

# A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING PEDAGOGY AND CONTEMPORARY JOB DEMANDS

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose of the Study:** The study addresses a disconnect between university curricula and social media-related job requirements.

**Method/Design and Sample:** Data collection included gathering responses from U.S. social media marketing educators and social media management job descriptions.

**Results:** Exploratory findings suggest that educators and practitioners are aligned on several core concepts and skills. However, a number of core concepts and skills that are vital in the industry are currently not prioritized by educators.

**Value to Marketing Educators:** The findings allow educators to assess the ways in which their courses align with industry needs and the areas that they can adjust to better prepare students for successful careers in SMM.

**Keywords:** social media marketing (SMM), social media marketing course, curriculum design, course design, marketing education, marketing curricula

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of consumers' lives today with over 4.8 active users worldwide (Chaffey, 2023). Global social media usage has grown exponentially at a rate of 12% annually since 2012 with 5.8 billion active users projected by 2027 (Dean, 2023; Dixon, 2023). The average consumer visits seven social media platforms monthly and the average American spends over two hours daily on social media (Beveridge & Lauron, 2023). Consumers live out their consumption experiences—from acquisition, preparation, ownership, maintenance, and disposal—on social media (Malhotra, 2006).

Technological advances and the explosion of social media have led to a transformative marketing environment (Bolotaeva & Catan, 2010; Kumar, 2018). In the new transformative marketing environment, social media influences how consumers access, choose, and buy goods (Albors et al., 2008; Alves et al., 2016). Value creation in the transformative landscape is grounded on the firm's ability to leverage social media and other forms of consumer data to offer personalized offerings that meet individual consumers' unique promotion, price, product, and place needs (Kumar, 2018; Meyer, 2018; Varadarajan, 2018). As such, social media initiatives are at the core of most organizations' marketing communications today, and this trend is not likely to decrease (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015).

Given the above mentioned trends, there is a need to integrate social media content into marketing curricula in order to prepare students for successful careers in social media marketing (SMM) (Brocato et al., 2015) and general marketing in a transformative landscape. However, marketing education is lagging in fully incorporating necessary social media skills into marketing curricula (Childers, 2022). Due to the rapidly changing nature of this discipline, curricula must continuously innovate in order to adequately prepare students for contemporary SMM jobs (Beachum & Krallman, 2023). However, keeping curricula up-to-date is often a struggle largely due to the resource and time limitations on educators. Thus, there is a need for attainable instructional models of SMM education that keep up with rapidly changing social media

technologies and provide students with the necessary skills to thrive in contemporary SMM jobs.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the perceptual variances between SMM practices and pedagogy, we conduct a qualitative exploratory study to analyze the requirements and expectations for an entry-level SMM position in comparison to prevalent methods of SMM education employed by educators in the United States. To accomplish this, we examine SMM job postings across all 50 states in the United States and survey more than 70 SMM educators. This study aims to delineate the divide between marketing curricula and industry needs to inform SMM curriculum design. Our research contributes to the literature on SMM pedagogy by summarizing the tools and skills sought out in SMM job candidates and explicating the common approaches to SMM pedagogy used by educators in the United States. Finally, we offer sustainable ideas on how to design and teach SMM to bridge the gap between contemporary industry needs and marketing curricula in order to better prepare candidates for future roles in SMM.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing practitioners and scholars agree that the marketing discipline is currently in the transformative marketing era, which will continue to define the next 20 years of marketing practice (Kumar, 2018). Already in the transformative era, technological advances and demographic changes in population have made individual user constraints such as convenience, personalization, experiences, environmental sustainability, and social connections essential to value creation. Thus, marketing pedagogy must change to keep up with the demands of the transformative era. Rohm, Stefl, and Clair (2019) outline a complete overhaul of the marketing curriculum to a “digital-first curriculum.” In this view, marketing educators should view the entire marketing curriculum as a blend of digital and social media to cope with the new era.

Previous literature has demonstrated that incorporating social media focused content into marketing courses provides students with applicable, enriched learning experiences. Rinaldo et al. (2013) employ a nuanced learning approach by requiring students to actively participate in social media to gain a deeper understanding of the platform’s uses and benefits. Cappuccitti et al. (2019) found that incorporating social media campaigns into a retailing course provides a greater breadth of knowledge for students. This is in line with Rohm et al. (2019)’s digital-first approach which could be applied to numerous marketing courses in universities where developing a focused SMM course is not feasible. This may be of utmost importance to digital-first educators, as research by Langan et al. (2019) found that only 28% (approx. 134) of the 477 universities analyzed offer a dedicated SMM course. This suggests that many universities have yet to prioritize the growing area of SMM via specialized courses and that integrating social media content into existing courses may be more immediately feasible.

One of the most important considerations for developing or integrating SMM curricula is crafting content that familiarizes students with the business side, rather than the consumer side, of social media concepts. Personal use of social media is quite different from strategically developing marketing campaigns to fulfill business objectives. Marketing educators ought to keep this in mind when determining the skills necessary for SMM curricula (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015).

On a similar note, researchers are beginning to explore the gap between SMM in the classroom and SMM industry positions. Beachum and Krallman (2023) examined job descriptions, along with the feedback of marketing managers and students, to propose a prioritization of either client projects or simulations in the SMM classroom. The authors found that client projects offer more practical experience than simulations. Simulations, despite their inherent limitations, can have benefits for students, including opportunities to collaborate with others to make decisions (Beachum & Krallman, 2023). After a series of interviews with marketing professionals, Freburg and Kim (2018) note that content creation know-how, writing skills, analytical skills, and the ability to handle crises stand as some of employers’ most-desired characteristics of new graduates applying for SMM positions.

Brocato et al. (2015), as well as Munoz and Wood (2015), identify common objectives, topics, assessments, and pedagogical approaches for SMM instruction. Langan et al. (2019) question the ability of marketing departments with finite resources to shift to offering more social media classes to meet business demands for social-media-focused graduates while maintaining other marketing courses and specializations. As such, Langan et al. (2019) call for research that investigates sustainable approaches to meet market demand in the classroom whether through digital marketing topics in the classroom or by offering more general introductory marketing courses for students. Zahay et al. (2022) documented a case in which a university considered feedback from marketing professionals, marketing students and other

stakeholders to infuse digital marketing components into required and elective marketing courses. The revamped curriculum includes a variety of marketing simulations, industry platforms, and certifications (Zahay et al., 2022).

