

Brand Community Dynamics as a Basis for Competitive Strategy

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The fitness industry is one characterized by fads and failures. With the pervasiveness of technology, the range of offerings and accompanying competitive strategies have only increased. However, lasting success remains elusive. This work uses a grounded theory approach through qualitative exploration of community members' descriptions of their experiences combined with quantitative analysis of survey data. A conceptual model is proposed and tested through the application of PLS Modelling. An examination of how one competitor has overcome the challenges to endure for decades is presented. Findings indicate that inclusivity, community, and providing financial opportunity are critical elements of the successful strategy.

Keywords: brand love, sense of community, brand communities, branded fitness, partial least squares structural equations modelling

INTRODUCTION

Branded fitness programs are popular among consumers. These programs often feature community-building opportunities that allow users to interact. For instance, Peloton®, a relatively new offering, has a virtual component that simulates a physical group setting as the users' exercise. Myriad others have come and gone over the years. So, what differentiates programs that demonstrate longevity versus those that are merely fads?

We utilize Zumba Fitness for our investigation. Although Zumba Fitness is a single brand, it is a good representation of successful branded fitness programs due to longevity of over 20 years, global reach of 180 countries, and 15 million weekly participants (Zumba® Fitness, 2024). Zumba has also been seen as a fitness program that encourages inclusivity (Rivera-Rideau, 2024) and not only as an activity for health and fitness at all levels. Zumba classes are an affordable exercise regime that reaches several socio-economic layers (Wiltshire, 2019), and genders (Schaillée et al. 2021). Diversity comes in many forms, and Zumba Fitness can help build a sense of community while working out (Neary, 2024). Besides end users, Zumba's customer-centric strategies pay particular attention to instructors (also known as brand ambassadors), a key distinctive element in their programs (Babu and Namratha, 2023). The company provides a major financial opportunity to those instructors who are also considered partners. Despite this perspective, instructors are

not bound by any contractual obligation to continue to purchase licenses, yet the brand continues to thrive. With this in mind, our primary research question is “What drives Zumba Fitness’ continued success in the highly competitive fitness industry?”

Through analysis of a global fitness program brand, this work seeks to contribute to the research by exploring potential factors that influence brand and brand community success. Specifically, the relationships between purchase intentions and brand love, SOC, and attitude toward fees are examined through qualitative study and subsequently tested with quantitative methods to answer our primary research question: what is the driving force of purchase intentions that stem from brand community membership?

This paper comprises two studies. The first is a qualitative study that provides guidance and information that supported the second study’s design, culminating in a quantitative PLS-SEM analysis. Combining qualitative methods and PLS-SEM is an approached noted for strengthening research design and findings (Kurtaliqui et al., 2024). Qualitative study data are derived from autobiographical profiles of Zumba consumers, and quantitative study data are from a survey hand-collected from Zumba consumers. The results indicate SOC mediates the relationship between brand love and purchase intentions. Although the literature continues to examine these constructs’ roles in various phenomena, the relationship between brand love and SOC has received relatively little attention in scholarly research and findings are inconsistent.

The structure for this manuscript starts with some background on brand communities and a description of the first study. Qualitative analysis, interpretation and findings are then presented. The text continues with a brief review of relevant SOC and brand love research, and a conceptual model is proposed and tested. Lastly, results are presented, followed by a discussion of the implications, limitations and opportunities for future research.

Brand Communities

Brand communities are ‘non-geographically bound communit[ies], based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand’ (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). The foundation of the brand community literature is built upon the sociology studies of Durkheim (1915/1965) and Weber (1922/1978). From this foundation, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) noted brand community members feel an ‘intrinsic connection’ and a ‘collective sense of difference from others not in the community.’ In addition, community members experience a sense of moral obligation to other members and the community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) clarified the definition of brand communities by considering the connections among customers, the brand, the product, and the company. These connections can occur in several formats, including online and in-person interactions (Devasagayam and Buff, 2008; Santos et al. 2022). From these definitions, it is apparent that Zumba® consumer(s) form a brand community. The Zumba brand communicates directly to consumer(s), who purchase the brand’s main product, instructor licenses. The consumer(s) are connected through several formats including social media, live events, and an annual convention.

