

Exploring Social Media Marketing Knowledge Among Students and Professionals

Randi Priluck*, Martin Topol**

ABSTRACT

We examined social media marketing knowledge of two groups of internet users: college students in the United States, who had taken an introductory marketing course, and marketing professionals working in the field. Our findings suggest that while both students and professionals are confident regarding their social media knowledge, the students do not understand the key elements of executing strategy in the field. The findings suggest a disconnect between what students think they know and what students need to learn before starting their careers in social media marketing. Faculty can be more effectively armed with the awareness that students suffer from overconfidence in their knowledge, and instruction must emphasize the key strategic elements of social media marketing strategy.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Advertising Curricula, Social Media Education, Student Overconfidence

Around the world, young adults are among the most prolific social media users spending 170 min per day in North America, 232 min per day in Latin America, 180 min a day in Europe, and 165 min a day in Asia (Global Web Index, 2017). According to the Pew Research Center, 80% of the US adults aged 18–29 use Facebook, 71% use Instagram, 78% are on Snapchat, and 45% indicate they use Twitter. Usage rates for all these platforms, except Facebook, are higher among this younger demographic than for older adults, who have not abandoned Facebook to the same degree (Smith and Anderson, 2018). American internet users aged 16–24 spend 165 min a day with social media networks/services, while those 35–44 spend only 105 min a day using social media (GlobalWebIndex and Statista, 2016). College students in the United States are particularly active social networkers. Specifically, 47% of college women and 34% of college men spend more than six hours per week using social media (HERI, 2016).

Social media skills are important to students' potential careers in marketing, and graduates should have a working knowledge of strategies to successfully reach, engage, and sell to today's customers. According to Media Bistro, a social media professional develops,

implements, and manages campaigns, enhances brand awareness, and drives traffic by acquiring customers. To do so effectively, the practitioner must also identify new digital technologies and use analytics tools to measure success (Talley, 2016). However, despite heavy usage of social networks, college students' social media marketing skills may be "inadequate to meet the needs of potential employers" (McCorkle and Payan, 2017).

The number of career positions in social media marketing and demand for digital skills by employers have grown. A study of 186 marketing professionals by McKinley found that digital marketers were the most hired marketing practitioners in 2015 and 38% of those surveyed indicated that they planned to hire more digital marketers going forward (McKinley Marketing Partners, 2016). According to eMarketer, digital now represents 37% of total US advertising spending surpassing media spending on television (eMarketer, 2017). Growth in the area is expected to continue as consumers spend increasing percentages of their days with digital devices. The Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that managerial careers in marketing, advertising, and promotions will see

* Professor of Marketing & Director of the Media Storm (MS) in Social Media & Mobile Marketing Program, Pace University, Lubin School of Business, United States. Email: rpriluck@pace.edu

** Professor of Marketing & Undergraduate Program Chair, Marketing, Pace University, Lubin School of Business, United States. Email: mtopol@pace.edu

9% growth through 2026 with median pay at \$127,560 per year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

A number of reports suggest that there may be a digital skills gap in hiring professionals in both business and government. Specifically, the Digital Marketing Institute surveyed 908 employees in the UK, the US, and Ireland engaged in marketing for their organizations and found that two-thirds believe there is a shortage of people with digital knowledge (O'Brien, 2016).

Though students are able to use social media platforms and digital devices, they must be exposed to a full range of digital competencies in order to be effective marketers. As Lou (2017) suggests, knowledge of analytics is particularly important. It is in this area where marketing faculty can help students by providing digital skills relevant to the practice of marketing professionals. This research examines students' actual knowledge of social media marketing pertaining to their beliefs in their level of knowledge and compares them to a sample of marketing practitioners. The findings suggest that there is a distinct and measureable gap between students' levels of confidence with social media platforms and their ability to identify key drivers of social media marketing strategy as practiced by professionals.

BACKGROUND

Students who study marketing believe they have strong knowledge in the area of social media because of their intense interest and high usage rates. In fact, college students tend to be overconfident of their knowledge of many topics, even when they know little beyond the basics. For example, in a study of library science, traditional students were more confident in their technology skills than non-traditional students were, but performed no better on an assessment (Eichelberger and Imler, 2016). Professionals, benefiting from their experience in the field of social media, are likely to be well versed in the issues related to their jobs and know more than students, but are less likely to suffer from overconfidence.

Although young people are skillful in posting on various social media sites and capable of creating content, the research question remains as to whether these skills sufficiently lead to greater levels of strategic marketing knowledge in social media. As Grewal, Roggeveen, and

Shankaranarayan (2015) suggest, tweeting is not the same as knowing how to analyze trends, engage customers, or grow a business and will not make students prepared to fill social media marketing jobs that await those having more advanced knowledge and skills.

