also found that facility and price positively affected commitment to relationship. Facility and price are key elements of service business (Lee, 2002)—particularly price, which corresponds to expenses a sports center spends on exercise facilities, equipment, and human resources, exerts a direct influence on the relationship between a sports center and its customers (Jung and Han, 2005). It is not easy for users to acquire accurate information on how sports centers operate—physical facilities and prices allow them to evaluate sports centers (Zeithaml, 1988). Facility and price, as they are open to sports center users, can affect commitment to relationship. Thus, they are considered essential variables in relationships with customers in terms of relationship and general consumer marketing.

Interviews on price showed that promotions related to the price of sports centers can be divided into two types: 1) promotions related to rational consumption and 2) specialized promotion. In terms of rational consumption, it was necessary to subdivide prices and programs considering the diverse customer needs. For specialized promotion, it was important to develop new lesson items and secure high-quality instructors and contents for high-level lessons, rather than consider the prices of competitors. In particular, an interviewee mentioned that he/she would go to the center for lessons despite poor accessibility and high price if he/she were recommended an excellent instructor, which implies that promotions with instructors specialized in training are important. Moreover, specialized promotions also have a considerable effect on commitment to relationship with sports center instructors and positive intention to recommend.

We can consider intention to recommend as word-of-mouth information. It is a more effective marketing tool than commercial advertising, since customers tend to consider information from their acquaintances as more reliable (Lee, 2009). Positive intention to recommend is significantly affected by customer satisfaction (Son and Kim, 2011). Among relationship marketing factors, facility and expertise positively influenced intention to recommend, with facility having the strongest positive impact. In fact, facility was the only relationship marketing factor that positively changed both commitment to relationship and intention to recommend, and therefore, sports center managers should pay attention to it. Lee (2017) found that facilities provided by sports centers positively affect customer loyalty and the intention of adhering to exercise, a factor related to re-purchasing. As such, it is important for sports center management to provide details on how to use facilities and specific information on exercise equipment (Lee, 2017). Thus, we may assume that positive experience in a given facility increases customer satisfaction, and thus, lead users to make a positive recommendation. This suggests that facilities available at a sports center are key components of the intention of spreading positive word-of-mouth, which may sustain the center's long-term performance.

Based on interviews with the participants, related to the facility, we found that, while high-quality facilities are important, how they are operated is a far vital factor. As mentioned by the participants, it is necessary to routinely manage equipment to prevent defects. This way, customers do not face inconveniences. Moreover, frugality in heating and cooling would drive customers away to competitors due to unpleasant experiences. This can be a direct cause of a highly negative effect on bonding, as well as intention to recommend.

Expertise also positively influenced intention to recommend, since consumers are affected by the teaching capabilities and work ethics of sports center employees or instructors. Lee (2017) found that sports center instructors can have a positive impact on both customer loyalty and intention of adhering to exercise, which is a factor relevant to repurchase. Prior literature also suggests that people go to sports centers with many motives. Above all, users are motivated to have fun and be active by learning a new skill (Kim and Baik, 2008). This result is supported by other research that considers users' perception and achievement motivation, which are in line with learning a new skill. Studies conducted by Kim (2009) and Park and Jang (2007) demonstrate that sports center users' consumer behavior is attributed to their longing for understanding new information, satisfying intellectual curiosity, acquiring various information, etc.

Interviews with the participants related to expertise showed that service quality in sports centers is very different from service attributes of hotels and restaurants that provide general services. Most sports participants lay much more stress on the importance of the education services provided by sports instructors than the specialized services provided by the general staff. In particular, the importance of the instructor was prominently emphasized for sports, such as golf, that are difficult to play well. Participants experienced in sports tended to have a desire for higher quality education services by instructors based on their multiple unsuccessful attempts at taking good lessons. Therefore, based on the interview, they were willing to move to a different sports center, even at a long distance and with expensive lesson fees, as long as they were recommended a good instructor. We found that expertise of instructors promotes bonding and serves as the most essential factor for intention to recommend.