Given the growing importance of SMM, the rise in SMM-related jobs, resource limitations on educators, and the disconnect between SMM practice, research, and pedagogy, the current manuscript aims to 1) identify the expectations and requirements for entry-level SMM positions, 2) investigate major pedagogical approaches employed by educators teaching SMM, and 3) explore the gap between practitioners' expectations and educators' expectations of students learning SMM. Our study contributes to ongoing research that considers how marketing education aligns with industry needs. This study also contributes to the literature by identifying and describing common approaches to SMM pedagogy and demonstrating the gap between market expectations and pedagogy. Finally, suggestions are offered for SMM course design and improvement. As such, this manuscript aims to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the expectations and requirements for entry-level SMM positions?

Research Question 2: What are the common pedagogical approaches of SMM?

Research Question 3: What gaps exist between the requirements and expectations for entry-level jobs and the common approaches to SMM pedagogy?

## METHODOLOGY

### Study 1: Analysis Of Entry-Level SMM Jobs

To address the first research question, the authors examined job descriptions for entry-level SMM positions. The goal was to assess the alignment between SMM course curricula and the practical expectations for entry-level positions. To achieve this, we initially extracted a substantial number of job listings from a diverse population, ensuring representation from every U.S. state and the District of Columbia. The data collection process entailed gathering descriptions for open positions that appeared when using the search phrase "social media." If a low number of results appeared upon the initial search, the authors conducted the search again using the phrase "social media marketing." Authors collected job descriptions from Indeed, American Marketing Association, LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Monster, Robert Half, and Simply Hired. The authors narrowed results accordingly on platforms that offered capabilities to filter results by full time SMM jobs requiring a bachelor's degree. On platforms that did not offer a way to filter the results, the authors made a judgment based on the information in the job description in which the job description required a bachelor's degree in marketing or a related field and required one to three years of experience (signaling an entry-level position). Only positions in which social media management entailed the majority or entirety of time spent on the job were included in the sample. The sample was collected from October 2022 through November 2023 and contained a final sample of 200 job descriptions. Company type varied among the positions in terms of size and value offerings, representing industries from consumer goods and financial services to advertising and postsecondary education. The position postings featured information on a position's overall role in the company, specific daily tasks, social media platforms used by the company, content creation and task management tools to be used on the job, and preferred skills, knowledge, and experience of an applicant.

### Study 1: A Priori Coding

To address the research questions, the authors employed a content analysis procedure (Weber, 1990). First, the authors gathered a list of a priori themes to establish criteria for coding with the aim of reducing subjectivity (Kassarjian, 1977). The a priori themes for the job description dataset were based on themes from Verma et al.'s (2021) examination of SMM job descriptions and Freberg and Kim's (2018) analysis of depth interviews with social media industry professionals. Table 1 provides a summary of a priori themes developed for the job description dataset. Following the establishment of a priori codes, two authors independently coded the qualitative data to identify a priori and emerging themes. As the analysis progressed, some a priori themes were removed due to low presence in the data or regrouped due to emerging subthemes.

**Table 1. A Priori Themes for Job Description Dataset**

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Concepts/Knowledge	Audiences and Content Consumption Buyer persona's influence on campaign objectives, content, and metrics to measure progress Marketing and Public Relations Principles/Strategies
Tasks	Platform Management/Administrative Analytics/Research Campaign Management Branding/Maintaining Voice Content Creation
Preferred Skills	Writing Photography Graphic Design Videography Analytical/Reporting Skills Website Design Crisis Communication Experience Storytelling/Creativity
Tools and Platforms	Adobe Creative Suite Canva Google Analytics Hootsuite Meta Business Manager Microsoft Suite Sprout Social

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## RESULTS

### Study 1: Results

The following results section presents a detailed analysis of the current expectations for entry-level SMM jobs. Through the coding and examination of job descriptions, the authors identified key themes and subthemes related to the required concepts and knowledge, tasks involved in the role, preferred skills sought by employers, and the tools and platforms applicants should be familiar with. The final themes and subthemes are depicted in Table 2.

### Concepts and Knowledge

The authors coded any SMM topic that can be learned and discussed to build one's knowledge, as well as be applied to enhance the performance of a marketing activity, as a *concept*. Companies hiring for an SMM position desire applicants who have strong familiarity with several concepts. Applicants should have a deep understanding of the capabilities, audiences on each social media platform, metrics, and best practices for each social media platform. Employers desire the ability to form and implement an SMM strategy from inception to completion, creating cohesive and platform-appropriate content across different channels to achieve an organization's goals. Successful applicants need to be competent in content creation, which requires knowing what audiences would like to see and how they would like to consume content. In this regard, applicants should also be well-versed in how to write content for a company's brand voice. Finally, applicants should be knowledgeable on search engine optimization, including conducting keyword research and boosting web page traffic from search engines.

### Tasks

The authors coded any actions to be performed as part of job duties, such as posting a video or analyzing campaign results, as *tasks*. Several task-oriented subthemes emerged, including managing social media platforms in general, staying up to date with social media trends, educating colleagues about

best practices in social media management, analyzing metrics, building and maintaining a community, managing a brand's reputation, running campaigns, managing influencer marketing, maintaining brand standards, managing a website, writing, designing, taking photos, shooting and editing video, and writing content.

Platform management encompasses functional tasks, from creating a brand's social media profiles and social media style guidelines to maintaining content calendars and scheduling posts. Part of managing each active platform includes determining the most lucrative platforms and the frequency at which to post content to best reach and appeal to the target audience. Staying up to date with the latest platform and content trends includes researching new technology, hearing from industry thought leaders and conducting competitive analyses. The expectation to educate one's colleagues on social media trends also appears as a common task subtheme, noting one's responsibility to hold information sessions on best practices and act as the team social media expert. Analytics entails observing performance metrics on all platforms, determining the most pertinent metrics for measuring effectiveness and setting key performance indicators, creating reports, and making strategic recommendations and changes based on data interpretations.

Community building includes not only the recruitment of followers but also the fostering of deep connections between the brand and community members through interactions and engaging content. Social listening and managing a brand's reputation co-exist as a related subtheme, focusing on sentiment analysis, responses to reviews, and public relations matters. Running campaigns includes the development and management of both organic and paid social campaigns, pitching ideas, and determining bidding and placement strategies. Influencer marketing surrounds identifying key influencers that align with the brand, strengthening relationships to build a network, and recognizing and forming partnership opportunities with influencers. Managing brand standards translates to using a consistent brand voice and ensuring that all communication across platforms aligns with the brand. Website management includes carrying out the basics of adding landing pages, creating content for the web, and optimizing websites for search engines. Finally, several subthemes relate to content creation, such as writing blogs, reports, and captions, designing graphics, taking and editing photos, and scripting, filming and editing videos for social media.

