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Introduction (Topic & Rationale)

The global weight loss industry is currently experiencing rapid transformation which appears to be driven by rising health consciousness, digital innovation, and increased competition. Within the UK alone, the market has exceeded over £5b in revenue, rising from £5.2m in 2023 to £5.7m in 2024 (UKActive, 2025) with major players such as Weightwatchers and Slimming World holding substantial market shares (ION, 2025). As competition intensifies, companies need to be more mindful and begin recognising the importance of long-term customer retention. Long term retention, as opposed to just new customer acquisition, is critical to grow and sustain business growth and plays a role in improving health outcomes for their customers. Branding and customer engagement strategies are central to this effort due to the fact that they shape customer perceptions, emotional connections, and behavioural loyalty (Aaker, 1996, Keller, 2009).

Branding is more than simply an aesthetic or promotional function because it serves as a psychological pull that can influence how customers identify with a brand and remain loyal to said brand (Kapferer, 2012). Equally, customer engagement, through personalised support, digital platforms, social interaction, and community building, is seen as a key mechanism when looking to increase customer satisfaction and drive long-term commitment (Brodie et al., 2011, Hollebeek et al., 2014). In weight loss services, where emotional and motivational factors are wholly connected with behavioural change, these strategies can be particularly influential.

The research in this report will focus on 2 UK based weight loss company 'leaders' trading as Weightwatchers and Slimming World. Both these companies have developed strong brand identities and built dedicated customer communities. Weightwatchers has moved forward with a technology-driven model that has a huge emphasis on app-based engagement and holistic wellness branding (WW International, 2022), whereas Slimming World centres its strategy on in-person group support and traditional brand values (Slimming World, 2023). Despite their different approaches, both companies have high retention rates, however the factors contributing to their customer retention is an underexplored area within academic literature.

Customer retention is a crucial element when it comes to long-term business viability. According to Reichheld and Sasser (1990), increasing customer retention by as little as 5% has the potential to increase profits by between 25% and 95%. In industries that are service-oriented, particularly ones that are focused on behavioural change such as weight loss, long-term engagement is essential for delivering meaningful outcomes (Berry, 2000). Retaining members allows companies to deepen relationships, in turn building brand advocacy, and achieving greater customer lifetime value.

Whilst there is academic research around branding and customer engagement influencing customer retention, there is limited comparative academic research on how

branding and customer engagement directly influences customer retention specifically in the UK weight loss market. Most studies that have explored this focus on just clinical effectiveness or general marketing tactics. The studies overlook the psychological and emotional underlying forces that drive continued membership (Coulson, 2015; Hartmann-Boyce et al., 2014). This research will seek to fill that gap in research by exploring how Weightwatchers and Slimming World implement branding and engagement strategies, how these are perceived by customers, and how they ultimately impact customer retention.

By using a mixed-method comparative case study approach, this research will aim to provide actionable insights for not only Weightwatchers and Slimming World leaders but also professionals in the health and wellness sector seeking to improve customer loyalty. It also hoped that the research will contribute to academic understanding of customer-brand relationships in emotionally sensitive customer environments.

Research Question, Aims and Objectives

The research question to be looked at for the study is: *How do branding strategies and customer engagement practices influence customer retention in UK-based weight loss companies?* This will be explored through a comparative case study of Weightwatchers and Slimming World. The main aim of the study is to analyse the role of branding and customer engagement in influencing customer loyalty within the UK weight loss industry. Particularly, the study will evaluate and compare the retention strategies employed by two leading organisations and provide actionable insights for enhancing customer retention across the wider health and wellness division. To achieve this, the study will pursue the following objectives:

1. To analyse the branding and engagement strategies employed by Weightwatchers and Slimming World in the UK market
2. To examine customer perceptions and experiences through the collection of primary data
3. To compare the effectiveness of each company's approach to member retention
4. To develop strategic recommendations for weight loss companies seeking to strengthen customer loyalty and foster long-term engagement.

Through these objectives, it is hoped that the research will contribute to both academic literature and to practical strategy development in the health and wellness industry.

Literature Review

When looking at drivers of competitive advantage, branding is fundamental in this area especially for companies within saturated markets such as the health and wellness industry. Having a strong brand does not only attract customers, it also plays a significant role in building long-term loyalty (Keller, 2013). Relating specifically to weight loss companies, where emotional factors such as self-esteem and body image

are heightened, brand identity must bear trust, value, and emotional resonance (Kotler and Keller, 2016).

