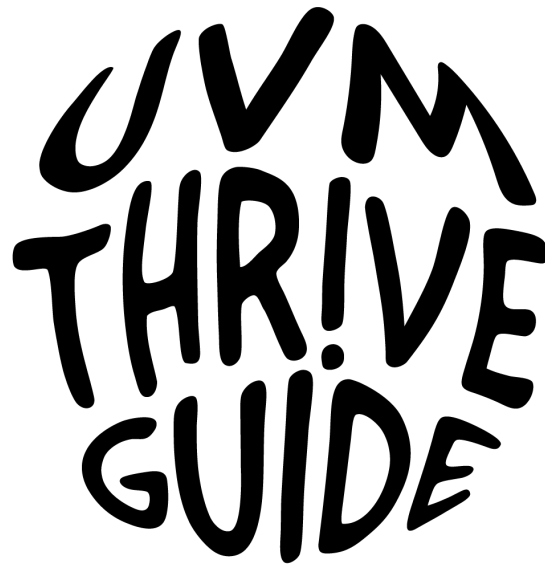


UVM Thrive Guide: Using Social Media to Address Levels of Happiness and Stress in
Undergraduates at the University of Vermont During Final Exams



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Abstract

Social media platforms are continually evolving and presenting new ways to connect users with people in the world. While these platforms help us connect to friends and family quickly, transgressing geographic boundaries, these platforms also pull people away from experiencing life which results in mental and physical health problems, particularly lowering happiness levels. The effects of social media on mental health and happiness levels are affecting everyone, and college students are at particular risk, especially around final exam season. To reconnect UVM students with nature, others, and self-respect and values, student researchers at the University of Vermont created the “UVM Thrive Guide” campaign. “UVM Thrive Guide” uses a website and Instagram platform to use research-based visuals and written posts to help shift peers away from harmful social media usage and towards more healthy activity to prep for final exams.

Keywords: social media, happiness, health, connection, effects, thrive, campaign, finals

Background

Humans are social beings that crave interaction with others. In the age of technology, though, social media and the constant use of devices has promoted a society that is all too comfortable with the notion of social isolation. Social isolation is defined as “a state or process in which persons, groups, or cultures lose or do not have communication or cooperation with one another, often resulting in open conflict” (Merriam-Webster). Negatively affecting the productivity of individuals and groups, social isolation can also lead to several health issues down the road, as well as negatively affecting general happiness. Solidifying this idea in his book *Lost Connections*, Johann Hari writes, “Loneliness isn’t just some inevitable human sadness, like death. It’s a product of the way we live now” (Hari, 2018, p. 78). Hari continues to conclude that spending less time with each other and spending less time around nature are the two sources of anxiety and depression.

Literature Review and Context

The UVM Thrive Guide campaign is specifically designed to address the trend of disconnection among college students. Disconnection, due to social media usage, has been associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and stress. The UVM Thrive Guide campaign addresses these issues by using the framework provided by Johann Hari in his book *Lost Connections*. The campaign message is communicated through three categories; connection to nature, connection to people, and connection to self-respect and values.

Additionally, The UVM Thrive Guide campaign is addressed from a social marketing perspective. The framework of Nedra Kline Weinreich, from her book *Hands-On Social Marketing*, is used in this campaign to ensure that all aspects of project development are

addressed. Weinreich describes social marketing as “the use of commercial marketing principles and techniques to promote the adoption of behavior that will improve the health or well-being of the target audience or of society as a whole” (Weinreich, 2011, p. 4). Using the Weinreich Social Marketing Framework, we analyzed the first three steps outlined in Figure 1: analysis, strategy development, and program and communication design.