### **Preferred Skills**

Preferred skills are based on an applicant's ability to carry out a particular action well based on previous training and experience. Employers prefer several different skills for entry-level SMM positions, including the ability to write well (especially the ability to adjust copy for different audiences or target markets), more refined photography and videography skills, and design graphics. Employers also prioritize analytical skills, such as observing, interpreting and reporting performance metrics and recommending future strategies, and evidence of growing a social media following with high audience engagement. Lastly, the job descriptions emphasize a knack for using audio, images, and words to tell stories.

### **Tools and Platforms**

Software used to create or assist in social media management, along with social media platforms, were designated as *tools and platforms*. Employers want applicants who are familiar with creative software (i.e., Adobe Creative Suite, Canva), information processing programs (i.e. Microsoft Suite), analytical programs (i.e. Google Analytics), and platforms for content distribution and social media management (i.e. Hootsuite, Sprout Social). Employers frequently cited Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), LinkedIn, TikTok, YouTube, and Pinterest as platforms with which applicants need to be most familiar.

Firms using Facebook as part of their social media strategy commonly note the importance of an applicant's ability to boost posts or initiate promoted post ads to gain greater reach using Meta Ads Manager. Firms also distribute organic content on Facebook, expecting applicants to publish photo and video content, as well as feature content using Facebook live. Brands consider Facebook as an appropriate platform through which to manage corporate brand matters and achieve goals that span from brand awareness to conversions. Applicants should know how to analyze results provided by platform metrics and respond to comments and reviews. Firms using Instagram as part of their social media strategy highly regard applicants' ability to create photo and video content to accommodate Instagram's many content formats, including Reels and Stories. Further, firms also prioritize using Instagram's in-platform video editing

capabilities, achieving goals like awareness and engagement, and managing communities by interacting with followers through messaging.

**Table 2. Final Themes for Job Description Content Analysis**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Sample (%)</b>
Concepts and Knowledge	Capabilities of each Social media platform	74	37%
	Major audiences on each social media platform	23	11.5%
	Metrics available on each social media platform	28	14%
	Best practices of each social media platform	52	26%
	Social media strategy from inception to completion	55	27.5%
	Creating cohesive and platform-appropriate content across various social media platforms	76	38%
	Audience knowledge for developing appropriate content	31	15.5%
	Understanding how to create content which maintains the company's brand voice	31	15.5%
	Search engine optimization	20	10%
	Tasks	Managing social media platforms in general	187
Staying up-to-date with social media trends		115	57.5%
Educating colleagues about best practices in social media management		30	15%
Analyzing social media metrics		129	64.5%
Building and maintaining a community on social media		100	50%
Running social media campaigns		97	48.5%
Managing influencer marketing		59	29.5%
Managing brand's reputation		41	20.5%
Maintaining brand standards; "on-brand" content		85	42.5%
Managing the company's website		40	20%
Designing content		74	37%
Basic photo content		82	41%
Basic video content		109	54.5%
Writing content		36	18%
Preferred Skills	Excellent copywriting skills	126	63%
	Adjusting copy for different audiences or target markets	25	12.5%
	Photography; Skilled shooting and editing	74	37%
	Videography; Skills filming and editing	80	40%
	Storytelling via audio, imagery, and copy.	24	12%
	Graphic design skills	21	10.5%
	Advanced analytical skills; observing, interpreting, and reporting performance metrics and recommending future strategies	69	34.5%
	Evidence in growing a social media following with high audience engagement	27	13.5%
Tools and Platforms	Adobe Creative Suite (Photoshop, InDesign, Illustrator)	59	29.5%
	Canva	36	18%
	Microsoft Suite	51	25.5%
	Google Analytics	36	18%
	Hootsuite	30	15%
	Sprout Social	34	17%
	Instagram	114	57%
	Facebook	112	56%
	X (Twitter)	77	38.5%
	LinkedIn	71	35.5%
	TikTok	67	33.5%
	YouTube	67	33.5%

Firms using X (Twitter) as part of their social media strategy manage both X (Twitter) ads as well as distribute content to engage with target audiences, including companies operating in the B2B realm. Managers also employ social listening through use of X (Twitter) mentions. Firms using LinkedIn as part of their social media strategy manage ad campaigns through LinkedIn Ads Manager and find the platform useful for engaging with users in the B2B realm as well. Firms using Pinterest as part of their social media strategy aim to supplement their overall efforts with product or brand-related pins that offer aesthetic content. Firms using TikTok as part of their social media strategy use the platform in a similar way to Instagram, favoring the use of in-platform editing functions and achieving high reach and frequency. Lastly, firms using YouTube as part of their social media strategy commonly note the expectation of applicants to run ads on YouTube and create organic content, including in the form of YouTube Shorts.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study 2: Analysis of SMM Curricula

To address the second research question, the authors examined pedagogical approaches of educators teaching SMM. The authors developed an open-ended survey to gain an in-depth understanding of the curricula employed in SMM courses. Using open-ended surveys allows for the collection of rich, detailed information that can provide insights that closed-ended surveys may not be able to capture (Connor Desai & Reimers, 2019; Gendall, et. al, 1996). The survey inquired about the educator's SMM curriculum specifically in regards to the core concepts taught, social media platforms used or discussed, group projects, simulations, and other assignments given, as well as textbooks and other resources utilized. The survey included broad questions in regards to SMM curricula such as whether the educator could identify unfulfilled needs that would otherwise enhance the course and thoughts on alignment between SMM curricula and social media job requirements. To ensure only relevant respondents participated in this research, the survey included an initial screening question asking whether each respondent taught a university course on SMM or a related course in which a large portion of the course focused on SMM.

### Study 2: Data Collection

The authors engaged in two data collection processes to collect a substantial amount of data. The first data collection involved several distribution channels to reach educators who teach SMM or a related course (i.e., digital marketing). The authors requested participation from educators in their professional networks, from members of academic SMM groups (Social Media Educators Community Group and Digital Marketing Professors Community Group), and the academic resource company Stukent disseminated the educator survey to their network of educators teaching SMM. This effort resulted in 46 complete, usable responses. This data collection served as an initial sample for the research to determine its merit.

