Nolte, Molly L. M.  *Social Media and Marketing Communication in Fitness Centers*

**Abstract**

In the field of communications, it is important not only to understand the history of the practice, but also to have just as great an understanding of the evolution of the field as well as a grasp on the direction of its future. With each generation, technology improves and more deeply permeates the layers of society. It has become, in and of itself, a massive, global communicative tool. This research project delves into communication and its use by observing social media as a marketing tool; in this case, the focus is specifically fitness centers. The purpose of this paper is to observe methods of digital and marketing communication on social media platforms in order to provide guidance and direction to businesses in their pursuit to market effectively to an audience via social media. With the combination of existing academic literature, scholarly research, and several months of field observation, it was found that fitness centers use various social media platforms to communicate with their customers and potential consumers.
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Chapter I: Introduction

From a technical and professional communication standpoint, it is of interest to communication scholars to study how communication is being utilized in digital marketing. Research indicates that digital communication is the future of business marketing. According to social media expert Michael A. Stelzner, 63% of marketers plan on increasing their use of social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (2016, p. 5). While more traditional marketing is certainly still viable, there is enough evidence to suggest businesses should consider utilizing digital formats to solicit products and services to their audiences. The emergence of Internet-based social media has made it possible for a single company or organization to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other people about products or services that can be provided to them (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Organizations now have a seemingly unprecedented opportunity to communicate quickly with a very broad audience unlike more traditional marketing methods such as paper literature dissemination.

The observations made from following the target fitness centers indicated a vast and varied audience willing to communicate and interact with not only the organizations themselves but with other consumers as well. Changes like these in consumer behavior more or less require organizations to reconsider their marketing and communication strategies in the digital domain (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). Communication strategies that exist online on social media platforms can directly engage consumers in the creative process by both producing and distributing information through collaborative writing, content sharing, and social networking (Thackery, et al., 2008, 338). For this study, I drew from existing academic texts and field observation over the course of seven months to draw conclusions as to how fitness centers are effectively using social media platforms to communicate and market to their consumers. The
research focused on the social media platforms that are most effective and the kinds of posts that generate consumer interaction, thus influencing communication effectiveness.

**Why Fitness Centers?**

The reason fitness centers were the focus of this paper instead of other types of organizations is due to the trends I have noticed as a consumer, communication student, and a former fitness center employee. Since I have a personal and academic interest in the trend, it made sense to focus on these businesses as the subject of my field research project. As a former fitness center employee, and upon visiting several different fitness centers, I observed that businesses rarely use print marketing to advertise their products and services. Flyers and brochures are often not provided within the businesses. Additionally, I found distributing paper literature in non-fitness center organizations (to promote services and events) was not allowed by most businesses. Most companies focus instead on digital communication and technology to connect with their audience.

Many fitness studios use a wide range of social media platforms, electronic communication, and other modes of mass communication including, but not limited to, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. While we study the new means and modes to communicate digitally, businesses must understand and anticipate these trends and be ready when they arrive. In this study, I intended to study different forms of marketing communication via social media platforms used by fitness centers to best understand their methods. I observed and recorded their methods and observed their online communities and how consumers interacted with the business and with one another. By using social media platforms, businesses can potentially establish a culture for their organization and improve connections with consumers. These observations
were used in part to measure communication effectiveness. The utility for this topic was to determine the effectiveness of social media in the field of communication and marketing.

Over the past several years, the appeal of fitness centers has increased markedly as evidenced by the rapid spread of these businesses across North America and around the world. The number of fitness centers in the United States has risen from approximately 30,000 in 2008 to over 36,000 in 2015 (Statista, 2017). This trend targets fitness consumers seeking to improve physical fitness, reduce stress, lower blood pressure, lose weight, and live a healthier, more abundant lifestyle.

