



## M. A. in Lifespan and Digital Communication

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Final Research Paper

### **Global Communication and Persuasive Business on Social Media: An Empirical Study of the New Way of Doing Bodybuilding**

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*“The beauty of social media is that it has been giving a lot of people an opportunity to make a true living out of the sport.”*

– The Late John Meadows (Mountain Dog), 2018

Little research attention has been paid to the evolution of bodybuilding and the roles of language on social media. It has been acknowledged for years that bodybuilding is synonym of the usually denigrated vast group of super muscular athletes who supposedly consume steroids and compete at the Olympia, like “the best of all time” (McIntyre, date unknown) Arnold Schwarzenegger, Dorian Yates, and Jay Cutler. It may be argued, however, that the introduction of social media, primordially Instagram and YouTube, has changed mentality in the last couple of years, evolving the way of doing and perceiving bodybuilding.

In a 2018 YouTube video, late pro-bodybuilder and coach John Meadows (2018) identifies online networking and entertainment as transformative for bodybuilding, stating that “The beauty of social media is that it has been giving a lot of people an opportunity to make a true living out of

the sport.” (Meadows, 2018); however, this living, is dependent on bodybuilders navigating the dynamics of digital networking platforms and “influencer” culture, with the added challenge of doing so across language barriers inherent to a global industry like the sport in discussion which, after all, “was never really popular among the mass” (Meadows, 2018).

Proper digital marketing and sales empowerment have influenced bodybuilders' behavior on personal performance and fan satisfaction, leading to the attraction of an enormous group of people who, with the mindset of “If he can be a pro, I can be a pro!” (Meadows, 2018), have become global customers transforming the sport into fashion. Due to the mysterious desire of reaching a similar body fat percentage and leanness, the same kind of muscularity, and a physique of which to be proud, a myriad of coaching inquiries are continuously messaged on Instagram, via hashtags, questions in Stories or direct PMs, to those bodybuilders who, until the beginning of the last decades, were simply considered unpleasant pumped athletes, and were possibly victims of semi-altered images of creative bodybuilding magazines, like the renowned *Muscle & Fitness* and *Shape Up*. What in the remote past could only be skimmed while browsing pages of those magazines offered at a random waiting room has become dream for some and an achievable goal for others, globally, which greatest results must be granted to the still-to-be-profoundly-studied social media.

This report wants to explore contemporary digital communication through bodybuilding, being this one of the most observed and competitive globalized sports within popular culture, and its global outreach via social media platforms, and is aimed at providing insight into the roles of language on Instagram.

To approach social media at a different level would be beneficial to gain an accurate and deep informative understanding of contemporary global communication: Rather than the mere usage of

two fingers to scroll down from post to post without attaching a real meaning to the number of hours spent on platforms, social media is more than just what is seen at a simple and quick glance. This new contemporary networking media offers an infinite number of resources and intrinsic meanings, some of which are still to be identified and explored. Nevertheless, this paper wants to focus on the culture of attraction of influencer/follower of social media and its being a new figurative art and way of communication, which “if it doesn’t spread, it’s dead” (Jenkins H., 2009), but how does posted information become sticky and, therefore, spreadable?

## **Literature Review**

In an article posted in the *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016), researchers Cunningham and Craig (2016) consider the phenomena of social media, noting how these “platforms have circumnavigated the planet with near frictionless ease” (Cunningham, Craig, 2016) which, contrary to portals like Netflix with its “80 million subscribers in 190 countries” (Cunningham, Craig, 2016), feature billions of users “in more than 88 countries and 76 languages” (Cunningham, Craig, 2016). In this “New Media Imperialism” (Cunningham, Craig, 2016), they detail, global availability, facilitations, relatively present content algorithms, and the brand-new “professionalizing-amateur screen ecology embody a huge change in producer diversity, both in terms of amateur backgrounds and global location” (Cunningham, Craig, 2016) which, we may say, saw a major evolution with COVID-19.

During the first years of the pandemic, a huge amount of people was economically impacted and had to be creative to find ways of becoming knowledgeable entrepreneurs, in an effort to survive a normal everyday life, while others, those who were lucky enough to only change the location of their office by working from home, had a chance to enjoy the perfect work-life

balance and learn new ways of living. No matter the personal situation, long commutes were no longer needed, more time for going to the gym and distress was available, and online global marketing was the most efficient option to shop basically for everything (Septianasari, Baihaqi, Abqoriyyah, Syaputri, 2021): Food, toilet paper, *and* gym items. Consequently, marketing saw a change: New sales representatives were needed to move forward, and any level of experience was obviously accepted. Thanks to the implementation of virtual training and the expansion of contemporary digital media and social commerce in a global-pandemic-affected digital era, newbie sellers no longer needed to be professional marketers or graphic designers; they were able to learn how to be strategically creative in using their image and language to persuade online shoppers and possible customers. It is the era of the “fake famous” (Fry, 2021) or “microcelebrities” (Marwick, 2017).

