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Just Be Happy?: Investigating the Role of Joy in Influencer Marketing Campaigns within the Fitness Industry

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INTRODUCTION

        Influencer marketing has become a rapidly growing research field in recent years, as social media continues to dominate the business environment and work to bring brands and consumers closer together than ever before. It is a topic that has garnered increasing attention from scholars and practitioners alike, shown by an explosive growth of publications from 2003 to 2019 (Ye, 2021). Of course, with the rise of social media platforms and influencer culture, it is not difficult to see why social media marketing, specifically influencer marketing, is demanding the attention of researchers. More importantly, companies are increasingly interested in this research, as they are turning to social media influencers as a means of promoting their products and services. However, despite the considerable attention this topic has received, there is still much unknown about how influencer marketing works and what factors contribute to its success. According to *The Value of Influencer Marketing for Business* (2021), "Despite the rapid increase in influencer marketing publications, it should be noted that, so far, only 387 research papers on influencer marketing have been retrieved" (p. 165). Research into best practices for influencer marketing depending on the industry is even more limited.

        Influencer marketing has become an especially popular means of marketing goods and services in the fitness industry. Fitness brands have partnered with fitness influencers to promote their products and services, often using social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok as their primary channels. There is a recognized potential value of studying influencer marketing within the fitness industry. As consumers become more health-conscious and interested in fitness, there is an increasing demand for products that meet their specific needs and increasing companies joining this marketing and looking for ways to differentiate their product and capture market share through influencer marketing efforts. Due to the growth in both influencer marketing and the fitness industry, it is extremely relevant to conduct research to shed light on the best practices for fitness brands and influencers doing influencers marketing.

        To conduct my research on influencer marketing within the fitness industry, I collected third-party data and conducted social media audits of fitness influencers' profiles. This allowed me to gain both quantitative and qualitative insights into the emotions conveyed in branded fitness content. Specifically, I focused on whether content that expressed the emotion joy was more successful in boosting engagement and sales for fitness brands partnering with fitness influencers. Through my research, I observed three valuable trends relating to joy and fitness influencers. I identified that joy does not necessarily boost engagement, but it can be key to brand alignment, authenticity, and building to maintain a tight-knit brand community centered around the company and the influencers involved in a brand's network.

        These findings have important business implications for fitness brands and influencers alike. By incorporating more joy into their content, influencers and companies have an opportunity to deepen their connection with consumers who view content and reap the business. This research sheds light on the value of emotion in influencer marketing and provides insights into how to create more effective content for the fitness industry.

INFLUENCER MARKETING

        The world of marketing has witnessed a significant shift towards a new method of advertising- influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is a type of marketing that involves the use of influential individuals to promote a product or a service. As stated in an article from Northeastern University, "influencer marketing specifically refers to the involvement of these influential users who have the credibility, following, and motivation to spread positive word of

mouth in their blogs and on social media and who have an important impact on the consumption decisions of others" (Ye et al., 2021, p. 165). The power of influencer marketing lies in the ability of these influential individuals to effectively reach out to many people who trust their judgment, making it an effective way to promote products and services in today's digital era.

Social media marketing influencers are a crucial component to influencer marketing. As said in *Navigating the New Era of Influencer Marketing*, "a social media influencer is a person with a large and engaged follower base on social media platforms, which one would not know unless one follows them" (Haenlein et al., 2020, p. 17). These individuals appear to have a superior power to impact the purchase decisions of their followers, and they are a reliable resource for those wanting to know about a product or a brand. In some instances, "social media influencers achieve the status of celebrities; however, they do not become famous because of any activities other than social media, but because they share their daily routines and images with a large audience" (Duplaga, 2020, p. 2). Additional sources define influencers as "branded and vocational actors with a 'practice focused on social media-based, multimedia, fame on the internet'" (Kubler, 2020, p. 7). To be an influencer, one needs more than a large follower count. It requires a certain aesthetic and engaging content strategy that resonates with their audience, inspiring them to aspire to live a similar life through the goods and services preferred by the influencer. Thus, the social media marketing influencer phenomenon is a modern lifestyle that has become an integral part of the everyday experience.

Evolution of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has its roots in relationship marketing, which has been around for decades. Celebrity endorsements were the original forms of influencer marketing, with companies paying top dollar to have their products promoted by A-List celebrities. The 1950s saw the first TV commercials featuring celebrities, with people such as Lucille Ball for Philip Morris cigarettes, and Michael Jordan for Nike shoes, helping to sell products through their fame and status (Jain 2022). As the digital age began to rise, the concept of influencer marketing began to evolve. Social media marketing became a game-changer, providing a platform for brands and influencers to connect with their followers directly. Influencer marketing campaigns shifted from hiring big-name celebrities to collaborating with niche influencers who have dedicated followings in specific industries.

Omni-channel marketing has also played a significant role in the evolution of influencer marketing. Marketers are expected to leverage owned, earned, and paid media opportunities to offer a comprehensive experience across all channels. This means that influencers become a crucial part of the brand's overall marketing strategy. Brands now work with influencers to create content that can be shared across multiple channels, from social media to email campaigns, providing a seamless experience for their target audience.

Additionally, the evolution of the attention economy has pushed influencer marketing to an essential element in the marketing landscape. As described by Kubler (2023), "The attention economy rests on the assumption that a globalized and industrialized capitalism has mostly solved the problem of producing and distributing the goods and services we all need to survive, and in so doing, rewrites the rules of economics to focus on the exchange of attention" (p. 3). In the past, the economy was driven by supply and demand, where the focus was on producing and distributing products. However, in the digital age, the attention economy is driven by the struggle to capture and hold the attention of consumers. The competition for attention is intense, and the attention economy highlights the challenges of attracting and maintaining consumer attention

(Kubler, 2023). This shift is important to influencer marketing, as consumers increasingly turn to social media for information and entertainment. Influencers build a loyal following by providing entertaining or informative content, and consequently develop trust and credibility with their audience. Influencer marketing as a valuable tool for brands to capture and engage with their target audience in the attention economy.

Finally, social media platforms have become tremendously popular with people of all ages, allowing interaction and engagement with each other like never before. Social media is based on user-generated content, which has also contributed to the rise of influencer marketing. According to Haenlein et al. (2020), "People use social platforms to follow other users for their entertainment value, even if they have never met these individuals in real life" (p.10). Therefore, influencers have become crucial in driving engagement, brand loyalty, and ultimately, sales.

Influencer Marketing Practices

Influencer marketing has become a popular and effective way to promote a brand or product to a specific audience. Although influencer marketing is a relatively new and constantly evolving marketing method, there are proven best practices to ensure success. First, it is crucial to carefully choose the appropriate platforms and influencers that best align with the brand's goals and values. Each platform and influencer have a unique purpose and audience, so it is key to determine platforms and influencers that align with the brand. Secondly, maintaining a high frequency and quality of content is essential for keeping the audience engaged and interested. Consistency and relevancy are key factors for building trust and credibility among consumers online. Lastly, it is important to maintain brand authenticity throughout any influencer marketing campaign. Transparency and trust are essential for building a loyal following and establishing a positive reputation.

1. Choosing Apt Platforms and Influencers

In the world of influencer marketing, the key to successful campaigns lies in researching and understanding the target audience of each platform and choosing the appropriate influencers to promote the brand. As stated in *Navigating the New Era of Influencer Marketing*, "The question is less which platform to establish a presence in and more which target group to reach with which idea and then, in a second step, which channel is most efficient for achieving this goal" (Haenlein et al., 2020, p.12). One important factor to consider when choosing an influencer is determining the marketing goals of the campaign. This ensures that the chosen influencer and platform align with the desired outcome of the campaign. Therefore, it is important to work with influencers on aligning platforms who have a solid and respected reputation within their niche and create engaging and authentic content that resonates with their audience, which in turn is the brand's target audience.

2. Maintaining High Frequency and Quality of Content

Maintaining a high frequency and high quality of posted content is crucial for the success of influencer marketing campaigns. In today's fast-paced digital world, consumers are constantly bombarded with information and have increasingly short-lived attention spans. Hence, creating content that is not only high-quality but is also delivered at frequent intervals, is a priority for influencer marketing campaigns. For example, "in most cases, multiple exposures to the same content (up to 15) are required, which makes

frequency an essential driver of campaign success" (Haenlein et al., 2020, p.12). This means that brands must employ a consistent and sustained presence across various social media platforms to keep their target audiences engaged. With high-frequency content, brands employing influencers can reap benefits such as brand awareness, positive brand perceptions, and ultimately more sales. Considering that influencer marketing has become increasingly competitive, it is more important now than ever before to produce quality content consistently to capture the attention of consumers, leading to a better return on investment.