Finally, commitment to relationship positively affected intention to recommend. Commitment to relationship is a concept that values mutual altruism and is an expression of one's willingness to form a stable relationship and risk sacrifice in the process of relationship building (Anderson and Weitz, 1992). In other words, the willingness of sports centers and users to sustain a stable relationship positive affects intention to recommend, which is a highly effective marketing factor. Additionally, this result suggests that an individual's psychological status toward relationship maintenance and retention might influence his/her intention to make a positive recommendation.

Conclusion

The study found that, among the relationship marketing factors, bonding, facility, and price positively affected commitment to relationship. Expertise and facility exerted a positive impact on customer intention to make a positive recommendation. Moreover, commitment to relationship has a positive effect on intention to recommend. Among factors of relationship marketing, the facility is related to both commitment to relationship and intention to recommend, which suggests that sports center managers should focus on facility maintenance, equipment purchase, and management based on diverse customer surveys. Managers should also consider adopting measures to promote sports center group meetings for greater bonding. They must provide an expertise-building program for employees to nurture personnel who fit the current market trends. In other words, the findings of this study offer practical information on how to run sports centers, which are currently facing difficulties, by identifying factors of sports center promotion.

However, this study holds certain limitations. First, the study was conducted on a limited group of people who had been using services provided by large-scale commercial sports centers located in Korean metropolitan areas. As such, further research should cover a wider range of users. For instance, these users tend to visit facilities close to their residence frequently. However, some sports resorts, such as golf and ski resorts, typically target travelers who would not make frequent visits. In this regard, there is a need for relationship marketing studies to examine such travelers, and compare them with sports center users in order to identify characteristics and differences. Such studies could present accurate data that helps better manage different types of sports facilities.

Second, this study investigated factors of relationship marketing and their effects on commitment to relationship and intention to recommend. Therefore, future research should verify causal relationships between relationship marketing factors and other variables, thereby providing practical information for sports facilities.

Finally, relationship marketing factors should be categorized from the perspective of consumers and subsequently examined. Bonding, facility, price, and expertise should be divided into sub-categories before their effects on positive intention to recommend and commitment to relationship are analyzed. For example, future

studies could investigate the price range at which people begin to build an intention to make a positive recommendation or the types of activities or psychological status that influence bonding.

Conflict of Interest

To our knowledge, this study holds no conflicts of interest.

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About the author

Sheng Yen Lee holds a Ph. D. in Physical Education from Kyonggi University since 2008. Sheng Yen Lee has been a lecturer with the Department of Leisure Sports, Kyonggi University for 11 years, specializing in sports facility management, sports marketing, and golf.

Figure Legends

Figure 1. Research model

Figure 2. Confirmatory factor analysis of relationship marketing factors

Tables

Table 1. General participant characteristics (n = 377)

Variables	Classifications	Frequency (Number of participants)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	215	57.0
	Female	162	43.0
Age	20s	133	35.3
	30s	71	18.8
	40s	27	7.2
	50s and above	146	38.7
Experience	Less than 1 year	95	25.2
	1 year to less than 3 years	128	34.0
	3 years to less than 7 years	102	27.1
	7 years or more	52	13.8
Frequency/week	Less than 3 times	108	28.6
	3 to less than 5 times	189	50.1
	More than 5 times	80	21.2
Exercise time/visit	Less than 1 hour	46	12.2
	1 hour to less than 3 hours	252	66.8
	More than 3 hours	19	15.9

Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis for relation marketing factors

Relationship marketing factors				
	Facility	Bonding	Expertise	Price
Facility 1	.900	.005	-.002	.027
Facility 2	.888	-.065	-.009	.032
Facility 3	.698	.210	.026	-.077
Facility 4	.583	-.022	-.123	-.238
Bonding 2	.000	.902	-.012	.104
Bonding 1	.062	.811	-.019	-.034
Bonding 3	-.032	.716	-.035	-.134
Expertise 2	.106	-.018	.873	.094
Expertise 3	-.007	.019	.819	-.022
Expertise 1	-.089	.057	.794	-.101
Price 3	.020	.052	.054	.866
Price 1	-.021	-.020	-.113	.837
Price 2	.080	.007	.011	.824
KMO and Bartlett's test	KMO=.898, $\chi^2=2326.035$, $p<.001$			
Reliability	.848	.784	.800	.846