**Statement of the Problem**

Communication is an important aspect of marketing. Improper execution of communication techniques via digital platforms could have a negative effect on the business and their goals as an organization. It is not enough for a business to simply utilize social media. An organization needs to facilitate an understanding of digital communication and social media usage as well as the benefits and inhibitors to improve digital marketing engagement and focus on relationship-based interactions with their customers (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014).

**Purpose of the Study**

The challenge facing many organizations is that they recognize the need to utilize social media platforms, but they do not understand how to do it effectively. Consumers are now participating in co-creating marketing content with companies, so organizations are looking to online social marketing programs and campaigns to reach consumers online (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). The purpose of this study was to observe and record existing digital communication and marketing techniques among fitness centers and connect that information with existing trends regarding communication and established digital marketing best practices. It
is the hope that this information will aid organizations and professional communicators in their attempts to market and communicate effectively with customers and potential consumers on various social media platforms.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms have been defined in order to clarify their use in this research. First, Market(ing) Communication is a fundamental function of any business’s or organization’s marketing efforts and is described as all the messages and media used to communicate with the market/audience/customers/potential consumers. This can include advertising, direct marketing, branding, packaging, online presence, and printed materials. Next, a Fitness Center is any business or organization, including smaller, boutique fitness studios, or larger, franchised boxed gyms, that offer products and services including, but not limited to, group fitness classes, yoga, cycling, strength training, individualized exercise, circuit training, cardio and strength machines, etc. Lastly, while many social media brands and platforms exist, for the purpose of this paper, any use of the term “social media platform” shall refer to only Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter specifically. All observations made throughout the timeframe of this research project included those three platforms.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study focused solely on existing research, academic publications, and individual observation. Surveys and interviews were not conducted, and fitness center employees were not solicited, interviewed, or otherwise questioned. Additional information could be gathered and recorded by interviewing and surveying fitness center employees, marketing managers, social media employees, existing customers (users), and potential employees.
Methodology

Over the course of approximately seven months, various fitness centers located within southcentral Wisconsin were observed. A total of twelve fitness centers were the focus of research and observation. The fitness centers included both smaller, specialized boutique fitness studios as well as larger, franchised “box” gyms. All fitness centers utilized one or more of the following social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and/or Twitter. According to Stelzner, more than half of marketers in general (55%) chose Facebook as their most important platform, followed by LinkedIn (18%), Twitter (12%), and then YouTube (4%) (Stelzner, 2016, p. 29). Instagram was used by 4% of marketers, but for the purposes of this study it was considered as important as Facebook and Twitter due to the high number of accounts used by the twelve selected fitness centers. LinkedIn and YouTube were not considered or observed in this study. LinkedIn is a professional networking tool, but its environment does not encourage audience participation as does Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. YouTube was not considered because the majority of the fitness centers that were the focus of this study did not maintain a YouTube channel.

I followed each of the fitness center’s social media platforms and observed the types of postings on all platforms and paid specific attention to consumer interaction with the posts. In this way, combined with existing communication and marketing research, it was found that utilizing social media platforms to communicate with consumers was an effective way to establish culture, improve connections with consumers, answer customer questions, and advertise products, services, special events, among other type of business “happenings.”

On a weekly or multi-weekly basis, I visited the fitness centers’ social media platforms and recorded my observations on a chart. First, I visited each organization’s Facebook page and
made notations about how many posts were made per day or per week. Next, I recorded the amount of “likes,” “shares,” or “comments” made by consumers. Having the highest level of participation and interaction from the audience indicated post popularity and communication effectiveness. Marketing research suggests social media use positively contributes to brand performance, retailer performance, and consumer–retailer loyalty (Rapp, et al., 2013). Next, I visited the organization’s Instagram account and recorded findings similarly to Facebook: how many new posts per day/per week, and audience participation and interaction. The same method of observation was used for the Twitter accounts. In each case, consumer interaction with posts were recorded, and higher levels of interaction were observed.
Chapter II: Background