Students may use social media sites and those sites may influence their brand loyalty (Hossain & Sakib, 2016), but the practice does not prepare them for strategic marketing thinking. Finch, Nadeau, and O'Reilly (2013) surveyed Canadian marketing practitioners and found that firms expect students to have knowledge of return on investment, strategic marketing, and problem solving. In addition, their study examined the importance of social media as an area of knowledge (Finch et al., 2013). The study found that Canadian practitioners viewed student skills in social media as strong, thus, awarding students a 5.70/7.0 in terms of their performance in the category of social media. Because 18–29 year olds have some of the highest social networking usage rates, it is likely that students have basic social media skills in terms of posting on networks. However, as Finch et al. (2013) suggest with their gap analysis, Canadian marketing practitioners do not perceive that graduates have mastered the strategic thinking in social media, specifically in the areas of strategic marketing and return on investment.

A number of recent articles discuss methods to incorporate strategic social media marketing knowledge into courses and these advanced assignments help teach students the strategic skills required for social media marketing. For example, Lou (2017) had students analyze Twitter accounts with reports from Simply Measured and asked them to develop campaigns using the information. The students indicated that they increased their skills incorporating data into decision-making. Another approach brings real-world experience to the classroom as discussed by Slater, Broyles, and Clifton (2017). These approaches better prepare students for their careers and may help them recognize areas where they may need additional training.

HYPOTHESES

As employers begin to replace retiring boomers with millennials entering the workforce, they may be confronted with the need to adapt the workplace for millennials. Researchers suggest that millennials respond to the work environment differently when compared to

prior generations. Specifically, Anderson, Buchko, and Buchko (2016) refer to this group of young people as the “most praised” generation, and suggest that employers may have to temper negative feedback in the course of training these workers. This issue may be exacerbated when students are overconfident in their false knowledge.

Overconfidence may be endemic. A number of studies suggest that adults generally overestimate their abilities; particularly, in areas where they have little experience. For example, Kruger and Dunning (1999) examined the ability to recognize humor, a test of standard grammar and logical reasoning from the LSAT test, and found vast overconfidence in abilities among the samples. Moreover, those judged incompetent overestimate at much higher levels than those who have actual skill in a particular area (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Another study found that people are weak at predicting how quickly they will learn skills pursuant to using particular products and overestimate their abilities in skill acquisition after trying products such as computers, cell phones, and sports equipment (Billeter, Kalra, & Lowenstein, 2011).

As a result, we predict in H_1 that because students have strong familiarity with social media platforms, they will report high levels of confidence in their knowledge of social media marketing. However, students will not perform as well as professionals in an assessment. In addition, professionals will perform significantly better on higher-order strategic issues than students as suggested in H_2 .

H_1 : Though students report similar levels of confidence in social media marketing knowledge to the level of confidence reported by professionals, professionals perform better on a test of social media marketing topics than students.

H_2 : Professionals perform better on a test of strategic areas of social media marketing than students.

Overconfidence of one’s knowledge and skills can be a problem in the classroom with the least prepared students showing the largest skills to knowledge gap. These students may dominate and negatively affect the learning of others. Students have been found to overestimate their test performance in a number of studies, and lower performers are most likely to misreport their skills (e.g., Hacker, Bol, & Bahbahani 2008; Miller & Geraci 2011; Shanks & Serra 2013; Szpunar, Jing & Schacter 2014). Such misconceptions also affect their abilities to learn and commit to studying (Metcalfe & Finn, 2008).

A number of factors may boost a person’s confidence in their knowledge of a topic even without significant experience. We expect that students who are heavy users of social media would report their knowledge of social media as relatively high – even without actual real-world experience with strategic execution as in H_3 . In addition, those with internships are likely to report high levels of knowledge, but do not necessarily have strategic decision-making power as interns. As a result, their knowledge is predicted to be more limited than their perceptions of their experience as suggested in H_4 .

H_3 : Students with heavy social media usage perceive greater levels of social media marketing knowledge than students with light social media usage, but do not perform better on a test of social media marketing knowledge.

H_4 : Students with more internship experience perceive themselves to have stronger knowledge of social media marketing than those with less internship experience, but do not perform better on a test of social media marketing topics.

METHOD

Overview: To understand students’ social media marketing knowledge and social media usage behaviors, we surveyed 89 students and 63 professionals who work in marketing. The students were recruited from an introductory marketing class and asked to complete a Qualtrics survey as part of their course requirements. The professionals were recruited via LinkedIn and Twitter and invited to “Test their Knowledge” via a link to the survey.