Early brand community studies investigated typical marketing relationships such as customer empowerment (Cova and Pace, 2006), value creation (Schau et al., 2009) and brand loyalty in mainstream brands (Felix, 2012). More recently, the literature is including specific target or specialty groups such as children and adolescents (Flurry et al., 2014), sentiment analysis as Facebook impacts the brand community’s engagement with the brand (Razi et al., 2019) or the effect of personality and social traits on luxury clothing design and brand loyalty in surrounding communities (Monfared et al., 2021). We build upon this trend with the exploration of the Zumba brand community.

STUDY 1—QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

Methodology

Developing grounded theory through qualitative data analysis is appropriate in areas for which limited research exists (Charmaz, 2006). Branded fitness programs are pervasive in practice but have received limited attention from marketing scholars, so we utilize a grounded theory approach to explore the success of such programs. The data were gathered from a sample of the written autobiographical profiles of

Zumba® consumers. Given the colloquial language and tone used in the autobiographies, we utilized United States consumers to avoid confounding effects of translation errors on our analysis. The purpose of the analysis is to better understand what draws consumers to Zumba, not what is disliked by non-consumers, so although these consumers' profiles may present unbalanced accounts in favor of Zumba, this provides evidence about what consumers like about the fitness program. Given that consumers personalize the profiles as they so choose, it is reasonable to expect that they actually believe Zumba offers the appeal described in their profiles. These self-expressions provide the foundation for our qualitative exploration.

The official Zumba® Fitness website features a search function through which Zumba® instructors, the consumers of the fitness program, are listed. By creating a profile webpage for the site, instructors can demonstrate their views of the fitness program and promote themselves. These profiles thusly serve the dual function of representing the consumers' feelings about Zumba® and encouraging potential students to join the instructors' classes. Through an interval-based stratified random sampling method, 10 consumers from each state were selected for a final sample of 500. Interval size was determined by the total number of consumers listed in each state. Consumers' profiles were transcribed into text format and then uploaded to Atlas.ti, a qualitative data management software that facilitates the organization and coding of text ("ATLAS.ti," 1991-2014).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In the initial analysis, a representative set of 10 consumer profiles was reviewed for recurring meanings by the authors. This review resulted in a list of 30 keywords. Next, the authors presented the 30 keywords to a panel of eight impartial business research experts participating in an unrelated colloquium. Through discussion, the experts agreed on conceptual groupings of the keywords and the terms designated to represent those groupings. Hence, all codes included in the analysis of the full sample resulted from consensus among the research experts.

In the second analysis stage, semantic level or "open" codes were assigned to identify the unit of meaning of each attitudinal statement from all 500 consumer profiles. Statements were assigned as many codes as they reflected. Following the methods of Charmaz (2006), only codes that occurred 50 times or more were retained for further analysis to ensure that anomalous statements did not convolute interpretation. The lone exception to this policy was made for comments reflecting the code "Addiction" because these comments reflected such a strong view of or connection to Zumba®.

Following qualitative research protocols, inductive thematic analysis was applied in the third stage to develop higher-level axial codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this stage, seven marketing professors were provided the list of "open" codes and examples of exemplary attitudinal statements. The professors were then asked to group the "open" codes by conceptual relatedness to create axial codes. These axial codes represented the emerging themes of the overall data. Finally, the authors linked these axial codes to constructs from extant theory to illustrate consumers' perceptions of the branded fitness program.

Findings

A cursory examination of a handful of consumers' profiles offers an inside glimpse of their perceptions. Table 1 provides a few examples of the profiles. To maintain anonymity, each example has been labeled with a combination of the postal abbreviation of the state of origin and a number. In addition, consumers' names were changed.

TABLE 1
EXAMPLES OF PARTICIPANTS' PROFILES (UNEDITED TRANSCRIPTIONS)