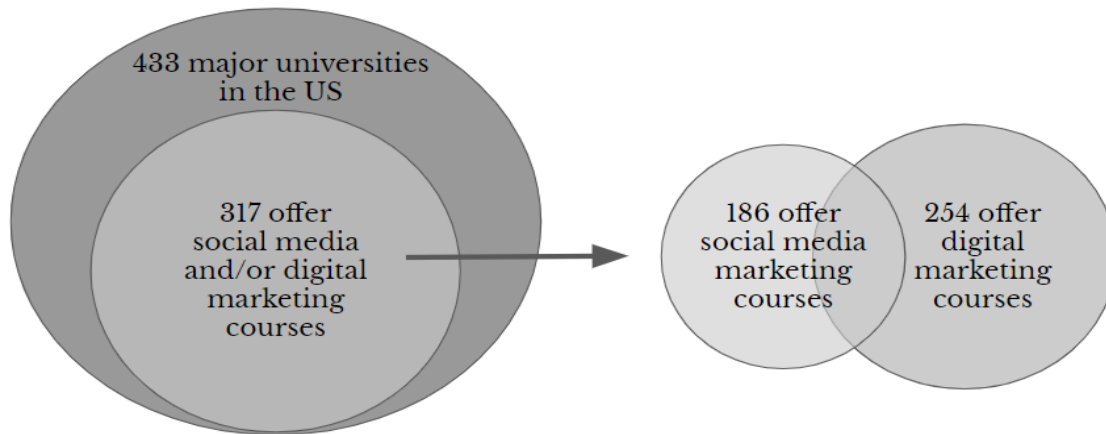
After the first data collection, the authors sought to collect more robust, comprehensive data to ensure it represented an accurate depiction of common approaches to teaching SMM. The second data collection encompassed a comprehensive approach which involved gathering information from the top 10 universities in each state, as identified by a college search tool. This process ensured a well-rounded representation of diverse educational institutions across various states for our study.

The authors collected contact information for potential respondents by first examining the top 10 four-year universities based on the total number of students (both public and private) in each of the 50 states within the United States and the District of Columbia. Some states (e.g., Delaware, Nevada) did not have several large (i.e., student population over 2,000) universities, so fewer than 10 universities were recorded. This process resulted in a population of 433 universities which were further examined to determine whether they offered a digital marketing concentration as such specialized tracks are most likely to offer an SMM course. The authors also recorded which universities offered SMM course(s) or digital marketing course(s)(see Figure 1).

According to the results based on the time of collection, 76 universities in the United States offer a digital marketing concentration, 186 universities offer an SMM course, and 254 universities offer a digital marketing course. Based on this current United States sample, a mere 18% of universities offer a concentration in digital marketing, 43% offer an SMM course, and 59% offer a digital marketing course. Note that universities who offer a digital marketing concentration are most likely to offer both an SMM and

digital marketing course, so these figures are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the reported statistics represent a total of 317 universities which offered at least one of the three criteria. The authors did not find clear evidence for such criteria in the other 116 universities sampled.

**Figure 1. Summary of major universities in the US offering social media and/or digital marketing courses**



Once the relevant universities were identified, the authors thoroughly reviewed course catalogs to record contact information for educators who teach either SMM or digital marketing. This effort resulted in 304 educators to contact who were each sent the same open-ended survey as in the first data collection. The survey did not change between the two rounds of data collection. Further, to maintain response integrity and prevent duplicate submissions, we implemented Qualtrics' "Prevent Ballot Box Stuffing" feature. This feature places a cookie on participants' browsers upon initial response submission, preventing them from retaking the survey twice. Furthermore, we conducted thorough checks by cross-referencing respondent IP addresses during data collection to identify and exclude any instances of individuals taking the survey multiple times. The second data collection process resulted in 26 complete, usable responses. Both data collections took place from June 2022 through November 2022. The authors note that the length and open-ended nature of the survey required a substantial time commitment for respondents which have deterred some educators from responding. The authors conducted a content analysis on the combined datasets to assess their compatibility and found similarities and thematic repetitions. In total, 72 responses were analyzed, providing a robust sample size for qualitative analysis. Combining the datasets collected at different times was deemed appropriate as the research question remained consistent, and the data exhibited similar themes and patterns, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of pedagogical approaches in SMM.

### Study 2: A Priori Coding

Similar to Study 1, the authors established a priori themes for the pedagogical dataset based on themes from Brocato et al.'s (2015) examination of SMM syllabi and Muñoz and Wood's (2015) analysis of SMM educator responses. Table 3 contains a priori themes and subthemes developed for the pedagogical dataset.

**Table 3. A Priori Themes for Pedagogical Dataset**

Core Social Media Concepts	Analytics Social media capabilities Social media strategy	Social listening Website design
Assessments	Presentation Proposed social media strategy/plan	Social media audit Content creation
Tools and Resources	Google Analytics	YouTube



Hootsuite	LinkedIn
HubSpot	X (Twitter)
Facebook	Pinterest
Instagram	

## RESULTS

### Study 2: Results of Common Pedagogical Approaches

This result section provides insights into the common pedagogical approaches used by educators in preparing students for entry level job positions. The content analysis procedure identified key themes and subthemes relating to core social media concepts, assessments, tools and resources utilized in the curriculum. The section also explores how these approaches align with employer needs and addresses challenges faced by educators in keeping up with rapidly evolving social media platforms and tools. See Table 4 for the final themes, subthemes and percentage of the sample that contains each subtheme.

