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Return on Community for Consumers and Service Establishments

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This study introduces the concept of return on community (ROC) to the services marketing domain. The ROC represents the health outcomes to customers and financial outcomes to firms that materialize when customers receive social support from other customers in service establishments. By administering Barrera's Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule to teenagers who patronize a video arcade, to members of Gold's Gym, and to middle-aged women who exercise at Curves, the author shows that customers can obtain six types of social support from other customers: intimate interaction, social participation, physical assistance, feedback, guidance, and material aid. In terms of health benefits, intercustomer support provides customers with group cohesion and enhanced well-being. Service firms that host supportive customer networks benefit from customer satisfaction, positive intentional behaviors, and the ability to charge higher prices. By using the contingent valuation method, this article also reveals how customers value support from other customers and employees.

Keywords: commercial friendships; intercustomer support; social support; Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule; third places; return on community.

Researchers have shown that consumers often patronize firms such as hair salons (Price and Arnould 1999), fast-food outlets (Day 2000), coffee shops (Thompson and Arsel 2004), diners (Rosenbaum et al. 2007), and bookstores (Miller 1999) because these places house employees and customers who often act as caregivers who deliver social support to customers.

The significance of social support on people's lives is indisputable, as it provides people with a buffer against stress, anxiety, depression, and high blood pressure (Cohen 2004; Hawkley et al. 2006). Most people acquire support from family, friends, and coworkers. However, some consumers often turn to retail employees, bartenders, hairstylists, and so forth, for informal support because of their anonymity and neutrality (Albrecht and Adelman 1984; Cowen 1982).

Service researchers have explored support in commercial settings, but limitations exist. First, prior work presents commercial support as promoting satisfaction by providing customers with information, brand knowledge, or a user identity (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005). These benefits are beneficial, but they are overshadowed by evidence showing that the impact of commercial support on human health may be profound (Rosenbaum et al. 2007). Yet empirical research exploring the health benefits of commercial support is lacking (Frumkin 2003) and relatively absent in the services literature (Berry and Bendapudi 2007).

Second, the Marketing Science Institute's (2006) 2006-2008 research priorities call for investigations on how companies can increase customer loyalty through customer engagement. Jones (2007) emphasized that the act of linking customers with the firm and other customers is vital for service innovation in the 21st century. Yet do service establishments actually realize financial returns from hosting in-house customer communities?

Third, given that older-aged consumers often experience life events that destroy supportive relationships, it is understandable that many may patronize firms to offset the loss of human support. However, it is less clear whether consumers who have not experienced these events, such as teens and younger to middle-aged adults, also receive commercial social support. Furthermore, given that women's use of public spaces differs from men's (Krenichyn 2004),

an understanding of the role of intercustomer support as it pertains to women's lives is warranted.

Fourth, service researchers have tended to explore the transference of one type of support—namely, companionship or feelings of friendship (Gremler and Gwinner 2000; Price and Arnould 1999)—from service providers to customers. However, in social psychology, Barrera (1980, 1981, 1988; see also Crase, Hockaday, and McCarville 2007) showed that people can receive as many as six types of support from others. Whether consumers can obtain these six types from other customers, referring to intercustomer support, is unknown (for scale development, see Barrera, Sandler, and Ramsay 1981; for methodological discussion, see Wills and Shinar 2000).

This article addresses these limitations by exploring the return on community (ROC) for consumers and service firms among teens, younger to middle-age adults, and women. The ROC represents the health outcomes (to the customer) and the financial outcomes (to the firm) of social support that materializes in service establishments. It is beyond the scope of this study to answer definitively the question whether supportive customer relationships cause health benefits or whether the two are correlated. Regardless, this works shows that customer communities offer health-related benefits to consumers, which support a transformative service paradigm, and positive financial outcomes to service firms. The article begins with a literature review regarding intercustomer support and then unfolds as a series of four empirical studies (see Table 1). The article concludes with a discussion of implications and research limitations.

Social Support and Health

Social support denotes the types of resources people receive, or perceive to be available in the future, from other people. Furthermore, researchers have shown that supportive relationships help people ease the pathogenic effects that are associated with stressful events, such as bereavement, cancer, HIV, and cardiovascular disease (Cohen, Gottlieb, and Underwood 2000; Steptoe et al. 2004).

Barrera (1980, 1981) contended that people can obtain as many as six types of social support from others: intimate interaction, social participation, physical assistance, feedback, guidance, and material aid. Intimate interaction refers to a person's ability to share personal concerns and feelings with another person. Social participation provides people with feelings of fun and relaxation. Physical assistance means that people have someone they can rely on for help with personal tasks. Positive feedback provides people with interesting and valuable information about themselves, such as how others like their ideas, appearance, or accomplishments. Guidance provides people with personal advice. Finally, material aid offers people the ability to borrow money or valuable objects from others. Many researchers also conceptualize social participation and intimate interaction as companionship and emotional support, respectively.

Social Support Issues in Marketing

Psychologists and health researchers have focused almost exclusively on the role of support from family and friends (Brissette, Scheier, and Carver 2002), coworkers (Deelstra et al. 2003), and members of formal support groups (Poole et al. 2001). However, only a fraction of people seeks support through formal groups; a greater majority obtain informal support from service providers, such as physicians, bartenders, hairstylists (Cowen 1982), and even funeral planners (Gentry and Goodwin 1995).

The origin of commercial friendships stems from McClenahan (1945/1946), who coined the term *communality* to denote people who meet together in places other than their residences because they share like interests rather than residential ties. McClenahan (1945/1946) argued that people require access to communalities and to the social interaction they provide because "neighboring, especially in the city, has almost become a lost art (p. 266)."

Researchers applied this concept to the marketplace by revealing that a consumer's need to belong to an ersatz community, in which consumers participate in brief but enjoyable encounters with employees and other customers, may drive consumption (McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley 1993). Similarly, Goodwin (1997) proposed that all service relationships, consumer and professional (Swan et al. 2001), can be viewed from a communality perspective, in which service provider-customer relationships range from unacquainted to quasi-familial strangers.

Finding Support in Third Places

Third places represent marketplace communalities. These small, independently owned bars, diners, coffee shops, and hangouts nourish the kinds of fleeting relationships and diversity of human interaction that provide people with outlets to engage in social interaction and conversation with others (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982, 1994). These relationships also enable people to escape

Table 1
Research Overview

	Study	Setting	Influence of Intercustomer Support on Dimensions
Hypothesis			
1	1	Fun Factory Video Arcade	Cohesion and satisfaction
2	2	Gold's Gym	Cohesion, satisfaction, loyalty, switching, and likelihood to pay higher prices
3	3	Curves	Cohesion, satisfaction, loyalty, switching, and likelihood to pay higher prices
4	4	Curves	Monetary value that consumers place on support
Model	4	Curves	Subjective sense of well-being

from their external roles and to engage in pure sociability. Third-place relationships are a play form of association that is not found in family life, work, commercial relationships, or organized and formal groups because people are subordinate to the roles' requirements. In pure sociability, people enter into associations with others that are not premised on the social qualifications of the people involved; that is, "every consumer" (McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley 1993, p. 308) has the opportunity to "rub elbows" in third places.