3.   Authenticity

Authenticity is the most critical component of influencer marketing campaigns. Both the brand and the influencer need to present an authentic online presence to build a strong connection with their audience, starting with identifying influencers who can reach the relevant community and who genuinely use and endorse their products. For example, "to ensure that a post…is more than product placement, companies need to identify influencers who can reach the relevant community and who actually and authentically use the products they promote" (Haenlein et al., 2020, p.13). According to *The Value of Influencer Marketing for Business*, "highly sincere influencers are more effective in eliciting favorable brand attitudes from consumers when endorsing a utilitarian product rather than a symbolic product" (Ye et al., 2021, p. 169). However, being an authentic influencer is not an easy feat. Influencers need to be "willing to share a substantial part of their personal life with the outside world" to build a sense of trust and transparency with their followers (Haenlein et al., 2020). Brands and influencers must strive for authenticity to achieve a successful influencer marketing campaign that resonates with its target audience.

Effect of Influencer Marketing for Brands

Influencer marketing campaigns are becoming increasingly relevant for brands due to the growing importance of social media marketing. The potential benefits of such campaigns are manifold; not only can they offer a significant boost in brand exposure and sales, but they can also provide a form of social proof that is highly valued by consumers. According to *Navigating the New Era of Influencer Marketing*, as online retailing continues to gain traction, "more companies may, in the future, move increasing shares of their advertising budget online," which indicates influencer marketing will continue to be important in the years to come (Haenlein et al., 2020, p. 22). This trend is backed up by the fact that influencer marketing produces a high return on investment compared to traditional marketing efforts.

Although influencer marketing can yield a high result for the low cost, brands still face considerable challenges when it comes to tracking campaign effectiveness. The lack of reliable metrics available to measure audience engagement and return on investment is a major obstacle for brands employing influencers. Also found in *Navigating the New Era of Influencer Marketing*, "Appropriate integration between different environments also helps to solve a critical challenge that the influencer marketing industry is still struggling with: measurement" (Haenlein et al., 2020, p. 20). Without effective means of measuring performance, it is a struggle for brands to determine which influencers are driving meaningful engagement and which are simply costing brands money. For example, industry insiders estimate that "only 20% to 25% of influencers are truly influential, generating more benefits such as incremental sales, than they cost" (Haenlein et

al., 2020, p. 17). Overall, while influencer marketing is incredibly relevant for brands with the rise of social media marketing, the lack of reliable metrics remains a significant challenge.

      An influencer marketing campaign is advantageous for brands looking to increase their visibility and reach a wider audience. By partnering with influencers who have a large and engaged following on social media, brands can tap into a network of potential new customers and build brand awareness in a targeted and tailored way. According to research on influencer marketing, "In this constant process of online interaction, individuals become more active, participating in building the perception of others about what companies are and what they offer" (Silva et al., 2021, p. 2). This means that by working with influencers, brands can benefit from the trust and credibility that these individuals have built up with their followers, helping to boost their own image and reputation.

      However, with greater brand exposure using influencers, brands allow messaging and advertising from individuals outside of the company. One of the biggest challenges of an influencer marketing campaign for brands is the lack of control over the content shared by the influencers. While partnering with influencers can help brands reach broader target audiences, the content influencers create may not always align with brands' values or messaging. Conversely, attempting to increase brand control of the content shared by influencers may also backfire, as consumers may start to perceive the information as biased and inauthentic (Martínez-López 2020). Moreover, as stated in *How Do Influencer Marketers Affect Brand Associations?,* the "intended brand associations created by the influencers may not always be realized by the consumers, and the realized brand associations by the consumers may not have been intended by the influencer" (Juhlin & Soini, 2018, p. 56). Hence, it becomes crucial for brands to strike a balance between influencer creativity and the brand's vision, and plan social media policies to address any worst-case scenarios that may arise.

      Still, influencer marketing campaigns are uniquely beneficial to brands due to the power of parasocial relationships that are created with influencers. The success of an influencer marketing campaign is often dependent on the strength of the parasocial relationship between the influencer and their followers. According to *The Value of Influencer Marketing for Business*, as influencers "interact with their followers through social media, feelings of closeness are often strengthened, making them likable and trusted sources of information," and further, "to be persuasive, it is very important that influencers' followers feel connected to the influencers and that there is a parasocial relationship between them" (Ye et al., 2021, p. 174). This closeness makes it easier for influencers to persuade their followers to try out new products, services or to support a brand.

      However, not every influencer has the power to be persuasive for any brand. Oftentimes, brands struggle to choose the right influencers. Not every consumer base is as easily influenced, and the wrong choice of influencer can be a waste of resources or cause damage to a brand's reputation. Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate and choose influencers who have a natural connection with their followers and are genuinely passionate about the products or services they endorse. As said by Haenlein et al. (2020), "From a firm perspective, this implies that it is vital to identify those influencers who are in the industry for the long game and who are willing to put in the effort required" (p.18). Influencer marketing campaigns can be successful only when the brands invest time in finding the right fit, which leads to increased engagement rates and a greater positive return on investment.

      In conclusion, influencer marketing has become an essential strategy for brands to reach their target audience, increase brand awareness, and achieve a high marketing return on

investment. Collaborating with influencers can provide brands with a significant competitive advantage, as they have the power to create engaging and authentic content that resonates with their target (existing and new) consumers. However, influencer marketing also comes with its challenges, including measuring performance and ensuring that content meets brands' standards. The rapidly evolving landscape of influencer marketing also means that brands must stay up to date on best practices and new trends. Overall, influencer marketing is an invaluable tool for brands, but it requires strategic planning and execution to reap the full benefits.

BACKGROUND OF THE FITNESS INDUSTRY

The fitness industry is a rapidly growing and dynamic industry that encompasses a wide range of products and services designed to improve physical wellness and health. It includes everything from gym memberships and personal training sessions to nutritional supplements and athletic apparel. The fitness industry has seen significant growth in recent years due to the increasing awareness of the importance of fitness in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, except for suffering in the industry during the pandemic in 2020. In fact, according to a report by IBIS World (2023), the market size of the gym, health and fitness clubs in the United States alone is $30.8bn in 2023. Additionally, according to research by Global Industry Analysts, Inc (2023), the global market for sports and fitness apparel was around $182.8bn in 2022. This highlights the highly competitive fitness market and the continual growth of the industry.

The history of the fitness industry dates to the evolution of the healthy lifestyle culture in the 1970s. During this period, society became more health-conscious, as Americans started engaging in physical activities and pursuing diets that promised to enhance their overall well-being. The industry continues to evolve, with innovations in health foods and exercise technologies. With the continual growth and relevance of the fitness industry, fitness companies will continue to play a significant role in offering products and services that meet the needs of existing consumers and entice new consumers into the space.

As previously mentioned, the fitness industry is large and growing, composed of companies with products ranging from workout equipment to nutrition supplements to motivational coaching. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are only more consumers investing in health and wellness. As people started working from home, sportswear has become even more popular. (Sternlicht, 2020, p. 42). This trend has increased the demand for fitness apparel, with many brands catering to this new consumer need. As Sternlicht (2020) notes, "Athletic clothes are also largely a commodity; marketing is everything in this game" (p. 42). With the pandemic bringing renewed attention to health and fitness, the products within the industry are more relevant than ever before.

Although the consumer base within the fitness industry is large, there are common consumers, each with their own purchasing behaviors. According to the study *Success Story of a Young Fitness Brand: Social Media Influence as an Indicator of Success in the Fitness Industry*, the primary consumer groups include predominantly male consumers interested in strength training, mixed gender low-usage consumers, predominantly 50+ consumers, super avid and high spending consumers, and predominantly low spending female consumers interested in group exercise (Haemers, 2016). Though general groups can be formed to describe the consumers within the fitness industry, it has been noted that "there is no correlation between purchasing behavior and the number of visits and length of membership," instead there is "a correlation between the products purchased and the goal in mind" (Haemers, 2016, p. 28). Further, this study reveals that consumers in this industry can be easily influenced into purchasing products they

may not even need (Haemers, 2016). This demonstrates that the products within this industry act equally as educational as to meet consumer needs.

Among the most well-known brands in the fitness industry are Nike, Under Armour, Lululemon, Reebok, and Adidas, all of which focus primarily on apparel and personal equipment. Brand loyalty is evident in this industry as consumers' fitness motivation can be highly correlated to the trust and quality associated with a particular brand. As mentioned by Haemers (2016), "The products may or may not have a direct effect on the performance or success of the people using it, but still these people buy the products, based on the brand's promise" (p.48). Therefore, brand reputation and marketing efforts play a significant role in attracting and retaining fitness enthusiasts.