Example Profile 1
Hi, I'm Jenny and I love teaching Zumba® classes. The reason is simple: Every class feels like a party! Come join me and you'll see what I mean. You don't even have to know how to dance. Just move your body and follow my lead. It's easy! Come try it, I guarantee you will have a blast! I look forward to meeting you!
Example Profile 2
I will be the first to admit that I never went to a gym outside of school until last year. Now, I can be found in the gym several times a week either instructing a class or attending a class. Zumba® has changed me for the better, and I am proud to say I have lost almost 50 pounds thanks to this amazing program! If you give it a try, I know you will enjoy the party. My Zumba® story began in March of 2011 when I attended a Zumbathon for AIDS Resource. I really did not know what Zumba® was, and I was the shy participant in the back of the room that evening. I had no idea at the time how Zumba® would become a huge part of my life, but the experience has been very positive. I received my B1 Certification in August 2011, and continue to attend trainings as the opportunity happens. I am now certified in Aqua Zumba®, Zumba® Gold, Zumba® Toning, Zumba® Gold-Toning, Zumba® Sentao, and Zumbatomic. I am also certified by the American Red Cross for First AID, as well as CPR/AED. My most memorable experience was being able to instruct a Zumba® Gold class at the Assisted Living Home in which my grandmother is a resident at. Currently, I am teaching Aqua Zumba® in Harrisburg and Camp Hill. I plan to expand my class offerings later this fall. Please contact me to learn more, and I hope to see you in class soon!

As demonstrated in Table 1, a wide variety of communication patterns emerge. Profiles vary in elaboration. Some provide specific information about the classes offered, and some are more generally about the consumer's experience. The variety in the profiles also displays the different types of objectives the messages provide. Some are more informational, whereas others are more persuasive. Similarly, some emphasize the Zumba® program while others focus on the consumer.

Nine (9) recurring codes emerged from the content analysis of 500 profiles: (1) brand identification, (2) devotion, (3) addiction, (4) fun, (5) fitness benefits, (6) emotional benefits, (7) simplicity, (8) welcoming and (9) business communication. Table 2 lists these codes and examples of supporting attitudinal statements. The following definitions were used when grouping attitudinal statements: Brand Identification is seen as the positive way consumers perceive Zumba®. At the same time, Devotion demonstrates as a profound dedication towards it through statements using terms such as love or passion. Addiction goes beyond the previous two definitions and shows psychological dependence. Fun refers to entertaining or enjoyable situational statements. Two codes address benefits: Fitness Benefits or gains on physical health and Emotional Benefits of enhancements on spiritual condition. Simplicity accounts for Zumba® being easy to understand, while Welcoming deals with the warm and comfortable environment Zumba offers. Lastly, Business Communication is evidenced by Zumba® consumers transmitting information about their offerings.

TABLE 2
CODES AND ATTITUDINAL STATEMENTS

Code	Supporting Attitudinal Statements (unedited excerpts)
Brand Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Zumba® is a lifestyle.</i> – <i>Zumba® has been my life ever since,</i> – <i>If you ask my friends and family to say five words to describe me, I guarantee you ZUMBA® is going to be one of them.</i>
Devotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>I honestly love teaching Zumba®, The passion I have for this amazing fitness program is like no other</i> – <i>In 2010, I discovered Zumba® and I fell completely in love with it.</i> – <i>I would love to share my passion with you! Zumba® Love</i>
Addiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>I went to my first Zumba® class in April 2011 and I have been hooked ever since</i> – <i>Hi, I'm Christy and I'm a Zumbaholic.</i> – <i>Hey there, I am Monette and I am addicted to Zumba® Fitness!!!</i>
Fun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Every class feels like a party!</i> – <i>I guarantee you will have a blast!</i> – <i>There's nothing more fun than smiling, laughing... all at the same time!</i>
Fitness Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>This program has let me get fit and stay fit</i> – <i>I am proud to say I have lost almost 50 pounds thanks to this amazing program!</i> – <i>What I love about Zumba® is how you can get an incredible work out without even realizing it</i>
Emotional Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>-Zumba® has introduced me to so many amazing people and blessed me with many new friendships</i> – <i>It really changes you from the inside out and your always wanting more</i> – <i>I strive to help everyone get through depression, stress, or everyday life issues that we all go through</i>
Simplicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>You don't even have to know how to dance</i> – <i>Just move your body and follow my lead. It is that easy!</i> – <i>Zumba® is a simple... workout</i>
Welcoming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Come to one of my classes</i> – <i>Even my 7 year old daughter says to me "Come on mom, Lets do Zumba®"</i> – <i>As long as you're moving and smiling I will be one happy instructor</i>
Business Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Savings! Savings! Savings! Use my discount code NEWYOU to save 10% off the hottest Zumba® styles! Click the link below and enter my discount code NEWYOU at Checkout!</i> – <i>Check out my class schedule to so that you can join my party!!!</i> – <i>I am available to teach Zumbatomic® in elementary schools, to do Zumba® private parties, and I am licensed in all the specialties!</i>

In the second phase of content analysis, conceptually related codes were grouped into axial codes. Finally, these axial codes were mapped onto constructs. Occurrence percentages for open codes were calculated on the basis of the number of statements that reflected the code divided by the total number of codes assigned over the course of content analysis. Table 3 shows the results of this process.

