
Mouth advertising, an effective tool for loyalty of sport customers, case study: women's health clubs in Mashhad

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to investigate the role of mouth advertising on loyalty with mediating variable of consumer purchasing behaviour of women's health clubs in Mashhad. The study was a descriptive-correlation research. The research population included all customers of 91 female health clubs in Mashhad, obtained through random sampling with appropriate allocation. To analysis of data, structural equation modelling was used in inferential statistics. The results showed that mouth advertising ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.05$), the alternative choices ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$), and commercial purchase ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$) had a significant effect on loyalty, while the re-presence ($\beta = 0.03$, $p < 0.67$) had no significant effect on loyalty. According to the results of the research, managers and owners of clubs can be recommend to provide services to clients showing their best performance so that existing customers attract new clients by mouth advertising in the city.

Keywords: consumer purchasing behaviour; loyalty; mouth advertising.

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1 Introduction

One of the characteristics of today's markets is their increasing competition. This competitiveness means requirement of significant competitive advantage resulting in the survival of the company in the market, and achieving such a competitive advantage is not possible in the absence of proper knowledge and implementation of marketing strategies and using effective and efficient marketing methods (Kotler and Armestrang, 2004). Marketers actively try to influence customers, but sometimes remain unaware of the fact that customers are constantly in communication with each other, and this is here that the most influence and impact on customers occur (Brown and Reingen, 1987). One of the most widely accepted concepts in consumer behaviour is WOM communication that plays an important role in shaping consumer behaviour and attitude (Tax and Christian, 2008). In an environment where confidence has fallen to agencies and advertisers, WOM advertising is a way to achieve competitive advantage (Abdolmaleki et al., 2016). WOM advertising has been described as a kind of informal communication about the features of a business or a product that can be exchanged in a community (Brown and Reingen, 1987). Influence on the ideas of others has considerable interest for supplier and service organisations (Jillian et al., 2007). It seems that WOM advertising is of utmost importance in the service sector. Compared with the commodity market, consumers in the service sector have more confidence to personal information resources, and compared with the commodity sector, WOM and verbal communication has a greater impact on the purchase decision, since unlike goods, services are intangibles and experimental and relying on WOM communication consumers try to reduce the level of perceived risk and uncertainty in purchase in the services sector (Mangold et al., 1999). Previous research shows that WOM advertising can significantly influence selection and continued cooperation with the customer (Gremier and Gwinner, 2000).

In this regard, Mazzarol et al. (2007) suggest that organisations are always looking for new ways to gain competitive advantage and WOM advertising can provide such an opportunity for organisations, since WOM advertising have a profound impact on attitudes and behaviour of customers (Mazzarol et al., 2007). WOM marketing has recently attracted a great deal of attention among practitioners. For example, several books tout WOM as a viable alternative to traditional marketing communication tools. One call it the world's most effective, yet least understood marketing strategy (Misner, 1999). Today, WOM advertising plays an important role in the distribution of information to other individuals. On the other hand, people feel WOM advertising is a reliable source for their decisions (Lim, 2006). Therefore, WOM advertising is an early indicator of the success in the future (Kim and Trail, 2011). WOM advertising is usually more important for services than goods. Services are experimental in nature and hence it is difficult to evaluate them before purchasing (Abdolmaleki et al., 2014a). Characteristics of services (such as intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability of production and consumption) make customers pay attention to the views of others before purchase. As a result, it is usually perceived risk when compared with purchase more services. So, customer service will have greater confidence in their WOM advertising in purchasing decisions (Wirtz and Chew, 2002). In the past, advertising has been WOM alone, face to face. But today, several methods including phone and internet have expanded its range (Abdolmaleki et al., 2015a).

The organisation of services for reasons such as: fewer customers, the continued use of their services, the importance of maintaining and strengthening long-term relationships with customers and closer and deeper relationships with clients and customers has led professionalism. Factors affecting customer loyalty are very important to this organisation (Jayawardhen et al., 2010). In today's competitive market and complex economy, the ability to attract and retain customer loyalty is a crucial factor for many organisations (Caruana, 2006). Fullerton (2003) considers the customer loyalty business consists of two parts,

- loyalty behaviour intention to repurchase commercial customer service and product provider, and they intend to maintain relationships with suppliers
- attitudinal loyalty level of psychological dependence and the customer's attitude towards service providers.