Branded Fitness

Branded fitness refers to a particular fitness organization or gym that has developed a unique identity or style, often linked to a well-known person or company. This type of fitness has become popular as more people seek out personal, tailor-made fitness experiences. As published in *Branded Fitness: Exercise and Promotional Culture* (2017), "newer forms of exercise involve a coach or instructor who guides groups of participants through highly regimented set of actions; members of the gyms or studios frequently enjoy strong community…Branded fitness, in this way, resembles sports" (p.524). The culture of branded fitness is one of empowerment and community. With a focus on personalization and self-actualization, members of branded fitness communities are willing to pay a premium for goods and services that help them achieve their fitness goals. Services such as personal training, nutrition coaching, and specialized fitness gear are all integral parts of the branded fitness experience. The importance of these goods and services cannot be overstated, as they provide the consumer with access to a unique fitness community, which in turn creates a sense of belonging and motivation.

Fitness has become a personalized experience, and as a result, consumers seek out goods and products to aid in their fitness journey. In fact, a market for "high-end fitness has flourished" in recent years due in part to the commodification of fitness and, as said by Powers & Greenwell (2017), "To achieve the body we want, we must work and, increasingly, buy access, goods, and products to aid that working" (p. 527). Branded fitness has capitalized on this by offering premium goods and services to consumers who seek a unique and personalized fitness experience.

In conclusion, branded fitness has become an integral part of the modern fitness industry. With its focus on personalization and exclusivity, branded fitness offers consumers a unique and tailored fitness experience. Goods and services are an important part of this equation, as they provide members with access to a community and motivation to achieve fitness goals. As fitness continues to be commodified, branded fitness will likely continue to thrive as a premium option for those seeking a customized and elevated fitness experience.

Social Media in the Fitness Industry

Social media has revolutionized the fitness industry, impacting the way people view fitness and health. The ability to access fitness communities online has become essential. As stated by Haemers (2016), "Whereas in the past gym fanatics had to buy magazines and/or find gym partners to stay motivated, nowadays people find that motivation online" (p. 9). People can now interact with others who share their interests and goals, create challenges, and share tips. Because of social media, "Popular media remains strongly focused on fitness, whether through

coverage of diet and exercise crazes, health research, or celebrity figures" (Powers & Greenwell, 2017, p. 526). Along with providing motivational resources, social media also allows for the promotion of fitness products and services. Fitness professionals and enthusiasts can now access online platforms to establish a following, share their knowledge, and gain exposure.

The fitness industry has benefited greatly from the impact of social media, offering numerous advantages to both fitness enthusiasts and industry professionals. First, social media helps reduce the barriers to entry into the fitness industry by providing access to a wealth of information, resources, and inspirational content, overall making it easier for individuals to get started with their fitness journey. Certainly, "a beneficial effect of the fitness industry is at least partially related to the development of a specific healthy lifestyle culture that is frequently supported by social media" (Duplaga, 2020, p. 3). Moreover, social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube have enabled fitness professionals to reach larger audiences, resulting in more clients and opportunities to grow their brand, as well as provided a platform for online fitness communities to thrive, allowing individuals to connect, share their progress and support each other in their fitness journeys. All these benefits have led to expansion of the fitness industry, bringing a positive impact to society's health and well-being.

There are disadvantages to social media within the fitness industry, despite the many benefits that it has prompted by making fitness more accessible and inclusive. One disadvantage is the considerable amount of misinformation that is available online. Mass misinformation about fitness congregates online and allows for individuals to "exist across the online and the physical worlds, and operate as trainers, writers and social media gurus" (Haemers, 2016, p. 10). With so many people offering advice on exercise and nutrition, it can be difficult to know who to trust. This can lead to individuals following incorrect or even dangerous guidance.

Another disadvantage of social media in the fitness industry is the heightened stress on physical appearance. As published by Powers & Greenwell (2017), "Given that our bodies are a way of showcasing that we are living our lives well, it is problematic when they do not conform to the ideals promoted on social media, in the gym or studio, or by celebrity brand ambassadors" (p. 536). This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and unrealistic expectations, which can in turn cause individuals to engage in harmful behaviors such as obsessive exercise or extreme dieting. Overall, it is important to recognize the potential harms of social media in the fitness industry and to promote healthy attitudes and behaviors towards exercise and nutrition.

INFLUENCER MARKETING IN THE FITNESS INDUSTRY

Influencer marketing is a valuable strategy for the fitness industry because "our bodies…are now also potential avatars of brand value" (Powers & Greenwell, 2017, p.529). For any brand in the fitness industry, it is critical to understand the role of a fitness influencer. A fitness influencer is an individual who has a large social media following and who is recognized as a kind of expert in the field of fitness. These individuals are considered fitness influencers if they "regularly post exercise and fitness-related content while pursuing the vocational practices of health and wellness" (Kubler, 2023, p. 7). In the article *The Use of Fitness Influencers' Websites by Young Adult Women* (2020), "the emergence of Internet fitness influencers was a response to the significant interest in exercise and fitness already active in users of the Internet" and these influencers "gain popularity because they are able to satisfy the expectations of large groups of consumers who are intent on enhancing their health and wellness" (Duplaga, 2020, pp. 2-13). For a brand to make smart choices regarding its influencer marketing campaigns,

marketers must be able to identify best practices for fitness influencers promoting branded content to garner the desired result for both the brand and the influencer.

Best Practices for Fitness Influencers
    1. Awareness

Social media has become an increasingly important platform for fitness influencers; however, a successful influencer must first establish a strong follower base, requiring a certain level of attention-seeking behavior. As Kubler (2023) puts it, "Attention can appear like a currency for those looking to become influencers because having attention from a follower base is the necessary, but not sufficient, condition for making money as an influencer" (p. 13). Successful fitness influencers use methods that will gain them attention to increase their engagement on social media. One effective attention-seeking strategy is focused on a wide range of exposure using hashtags and advertisements (Kubler, 2023, p. 10). Hashtags allow influencers to reach a larger audience beyond their current follower base and increase unique viewers of their content.

Another way to gain attention on social media is through engagement groups. These groups are typically composed of influencers in the same or similar niches who support each other by commenting and liking each other's posts. According to Kubler (2023), "Engagement groups can work well for those that are looking to secure advertising deals because they boost engagement metrics such as likes and comments which play a role in valuing one's worth to advertisers" (p. 12). However, it is vital to ensure engagement is genuine and not forced, fake engagement can harm an influencer's reputation and future deals. Overall, gaining attention and increasing engagement are key to kickstarting an influencer's status.

    2. Manage Messages & Attitudes

Fitness influencers who have built strong followings understand the motivations and attitudes of their follower base. Research has shown that individuals are more likely to engage with content featuring people who they can easily recognize as being like themselves. For example, the study published by Johnson & Davis (2019) shows that "less fit individuals may be more motivated by social media content featuring people they can easily recognize as being similar to themselves (more often posted by individuals), and less motivated by content featuring professional athletes and extremely fit individuals (more often posted by corporations)" (p.124). By this study, it is evident that connecting to the emotions of the followers has a significant influence on an individual's motivation to engage with the content.

Further qualitative research from the study by Johnson & Davis (2019) suggests that "attitudes toward exercise-related social media posts can vary considerably, depending on various contextual factors" (p. 121). The attitudes towards these posts, as outlined by the study, ranged from motivated to annoyed, emphasizing the importance of aligning with attitudes of the follower base while creating content, especially as a fitness influencer. An emotionally connected follower base not only generates engagement and promotes a sense of community, but it also ensures successful influencer marketing campaigns. A robust following provides leverage for partnership opportunities and a higher return on investment for the brands affiliated with these influencers.

In addition to being conscious of followers' attitudes, successful fitness influencers understand the messaging in their branded content. This is crucial because it directly impacts the way an influencer's audience perceives their image and the products they promote. In the fitness industry, brand associations play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior, and this is where influencer marketing can be particularly effective if an influencer grasps the intentional and unintentional messages within their own content. According to the article *How Do Influencer Marketers Affect Brand Associations?* (2018), within the fitness industry, "the intended symbolic brand associations are often related to social acceptance, status, and exclusivity" (p. 45). For skilled fitness influencers, "all the brands and products announced…communicate from the endorser elements linked to the care of the body, the cult to the beauty of the form and the shape, and the status generated from it" (Silva et al., 2021, p. 9).

Different brand associations come into play when it comes to male and female influencers. Also described in the study *How Do Influencer Marketers Affect Brand Associations?* (2018), "Females focused mostly on associations related to size and attractiveness, while male influencers focused more on associations related to strength and performance" and "male influencers captured the associations of strength and motivation more than the female influencers but were also signaling happiness more than the male influencers" (pp. 47-57). As a result, it is necessary for fitness influencers to have a deep understanding of the signals they are posting and consider the messages they want to portray through their content. By doing so, it becomes easier to create a relationship of trust and credibility with the audience, which can be beneficial for the brand's reputation and sales growth. Recognizing different brand associations specific to the fitness industry allows influencers to tailor their messaging and resonate more with their target audience. Ultimately, it helps build a solid reputation as a trusted source of information, creating a win-win situation for the influencers and the brands they promote.