Health-Related ROC to Consumers

Third places may also enhance the health of their surrounding citizenry. For example, Spaniards have access to 133,000 pubs, cafés, and so forth, more than all other countries of the European Union together, and research shows that they are less likely than their North American counterparts to experience factors related to loneliness, including social inadequacy or alienation, interpersonal isolation, and self-alienation (Rokach et al. 2001). Indeed, marketing researchers (Kang and Ridgway 1996; Rosenbaum 2006), psychologists (Day 2000; Ng 2003), sociologists (Lofland 1998; Stone 1954), symbolic interactionists (Milligan 1998), gerontologists (Cheang 2002), and humanistic geographers (Seamon 1979) all contend that service establishments can transform into "fields of care" (Tuan 1974) for their customers.

For example, Day (2000) revealed that lonely parents receive reprieve by talking with other parents at a McDonald's play lot and that they easily divulged information about marital stress and life problems among strangers. Cheang (2002) explored a group of senior citizens who met every morning at McDonald's to engage in banter. In that study, members ostracized other members who became despondent because the group craved humor rather than the grim realities of age-related illness. Finally, Rosenbaum (2006) showed that widows and widowers, who have similar experiences and emotional needs, regularly gather in a diner. Although these studies offer qualitative insights into the role of third places in consumers' lives, empirical evidence regarding the health benefits associated with third places is still lacking (Frumkin 2003).

Financial ROC to Firms

Service establishments also realize financial benefits from harboring customer networks. Friendly rapport (Gremler and Gwinner 2000) and friendships between service providers and clients are linked to satisfaction (Adelman and Ahuvia 1995), loyalty (Beatty et al. 1996; Goodwin 1997; Goodwin and Gremler 1996; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002; Reynolds and Beatty 1999), increased confidence (Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner 1998), enhanced trust (Wong and Sohal 2003), and customer voluntary performance, whereby customers become partial employees (Bailey, Gremler, and McCollough 2001) who voluntarily assist other customers and spread positive word of mouth (WOM; Rosenbaum and Massiah 2007).

Guenzi and Pelloni (2004) found that intercustomer relationship closeness does not affect a firm's financial return on investment when customers maintain a single customer-to-customer relationship in a gym. Indeed, social support is most effective when a network of people who have lived the same experiences delivers it (Albrecht and Adelman 1984; Goodwin and Hill 1998). Thus, customers who form relationships with solitary customers in a place appear to be less dependent on the place than customers who maintain several relationships.

Perceived Group Cohesion as a Customer Health Benefit

Many environmental psychologists and social scientists have explored how people form an attachment, or community cohesion (Tigges 2006), to places where

they maintain supportive social relationships. Durkheim (1933) viewed social cohesiveness as a sense of the likeness and similarities among individuals in a group or a society. His thesis is that social cohesiveness supports health and well-being because people who lack social integration are more likely than others to encounter psychological strains and to have a higher propensity to commit suicide.

Contemporary researchers have also shown that people benefit from better access to information, resources, and material goods when they actively participate in a social network (Berkman 2000). People who lack social integration are often vulnerable to emotional and physical problems because they lack something essential that is available through relationships with others. That element may be a sense of belonging (Mayo Clinic 2005).

People may obtain a sense of belonging by cohering to an engaging social network. Bollen and Hoyle (1990, p. 482) conceptualized perceived cohesion as "an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in a group," even regarding a group in which all members do not know one another (Dion 2000). They contended that feelings of morale enable members to achieve group goals, and a sense of belonging encourages members to desire association with other members.

Service establishments, especially third places, often serve as natural forums for their customers' social relationships; therefore, they may be able to provide consumers with cohesion. Although third places are conducive for hanging out, teenagers often view service settings, such as malls and retail areas, as prime hosts for their social networks (Shann 2001), which is often problematic for other shoppers and retail merchants. The presence of disorderly youth in public places is one of the most common problems that U.S. police agencies handle (Scott 2002).

However, video arcades provide entertaining services to teenage consumers in locales where they can safely congregate under minimal parental supervision and feel comfortable. Because arcades may encourage group cohesion and, thus, belongingness among patrons, they could provide tremendous health benefits to their patrons. Along these lines, arcades could be critical to homosexual or other marginalized teenage patrons who may have an elevated risk for attempting and committing suicide, which often stems from social isolation and alienation in school (Remafedi et al. 1998). Study 1 explores this contention.

Study 1: Teens in a Video Arcade

Teens who patronize mall-based video arcades that host their supportive social networks should perceive a sense of cohesion to the arcades and their customers. From a managerial perspective, cohered customers should be more likely than other customers to be satisfied because the arcade is a place not only to play games but also to engage in meaningful interaction with their social networks. This discussion supports the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Customers who receive intercustomer social support, including emotional support, companionship, physical assistance, positive feedback, guidance, and material aid, from other customers in a commercial establishment report a higher level of (a) perceived cohesion to and (b) satisfaction with the firm than other customers.

Overview

Study 1 employs Barrera's (1981) Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule (ASSIS) to assess a customer's perception of intercustomer social support. The ASSIS is a social network-based interview protocol that is used in the social psychology and health literature streams (Wills and Shinar 2000). The ASSIS requires respondents to identify social network members they perceive as providing them or being able to provide them with six types of social support: intimate interaction (emotional support), social participation (companionship), physical assistance, positive feedback, guidance, and material aid.

Procedure

With the help of the owner of a West Coast mall-based video arcade chain, a convenience sample of 100 arcade customers was randomly selected over a 2-day weekend to participate in the study. Respondents had to be at least 16 years of age. Each respondent received five free games, worth US$5, for participation. Two respondents were removed from the sample because of a high amount of blank answers. Of the respondents, 62 were men, and 36 were women. They ranged in age from 16 to 20 years.

Measures

Social support. Based on the ASSIS, six questions asked respondents to identify the names, nicknames, or initials of other customers they meet at the video arcade

who provide them with emotional support, material aid, guidance, feedback, physical assistance, and companionship. All the given names needed to be nonfamily members. A score of one was assigned to each name the respondent provided. Then, the scores were summed to calculate how many people provided respondents with each type of social support.

