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Stories of Words, Numbers, and Communities: My USRI Research and Speak Fluent Marketing Internship Experiences

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When scrolling through news feeds on Facebook and Instagram, I like to take a careful look at the advertising posters and videos. During this reviewing process, three components often come to mind: the word choice and sentence structures that are being utilized, the thematic messages being conveyed, and other forms of content that support the message, including the arrangement of sounds, images, and colors. Aside from being a fun little social media activity that I engage with during my free time, it is also an important practice that I transferred to my SASAH experiential-learning opportunities. During my internships at Speak Fluent Speech Services and Western University's Undergraduate Student Research Internship (USRI) program, I developed graphics and monitored the performance of several digital marketing campaigns and conducted linguistics research on social media content that discusses an ongoing social issue. Through these experiences, I have developed a diverse set of technical and interpersonal skills, which I combine with my arts and humanities education to develop digital content that evokes meaningful afterthought and that inspires the audience on the other side of the screen to draw connections between language, performance, and our social behaviors.

Thinking about my internship experience at Speak Fluent Speech Services, a speech clinic based in Toronto, I realized that much of marketing is like cooking: just as how recipes are developed from the demographic's preferred tastes and interests, marketing content is not purely

built from the creator's own assumptions. In fact, the marketer must tailor the information to each specific audience; this can be practiced by making the smallest variations in the content's writing and design decisions (i.e., vocabulary and color schemes) and applying strategic thinking by identifying the pain points that are specific to clients in each stage of the funnel, such as the need to improve fluency and omitting filler words in speech. Another skill that I learned is inferring the meanings from existing data, in order to determine the appropriate next steps for resolving a marketing problem. These are the overarching lessons that I've learned during my time internship creating various promotional materials.

Throughout this internship, I realized that the skill of content writing played a vital role in the process of designing websites and writing email newsletters. For example, when drafting a landing page for the clinic's prospective clients, I modified the content to emphasize specific areas where clients can receive speech training. I also used a more formal tone of voice with statements such as "communicate your ideas in a clear and persuasive manner." In contrast, when I was creating another landing page to introduce a conversation-group program for existing customers, I recognized that they already have considerable understanding of how the clinic's service works, in contrast to the prospective clients who have never heard of the clinic before. To account for this difference, I tailored the writing's focus towards the key value of applying their training knowledge to various communication situations and rephrased the sentences with a more lighthearted tone—so that the same statement was now "become a conversation master," instead of simply "communicate your ideas clearly." From this experience, I was able to apply my content-writing skills by writing to inform an audience about a certain topic. More importantly, the writing process challenged me to take this same skill to the next level. By changing the word choice and tone of voice in accordance with the specific audience, I developed a stronger

understanding of the customer-relationship management (CRM) funnel, and ultimately, learned to craft a coherent "story" that is unique to their particular needs and pain points, and that enables them to emotionally connect with the content from beginning to end.

Besides content writing, I also used WordPress to create the landing pages' visual interfaces. Although I struggled to understand the different design tools and features in the beginning, I found that my experience building a Hotglue website from SASAH's Digital Humanities course helped me adapt to the process more easily. In the course, I built a few basic web pages from scratch, devising a color scheme that reflected my website's theme and arranging the user profiles and main content in a blog-like layout. With this layout and graphic design knowledge on hand, I redesigned the landing pages by experimenting with different stylistic elements in a strategic way; this included positioning the clinic's top offers in the first section and using bolder colors for the call to action buttons to increase the client's potential sign-up rates. At the same time, I also learned and applied basic HTML knowledge by implementing shortcuts to change font sizes and spacing, as well as writing basic code to organize the information in a table. While there is still a lot for me to learn, I felt glad that I was able to transfer my strategic-thinking skills into the website-design component (which was an area that I lacked experience in), where I focused on building a comprehensive initial outline to drive the clinic's website development decisions. Particularly, I realized that it is these intricate design details (i.e., choices of fonts and colors) that can significantly enhance a webpage or an advertisement's effectiveness.