3. **Trust & Transparency**

Transparency in the online world is paramount, especially for fitness influencers. As stated by Baranow (2019), "On social media websites, where a lot of content is created for the end user, it is all about transparency…This applies for all industries, but the fitness and health industry is even more dependent on it, since Instagram users completely trust the influencers with their health" suggesting that trust is at the core of the relationship between fitness influencers and their followers (p. 40). Preserving genuine, honest, and transparent social platforms is necessary for maintaining the trust that is needed to be influential with sponsored content.

With sponsored content, it is key for influencers to genuinely support the products and services they are promoting. In fact, "the closer the endorsement reflects the endorsers and their characteristics, the better the acceptability and the communicative efficiency of it' (Silva et al., 2021). As followers trust their favorite influencers with their health and fitness goals, it is imperative that they are given honest, genuine advice and not just an attempt to sell a particular product. Therefore, the most favorable influencer partnerships are when influencers get to promote products they believe in because they genuinely use and support them, which simultaneously earns trust from the influencer's followers.

Maintaining transparency as a fitness influencer also includes presenting genuine and authentic content, especially when creating branded content. As said by Powers & Greenwell (2017), "the body is the medium of branded fitness" (p. 528). This means that an influencer's body becomes a representation of the brand they are promoting, and their followers look to them for guidance on how to achieve similar results. For example, research shows that the exposure of digital influencers and their bodies guides their followers to adopt specific lifestyles and behaviors that align with the products they promote (Silva et al., 2021, p. 2). In some cases, consumers even prefer to seek sizing advice from influencers rather than directly from the companies themselves (Juhlin & Soini, 2018, p. 59). Therefore, it is essential that fitness influencers remain transparent about their own fitness journey and lifestyle choices, to maintain trust and credibility with their followers. This also ensures that the products they endorse align with their own beliefs and values.

Virtual Brand Communities

Fitness influencers act as pillars in building virtual brand communities through their social media platforms, which provide networks for like-minded individuals to connect and share their fitness journeys. These communities are defined as online groups of individuals who have a common interest in a particular brand and engage with each other and the brand through digital channels. According to research, virtual brand communities have become increasingly important to influencer marketing in the fitness industry as they establish communities by providing a platform for brands and influencers to connect with their followers on a deeper level, giving both a bigger purpose beyond just selling products.

Yet, virtual brand communities can be lucrative for the influencers and companies involved because in a virtual brand community, "consumers can share their product opinions and obtain support from both the influencer and marketer, which leads to consumer value co-creation" (Ye et al., 2021, p.173). This means that not only are consumers able to connect with others who share their interests, but they are also able to provide feedback and suggestions to both the influencer and brand, creating a sense of co-creation and collaboration.

General fitness brings together a huge amount of people and notably, "the content on social media has focused on the most popular and universal fitness hashtag, #fitness, rather than identifying one specific type of fitness behavior or activity" (Kubler, 2023, p. 7). Although the healthy lifestyle culture can be found in all fitness groups, individuals who enjoy pilates are usually different from individuals who enjoy strength training or outdoor activities. Influencers participation in virtual brand communities has resulted in a less nuanced understanding of the types of fitness communities that exist online. Fitness influencers are essential to creating niche communities that cater to specific fitness interests and needs.

Fitness influencers uphold responsibilities in these virtual communities because "People that have just started going to the gym want to belong to a community, and these companies offer these people a community to belong to," (Haemers, 2016, p. 42). By building communities around their brands, both influencers and brands can create a sense of belonging and motivation for their followers. This not only increases brand loyalty but also helps to drive sales and reach a wider audience.

Notable Fitness Brands Using Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has become a powerful tool for many fitness brands, especially those that specialize in lifting and iron culture. Iron culture refers to the attitudes, practices, and values that are associated with lifting weights, bodybuilding, and strength sports within the fitness community. This culture places a strong emphasis on strength, discipline, and dedication to workouts, with a focus on building muscle and achieving personal goals. Some successful brands that have leveraged influencer marketing within this culture include Gymshark, Alphalete, Darc Sport, YoungLA, and Inaka Power.

Gymshark is one of the most well-known fitness brands in the world, with a strong focus on bodybuilding and weightlifting. Gymshark has partnered with numerous influencers in the fitness industry, including fitness models, bodybuilders, and professional strength athletes. According to the article *Success Story of a Young Fitness Brand*, "Gymshark has carefully selected its team of ambassadors, thereby trying to create a community of people that want to help each other, instead of being after money, and this strategy has worked off extremely well for them" (Haemers, 2016, p. 31). This strategy has allowed the brand to reach millions of potential customers around the world and has contributed greatly to their success within the iron culture community.

Lifting brands have followed in Gymshark's footsteps and used influencer marketing to boost their brand. Other examples of popular lifting brands that have risen in the fitness industry in part to their influencer strategies include Alphalete Athletics, Darc Sport, YoungLA, and Inaka Power. Each of these companies has its own approach to influencer marketing, however, they have all gained a loyal following among fitness enthusiasts who buy into the brand culture through purchasing products.

In gathering information on notable brands, it was clear to see which companies are popular through observing gym goers at various fitness centers. Each company above primarily sells workout apparel and personal gym accessories/equipment, like lifting straps and wraps, knee sleeves, lifting belts and gym bags. Additionally, I conducted online research to discover popular fitness brands and checked out each company's online following. When exploring the social pages for each company, I noted the brand ambassadors, both macro and micro influencers, featured on the respective pages. After identifying key brands, I researched these brands to create company profiles that will be valuable in analyzing and understanding the similarities and differences in influencer marketing strategies that exist between each company.

COMPANY PROFILES
Brand: Gymshark
Established: 2012 by Ben Francis
Online Community: 6.1M (Instagram), 4.5M (TikTok), 467K (Youtube), 362.9K (Twitter)
Mission Statement: "We exist to unite the conditioning* community. It's not our goals that unite us, but the things we do to achieve them. Because although our training grounds and end goals might be different, sweat is our sport. And we're a team of individuals who know that to go further, we go together."

Influencer Policy: "We don't really have set criteria when we choose our athletes, as all our athletes are so unique. The only advice we can offer is to identify what makes you unique and how that unique nature or ability can inspire others to become greater versions of themselves. More simply - it's not just about the athlete – It's about how you can positively influence others.

Make sure you're following us on social media, tagging us in your posts and repping the Gymshark brand! We're always on the look-out for new talent."

Notable Influencers & Instagram Following:
- Leana Deeb (@leanadeebb), 4.7M
- Zac Perna (@zacperna), 559K
- Brittany Lupton (@_brittanylupton), 472K
- Libby Christensen (@libbychristensen), 432K

Brand: Alphalete Athletics
Established: 2015 by Christian Guzman
Online Community: 1.4M (Instagram), 141.3K (TikTok), 81.9K (Youtube), 67K (Twitter)
Mission Statement: "Learn More, Dream More, Be More."

Influencer Policy: Alphalete is a group of people. People with a relentless focus on making small, incremental improvements each and every day. Since day one, our Learn More, Dream More, Be More mission statement has pushed us to innovate and grow. Our focus has always been to bring value to our community, to lift someone's spirits, and to always listen to feedback in our pursuit to become the best that we can be. We do this by always keeping our values at the forefront of everything we do, encouraging people to never stop developing themselves, to keep an open mind to what tomorrow may bring, and most importantly, to do what they say they are going to do when they say they're going to do it. If you're ready to embrace these core values, apply for our Influencer Program."

Notable Influencers & Instagram Following:
- Christian Guzman (@christianguzmanfitness), 1.1M
- Courtney King (@courtneykiing), 1.1M
- Maddy Forberg (@maddyforberg), 502K
- Eduardo Marín (@edmarin_physique), 101K

Brand: Darc Sport
Established: 2015 by Dustin Sakr and Michael Sakr
Online Community: 914K (Instagram), 204.5K (TikTok), 5.89K (Youtube), 3K (Twitter)
Mission Statement: "It's not for everyone. It's for "us". Never F*ckin Give Up. Wolves Forever."

Influencer Policy: No public information about the influencer program. Darc Sport hand picks IFBB Pro bodybuilders and extreme fitness enthusiasts that closely align with their mission statement to represent Darc Sport's intense and tight-knit brand community.

Notable Influencers & Instagram Following:
- Brandon Hendrickson (@brandon.d.hendrickson), 1.2M
- Logan Franklin (@logan_franklin), 1M
- Charity Witt (@charity_witt), 311K
- Kenzie Vance (@kenzie_vance), 96.4K

Brand: YoungLA
Established: 2014 by Gurmer Chopra and Robby Chopra
Online Community: 935K (Instagram), 108.4K (TikTok), 1.38K (Youtube), 3.1K (Twitter)
Mission Statement: "More than Clothing, it's a Culture."