The emotional support question asked respondents to identify customers in the arcade with whom they talk about things that are personal and private. The material aid question asked respondents: "Who are the customers who would lend you US$25 or more if you needed it?" and "Who would lend or give you something that was valuable?" The guidance question asked respondents: "Who are the customers who give you guidance or advice when you need it?" The positive feedback question asked respondents: "Who are the customers who let you know that they like your appearance, your ideas, or the things you do?" The physical assistance question asked respondents: "Who are the customers who would give up some of their time and energy to help you take care of something that you needed to do—things like driving you someplace that you needed to go?" Finally, the companionship question asked respondents to name the customers with whom they get together to "have fun or relax with."

Perceived cohesion. Cohesion was measured with Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) 6-item scale. Each item was assessed on a 5-point scale anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*). The items were subjected to principal axis factoring (promax rotation). The analysis retained all 6 items in one component, capturing 69% of the variance. The scale had a coefficient alpha of .90, indicating internal consistency (see the appendix; Nunnally 1978).

Satisfaction. Arcade satisfaction was measured with a 6-item scale. Each respondent evaluated items using a 5-point scale anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*). It is worth noting here that after arcade customers purchase a complimentary token card and place US$30 on the card, they become eligible to participate in the arcade's VIP card program. The VIP program offers its members discounts on game playing. By spending at least US$500 as a VIP member, arcade customers can enroll in the arcade's Gold card program. To determine the factor structure, the items were subjected to principal axis factoring (promax rotation). The analysis of the factor matrix retained all items in one factor, capturing 66% of the variance. The scale had a coefficient

Table 2
Mean Number of Intercustomer Relationships

	Video Arcade		Gold's Gym		Curves	
	Low Support	High Support	Low Support	High Support	Low Support	High Support
Emotional support	1.15	2.94	.28	1.96	2.19	6.67
Companionship	1.54	3.71	.39	2.23	4.23	12.65
Physical assistance	1.00	2.49	.33	2.42	1.54	5.19
Feedback	1.07	2.53	.62	3.15	3.22	8.60
Guidance	0.98	2.24	.92	2.27	2.78	7.00
Material aid	0.76	2.20	.33	2.21	1.76	6.74

alpha of .89 (the items appear in the appendix). Finally, each respondent was asked to approximate monthly expenditures on food and games in the arcade.

Results

To assess the influence of intercustomer support on cohesion and satisfaction, a two-step cluster analysis was performed with SPSS 15.0. The two-step cluster analysis overcomes many obstacles that characterize traditional cluster analysis procedures, such as k-means. Most notably, the two-step cluster analysis eliminates uncertainties regarding the optimal number of clusters in a continuous or categorical data set by employing the lowest Bayesian information criterion (BIC) value as a criterion statistic (Fraley and Raftery 1998; Norusis 2005; SPSS 2007).

By means of the lowest BIC value, the two-step cluster analysis classified the respondents into two exclusive groups according to their ASSIS responses. Of the respondents, 41 (41.4%) were placed in the first cluster, 51 (51.5%) were placed in the second cluster, and 7 (7.1%) were unclassified. The results reveal that the respondents in Cluster 1 have few, if any, relationships with other customers, and Cluster 2 maintains several supportive relationships with other arcade customers, as the first two columns in Table 2 show. In addition, a chi-square analysis found that gender did not differ between the two clusters, $\chi^2 df(1) = .65$, $p = .42$.

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the effect of intercustomer support on perceived cohesion and satisfaction. Significant differences were found between the clusters on cohesion and satisfaction: Wilks's lambda = .70, $F(2, 89) = 19.22$, $p < .001$. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilks's lambda was strong at .30. Table 3 contains the means and standard deviations of the dependent variables for the two groups.

Table 3
Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis Between High- and Low-Support Clusters

	Video Arcade		Gold's Gym		Curves	
	Low Support	High Support	Low Support	High Support	Low Support	High Support
Dependent measures[a]						
Satisfaction	3.74 (.64)	4.50*** (.56)	4.10 (.65)	4.38* (.67)	4.54 (.53)	4.83** (.39)
Perceived cohesion	3.54 (.74)	4.34*** (.61)	3.84 (.76)	4.28** (.75)	4.47 (.55)	4.88*** (.26)
Future behavioral intentions[b]						
Loyalty/WOM			5.42 (1.23)	6.05** (1.12)	6.28 (.78)	6.81*** (.35)
Likelihood to complain			3.55 (1.48)	3.23 (1.63)	3.27 (1.60)	2.95 (1.60)
Likelihood to pay higher prices			4.20 (1.51)	5.11** (1.38)	5.17 (1.41)	5.74* (1.11)
Number of years as a member			3.35	3.45		
Number of weekly workouts			4.04	4.76*	3.69	4.26**
Monthly spending (US$)	48.00	52.00	49.00	126.00*		

Note: WOM = word of mouth. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
a. 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.
b. 1 = *not likely,* and 7 = *extremely likely*.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on each variable were conducted as follow-up tests. By means of the Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the .025 level. The ANOVAs on perceived cohesion, $F(1, 90) = 14.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$, and satisfaction, $F(1, 90) = 13.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .29$, were significant. Cluster 2 is more likely than Cluster 1 to be satisfied with and to sense cohesion to other customers in the arcade. Although satisfaction and cohesion suggest that loyalty prevails among Cluster 2, the impact on monthly expenditures appears somewhat minimal because Cluster 2 members (M = US$52) spend US$4 more than Cluster 1 members (M = US$48), an insignificant difference, $t(83) = .28$, *ns*). The results support Hypothesis 1.

To probe intercustomer support further, the number of unique names provided by each respondent was calculated ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 4.12$) and considered a predictor for two regression analyses. The results reveal that the number of names predicts cohesion ($\beta = .33$, $p < .01$) and satisfaction ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$). Thus, as teens maintain a large number of arcade relationships, the extent to which they perceive cohesion and obtain its related health benefits increases.

From a macro perspective, the results of this study suggest that municipal governments should consider subsidizing the development of youth centers that feature video arcade formats. This would enable teenagers to obtain the benefits of third places, such as cohesion, a sense of belonging, access to a safe haven to hang out, and a means to develop social skills.

These findings also reveal that commercial support is not a mark of older-aged consumption. Yet it might be argued that both adolescents and older adults are prone to experiencing insufficient levels of support. Do consumers in their twenties and thirties also obtain support from commercial relationships? Study 2 explores this question.

