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**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MODERN FORMS OF MARKETING, BRANDING, AND SALES IN THE FITNESS INDUSTRY**

**ODNOSI MED MODERNIMI OBLIKAMI TRŽENJA, BLAGOVNO ZNAMKO IN PRODAJO V FITNES PANOGI**

**ABSTRACT**

The fitness center industry is growing year after year and marketing is becoming more challenging. Especially in recent years, when communication is shifting to digital channels. We have reviewed all research resources that have studied the relationships between digital marketing, branding and sales in the fitness industry from 2010 to 2020. Three different databases (Pubmed, Sciencedirect, Ebscohost) and grey literature identified 482 potential articles, of which 28 were relevant. We found researchers strongly recommend fitness centres use digital channels and social networks to communicate with their members. The researchers cited Facebook as a great way to create value for the fitness centre brand and indirectly increase the chances of buying fitness memberships. Instagram has a similar effect, with the fitness industry primarily advising to engage with influencers. Marketing through digital channels and technology innovations greatly contributes to branding and the sales of fitness services, so fitness centres should integrate digital marketing as a key part of marketing activities.

*Keywords:* digital marketing, social networks, fitness centres, fitness brand

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**IZVLEČEK**

Panoga fitnes centrov iz leta v leto raste in tržno komuniciranje postaja vse bolj zahtevno. Še posebej v zadnjih letih, ko se komuniciranje prestavlja na digitalne kanale. Naredili smo pregled vseh raziskovalnih virov, ki so preučevali odnose med modernimi oblikami oglaševanja, blagovno znamko in prodajo v fitnes industriji od leta 2010 do 2020. V treh različnih podatkovnih bazah (Pubmed, Sciencedirect, Ebscohost) in sivi literaturi smo identificirali 482 potencialnih člankov, od tega 28 relevantnih. Ugotovili smo, da raziskovalci fitnes centrom močno priporočajo uporabo digitalnih kanalov in družbena omrežja za komunikacijo s svojimi člani. Raziskovalci so navajali Facebook kot odličen način za ustvarjanje vrednosti blagovne znamke fitnes centra in posredno povečanje možnosti nakupa fitnes karte. Podoben učinek ima tudi uporaba Instagrama, za fitnes branžo se svetuje predvsem sodelovanje z influencerji. Trženje preko digitalnih kanalov in tehnološke novitete močno prispevajo h grajenju blagovne znamke in prodaji fitnes storitev, zato bi fitnes centri morali integrirati digitalno trženje kot ključen del trženjskih aktivnosti.

*Ključne besede:* Tržno komuniciranje, digitalni kanali, družbena omrežja, fitnes centri, blagovna znamka fitnesa

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## INTRODUCTION

The fitness trend has a long history, but fitness centers as we know them today did not emerge until the late 19th century (Koch and Luu, 2015). Fitness culture in America came to the forefront with the Industrial Revolution and with an emphasis on the post-Civil War period (Dalleck and Kravitz, 2002). Due to major technological advances, there was a general decline in physical activity, cities emerged leading to an urban lifestyle, and as a result, obesity increased in the population (Finkelstein, Khavjou, Thompson, Trogon, Pan, Sherry, and Dietz, 2012; Taubes, 1998). It was during this time that diabetes first appeared in human history (Dalleck and Kravitz, 2002). After 1960, the importance of physical activity was occasionally emphasized for younger generations, becoming a preventative measure against disease and illness (Shephard, 1985; Blair, Kampert, Kohl, Barlow, Macera, Paffenbarger, & Gibbons, 1996). It could be said that fitness is a prevention of disease and not a cure (Zhu, 2018).