Another area where I was able to apply my SASAH learnings was with the task of creating monthly marketing reports. Since I created multiple essay theses in my previous SASAH courses, this practice allowed me to build a strong expertise in extracting the main ideas

from large volumes of research information. By using the same methodology, I successfully

identified the key metrics that are most important to a specific group in the sales funnel and

integrated them in the report to determine the appropriate next steps that can be used to re-

engage each group. This skill of summarizing was something that I've always struggled with in

the past, but by consistently applying it in the process of my academic work and the marketing

report, I was able to turn this weakness into a developing strength.

 Moreover, as a SASAH student, we are often encouraged to remain curious, and consider

the subtle meanings and questions from the literature we read. A few months into the internship,

I faced the problem of having zero customer conversions through my "Level Up" ad campaign.

In addressing the problem, I applied this attention to detail to my thinking by asking in-depth

questions: why has the customer rate remained at 0% for the past few months? Is this a

marketing or sales-based problem? Along this process, my supervisor provided further guidance

by encouraging me to imagine myself as a client and consider the possible problems that are

holding them back from continuing with the clinic's services. From this brief but important

mentorship experience, I discovered that the intersection between inferring implicit meanings in

academic literature and a business development problem is rooted in our abilities to understand

the reasoning behind the events and individuals' actions in question.

 After I double checked the database, I found that the issue was due to the lack of

specificity in the campaign's audience targeting: a lot of the incoming clients came from a mix of

industries and had scattered interest levels for the services. In retrospect, I had the opportunity to

apply my critical-thinking skills by digging deeper into the context of the situation. This is also

what made the internship experience so meaningful for me: this hands-on approach allowed me

to apply the fundamental concepts of marketing analytics to the process of solving a business

problem and become more proficient in recreating client journeys through analyzing numbers from the given data.

Besides tackling the problem of low customer conversions based on an analysis of the sales funnel data, the internship's remote nature has also presented some challenges. All of my internship tasks were done in an online setting, and unlike the majority of workplaces, such as corporate companies, the clinic did not have regular team meetings. Rather, my supervisor would do a quick check-in a few times throughout the day, and communication with other team members took place on an ad-hoc basis. At first, I enjoyed the high level of flexibility in the working environment, as I had a significantly greater amount of time during the day to work on my tasks independently, without needing to jump between several meetings and re-orienting myself back to my own work. However, this flexibility was also a double-edged sword since I became more easily distracted as the day went on and was accustomed to delving into my tasks for several hours without endeavoring to provide updates to my supervisor. In one instance, I spent over four hours researching and gathering notes about the scaling strategies that can be used to enhance the performance of Facebook advertising campaigns. This resulted in some unnecessary delay in the campaign's development process since my supervisor needed a clear solution by the end of my work shift.

Although I did not complete the expected deliverable that day, I communicated my oversight with my supervisor. This experience challenged me to implement several actionable changes from that point on until the remaining duration of the internship. Namely, I made sure to relay progress updates to my supervisor halfway and before the end of the workday, even when I did not have urgent questions or issues. When engaging in deep work, such as writing blog content or conducting research for marketing strategies, I also sent rough drafts for feedback

earlier on, in order to make appropriate revisions before I complete the content fully. Ultimately, these changes pushed me to exercise self-accountability, and moving away from the mindset that a well-polished draft or idea is necessary in the beginning stages. These changes also allowed me to maintain close communication with my supervisor and team members when working in a fully remote environment and learning to allocate time strategically between the brainstorming or research, feedback, and reiteration stages.

Looking back on those four months, my internship experience at Speak Fluent Speech Services enabled me to define my personal strengths and weaknesses more clearly. Until now, even after revisiting the future plans that I've mentioned in my previous reflections, I am more confident that my career interests lie in market research and copywriting (as well as user-experience writing), where I can transfer my writing and basic website-design skills to develop content that tells effective brand stories, while providing information that is tailored to specific audience groups. The practice of determining key insights from numeric data and providing growth strategies to improve campaign performances are still a relative challenge for me, but in the future, I'm dedicated to doing more online learning in my spare time to strengthen my knowledge in the area of marketing analytics.