Table 3. Goodness-of-fit test for confirmatory factor analysis of relationship marketing factors

Q value	RMR	CFI	NFI	RMSEA
2.130	.043	.971	.947	.055

Note: RMR (root mean square residual), CFI (comparative fit index), NFI (normed fit index), RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation)

Table 4. Exploratory factor analysis for commitment to relationship and intention to recommend

Commitment to relationship	
Commitment to relationship 4	.835
Commitment to relationship 2	.814
Commitment to relationship 5	.773
Commitment to relationship 3	.737
Commitment to relationship 1	.730
KMO and Bartlett's test	KMO = .827, $\chi^2 = 705.030$, $p < .001$
Reliability	.835
Intention to recommend	
Intention to recommend 1	.880
Intention to recommend 2	.871
Intention to recommend 3	.865
KMO and Bartlett's test	KMO = .728, $\chi^2 = 460.423$, $p < .001$
Reliability	.843

Table 5. General characteristics of the interviewees of qualitative research

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation
1. Sports center user A	Female	29	Graduate student
2. Sports center user B	Male	35	Self-employed
3. Sports center user C	Male	41	Office worker
4. Sports center user D	Female	45	Housewife
5. Sports center user E	Male	55	Business owner
6. Sports center instructor F	Male	36	Golf instructor
7. Sports center manager G	Male	44	Sports center manager
8. Sports center manager H	Male	50	Sports center manager

Table 6. Correlation analysis among variables

Variables	Bonding	Expertise	Facility	Price	Commitment to relationship	Intention to recommend
Bonding	1					
Expertise	.523**	1				
Facility	.406**	.445**	1			
Price	.494**	.509**	.611**	1		
Commitment to relationship	.609**	.543**	.563**	.625**	1	
Intention to recommend	.523**	.563**	.624**	.633**	.703**	1

$p < .01$ **

Table 7. Results of hypothesis tests and goodness-of-fit test

	Path	Path coefficient	Standard error	CR	Results
H1	Bonding → Commitment to relationship	.390	.053	5.202***	Accepted
	Expertise → Commitment to relationship	.123	.054	1.772	Rejected
	Facility → Commitment to relationship	.196	.054	2.858**	Accepted
	Price → Commitment to relationship	.293	.053	3.642***	Accepted
H2	Bonding → Intention to recommend	.027	.072	.355	Rejected
	Expertise → Intention to recommend	.171	.068	2.579**	Accepted
	Facility → Intention to recommend	.238	.069	3.536***	Accepted
	Price → Intention to recommend	.126	.069	1.599	Rejected
H3	Commitment to relationship → Intention to recommend	.490	.134	4.852***	Accepted

$p < .001$ ***, $p < .01$ **

Note: CR (critical ratio), RMR (root mean square residual), CFI (comparative fit index), NFI (normed fit index), RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation)

Table 8. Categorization for qualitative interviews of sub-factors of relationship marketing

Factors of relationship marketing	Details
Bonding	Events for building rapport among customers
	Anniversary events for customers
	Comfortable relationship with staff
	Kind and hospitable service
	Efforts to obtain customer information
	Constant sharing of information
	Smooth communication with customers
Expertise	Expertise of instructors
	Expertise of staff
	Knowledge and experience in the relevant tasks
	Prompt problem-solving skills
Price	Adequacy of price compared with facilities
	Adequacy of price compared with services
	Price promotions and events
Facility	Safety of facilities
	State-of-the-art facilities
	Size of facilities
	Convenience of facilities (parking, rest, restaurants, and cafeteria)