Study 2: Gold's Gym Members

The informality of customer groups in service firms means that there is usually not a formal joining process for these groups. That is, consumers often form their commercial friendships by sharing consumption experiences in service settings with other consumers, who typically represent unacquainted strangers (McGrath and Otnes 1995). A gym represents a prime service setting that is conducive for harboring intercustomer relationships and for nurturing the transformation of fleeting relationships into supportive relationships among members.

For example, leisure companionship, which refers to people engaging in shared leisure activities with others primarily for the sake of enjoyment (Iso-Ahola and Park 1996), reduces depression among Taekwondo participants. In addition, leisure friendships, or supportive friendships among leisure participants, help university students reduce mental illness and enhance well-being (Iwasaki 2003). Other leisure scientists have drawn on the social stimulation hypothesis to show that social contact, which is facilitated by socially laden physical activities, improves cognitive functioning by stimulating the nervous system and reducing depression (Vance et al. 2005).

From a managerial perspective, customers who obtain support from other customers in a service firm often exhibit loyalty because patronage offers them cathartic benefits (Rosenbaum 2006). Thus, customer participation in commercial networks should promote future behavioral intentions. More specifically, customers who receive support from other customers in service establishments should demonstrate favorable intentions on at least three dimensions: loyalty, switching, and price sensitivity. Building on Study 1 and its hypothesis, the following hypothesis is offered.

> *Hypothesis 2:* (In addition to Hypothesis 1) Customers who receive social support from other customers in a commercial establishment report (a) a higher level of loyalty, (b) a lower level of switching to other service providers, and (c) a greater willingness to pay higher prices than other customers.

Sample

One hundred nine customers of a West Coast urban-based Gold's Gym volunteered to participate. The gym's owner permitted a random sample of members to be interviewed over a weekend. Each respondent received a US$5 gift certificate for products or services in the gym. Of the respondents, 79 (73%) were male, and 30 (27%) were female. They ranged in age from 18 to over 81 years, and 63% were between 18 and 40 years of age. In addition, 62 (57%) were single, 32 (29%) were married, and 15 (14%) were divorced or in a domestic partnership.

Measures

The ASSIS and the scales from Study 1 were used in this study. The respondents were asked to name the people they primarily interact with at Gold's Gym who provide them with each type of support. The word primarily was clarified with the explanation that the majority of respondents' interactions with the named person occur in the gym; therefore, coworkers, established friends, and family members were not included in the commercial network.

The respondents' future behavioral intentions toward patronizing the gym were measured with a 13-item scale (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). Respondents also provided the average number of times they exercise at the gym in a week and their membership duration.

Each respondent evaluated the likelihood of engaging in behaviors that signal a commitment to the gym using a 7-point scale anchored by 1 (*not likely at all*) and 7 (*extremely likely*). The items were subjected to principal axis factoring (promax rotation). The rotated matrix retained all the scale items in three components, accounting for 70% of the variance. Consistent with the work of Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996), the first scale was labeled *Loyalty/WOM*. This scale assessed the likelihood that a respondent would engage in positive word of mouth and continue to do business with the gym. The second scale was labeled *Propensity to Switch/Complain* and assessed the likelihood that a respondent would complain to others about service breakdowns. The third scale was labeled *Likelihood to Pay More* and assessed the extent to which respondents would remain members despite price increases. Analysis using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and item-to-total correlation was used to refine the measures and to eliminate items whose inclusion resulted in lower coefficient alphas. One of the items from the second scale, Complain to Employees If I Had a Problem With Service, was removed to increase coefficient alpha. After this deletion, all scales had coefficient alphas greater than .70, indicating good reliability (Nunnally 1978). The items appear in the appendix. The satisfaction and cohesion scales each had coefficient alphas of .93, indicating strong reliability. Each respondent also provided answers regarding membership length, weekly patronage, and average monthly spending on clothing, accessories, classes, and food in the gym.

Results

Through the use of the two-step cluster analysis, respondents' ASSIS responses, and the lowest BIC value, respondents were classified into two clusters. Of the respondents, 61 (56%) were placed in the first cluster, and 48 (44%) were placed in the second. The first cluster maintains few, if any, customer relationships in the gym compared with the second cluster (see Table 2). The results of a contingency table analysis, Pearson $\chi^2(1, N = 109) = .12$, $p = ns$, and an independent-sample t test, $t(107) = .67$, $p = ns$, reveal that gender and age, respectively, do not differ between the clusters.

A one-way MANOVA was conducted to determine the effect of intercustomer support on five dependent variables: perceived cohesion, satisfaction, loyalty/WOM, likelihood to pay higher prices, and willingness to complain. Differences were found among clusters on the dependent measures: Wilks's lambda = .89, $F(5, 98) = 2.43$, $p < .05$. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilks's lambda was .11. Again, Table 3 contains the means and standard deviations of the dependent variables.

The ANOVAs on each variable were conducted as follow-up tests. By means of the Bonferroni method,

each ANOVA was tested at the .01 level. The ANOVA on cohesion, $F(1, 102) = 4.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$, was significant; however, the p value was above the .01 cutoff on satisfaction, $F(1, 102) = 4.66$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .04$. In terms of intentions, the ANOVAs on the likelihood to remain loyal/WOM, $F(1, 102) = 9.83$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$, and the willingness to pay higher prices, $F(1, 102) = 21.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, were significant. The ANOVA on the likelihood to complain was not significant. It is worth noting here that both clusters reported satisfaction with the gym, albeit at different strengths; thus, respondents most likely do not have an incentive to complain about Gold's to other members or to outside agencies.

To probe intercustomer support further, the number of unique names was considered a predictor for four regression analyses. The results reveal that unique names predict cohesion ($\beta = .32$, $p < .01$), satisfaction ($\beta = .30$, $p < .01$), likelihood to remain loyal/WOM ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), and likelihood to pay higher prices ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$). Thus, by hosting customers' supportive relationships, service establishments can help ensure their own longevity.

To probe cluster differences further, a one-way MANOVA was conducted to analyze whether membership duration, weekly patronage, and monthly spending on products and services in the gym differed between the two clusters. Significant differences were found among the dependent measures: Wilks's lambda = .91, $F(3, 85) = 2.99$, $p < .05$. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilks's lambda was .10. The ANOVA on membership duration was nonsignificant. However, the ANOVAs on both weekly patronage, $F(1, 87) = 4.46$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$, and average monthly spending, $F(1, 87) = 4.30$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$, were significant. Although the average person has been a Gold's Gym member for three years, members who maintain larger social networks exercise about one day a week more than those with smaller networks ($M = 4.76$ vs. $M = 4.04$). This one extra workout day proves beneficial to the gym; members in the high-support cluster spend approximately US$126 per month on products and services in the gym, compared with US$49 among members in the low-support cluster.