Influencer Policy: No public information about the influencer program. YoungLA recruits young fitness and lifestyle influencers with high social media post engagements to represent YoungLA's trendy but refined brand community.

Notable Influencers & Instagram Following:
- Chris Bumstead (@cbum), 16.8M
- Noel Deyzel (@noeldeyzel_bodybuilder), 3.7M
- Lexx Little (@lexx.little), 738K
- Georgia Daniels (@gdanielsfitness), 167K

Brand: Inaka Power
Established: 2018 by Shawley Coker
Online Community: 310K (Instagram), 90.9K (TikTok), 2.77K (Youtube), 11.7K (Twitter)
Mission Statement: "The power to transcend comes from within. This is what we've believed since day one, and has continued to push us forward ever since. This isn't just a motto — it's defined our way of life, and remains the core value that sparks the process in everything we create."

Influencer Policy: "Together we transcend. A community that believes in uplifting & empowering one another. What's within matters. Become a member of the Inaka family. There's no better time than the present – join the mob."

Notable Influencers & Instagram Following:
- Oliver Forslin (@oliverforslin), 733K
- Viviana Ruby Yanez (@vivianarubyy), 123K
- Marco Spasiano (@marco.spasiano), 110K
- Taylor Saylor (@iamtaylorsaylor), 92.1K

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The purpose of my research is to determine the significance of emotion behind influential, branded fitness content. The basic principles of influencer marketing were presented as a framework for the study; however, the primary focus was on understanding the emotion breakdown of effective branded content. To gather data on this topic, I utilized third party social media data platforms and conducted a social media audit. All the data for this study was collected within a recent 30-day period, starting on February 27th, 2023, to March 31st, 2023. The result of this research determines the connection between influence and emotion within social media posts and expand the understanding of best practices for branded fitness content. Finally, this research illuminates guidelines for influencers and companies seeking to create successful influencer marketing campaigns in the fitness industry by determining key themes from the research.

Data from Influencer Marketing Platforms

Brandwatch is a powerful tool that I utilized to collect data for my study. The platform provides a range of social media monitoring and analytics services that allow users to track and analyze social media data in real-time. It provides valuable insights across major social media channels, primarily platforms that are text heavy. Of the various data available, I chose to focus on emotion breakdown, which refers to the share of voice for emotion during a selected period.

Initially, I collected data on the fitness industry in general by looking at the emotion breakdown for the most popular hashtags found on fitness-related content. This gave me a sense of the overall emotional landscape and allowed me to identify any relevant trends. As previous studies have mentioned, the hashtag "#fitness" is the most popular and universal fitness hashtag (Kubler, 2023). The universal hashtag, as well as three others, provides useful insights into the emotion evoked from fitness content collectively. Next, I collected the emotion breakdown for the five companies I selected to represent influencer marketing for a fitness brand. I compared the emotions of these brands to the emotions found in the industry as a whole. This provides a deeper understanding of how different companies' marketing strategies align with the mass viewers of fitness content.

Phlanx is the second data platform I will be using to collect data on specific fitness influencers. Phlanx is a digital marketing platform that provides brands and businesses access to influencers for marketing campaigns. Phlanx's influencer marketing tools were useful in gathering data on the chosen influencers' engagement rates. The aim of this was to collect average engagement data and compare it to influencers' emotion breakdown, which was gathered through a social media audit, and identify patterns that correlate the level of emotion layered in influencer posts with the engagement that influencer receives on their content. Through this process, I hoped to identify a key aspect in curating content that is best for influencer marketing.

Social Media Audit

To gain further insights into the emotion of content for a specific group of fitness influencers, I conducted social media audits of each influencer's profile on Instagram. From February 27th, 2023, to March 31st, 2023, I examined the Instagram profiles of four fitness influencers, including both micro-influencers and mega-influencers, for each of the five brands. I chose these influencers by investigating the Instagram profiles of each company and noting influencers featured in the most recent reposted content. By analyzing the photos (excluding any pinned content), videos, captions, and hashtags, I determined the number of posts containing joy and find a percentage to compare the proportion of joy-focused posts found on one influencer's page to another. Lastly, I captured the post with the most likes within the set of content. This acts as qualitative data to add to or help clarify the quantitative results documented through the audit. Here are descriptions of each aspect I evaluated during the social media audit:

Number of Posts: The total amount of posts within the 30-day period, including reels and excluding pinned posts.

Community & Personal Content: Content focused on personal announcements, community announcements or content specific to the lifting community. Examples include posts about relationships/marriage, appreciation posts to followers, travel posts, funny gym reels, and collaboration posts with other influencers.

Promotional Content: Content primarily for promotion of products, services, and partnerships. Examples include posts advertising apparel drops, athlete codes, workout programs, nutrition plans, supplements, and giveaways.

Educational Content: Content sharing fitness knowledge, tips, and tricks. Examples include workout videos (specifically with workout listed for followers), gym hacks, meal prep recipes and how-to videos.

Motivational & Inspirational Content: Content posted to motivate and inspire followers, usually including motivational quotes or sharing stories from personal fitness journeys. Examples include physique updates/mirror pictures, gym outfit inspiration, motivational quotes and anecdotes, videos of morning/night routine, and transformations.

Posts Featuring Joy: Content showing smiles, laughing and/or cheering, as well as posts with captions about loving the fitness journey and the gym. Examples include photos smiling, photos laughing with friends, captions about loving the gym, captions about making progress/loving the journey, and content expressing joy towards the fitness community and culture.

Percentage of Posts of Joy: The percentage of posts that are considered emotional and eliciting joy to viewers through the posted content. Measured by the number of posts that meet the requirements of a post featuring joy to the total number of posts within the 30-day period.

Hashtags Used: Noting the frequency of hashtags on content. Evaluated on a scale of "none" to "all", "some" used when they are only found on 1-10 posts and "most" used when hashtags are found on all but 1-5 posts.

Top Liked Post: Content posted within the 30-day period with the highest number of likes, including reels and excluding pinned posts. Likes are measured in thousands.

LIMITATIONS

Certain limitations that existed in this research design, hindering the ability to fully capture the nuances and complexities of influencer marketing. One limitation is the lack of data collected from social media platforms that are not text focused. Brandwatch primarily analyzes text-based data sources, which poses a challenge when it comes to tracking influencers on image and video-based platforms, like Instagram and TikTok. This limitation is particularly relevant for fitness influencers given the popularity and significance of these platforms in the fitness industry. Limitations also exist in my approach to the social media audit, specifically regarding the sample size and time frame. In my audit, I chose to analyze a small sample of influencers over the course of one month. This limited scope does not fully capture a brand's influencer marketing relationships, as the companies in this study have large and diverse groups of influencers connected to their brand. Furthermore, personal biases can also impact the effectiveness of the audit. It is important to acknowledge that while I clearly defined the variables I was examining when conducting the social media audit, the content reflecting joy could vary depending on an individual's perception of the emotion. Moreover, it is important to note that influencer marketing is still a relatively new phenomenon and there is still much to be discovered about its effectiveness and impact on consumer behavior. As the landscape of social media and influencer marketing continues to evolve, it is essential for influencers and brands to continually revisit best practices for successful influencer marking campaigns.

RESEARCH FINDINGS
Brandwatch Results

The emotion breakdowns collected from Brandwatch, as illustrated in Charts 1A-D below, for general fitness hashtags show that fitness content does carry significant emotion. According to this data, most fitness content is imbued with positivity, with words associated with emotions such as excitement, joy, and inspiration resonating the most with the audience. For