In recent decades, with the increase in physical inactivity as the fourth leading cause of premature mortality in the world (World Health Organization, 2010), obesity has increased by 100 percent (Malik, Willett, & Hu, 2013). The number of gyms is growing at an annual rate of 4.6 percent (Hollasch, Rutgers, Smeeman, Ludwig, & Lehmkuhler, 2019), and in 2017 they recorded more than 170 million memberships in more than 200,000 gyms. The main reasons for enrolling in gyms are to improve health, appearance, increase self-confidence, and a sense of self-control (Mullen and Whaley, 2010). The fitness industry is one of the fastest growing industries, so new ways for fitness advertising are constantly developing (Bernal-Garcia, Fernandez-Gavira, Garcia-Fernandez, and Velez-Colon, 2014). A combination of multiple advertising channels (Sharpe, Burroughs, Granner, Wilcox, Hutto et al., 2009) has been shown to help increase physical activity and leisure time participation among middle-aged women, but at the same time it must be innovative and creative (Bernal-Garcia et al. 2014; Southward, 2013; Walls, 2014; R. Zajc, personal communication, March 2020).

One of the most prevalent and growing forms of advertising in the fitness world is the use of digital channels (websites, landing pages, social networks, email marketing, automated campaigns, etc.), the advantage of which is the measurability of reach and success (Reiss-Davis, 2015; Smith, 2016). Fitness and healthy lifestyle topics on social networks are on the rise (Ridgway and Clayton, 2016), and Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube are among the most used in 2018 because they allow interactive communication, brand collaboration (Tuten and Salomon, 2017), and viewing images and videos without an intermediary (Sajid, 2016).

The main reasons for using social networks for marketing purposes are affordability, increasing number of users, and feedback from potential customers (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). In recent years, many authors, including Park and Dittmore (2014), Coyle (2010), Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015), have pointed out that the use of digital advertising and social networks in the service sector is growing exponentially.

In the past, there were few fitness clients and even fewer gyms, so almost any type of marketing worked (Plummer, 2003). Gyms were full and making a profit regardless of quality, business model, or marketing. This changed at the beginning of the 20th century as the number of people interested in fitness increased and the amount of fitness available also increased. Traditional marketing produced increasingly poor results, and the first successful business models based on economies of scale emerged. Today, the situation is completely different: the number of customers visiting gyms is constantly increasing, but the offer is almost unlimited, so it is necessary to build a good business model and excellent marketing and sales to run the gym successfully (Vučković, 2018).

The main goal of this review article is to connect these two fast growing fields. We would like to help connect the two fields.