A crucial part of SASAH students' leadership trait is curated through interdisciplinary learning, and this applies to another type of classroom in particular—the workplace "classroom." With many different projects involved in internships, they constantly push us out of our comfort zones by allowing us to learn new software and methodologies and to take initiative in solving any arising problems along the way. At the same time, working in a team setting provides us with the opportunity to observe the different aspects of how a business is managed beyond our own area of work, including sales, public relations, and product management. The internship at

Speak Fluent has allowed me to grow as a professional and as a SASAH student by developing many skillsets that can last for a lifetime. I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Michael, and other team members for all their guidance and support along this four-month journey.

While I had a taste of content development in my marketing internship at Speak Fluent, the majority of my work in the Undergraduate Student Research Internship (USRI) program focused on content analysis. What does it mean to be an ally? How can research inform us about the different ways to demonstrate allyship? My USRI internship explored these questions by analyzing the main themes and linguistic techniques used by content creators in online verbal art (e.g., rap, songs, and spoken word) to express their views on anti-racism. Before starting the project, I thought that the majority of the research process would simply involve analyzing main ideas from the discourse content and communicating our findings in an academic essay. As the internship came to an end, this expectation was completely thwarted; on one hand, I learned to define criteria for theme classifications and analyze verbal art transcripts using features of a qualitative-analysis software; on the other hand, I also solved technical issues, analyzed the implicit ideologies of anti-racism discourse, and challenged myself to communicate research information in a creative manner. From these experiences, I realized that an important part of the research's outcomes is precisely the journey in itself; this includes building my teamwork and effective communication skills, as well as learning to conduct research meaningfully with a critical attitude.

Throughout the process of conducting thematic analysis, I learned that an important aspect of team communication involves keeping an open mind to external feedback. For example, I stumbled upon a few verbal-art pieces that point to our settler statuses on Indigenous territories, and that express the artist's awareness of the events of racism occurring around them.

To demonstrate these perspectives, they utilized statements such as "I could roll over and go to sleep, but I can't. I'm waking up" to illustrate their thought processes. Initially, I thought that these statements could be classified as examples of allyship, with the premise that they are critiquing or acknowledging one's privileges. However, my research partner suggested that the examples defied our project's existing definitions of allyship, because when examining each piece as a whole, they lacked in-depth or sufficient reflections on racism's systemic nature, and the discourse was more of a general commentary on racism and oppression. My research partner's suggestion helped guide the thematic analysis process by reminding me to carefully evaluate the entire context of discourse content's main ideas, aside from focusing on the details in specific lines. Their suggestion also inspired me to effectively categorize different types of research content by creating a new theme that contains general discussions of racism, including privilege and cultural appropriation. Thus, an important lesson I learned is to not assume your analysis criteria is always correct or similar to your research partner's criteria. Rather, keeping an open mind to others' suggestions, and identifying ways to combine or integrate our own and our research partners' ideas can lead to innovative approaches of analysis, which is critical to a research project's development process.

Furthermore, although having general criteria can help keep our research options open, the caveat is that our research output ultimately reflected a bias towards American-based content and racism's impact on the Black communities (despite our intentions to illustrate the importance of anti-racism for various racial groups). To improve my approach in future projects, I would have more frequent group discussions during the early stages of the thematic analysis process. This alternate strategy can bring a clearer focus to the project's research direction early on,

primarily by focusing on a specific discourse genre or a racial group's personal experiences in relation to the expression of allyship.