The consumer purchase behaviour depends on the interests and demands of his/her sport and the measures that the organisation thinks the exercise to protect this category of buyers (Abdolmaleki et al., 2015b). The organisation carried out a series of measures to attract and retain customers. The attitudes the sport organisations especially sport clubs take to influence customer's purchase are different (Funk et al., 2003). The first approaches about customer's loyalty are focused on repeat purchase with the chance of repeat purchase. But gradually, some researchers criticised this because they believed that repeat purchase is because of lack of other choices. To answer to these criticisms, researchers suggested to measure loyalty through attitude dimensions in addition to behaviour dimensions (Jayawardhen et al., 1997). To retain customer and create a proper condition to make them back is vital, which has special tools and policies. The most important tools for many marketers are constant communication with people, provision of good service and knowledge of the movements of competitors (Hassanzadeh, 2005).

In this regard, trademarks can be also pointed out that organisations conduct the broad and long-term investments for their trademarks particularly in the areas of WOM advertising to promote the sale of their products and services. They know that their market power is due to the brand's products or services and strong trademarks they will bring to customer loyalty (Taylor et al., 2004). To grow and expand their presence in the market, it is, therefore, essential that organisations evaluate the role of their trademarks in the formation of customer loyalty to develop their marketing strategies for the creation of a strong brand to maintain the loyal customers. Recent research reports indicate that perceived value by customers and loyalty to the brand of products or services provided by organisations and clubs depends on WOM advertising (Park and Kim, 2016, e.g., Chen and Chang, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2010; Zeithaml, 1988; Jialing et al., 2017). Litvin et al. (2008) have introduced WOM advertising as communications between the consumers of products or services of company and the purchase with the brand of organisation, which will lead to customers' reappearance. Alexa et al. (2015) in their research concluded that organisations before the production of new products with a focus on advertising can increase their sales and profitability after the introduction of new products that was similar to the results of Kim and Hanssens (2017), Alexa et al. (2015) and Kim and Hanssens (2017).

Naz (2014) in his study concluded that marketing managers through the use of positive WOM advertising can have loyal customers. Ntale et al. (2013) in his study found that WOM advertising has an impact on customer loyalty, so that WOM advertising leads to customer loyalty. On the other hand, customer loyalty leads to willingness to reuse the services. As Jun et al. (2006) and Liu (2008) state, levels of customer satisfaction directly affect customer loyalty, as well as the high levels of customer loyalty directly is effective on their future purchase behaviour.

Kisang and Hessup (2010) in his study found that satisfaction and loyalty of our customers tend to re-direct connection. Yoon et al. (2007), according to their findings, suggest that quality of service and positive WOM advertising often lead to reuse of the service by the organisation's clients.

One of the already centres in the country to provide sports services to customers is a health club. Health clubs provide services not only to the community but particularly also to women as half of the population of the society (Azarbakht et al., 2011). Afchangi et al. (2013) found that in the study of physical activity Housewives Surrey Activity was lower in women than in men and women's lifestyle (sedentary lifestyle and obesity, etc.) is a significant problem. Providing these services requires consideration of factors such as the organisation of WOM advertising is competitive, loyal and ultimately lead to repeat purchase. For example, Ian (2011) also expressed that WOM advertising was effective on the willingness of reappearance and will increase the loyalty of customers and thus will lead to the development of sport. Results like these can be good, and to be fully operational, it is suggested to managers and health club owners to focus on WOM advertising and give more emphasis and more attention to the cause of customer loyalty and ultimately ensure the club's financial profitability.

Several researchers in the field of marketing seek to determine the factors influencing customer loyalty and repeat purchase and the effect of WOM advertising on these factors. However, very little research has been conducted in our country, especially in the realm of sports, and these variables (especially WOM advertising) in internal investigations still look new. On the other hand, according to interviews with directors of health, finding aspects of marketing that affect customer loyalty and subsequent purchasing behaviour is

one of the challenges facing them. The few attempts have been performed to explain the relationship between these variables. This study aims to model the impact of WOM advertising on customers' purchase behaviour of women's health clubs in Mashhad with mediating variable of customer loyalty. This study is trying to answer the following fundamental question: Is advertising by WOM is an appropriate predictive variable of customer loyalty with mediating variable of customer purchase behaviour of women's health clubs in Mashhad?

2 Literature review and hypotheses development

H1: WOM advertising has an impact on sport customer loyalty.