example, Chart 1B shows that most content posted with "#gym" makes viewers happy and Chart 1D shows that 98% of the content posted with "#motivation" delivers the emotion of joy. Overall, this data portrays that the comprehensive environment of online fitness content recently posted is majorly joyous.
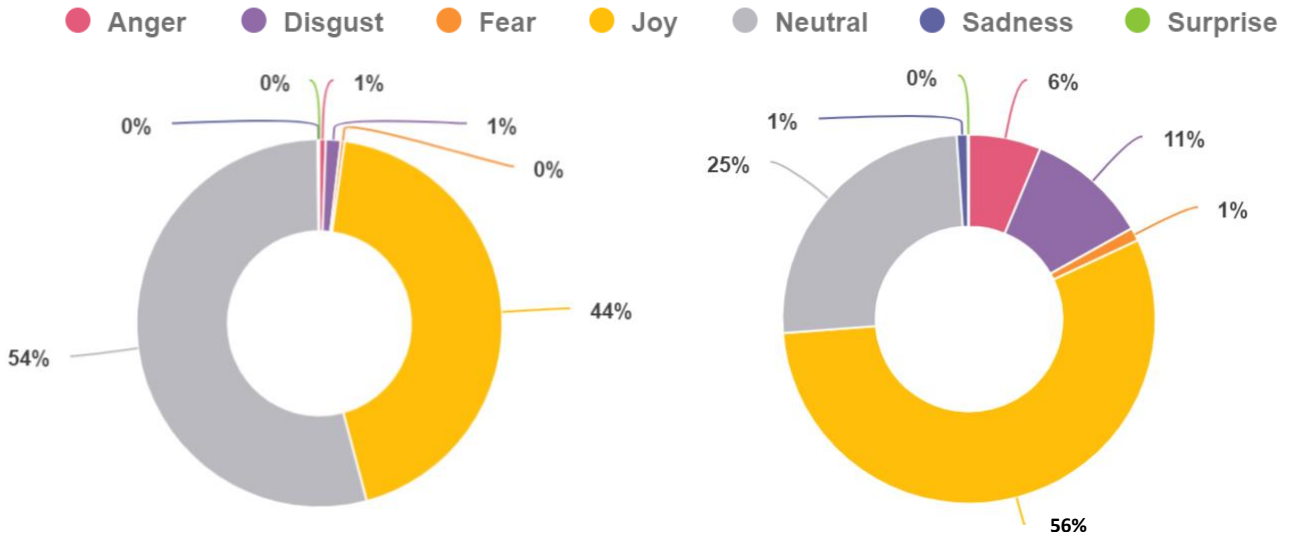

Chart 1A: #Fitness Emotion Breakdown

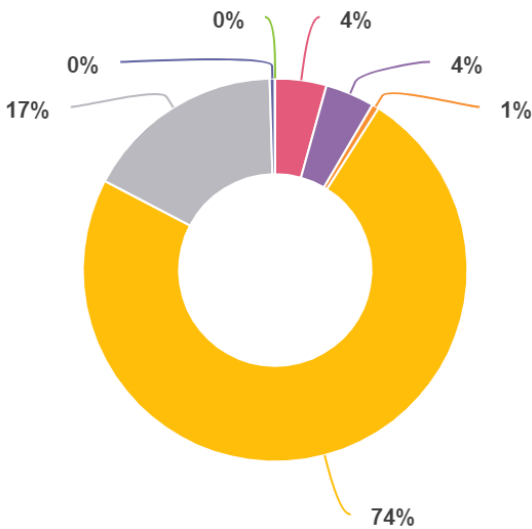Chart 1B: #Gym Emotion Breakdown

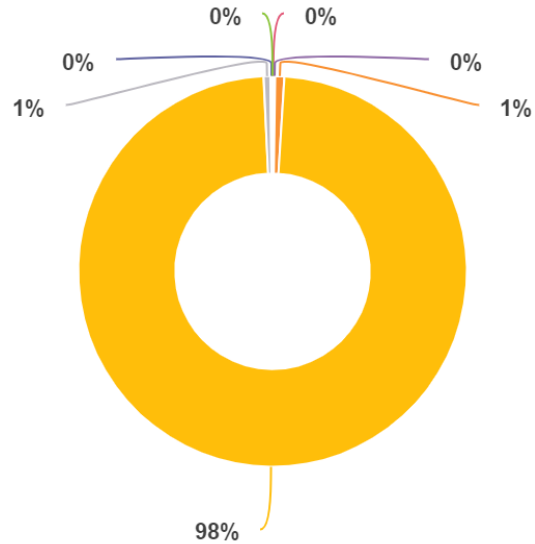
Chart 1C: #Workout Emotion Breakdown

Chart 1D: #Motivation Emotion Breakdown

Further research conducted on Brandwatch illustrates the emotion breakdowns of content for the five popular fitness brands whose company profiles are listed above. As illustrated below in Charts 2A-E, company content also carries emotions to viewers. Each company proves to post content that bears joy; however, these graphs show a wider variety of emotions than for the general fitness data. For example, Chart 2D depicts that YoungLA achieves joy in 40% of its content but disgusts users with another 20%. Therefore, fitness companies should be aware of the emotions associated with its brand. Conversely, as seen in Chart 2C and 2E, Darc Sport and Inaka maintain neutral regarding emotion in most of its content accessed by Brandwatch.

Although each company has relatively low percentages of negative emotions associated with it, it is also disadvantageous for fitness businesses to have no emotion tied to the brand, as emotion plays a huge role in conversion and ultimately consumers' purchasing decisions. Overall, this data portrays that some companies in the fitness industry evoke emotions within their content better than others, as these brands convey joy similarly to the fitness environment in general.
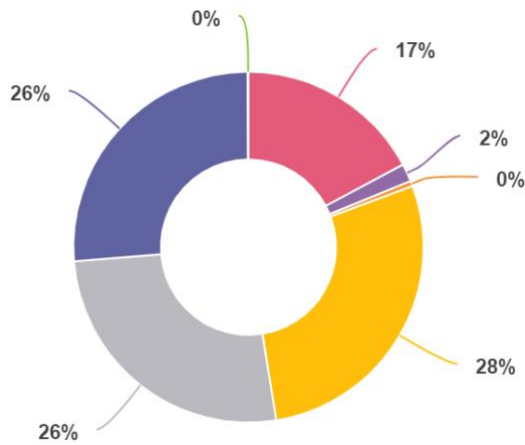
Chart 2A: Gymshark Emotion Breakdown
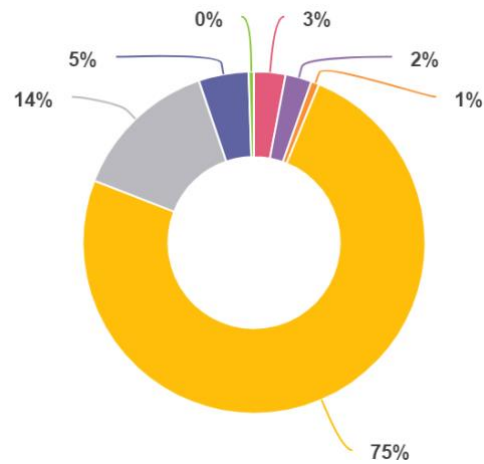
Chart 2B: Alphalete Emotion Breakdown
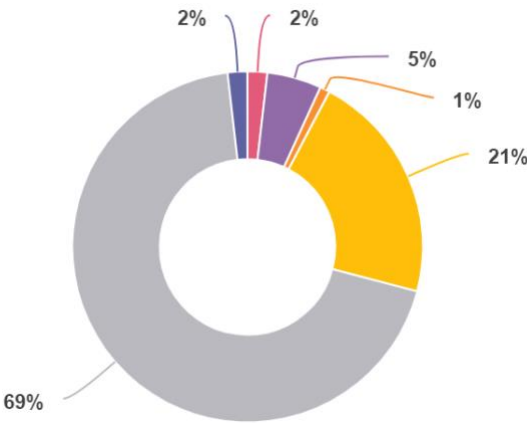
Chart 2C: Darc Sport Emotion Breakdown
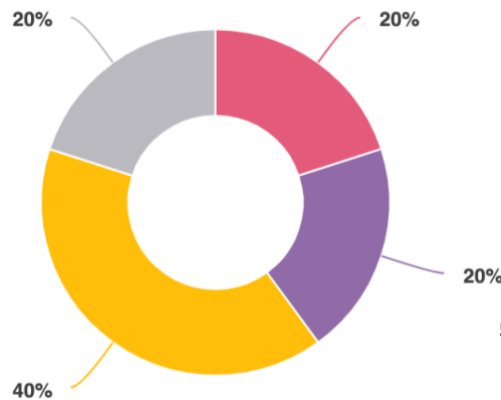
Chart 2D: YoungLA Emotion Breakdown
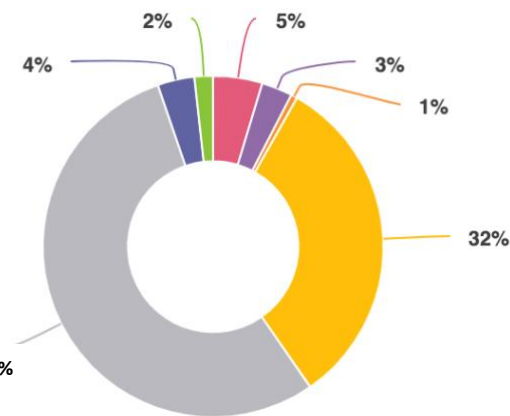
Chart 2E: Inaka Emotion Breakdown

Social Media Audit Results

After developing a better understanding of the emotions within the fitness industry, I conducted a social media audit to discover the emotions and potential correlations between successful brand influencers' content and the percentage of recently posted content that can be associated with joy. Chart 3A represented below outlines the data collected from analyzing the profiles of four influencers of each fitness brand. The results show that the number of posts, assortment of posts, and posts eliciting joy vary between influencers, even if they are representing the same brand. Additionally results prove that only six of the selected influencers

use hashtags on every post and seven of the influencers use no hashtags at all. The most important takeaway from the initial findings is that Darc Sport ambassadors are the most uniform, all measuring within the same percentage range of posts conveying joy and using hashtags on almost all, if not every post. Overall, this data revealed that there is not one single aspect to ensure successful influencer content.