The importance of teamwork also applies to ensuring data accuracy when working under technical constraints. Since multiple team members were all working with the same qualitative analysis software at the same time, the process of merging files led to inconsistencies in demographic data (e.g., artists' race and solo/group classifications). To address this problem, I suggested splitting up responsibilities among the team members, where I would identify the remaining inconsistencies during the subsequent round of merging and conduct a final review after my research partner has resolved the data discrepancies. As a result, our team was able to work with accurate case classifications going forwards and minimize potential misconceptions during the data-analysis process, especially when examining how allyship may be expressed differently among artists of different races. Besides strengthening my problem-solving skills, I was also able to uphold Responsibility (one of my top five CliftonStrengths) by committing to tackle the problem and finding correct solutions. Building further on the analysis results, this experience motivated me to bring greater depth to what this notion of "responsibility" entails personally. Namely, responsibility is not just about performing well individually, but it is also about recognizing the power of collaborating with others as a team. This is achieved through understanding when and how to ask for teammates' help, which reduces errors that I may overlook when reviewing data from one single perspective. Overall, this experience encouraged me to take initiative and recognize the importance of asking for support, both of which are personal weaknesses that I continuously strive to improve. Additionally, I also learned to tackle both independent and group work with care and sensibility.

An area where I applied concepts from my linguistics program was the task of analyzing historical and social event references within the verbal art content. In my linguistic anthropology classes, I often explore the cultural and social factors that influence a community's particular linguistic choices and practices (e.g., forms of artistic expressions) and critically evaluate the credibility and strength of academic arguments in literature reviews. By applying these frameworks to my supplementary research on the Black Lives Matter movement and past events of racism, I gained new insights into the meaning of naming victims of police brutality, and the Black Lives Matter organization's fundamental purpose. In particular, naming victims of police brutality, including individuals with intersectional identities such as queer and trans Black folks, allows artists to remind the audience of the humanity associated with their names, and amplify traditionally excluded minority voices from social organizations' activism efforts.

Naming Victims of Police Brutality

Naming is consistently used by content creators to commemorate and bring awareness to the victims of police brutality and racially motivated hate crimes. With the George Floyd murder in 2020, content creators referred to him by his name explicitly, or indirectly through describing the incident from the narrator's perspective. In "I am Coated in Melanated Skin" by Randell Adjei, Adjei explains that "George Floyd is one of many who died by an officer of the law / a job meant to serve and protect / Instead, he put a knee to his neck / Without the camera footage / Would you even know it happened." While in Jewel Massiah's poem "I Can't Breathe", Massiah calls out the issue of racial profiling by criticizing the fact that police officers saw Floyd's racial identity as a threat (focusing on the belief of him being a criminal), and neglected to regard him with humanity: "I know you're wondering if this black man has a criminal file / Why you not wondering if this black man has a child / I wonder if an entire household is waiting for him to come home and provide / I wonder if he's his mother's only child."

In "The Black Lives that Don't Matter to Black People", the creator They/Them also mentions the names of several Black transgender women, asking "why did Dana Martin, Ashanti Carmen, Michelle Washington have to die young? Why did their black lives not matter to you? Why does the makeup I put on my face paint a target for you to want to shoot?" When the victims' names are referenced, it is not only an effort to uphold their humanity and identity, but also a vivid reminder of how racism continues to devalue and dehumanize the lives of BIPOC communities. This includes folks with intersectional identities who are particularly susceptible to becoming a target of hatred.

Screenshot of a blog page on the importance of naming with historical research included

Moreover, from conducting literature reviews, I learned to identify not only discourse content that criticizes colorblind racism but also how the artist themselves may demonstrate colour-blind ideologies. For example, a few artists used statements such as "we bleed the same color, therefore we are all equal" or "I am white and made of all colors" to call for unity and highlight the diversity in their life experiences. The complexity of the situation lies in the fact that, while the artists may have positive intentions in striving for equality, their approach can be insensitive by overlooking the systemic barriers faced by marginalized racial communities and suggesting that equality can be easily achieved. From a researcher's perspective, it is important to *critically analyze* these statements by considering the reasons why and how the content displays colour-blind racism, such as the use of specific linguistic or narrative techniques, rather than *blindly criticizing* the content itself. These steps played a crucial role in reminding me to take on a more objective analysis approach and in making me realize that the difference between a social criticism piece's underlying messages compared to how it is actually conveyed on a linguistic level can lead to very different audience interpretations.