According to Aaker (1991), brand equity, meaning the value that a brand adds to a product or service, has the ability to enhance customer loyalty by providing customers with additional reasons, beyond the core services offered, to remain engaged with their brand. In the weight loss industry, brands such as Weightwatchers and Slimming World use specific narratives of community, empowerment, and proven success to differentiate themselves.

Additionally, empirical studies show that the alignment between a brand's identity and a customer's self-concept, significantly influences loyalty (Sirgy, 1982, Malär et al., 2011). Therefore, retention can be strengthened for weight loss brands when they reflect real customer goals, such as healthier living and self-confidence. This can be achieved through identity alignment.

Customer engagement, defined as the strength of an individual's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions (Brodie et al., 2011), is crucial when looking to sustain loyalty. In service industries, where consumption experiences are continuous rather than one-off events, engagement mechanisms must be comprehensive and have a proactive reach.

Hollebeek (2011) identifies three primary dimensions of customer engagement: cognitive (thinking about the brand), emotional (feeling connected to the brand), and behavioural (acting towards or on behalf of the brand). When comparing Slimming World against Weightwatchers, Slimming World encourages behavioural engagement through attendance at regular group meetings compared to Weightwatchers who encourage use of their mobile app and online communities to promote cognitive and emotional involvement.

Research by Vivek, Beatty and Morgan (2012) indicates that higher customer engagement has a positive correlation between advocacy behaviours, repeat patronage, and resistance to switching. In weight loss programmes, where drop-out rates are typically seen to be high (Thomas et al., 2014), effective engagement strategies can mean the difference between successfully retaining customers and customers leaving a brand. This is known as member churn. Branding and engagement are interrelated drivers of customer retention. Churn prevention depends not only on initial brand attraction but also on sustained engagement that continually improves customer satisfaction and perceived value (Verhoef, 2003).

Bowden (2009) argues that customer engagement plays a key role in linking initial satisfaction to long term loyalty. When someone has a good first experience with a brand, it can lead to emotional and mental commitment that makes them more likely to stick with it. For weight loss brands, this means it is crucial to build an ongoing interactive relationship with members through regular updates, coaching, digital tools, and community support.

Current research shows that building ongoing, two-way relationships with customers, commonly known as 'relational branding' is incredibly effective in-service sectors where people are more personally invested in a product (Veloutsou, 2015).

Weightwatchers' had a rebrand to "WW" meaning it has had a shift in focus from weight loss alone to general wellness (Jordan, 2019). This is a clear move to stretch the life of its customer relationships. Weightwatchers has positioned itself within the weight loss sector as a well-structured, science-backed programme that is built around coaching, group support, and personalisation of its programme. Its brand messaging relies heavily on long-term health and changes that promote sustainability rather than fast results and quick fixes. According to company reports (WW, 2023), the mobile app is central to its customer engagement strategy, and offers tools such as progress tracking, recipe sharing, and live coaching.

Having a digital investment, such as a mobile app, lines up with broader trends seen in customer engagement strategies. By blending online and offline interactions, a phenomenon known as omnichannel engagement, businesses have seen improved customer retention by making their experiences more flexible and tailored (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Weightwatchers also incentivise loyalty by promoting a 'personalised plan' helping individuals who are not only following the plan by choice but also by offering tailored plans for diabetic members and also members utilising GLP-1 medications alongside their programme (WW, 2025).

However, in contrast to this, Slimming World moves more toward a community-driven model that is based on regular in-person group sessions led by trained Slimming World consultants. Slimming World's branding highlights emotional support, a judgement-free environment, and peer accountability (Slimming World, 2025). By using this face-to-face approach, they tap into the emotional side of engagement and help members to feel a stronger sense of belonging and connection.

Arguably the most unique part of Slimming World's programme is the group sessions known as "IMAGE therapy". 'IMAGE' standing for 'Individual Motivation And Group Experience' (Slimming World, 2025). The sessions are designed to promote emotional resilience and boost body positivity. Using this focus helps to create loyalty, therefore leading to lower dropout rates. When in an emotionally challenging journey, such as a weight loss journey, peer support, has been shown to improve commitment to reaching health goals (Burke et al., 2006). Comparative studies can also back this up. Jolly et al. (2011) found that Slimming World tends to achieve higher retention than any of its competitors. This suggests that emotional and social strategies are particularly effective in this space.

Nevertheless, retention is a constant challenge for all weight loss brands. Members often drop out due to the time it takes to see / feel results, personal goals may change, or simply, members losing motivation (Moroshko, Brennan and O'Brien, 2011). Weight loss is emotionally tough, and keeping members engaged comes with the challenge of dealing with deeper psychological factors such as confidence, mindset, and resilience (Teixeira et al., 2012). Breakdowns in user experience or branding, such as problems with apps or unhelpful group sessions have the potential to quickly push people away.