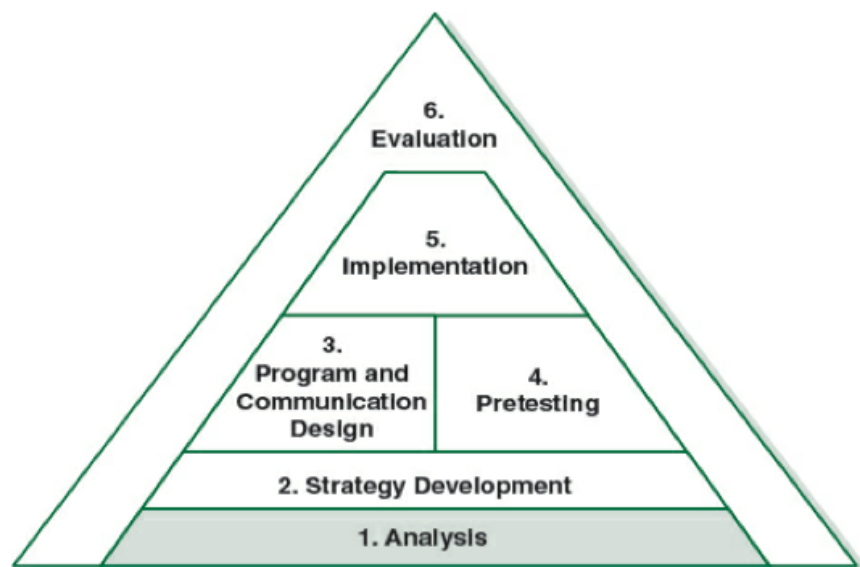


Figure 1.

Opportunity Statement

UVM Thrive Guide serves as an opportunity for us to increase happiness and decrease stress levels of UVM underclassman before and during finals, utilizing social media. We worked to develop strategies and tactics to exercise on the UVM Thrive Guide Instagram account.

Ultimately, Using Hari's framework, we worked to raise net happiness by using online technologies to connect people to largely offline activities, connecting students to themselves, nature, and others.

Methods

To address the problems that social media brings, (outlined above,) our team used three methods of communication: an Instagram account, a website, and face-to-face marketing.

1. Instagram

To ensure an effective campaign that met our goals, we knew that we needed to utilize a multitude of methods on our Instagram account. To start, we used permanent posts as a way to build a following and brand ourselves visually. The permanent posts are an assortment of locations around Burlington and the University of Vermont campus, quotes, advice from upperclassmen, and graphics designed from students in the class. The captions of the posts were written to be direct about *why* students should do what we are telling them to do and why it is going to help them do better on finals. Ultimately, to answer this *so what?*, we backed up our suggestions and claims with research and data either in the caption or by directing students to our website. For instance, captions would say things like: "To learn more about how meditation can help you do better on finals, follow the link in our bio to learn more!"

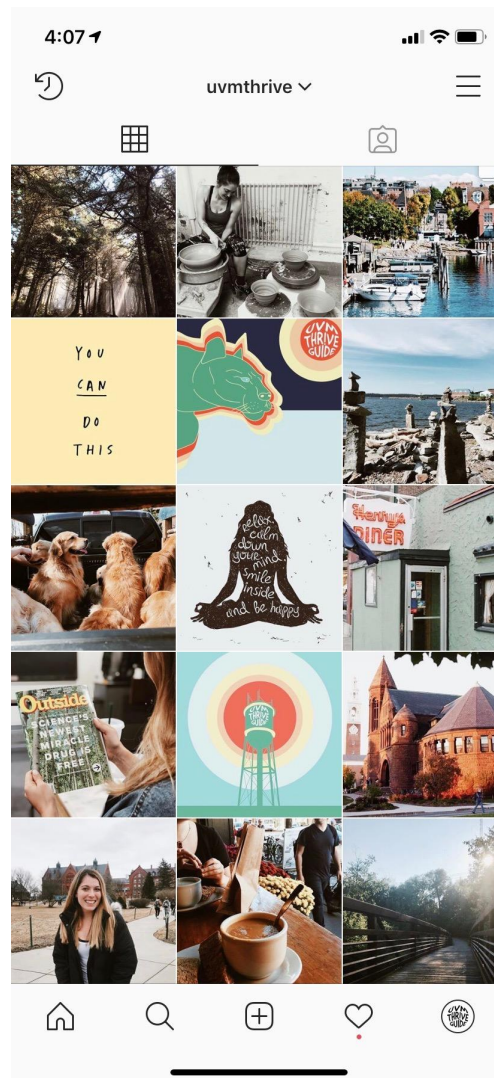


Figure 3. @uvmthrive Instagram feed using a consistent filter and aesthetic.

Secondly, it was important to brand ourselves visually, not only to solidify our brand image but to attract students with a visually appealing feed that they wanted to look at. To ensure we met this goal of professionalism, we used one filter for the image.

In addition to permanent posts, it was crucial to incorporate the Instagram story feature into our campaign. Posting every day for the two weeks leading up to finals, we posted about

events happening on and around campus, with the hope that students would attend these fun activities with friends. These posts urged the followers of UVM Thrive Guide to bring a friend which is one of the main areas we focused on in leading to more happiness and success on finals.