When writing my research findings on the blog website, I also applied the "rule of three" concept from the "Art and Science of Healing" LinkedIn Learning course which I worked through in SASAH's Introduction to Professional and Community Practices course. Particularly, I described the concept of performative allyship through specific examples that occur in social discourse, and in terms of its common consequences and mentalities of an individual demonstrating performative allyship, such as "I only choose whom I want to support." Through experimenting with multiple approaches to describing a social term, I successfully presented its complex nature using precise examples. Ultimately, this application of the "rule of three" concept also made me realize that there are various ways of expressing a social concept, and

especially when writing for a lay audience, adopting a simple and creative writing style can be more effective than just using a technical definition.

Looking back on the USRI internship experience, it presented several opportunities for me to develop my interpersonal skills and qualitative research experience. This includes having group discussions in the research project's initial stages to become aware of different analytic approaches, and learning to break down larger, more intensive tasks by delegating responsibilities and asking for support. Through this internship, I also learned to analyze implicit ideologies about racism in the verbal art content and translate social concepts and ideologies into writing that is engaging and simple to understand. For SASAH students, USRI also offers an especially valuable opportunity to build their local and even global citizenship by learning about the historical and social contexts of a topic of interest.

Furthermore, learning about the social nuances of racism and anti-racism made me realize that drawing data from online resources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, may be an essential part in the research process, but it is also important to consult relevant individuals to gain insight into a diverse set of lived experiences. As I plan on pursuing a marketing generalist position in the non-profit and arts and culture sectors after graduation, this practice can be implemented in areas where I conduct interviews for market research purposes (which was a personal goal that I outlined after my internship experience with Speak Fluent). For example, when conducting informational interviews for a social media campaign about language use and social stigmas, this process can be an ideal opportunity to learn about the strategies that can be used to develop culturally-informed interview questions, and to identify thematic patterns and differences from the interview responses—both of which can help provide appropriate development approaches for the campaign. Additionally, my experience in translating the

project's research findings into a Wix blog showcased that there are different ways to present complex, extensive information. This concept can be transferred to the content development aspects of a marketing career, where I can experiment with mediums such as podcasts and Instagram reels for a more creative and engaging approach. At the same time, trying out different platforms will also allow me to promote the research information with an impact, primarily by prompting the public to think about the social implications of the issues that are mentioned in the marketed content.

As I revisited my previous reflections and summative reports to prepare for the final presentation, one thought immediately jumped out: *where do I start*? The thought of summarizing both of my internship experiences in under ten minutes seemed like a daunting challenge, but it turned out to be a valuable lesson for me to build on the skill of information synthesis. Based on my previous reports, I found that all of them included the key responsibilities that I have undertaken during my internships, as well as challenges encountered, which became the starting points for my initial presentation outline. While developing the presentation, I also learned that the main points of a narrative can usually be told in fewer words than our initial assumptions and that they can also be illustrated through mediums other than written text. For example, when presenting about the concept of poster messaging for my internship with Speak Fluent, I filled the majority of the PowerPoint slide with only a heading and two posters that I created during the internship. In another slide where I explained the ways in which I applied my linguistics knowledge to the process of poster creation, I used a picture containing the phonetic sounds of certain English words, with arrows pointing to specific components of the poster to indicate the process work. This presentation format allowed me to compare and make reference to the posters' visual details in a clear and nuanced manner, rather

than having to provide the same explanation through several lines of written text. The use of multimodal content, particularly the arrows and images that directly relate to my internship experience about speech and language production, thus became an effective strategy of information synthesis, where I was able to use different forms of visual content to expand on the message of my verbal speech.