Samples: The majority of the sample of professionals were from the United States and all held positions in marketing. Specifically, 50% of the sample came from advertising or media agencies, 26% represented the client side, 8% were in technology, and 5% indicated that they were in other areas such as small business or retail. A majority of professionals were between the ages of 26–54.

The students (89%) were between 18 and 24 years old, 60% were female, and 66% were from the United States. Most indicated they were business majors (89%) with the remainder majoring in communications, political science, or entertainment. 26% of the business majors were concentrating in an area of marketing. Finally, 25% of the

students reported that they work in some area of social media marketing in their jobs or internships.

Measures: Both the students and professionals were asked to respond to a series of questions pertaining to digital marketing. There were 12 multiple-choice questions and 20 true/false questions. The first set of questions was adapted from the teaching manual of an introductory marketing textbook and faculty members with experience teaching social media marketing developed the true/false questions. We examined reliability for the test questions among professionals and found that the test was fairly reliable with Chronbach's $\alpha = .72$. The question topics and samples appear in Table 1.

We also measured the degree to which participants in the study were heavy social media users. For a measure we asked "about how often do you use the services below" and listed Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. Heavy users were those who used the service at least once per day and the measure was reliable at $\alpha = .70$, suggesting that those who are heavy users tend to use multiple sites often. Finally, we asked both students and professionals their level of confidence in their knowledge of social media marketing with the following question "on a scale of 0–10 with 0 being very weak and 10 being very strong, how strong is your knowledge of social media marketing?"

Table 1: Social Media Marketing Questions by Topic and Samples

Category	Total	Sample Questions
Social Media Platforms	6	Which of the following does Facebook NOT allow businesses to do on their site? (MC)
Targeting	4	You would like to reach US mothers of young children (newborn to three) and want to run an advertisement for Pampers. Which would be the strategy that would bring you the most views of your advertisement among members of the target? (MC) The fastest growing new users of social media are over 65 years of age. (TF)
Measuring Effectiveness	5	In determining the Return on Investment in Social Media you: (MC)
Basic Terms/ Concepts	4	Which of the following best represents an owned media strategy? (MC)
General Digital Knowledge	4	Advertisers can target customers who visited their site with ads on a different website aimed at the same person. (TF)

Category	Total	Sample Questions
Mobile Marketing	4	The US has the highest penetration of smartphone ownership in the world. (TF)
Effective Strategies	5	A good strategy for a brand is to develop a video to go viral. (TF)

RESULTS

As predicted in H_1 , professionals perform better on a test of social media marketing knowledge as compared to students. Specifically, on average professionals scored three points higher than students on the 32 question test ($F_{1,147} = 37.3, p = .000$). We also examined students who majored in either marketing or communications and compared their scores with the professionals'. In this case, the professionals also outperformed the students ($F_{1,90} = 10.5, p = .002$). However, as per Table 2, there was no significant difference between marketing and communications students and professionals on their respective levels of confidence in their knowledge. Students in the related majors scored 6.3 out of 10, while professionals scored 7.0 out of 10 ($F_{1,113} = 2.3, p = .135$) when asked "how strong is your knowledge of social media marketing?"

Table 2: ANOVA Results Professionals Versus Students Score and Confidence in Knowledge Marketing and Communications Majors

Source – test score	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	145.3	1	145.3	10.45	.002
Intercept	30559.4	1	30559.4	2198.1	.000
Case (prof v. stud)	145.3	1	145.3	10.45	.002
Error	1237.3	89	13.9		
Total	36908	91			
Corrected Total	1382.7	90			

Source – confidence in knowledge	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	9.4	1	9.4	2.3	.135
Intercept	3553		3553	863	.000
Case (prof v. stud)	9.4	1	9.4	2.3	.135
Error	370	90	4.117		
Total	4653	92			
Corrected Total	380	91			

The marketing students have had exposure to basic marketing principles and practices in their courses and, therefore, would be expected to have some knowledge of marketing concepts and basic strategies. However, we predicted that professionals would have more advanced capabilities and demonstrate their superiority on a test. We found that professionals significantly outperformed marketing and communications students in knowledge of targeting ($t = 2.4, p = .019$), measuring effectiveness ($t = 2.0, p = .044$), general digital marketing ($t = 2.1, p = .036$), and mobile media ($t = 5.7, p = .000$) supporting H_2 .

A key reason why students may view themselves as knowledgeable is their high usage rates of social media platforms. We asked subjects to indicate how often they use each of the major social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest) and created a variable based on those who used the sites every day. We found that heavy users do self-report greater levels of social media marketing knowledge than lighter users ($F_{1,110} = 2.5, p = .024$). However, we found students who are heavy social media users did not do well on the test administered to both students and professionals (see Table 3). The students reporting having “heavy” social media usage had lower test scores (17.0 vs. 20.0) than professionals who were heavy users. ($F_{1,75} = 14.4, p = .000$). Therefore, H_3 is supported.