Moreover, it was important that we continued to brand ourselves as a campaign focused on final exams and ways to de-stress during that time. We developed a mini-campaign known as the “Countdown to Finals.” During the Countdown to Finals, we used the Instagram Story feature to provide detailed tips, activities, and advice for our followers. We planned out which days we would post each slide to best benefit our followers. For example, on the weekend, we posted tips about where students could go to study off-campus, knowing that the weekend would allow for more time for exploration. On Sunday before finals week started, though, we posted a quick and easy meditation, knowing that this was likely the peak of student stress.

Finally, we created permanent Instagram story bubbles on our page that included multiple categories. For instance, we incorporated an “About Us” section that highlighted all of the students working on the campaign. Providing followers with photos and biographies of our campaign members, we knew it was important for our followers to see that the creators of this account are students just like them. Additionally, we created an “Our Mission” section that provided two slides about our campaign and the purpose behind it. After receiving feedback from initial tabling events, we determined that students were unclear what our purpose was. Student feedback after including a permanent mission on our Instagram was much more positive. Ultimately, the story bubbles served as a way for students to quickly learn our mission and goals, and get a feel for the content we post.

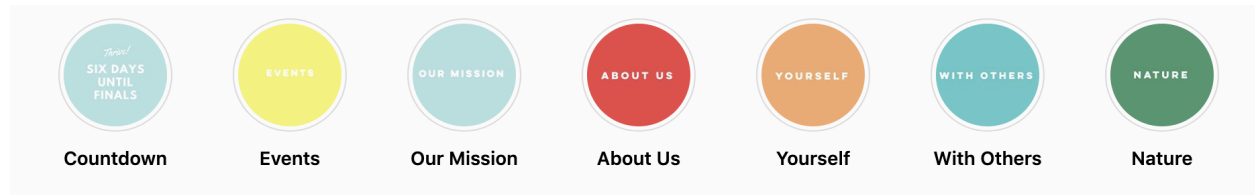


Figure 2. @uvmthrive story highlights.

2. Website

In addition to an Instagram account, the UVM Thrive Guide Campaign also consists of a website. The UVM Thrive Guide's website is home to blogs post, information about the purpose of the campaign and the team behind UVM Thrive Guide, surveys, and means in which users can get involved with our campaign. The website is a much more in-depth version of the Instagram page that provides more details, explanation, and research behind our campaign.

3. Marketing

Our team's main point of marketing was face-to-face marketing by means of tabling events in the Davis Center. Over the course of the semester, we have had four tabling events. For these tabling events, the design team created business cards with our logo, Instagram handle, website link, and catchphrase. We created the business cards with the hope that people would be able to put them in their pocket and take them out later to follow our Instagram. Our team thought that being handed posters was cumbersome because there is never an easy place to store a poster.

Additionally, we believed that business cards would make our campaign look more professional and would, thus, lead people to take our campaign more seriously. We taped candy

to the business cards for tabling events. Group members at the tabling events intrigued students with the candy and gave out the business cards if people were interested. If students in the Davis Center showed interest in the campaign, the team members at the event gave them more information about our campaign. Not only did we hand out candy and business cards at our table, but we also brought them to people around the Davis Center that we thought would be interested.

Finally, we did “candy bombings” around campus in which our team members distributed business cards with candy taped to them. The purpose the candy bombings was to continue to get our name and purpose out to as many students as possible, in addition to sparking joy and happiness in students during a busy time of year. Finally, the design team created posters with the website team that we dispersed around campus. Both the posters and business cards were created to give people enough information to draw them into our Instagram which would then lead them to the website.



Figure 4. Front of Thrive Guide’s business card.