According to Marwick’s (2017) research study, individuals gain online success thanks to the adoption of two self-presentation strategies which represent the penetration of marketing and consumer culture, “microcelebrity and self-branding” (Marwick, 2017, p. 1). Through the first strategic practice, common individuals manage to become famous, within a selected fanatic audience, via the creation and usage of affective and persuasive messages on social media and, particularly, on Instagram; whereas the business-related self-branding encourages influencers to showcase themselves as “personal brands” (Marwick, 2017, p. 1) in an effort to reach interest of possible online customers and organizations (Marwick, 2017).

Based on Leaver (2020), Instagram has grown into a vast phenomena “where communication and commerce have overlapped (Leaver, 2020, p. 1). First released as mobile vintage photo application, where touching up and adjusting individuals’ appearance (Leaver, 2020, p. 107) are now available, Instagram has transformed into a largely improved channel of digital

communication which flaunts the appearance of well-made strategic and persuasive publicization and the rise of “fake famous” (Fry, 2021) influencers who perform as self-instructed content creators who strive to become, act, and are treated as celebrities. While in the past bodybuilders had to be “top of the top pros in demand to make a living in the sport” (Meadows, 2018), in the new digital era, doing strategic marketing via social platforms does no longer require a really good supplement sponsorship or, even, a higher-level degree or certification in Graphic Design or Marketing; those who desire to become famous influencers on social media and sell their brand only need a cellular phone, the most appropriate mobile application (usually IG), dedicated time, and a good sense of entrepreneurship and will to achieve. After all, basic persuasive communication knowledge and best strategic practices may be learned searching Google, but what is important to be discusses is how Leaver (2020) details that the option to add music to Stories, for instance, is only available in some countries due to local differences based on language and region. Furthermore, the author mentions how the impersonal “likes” in English become “j’aime” in France and “vind-ik-leuks” in Germany. She also brings to the reader’s attention that Instagram pods are hard to track, and that “influencers are now collaborating with others across agencies, genre, language, and target demographics” (Leaver, 2020, p. 157). “To see this complexity on Instagram, an understanding of the platform and context is needed” (Leaver, 2020, p. 202), as this platform is “a visual language that older people – even those like me, in their 30s - simply don’t speak” (Leaver, 2020, p. 202).

While exploring *Fake Famous* in *The New Yorker*, writer Fry (2021) finds that, although Instagram influencers might become famous and receive free products, their strategic practice might become hard work (Fry, 2021): “Working a menial job is hard, but *Fake Famous* demonstrates that being an influencer, too, can be a tedious kind of labor.” (Living Word, 2021).

It is demonstrated, in fact, that social media organizations like Meta have realized that providing portals, features, and content in other languages is fundamental for growth (González, 2021) – Think about the “See translation” instant tool on Instagram, which definitely makes content stickable and, therefore, more spreadable (Jenkins, 2009).

Let us deep dive now into some functional examples.

## **Research Study**

As previously explored, the invention of contemporary social media has impacted the mentality of both influencers and followers, changing the way of doing bodybuilding. But why this exact sport? Like most META platforms, Instagram has grown into a global phenomenon (Leaver, 2020) which, with its touch-up and physical appearance adjustment features (Leaver, 2020, p. 107), magnifies the ability to virtually present oneself through selfies, Reels, and Stories while encouraging influencers to showcase themselves as “personal brands” (Marwick, 2017, p. 1), and bodybuilders are all about it (even the intrinsic literal meaning of the lemma “bodybuilding” says it all: bodybuilding A.K.A. perfect body appearance and subsequential competition). It has also been found that social media companies are brainstorming to find the best ways to make these platforms reachable all around the world (González, 2021), making language one of their first priorities.

The roles of language have taken a different trajectory with social media and digital networking. Despite English, and precisely American English, persists on being the language of power, dominating to some extent multilingualism, and strategic non-verbal communication serves as the most currently-used persuasive method in support of digital marketing, most online influencers, and specifically the least famous, do not achieve their desired goals of being famous

and raising funds, due to lack of knowledge of other languages, to include English. In order to achieve it all, one has to have it all. In her popular source, Arias (2022) notes "We think that all our clients' language projects, such as website localization and transcreation, are about connecting with this new type of customers in an effective and meaningful way, not only speaking their language, but also learning a bit more about their experiences and expectations towards the brand's service, products and messages" (Arias, 2022), demonstrating the importance of multilingualism for growth.