Nowadays, WOM advertising as an important component in the marketing literature is taken into consideration (Westbrook, 1987). WOM advertising is the discussion of consumers in conjunction with their wonderful experiences of particular goods or services that they share with family members, friends and colleagues and encourage them to purchase the product or service. As well as, it refers to interpersonal communications among consumers in relation to the assessment and their personal experiences of an organisation or product or service (Jason et al., 2010; Yasin and Shamim, 2013). In the past few years, we have seen the increasing rate of WOM advertising to increase sales of products and customers' loyalty in the long run (Kim and Hanssens, 2017). In an environment where confidence to organisations and advertising has fallen, WOM communication is a way to achieve competitive advantage. Thomas et al. (2006) in a research concluded that the WOM advertising can affect the evaluation of products and services, and, in particular, customer loyalty. Ozcan and Ramaswamy (2004) also concluded in their study that WOM advertising affects not only the perceived value of products and services but also, particularly, the customer loyalty. So, considering the importance of WOM advertising in this study, this variable is considered as the predictor variables.

H2: Selection of alternative for presence has an impact on sport customer loyalty.

In the case of variable selection of alternative for presence, the sport consumers' behaviour and their attitudinal properties for practical planning should be used. In this context, the role and importance of sports in different aspects of motivation should be pointed out, which causes the presence of sport customers in health clubs instead of watching sports on television (Saatchian et al., 2014). Aminuddin and Lee (2008) stated that the physical facilities of clubs are one of the predictors of appearances in club and the loyalty of customers. Research results of Hall et al. (2010) and Lee et al. (2011) showed that factors affecting the choice and the presence in the sport clubs are attractiveness, security issues, health and wellness, prestige and comfort. It seems that these factors are different according to the type of club and the sport. In this study, the selection of alternative for presence includes the selection of alternative entertainments instead of attendance in health club and purchasing services through the media, such as television, radio and the internet.

H3: Commercial purchase has an impact on sport customer loyalty.

Commercial purchase includes all peripheral products that are produced or sold with name and logo of a club or brand through permission of club or league or proposed for sale (Kim and Trail, 2011). In the literature related to the purchase with brand in terms of experts, the ability to offer better prices than the competitors, the ability to gain more market share, the ability to maintain and finally the ability to make the loyal customers and reduce marketing costs of services sector are new matter in the marketing that should be considered (Chen, 2010). Purchase of a good brand directs the consumer choice, so that brand names in the space of a very complex market increase the customer loyalty (Raj et al., 2000). As Paul Flodik said, brand name is a set of images and perceptions in the mind of consumer. In this regard, Stephen King says that product is something that is made in a factory, but the brand is something that is made in the customer's mind and causes consumer loyalty (Oliver, 1997).

H4: Willingness for the reappearance has an impact on sport customer loyalty.

Willingness to appear again in health clubs and increasing the presence through registration, membership, etc., is one of the primary goals of sport managers and marketers. Increasing attendance is one of the most important objectives for sport organisations. Relationship quality has been linked to positively influencing purchase intention and actual purchases (Kim and Trail, 2011). One of the benefits of high-quality services is to achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty. De Souza (1989) in his studies found that 9 people of every 10 customers will not return if they are not satisfied from purchase, thereby keeping satisfied current customers increases the willingness for reappearance and thus will increase the customer loyalty (Saatchian et al., 2014). Lim (2006), Jun et al. (2006) and Liu (2008) argue that service quality directly affects customer satisfaction as well as high levels of customer satisfaction increase the willingness to reengage followed by increased customer loyalty. One factor that is important in the presence of sport customers is features related to the clubs and environment in which sport services are delivered. Dhurup et al. (2010) in their study investigated the relationship between seven dimensions of stadium features including beauty of equipment, space allocation, access to the stadium, seat comfort, quality of scoreboard, food services and cleanliness of stadium with the willingness of spectators to stay in sports area and found that increasing the quality of mentioned features has a significant relationship with their presence in the stadium. So, health club managers can also play their role more effectively in features related to health club.

3 Research methodology

This study is a descriptive-correlational research that has been done in the field in terms of data collection. The research population includes 91 female health clubs in Mashhad, obtained through random sampling with appropriate allocation. According to Cochran formula, a sample of 54 clubs and 340 female were selected as the final sample. To collect data, two standard questionnaires, i.e., Kim's purchase behaviour (CB) (2008), which consists of 10 questions and three components of commercial shopping = (three items), the alternative choice = (3 items) and the desire of re-presence = (4 items), and Holbrook loyalty questionnaire (2001) containing 15 questions and two behavioural

component = (4 items) and attitude = (11 items), were used. Validity of the form and the content of the questionnaire were confirmed by 10 professors and experts in sports management. The reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha was calculated to be 0.92. Structural equation modelling was used in inferential statistics.