In a digital world like today, the ability to build genuine, personal member engagement across platforms is more difficult than ever. Companies can risk making customer experiences feel cold or transactional, especially in a digital world where companies are replacing human contact with tech driven solutions (Pansari and Kumar, 2017).

A growing trend in the industry is the focus on wellbeing and personalisation. More and more people are looking for weight-loss programmes that fit into their wider lives and don't focus on simply calorie counting, but focus on mental health, physical activity, and self-care as well (Mintel, 2022). In their move from Weighwatchers to WW, the company has moved toward this by offering tailored meal plans, fitness advice, and mental health resources via apps and wearables (WW, 2025). Slimming World has also added content focused on emotional wellbeing and use techniques such as Transactional Analysis and Motivational Interviewing to explore wellbeing more (Slimming World, 2025).

According to Tam and Ho (2005), personalisation matters because it makes people feel seen, heard and understood. When customers feel that a brand can identify with them and 'gets' them then they are far more likely to be, and remain, loyal. The shift from a company promoting simply "weight loss" to also including "wellness" reflects a bigger cultural change towards sustainable living and body acceptance (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2018). When brands appear to genuinely reflect these values, then they are more likely to hold onto their customers in the long run.

Even with strong research showing links between branding and customer engagement with customer loyalty, studies that specifically focus on weight loss within the UK are still very limited. There's a huge gap in the literature, more so when it comes to case studies that combine hard data, such as retention rates, with more of a personal insight, such as user experience and emotional connection.

Owing to the fact that weight loss brands operate in a unique space where physical health, emotional wellbeing, and brand experience all intersect, a mixed-method approach of primary data collection is needed. By blending surveys with interview output, the hope is that the research will give a fuller, more useful picture of what's really going on with customer retention.

Paradigm and Methodology

This study will explore how branding and engagement strategies have an impact on customer retention in two main UK-based weight loss brands: Weightwatchers and Slimming World. A pragmatic research paradigm will be used due to its ability to allow the study to pull in both qualitative and quantitative data, based on the research question, its aims and its objectives (Creswell, 2014; Saunders et al., 2019).

Pragmatism is a good approach that works well in business research due to the fact that it focuses on outcomes and provides flexibility to handle the complex realities of human behaviour. In this specific research, understanding what keeps customers

engaged means looking at both company strategy and individual experiences (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). A mixed-methods design with support this aim by combining measurable patterns with deeper insight.

The study will also take an abductive approach, allowing the researcher to move back and forth between theory and data. This approach will then refine the research as new themes emerge (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The approach is also very useful in-service research, in situations where practice can often challenge existing theory.

The research will use a comparative case study design. Weightwatchers and Slimming World will be treated as separate cases with distinct branding and engagement models (Yin, 2018). By looking at both on a case-by-case basis, this will help to identify what works across both weight loss companies and what is unique to each company.

By combining surveys with interviews, it is hoped this will strengthen the research outcomes. Whilst surveys work to provide broader trends, interviews provide depth and context. By triangulating research methods, the validity will improve, and the research will give a more rounded view.

Method Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods have strengths and limitations in all areas of research. A strength of qualitative data collection is that interviews can use open ended questions that are ideal for exploring how people experience, in this case, weight loss programmes. Interviews with customers can help to uncover emotional drivers, motivation and perceptions of a brand (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). In addition to this, interviews with staff can reveal internal strategy, challengers and decision-making processes (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

Alongside these strengths, qualitative methods do have their limitations. Gathering the data and analysing it can be time consuming and very hard to generalise. Typically, qualitative methods are done by way of interview which can be time consuming and difficult to generalise along with holding the risk of researcher bias if not managed correctly (Silverman, 2016).

Quantitative methods can be undertaken by way of survey's and can reach a wider target audience that can make results more generalisable (Saunders et al. 2019). They also allow for measurable comparisons across both Weightwatchers and Slimming World and can help to identify patterns using statistical tools like regression (Hair et al., 2020).

The limitation with quantitative methods is that it often misses emotional nuances from participants. Surveys tend to use closed questions that limit emotional depth and response bias can impact accuracy of the responses (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Survey design and validation also needs a careful level of attention.

Using a mixed methods approach can provide researchers with a balanced view. By using both approaches, the weaknesses in both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods can be balanced. A mixed method approach allows for more reliable conclusions to be drawn and also supports cross checking of findings (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). It is important to note and be conscious that mixed methods can take more time to collect your data, require more planning time and researcher skill to execute well.