**Table 4. Final Themes for Pedagogical Content Analysis**

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Sample (%)
Core Social Media Concepts	Basics of each social media platform	15	60%
	Integrating Social Media into an Overall Marketing Plan	10	40%
	Social Media Strategy	9	36%
	Social Media Tactics	9	36%
	Analytics	11	44%
	Influencer Marketing	8	32%
	Audience Targeting	12	48%
	Paid Advertising on Social Media	5	20%
	Social Listening	4	16%
	Community Management	3	12%
Assessments	Simulation - Mimic Social	15	33%
	Simulation - Mimic Pro	7	16%
	Client-based Group Project - Working with a local business or non-profit to develop an SMM plan	20	41%
	Simulated Group Project - Acting as a consultant for a recognizable brand to develop an SMM plan	12	24%
	Presentation - Proposed Social Media Strategy	14	29%
	Social Media Auditing	10	20%
	Tools and Resources	Textbook - Essentials of Social Media Marketing by Michelle Charello	9
Textbook - Digital Marketing Essentials by Jeff Larson and Stuart Draper		15	28%
Textbook - Social Media Marketing by Tuten		6	11%
Canva		9	12%
Google Ads		12	16%
Google Analytics		32	44%
Hootsuite		27	37%
HubSpot		38	52%
SEMRush		16	22%
Facebook		65	99%
Instagram		64	99%
Youtube		63	97%
LinkedIn		60	96%

TikTok	55	88%
X (Twitter)	60	94%
Pinterest	49	81%
Snapchat	16	64%

### **Core Social Media Concepts**

SMM educators focus on several core concepts in their courses, including basics about each social media platform, social media strategy, social media tactics, analytics, influencer marketing, budgeting, audience targeting, paid social, social listening, and community management. Discussing the fundamentals of each popular social media platform typically takes place during class time and involves talking about a platform’s metrics, user demographics, advertising capabilities, and contribution to SEO efforts. Educators also discuss how to choose ideal platforms for engaging with target audiences. Social media strategy involves understanding the role of a social media platform in social media strategy, as well as its role when paired with other media types in overall marketing strategy. Students are introduced to the practice of using goals and objectives, as well as the research and exploration of audience segments, to guide the development of a social media strategy. Social media tactics include more specific actions for carrying out the strategy, such as conducting a social media audit, planning a content calendar, and creating share-worthy content.

Analytics involves the study of metrics on social media platforms to measure audience responses and to track campaign effectiveness. Students are introduced to analyzing metrics for making data-driven decisions in future social media efforts. Influencer marketing discussions surround the strategy a marketer can implement in influencer partnerships, given the unique qualities of each platform. Educators focus on the return on investment, return on ad spend, and overall profitability in social media campaigns when discussing the concept of budgeting. Audience targeting includes topics such as aligning a brand’s buyer persona with the platform of choice and content used to effectively reach the audience. Given the value sought by a particular persona, students must recognize the way in which the persona prefers to consume content and the specific messaging that best answers the persona’s questions.

Paid social includes launching and managing social media advertising campaigns using a specific platform’s advertising management function, with discussions involving campaign results and overall objectives one aims to achieve. The concepts of social listening and community management relate closely to each other but still stand as separate topics. Social listening includes monitoring and interpreting user comments and discussions on social media involving a certain brand, organization, or topic to draw conclusions for future strategies. For instance, students are introduced to sentiment analysis to examine the valence of the conversations and text analysis to examine themes. Community building surrounds interacting with users and strengthening emotional bonds between users and the brand.

### **Assessments**

Assessments such as simulations and group projects emerged as a common theme in SMM instruction. Educators expressed a range of opinions regarding the benefits of using simulations. Some educators recognized the value of hands-on learning via simulations and the opportunity for students to apply theoretical knowledge in a simulated environment. Simulations were seen as a means to bridge the gap between theory and practice in SMM education. However, several educators mentioned certain disadvantages associated with the use of simulations. One of the main concerns raised was the significant time investment required for students to derive real value. Some educators desired simpler simulations that could automate the grading process as their current assessment methods were found to be time-consuming. Educators expressed the need for a better replication of real-world scenarios. They emphasized the importance of a simulated dashboard that could be viewed by both themselves and students, as well as a more effective way to manage a content calendar to demonstrate successful usage. Additionally, some educators expressed a preference for simulations that incorporated real-world companies and recognizable brands. They felt this would enhance student engagement and allow for a more relatable and authentic learning experience. Another suggestion put forward by educators was the availability of a wider variety of simulations. This would provide educators with more options to align the simulation with their specific teaching objectives and better meet the needs of their students. The desire for additional simulations stemmed from the belief that more options would contribute to a more comprehensive and well-rounded

SMM course.

For group projects, many educators assign client projects emphasizing the importance of real-life application and engagement with clients. Students were assigned real-life clients, such as small businesses or non-profit organizations, and tasked with developing social media strategies. This involved conducting audits, audience research, and creating content calendars and style guides. One significant benefit mentioned was the opportunity for students to pitch their creative plans to clients. These larger group activities required students to deliver visualizations and final presentations, enabling them to practice their public speaking skills. By eliminating written papers and focusing on practical analysis, students were able to gain hands-on experience and develop real-world skills.

Educators highlighted the flexibility in incorporating group projects into different courses. Some classes dedicated a substantial portion of the curriculum to SMM, while others focused solely on it for the final project. Additionally, collaborations with local non-profits were mentioned, allowing students to work on digital marketing initiatives with real community organizations. The structure and scope of the group projects varied across courses. Some projects encompassed multiple components, such as the creation of a digital marketing plan, social media style guide, and implementation of campaigns. Others involved tasks like completing buyer persona projects, conducting social media audits, and developing marketing plans. Students also had opportunities to create content for real-world clients, work on web audits, and design social media campaigns.

While the benefits of group projects were acknowledged, a few challenges were identified. Time management and coordination within teams were mentioned as potential obstacles. Furthermore, educators expressed the need for clear guidelines and support to ensure the successful execution of group projects. It was noted that breaking projects into manageable pieces allowed for ongoing evaluation and adjustments, ensuring the quality of the final deliverables.

### **Tools and Resources**

Educators utilized several tools and resources for designing their SMM curriculum. Of the educators in the sample, 51 (72%) use a textbook and 21 (28%) do not. Among those who employ a textbook, three titles were mentioned most often: *Essentials of Social Media Marketing* by Michelle Charello, *Social Media Marketing* by Tracy Tuten, and *Digital Marketing Essentials* by Jeff Larson and Stuart Draper. Aside from textbooks, educators integrate various industry tools, namely Canva, Google Ads, Google Analytics, Hootsuite, HubSpot, and SEMRush. The most commonly integrated social media platforms in course instruction include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, TikTok, X (Twitter), Pinterest, and Snapchat.