	Influencer	Instagram Following	Total Posts (#)	Community & Personal Content (#)	Promo Content (#)	Education Content (#)	Motivation & Inspo Content (#)	Posts feat. Joy (#)	Posts of Joy (%)	Hashtags Used	Top Liked Post (K)
Gymshark											
	@leanadeebb	4.7M	16	4	5	5	2	7	44%	None	680
	@zacperna	559K	22	5	9	3	5	2	9%	All	94.5
	@_brittanylupton	472K	32	6	7	12	7	11	34%	Some	21.2
	@libbychristensen	432K	14	3	6	0	5	5	36%	None	N/A
Alphalete											
	@christianguzmanfitness	1.1M	49	14	20	1	14	5	10%	None	27.8
	@courtneykiing	1.1M	18	7	5	1	5	11	61%	Some	859
	@maddyforberg	502K	26	4	5	9	8	12	46%	Most	25.3
	@edmarin_physique	101K	35	1	13	0	21	1	3%	All	24.9
Darc Sport											
	@brandon.d.hendrickson	1.2M	37	13	14	0	10	12	32%	All	60.1
	@logan_franklin	1M	23	6	8	2	7	5	22%	All	58.5
	@charity_witt	311K	22	2	12	1	7	6	27%	All	N/A
	@kenzie_vance	96.4K	19	4	5	1	9	10	53%	Some	14.3
YoungLA											
	@cbum	16.8M	17	7	2	1	7	6	35%	None	4.7M

	Instagram Following	Posts (#)	Community & Personal Content (#)	Promo Content (#)	Educational Content (#)	Motivation & Inspo Content (#)	Posts feat. Joy (#)	Posts feat. Joy (%)	Hashtags Used	Top Liked Post (K)
@noeldeyzel_bodybuilder	3.7M	23	6	2	8	7	5	22%	All	669
@lexx.little	738K	5	2	1	0	2	0	0%	None	156
@gdanielsfitness	167K	28	12	4	0	12	13	46%	None	29.5
Inaka Power										
@oliverforslin	733K	10	2	3	0	5	1	10%	None	64.1
@vivianarubyy	123K	21	3	7	7	4	10	48%	Most	44
@marco.spasiano	110K	10	1	5	1	3	1	10%	None	14.8
@iamtaylorsaylor	92.1K	21	1	8	0	12	5	24%	Some	7.7

Chart 3A: Initial Social Media Audit Results

Due to the variance in data between influencers, I continued my research by sorting the data collected from the social media audit to reveal further findings. As illustrated in Chart 3B, I sorted the data in descending order based on the percentage of recent posts eliciting joy. The percentages of joyous posts on each of the influencers' profiles ranged from 0% to 61%, a widespread, indicating that posting with intentional joy has not yet been considered vital to a successful influencer marketing strategy. To emphasize, the average percentage of happy posts within this research is 28.6%, meaning that ensuring happiness through influencer content is not overwhelmingly important to influencers in the fitness industry. However, this table does reveal an interesting aspect relevant to fitness brands in choosing influencers. The female influencers' content included in the research is significantly more emotional and conveys joy more often than the male influencers. In fact, only two male influencers are listed within the top ten influencers with the most joy-filled content.

Influencer	Instagram Following	Posts (#)	Community & Personal Content (#)	Promo Content (#)	Educational Content (#)	Motivation & Inspo Content (#)	Posts feat. Joy (#)	Posts feat. Joy (%)	Hashtags Used	Top Liked Post (K)
@courtneykiing	1.1M	18	7	5	1	5	11	**61%**	Some	859
@kenzie_vance	96.4K	19	4	5	1	9	10	**53%**	Some	14.3
@vivianarubyy	123K	21	3	7	7	4	10	**48%**	Most	44
@gdanielsfitness	167K	28	12	4	0	12	13	**46%**	None	29.5
@maddyforberg	502K	26	4	5	9	8	12	**46%**	Most	25.3

@leanadeebb	4.7M	16	4	5	5	2	7	**44%**	None	680
@libbychristensen	432K	14	3	6	0	5	5	**36%**	None	N/A
@cbum	16.8M	17	7	2	1	7	6	**35%**	None	4.7M
@_brittanylupton	472K	32	6	7	12	7	11	**34%**	Some	21.2
@brandon.d.hendrickson	1.2M	37	13	14	0	10	12	**32%**	All	60.1
@charity_witt	311K	22	2	12	1	7	6	**27%**	All	N/A
@iamtaylorsaylor	92.1K	21	1	8	0	12	5	**24%**	Some	7.7
@logan_franklin	1M	23	6	8	2	7	5	**22%**	All	58.5
@noeldeyzel_bodybuilder	3.7M	23	6	2	8	7	5	**22%**	All	669
@christianguzmanfitness	1.1M	49	14	20	1	14	5	**10%**	None	27.8
@oliverforslin	733K	10	2	3	0	5	1	**10%**	None	64.1
@marco.spasiano	110K	10	1	5	1	3	1	**10%**	None	14.8
@zacperna	559K	22	5	9	3	5	2	**9%**	All	94.5
@edmarin_physique	101K	35	1	13	0	21	1	**3%**	All	24.9
@lexx.little	738K	5	2	1	0	2	0	**0%**	None	156

Legend:

Chart 3B: Social Media Audit Results by Percentage of Posts of Joy

Gymshark
Alphalete
Darc Sport
YoungLA
Inaka Power

Continuing with the data collected from the social media audit, my last attempt to uncover relevant data about fitness influencers' posts and the emotions they convey led me to gather additional data from a third party, Phlanx. Phlanx provided information on the average engagement rate for each influencer. The point of adding engagement for each influencer was to see if there was a correlation between a higher percentage of posts expressing joy and a higher

engagement rate, since a high engagement rate is often used to measure the performance of an influencer. Clearly, there does not seem to be a substantial correlation between influencers who post happy content and influencers with a high engagement rate. These two factors alone do not seem to be directly impacted by one another. The data table presents more inconsistent data between influencers when comparing those two variables. For example, barring @lexx.little as an outlier without a single recent post reflecting joy, the top three influencers in terms of engagement range from 10%-60% regarding post emotion, which is essentially the range of the whole data set. This indicates that there is not necessarily a strong connection between posts with high emotion and posts with high engagement. However, it is worth noting from this table that the influencers associated with YoungLA trend towards the top of the list because each influencer has a relatively high engagement rate and again barring @lexx.little as an outlier, the YoungLA influencers also have high percentages of joy in their posts relative to the rest of the influencers selected for the audit. Finally, this table demonstrates that a high follower count does not translate to high engagement. It is important to understand this fact as a fitness brand looking to employ influencers for influencer marketing campaigns.

Influencer	Instagram Following	Posts (#)	Community & Personal Content (#)	Promo Content (#)	Education Content (#)	Motivation & Inspo Content (#)	Posts feat. Joy (#)	Posts feat. Joy (%)	Top Liked Post (K)	Average Post Engagement (%)
@lexx.little	738K	5	2	1	0	2	0	0%	156	**16.98%**
@noeldeyzel_bodybuilder	3.7M	23	6	2	8	7	5	22%	669	**16.54%**
@courtneykiing	1.1M	18	7	5	1	5	11	61%	859	**14.65%**
@marco.spasiano	110K	10	1	5	1	3	1	10%	14.8	**13.38%**
@gdanielsfitness	167K	28	12	4	0	12	13	46%	29.5	**13.14%**
@cbum	16.8M	17	7	2	1	7	6	35%	4.7M	**11.80%**
@kenzie_vance	96.4K	19	4	5	1	9	10	53%	14.3	**7.38%**
@leanadeebb	4.7M	16	4	5	5	2	7	44%	680	**6.56%**
@edmarin_physique	101K	35	1	13	0	21	1	3%	24.9	**6.20%**
@zacperna	559K	22	5	9	3	5	2	9%	94.5	**4.59%**
@oliverforslin	733K	10	2	3	0	5	1	10%	64.1	**4.32%**
@vivianarubyy	123K	21	3	7	7	4	10	48%	44	**3.24%**

@iamtaylorsaylor	92.1K	21	1	8	0	12	5	24%	7.7	**2.54%**
@brandon.d.hendrickson 1.2M		37	13	14	0	10	12	32%	60.1	**2.03%**
@maddyforberg	502K	26	4	5	9	8	12	46%	25.3	**1.83%**
@logan_franklin	1M	23	6	8	2	7	5	22%	58.5	**1.74%**
@_brittanylupton	472K	32	6	7	12	7	11	34%	21.2	**1.65%**
@libbychristensen	432K	14	3	6	0	5	5	36%	N/A	**1.63%**
@charity_witt	311K	22	2	12	1	7	6	27%	N/A	**1.19%**
@christianguzmanfitness 1.1M		49	14	20	1	14	5	10%	27.8	**0.47%**

Legend: *Chart 3C: Social Media Audit Results by Engagement Rate*

Gymshark
Alphalete
Darc Sport
YoungLA
Inaka Power

The last data presented in this study are images taken from the profiles of the influencers to highlight similarities in emotion between the influencers within similar ranges of joy found in their recent content. It becomes clear through this qualitative method that although there is not indisputable evidence for the benefit of conducting joy in branded social media content, joy can be attributed to posts that happen to be successful on the influencers' profile.