## **METHODS**

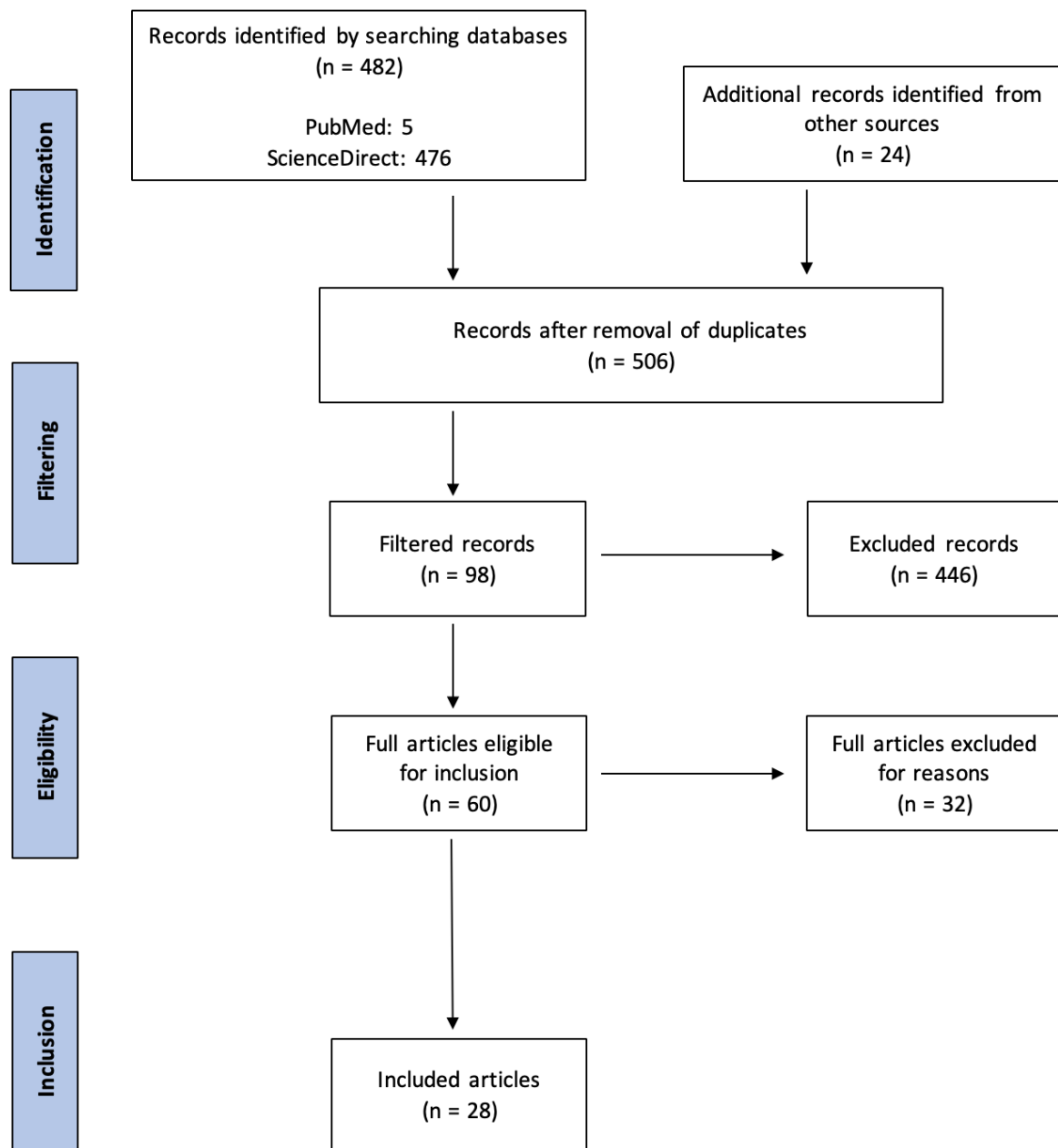
We reviewed all research sources that examined the relationship between modern advertising formats, brands, and sales in the fitness industry from 2010 to 2020. We used the Scencedirect, PubMed, and Scopus databases to search for sources and then reviewed the literature we found. For the purposes of this article, we used the following search terms: "impact" OR "effect" AND "digital" OR "web" OR "social media" AND "marketing" AND "sales" AND "fitness". The sources obtained were analyzed according to the following characteristics: (1) basic characteristics of the study, (2) sample size, (3) study objectives, (4) study results. We followed PRISMA guidelines when searching for sources and writing the results (Moher, Altman, Liberati, & Tetzlaff, 2011).

## **RESULTS**

We identified 482 potential articles in three different databases (Pubmed, Scencedirect, Ebscohost). A review of Google Scholar revealed an additional 24 articles. Due to limiting

factors, we excluded 446 articles and then read 60 full articles. At the same time, we excluded another 32 immediately and 18 only when we printed the data in Table 1 because they were thematically insufficient. The procedure for finding and extracting articles is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Scheme of the literature search.



In reviewing the databases, we found 482 items for this search term and a further 24 items in the gray literature. From these results, 98 summaries were reviewed. Based on the summaries we read, we found 28 relevant articles.

Table 1. Relevant articles.