A correlation analysis was performed to explore the relationship between the number of times a member exercises at Gold's in a week and the size of his or her customer network (calculated by the number of unique customer names provided). The results were significant ($r = .19$, $p < .05$). Another correlation analysis revealed a relationship between customer network size and monthly expenditures in the gym ($r = .24$, $p < .05$). Thus, in-house customer social networks provide ROC in the form of

health benefits to members and financial benefits to Gold's Gym.

Overall, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported. Members who receive substantial social support from other members in the gym are more likely than members who receive minimal support or no support at all to demonstrate satisfaction with and favorable behavioral intentions toward Gold's in terms of loyalty/WOM and a willingness to pay higher prices for the same services. From a managerial perspective, intercustomer relationships appear to represent a type of glue that bonds customers to service establishments, which in turn fuels ROC.

Study 3: Women at Curves

To date, marketers have evaluated intercustomer support in mixed-gender consumption settings, such as diners, gyms, and bookstores (see Rosenbaum 2006 for review). However, social scientists have shown that women's use of public spaces significantly differs from men's (Krenichyn 2004; Miller 1995). In general, the commercial friendship literature highlights the relative ease with which women seem to develop brief, supportive relationships with strangers, customers, and employees in service establishments (Day 2000; Stone 1954).

This phenomenon may be partially explainable by the feminist theory of the ethic of care, which posits that women are more inclined than men to formulate decisions that emphasize caregiving and maintaining connections to others. The theory often rouses debate in psychology and leisure sciences because it constrains possibilities for women in public (Day 2000; Krenichyn 2004). In terms of constraints, the ethic of care posits that women often provide for the needs of others first; thus, they may have less time available for personal leisure, may neglect their own leisure needs, or may feel guilty for partaking in personal leisure (Henderson 1996; Shaw 1994). A concern about violence in public places, as well as insecurity and concerns about physical appearance, further constrains women's use of public places (Shaw 1994).

Curves, a women's-only gym, remedies many of these constraints for its members. Curves opened its first gym in 1992, and each facility offers women access to a moderately priced exercise facility, a 30-minute aerobic regimen, and a convenient location, usually in a well-lighted, local strip mall with nearby parking.

Some researchers also question the ethic-of-care gender linkages. Tronto (1987) argued that people's caretaking experiences, which, by and large, are more pronounced among mothers and lower-status women

because of societal norms, cause them to be more inclined to extend care to other people in public places. Perhaps this explains why many middle-class men have become overly dependent on their wives or girlfriends for social interaction in public; many men may lack experience socializing with strangers in public (Miller 1995; Oldenburg 1999).

However, the findings regarding women's supportive behaviors in the commercial realm have been based on descriptive data rather than empirical data. Thus, Study 3 addresses this chasm by building on Studies 1 and 2 and their hypotheses.

> *Hypothesis 3:* Female customers who receive social support from other female customers in a commercial establishment report (a) a higher level of loyalty, (b) a lower level of switching to other service providers, and (c) a greater willingness to pay higher prices than other customers.

Sample

One hundred seventy-two female members of a franchised branch of Curves located in a West Coast city volunteered to participate. The owner permitted a random sample of members to be surveyed on-site over a weekend. Each respondent received quilted napkins, a US$5 value. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to over 81 years. Of the respondents, 35% were 18 to 50 years of age, 32% were 51 to 60 years of age, and 33% were 61 years or older. In addition, 72% were married, 12% were single, 9% were widowed, 6% were divorced, and 1% was in a partnership. Finally, 54% were employed either part time or full time, and 44% were retired.

Measures

All the aforementioned scales and the ASSIS methodological procedure were used in this study. In terms of perceived cohesion and satisfaction, the coefficient alphas were .94 and .92, respectively, indicating strong reliability (Nunnally 1978). Because this franchise was open for less than a year at the time of sampling, respondents were asked to provide the average number of times they exercise in a week. The three future intentional scales had coefficient alphas greater than .70 (see the appendix).

Results

Respondents were classified into groups on the basis of the two-step cluster analysis and the lowest BIC value.

Of the respondents, 129 (75%) were placed in the first cluster, and 43 (25%) were placed in the second. The results reveal that the first cluster maintains fewer customer relationships in the gym than the second cluster (see Table 2). It is worth noting that even female respondents in the low-support cluster maintain about the same number of relationships as respondents in the high-support cluster in Gold's Gym. Furthermore, respondents in the high-support group at Curves report having access to social support networks, based on each of the six types of social support, that range in size from 5 to nearly 13 people. Thus, in support of the ethic-of-care theory, the results show that women have a profound ability to develop and maintain commercial friendships, especially with other women, in Curves.

A one-way MANOVA was conducted to determine the effect of intercustomer support on five dependent variables: perceived cohesion, satisfaction, loyalty/WOM, likelihood to pay higher prices, and likelihood to complain. Significant differences were found among the two clusters on the dependent measures: Wilks's lambda = .64, $F(6, 158) = 14.99$, $p < .001$. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilks's lambda was strong at .36 (see Table 3).

The ANOVAs on each variable were conducted as follow-up tests. By means of the Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the .008 level. The ANOVAs on perceived cohesion, $F(1, 163) = 23.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$; satisfaction, $F(1, 163) = 11.00$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$; and the likelihood to remain loyal/WOM, $F(1, 106) = 8.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$) were significant. However, the ANOVA on the likelihood to pay higher prices, $F(1, 106) = 10.50$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .03$ was mildly significant, as the p value was above the cutoff of .008. The ANOVA on the likelihood to complain to others was not significant. Overall, Curves members are satisfied with the gym; thus, they probably find it implausible that they would complain to other members or to external agencies about Curves.

Similar to the Gold's finding, a regression analysis revealed that the size of a member's customer network significantly predicts the number of times she exercises at Curves in a week ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). Because this gym was open slightly less than a year at the time of sampling, the relationship between network size and membership duration was not investigated.