Educators emphasized the value of industry certifications and requested more free certifications related to brand listening and social media content. They also expressed a desire for real-world examples, templates, and resources for audits, buyer personas, content calendars, and social media plans. Educators expressed the need for modules with real-world cases and problems for students to solve, as well as improved access and smoother processes for running paid ad campaigns on platforms like Google Ads and Facebook/Instagram. Access to data, research databases, and open-source profiles to showcase successful and unsuccessful business profiles on social media platforms was another area of interest. Some educators highlighted the benefits of working with real organizations and developing digital marketing resources for them, rather than relying solely on simulations. Educators also expressed interest in tools for sentiment analysis, data extraction, and comprehensive resources that delve into specific topics with the latest research and relevant psychology. Additionally, they mentioned the need for better assessment tools and resources, such as simulations that can grade students' work and reduce the time required for grading. Overall, addressing these needs would contribute to more effective and engaging SMM education.

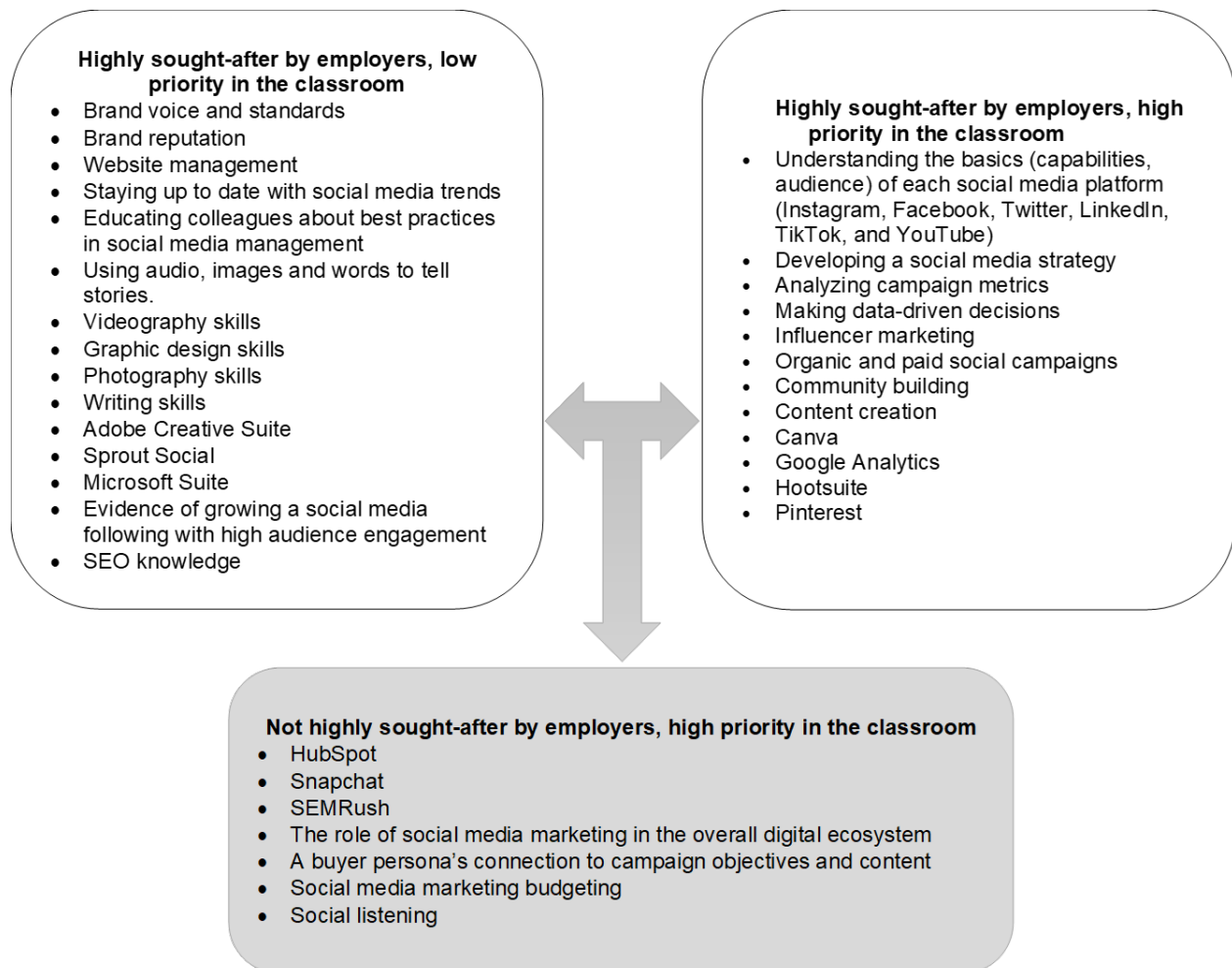
### **Pedagogical Performance in Preparing Students for SMM Positions**

To address the third research question, the authors examined each set of key themes and subthemes from the pedagogical and industry-based datasets. Following this, each set of themes was compared and contrasted to identify areas in which SMM education and contemporary job demands align and gaps that ought to be addressed. Both sets of themes, including conceptual topics in SMM and tactical data actions, tools, and platforms in SMM, are organized in Figure 2 to depict areas in which pedagogical approaches sufficiently align with and greatly differ from employer needs.

Educators note challenges to settling discrepancies between concepts and skills that students learn in an SMM classroom and needed skills for entry-level SMM positions. First, social media platforms and tools

change at such a high rate with regard to content trends, technological capabilities, and overall platform popularity that one may find it challenging to stay up-to-date while juggling other job responsibilities and courses. Educators' most-desired resource is free student and educator access to subscription-based tools, such as analytics tools, market research databases, and content management systems. Access to industry tools can be difficult to obtain as many platforms fail to offer subscription packages for a class to use at an affordable price. Further, educators and students do not always have access to real company data to use with the industry tools, making it difficult to provide students with a highly realistic experience. Additionally, responses on pedagogical approaches highlight the issue of deciding how to balance overall social media strategy with specific tools and platforms as well as hands-on experiences with theoretical content in course curricula.

**Figure 2. A comparison of employer-desired skills and SMM pedagogical approaches.**



## DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the expectations and requirements for entry-level SMM positions, common pedagogical approaches in teaching SMM, and gaps that may exist between the two perspectives. Content analyses were conducted to address these research questions from both the perspective of entry-level social media positions and United States-based social media educators. By comparing the results of these studies, we aim to identify any gaps between the expectations and requirements for entry-level jobs and common approaches to SMM pedagogy. The following discussion addresses each of the three research questions.