Author (year)	Country	Objective	Sample size	Results
García-Fernández, J., Fernández-Gavira, J., Durán-Muñoz, J., & Vélez-Colón, L. (2015)	Spain	Describe how gyms in Spain advertise on social media and how this affects customers.	7 franchises, 73 gyms	Multimedia content, brand-specific information and posts received the most likes, shares and comments on Facebook. On Twitter, they have the most impact from brand-related posts.
Schmidt, E. (2018)	USA	Discover the best advertising methods from Orange Theory Fitness.	1	Orange Theory Fitness uses experimental marketing, digital marketing, and technological innovation to promote its brand.
Brown, T.C., Miller, B.M., & Palmer, B.M. (2017)	USA	Investigate the impact of the name on advertising fitness workouts.	389	The names of different workouts typically influence the engagement of different workouts in fitness centers, which is reflected in different types of motivation.
Wright, B.K., Williams, A.S., & Byon, K.K. (2017)	USA	Assess the impact of social networks on brand value and customer purchase intention in the fitness center.	393	Structural equation modeling results showed positive relationships between communication related to social media market mixes and equity, and equity and purchase intention. The results have implications not only for social media marketing and fitness marketing, but also for consumer-related brand equity and consumer-related marketing behavior.
Williams, A. S, Rhenwick, I., Wright, B., Choi, W., Kim, D. Y., & Vickey, T. (2014)	USA; Ireland	Empirically explore the antecedents of fitness brands in the sports industry.	213	The best way to promote gyms is through word of mouth.
García-Fernández, J., Elasi-Eijaberi, A., Pérez-Tur, F., Triadó-Ivern, X. M., Herrera-Torres, L., & Aparicio-Chueca, P. (2017)	Spain	Investigate the use of social networks in the Spanish fitness industry and determine their usefulness by measuring the relationship between the number of followers and fitness center revenue.	194 gyms	The authors found a positive correlation between the number of followers and the revenue of fitness centers. The results show that social networks are an important marketing channel for gyms.
Heroux, L. (2017)	USA	Examine the marketing strategies of American and Canadian gyms and the differences between the two.	20 gyms	American centers use more print and outdoor advertising. Canadian gyms have better customer service and sales staff.
Chao Ren-Fang. (2015)	Taiwan	Examine the relationships between experimental marketing, brand, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in fitness centers.	341	Experimental marketing is very important in creating a brand for gyms.
Kolbeck, C. (2018)	USA	Define how gyms should use social media for marketing.	N/A	Using social media such as Facebook and Instagram is very important for gyms to advertise. It is best to post pictures or videos.
Baranow, R. (2019)	Austria	Find out how the kindness, integrity, and competence of fitness influencers affect the trust of their followers.	136	A fitness influencer needs to be friendly and honest on Instagram if they want their followers to trust them.

Using our first search term, we found 28 relevant articles. In total, 18 articles were excluded from the data, showing results for 10 studies (Table 1). Seven articles were excluded because their problem was not marketing of fitness centers, but advertising in related areas of fitness, such as.: (i) FB advertising for sports teams (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012); (ii) advertising for campus recreational sporting events (Bayne and Cianfrone, 2013); (iii) advertising for martial arts clubs (Conklin, 2017); (iv) smart bracelet advertising (Pinto and Yagnik, 2017); (v) energy drink advertising (Buchanan, Yeatman, Kelly, & Kariippanon (2018); (vi) conference center advertising (Samuel, 2018); (vii) Bikram yoga and Crossfit (Powers and Greenwell, 2017). A further four articles were excluded because their problem related mainly to the marketing of sports activities in general (Sharpe, Burroughs, Granner et al., 2010; Williams and Chinn, 2010; Johnston and Davis, 2019; Wilczynska, Lubans, Cohen, Smith, Robards, & Plotnikoff, 2016). We excluded the paper by Schiefer (2018) because he found an association between fitness influencers on Instagram and the purchase of sports products by their followers. Four studies were excluded because we found that they did not address gym marketing, but rather gym demographics (Stadnyk and Sereda, 2016), customers' decisions about which fitness package to choose (DellaVigna and Malmendier, 2006), why individuals choose fitness (Mullen and Whaley, 2010), and brand perceptions of a particular gym (Bodet, Meurgey, & Lacassagne, 2009). The last two articles were not related to sports at all (Wells, Valacich, & Hess, 2011) and (Čargonja, 2017), so we excluded them as well.

## **DISCUSSION**

There is very little scientific literature in the field of digital advertising in fitness centers (Baranow, 2019; García-Fernández, Elasri-Eijaberi, Pérez-Tur, Triadó-Ivern, Herrera-Torres, & Aparicio-Chueca, 2017; Wright, Williams, & Byon, 2017). In the world of fitness center marketing, there is a relentless race between gyms to attract new members and retain existing members (DellaVigna, & Malmendier, 2006; Tharrett and Peterson, 2012; Plummer, 2003, 2007, 2011; Heroux, 2017; Stadnyk, in Sereda, 2016; Amin, 2018). This is only possible if companies think tactically ahead and are aware of the demographic members they want and where their target customers are located (Bodet, Meurgey, & Lacassagne, 2009; Kolbeck, 2018; Amin, 2018). In general, modern forms of marketing are useful for building a fitness center brand (Chao, 2015; Conklin, 2017; Schmidt, 2018) as well as online rumors about fitness (Williams, Rhenwrick, Wright, Choi, Kim, & Vickey, 2014).