The findings reveal that women who maintain large customer networks at Curves are more likely than those who maintain small networks to sense cohesion, to be satisfied, to remain loyal, and to act as partial employees. These members are also more likely to be resilient toward price increase; thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Figure 1
Relationships Between Intercustomer Social Support and Well-Being
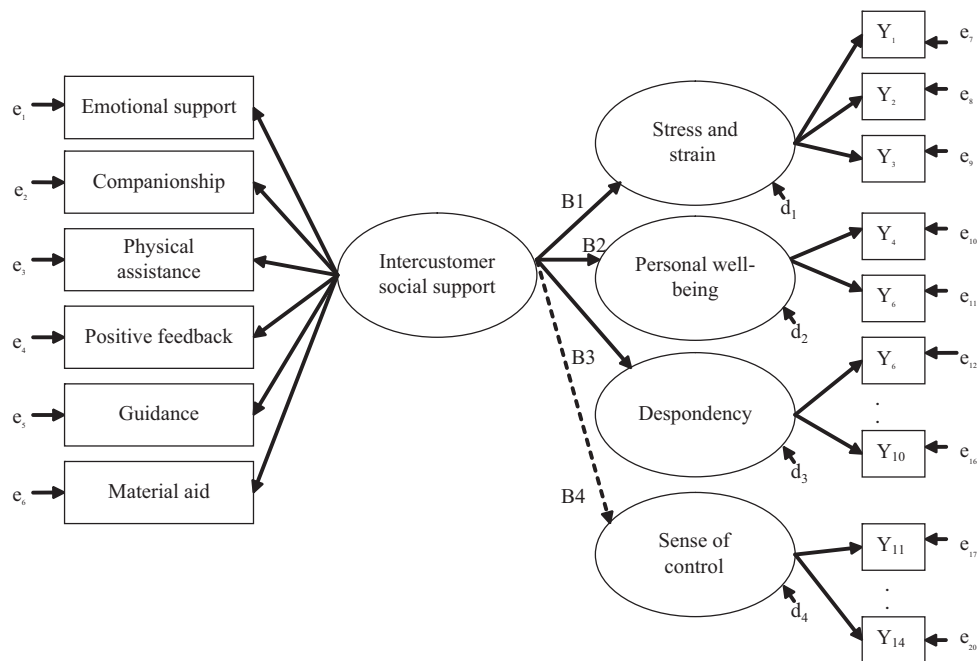
Note: All paths are significant at *p* < .05, unless the path is a dashed line.

Study 4: Women at Curves and Financial ROC

Third-place customer communities provide health and financial benefits to both service providers and consumers. Nonetheless, these benefits are still rather vague. It is known that intercustomer support promotes feelings of group cohesion, which helps people sense that they are integrated into an engaging social network and helps diminish feelings associated with loneliness (Rosenbaum 2006; Stone 1954). However, can third-place community memberships transform consumers' well-being? Furthermore, given the nonfamilial quality of commercial relationships, a positive association between these relationships and a consumer's well-being would support Granovetter's (1983) findings regarding the strength of weak, nonobligatory ties on people's lives, albeit in the commercial realm.

With regard to service establishments, although third-place community membership enhances customer loyalty, how do customers monetarily value their third-place commercial friendships? Thus far, positive relationships between intercustomer support and consumer attitudes toward satisfaction and future behavioral intentions have been shown. However, can service firms be provided

with a specific dollar value associated with commercial friendships? To the best of my knowledge, this question remains unanswered—until now.

Framework and Hypotheses

Figure 1 represents a framework that illustrates the hypothesized relationships between intercustomer support and a consumer's sense of well-being. The model considers intercustomer support a latent variable that comprises Barrera's (1980, 1981) social support taxonomy. Intercustomer social support can be evaluated either as the number of relationships that provide a customer with each type of support or as a percentage of each type of support a customer receives from relationships in a commercial establishment versus from outside relationships. Given the expected interrelatedness among the support resources, the errors of the exogenous variables were permitted to correlate.

The model draws on the Ontario Health Survey (OHS) 14-item scale on well-being, which is used in the social science, health, and medicine literature streams to evaluate a person's subjective well-being and quality of life (John 2004; Tang et al. 2006). The model predicts that intercustomer support is related to four dimensions of a

person's subjective sense of well-being. The first dimension represents a negatively worded perceived stress-and-strain factor that evaluates a person's health worries. The second represents a positively worded index of positive well-being, which consists of a person's belief that he or she has an interesting life, is cheerful and light-hearted, is loved, is relaxed, and is full of vitality. The third represents a negatively worded despondency factor, which evaluates a person's sense of loneliness, boredom, inability to control feelings, and low feelings. The fourth dimension represents a person's sense of control over his or her health and feelings. Of the dimensions, the fourth is the least straightforward and is difficult to interpret (John 2004). The model proposes that intercustomer support is related to consumer well-being because it reduces a consumer's stress and strain and despondency and enhances his or her sense of control and feelings of being cared for and loved.

In terms of corporate ROC, literature suggests that consumers value commercial social support. Customers can receive social support from employees, customers, or both. Because employees may be motivated to feign support, for example, to obtain bigger tips (Price and Arnould 1999), employee support should be valued less than intercustomer support. However, consumers should place the highest value on social support from both customers and employees in a specific service setting. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered.

> *Hypothesis 4:* Consumers place the lowest monetary value on exchanges that transpire in a nonsocially supportive service setting, a higher amount in a setting with some supportive employees, an even higher amount in a setting with some supportive customers, and the highest amount in a setting with some supportive customers and employees.

Sample

One hundred three members of a West Coast-based Curves franchise, which differed from the site in Study 3, volunteered to participate in this study. The franchise owner permitted a random sample of members to be surveyed. Each respondent received a pair of Curves logo socks, a value of US$5, for participation. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to more than 81 years. Of the respondents, 27% were 18 to 50 years of age, 34% were 51 to 60 years of age, and 39% were 61 years or older. In addition, 74% were married, 10% were single, 9% were widowed, 6% were divorced, and 2% were in partnerships. Finally, 46% were employed, and 51% were retired.

Measures

The ASSIS scale and the methodological procedure were again used in this study. However, respondents were asked to list the names of both customers who they primarily interact with at Curves and people outside Curves who provide them with each of the six social support types. Respondents' sense of well-being was assessed with the OHS scale (see John 2004 for scale development), which was anchored by 1 (*hardly ever*) and 4 (*most of the time*). To probe the strength of closeness of respondents to commercial friendships, respondents were asked to consider their closeness (1 = *not close,* and 10 = *extremely close;* Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen 1996) to Curves members who provide them with at least one type of support and to their family and friends who are not affiliated with Curves.

To explore corporate ROC regarding in-house customer networks, respondents were asked the following question: "What is the maximum amount of monthly membership that you would be willing to pay for a gym that offers you the following items?" The first set of items included a convenient location, comfortable work-out conditions, and good equipment. The second set expanded on the first with the phrase "and some supportive employees." The third set changed the words "and some supportive employees" to "and supportive members." The fourth set included the phrase "and some supportive employees and members."