TABLE 3
ZUMBA® CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION OF THE PROGRAM AND EMERGING THEMES

Open Code	Axial Code	Construct	Occurrences
1. Brand Identification	--	Brand Love	92 (4.15%)
2. Devotion	Commitment	Brand Love	244 (11.02%)
3. Addiction	Commitment	Brand Love	28 (1.26%)
4. Fun	Needs Fulfillment	SOC	445 (20.09%)
5. Fitness Benefits	Needs Fulfillment	SOC	247 (11.15%)
6. Emotional Benefits	Emotional Connection	SOC	81(3.66%)
7. Simplicity	Membership	SOC	191(8.62%)
8. Welcoming	Membership	SOC	493 (22.26%)
9. Business Communication	--	Attitude towards Fees	394 (17.79%)

DISCUSSION

The cumulative findings of the content analysis of consumers' profiles were enlightening. As expected, fitness benefits were reported repeatedly, but it is clear that Zumba® Fitness means much more to instructors than getting some exercise. For example, the profiles allude to a recreational aspect (Fun), the role of the brand in the consumers' lives (Brand Identification and Addiction), and the inclusivity of the group (Welcoming and Simplicity). In addition, references to an emotional bond with the brand (Devotion and Emotional Benefits) are frequently noted.

The majority of codes were related to the construct of SOC. Fewer codes related to the constructs of attitude towards fees and brand love but both occur with similar frequency. Although fees and love for the brand are on the minds of Zumba consumers, they write most frequently about the community of Zumba. In addition, the in-person events seem to serve as a potential source of differentiation/community-building. This consumer emphasis on community motivates our quantitative examination.

Hypotheses Development

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) seeks to explain behavior as a result of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). It has been used to study brand management related concepts such as brand love, attitude towards the brand, and purchase intentions (Hegner et al., 2017; Toldos-Romero and Orozco-Gómez 2015). This study builds upon the TPB model by examining SOC, brand love and attitude towards fees as relevant attitudes that could impact purchase intentions for the Zumba brand.

Sense of Community and Brand Love

Literature in psychology (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) and sociology (Durkheim 1915, 1965; Weber 1922, 1978) has contributed significantly to the development of the theory of sense of community. While the meaning of the phrase sense of community (SOC) may seem apparent, a specific use of the word "community" must be established to fully define SOC. Community in this context refers to the quality of

human connection without consideration of physical location (Gusfield, 1975). Building on this context, SOC can be summarized as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 9). The four factors of this construct are (1) membership, (2) influence, (3) needs fulfillment, and (4) emotional connection.

Membership is “a feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore has a right to belong” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p.9). For SOC, membership provides “emotional safety” which creates the group familiarity required for shared understanding among group members (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Influence follows, and is a joint connection between the consumer and the community. Therefore, the member will experience feelings that they can impact the group, and the group will simultaneously impact the consumer. Consumers are drawn to communities by this mutual exchange (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Additionally, needs fulfillment is the affirmation of the consumer’s choice to participate in the community. Community membership produces a reward for the consumer, such as social status, increased success, and increased resources. Although the reward can vary, the reward must be present or members would disassociate from the community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Lastly, emotional connection is a multi-faceted idea that includes both the quantity and quality of interactions such as, shared history, current interactions, and spiritual bonds (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

SOC has been applied in a variety of contexts over time. For example, church members, science-fiction fans, school children, and firefighters are just a few group members who reported feeling SOC (Peterson, Speer, and McMillan, 2008). SOC has been examined in the context of customer loyalty programs and financial services (Fraering and Minor, 2006; Rosenbaum, Ostrom, and Kuntze, 2005). Additionally, members of a brand community also experience SOC (Swimberghe et al., 2018). More recently, virtual experiences of SOC related concepts have also been studied. There are two examples of consumer motivation to buy products via Facebook on consumer-to-consumer communities (Trehan and Sharma, 2020) and why consumers engage in online brand communities (Van Heerden and Wiese, 2021). The SOC construct has been tied to virtual and in-person settings linked directly to perceptions of quality and revenue generation (Bunker, 2014). Considering this range of situations, its inclusion in this study seems justified.