More and more sports clubs and centers are also using social networks to communicate with their members (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; García-Fernández et al., 2017). More than 71 percent of the population that has access to the Internet uses Facebook, and the number of users over the age of 55 has grown particularly rapidly in recent years. In her article in the journal of the prestigious American College of Sports Medicine, Kolbeck notes that Facebook is still a good marketing channel for gym advertising precisely because of its growing audience. She recommends paying for successful posts and carousel posts to attract new customers and retain existing members by promoting the fitness community (Kolcbek, 2018; Johnston and Davis, 2019). Pronschinske, Groza, and Walker (2012) have already found that Facebook is very useful in creating a sense of belonging among members. García Fernández, Fernández Gavira, Durán Muñoz, and Vélez Colón (2015) have studied the use of Facebook in fitness centers. A review of the Facebook profiles of 73 gyms revealed that Facebook is the best social network for brand building, as relevant posts received the most likes, comments and shares. Exercise schedules and general information are also frequently viewed on Facebook. Wright, Williams, and Byon (2017) examined 1,856 gym Facebook posts. Similarly, they proved with 393 respondents that advertising through Facebook is a great way to increase the brand equity of gyms and indirectly increase the likelihood of purchasing a fitness ticket. Baranow (2019), Haemers (2016), Dahlqvist and Preiksaite (2018) have shown that advertising via Instagram influencers in the fitness industry has a positive impact on brand perception, which even influences the purchase decision (Schiefer, 2018).

Twitter is also an ideal channel to provide up-to-date and interactive information for sports organizations and clubs (Hopkins, 2013; Svensson et al., 2017). Of the 328 million Twitter users, most are between the ages of 18 and 29, and as many as 82 percent access Twitter via mobile devices. Interestingly, Twitter users have, on average, the highest level of education among all social networks, with most having a college degree (Kolbeck, 2018). Twitter is most useful for building a fitness and customer care brands (García Fernández et al., 2015).

Snapchat is a social network where 160 million users watch more than 10 billion videos per day, so a Snapchat profile is also important for modern fitness. In particular, geofilters are an important asset for gym marketing, and for building a fitness community, coaches and clients are advised to post videos of their workouts on Snapchat (Kolbeck, 2018).

It is important that our website and all digital advertising is suitable for mobile devices, as the vast majority of communication takes place there, which is confirmed by many authors

(Kolbeck, 2018; Wells, Valacich, & Hess, 2011; Wilczynska, Lubans, Cohen, Smith, Robards, & Plotnikoff, 2016). Experimental marketing, marketing through digital channels, and technological innovations contribute strongly to brand building (Schmidt, 2018). Details such as choosing the right name for fitness are also important online (Brown, Miller, & Palmer, 2017). In fitness, the brand name is especially important because users need to believe that working out at that gym will help them achieve their goal, whether they are trying to build muscle mass, lose weight, or simply strive for a healthy lifestyle (Powers and Greenwell, 2017).

The only analysis of the impact of marketing through digital channels or social networks on the turnover of fitness centers was conducted in Spain, where García-Fernández et al. (2017) analyzed the appearance and activity on social networks of 194 Spanish companies engaged in the activity of fitness centers and the impact of this appearance on the turnover of these fitness centers. They found that 88.66 percent of gyms communicate with their customers through the website. In total, 70.6 percent of gyms have a dedicated Facebook profile to communicate with customers, and 51 percent have a Twitter profile, while 18.6 percent use their YouTube channel, 9.8 percent Google+ and only 8.8 percent Instagram. Gyms should integrate digital marketing as an important part of their marketing activities (García-Fernández et al., 2017).

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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