Data Collection

The primary data collecting methods will be surveys and interviews. Surveys will be created online, using Microsoft Forms or Qualtrics, and will be shared through social media and online forums to individuals who identify themselves as current or former members of either WW or Slimming World. The questions will use a mixture of question types that will look to measure satisfaction, trust, engagement and retention. Tools will be drawn from Keller's brand equity model and Hollebeek's engagement framework. The target response number will be around 150 and a snowballing method will be used. Interviews will be held, if access can be granted, with customer engagement staff and marketing at both Weightwatchers and Slimming World. The interviews will look to explore strategy and challenges and will also look at customer feedback. Following these interviews, the researcher will explore follow up interviews with customers to explore any identified themes in depth. These interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Consent will be obtained from all participants. The number of interviews to be held will be dependent on the number of staff employed in the necessary roles. Customer interviews that may follow would be between 10 and 15 per company.

In addition to the primary data, secondary data will also be collected and analysed through company reports, marketing materials, customer reviews and online forums. The hope is that the primary data can be reviewed against the secondary data to compare the 'public facing brand' against how customers actual experience each brand.

Data Analysis

Following a successful data collection period, the survey data will be analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics and will utilise functions within computer software such as Excel or Qualtrics. The qualitative data collected from interviews will go through thematic analysis, with coding done either manually or using a software such as NVivo. In line with the proposed abductive method, themes will be developed both from existing theory and new patterns in both quantitative and qualitative data collated.

Resource Implications

Whilst there are no major costs expected with the proposed study, there will be significant amounts of researcher time spent when conducting interviews and undertaking the thematic analysis. Access to the software needed can be accessed through the university meaning there will be no additional costs to estimate once data is collected. As interviews held in this area may be highly emotive, refreshments may need to be provided for those who provide interviews.

The estimated cost of this would be around £40.

Surveys will be promoted widely through social media snowballing. Any participants who take part in customer interviews will be asked to provide proof of membership to ensure they are current members of the necessary group.

Securing interviews with staff members at both businesses may be difficult. Early contact via multiple channels such as emails and linked in will be used to improve the chances of positive contact. Company barriers may prevent interviews from taking place so as much transparency with the participants as possible will be given at the time of requesting interviews.

Suggested Time Plan (Appendix 1)

The data collection period will run over 8 weeks. The first week will consist of finalising the survey, undertaking pilot opportunities and identifying individuals to undertake interviews with. The second week will involve the survey being circulated through appropriate online platforms and social media networks. Recruitment for the company and customer interviews will also start in this week with emails and follow up calls being made to potential participants. Week 3 through to week 6 will focus on the collection of survey responses and as many interviews as possible with company representatives and customers. Weeks 7 and 8 will act as additional weeks for final interviews to take place, allowing maximum flexibility to arrange interviews at suitable times. The survey will also close at the end of week 8. In week 9, the data will be anonymised and securely stored and a preliminary cleaning and organisation ahead of analysis will take place. Following the cleansing and organisation of anonymised data, significant time will be spent undertaking thematic analysis of the interview data. Braun & Clark (2006) recommend a 15-point checklist that outlines a criteria to ensure good thematic analysis (appendix 3). This covers transcription, coding, analysis, overview and the completion of a written report. It is estimated the transcription of interview materials will take between 4 and 6 hours per interview to ensure accurate information is noted. This will equate to a maximum of 180 hours of transcription before the analysis can commence.

Ethics

Before undertaking any research, approval will be sought from the University ethics committee by way of ethical approval form (*Appendix 2*). All data that will be collected

will be anonymised with clear links made to the appropriate company. For example, all participants responding as Weightwatcher members will be labelled 'W' followed by a number and all those responding as Slimming world members will be labelled 'S' followed by a number. Data will be stored on university cloud servers that are Data Protection 2018 and GDPR UK compliant, and all participants will be fully informed of their rights under GDPR legislation. As the data collection will involve sensitive and emotional disclosures, participants will be provided with a consent form and given the right to opt out at any time. Information on support available will also be provided. In order to provide participants with an additional layer of support, the right to withdraw from the study at any time will be clearly given to all participants prior to the survey or interview and again following completion of the survey or interview.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 -Timeline Gantt Chart



Appendix 2 – Ethical Approval Form

Link to University PG2 Application for Ethical Approval: [UWTSD PG2 Ethical Approval Form](#)

Appendix 3 – Thematic Analysis Checklist

Table 2 A 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
Analysis	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
Overall	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – ie, described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.