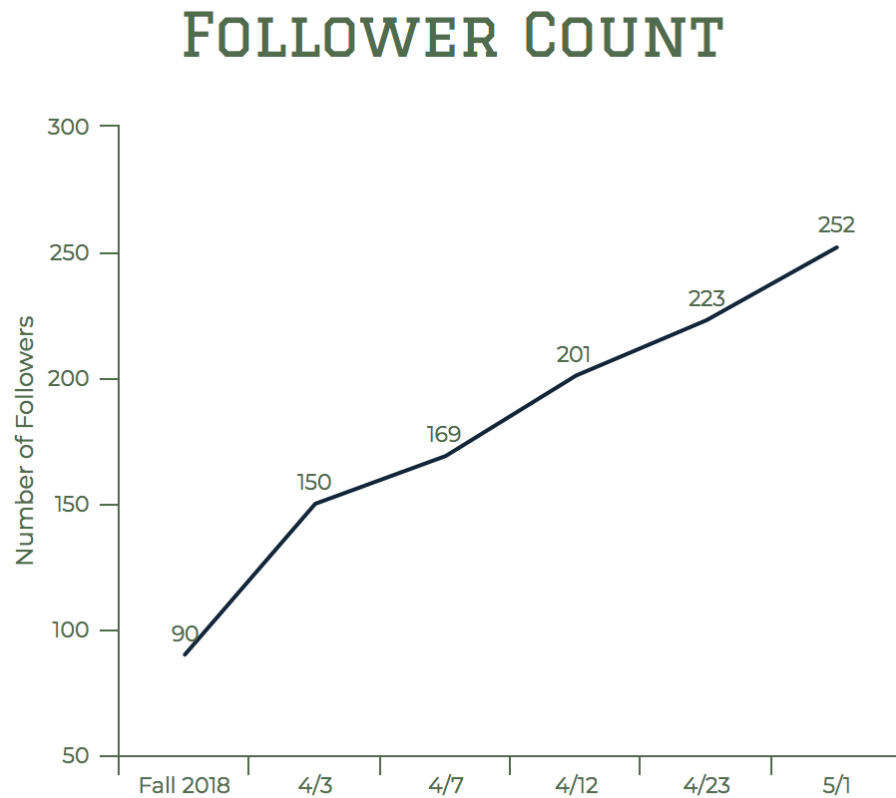


Figure 5. Follower Count Graph.

Results/Analytics

As the strategy team, our analytics are primarily from Instagram. Our main goal was to market the message of the Thrive Guide to a broad audience and directing students to our website where more in-depth content existed.

One of our other roles within the campaign was scheduling tabling events, as well as ensuring there was cohesion throughout our materials. We asked the rest of the class to submit photos that we could post and curate to our theme. We made a mock feed for sharing with the class, which generally had positive feedback and buy-in from (Figure 3). As for growing our audience, we began to follow our friends and others associated with the UVM community. We

then shifted focus to developing the highlight features for our Instagram and working at the tabling events. Each of these efforts led to an increased awareness of the campaign, whether it be in-person contact or throughout efforts on Instagram. Below, are the analytics that we gathered throughout the campaign are listed.

Instagram Analytics:

- **April 3rd Analytics:**

- 313 profile visits in the past week
- 60 new followers in the past week (90 followers to 150 followers 4/3)
- The audience age range on Instagram: 87% 18-24 years old
- Audience gender on the Instagram account: 70% of women
- Our followers use Instagram the most active on Mondays - *note:* may be due to Monday being the day we followed many students

- **April 7th Analytics:**

- 19 new followers on Instagram since April 3
- The number of likes on our new posts range from 21 to 28 likes

- **April 12 Analytics from Instagram:**

- 381 profile visits in the past week (68 more visits than the week of 4/3).
- 25 new followers in the past week (176 followers to 201 followers).
- Audience ratio: 74% women (which has raised 4% since 4/3).
- 13 website clicks since 4/4.

- **April 23rd Analytics from Instagram:**

- 381 profile visits in the past week (68 more visits than the week of 4/3).
- 25 new followers in the past week (176 followers to 223 followers).
- Audience ratio: 74% women (which has raised 4% since 4/3).
- 13 website clicks since 4/4.
- **May 1 Analytics from Instagram**
 - 200 profile visits in the past week (71 more than the week of 4/23)
 - 13 website clicks (8 more than the week of 4/23)
 - 337 accounts reached from April 24 - April 30
 - 252 total followers
 - 1 email
 - Follow by the official University of Vermont Instagram account
- **Feedback from Tabling:**
 - Spoke to 47 people.
 - Gained 25 new followers.
 - Students seem excited about our campaign! Students that already follow us are unsure of our mission, which is what prompted us to more clearly outline our mission statement in an Instagram post.
- **Feedback from Tabling:**
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Discussion

Overall, our analytics demonstrate there was growth in our reach to our audience. As noted in the results section, our team worked primarily to post on the Instagram and coordinate tabling events. From the beginning of our launch in early April, we had 150 followers. On May 1st, we had 252 followers. With 100 new followers and increased audience engagement with our posts, we have objectively succeeded in growing the platform. On April 28th However, we feel there are ways in which the growth of our platform and therefore the growth of the campaign, could have been greater.

As for our tabling events, we felt that they were generally successful in getting our message across. Each time that we tabled in the Davis Center, we grew our follower base and informed people in the Davis Center about the goal of our campaign. Overall, it seemed that students thought that we had a valuable campaign. With sixteen students in the class, we thought that it would have been more productive if we had done two tabling events a week for the month of April. Most people who were spoken to during our tabling events hadn't heard of this campaign, so getting the general student body informed would've been advantageous to growing our audience.