Conceptualizations of and means of operationalizing brand love and related constructs have varied widely (Palusuk et al., 2019). However, the results of numerous studies have proven consistent. Researchers have repeatedly found support for relationships between brand love, the highest form of emotional bond between a consumer and a brand, and practical outcomes such as product purchase intentions, increased spending, word of mouth behavior, consumer-brand relationship building, and brand loyalty (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Bagozzi et al., 2016; Batra et al., 2012; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carlson et al., 2008; Castaño and Perez, 2014; Cho, Fiore, and Yu, 2018; Fetscherin, 2014; Tran, Muldrow, and Ho, 2021).

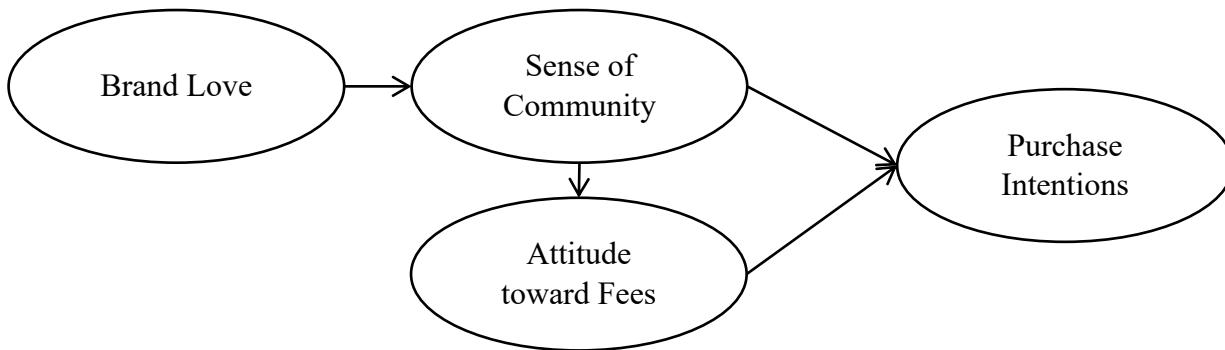
What is less certain is how brand love relates to other relevant phenomena, such as SOC. Just as brand love has been characterized and operationalized in an inconsistent manner across the literature, its relationships with other constructs have been depicted in many ways. Specifically, SOC has been alternately indicated as an antecedent to, the result of, and moderator of conceptual relationships of brand love and related constructs (Carlson et al., 2008; Velmurugan and Thalhath, 2021; Wang et al., 2018). The nature of this relationship is particularly relevant for brands that inspire group activity such as brand communities.

In the context of brand communities, consumers maintain relationships with the brand and the group (Snyder and Newman, 2019). So, either “node” could be the initial draw for the consumer. That is to say consumers could be drawn to the group due to some characteristic of the people in the group or some specific benefit conveyed by membership therein, or due to an appreciation or affinity for the underlying brand (Haverila et al., 2022). Logically, though, it seems consumers who, over time, do not feel some direct tie to the brand would interact with the other group members through some form of engagement other than those rooted in the brand. Drawing from the qualitative analysis above, consumers’ Brand Love should contribute to all facets of SOC. Brand Identification will drive consumers to feel a bond and shared identity with others in the community (i.e. membership and emotional connection). Further, interactions with the community will satisfy the consumer’s urge and/or Addiction to demonstrate and celebrate appreciation for

the brand as well as to engage with the brand itself (i.e. need fulfillment). Lastly, to the extent that a consumer feels Devotion to the brand, their expression of those feelings will likely affect others' perceptions of the brand (i.e. influence). Hence, we propose that brand love should serve as an antecedent to SOC related to brand communities.

Based on this literature review and our qualitative findings that community is central to the relationships among brand love, SOC, attitude towards fees, and purchase intentions we propose the following hypotheses which motivate the conceptual model shown in Figure I.

FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL MODEL



H1: *A consumer's love for a brand will be positively associated with that consumer's SOC.*

H2: *A consumer's SOC will be positively associated with that consumer's purchase intentions.*

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, intention and behavior are linked via attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Significant positive correlations between price and brand loyalty have been previously found (Cestare and Ray, 2019; Wijaya and Aprianingsih, 2015). In our model, we are testing if purchase intentions can be directly impacted by attitude toward fees.

H3: *A consumer's attitude toward fees will be positively associated with that consumer's purchase intentions.*

TPB indicates that the antecedents to purchase intentions will be correlated which implies the potential for mediating effects such that the influence of one antecedent could flow through another. Hence, we propose two mediation hypotheses that could impact purchase intention.

H4: *SOC mediates the relationship between a consumer's love for the brand and that consumer's purchase intentions.*

H5: *Attitude toward fees mediates the relationship between SOC and that consumer's purchase intentions.*

STUDY 2—QUANTITATIVE EXAMINATION

Methodology

Data was collected during an annual Zumba® convention attended by thousands of global Zumba consumers. All convention attendees had made branded fitness purchases directly from Zumba, differentiating convention attendees from the average gym participants who may be taking Zumba classes at their gym but are not making purchases directly from Zumba. We administered and collected surveys in a face-to-face format. 155 Zumba consumers initially completed the questionnaires. After reviewing for

inconsistencies, we found five observations to be unreliable based on incomplete or inaccurate (e.g. verifiably false) responses given, and we excluded those observations. The final sample included 150 which is within the guidelines for the methods employed here (Hair et al., 2018).

Table 4 displays the questionnaire items included in the survey. To measure brand love, we utilized an adapted scale based on Batra et al. (2012) and Bagozzi et al. (2016). SOC was gauged using the scale developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Attitude towards Fees was measured with a 5-item scale adapted from the work of Maddox (1976). Lastly, purchase intentions were measured with a 5-item scale adapted from (Grewal et al., 1998). All were presented with Likert scale response options.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed for analysis because this method is appropriate for exploring relationships among constructs compared to Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM) which is appropriate for confirmation of theory (Hair et al., 2017). SmartPLS-3 software (Ringle et al., 2015) was utilized to estimate PLS-SEM.

TABLE 4
QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS

Sense of Community	
1	I feel like a member of this group.
2	I feel connected to this group.
3	I can get what I need in this group.
4	I have a good bond with others in this group.
5	People in this group are good at influencing each other.
6	I feel like I belong to this group.
7	I get ideas from other people in this group.
8	My opinion matters to other people in this group.
9	I am part of this group.
10	I have a say about what goes on in this group.
11	This group helps me fulfil my needs.
12	I fit in with this group.
Attitude towards Fees	
1	ZIN fees are too high.
2	I am happy with the price of ZIN fees.
3	ZIN fees are worth the money.
4	ZIN fees are a good buy.
5	ZIN fees are too high for the quality.
Purchase Intentions	
1	I intend to continue to pay for Zumba Instructor Network membership.
2	I am willing to continue to pay for Zumba Instructor Network membership.
3	I will definitely continue to pay for Zumba Instructor Network membership.
4	I plan to pay for Zumba Instructor Network membership in the future.
5	The probability I will continue to pay for Zumba Instructor Network membership is high.
Brand Love	
1	You have a feeling of desire for time spent on Zumba.
2	You are willing to spend a lot of time to get the most out of Zumba.
3	Zumba is inherently important.
4	You feel emotionally connected to the Zumba instructors' group.
5	You experience anxiety at the thought of living without Zumba.
6	You frequently find yourself thinking about Zumba.
7	Zumba meets your needs perfectly.

8	Zumba will be a part of your life for a long time to come.
9	Zumba makes you look like what you want to look.
10	Zumba helps you relax.
11	You hold your evaluations of Zumba strongly.
12	Zumba meets your expectations.
13	You have done a lot of things with Zumba in the past.
14	Zumba is an important part of yourself.