Group 1 (41-60+% posts feat. joy):

@leanadeebb   @maddyforberg   @kenzie_vance   @gdanielsfitness.   @courtneykiing

Findings of Group 1: All posts in this group were made by female fitness influencers, illustrating the finding in the quantitative data that female influencers were more likely to have posts that met the criteria of conveying joy. While there is representation of the female body in this group, content not centered around the influencers' physiques was still well-received by followers. The content in

24

this group covered multiple categories, including motivational content, personal content, and promotional content. Finally, each post within this group except for one met the criteria of being content expressing joy, which supports the idea that posts with emotion tend to capture viewers, even if it is not a key driver of engagement or conversion.

Group 2 (20-40% posts feat. joy):
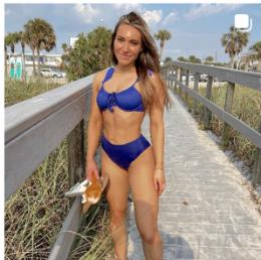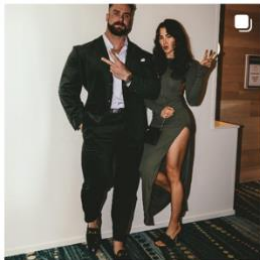
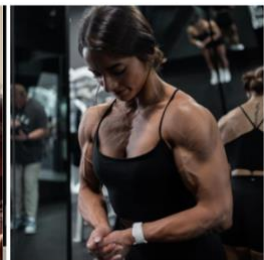@_brittanylupton   @cbum   @brandon.d.hendrickson   @logan_franklin   @iamtaylorsaylor

Findings of Group 2: This group of posts had the least in common with each other than Group 1 or Group 3, which indicates that the emotion of influencer content does not directly correlate to higher engagement. These posts are taken from both male and female influencers and the posts cover every content type, including motivational, personal, highlighting community, promotional, and educational. Most of these posts met the criteria of content featuring joy, but each post has its own unique reason for being highly engaged with by followers, again supporting the data proving my hypothesis about joy as incorrect.

Group 3 (0-19% posts feat. joy):

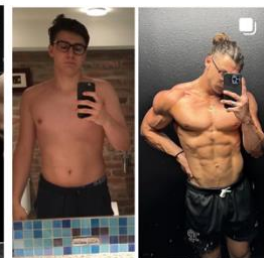@christianguzmanfitness   @oliverforslin   @edmarin_physique   @lexx.little   @marco.spasiano

Findings of Group 3: The most noticeable finding within this group of posts was the fact that these were all posted by male fitness influencers. This illustrates that between male and female influencers, it is more likely for a female to use emotions of joy and excitement, while males tend to convey motivation and aggression in their fitness content. All posts except for one showed that like posting pictures of their body, similarly to women. Finally, the content in this group is covers multiple categories, as with all the groups, demonstrating that a variety of content is important to influencer marketing and not one is more important to generating traction on influencers' content.

RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

After gathering data and conducting a thorough social media audit, my analysis revealed three crucial trends regarding the value of emotion to fitness branded content. The first trend is that the joy found in influencer content, such as smiling, laughing, and commenting about love,

in branded fitness content does not necessarily drive higher engagement rates on the content. The second trend showed that incorporating feelings of joy in the content influencers post is beneficial towards building authenticity in fitness content, which also enhances brand trust. The final trend that emerged from my analysis is the importance of joyful content to improving the potential for building and maintaining communities around brands. It was only by analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data together that I was able to suggest important practices for influencer marketing.

1. **Joy (conveyed through content) does not necessarily boost engagement:** Based on the outcomes of my research, I have discovered that joy conveyed through influencer content does not have a direct impact on the success of a campaign. Initially, I hypothesized that emotions, both positive and negative, can significantly influence the potential reception of influencer content by followers online. However, my findings suggest otherwise. Despite joy being a prevalent emotion in the industry, my data shows that it is not a priority within influencer content. In other words, there was no direct correlation between the level of joy conveyed and the success of the campaign.

   For fitness brands looking to start influencer marketing, focusing on influencers bringing joy to the target audience may seem necessary, however, it does not necessarily mean it will result in a successful campaign. Instead, brands need to focus on creating authentic partnerships with influencers who develop content that resonates with its target audience to effectively communicate the brand message and values to their followers. These findings suggest that a more holistic approach to evaluating influencers is needed, one that accounts for multiple factors working together to boost engagement and conversion on influencer content.

2. **Joy (conveyed through content) can be key to brand alignment and authenticity:** During this process, I discovered my initial hypothesis wasn't supported, but that emotions can drive authenticity, which is a crucial factor for the success of an influencer marketing campaign. Joy, in particular, is a primary emotion for conveying authenticity. I found that this was especially relevant in the fitness industry, as audiences are more likely to trust influencers who genuinely love and are passionate about their fitness journeys. For example, the influencers who did post with emotion may not have been doing it to boost content, but instead because they genuinely felt joy towards what they were sharing. In this way, it is important to note that being joyful in fitness content may not ensure success, but it will ensure that consumers see these influencers as genuine, which is proven to increase engagements and conversions from influencer marketing campaigns.

   As demonstrated in the data collected, female influencers expressed joy through their content more often than male influencers. Although this is not hindering the success of male influencers, this finding presents an excellent opportunity for male influencers to signify more authenticity on their page by incorporating more posts featuring joy, alongside the intense emotions they normally convey. Moreover, other implications for fitness brands looking to start influencer marketing include capitalizing on the fact that fitness goals are often emotionally charged for people, and look to influencers they trust for motivation, education and promotion of products

that will ensure they enjoy their journey as much as the influencer shows their love for the process.

3. **Joy (conveyed through content) connects a brand to a community:** The last key trend I identified from my research was that joy acts as a bridge between consumers, influencers, and brands. Joy is an emotion that can connect brands to communities, create brand loyalty and ultimately drive sales. For example, in my findings, YoungLA influencers had the highest amount of joy in their posts combined compared to the other four companies. This makes sense when considering how influencers spread brand values, this finding reflecting the YoungLA brand motto, "More than Clothing, it's a Culture." This was indoctrinated by influencers and resonated well with followers, helping to build a community around the brand.

    The use of hashtags was another aspect I investigated throughout my research and found was most important in reinforcing and rallying consumers around a brand's message. For example, Darc Sport's influencers stood out in my research by using the most hashtags, including company-specific hashtags like #NFGU and #wolves, which reflects their brand motto, "It's not for everyone. It's for us." This demonstrates the significance of using hashtags as a method of defining and supporting a brand community, often which is led by example of the brand's influencers.

    The implication of these finding is that fitness brands can leverage the power of joy and hashtags primarily to create a sense of community and develop brand loyalty. After assuring influencers embody the brand's values and resonate with their target audience, brands can create a loyal following and consequently boost sales through the community that influencers become vital in cultivating. Fitness brands that embrace these trends will have a competitive advantage with brand loyalty and often reach a wider audience of fitness enthusiasts as that community grows.

Overall, I was genuinely surprised that I did not discover data that supported my hypothesis that expressing joy through branded content would be a best practice for influencers in the fitness industry. That said, although no direct correlation was confirmed by my data, three valuable trends were still identified on the effect of joy on influencers' content. Throughout my research process, I uncovered the importance of expressing joy to building consumer trust, brand loyalty and brand communities. In this way, the emotion behind influencers' branded content can contribute to the overall success of influencer marketing campaigns. Further research I would be interested in conducting would be centered around the differences between male and female fitness influencers and the best practices for fitness brands when looking to partner with an influencer. Conducting further research in any aspect of influencer marketing would be valuable to the field, considering that there is limited available research and the environment of influencer marketing is constantly changing with the quickly adapting social media world. As research on social media marketing, specifically influencer marketing develops, I hope that the research I conducted brings valuable insight and new research questions to the conversation of best influencer marking practices in the fitness industry for successful campaigns for the many fitness brands.

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