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Empowerment Marketing: Online Fitness Programs

Within the last decade, the advancement of the health and fitness industry has skyrocketed, resulting from increased research on physical health. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of one developing cardiovascular disease, experiencing a stroke, even preventing certain cancers (Bassuk, 2013). Not only can physical activity prevent life-threatening health risks, but physical movement strengthens bones, builds muscles, improves lung capacity, and maintains weight. Further studies also confirm the intensity of physical exercise is negatively correlated with one’s likelihood of suffering from chronic diseases and experiencing premature death. Conditions such as hypertension, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and diabetes are less likely to occur as the intensity of physical activity increases (Bassuk, et. all, 2006). Using MET—the metabolic equivalent of task—researchers have been able to calculate the energy expended through physical activity, and how the amount of energy expended relates to one’s overall physical health (Bassuk, et. all, 2006). Vigorous intensity activity, such as running and calisthenics—including burpees, jumping jacks, and resistance training— is proven to significantly lower one’s risk of developing a chronic disease as opposed to those participating in moderate and low intensity activity on a consistent basis.

Increased research of disease and its relationship to physical health has stimulated further studies on mental and emotional health. These findings have also influenced people’s views of health and well-being physically, mentally, and emotionally. Ideals of “physical change, mental
change, and pleasure” attributed to the health and fitness industry have been proven to be the motivations behind participating in fitness programs (Lagrosen, 2007). The aspiration for a more muscular and toned body, the feelings of joy and happiness that stem from such physical improvement, and the enjoyment felt during physical activity all contribute to increased participation and investment in fitness programs.

The fitness industry has not only evolved with new research on health and wellness, but it has also expanded with the introduction of social media platforms. Social media outlets such as YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat have enabled entrepreneurs to extend their ideas beyond their small-scale circles restricted by geographical boundaries. The rapid rise of new technologies has connected people all around the world with a touch of the button. Increased communication has triggered the growth of global relationships through common interests. The health and fitness industry has used social media to reach a wider audience. Specifically, “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone It Up” are two businesses that have created fitness empires through outlets of social media: “Tone It Up” through YouTube, and “Kayla Itsines” through Instagram. YouTube fitness program “Tone it Up” compiles series of fitness videos aimed to be “a source of inspiration, motivation, and positivity for millions of women” (Gross, 2017). In a similar manner, Kayla Itsines, whose name is her brand, publishes online fitness videos on her Instagram account to promote to women that “[they] are good enough, smart enough, beautiful enough and strong enough” (O'Connor, 2017). Both empires foster millions of women dedicated to fitness as well as overall health, and create an alternative platform for women to achieve their fitness goals.

Not only do these two empires take fitness programs to a whole new level, but they also offer unique business approaches to gain subscribers, and to keep subscribers coming back. “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone it Up” have applied principles of psychology to tap into their
consumers’ innate attributes, attitudes, and personalities to hook them on their products, and most importantly, their missions. They develop their brands as symbols of the self and the ideal self, ultimately luring consumers into not only purchasing a good, but investing in the betterment of their lives (Harjoto, 2016).

Understanding how health and fitness has shaped new industries—specifically the online fitness industry—and how unique business principles enhance consumer retention rates leads me to question: How do people decide which methods to take to tackle their fitness journey? How do they choose between gym memberships and online fitness platforms? What is it specifically that hooks consumers—specifically women—to online/mass media fitness programs? In asking these questions, I am intrigued to discover how two social media empires, “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone It Up,” differentiate themselves from traditional gym businesses. I am curious to understand what draws women to become loyal members of online programs rather than dedicated gym members.

Both “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone it Up” utilize empowerment marketing to establish unique brands. Empowerment marketing triggers the betterment of one’s life through one’s own control and dedication to achieve such goals (Grace, 1991). Through empowerment marketing, companies have tapped into consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses evoked through the brain’s emotion center—the limbic system. From this angle, companies truly envision consumers as people through which they aspire to empower and inspire innovation (Voigt, 2017). Empowerment marketing has enabled brands to develop the concept brand loyalty and brand love, both of which are like that of a love sought through human relationships. Feelings of love through relationship such as intimacy, commitment, and compassion tie into the development of brand love, which is described as “the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” (Harjoto, 2016). This concept creates brand loyalty
through consumers’ personalized interactions with brands (Hancock, 2017). Brand loyalty is not only defined through human-like relationships and personalized interactions, but this term also describes the company’s value to consumers. Value is defined as the perception of what is received for what is given, hence the more received at the lesser cost, the better the value (Harjoto, 2016). Furthermore, brand loyalty is also dependent on company values—which includes societal, functional, and emotional values—that represent the brand to consumers (Syed, 2017). These ideas of developing brands to mold consumers’ individualistic lives is seen through empowerment marketing, creating greater confidence specifically in women’s abilities through health and fitness. What do these companies reveal to the greater population about the psychology behind their marketing strategies to ultimately create an online empire?