3.1 Research findings

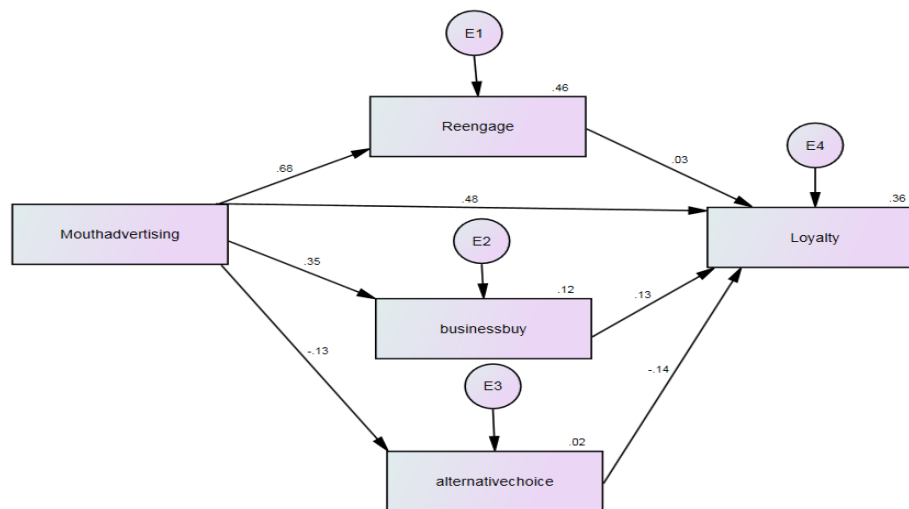
The results show that the proposed model fits to the data model. Using indicators such as Chi-squared and appropriate statistics, the fitted model is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Indicators of the model of intellectual capital

	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>NFI</i>	<i>NNFI</i>	<i>CFI</i>	χ^2/df
Measure	0.030	0.965	0.924	0.975	2.18
Criteria	Less than 0.05	Higher than 0.90	Higher than 0.90	Higher than 0.90	Less than 3
Interpretation	Well fitted	Well fitted	Well fitted	Well fitted	Well fitted

Figure 1 shows research model with standardised values of factor loadings of components.

Figure 1 Proposed model (see online version for colours)



Chi-square = 9.184, Degrees of freedom = 3, Probability level = 0.027.

As can be seen, WOM advertising ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.05$), the alternative choices ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$) and commercial purchase ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$) had a significant effect on loyalty, whereas the re-presence ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = 0.67$) had no significant effect on loyalty. The standardised impact factor of WOM advertising on purchasing behaviour and customer loyalty variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Standardised values of factor loadings

	<i>Mouth advertising</i>	<i>Business buy</i>	<i>Alternative choice</i>	<i>Reengage</i>
Business buy	0.350	0.000	0.000	0.000
Alternative choice	-0.126	0.000	0.000	0.000
Reengage	0.682	0.000	0.000	0.000
Loyalty	0.567	0.128	-0.136	0.032

4 Discussion and conclusion

Since several studies have shown that WOM advertising attracts clients and customers' loyalty and, therefore, makes customers repeat their purchase, this study investigates the role of WOM advertising on loyalty with mediating variable of consumer purchasing behaviour of women's health clubs in Mashhad.

The output of Amos software showed WOM advertising ($\beta = 0.48$), alternative choice ($\beta = 0.14$) and commercial shopping ($\beta = 0.13$) have an impact on loyalty, but the re-presence has no impact on loyalty. Perhaps, one explanation for this finding is the low quality of communication with customers by managers of health clubs. On the components of purchase behaviour, it can be said that WOM advertising with the highest beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.48$) has had the greatest impact on customer loyalty. In other words, the impact of WOM advertising on loyalty is fit enough with mediating variable of purchasing behaviour of customers. The results showed that WOM advertising had a significant effect on customer loyalty in female members of health clubs. This means that WOM advertising can be a good predictor of customer loyalty in women's health clubs. These results are consistent with findings of Naz (2014), Mazzarol et al. (2007) and Brown et al. (2005). On the other hand, Carvajal et al. (2012) states that customers who receive information through WOM advertising are more loyal than others who receive information from traditional media. So, it can be said that WOM advertising can affect customer loyalty. This mutual relationship of WOM advertising and customer loyalty is very important. On the other hand, results showed that willingness to reengage the customer loyalty will not affect women's health clubs; this is not consistent with findings of Lim (2006). This may be because of differences in study population, the high cost and low-income families, clubs, club location and perhaps cultural affiliations. The findings also showed that the commercial purchase affects loyalty. This is consistent with results of the study by Kim and Trail (2010) and Bee and Cahle (2006). Trail and Kim believe that commercial purchase in the name of the club is one of the infrastructures of WOM advertising. Therefore, it is suggested to identify and use those skills of customer relationship management that are related to commercial shopping and can help to maintain and retain customers and make them loyal to the club. Research by Bee and Cahle (2006) showed that the use of relationship marketing will increase commercial shopping and, therefore, increases customer loyalty. So, clubs can use this opportunity to increase purchases of commercial customers. However, Kim and Trail (2010) believe that the effect of commercial purchase on loyalty is subject to a series of special conditions such as income level of the customer. The results showed that alternative choice has effect on the loyalty. This is consistent with findings of Kim and Trail (2011).