Our analytics demonstrate that there was growth both in our in-person efforts to increase awareness and the growth on our Instagram presence. However, our analytics also demonstrate

the dynamics between our efforts to reach people in-person and develop our presence on Instagram. During the planning stages of the campaign, we were collectively unsure how much emphasis to put on in-person marketing versus developing a strong online presence. While we didn't land on a specific ratio, we collectively decided to emphasize both methods of reaching our target audience.

The growth of our Instagram peaked on the week of April 12th, but as we began to focus more on tabling efforts, our energy was directed at informing our target audience rather than all of the energy being directed at growing our online platform. We would argue that the tabling events were more effective in ensuring that our target audience was aware of our campaign goals. While it's hard to say based on our analytics which method was better at engaging more people with our campaign, we would argue that a more cohesive strategy plan for balancing the in-person and Instagram efforts would have overall increased campaign engagement.

Conclusion

As a whole, the launch of UVM Thrive Guide was fairly successful, but certainly left room for improvement. In an effort to increase happiness among UVM undergraduate students during finals week, our class divided up into four teams: Strategy, Design, Writing, and Website. The four teams met three times a week for an hour, and together used research to develop Thrive Guide. While the initial planning of the launch was strong, there are many of things that could have been done differently for a more successful final product.

While the class worked well together to come up with products and broad methods for communicating Thrive Guide's message, the actual message and content development fell short.

There were so many strong ideas including stickers, business cards, giveaways, etc., but we needed to start smaller, with a more narrowed down message and goal.

There were also moments of brilliance. From developing the Instagram story highlights, the aesthetic of the feed, content for our website, and interviewing students on campus to be featured, many aspects of our campaign were very successful. These were moments when all four teams brainstormed, listened to each other, and equally contributed to what was produced.

While a lot of our ideas were excellent leading up to the final two weeks of the launch, many classes felt less productive toward the end. There was frequent talking over one another, little active listening, it lacked leadership; this is something that classes in the future should be aware of. Developing clear expectations around laptop and cellphone use during class, one person talking at a time, note taking and hard deadline expectations would be helpful.

While our launch made many huge strides, including gaining 162 followers on Instagram, awareness on campus, and recognition from @universityofvermont and Living Well, from a professional perspective we could have gone further. As stated above, clear guidelines for the classroom could have gone a long way, and had we all put in greater effort outside of the classroom, the ultimate launch may have grown faster and been more successful. We could have used the connections we made and reached out further, asking for advice on how to grow our campaign, or even connecting more thoughtfully with Living Well.

Over the semester, we learned many lessons that are applicable to the real world. The main one being how to problem solve. On the first day of class, Professor Dugan said, “Today’s problems are complex, the simple ones have already been solved.” This stuck with our team throughout the semester, and is a lesson that we can take with us in our lives moving forward.

Future Research/Limitations

Reflecting on our work this semester, we could have done a better job at keeping track of Instagram analytics. The basic analytics feature on the Instagram app only allowed us to look at our stats one week at a time. This feature, or lack thereof, was a limitation because if we had paid to upgrade our page, we would have been able to see a much broader range of analytics. Also, we could have kept better track of our number of website clicks, and asked our class to refrain from clicking on our website from our Instagram page. That way we could get a more accurate idea of how many people clicked on our website from our Instagram page.

Another option for keeping track of our Instagram analytics would have been to pay for the Followers+ app. This app would have given us an idea of who followed and unfollowed us each day, and we could have tried to analyze that data to see what audiences we appeal to and tweak our content and methods accordingly.

One thing that we promised but did not deliver was themed weeks. Initially, in our planning stage, we had agreed as a class to do themed weeks on our Instagram stories. These themes included: Yourself, With Others, and Nature. Using these story bubbles as a tool, we were going to add various tips, advice, and resources near and on the UVM campus that corresponded with the three categories. These posts would include tips for de-stressing, locations to take a break with a friend, outdoor locations to visit, easy recipes, advice from upperclassmen, and much more. We did end up adding to these stories individually, but there was no themed approach about it. Instead of planning out specific weeks' posts, we instead would post to the stories when we saw the opportunity, and add them to the highlight reel. We could have certainly

done this differently, and planned out specific content for specific weeks and executed our original plan.

Instagram Login Information

- **Username:** uvmthrive
- **Password:** strategyteamrocks

References

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