### **Research Question 1: What are the expectations and requirements for entry-level SMM positions?**

The present study sought to examine the entry-level job requirements for a social media marketer in order to better understand the skills and knowledge that companies expect applicants to possess. Findings indicate that strong familiarity with various concepts, including the capabilities and demographics of different social media platforms and the development and implementation of SMM strategies, is highly desired by employers. These findings align with previous research on the importance of understanding social media platforms and strategies in the marketing industry (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

In terms of tasks, the findings suggest that entry-level social media marketers are expected to be proficient in managing various social media platforms, staying up to date with trends, and educating colleagues on best practices. These responsibilities reflect the dynamic nature of the social media landscape and the need for continuous learning and adaptability (Langan et al., 2019). Additionally, tasks related to analytics, community building, and campaign management highlight the importance of data-driven decision making and the ability to effectively engage and retain a brand's online community (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010), as well as the need for both technical and interpersonal skills in the field. It is clear that the role of a social media marketer involves both conceptual and practical knowledge, as well as the ability to adapt to a rapidly evolving industry. These expectations reflect the evolving nature of the SMM industry and the importance of data-driven decision-making and audience engagement in successful campaigns (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Overall, our findings suggest that entry-level SMM positions require a broad range of knowledge and skills that extend beyond a basic understanding of social media platforms and strategies. In addition to these core competencies, candidates must also be able to apply their knowledge to real-world tasks and situations and adapt to the industry's evolving nature. These tasks reflect the multifaceted nature of SMM and the importance of coordination and collaboration in the field (Cameron & Green, 2012).

### **Research Question 2: What are the common pedagogical approaches of SMM?**

The results of the educator survey suggest that the common pedagogical approaches in teaching SMM focus on a range of core concepts, including platform knowledge, strategy, tactics, analytics, influencer marketing, budgeting, audience targeting, paid social, social listening, and community management among others (see Fig 1). In addition to these conceptual topics, the results also revealed that marketing educators commonly use assessments, such as simulations and group projects, to evaluate student learning. Simulations allow students to practice applying their knowledge and skills in a simulated environment and provide hands-on learning, integration of theory and practice, and the development of practical skills. However, educators also highlighted the need to address concerns regarding the time commitment, simplification of simulations, replication of real-world scenarios, and variety in available simulations. By taking these insights into consideration, educators can make informed decisions about the effective integration of simulations into SMM courses, thereby enhancing the learning experience for students.

Group projects related to SMM provide students with hands-on experience, real-world client interactions, and the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. These projects foster critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and the development of essential skills for future careers in digital marketing and SMM. These assessments align with the practical, hands-on nature of SMM work and may be effective in helping students develop the skills and confidence they need to succeed in the field. Such projects also allow students to give back to the community by educating and training small businesses. Duffett and Cromhout (2022) found that small businesses who work with business students are satisfied with the knowledge and skills learned from students, and, perhaps most importantly, experience a boost in sales, customers, brand awareness, and customer loyalty. In this regard, educators who implement group projects in their SMM courses are able to positively impact the learning experience of both students and community partners.

Finally, the survey results indicated that marketing educators often incorporate tools and resources such as textbooks and industry guest lectures into their courses. Textbooks provide students with a foundational understanding of SMM concepts and practices. Guest lectures from industry professionals offer students the opportunity to learn from experienced practitioners and gain insights into the real-world applications of SMM. These resources may be valuable in helping students to build the knowledge and skills that are important for success in SMM roles. Further, simulations were regarded as effective learning tools for SMM courses. Specifically, simulations allow students to apply their knowledge in a controlled

environment fit for experimentation and timely feedback. Furst and Lefkoff (2021) find that simulations particularly enhance the online learning experiences of Generation Z students (born from 1997-2012) which represent a major portion of the current student population. While simulations may not provide all of the benefits educators seek, this tool may be particularly useful for SMM courses delivered online. Furthermore, effective learning experiences of Generation Z students may differ from previous generations, which points to the necessity of identifying the current generation's learning needs and commonly held perceptions. For example, Swanson and Davis (2020) identify Generation Z students' understanding of marketing concepts to demonstrate how educators can use this knowledge to develop curricula that challenges mistaken beliefs and reinforces relevant views. Similarly, educators can gain insight into how Generation Z students perceive SMM principles to develop curricula that enhance their understanding of concepts from a business (rather than user) perspective.

### **Research Question 3: What gaps exist between the requirements and expectations for entry-level jobs and the common approaches to SMM pedagogy?**

Overall, these pedagogical approaches appear to be well-aligned with the knowledge, skills, and tasks that are important for success in the field. However, some potential gaps are highlighted below. These gaps may be due to the rapidly evolving nature of SMM, which requires professionals to constantly adapt and update their knowledge and skills. The gaps may also be due to the fact that SMM is a highly practical field, requiring hands-on experience with tools and platforms that may not be fully covered in the classroom.

Specifically, the analysis of job descriptions indicated that employers place a high value on skills such as brand voice and standards, brand reputation, website management, staying up to date with social media trends, educating colleagues about best practices, and a range of creative skills such as videography, photography, writing, and Adobe Creative Suite proficiency among others (see Fig 1). However, these skills were not identified as a high priority in the educator survey, suggesting that they may not be emphasized in the classroom. It is interesting to note that creative skills, which are typically relegated to communication and graphic design courses, are being sought in SMM positions. Many marketing educators are not adept in teaching these creative skills (e.g., videography and graphic design) and their accompanying platforms (e.g., Adobe Premier Pro and Canva), which presents an opportunity for educators who seek to elevate their personal skills and curriculum.

In addition, the analysis of job descriptions identified a range of tools and platforms that are highly sought-after by employers, including Sprout Social and Microsoft Suite, as well as evidence of growing a social media following with strong audience engagement. Previous research has shown that employers place a high value on practical skills and experience in SMM, such as the ability to manage brand reputation, create and implement social media campaigns, and use analytics to inform strategy (Rohm et al., 2019). However, these skills may not always be emphasized in the classroom, as educators may prioritize more theoretical concepts and knowledge-based assessments (Langan et al., 2019).