Analysis and Results

Network size. In this analysis, intercustomer social support was measured by summing together the names of Curves customers who provide a respondent with each type of social support. Thus, the six social support types are observable indicators of intercustomer support, which represents an unobservable, latent variable. The relationships depicted in Figure 1 were analyzed by structural equation modeling. The measurement model showed acceptable fit; however, the structural model results revealed that the path from intercustomer support to a respondent's sense of control, the least straightforward OHS dimension, was not significant. After that path was removed, the fit for the model was acceptable ($\chi^2 = 180.87$, $df = 117$, $p < .001$; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .07; standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = .08; comparative fit index [CFI] = .92; and Tucker-Lewis Index [TLI] = .89). MacCallum and Austin (2000) suggested that researchers should focus on the RMSEA in small-sample-size studies because a small sample size influences both the CFI and

Table 4
Parameter Estimates for Effects of Intercustomer Support on Well-Being

Parameter	Description	Unstandardized Estimates	Standardized Estimates
Model: Intercustomer support = number of members providing each type of support			
B1	Intercustomer support $\rightarrow$ stress and strain	$-.26^*$	$-.66$
B2	Intercustomer support $\rightarrow$ positive well-being	$.27^*$	$.69$
B3	Intercustomer support $\rightarrow$ despondency	$-.34^*$	$-.82$
B4	Intercustomer support $\rightarrow$ sense of control	NS	NS
RMSEA		.07	
SRMR		.08	
CFI		.92	
TLI		.89	
R^2	Stress and strain	.44	
R^2	Positive well-being	.48	
R^2	Despondency	.57	
Model: Intercustomer support = percentage of members/total members and nonmembers			
B1	Intercustomer support $\rightarrow$ stress and strain	-3.76^*	$-.69$
B2	Intercustomer support $\rightarrow$ positive well-being	3.45^*	$.66$
B3	Intercustomer support $\rightarrow$ despondency	-4.82^*	$-.84$
B4	Intercustomer support $\rightarrow$ sense of control	NS	NS
RMSEA		.07	
SRMR		.07	
CFI		.92	
TLI		.90	
R^2	Stress and strain	.47	
R^2	Positive well-being	.43	
R^2	Despondency	.71	

Note: RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index.
$^*p < .01.$

other fit statistics. In addition, researchers should employ the Bollen-Stine bootstrap to correct for standard error and fit statistic biases that occur in structural equation modeling applications as a result of nonnormal data or small sample sizes (Bollen and Stine 1992; Enders 2005). Based on the Bollen-Stine bootstrap ($p = .08$, $n = 1,000$), the null hypothesis that the proposed model is correct cannot be rejected. Table 4 shows the results for the structural model.

S*upport percentages.* The next model tested considered the percentage of each type of support a customer obtains from other members. This percentage was calculated by summing the names of Curves members who provide each respondent with a specific type of support. This figure was then divided by the total number of people inside and outside Curves who provide such support. As with the first model, after the path from intercustomer social support to sense of control was removed, the fit for the model was acceptable ($\chi^2 = 175.11$, $df = 117$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .07; SRMR = .07; CFI = .92; and TLI = .90). The Bollen-Stine bootstrap ($p = .12$, $n = 1,000$) indicates that the null hypothesis that the proposed model is correct cannot be rejected.

Strength of Commercial Customer Relationships

A two-step cluster analysis was performed to classify the respondents into groups according to their reported strength of closeness to other members. On the basis of the lowest BIC value, the respondents were classified into

Table 5
Differences in Intercustomer Support Based on Customer Closeness

	Not at All Close to Members		Somewhat Close to Members		Very Close to Members	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Percentage of support obtained from other members						
Emotional support**	0.25	.17	0.37	.14	0.45	.19
Companionship**	0.24	.21	0.38	.17	0.46	.20
Physical assistance*	0.21	.16	0.29	.16	0.38	.21
Positive feedback**	0.24	.15	0.35	.16	0.44	.16
Guidance*	0.29	.23	0.42	.17	0.45	.16
Material aid*	0.17	.11	0.25	.12	0.30	.17
OHS dimensions[a]						
Stress and strain	1.66	.53	1.79	.50	1.47	.50
Positive well-being**	3.11	.60	3.13	.34	3.54	.50
Despondency	1.37	.50	1.40	.45	1.13	.33

Note: OHS = Ontario Health Survey.
a. 1 = *hardly ever,* and 4 = *most of the time*.
*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

three groups. Of the respondents, 31 (30.1%) were placed in the first cluster ($M = 2.90$), which was labeled *not close*; 42 (40.8%) were placed in the second ($M = 5.33$), which was labeled *somewhat close*; and 30 (29.1%) were placed in the third ($M = 7.97$), which was labeled *very close*.

A MANOVA was conducted to determine whether customers who maintain strong relationships in the gym depend on other members for a greater percentage of support. Differences were found among the clusters: Wilks's lambda = .73, $F(12, 182) = 2.55$, $p < .01$. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilks's lambda was strong at .14 (see Table 5).

The ANOVAs were conducted as follow-up tests. To minimize Type I errors, each ANOVA was tested at the .01 level. The ANOVAs on emotional support, $F(2, 99) = 10.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$; companionship $F(2, 99) = 9.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$; physical assistance, $F(2, 99) = 7.19$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .13$; positive feedback, $F(2, 99) = 11.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$); guidance, $F(2, 99) = 5.76$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .11$, and material aid, $F(2, 99) = 7.30$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .13$, significantly differed. The results of a linear contrast for each of the six ANOVAs were all significant at $p < .001$, with the exception of guidance at $p < .01$. The findings show that as members increasingly become close to other members, they receive an increasing amount of support in the gym. This finding is logical because some degree of closeness among members is required before they can begin exchanging social supportive resources, such as emotional and material support, with one another. However, does a person's closeness to other members influence his or her well-being?

Another MANOVA was conducted to answer this question. In the test, the independent variables were the three closeness groups, and the dependent variables were three OHS dimensions: stress and strain, positive well-being, and despondency. Differences were found among the three groups on the three dependent measures: Wilks's lambda = .83, $F(6, 196) = 3.28$, $p < .01$. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilks's lambda was .09 (see Table 5).

The ANOVAs were conducted as follow-up tests. By means of the Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the .017 level (.05/3). The ANOVA on well-being was significant, $F(2, 100) = 8.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$, as was its linear contrast at $p < .01$. Members who reported the highest closeness levels also reported the highest levels of personal well-being ($M = 3.54$), compared with members who reported some closeness ($M = 3.13$) or no closeness ($M = 3.11$). The ANOVAs for stress and strain, $F(2, 100) = 3.63$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$, and despondency, $F(2, 100) = 3.71$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$, showed mild significance; however, the p values were above the suggested cutoff point. Overall, women who maintain close relationships at Curves benefit from having access to people who make them believe that they have interesting lives and are loved.

Third-Place Communities and Financial ROC

Given the beneficial influence of Curves on its members' lives, their willingness to pay for various aspects of the Curves experience might be questioned.