RESULTS

First, indicator loadings were examined. The indicators represent the questionnaire items as listed and numbered in Table 4. The indicators of SOC 5, attitude towards fees 4 and 5, and brand love 6 and 11, were eliminated because the loadings were below .70. After elimination of these, the remaining indicators all had loadings above the established threshold of .708 (Hair et al., 2019). Next, internal consistency reliability was examined. Based on this examination, the following redundant items were eliminated, purchase intentions 4 and 5 and SOC 3 and 7. Following elimination of redundant items, internal consistency reliability was met as ρ_A values ranged from .87 to .95, except for SOC with a value of .954, which was deemed acceptable as it did not significantly exceed the threshold of .95 (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015). Convergent validity was achieved based on AVE values of .60 to .79 which is greater than the threshold of .50. Discriminant validity was achieved based on the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio, the most rigorous measure of discriminant validity, as all values are below the cut-off of 0.85 with a range of .42 to .64 (Henseler et al., 2015).

To test for statistically significant relationships in the PLS-SEM model, we performed a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 sub-samples. The results support each hypothesized relationship and, therefore, the proposed model. Collinearity is not an issue as VIFs are below the established threshold. R-squared values of .404, .328, and .237 for purchase intentions, SOC, and attitude towards fees, respectively, which demonstrates adequate explanatory power. All relationships have predictive power and are significant at the 95% level or greater as shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5
PATH COEFFICIENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Paths	Coefficients	p-values
Attitude towards Fees -> Purchase Intentions	0.425	0.000
Brand Love -> SOC	0.573	0.000
SOC -> Attitude towards Fees	0.487	0.000
SOC -> Purchase Intentions	0.308	0.020

DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The distinction between Zumba and other, shorter-lived fitness brands is worthy of examination. This analysis suggests that the brand's competitive advantage may derive from the effectiveness of its community-building efforts. Between the ease with which a broad range of individuals can access the brand, both in terms of physical presence and low barriers to participation, and the connections among individuals the brand facilitates, Zumba has, in essence, built a global network over the past decades.

Qualitative exploration revealed the majority of Zumba consumers' autobiographical statements were related to SOC. Although statements related to attitude towards fees and brand love also occurred, the community aspect of the Zumba Fitness program was at the forefront of consumers' minds. Quantitative examination solidified this finding, as evidence supports that SOC mediates the relationship between brand love and purchase intentions for Zumba consumers.

Brand love has been researched in several contexts and industries. Yet it seems there is still room to learn about relationships with other variables, mediating constructs and antecedents. For instance, Yasin and Shamim (2013) studied how brand love mediated purchase intentions and word of mouth. They found that brand experience, brand trust and affective commitment impact purchase intentions. But more interestingly, they also found that purchase intentions predict brand love and word of mouth. According to our study's findings, it seems that the order of the relationship between brand love and SOC matters. The results of this work suggest that when examined together in the context of consumer brands, brand love may be considered an antecedent to SOC. Furthermore, SOC could be seen as an important link between an emotional response to the brand and important action-oriented responses such as purchase intentions. Lastly, the combined influence of these two constructs impact consumers' perceptions of price or fees, affecting purchase intentions.

Managerial Implications and Future Research

In a practical sense, these findings highlight the importance for marketers to develop appealing brand identities but that they must go a step further to build strong communities around their brands. The implication is that simply offering a good product may not generate sales to the extent possible if consumers are not compelled to engage with the brand or feel disconnected to other brand supporters. Likewise, given the plethora of consumer groups supported by social media, this research demonstrates that a company-sponsored brand community will only thrive if the underlying brand succeeds in bringing people together.

For marketers engaged in establishing a new brand, this suggests an approach that puts the development of a community of product users and brand devotees at the heart of the process. These findings suggest new brands should strive to be "Born Communal" meaning they should utilize a community-development as a strategy from the start. This applies in the current context of branded fitness programs but should logically extend to other types of products and brands.

Regarding the context of this research, the specific industry it is based may be seen as a limitation. However, the underlying brand was chosen intentionally as Zumba stands out for its longevity in the highly competitive fitness industry. Nonetheless, future research should examine the conceptual relationships described here in other industries and in other cultures where brand-based SOC may manifest itself differently.

The sampling method employed for the qualitative study is a potential limitation as it generates equal representation of all U.S. states which may not reflect the actual proportion of Zumba consumers for each state. We do not believe this materially impacts our analysis, but we acknowledge some states may be over- or under-represented. Future research could address this through different sampling methods.

Finally, an additional area for future study is investigating which subfactors of brand love affect SOC most. This could equip brand community managers to cater to members with specific feelings towards the brand. This curated experience may positively impact the community and maximize purchase intentions.

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