To bridge these gaps and better prepare students for success in the field, marketing educators may need to adopt more experiential and applied learning approaches, such as incorporating real-world examples and case studies, providing students with opportunities to work on practical projects, and giving students hands-on experience with the tools and platforms used in the industry to achieve behavioral learning goals (Langan et al., 2019). Simulations can also promote deeper learning, especially in online classes or in times where educators struggle to gain access to industry platforms (Santos et al., 2019). Stronger use of video content in a flipped classroom can help educators reserve time in class to apply the concepts learned in videos to hands-on assessments. Flipped learning has been shown to help students achieve greater academic outcomes and interpersonal skills (Bredow et al., 2021; Noetel et al., 2021). In addition, marketing educators may want to consider seeking input from industry professionals on the knowledge, skills, and practical experience that are most important for success in SMM, as this can help ensure that their curricula are more closely aligned with the needs and expectations of employers. By adopting these approaches, educators can help ensure that their students graduate with the knowledge, skills, and practical experience needed to succeed in entry-level SMM positions.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This research provides a deeper understanding of how SMM is currently being taught, as well as how such curricula aligns with industry standards for graduates entering the field. By identifying any

discrepancies between these two areas, we can begin to consider ways in which education can better prepare students for success in the field. One of the key findings is the importance employers place on a broad range of conceptual knowledge in the field of SMM. This includes an in-depth understanding of the capabilities, user demographics, and culture of various social media platforms, as well as the ability to develop and implement a comprehensive SMM strategy. Additionally, employers value the ability to create engaging and platform-appropriate content and understand the preferences of a target audience. This research highlights the need for proficiency in managing various social media platforms, staying up to date with industry trends, analyzing performance metrics, building and maintaining a community, managing a brand's reputation, and running campaigns. Other important tasks include managing influencer marketing, maintaining brand standards, managing a website, and creating content using a variety of media, including writing, design, photography, videography, and audio.

Further, findings indicate that marketing educators place a strong emphasis on core concepts such as the capabilities and characteristics of various social media platforms, social media strategy, analytics, influencer marketing, budgeting, audience targeting, and paid social. They also cover topics such as social listening and community management. In terms of assessments, simulations and group projects are commonly used, with many educators assigning client projects in which students develop an SMM plan for a local business. The majority of marketing educators use a textbook and supplement their courses with additional resources such as industry articles and case studies.

Overall, this research identifies certain skills and knowledge areas that are highly sought after by employers in the field of SMM that may not be given as much priority in the classroom. This includes knowledge of brand voice and standards, website management, staying up to date with industry trends, understanding how to educate non-marketing colleagues about best practices, and expertise in various content creation skills such as videography, photography, writing, and design. Additionally, practical experience with tools such as Adobe Creative Suite and Sprout Social, as well as the ability to demonstrate a track record of growing a social media following with high levels of audience engagement, may be highly valued by employers but not always emphasized in the classroom. These findings allow educators to consider ways in which SMM education can be better aligned with the needs of the industry.

### Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this research should be considered with its limitations in mind. While the sample size is within guidelines for the content analyses performed, smaller samples may limit the generalizability of findings. One aspect to take into account is that some of the sample was collected through the Stukent network distribution channel. However, it's noteworthy that upon comparing the two datasets – one inclusive of the Stukent distribution channel and the other without it – we identified similar themes across both sets of data. This alignment of themes reinforced the rationale behind our decision to merge the two datasets. For example, the authors note that the mention of Stukent's textbooks and simulations were observed throughout the additional sampling sources leveraged in the present study including sources collected outside of Stukent's mailing lists (i.e., systematic United States-based data collection). It is also worth noting that future research, all of which is organized in Table 5, may benefit from further exploring social media course creation both domestically and internationally. Additionally, it is important to highlight the fast paced nature of the field in relation to the number of academic programs that offer digital and/or social media concentrations. Thus, we note that the current research provides a snapshot of the current state and anticipates rapid growth in this area. Given this, we suggest that future research continuously assess and track changes of the number of universities offering specialized programs.

**Table 5. Future Research Areas and Paths in SMM Education**

<b>Research Area</b>	<b>Research Paths</b>
Artificial intelligence	Use of AI chatbot tools to aid in class assignments Ethical use of AI chatbots in education and practice Teaching AI as a tool for practice
Curriculum structure	Teaching art and communication-based skills in marketing classes vs. intradisciplinary classes Emphasis on theoretical-based knowledge vs. practical,

	industry-based knowledge for short-term and long-term career readiness
Simulation tools	Effectiveness of textbooks and accompanying simulation packages in training students
Industry-specific SMM practices	Impact of industry-specific variations in SMM on the preparation of entry-level professionals Techniques for training students in SMM for B2B firms

On another note, while our study highlighted the perspectives of practitioners and educators, future research ought to consider the perspective of students. By incorporating student perspectives, educators can gain a deeper understanding of how specific curricula components influence student engagement, performance, learning experience, and career readiness. Analyzing student evaluation data would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of certain tools in meeting students' educational needs and identifying areas for improvement.

It is also worth noting that the job descriptions analyzed in this study were drawn from a variety of industries and organizations, suggesting that these expectations and requirements may be broadly applicable across different sectors and contexts. However, it is possible that there may be some variations in the specific knowledge, skills, and tasks that are required for SMM positions depending on the specific needs and goals of an organization. Future research could explore these potential variations and how they may impact the preparation of entry-level professionals for SMM roles. Further, a future study could explore the differences between the way companies advertise SMM knowledge and skills in practitioner job descriptions and the way higher education institutions advertise SMM knowledge and skills in SMM professor job descriptions.

Future research could also address the efficacy of teaching SMM-related skills in marketing courses and explore the potential pros and cons of requiring coursework outside of the marketing department (e.g. Art or Communication) for social media-related minors and concentrations. Further, educators mentioned the importance of both theoretical and practical knowledge with regards to SMM education, though the ideal balance between these two sources of knowledge are debatable. While some educators emphasize theoretical knowledge for its long-term value, other educators emphasize practical, trending industry concepts and tools that entry-level career candidates should be able to apply. Thus, future pedagogical research could explore the dynamics of theoretical versus practical knowledge with respect to SMM education.

Although a variety of AI-supported tools have been available prior to the introduction of Chat GPT, an AI chatbot from OpenAI (<https://www.openai.com>), this open-source platform has created a large amount of both excitement and consternation from practitioners and academics. It is already revolutionizing work flows for social media professionals by quickly creating content, content calendars, and SEO strategies with minimal time and effort, making it a potential tool to be taught in the classroom. However, while it may be a powerful complement to professional work, and eventually academic coursework, there are many ethical issues regarding its use to complete assignments that both students and academics will need to address. While further disc

Discussion of AI tools is beyond the scope of the present research, the area is ripe with possibilities for future research on best practices for incorporating them into the classroom.

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