An Experimental Study on the Effectiveness of Social Media Marketing: The Impact of Facebook Status Updates

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The popular social network site, Facebook, is often leveraged as a marketing tool by sport and recreation organizations. Facebook fan/organization pages allow the organization to connect with users who “like” the page and receive any messages disseminated by the organization. The utilization of Facebook by organizations appears to have many benefits, including reaching an identified market of interested consumers in a non-traditional and subtle format. The pervasiveness of social media in sport is highlighted by the hiring practices of sport and recreation organizations, which are developing staff positions to manage social media and social media marketing. The use of Facebook as a marketing tool follows traditional advertising theories, that suggest creating awareness and interest would benefit and increase intention and consumption. The cognitive, affective, and conative domains have often been examined in advertising literature to understand the effects of advertising on a consumer [e.g., Lavidge & Steiner’s Hierarchy of Effects Model (1960); Lewis’s Awareness-Interest-Desire-Action AIDA Model (1898)]. The use of Facebook status updates as social media marketing can often fulfill one or more of the many goals of advertising, including but not limited to: informing potential consumers and creating awareness, garnering interest (as more people “like” the status updates and creates conversations and comments among users), often with the focus of eventually driving consumption.

While use of Facebook as a marketing outlet is prevalent, empirical evidence of its use remains lacking. This study examined the effectiveness of social media marketing on college students, the largest demographic of Facebook users (The 18-24 year old segment accounts for more than 53.8% of activity on Facebook; Corbett, 2010). Specifically, the effectiveness of Facebook status messages were assessed via an experimental design to determine the influence of the messages on awareness of, interest in, intention to participate, and participation in a campus recreation special event; that is, the cognitive, affective, conative, and behavioral domains.

To measure the effectiveness of Facebook (through status updates) on a college student’s awareness, interest, and intent of attending a campus recreation event (an on campus adventure race), two groups were employed (Experimental-Facebook and Control). Subjects responded to a 55 item pre-test that measured demographics, social media usage, campus recreation involvement, cognition, affective, and conative domains (awareness, interest, and intention to attend various campus recreation events, including the adventure race). After completion of the survey, participants were assigned to a group--Experimental (n = 26) or Control (n = 29). The Experimental group was asked to “like” the Campus Recreation Center’s Facebook page. Then, for five days prior to the adventure race event, this group received the treatment--12 Facebook status updates, 5 about the race, 7 “dummy” messages about other recreation center happenings. The Control group received no social media treatment. The event, a one-time campus adventure race, was held and race participant list was compared to study list to determine if any were a part of the study. Finally, all study participants completed the post--test survey to determine if their cognitive, affective, or conative domains were influenced by the Facebook status updates.

In assessing cognition, chi-square analyses revealed awareness levels increased for the Facebook group participants (M=2.28; SD=2.00 to M=3.33; SD=2.07)and showed no statistical difference for the Control group (M=2.02; SD=1.72; M=1.97; SD=1.27). Affect/Interest levels in the Facebook group decreased from the pre-test (M=3.54; SD=1.65) to the post-test (3.34; SD=1.61), although not significant. The Control group's initial interest was determined to have a mean of 3.08 (SD = 1.69) and a post-survey awareness level mean of 2.52 (SD = 1.57). The intention of study participants to participate in the special event increased slightly for those who were in the Facebook group, but the intent level of participants in Control group decreased. There was no effect of behavioral change (no partipation in the adventure race).

The study aimed to quantify the effectiveness of using Facebook status updates as a social media marketing tool to
influence awareness, interest, intention, and behavior. Findings suggest that social media marketing was limited in its influence on effectiveness, but the study served as an empirical foundation for future research in the area.