During this process, an initiative that I also tried for the first time was thinking more in-depth about the relationship between the presenter and the audience. With this approach in mind, I intentionally incorporated two additional components, including internship outcomes and the main lessons that connect the experiences from both of my internships. This organizational structure allowed me to provide a clear overview of my internship journeys both individually and as a whole. At the same time, the choice of including and presenting my key takeaways from both internships, such as interpreting qualitative and quantitative data and learning new software, not only added more impact to the presentation itself, but it also allowed me to create a personable relationship with the audience by leaving them with general concepts that they can apply into their professional work and other everyday endeavors. The inclusion of this structure, along with the aforementioned elements of multimodal content, was an ideal opportunity for me to practice translating large volumes of information into concise and engaging forms of writing and being strategic with the use of particular words and pictures to deliver a coherent message in my presentation.

Moreover, the importance of creativity in learning (aside from implementing creativity in the process of presenting information) was also a lesson that I learned from my SASAH peers' presentations. For instance, Angelina's STEAM project reminded me that experimentation and curiosity-driven forms of learning are not only specific to science, but they are closely embedded

in the arts and humanities disciplines too. Whether it is gathering different literature to inform my research arguments on racism and socioeconomic inequalities or creating different drafts of an advertisement headline about the myths of language production, what remains important is being open to engaging in interdisciplinary learning in both classroom and workplace settings. Ahsif's points about performative EDI policies taught me that not all components of our CEL experiences will be ideal; however, these "ugly" parts play an equally important role in encouraging us to be honest with our own feelings and to identify potential gaps in the workplace environment and our personal learning experiences that can become areas of improvement in our future endeavors. Meanwhile, I admired that both Sophie and Bridget Leslie's delivery of ideas was very natural, but also appropriately intentional. Particularly, both of them presented with a moderate pace, and although their presentation slides had different design styles and layouts, what connects the two is that their overall presentations flowed smoothly from one section to another and felt like a cohesive narrative. Additionally, Sophie's aspirations in exploring the limitations of research during her Q&A session was a crucial point that helped expand on my own understanding of research methodologies. Research about marketing campaigns and social issues does not always have to focus on new approaches; instead, delving into the limitations of existing issues and strategies can be a valuable opportunity to develop one's social knowledge. As my personal next steps, adopting the aforementioned strategies, along with being more attentive to my presentation timing and making thematic transitions to connect individual sections can further strengthen my presentation and communication skills in the future.

Looking back at my internship experiences, they have been a huge driving force in my personal and professional growth. What I learned from my time at Speak Fluent is that the statement of trial and error is applicable to marketing; since industry trends and demographic interests can change quickly, it is more important to be flexible and test out different variations of the content (e.g., versions of poster designs and written captions), rather than settling with a specific, fully polished draft from the beginning. Additionally, taking on a marketing internship similar to my experience at Speak Fluent can be a beneficial opportunity for SASAH students to learn about effective strategies in branding, content design, and writing.

Meanwhile, from my USRI experience, I was able to enhance my digital literacy skills by drawing intertextual connections between the videos (e.g., how the themes of discussion differ or expand upon each other). For SASAH students and students in other programs beyond the Arts and Humanities faculty, taking on a USRI internship involving the same project would be an opportunity of high educational value, as it shows that research papers do not have to be the only platforms where formal discussions of social issues can take place. Rather, creative mediums such as TikTok and YouTube videos can showcase different styles of expression and allow creator-audience engagement on different levels (e.g., parody in response to another video, a spoken word performance inspired by a movement). In general, a USRI internship is also an ideal platform for SASAH students to learn new research methodologies and develop more in-depth knowledge on a topic of their personal interest, which can be a strong addition to the hands-on projects that they often take on in their SASAH classes. As I will be returning to Speak Fluent as a full-time marketing generalist, I strive to continue developing my skills and knowledge in the vast worlds of marketing, research, and linguistics. I would like to extend a sincere thank you to my supervisors and SASAH peers for encouraging me to learn

continuously, and to Dr. Bruce for providing unconditional support along my experiential-

learning journeys!