

Washington State University College of Education

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will defend the thesis on

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Time: 1:00 P.M.

Location: Zoom by request

Faculty, students and the general public are encouraged to attend

DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY RUNNING BRANDS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INSTAGRAM PHOTOS

Chair: Simon Ličen

This study presents a content analysis of Instagram profiles belonging to four running apparel and footwear brands employing broad and focused differentiation competitive strategies (Porter, 1985). Brand posts were evaluated in terms of content origin (i.e. user-generated [UGC] or brand-generated [BGC]), brand emphasis (i.e. overt brand/product focus, subtle brand/product focus, non-brand related) and level of engagement (i.e. likes and comments). A chi-squared test revealed that broad differentiation brands (Asics and Hoka One One) posted significantly higher percentages of UGC when compared with focused differentiation brands (Altra and On; 26% v. 19.3%; $\chi^2(1) = 5.2053, p = .023$). These results may suggest that broad differentiation brands utilize greater levels of UGC to target a wider consumer base. Other results revealed that, on average, BGC elicited more likes (6338.67 v. 2325.39; $p < 0.001$) but UGC elicited more comments (817.78 v. 240.54; $p = .005$). While both findings present unique insights, simplistic observations of additional factors (e.g. elite athlete presence, brand solicitation of comments) within content provide direction for future research on separate variables impacting engagement. Additional findings revealed that brands emphasized brand and product features in their posts to a large degree, with 54.6% of content being categorized as overt brand/product focus. This suggests that brands aim to leverage relationships with consumers through presenting the opportunity for greater exposure to brand-related elements. After standardizing engagement measures by a brand's number of followers, ANOVA results for BGC posts revealed overt brand/product focus posts received significantly more likes ($p < .001$) and comments ($p = .023$) than subtly brand- or product-focused content. In contrast, ANOVA results for UGC revealed insignificant differences across categories. Overall, findings suggest that high brand emphasis in Instagram content leads to greater follower engagement, while additional mediating variables may impact engagement levels as well. Brand management and social media specialists may use these findings to supplement their digital communication strategies. However, it must be recognized that what works for one brand, may not necessarily work for another. Professionals must be mindful of choosing strategies which fit their brand management framework.