There exists debate about whether or not using social media platforms to market and communicate about fitness, including philosophical movements such as the yogic lifestyle, is appropriate (Jain, 2012). There is existing research commenting on the subject, and while I began to focus heavily on that research in the early stages of this project, it was found that these philosophical stances were not pertinent to this research project or its goals. It is sufficient to say that there are yoga experts who believe advertising and marketing movements like yoga go against its fundamentals (Jain, 2014). This paper instead focuses on how businesses can best interact with consumers by using effective digital communication and by embracing the use of social media platforms as a method to promote products and services. In fact, according to social economics author Erik Qualman, social media touches every aspect of business, and it is imperative for social media to be an integral part of a business’s overall strategy (2010, p. 13).

Today, consumers are involved in a variety of activities when it comes to social media including consuming content, participating in discussions, sharing knowledge with others, and otherwise contributing. Consumers are assumed to be actively contributing to marketing content giving cause to organizations to perfect their digital communication methods (Heinonen, 2011).

There is research that indicates digital communication and digital marketing is the choice method for businesses now and will increasingly become the best way to market going forward. While the exact degree to which social media platforms will transform marketing communications and expand tactics is unknown, research and observational evidence suggests it is becoming the most used method (Thackeray, et al, 2014, p. 339). And it is possible business and organizations are just on the brink of realizing and recognizing the true power of social
media. The internet as we know it today continually creates new ways to communicate, collaborate, and share content (Michealidou, 2011, p. 5).

There is a common misconception that only younger generations utilize social media platforms for information, but this is becoming more untrue than ever before. People of all ages and generations are becoming users of social media and digital technology. According to the PEW Research Center in 2016, seven out of ten Americans use social media to connect, engage with news content, share information and entertain themselves. While approximately 95% of people ages 18-29 engage in the use of social media, nearly 50% of older adults age 65 and older also engaged in the use of social media. Among these statistics, it was found that nearly 40% of the users age 65 and older use Facebook. This evidence suggests the incredible potential social media and digital communication have to influence consumers and users. Social media outlets constitute excellent vehicles for fostering relationships with customers (de Vries, et al., 2012, p. 83). It is often low-cost and sometimes free to maintain a social media account, save the choice to pay for push advertisements and other types of sponsored marketing. Furthermore, there is enough evidence to suggest it is the first choice for an increasing and varied national and potentially global audience of information seekers and consumers (Berthon, et al., 2012).
Chapter III: Methodology

As aforementioned, this paper’s methodology was honed into a simple and straightforward practice of observing and recording. Of the twelve observed fitness centers, each of their social media platforms was “followed,” and types of posts and consumer interaction was considered and recorded. The observed data was then applied to existing marketing techniques and potential best practices were recommended. Consumer interaction was heavily considered as evidence of communication success.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Each week, I visited the social media platforms of each fitness center. On their Facebook pages, number and types of posting were observed and recorded. Audience/consumer interaction in the form of “likes,” “shares,” and “comments” were considered as an indication of communication effectiveness and consumer interaction. Instagram and Twitter accounts were observed similarly, including how many posts published each day/week, how many consumers reacted to each post, and level of participation and interaction with each post and post type. Each fitness center was evaluated based on post type and consumer interaction. Evidence of increased consumer interaction was considered a positive result of effective digital communication and marketing, and thus was recorded as marketing and communication success.

Limitations

As outlined in the introduction, there were several limitations to these methods. Since observation coupled with comparison against existing research and publication was the focus on this research paper, interaction with employees of each fitness center was not included. Further research on the subject could include interviews and surveys among employees, social media
experts, and marketing teams might provide more information regarding the use of social media platforms and the goals of individual business’s marketing and communication techniques.

**Summary**

Although interviews and surveys would provide additional insight as to the marketing and communication objectives of a business or organization, the observation of social media posts and consumer interaction indicate what might be effective methods of digital communication and marketing on the social media platforms of these twelve fitness centers. The observations, including tallies, post types, posts amounts, and consumer interaction were combined and considered in the results of the research project. The results are explained at length in the next chapter.
Chapter IV: Results

Results and findings were relatively consistent across all twelve fitness centers. Every fitness center included in the study had a Facebook account, while eleven had an Instagram account, and eleven had a Twitter account. To clarify, each organization had a Facebook, of those twelve eleven had Instagram, and a different eleven had a Twitter account; each organization had at least two platforms, while the majority had all three. Each of these accounts was observed weekly or multiple times a week over the course of seven months. Utilizing social media platforms is becoming more vital and appropriate for business. Whether a business is large or small, its overall success will be at least partly owed to its success within social media (Qualman, 2012, p. 13).

Social media marketing and communicating is becoming a valid low-cost method of marketing and has been evaluated as the most convenient communication channel to market products. Social media allows organizations to produce content and deliver it through interactive communication and is recognized as the most potentially powerful tool in business practice; marketers are intensively using social media to realize their strategies (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011). Additionally, the higher the social presence, the larger the social influence that the communication partners have on each other’s behavior (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

The observations for this researcher indicated consumers readily interacted with the fitness centers on social media. Interaction here means the degree to which consumers interact with the posts and one another on the social media platform (per post) (Liu & Shrum, 2002, p. 54). Interaction is characterized by two-way communication between companies and customers, as well as between customers themselves.
Each fitness center was found to post most often on their Facebook accounts. It was observed that fitness centers posted on Facebook anywhere between once a week up to four times a day. The majority of fitness centers posted at least once a day. It was noted that there were three types of posts generally publicized: for the sake of this paper, those categories are divided into videos, photos, and promotions. Videos are defined, in this paper, as any moving image. Photos are defined as any image that is not specifically a promotion of a specific service, such as a class or special event, or merchandise. Promotions included events, products, merchandise, etc. It was found that videos received the most amount of attention including consumers “liking” the post (i.e. giving the post a visual “thumbs up” indication). Videos produced the most amount of comments and interaction from consumers. There was often consumer interaction via comments and conversations that took place on a video post. Next, it was most common for photos to receive the second most amount of interaction including “likes,” but fewer comments were observed. Lastly, promotions, such as marketing special prices and merchandise, received the fewest number of likes and comments.

Next, Instagram was considered. Each fitness center posted on Instagram anywhere from less than once a week to up to twice a day. Instagram received fewer posts compared to Facebook. It was observed that Instagram received the most consumer interaction for videos followed closely by photos. In most cases, Instagram posts did not include promotions, but there were promotional posts in some cases. They tended to receive about as much interaction from consumers as photos as otherwise defined. For some of the franchised fitness centers, a great deal of consumer interaction was observed, oftentimes in the hundreds when it came to “likes” (on Instagram, a “like” is defined by clicking on the “heart” icon pertaining to a post).
Lastly, Twitter was observed. Overall, Twitter was used about as often as Instagram was used by each fitness center. It was found that consumers interacted with Twitter the least compared to both Facebook and Instagram. This is possibly indicative of Twitter losing popularity and Instagram gaining notoriety as a contender among social media platforms at least in terms of fitness centers. Twitter posts, while similar in style and content as Instagram posts, received very little consumer interaction overall including “likes” and “retweets”.
Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendation

Marketing research shows that consumers interacting with social media posts in a positive way can generate feelings among the audience. According to Wang, et al., “Consumer socialization through peer communication using social media websites has become an important marketing issue through the development and increasing popularity of social media” (2012, p. 198). Examples of these types of exchanges between consumers can have a positive effect on the perceptions of a business or organization, its products, services, and events. Positive comments on a social media post might have complementary value to the company increase the attractiveness of the company (de Vries, et al., 2012, p. 82-83).