Detailed research was initially performed, using a large amount of public Instagram profiles of various bodybuilders to identify several athletes who would make justice to this paper. Thereafter, an analysis of chosen profiles was executed; and a brief interview per sampled influencer was subsequently and purposefully conducted by way of coaching inquiry, via Instagram (IG) instant messaging or through Lives, using a compounded approach of sequential exploratory questions, serving as analysis of their fitness and professional career paths, and a purposeful observation of their statements around their own coaching method. Body language in Stories, posts, Reels, and YouTube videos was also observed to determine how their own success is achieved in the subject of bodybuilding not only as Olympia-level competitors or now, due to personal decision or private factors, as coaches but also as health and fitness erudite professionals who, normally, lack of higher-level education surrounding the subject in discussion.

Conclusively, considering the research findings and that the completion of this research study primarily serves as understanding the digital communication phenomenon under a different perspective, a study around the paramount focus of this thesis was implemented, and a brief discussion is herein enclosed to ultimately demonstrate the significance of multiculturalism and, predominantly, of multilingualism in a globalized digital world.

Brazilian Angela Borges, competitor and first-place overall winner in the Wellness category of the Brazilian Olympia, had not used any English until said division, first created in her own Country, was released in the United States of America where, followed by Isabelle Pereira, she lost her Olympia title against conational Olympia world champion Francielle Mattos.

What is acquired by the US becomes one of the myriads of American dreams, and the icon of that previously-only-Brazilian division is now a model to hungrily follow and achieve, the



synonym of motivation despite the hardship of training, diet, and possible risks within, like Bigorexia. In an effort to spread passion towards the sport and world-worth physiques, athletes like Borges use Instagram in an attempt to sell their branded fit image and business with the support



of some basic English in live streaming and covert non-verbal advertising in posts, Reels, and Stories which, in reality, results in paid collaboration. Images like Borges' (see her Instagram profile), although non-verbal, already stick in one's brain and are, therefore, spreadable (Jenkins, 2009). There is no need for verballity, or the translation of the Portuguese content written in her post. When digital marketing is strategically presented, the need for the "See translation" option at the bottom of social media posts only comes secondarily if it does not become superfluous or obsolete. Images like the one herein explored contain sufficient information to immediately catch fans' attention and persuade possible customers: Logos or logic of the message –i.e., the brand of the product also showcased in the sport bra the athlete is wearing, Ethos or credibility of the author –i.e., the Olympian bodybuilder, and Pathos or emotional appeal to audience –i.e., the desired athlete's physique (Note: The three Greek lemmas comprise Aristotle's formula to persuasion).

Findings from third-place Olympian Isabelle Pereira' post are totally different. The image forces the athlete's followers to read her post to learn about it, but she helps them by specifying



that an English version of her post is provided: “us english in the comments!”. It is important to notice how the bodybuilder emphasizes “us” (USA flag on the mobile version), indirectly highlighting her preference towards American English and its power. Although the marketing advertisement is not related to any products she uses or promotes, Olympian bodybuilder Isabelle Pereira reaches circa 20,000 (25,811) likes more than the conational Angela Borges (2,471), apparently by simply providing her own English translation to the Portuguese content. As a results, English or not English, when you find yourself in need of acquiring another language, you become multilingual.

Hereinbelow is a table containing each primary interview question and results, followed by a short paragraph summarizing findings.

| Question   | Language Attempt                                   | Interviewee 1 (Italian) | Interviewee 2 (Hispanic/ Portuguese) | Interviewee 3 (American) | Interviewee 4 (Korean)  | Interviewee 5 (Plurilingual) |
|--|--|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Coaching Inquiry</b>                                | 1 English  | No response             | No response                          | Response within seconds  | No response             | Response within seconds      |
| Coaching Inquiry                                       | 2 Spanish  | Response within seconds | Response within seconds              | No response              | No response             | Response within seconds      |
| Coaching Inquiry                                       | 3 Italian  | Response within seconds | Response within seconds              | No response              | No response             | Response within seconds      |
| Coaching Inquiry                                       | 4 Translation of other language                    | N/A                     | N/A                                  | N/A                      | Response within seconds | Response within seconds      |
| <b>Fitness and Professional Career Paths</b>           | N/A  | Provided                | Not provided                         | Not provided             | Not provided            | Provided                     |
| <b>Coaching Methods</b>                                | N/A  | Partially provided      | Partially provided                   | Partially provided       | Not provided            | Partially provided           |
| <b>Steroids (Personal usage or on customized diet)</b> | N/A  | No response             | No response                          | Partially responded      | No response             | Partially responded          |
| <b>Body Language in Stories, Posts, and Reels</b>      | Stage presence, routine, training videos or photos |                         |                                      |                          |                         |                              |

|                             |                       |                                   |         |                                    |   |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|---------|------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Language (when used)</b> | Italian; some English | Spanish; some English//Portuguese | English | Korean; barely any written English | Mainly English; other languages as needed |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|---------|------------------------------------|---|