They introduced alternative of purchase sports as the most important constraints and incentives. It is noteworthy that alternative choice has the negative impact on purchase behaviour. In this study, alternatives included shopping, restaurants, cinema, internet, play and study. Since WOM advertising can have a significant impact on the alternative choice, managers of women's health clubs in Mashhad are recommended to use strategies such as WOM, increase communication quality, send private message to customers to creating club's website and discounts to loyal customers to boost alternative choice in health clubs.

Finally, the research findings suggest that WOM advertising has an impact on the willingness of re-presence. This result is consistent with findings of Kisang and Hessup (2010), Liu (2008), Yoon et al. (2007) and Jun et al. (2006). In view of the findings, it should be understood that to increase the willingness of re-presence in customers, the customers should be committed. Commitment should be considered an important element in the relationship between customers and clubs, because as Bee and Cahle (2006) state, sports customers are faced with competitors from the moment of the beginning to the end of their relationship with sport organisations (purchases and advertising by WOM). Effective communication is the only way to attract customers and to make them faithful. Clubs can use this opportunity to maintain current customers and attract existing customers, providing appropriate facilities, lead customer-focused programs and create knowledge and information they need through different channels of communication, and finally to enhance the quality of communication between clients and increase the time of presence of customers.

Generally, WOM advertising is one of the most important factors and the foundation and factor of increasing customer loyalty. So, it seems that the emphasis on advertising by WOM and encouraging people to use the services of clubs can motivate people to participate in clubs. Accordingly, managers of sports clubs should enhance loyalty and desire to attend in customers, and take steps to improve and strengthen WOM advertising. One of the most important topics in this field is service quality, so that WOM advertising can be effective only in the first time to attract customers to the clubs. After the first appearance and use of services, quality of service is crucial to reengage customers. The results of this study show that the loyalty of WOM advertising affects loyalty and then on purchasing behaviour of customers of health clubs. According to the results of the research, managers and owners of clubs can be recommended to provide services to clients showing their best performance so that existing customers attract new clients by WOM advertising in the city. This can lead to customer loyalty and finally, in the long run will lead to increased profitability. According to the fact that WOM advertising is a significant predictor variable for both loyalty and purchase behaviour, if club managers want to provide opportunity of attracting new customers in lower cost and in a shorter time, it is suggested to have investment in the components of WOM advertising. However, owing to permanent changes in the market and the addition of other competitors, sports centres, in particular women's health clubs, should strive to improve relations and considering the components in different parts of WOM advertising, draw satisfaction in customers, and ultimately increase customer loyalty and create repurchase intention in customers. Given that customer satisfaction levels directly affect the customer loyalty, and finally, high levels of customer loyalty directly affect the customer's willingness of re-presence, it is proposed that health clubs for women

maintain and increase the loyalty of their customers, in particular, by sending gifts, gift card and loyalty cards as well as providing discounts and special services to the holders of these cards.

5 Implications

In this study, the researcher presented a model to investigate the impact of WOM advertising on customer loyalty mediated by customer buying behaviour. This study helps to increase the research literature on the future studies, because there are few studies in relation to advertising by WOM in the field of sport management. Thus, the development of conceptual model will lead to better understanding of the relationship of mouth advertising and customer loyalty and sport consumer behaviour. In this study, first, frequent assessment of customers causes their long-term sustaining and, on the other hand, providing quality services improves and develops WOM communications with loyal customers, and thus causes the expansion of services and increases diversity and skills to improve performance of club coaches.

Second, sport managers now more than ever are interested in building relationships with their customers. Therefore, suggestions of this research could be an important factor for their success in the field of sports and wellness. So, managers and officials of health clubs to meet the needs of their customers as well as achieve the interests and objectives should use strategies such as relationship marketing to provide positive WOM advertising and, most importantly, the reappearance and loyalty of their customers.

Finally, the highlights of this study are that when sport customers understand a good relationship with health club managers and officials, they have greater willingness to participate in the club, positive WOM advertising and use of services and goods of their favourite club that this reflects the strong impact of the quality of communications between the club and the customers.

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