Discussion

It was observed that online consumers of the fitness centers’ social media posts encouraged consumer interaction, business to consumer interaction, discussion, comments, and “likes.” There was little, if any, negative interaction observed in the duration of this study. While more traditional marketing including the distribution of flyers and handouts were not observed in this study, it can be predicted that consumers could not as easily interact with one another based on the reception of a flyer. It is also clear that public conversation and exchange between consumers could not occur in terms of viewing flyers or hand-outs. These second-to-second exchanges occur exclusively on a digital format. Information and interaction happens quickly and synchronously, and is easily measured and observed not only by consumers and observers, but of course by the businesses themselves (Qualman, 2010, p. 14). Technology and communication are empowering consumers and fueling interaction, and their role has shifted from being passive recipients of information to becoming active generators of information (Heinonen, 2011). Social media holds amazing potential partly because it allows businesses and
organizations to directly engage with consumers. In this way, the customer can be at the heart of the social marketing process (Thackeray, et al., 2008, p. 340). Importantly, businesses are now able to communicate immediately with their consumers whether it is to promote services and goods, answer questions, or simply connect with current and potential consumers and create a business culture. This increases the potential for positive marketing, relationship building, and community and culture among a business and its consumers.

Conclusions

Overall, it was found that fitness centers that utilize social media platforms and digital communication to promote their services, goods, and information about the business received attention from consumers on all three platforms in varying amounts. Each of the twelve fitness centers in this research used Facebook, eleven used Instagram, and eleven used Twitter. Facebook was found to be the most utilized social media platform both by the fitness centers and by consumers. Not only did all of the observed organizations utilize Facebook as a social media platform, it was observed that each fitness center posted anywhere from once a week up to four times a day which was more frequent than the other social media platforms. Videos were found to receive the largest amount of “likes,” “shares,” and “comments” from consumers. Next, photos received the most attention, and thirdly were promotional posts. Next, Instagram was found to be used slightly less than Facebook with fewer posts and less interaction from consumers. In general, organizations posted on Instagram once a day or less. It was rare for an organization to post more than once on Instagram per day. It should be noted, however, that videos still received slightly more consumer interaction, followed closely by photos. Lastly, Twitter was found to be used the least by the collective group of fitness centers. There were the
least amount of posts per fitness center, and each post received the least amount of consumer interaction as compared to Facebook and Instagram.

**Recommendations**

While Facebook is the oldest among the three social media platforms, all of the businesses in this research maintained a current Facebook account. Not only that, but each business posted more on Facebook than on other social media platforms. Additionally, consumers interacted the most with Facebook posts compared to Instagram and Twitter posts. Facebook posts receive the highest number of “likes,” “shares,” and “comments” which indicated a higher amount of consumer interaction with the business and with one another.

A recommendation to come from study is to encourage businesses to create and maintain an active, relevant, and current Facebook page. Videos received by far the most consumer interaction, including the most “likes” and other participation such as comments from consumers. It is recommended that businesses utilize videos as a method to communication with their audience and introduce consumers to the organization and its happenings. Next, photos that did not specifically promote specials, items with monetary values, merchandise, and events received the next highest amount of consumer interaction. Using photos of events occurring within the fitness centers, including fitness members taking classes, working out, and coexisting, garnered interaction with consumers. Lastly, consumers interacted least with promotional posts. Consumers did not as frequently interact with posts relating to sales, specials, and the monetary value of products or services. While Twitter was established before Instagram, the research indicated that Instagram posts were more likely to receive attention and interaction from consumers. It is possible that Instagram, in the case of fitness centers and similar businesses, would do better to focus on Instagram as a digital communication device rather than Twitter, or...
at least in addition to Twitter. Twitter did, however, receive some interaction from consumers. It is clear that businesses need to communicate with consumers and create interaction between themselves and consumers. As shown in this study, social media platforms are a step in the right direction to encourage communication and community between consumers for the benefit of the business.
References


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