Table 3: ANOVA Results Professionals Versus Students Score and Confidence in Knowledge Among Heavy Users

<i>Source – test score</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Corrected Model	123.8	1	123.8	14.4	.000
Intercept	19675.1	1	19675.1	2295.3	.000
Case (prof v. stud)	.000	1	123.8	14.4	123.8
Error	634.3	74	8.57		
Total	24952	76			
Corrected Total	758.1	75			

<i>Source – confidence in knowledge</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Corrected Model	61.4	6	10.24	2.5	.024
Intercept	2491.4	1	2491.4	619.8	.000
Case (prof v. stud)	61.4	6	10.24	2.5	.024
Error	414	103	4.0		
Total	4930	110			
Corrected Total	475.5	109			

Similarly, we predicted that students, who intern, would spend part of their time engaged in social media activities as part of their assignments. Therefore, they might perceive themselves as having more knowledge. However, updating Facebook posts or creating content does not prepare students for the more strategic issues as shown in Table 4. What an internship does appear to do is give false confidence as we found the same relationship between overconfidence ($F_{1,83} = .464, p = .497$) and significantly lower scores (17.0 vs. 20.7) than professionals on the test developed to demonstrate social media knowledge among those students with internships ($F_{1,82} = 17.0, p = .000$), supporting H_4 .

Table 4: ANOVA Results Professionals Versus Students Score and Confidence in Knowledge Among Students with Internships

<i>Source – test score</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Corrected Model	228.9	1	228.9	17.0	.000
Intercept	23534.8	1	23534.8	1748.5	.000
Case (prof v. stud)	228.9	1	228.9	17.0	.000
Error	1090.3	81	13.5		
Total	33330.0	83			
Corrected Total	1319.2	82			

<i>Source – confidence in knowledge</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Corrected Model	1.80	1	1.80	.464	.497
Intercept	33379.0	1	33379.0	873.6	.000
Case (prof v. stud)	1.80	1	1.80	.464	.497
Error	321.0	83	3.9		
Total	4629.0	85			
Corrected Total	322.8	84			

CONCLUSIONS

Our research suggests that though students believe they have strong skills in social media and digital marketing, their actual strategic knowledge is limited. As in other studies of people’s knowledge relative to their confidence, we found that students, in particular, those who use social media sites more often, display overconfidence relative to their knowledge. Practitioners overall were stronger in using digital means to identify and reach targets, measure the effectiveness of marketing strategies, use general

digital marketing to enhance social media executions, and demonstrate knowledge of mobile marketing. We did not find gender differences in our research, similar to the findings of Singla and Arora (2015), who investigated students' use of social media in Punjabi, India. However, we did find that marketing and communications students had more confidence in their knowledge, even as they used social media to the same extent as other students.

As social media become even more entrenched as a part of a sound communications strategy for marketers, employers will demand digital skills among students that go beyond simple posting and content creation. Interestingly, employers do not appear to be training interns in the strategic aspects of the discipline and students with internships do not display more knowledge than students who do not have internships. Rather, the internship adds to levels of overconfidence that may detract from one's ability to learn on the job.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research suggests that we have a long way to go in teaching aspects of social media and properly preparing students for the world of work. Although many schools now offer advanced courses in social media marketing, students must be encouraged or required to take courses that will address the gap that has been identified. Marketing faculty can provide the solution to the knowledge gap problem.

Course content is more important than the usage of the tools at this stage of teaching because the industries are developing and most students are already adept in the basics of the platforms. In examining marketing education, Brocato et al. (2015) collected syllabi from social media marketing courses and reported that classes tended to teach strategic and tactical aspects of social media, skills in using the tools and competencies such as critical thinking, ethics, and teamwork. However, the list is limited in that the courses do not connect social media marketing within the broader context of digital marketing or marketing communications. We would suggest that faculty develop strong foundations in SEO, SEM, legal issues, segmentation, and research in social media marketing and relevant aspects of the four P's executed

through social channels. The good news is that now many more resources are available for teaching social media marketing including texts (e.g., Tuten & Solomon, 2015, Priluck, 2017), online education systems (e.g., Hootesuite, Coursera, Lynda), podcasts (e.g., Internet Marketing, Social Media Examiner), and conferences (e.g., Social Media Marketing World, Social Media Week). In addition, there are several professional organizations that offer short-courses, webinars, and other presentations, which expand the educational list of resources worthy of careful inspection and adaptation to the classroom. Marketing faculty members can readily access a growing set of tools that can enhance their knowledge and understanding and cultivate and curate materials needed to teach students for the 21st century.

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