Table 6
Curves Members' Valuation of Commercial Support

What is the maximum amount of money that you would be willing to spend each month to remain a member of Curves, if your club provided you with each of the following benefits?	*M*	*SD*
A gym that has a convenient location, comfortable workout conditions, and good equipment.	US$35.30	US$15.07
A gym that has a convenient location, comfortable workout conditions, good equipment, and some supportive employees.	US$37.50*	US$16.43
A gym that has a convenient location, comfortable workout conditions, good equipment, and some supportive members.	US$38.70*	US$17.01
A gym that has a convenient location, comfortable workout conditions, good equipment, and some supportive employees and members.	US$40.77*	US$18.71

Note: All tests are paired-sample *t* tests compared with the first condition.
*$p < .001$.

The Contingent Valuation Method (Andersson and Mossberg 2004) is used in hospitality research for exploring this type of question. This method requires respondents to reveal the maximum amount of money they are willing to pay for certain hypothesized experiences. In this study, a stepwise increasingly supportive Curves experience was described for each respondent (see Table 6).

Three paired-sample *t* tests were conducted to evaluate whether Curves members valued commercial social support differently. The results indicate that members would pay US$35.30 a month for a gym that offered them a convenient location, comfortable workout conditions, and good equipment. The current membership at the time of sampling was US$34.00 per month. The addition of some supportive employees and customers increased this amount to US$37.50 and US$38.70, respectively. Thus, supportive employees are worth US$3.50 per month, and supportive customers are worth US$4.70 per month. Importantly, Curves members reported that they would pay almost US$41 a month for some supportive members and customers. Thus, Curves could raise its monthly fees US$7.00, approximately 20%, by ensuring that its members receive some type of social support from both its employees and other members.

Discussion

This article illustrates how service establishments that promote customer camaraderie (e.g., video arcades, weightlifting gyms, health clubs) and the resultant effect of intercustomer social support offer health-related returns for younger to middle-aged consumers and financial returns for service firms—essentially providing ROC to consumers and firms. The ROC emerges as a concept that has public health contributions, including providing people with a sense of perceived cohesion and an improved subjective sense of well-being, as well as providing lucrative financial contributions to service establishments.

This work heeds Berry and Bendapudi's (2007) call to link service marketing to health care issues and addresses Frumkin's (2003) concern that research on the health benefits associated with third places has been too anecdotal and incompatible with the rigor requested of health research. In doing so, it reveals an association between third places and public health. Yet pioneering opportunities to expand both theoretically and empirically on these findings exist because the social elements that constitute a consumption setting, or a servicescape, can transform consumer welfare and even social well-being.

The study shows that sociologists (e.g., Putnam 2000) who claim that the marketplace is anathema of community are mistaken. Small consumer groups that gather in places that promote customer connectedness and are bonded by social contracts that represent the weakest of personal obligations often provide their members with six types of social support that many believed were only available from families, friends, and community attachments that demand lifelong commitment (e.g., Wuthnow 1994). Therefore, this research demonstrates that customers, across all age groups, may benefit by sustaining weak social ties in commercial third places. Future researchers might want to explore the differential impact of these six support types on the dependent variables presented herein or on new ones. In addition, researchers could explore whether differences exist among consumers who receive many types of support from few commercial friendships or one type of social support from many different people.

Appendix

Satisfaction Scale[a]
   My choice to become a member of [organization] was a wise one.
   I am always delighted with the firm's service.
   Overall, I am satisfied with [organization].
   I did the right thing when I decided to become a member.
   I consider myself loyal to [organization].
   I am committed to remaining a member of [organization].
Perceived Group Cohesion (Bollen and Hoyle 1990)
   I feel like I belong at [organization].
   I feel that I'm a member of the [organization's] family.
   I see myself as part of the [organization's] family.
   I am pleased with [organization].
   I'm happy to be a member at [organization].
   [Organization] is one of the best health clubs in the area.
Future Behavioral Intention Scale (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996)
How likely are you to do the following?[b]
   Loyalty/WOM
      To say positive things about [organization] to other people.
      To recommend [organization] to someone who seeks my advice.
      To encourage friends and relatives to do business with [organization].
      To consider [organization] as my first choice when deciding on a gym.
      To do more business with [organization] in the next few years.
      To do less business with [organization] in the next few years.[d]
   $M = 34.19$, $SD = 7.25$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$ (Study 2)
   $M = 38.45$, $SD = 4.14$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$ (Study 3)
   Propensity to Switch/Complain
      To switch to a competitor if I experienced a problem with [organization's] service.
      To complain to other members if I experienced a problem with [organization].
      To complain to external agencies, such as the Better Business Bureau, if I experienced a problem with [organization].
   $M = 10.07$, $SD = 4.64$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$ (Study 2)
   $M = 9.58$, $SD = 4.79$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$ (Study 3)
   Likelihood to Pay Higher Prices
      To take some of my business to a competitor of [organization] that offers better prices.[c]
      To continue to do business with [organization] even if its prices increased somewhat.
      To pay higher prices for membership than competitors charge for the benefits that I currently receive from [organization].
   $M = 13.78$, $SD = 4.51$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$ (Study 2)
   $M = 15.86$, $SD = 4.14$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$ (Study 3)

a. 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.
b. 1 = *not likely at all* and 7 = *extremely likely*.
c. Recoded.

Although this research attempted to isolate commercial networks from traditional social networks, it is possible that people who were familiar with one another or who were acquaintances decided to patronize arcades or to join gyms together. Researchers are encouraged to draw on shopping companionship paradigms (Harris, Baron, and Ratcliffe 1995; Haytko and Baker 2004) to explore whether current friendships among customers in service settings foster or hinder the development of intercustomer relationships that occur among unacquainted strangers.

In addition, relationship duration was not evaluated herein. As a result, the discipline still lacks an understanding as to the time duration needed for intercustomer relationships to move from strangers to friendships. It is possible that intercustomer relationships are influenced by similarity among customers in a setting. For example, the time required for strangers to become supportive friends is probably shortened when customers are in the same boat.

Finally, although the Contingent Valuation Method is employed in hospitality research (Andersson and Mossberg 2004), the method essentially signals respondents that the stepwise offering may be increasingly worth more (or less). Researchers might want to evaluate a consumer's willingness to pay for hypothetical experiences using quasi-method experimental designs, which would yield responses to isolated experiences.

Perhaps this article has made the uncomplicated mistakenly complex. Given the therapeutic benefits of social support and laughter (Rosner 2002), it is clear why consumers relish patronage in settings that offer them the opportunity to kibitz with other people and to form supportive relationships; after all, "it is not good that man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

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