This first research on global digital communication is focused, as previously mentioned, on identifying the roles and usage of language in bodybuilders' social media profiles, resulting on the advantages of the power of English, plurilingualism, and absence of verbal language over monolingualism. The study compared monolingual and plurilingual bodybuilders on the methods they use to market their personal brand, image, and their business, and examined the usage of monolingual and plurilingual vocabulary within their Instagram profiles.

Findings show significant differences between the sampled accounts: The results suggest that while vocabulary in the dominant language seems to have an evident role when posting on social media, non-dominant languages seem to only appear in writing and very sporadically. Additionally, monolingual bodybuilders tend to not respond or accept coaching inquiries when submitted in a language they do not know, whereas multilingual athletes respond in a matter of seconds providing prompt answers. Consequently, this behavior translates in different outcomes: Monolingual anglophones, due to the popularity of the English language, have worldwide customers and followers who understand English; monolingual coaches who speak languages other than English only coach conational monolingual amateurs, although they have many worldwide followers, thanks to the creation of an appetible personal branding and reachable profile. Both categories of bodybuilders, though, tend not to respond to those who inquire using a language they do not understand; and those who speak a language other than English are somewhat attempting the introduction of the language either by using some basic words in hashtags relevant to the sport, or by providing a tentative English pseudo-version of their written content, as requested by followers, or also by interestingly sharing in their Stories they are learning said

language. Finally, not only do multilingual speakers vaunt of the highest number of followers, but they also take pride in having the most customers.

On the other side of the story, thanks to the popular previously-only-Brazilian Wellness bodybuilding category, which was only recently assimilated by the US Olympia, Hispanic fitness professionals are those who receive most coaching inquiries. The division focuses on symmetry and proportions, fuller hips, thighs, and buttocks; therefore, Hispanic fit bodies seem to have the highest potential in the category, and Hispanic coaches, who have more understanding in women who genetically have the well-known hourglass shape and carry more muscle mass at their lower body, are automatically expert in providing the most accurate personalized diets and training programs which would be beneficial for reaching that wellness physique and compete in Wellness Bodybuilding; on top of that, they are putting the effort into learning English. After all, Internet usage is rapidly growing in all countries; therefore, in order to support international following on social media, account owners need to analyze their demographics and know their target cultures, localize or generalize their images using non-verbality and, also, watch time zones so to not bury their content and reduce engagement; otherwise, they will miss quite a lot if they only provide content in their own language (Day, 2020). With their plurilingual profiles or even with some simple multilingual content here and there, brands and influencers are growing their following while attracting a wider international audience (Living Word, 2021).

Languages shape population, and communication depends on the receipt and interpretation by others (Nussbaum, 2014): Together they create culture and evolve while advancing ideas and how surroundings are perceived and explored. With globalization and the consequent melting pot of languages daily experienced around the world as a whole, social media has changed

communication interactions and methods, becoming a new figurative art, the art of persuasive social media and digital communication.

In conclusion, the lack of multilingualism in social media and, particularly, in those profiles whose owners' goal is to reach a large international audience, is damaging global positive interpersonal communication, and specific efforts embracing the importance of multilingualism within international interpersonal communication may help. Because scientific evidence suggests, but does not prove, that multilingualism as part of all individuals' cultural baggage may increase positive interpersonal communication, future research is essential: Further studies are needed to determine when, why, and how multilingualism may positively affect interpersonal communication. With that being said, it would be beneficial to advise, *if not persuade*, linguists, polyglots, psychologists, and Communication experts to partner and perform more extensive research in an attempt to ultimately demonstrate the importance of multiculturalism and, primordially, of multilingual communication in social media and digital marketing, in a globalized digital era.

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### **Instagram Influencers**

Angela Borges, <https://www.instagram.com/angelaborgeswellness/channel/?hl=en>

Isabelle Pereira, <https://www.instagram.com/isapereiranunes/?hl=en>