As stated earlier, I am increasingly curious about what particularly gravitates women to programs like “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone it Up” rather than traditional gym experiences. I have read articles on how marketers utilize psychological principles to capture their consumers’ loyalty and notice that this principle has not yet been explored in the realm of fitness programs. “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone it Up” offer unique marketing strategies that I would like to explore and compare with their retention rates to research how their specific strategies impact brand loyalty. Given this, I am proposing a more experienced-based research project which allows me to truly grapple with both empires’ unique marketing approaches. I propose to research how “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone It Up” use empowerment marketing strategies to evoke emotional responses and to create brand loyalty. The Goal of my research inquiry is to explore the influence of empowerment marketing in the branding of “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone It Up” on program retention rates. To conduct my research project, I will analyze both empires’ retention rates as well as conduct thorough interviews with those who have invested in each company’s
programs to determine how the marketing strategies of “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone It Up” influence their brand loyalty.

Retention rates are defined as the ratio between the number of retained customers to the number who are no longer customers. To calculate annual retention rates for previous five years (2012-2017), I will use the following formula:

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\text{Retention Rate} = \frac{\text{Subscribers at end of year} - \text{New subscribers during the year}}{\text{Subscribers at the beginning of the year}}
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In addition to calculating and comparing retention rates of both “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone It Up,” I will conduct in-depth interviews with subscribers to determine key elements that separate online fitness programs from traditional gym experiences. I will use convenience sampling to determine my sample pool from participants in the greater Los Angeles area. I will create a general demographics survey for each participant to fill out, giving me a general idea of her background. Questions I will include in the survey range from age, income level, education, and activity level. I will use these demographic questions to formulate informational graphs about my sample to include in the discussion part of my findings. I will talk about how demographics of participants may influence their susceptibility to empowerment marketing.

After conducting initial surveys to gain more insight into my participant pool, I will randomly select participants to conduct in-person, in-depth interviews with. To conduct interviews, I will formulate a series of questions to better understand people’s inclination to participate in online fitness programs as opposed to the traditional gym method. I will ask them questions regarding their personal emotions surrounding each method of exercise and how those
emotions influence fitness preference. I will incorporate my critical thinking skills to create questions regarding my participants’ attitudes towards the messages behind the “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone it Up” empires. I will ask questions such as “What specific qualities drove you to follow the ‘Tone it Up’/ ‘Kayla Itsines’ series?” as well as “What distinguishes this online fitness program from other programs offered at gyms?” To conduct interviews, I will have to use strong interpersonal skills and communication skills to get into contact with the participants who agree to participate in my study.

Furthermore, to gain more insight on the marketing strategies of “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone It Up,” I will personally contact both businesses. Since “Kayla Itsines” is stationed in Australia, I will reach out to Kayla Itsines, the owner, on social media and request a Skype interview. On the other hand, “Tone it Up” is stationed right in Manhattan Beach, CA, where I will be able to commute to their offices whenever necessary given that I live on campus at LMU. I will conduct these interviews to ask each business about its marketing direction. I will ask each business questions such as “What strategies do you use to gain subscribers on your YouTube channel/ Instagram page?” and “What business practices distinguish your brand from other fitness empires?” Again, I will have to incorporate ample networking and communication skills to contact my sample pool and both fitness empires.

To display my results of my research, I will provide a detailed research paper analyzing and discussing what distinguishes online fitness programs from average gym memberships. I will formulate personalized retention rate charts for both “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone it Up” as well as prepare a write-up to summarize my in-depth interviews. I will cross reference the demographic surveys with the in-depth interviews conducted and incorporate psychological principles to explore why online fitness empires’ marketing strategies may be more influential to some people
than others. From this information, I hope to discover what distinguishing characteristics “Kayla Itsines” and “Tone it Up” use to market their fitness programs.

To fund my research project, I will need transportation costs and supply costs. Since I do not have a vehicle on campus, I will need $150 for Uber costs to get me to and from Manhattan Beach, CA as well as to the greater Los Angeles area when conducting in-depth interviews. Depending on my sample pool, I may travel as close as Playa Vista and Santa Monica, or as far as Malibu and Hollywood. Supply costs include compensating my participants for their time in the form of coffees and pastries. I will conduct my interviews in public places, such as coffee shops, so about $10 per interview would be sufficient for both myself and the participant. I am planning on conducting at least ten interviews, so $100 for compensatory costs will be needed. Since I will be interviewing in person, I will also need printing money, about $20 worth to print my surveys and interview questions. My total resources for my research project will amount to $280.
References:


