Graduate perceptions of social media education: A retrospective analysis

Karen Sutherland [1] and Krisztina Morris [1]

Corresponding author: Karen Sutherland (ksutherl@usc.edu.au)
[1] School of Business and Creative Industries, University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland

Abstract

Social media education encompasses the study and application of social media platforms and technologies. It also examines their broader societal impact. Social media pedagogy refers specifically to the teaching methods and instructional strategies used to deliver social media education. As an emerging discipline area within the Higher Education sector there is a scarcity of research devoted to its delivery, particularly within Australia. Underpinned by Human Capital Theory (HCT), our study addresses this gap by examining the perceptions of 100 university graduates who studied social media at an Australian regional university. The research identifies strengths and weaknesses in the design of social media curriculum to better prepare graduates for the workplace. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using live, multi-streaming social media videos. The interviews were recorded and broadcasted in real-time across Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. Interview transcripts were analysed using Grounded Theory. Graduates identified time-management and teamwork skills learned through university group assessments as the most beneficial curricula approaches to their current roles. Digital advertising skills and networking were prominent themes in skills and knowledge graduates wished they had learned as part of their degree. Additionally, graduates highlighted the importance of gaining practical industry experience, through work-integrated learning opportunities, such as internships and industry projects, while at university to allow for a smoother transition to the workplace. This study provides valuable insights for scholars and practitioners into the perceptions of university social media graduates, highlighting the skills deemed essential to excel in digital and professions more widely.

Keywords
social media education, graduate perceptions, skills gap, work-integrated learning, Human Capital Theory, graduate employability

Introduction

Social media education can be defined as the academic discipline focused on the study and application of social media platforms, technologies and their societal impact. Often, social media education is delivered within a multidisciplinary context such as marketing, communication, advertising, media and/or cultural perspectives (Kumar & Nanda, 2020). Still a relatively new offering in the Higher Education sector worldwide, social media education is particularly underrepresented within the Australian Higher Education sector when compared to more established disciplines such as marketing or communication (Childers, 2022). Despite the now ubiquitous nature of social media technology,

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22.58 million users within Australia alone and 5.17 billion worldwide, fewer than ten Australian universities offer specifically named social media courses, minor/major streams and degree programs (Hughes, 2024; Dixon, 2023). Furthermore, a scarcity of research exists focusing on the delivery of social media education globally, and even fewer studies have been conducted within Australia. Worldwide, the research to date investigating social media pedagogy has largely focused on the perspectives of current students, academics and employers, with limited studies exploring social media education from the perspectives of university graduates (Schmidt et al., 2014; Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015; Lampropoulos et al., 2021; Abney et al., 2019; Freberg & Kim, 2018; Geurin, 2023; Childers, 2022). Social media pedagogy refers specifically to the teaching methods and instructional strategies used to deliver social media education (Purvis & Beckingham, 2024). While it shares foundational principles with broader higher education pedagogy, social media pedagogy is distinct in its need to constantly evolve with rapidly changing platforms, integrate real-time industry practices and balance theoretical knowledge with practical application in a digital environment.

Work-integrated learning is defined as 'any approach that integrates theory with the practice of work, within a 'purposefully designed curriculum,' (Simpson-Smith, 2024, p. 30). A work-integrated learning approach which encompass internships, industry projects and workplace experiences during university study, has become increasingly important in social media education to address the skills gap between academic preparation and industry needs (Freberg & Kim, 2018). Through alumni/graduate perspectives, this research examines the skills gap between university education and industry requirements, particularly focusing on work-integrated learning opportunities, such as internships and industry projects, that bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application in social media education. These concepts are particularly relevant given the rapidly evolving nature of social media technology and industry requirements.

Our study, underpinned by Human Capital Theory (HCT), addresses this research gap through 100 semi-structured interviews with graduates from an Australian regional university, who studied at least one social media course as part of their undergraduate degree. The aim of this research is to gain insights into the skills acquired throughout their university studies to increase graduate employability, that have been most beneficial in their current careers, and skill gaps that have required additional on-the-job training. Graduate employability extends beyond simply securing employment. It encompasses the combination of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, benefiting themselves, the workforce and the broader economy (Yorke & Knight, 2007).

In this study, enhanced graduate employability manifests through graduates' ability to secure relevant employment in their field of study, successfully apply university-learned skills in workplace settings, progress from entry-level to management positions, develop entrepreneurial capabilities and demonstrate professional adaptability through continued learning.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to inform scholars and practitioners regarding graduate perceptions of social media education to highlight necessary skills and knowledge gaps required to succeed in a field such as digital marketing, communication and/or advertising. However, it must be noted that, while this study aims to provide insights into social media education more broadly, the findings are based on graduates from a single Australian regional university. Therefore, the results may reflect institution-specific experiences rather than systemic issues across all social media education units, degrees, courses or programs.

Social media education

Social media education is an emerging research area, likely because it is also a newly established discipline area for many universities around the world (Freberg & Kim, 2018; Geurin, 2023; Childers, 2022). The limited number of scholars who have investigated social media education and pedagogy have generally done so from three separate perspectives: educators, current students (including a

focus on social media use within education) and employers of university graduates to provide a range of insights into the topic of the design, delivery and impact of social media education at a university level. The literature from these three perspectives will be explored in the following sections.

Educator perspectives

One of the first studies conducted exploring social media pedagogy from an educator perspective was undertaken by Schmidt et al. (2014) who proposed a personalised social media learning platform that was optimised for mobile access and self-directed learning. This was soon followed by Crittenden and Crittenden (2015), who emphasised the need for integrating digital and social media marketing into the marketing curriculum; also highlighting the challenges in doing so, suggesting a paradigm shift in marketing education to keep pace with industry practices. Darwish (2019) continued the discourse relating to the integration of social media education into university media programs by conducting a meta-analysis and interviews with Arab media faculty and proposing a model that aligns with societal and cultural values and intends to prepare students for careers in digital and social media. Additional studies focusing on educator perspectives did not fall within the context of social media pedagogy, but on the use of social media as a pedagogical tool. For example, Sutherland et al.'s (2020) pilot study, which surveyed academics at an Australian university about the methods, attitudes and strategies they used to integrate social media into teaching, without focusing social media pedagogy specifically found social media was used to broadcast announcements to students and that female academics used it more than their male counterparts. Additionally, Lampropoulos et al. (2021) conducted an extensive longitudinal study spanning 10 years and drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, which found increased student engagement, motivation and collaboration through the use of social media as a tool and highlighted the importance of proper infrastructure, security and privacy. All studies reviewed focusing on educators' perspectives explore social media educators (or its impact as a tool on education delivery) while students are completing their university degree. Student perspectives are examined below.

Student perspectives

While numerous studies have investigated students' perceptions of social media as a pedagogical tool for enhancing communication and collaboration in various disciplines, few have explored student perspectives of social media education as a standalone discipline (Cooke, 2017; Cook, 2022; Neier & Zayer, 2015; Ansari & Khan, 2020). Sutherland and Ho (2017) surveyed 81 undergraduate university students' perceptions of social media proficiency and its impact on their future employability. The key finding from this study was that, while students deemed social media education to be valuable, participants preferred social media skills to be taught in optional classes with a focus on generic competencies. In contrast, Abney et al. (2019) conducted a study using a combination of student surveys, Twitter analytics and the linguistic analysis of Tweets to explore the use of social media to connect students across universities and engage with the business community. This study's findings revealed increased student engagement, learning satisfaction and students' professional communication skills.

Employer perspectives

The greatest concentration of studies investigating social media education have been from the employer perspective. Schmidt et al. (2014) first explored both industry and academic perspectives to design a personalised learning platform for social media education in vocational training to enhance learning and support trainees, teachers and supervisors in vocational education. Next, Freberg and Kim (2018) interviewed 20 industry professionals in the United States to identify industry perspectives on desired social media curriculum and faculty competencies. The Freberg and Kim (2018) study highlighted the need for practical skills in content creation, marketing, public relations principles,

writing, and analytics and emphasised a gap between academic preparation and industry expectations in social media education.

An Australian study focusing on the employers of university graduates found public relations and customer service skills as the most sought-after skills and addressed the need for strategic communication and crisis management skills as also important for university graduates to possess (Sutherland et al., 2020). Furthermore, Geurin (2023) surveyed National Governing Bodies in the U.S. and conducted in-depth interviews with communication personnel to examine the benefits and challenges of social media use among athletes. The Geurin (2023) study highlighted the lack of consistent social media training for Youth Olympic Games athletes and its importance in building athletes' personal brands and managing potential risks, but this was not necessarily proposed to occur within a higher education context.

In the only study that bears a slight similarity to ours, that is focusing specifically on the perspectives of social media graduates, Childers (2022) utilised student surveys and in-depth interviews with 12 alumni professionals to examine the evolution of student expectations and alumni perspectives on social media education over a decade. Results from Childers' (2022) study revealed a gap between student expectations and industry needs and highlighted the importance of practical skills.

Our study differs from those conducted previously because it explores the perspectives of a much larger sample size of 100 graduates who studied at least one social media course as part of their university degree. Our research aims to identify the skills and knowledge of greatest benefit to the sample's current careers, and those required that their university education did not provide, plus advice graduates provide to current students to succeed in the workplace.

Theoretical framework

The concept of HCT is the framework underpinning our study. At its core, HCT deals with the attributes of individuals and how they contribute to the economic process in the marketplace (Sotula & Anning, 2022). Components of HCT include the knowledge, skills and health of individuals, with a strong focus on how education can enhance these aspects, resulting in a significant impact on individual earnings and economic development (Slaughter et al., 2015). The basic premise of HCT is that human capital is an ongoing investment, particularly in the realm of education and training, which is argued can lead to not only the economic growth of an individual, but also to the wider community in which they reside (Moreno-López et al., 2022).

Increased productivity resulting in economic stability is the main premise under which HCT operates (Boon et al., 2018). Nadezhina and Avduevskaia (2021) note that various scholars, namely Schultz, Becker, and Mincer, made significant contributions to the study of HCT in the context of education through exploring the positive impact education can have on the productivity and efficiency of workers. This notion is also highlighted by Nadezhina and Avduevskaia (2021) in their own work.

While HCT provides a valuable framework for understanding the relationship between education and economic outcomes, scholars have identified several limitations to the theory (Marginson, 2019; Gillies, 2015; Loumpourdi, 2021). Critics argue that HCT can oversimplify the complex relationship between education and employment by focusing primarily on economic returns while potentially overlooking social, cultural and structural factors that influence career success (Marginson, 2019; Gillies, 2015; Loumpourdi, 2021). Additionally, the theory has been critiqued for its assumption of rational decision-making in educational investments and its tendency to reduce education to purely economic terms, potentially neglecting the broader social and personal development aspects of higher education (Marginson, 2019; Gillies, 2015; Loumpourdi, 2021). Despite these limitations, the theory remains useful for our study as it provides a framework for examining how specific educational experiences and skill development contribute to graduates' professional capabilities and employment outcomes.

Furthermore, our study aims to identify deficiencies in the social media education provided to the graduates in the research sample. Our analysis highlights the need for regular curriculum development to ensure alignment for greater graduate preparedness. From a macro level HCT applied in the context of our study can assist in providing insights into broader questions surrounding the Return on Investment and economic value of Higher Education and how the findings from this research may influence educational policy in terms of enhancing graduate employability and outcomes.

As highlighted, social media education is an emerging research area and newly established discipline in many universities worldwide (Perez et al., 2023). The limited research that has been undertaken investigating social media education has focused mostly from the perspectives of educators, current students, and employers of graduates. A research gap exists in better understanding the perspectives of graduates who studied at least one social media unit at a university level. This study aims to address that gap by drawing on HCT, to identify curriculum deficiencies in essential skills gained from social media education and the broader implications for enhancing graduate employability, outcomes and higher education's value. Therefore, the scarcity of social media education research focusing on graduate perspectives has prompted the following research questions:

RQ1. What skills and knowledge gained at university do graduates who studied one or more social media courses find most beneficial in their current career?

RQ2. What skills and knowledge have graduates who studied one or more social media courses needed in their current career that they did not learn at university?

RQ3. What advice do university graduates who studied one or more social media courses provide to current students to help them succeed when transitioning to the workplace?

Method

This study adopted a qualitative methodological retrospective analytical approach. To address the research questions a total of 100 semi-structured interviews were conducted between the 3rd of June 2020 and the 24th of April 2023. As data was collected both during and after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, variation in response consistency may be present. The participants were all graduates from the same Australian regional university, who all studied one or more social media courses as part of their degree. This regional university was selected as the setting for this study because it offered a minor, major and undergraduate degree program in social media. The series of interviews was live streamed in real-time as they were being conducted using Streamyard to Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn under the project name of *Like, Share, Follow* (Sutherland & Morris, 2022) and the recording was later uploaded to YouTube. Graduates were recruited for the study using purposive sampling via LinkedIn in combination with snowball sampling where graduate participants were asked to nominate another relevant graduate for the study. Purposive sampling was deemed a relevant method because it allowed researchers to select participants who possessed the specific characteristics directly relevant to the research questions (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024; Ayub & Khaleel, 2024). Additionally, Snowball sampling was selected as an appropriate recruitment technique because it allowed the researchers to access graduates who had become disengaged with the university but not their peers (Parker et al., 2019; Leighton et al., 2021). Graduates could directly apply to participate by contacting the researchers via email or LinkedIn.

Ethics approval was granted from the researcher's home institution (Project Number A201390) and required participant consent. To counteract any ethical concerns (e.g. privacy, consent, content sensitivity etc.) regarding the use of live streaming as a method of interview data collection, all participants were briefed before the interview regarding the questions that would be asked, and the potential risks associated with live streaming. Participants were required to sign a consent form to ensure they understood and accepted these risks before the interview commenced. Participants were

also provided with the option of deleting the interview from social media channels (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube) after the live stream if they preferred.

This was never requested by any participant in the study. The only request was from one participant not to be tagged in the posts containing the interview, which was honoured without issue. The interview schedule (see Appendix) contained eight questions relating to the participant's career journey, university, and social media experience. The interview approach was aligned with the approach leveraged by Kinash et al.'s (2017) study exploring when university students and graduates know the career they want to undertake.

Data analysis

For the purpose of this study, the tasks of data collection, data analysis were conducted in an iterative process. This method enabled us to develop initial open coding by breaking down the transcripts of existing data from the first group of interviews into excerpts, then group them into categories. As the number of completed interviews progressed the researchers analysed new data to compare codes as part of the axial coding process to define the central idea and as the last step, develop selective coding.

The complex relationships presented by the coding between concepts combined with the volume of the data determined Leximancer software as the specific tool for content analysis for this research project. The Leximancer program is a concept discovery system operating at the 'almost fully automated end of the scale' (Kabanoff & Brown, 2008, p. 154). Following this methodological approach of cyclical analysis allowed the researchers to ascertain strong statements and emerging concepts as well as to verify the quality or overall importance of a potentially substantial core idea, leading into a significant construction of a new theory.

Procedure

Once the live stream of an episode was complete, the video was immediately transcribed, cleaned and converted to upload onto Leximancer for coding. Further, a manual analysis was completed to determine data on demographics. The combined use of these tools allowed an elaborate exploration of the data and showcased how each method contributed toward understanding graduate perspectives, as is outlined in the subsequent sections.

Leximancer

Leximancer is an Australian-developed text-mining or lexicographic tool that 'can be used to analyse the content of collections of textual documents and to visually display the selected information' (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). The key capabilities of Leximancer explicitly relate to the objectives of this research project since the software searches for context and goal-dependent models of meaning in texts and whether these meanings are changing over time (Angus et al., 2013). For our study, Leximancer was selected due to the large volume of interview data to be analysed and for its ability to identify key themes from the data set.

However, Leximancer does not automatically present a definition for each concept. Words are 'concepts' that become 'themes' when connected in a cluster. The software's concept grouping function identifies seed words that appear close to each other, as part of the gradual open to axial coding process once comparing new data to existing data and demonstrate contextual similarity which is then presented in a visual Concept Map or converted into a Concept Cloud (Leximancer, 2021). To further clear the data, seed words were manually adjusted in the learning process of the software when completing the selective coding process. This was to define highly relevant relationships and simultaneously to avoid words that are negatively correlated with the concept (e.g., words that rarely appear in sentence blocks containing the concept and frequently appear elsewhere).

Large datasets of communication are challenging traditional, human-driven approaches to content analysis. However, blending computational and manual techniques can preserve the strengths of traditional content analysis, with its systematic rigour and contextual sensitivity (Lewis et al., 2013). During the open coding process, the data indicated valuable demographic statistics offering supportive background information about the interview participants. Deploying manual content analysis provided an opportunity to apply codes to gender, degree completed, minor and major orientation within the degree, completion of undergraduate and/or postgraduate degrees, industry experience while studying and employment status at the time of the interview. Gathering and analysing the demographic data manually allowed us to further contextualise the graduates' educational background and circumstances and draw direct relationships between degrees completed and student employment through the axial coding process.

# Results

Sample Demographics

The manual content analysis revealed that, out of the 100 interview participants, 92% were female, and only 8% male. Next from the requests sent to prospective participants in the study, females responded predominantly more than males resulting in a much larger number of female interviewees. Further analysis exposed that the majority of the graduates completed a Bachelor of Public Relations degree (16%), Bachelor of Business degree (15%), closely followed by a Bachelor of Communication (12%), and Bachelor of Creative Industries (11%). Other degrees included Bachelor of Journalism (7%), Bachelor of Education (1%), Bachelor of Health Science (1%), and 2% of the participants completed the Undergraduate Certificate in Social Media. The remaining 35% of participants was labelled 'Unknown' when analysing the responses. The question of what degree/course the participants had completed at university was not included in the original set of questions developed for the semi-structured interview series. Only 65 participants out of a 100 discussed this information as part of the live stream interview. Further, only 17 out of those 65 graduates identified both their degrees (undergraduate or postgraduate) and the orientation of their major/minor, therefore collating the data of the completed degrees and stream of courses within was not possible.

When identifying the stream of courses the participants completed, the data revealed that 34% of those interviewees who disclosed this information were completing a Social Media Minor (17), followed by Marketing Major 30% (15), then Social Media Major at 16% (8). 10% of the interviewees completed a Graphic Design Major (5), 4% of the participants completed a Marketing Minor (2), 4% a Public Relations Minor (2), and 2% completed a Public Relations Major (1).

According to the data, 56% of interviewees were undergraduate, another 9% completed a postgraduate degree, while the remaining 35% was categorised as Unknown. The analysis identified that out of the 9 postgraduates 45% completed an Honours degree (4), 22% completed a Doctor of Philosophy (2) and 33% undertook a Masters degree (3).

When enquiring about employment status, the interview participants disclosed a 99% employment rate, with only one graduate actively looking for work at the time of the interview. Further analysis of the data uncovered graduates were gaining employment in their selected fields relevant to their degrees (Figure 1). Twenty-eight graduates were working as a marketing manager or coordinator, 16 graduates as a social media manager or coordinator, 12 as digital content creator or graphic designer. Roles identified by the graduates such as coordinator, manager and assistant were grouped together due to similarities in duties and requirements. Others fulfilled roles as freelance consultants (8) or started their own business (10). The remaining 16 students spread across various roles within the fields of marketing, education, and journalism. When asking graduates about their employment status and gaining industry experience while studying, 91% of participants confirmed that they were employed while completing their degree.

Figure 1: Position of employment
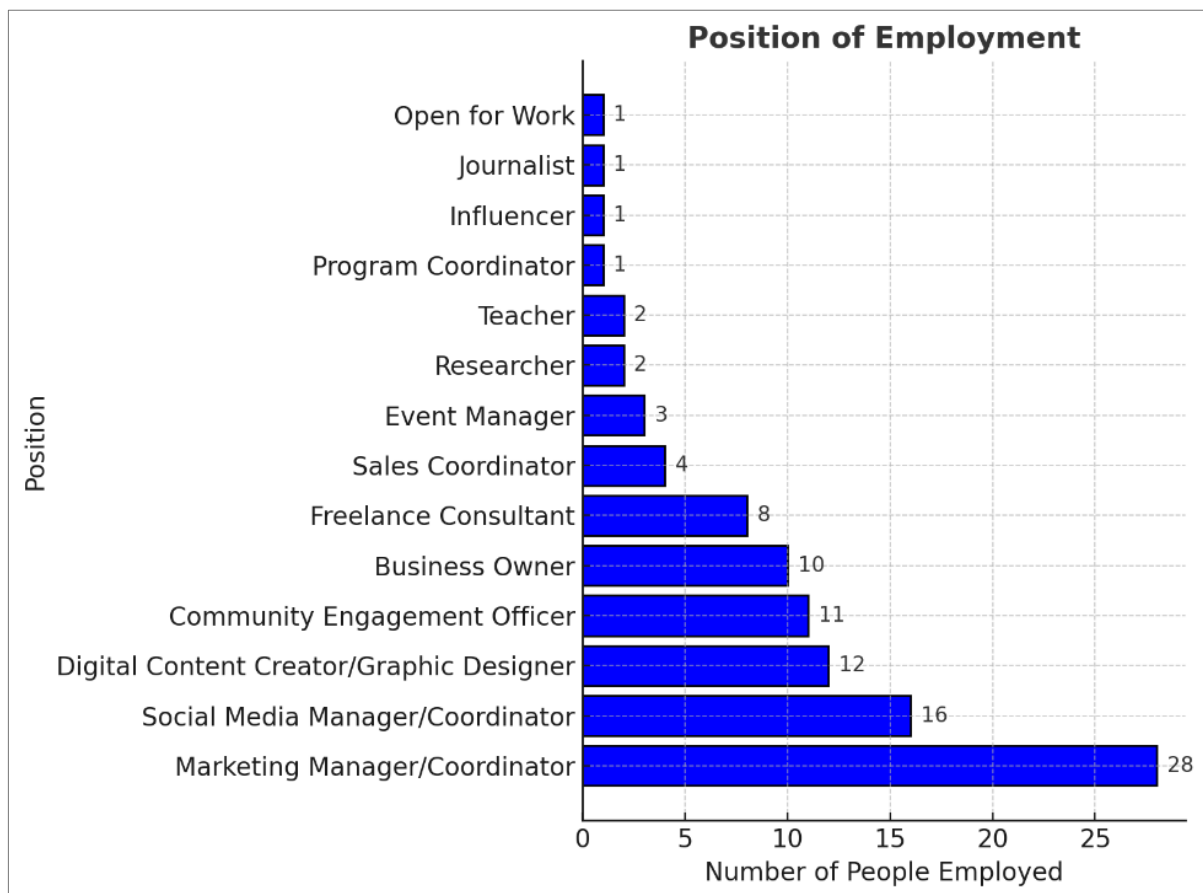
According to the participants, 31% completed an internship or held a volunteer role, 14% worked as social media freelancer, 11% worked under various professional services, while 10% fulfilled the role of social media manager, 10% of the role of graphic designer and 9% worked as a marketing assistant. Only 15% of the graduates had no or irrelevant work experience while completing their degree (Figure 2). Overall, 85% of the participants gained industry experience while still studying.

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Figure 2: Type of employment while studying

Type of Employment while Studying

(Bar chart. X-axis: Number of Students (0–30+). Y-axis: Type of Employment.)

- Retail: 6
- No Work Experience: 9
- Marketing Assistant: 9
- Graphic Designer: 10
- Social Media Manager: 10
- Professional Services: 11
- Social Media Freelancer: 14
- Volunteer/Internship (unpaid): 31
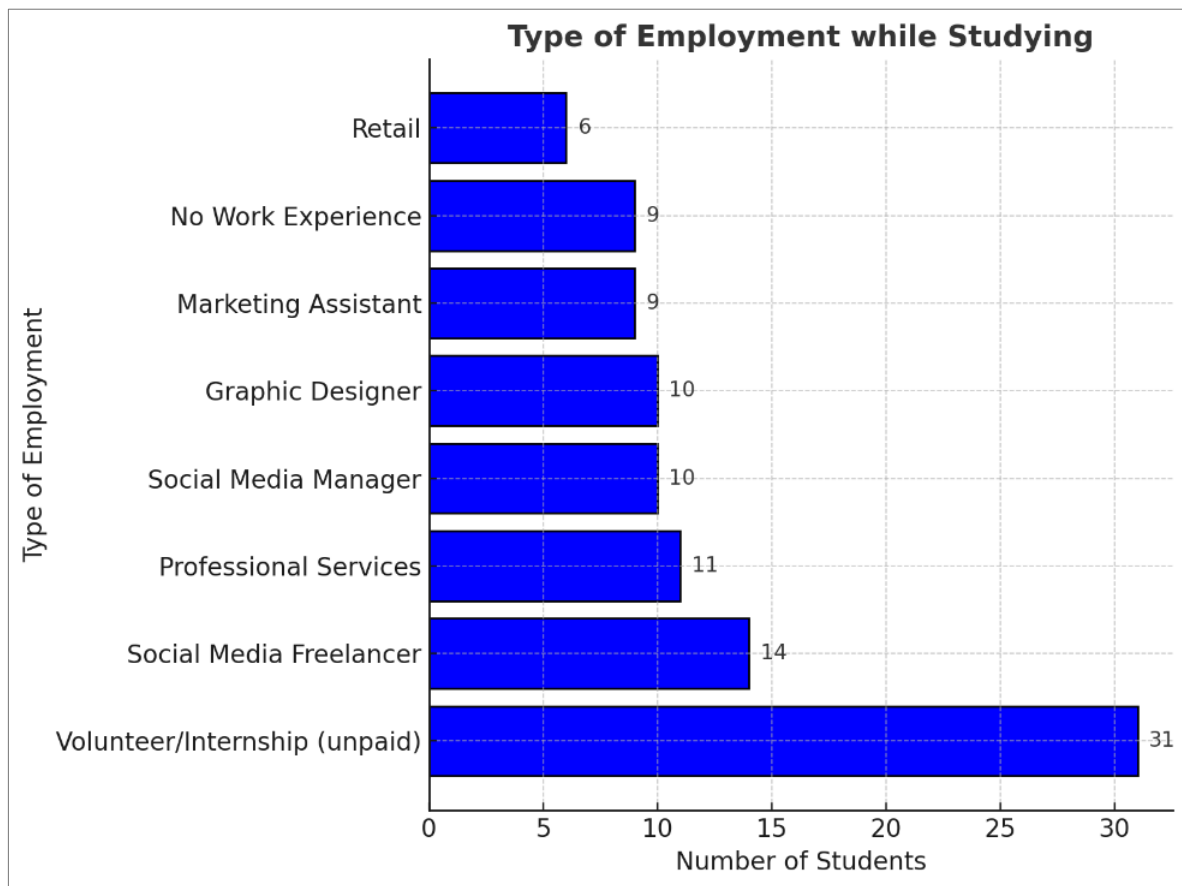
Leximancer analysis results

Results from the Leximancer analysis of the interview data has been organised under each of the research questions for greater clarity.

> **RQ1:** What skills and knowledge gained at university do graduates who studied social media find most beneficial in their current career?

When analysing graduate responses to discover what skills and knowledge they learned at university that was beneficial at their workplace post-graduation, the data revealed that the most frequently occurring themes were time management, teamwork, and learning skills in general. Participants cited time management 25 times as a key skill, using specific phrases in the context of university and studying such as 'You have to have really good time management' (Travel Social Media Influencer, Episode 28), and 'Self-management and time management is definitely key' (Digital Marketing Agency Owner, Episode 20).

When examining other relationships connected to time management (Figure 3, Points 1-9) the concept cloud view identified (marked with red lines) other themes such as confidence, valuable, opportunity, business, important, successful, skills, knowledge, helped, university and learned. Remarkably, the cloud displays connections to other relevant themes too, such as professional, career, and advice (Figure 3, Points 10-12), indicating an overlap where graduates wished for current students to focus on the particular skill of time management, based on their experience.

Figure 3: Concept map - Time and management relationships
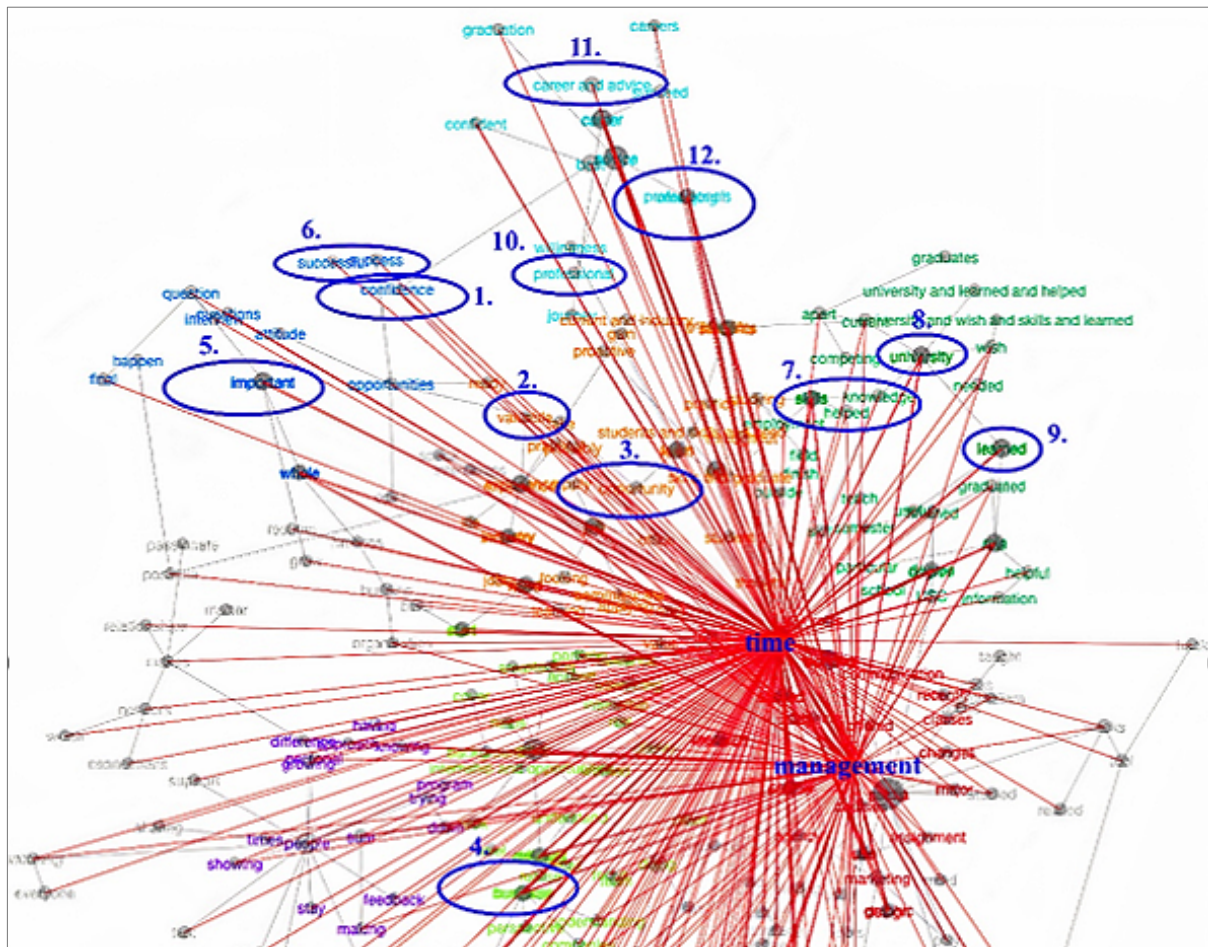
When uncovering meaningful relationships between team and work, 17 graduates identified that learning in a group or team environment contributed to their success when working as a member of a team, discussing that:

> It was a kind of workplace mentality with presentations. You're in your group, you have a preliminary presentation about halfway through, just to make sure you're on the right track, like you would as if you're in a workplace with bosses. They provide feedback, you address it. And then with your final presentation, you book a time slot with your tutor. You go and you present, everyone has to present. And then you have to sit down and justify everything you've done. They have questions just to make sure that everyone in your team is around everything. It's not one person that's done all the work' (Social Media Account Manager, Episode 89),

and

> I think teamwork is extremely important. If you can work as part of a team. Obviously, in the real world, you are a part of a team, whether you're working from home or in the office, I think that's extremely important. And to make sure that you get along with everybody, and that you know, what your roles are within that group. That's a big one for me.' (Social Media Manager, Episode 57).

The cloud view display of the relationship between team and work indicated a strong connection to a number of other themes, such as *people, valuable, important, experience, graduate students, knowledge, university, helped, learned, graduated, role, media*, and *content* (Figure 4, Points 1-9). Further, similarly to time management, the themes of *team* and *work* are also connected with *best, career* and *advice*, (Figure 4, Point 10).

Figure 4: Concept map - Team and work relationships
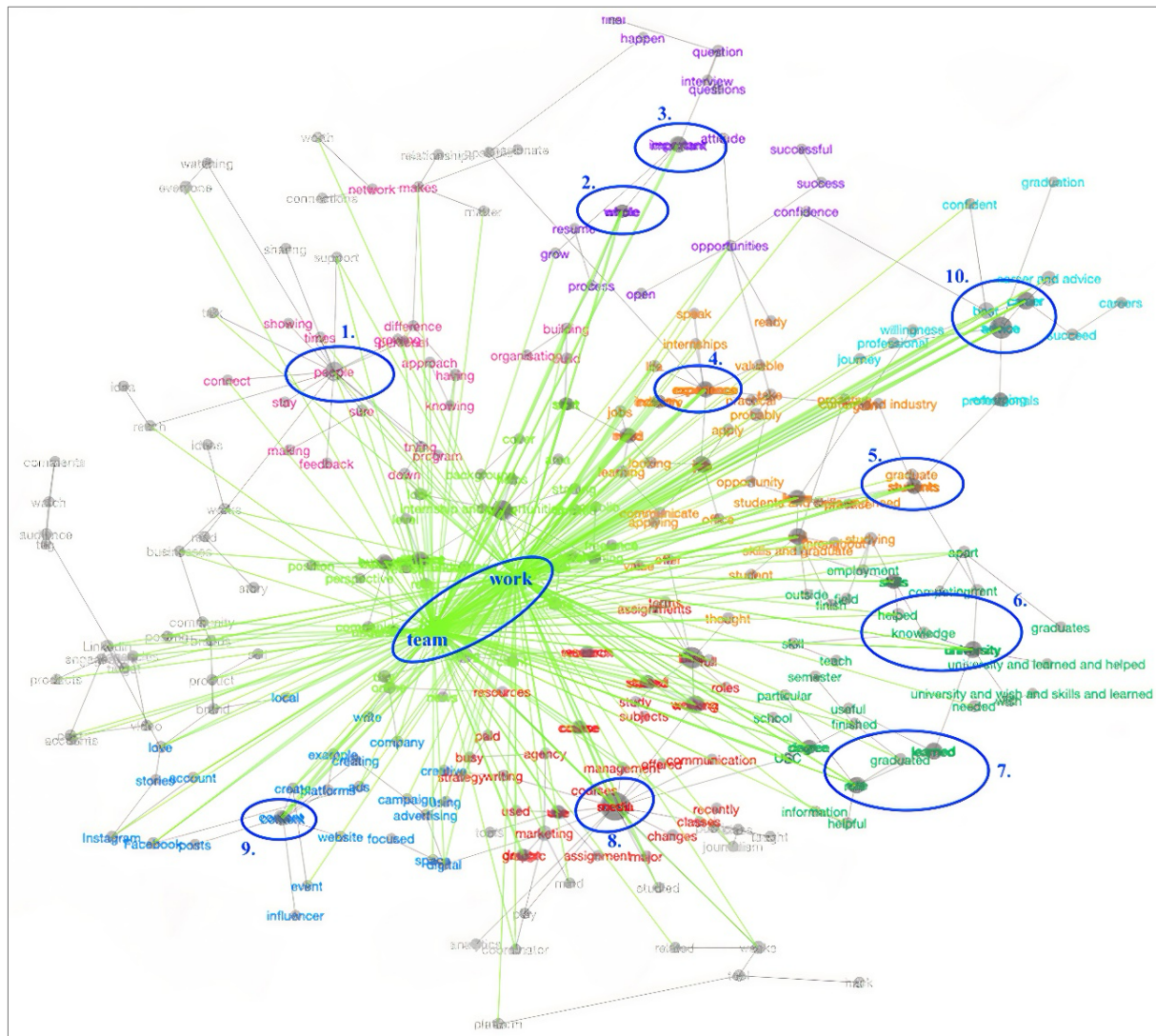
When graduates were asked the question about the skills and knowledge they learned at university, 57% percent of the participants identified working with real clients as part of their university assessments was the most important skill. Thirty-six per cent of graduates discussed that knowing how to apply theoretical research into real-life work situations was an essential skill they learned at university. Twenty-five per cent of graduates identified learning management skills in general as beneficial to prepare students to navigate their own professional development after university. Finally, 17% of graduates directly mentioned that understanding the process of continuous learning even after graduating was the type of knowledge that provided opportunities in the workplace an essential skill with the ever-evolving nature of social media. The previous two findings align directly with HCT strong emphasis on investing in education and training to enhance the productivity and efficiency of workers (Boon et al., 2018; Nadezhina & Avduevskaia, 2021).

RQ2: What skills and knowledge have graduates who studied social media needed in their current career that they did not learn at university?

When discussing the topic of what skills and knowledge the graduates wished they learned while at university, an overwhelming 99% mentioned that learning how to do paid social media advertising on socials would have been beneficial.

I've been diving into the world of ads. And it's definitely something that I haven't had an opportunity to learn about in the past. I've been diving headfirst into research and chatting to people as much as I can (Communication Manager, Episode 97).

and

I think being at university, something I really struggled with was getting into the digital marketing side of things. I think that everything is online at the moment, and I wish we kind of learned how to run Google ads, or even Facebook ads, because in hindsight, yes, I could go online and look at it and go, yep, I know how to do this (Marketing Specialist, Episode 95).

A further 29% of participants wished they learned social media analytics as part of their courses. While not specifically in a social media context, HCT also emphasises the importance of measurement and evaluation (Slaughter, et al., 2015; Sotula & Anning, 2022). Sixty per cent of the interviewees also identified that having opportunities to network and understanding how to network would have been beneficial for career building while still at university. Again, these findings highlight a clear deficiency in preparing graduates with necessary practical skills to meet industry expectations. This was supported by a need for more confidence building while still studying:

... interacting with people with more experience or who were older than me, which is a lot of what I have to do now. A lot. It took a little bit of preparation, a little bit of confidence boosting to be able to do that (Account Coordinator, Episode 41).

and

What I need to know I'm probably, just be a bit more confident, don't freak out as much. I was panicking a little bit towards the end of my degree. But people are just people, these managers, places you're applying to work, they're more than happy to answer your conversation, will answer your questions and it's okay to make mistakes. I was really afraid of my first mistake, but as long as you show that you're committed, you'll be okay (Marketing Manager, Episode 81).

The need for learning how to have confidence as an essential skill for new graduates was discussed 77 times within the overall project.

RQ3: What advice do university graduates who studied social media provide to current students to help them succeed when transitioning to the workplace?

When prompting the graduates to provide career advice to current students on how to succeed in the workplace, the analysis identified themes connected to *career* and *advice*, such as *team, work, confidence, authenticity, learning, time* and *management, attitude, internship* and *experience* (See Figure 5, Points 1-9).

Figure 5: Concept map - Career and advice relationships
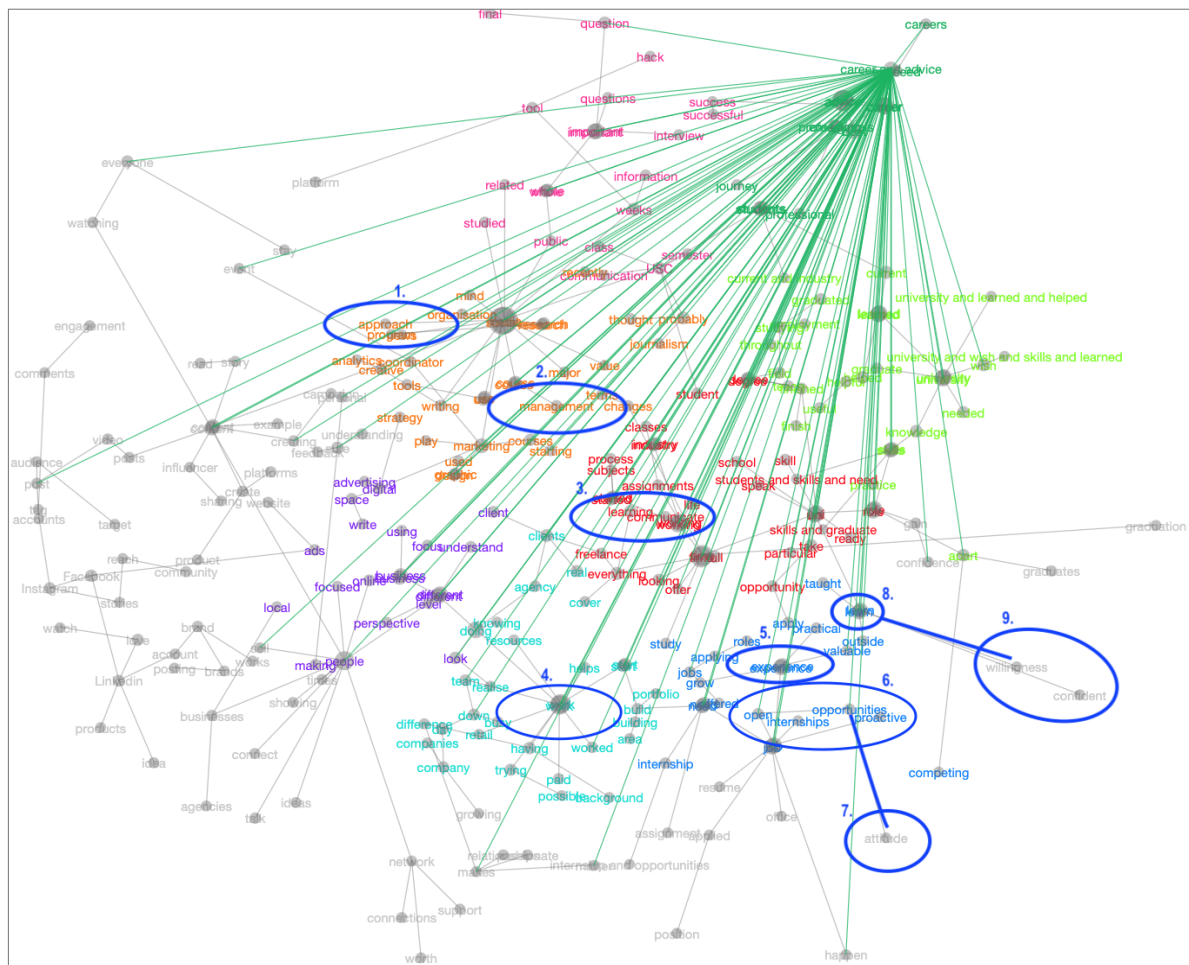
Evidently, graduates were offering advice to current students based on their own experiences, as it was previously identified within the overlaps between skills learned and skills they wished they had learned. Time management was identified by 25% of graduates and teamwork by 17% of graduates. Time management and teamwork are essential skills for university graduates overall, not only those who studied social media.

Additionally, 23% of graduates highlighted the importance of having the right attitude as an emerging professional applying for a job, and most importantly, when starting a new position:

> *And the connections, and the networks that you can sort of build along the way can be invaluable later on. Really, just trying to get your foot in the door as soon as possible. But as I was saying, (…) the first second third fourth internship I applied for, it's about being persistent and keeping a positive attitude. And, just try and try and get yourself out there. And internships are a great place to start, I think I was working within four weeks, five weeks, I had a paid part time role.* (Marketing Manager, Episode 96).

This advice was coupled with believing oneself and having enough self-confidence (77%) to apply for jobs and complete tasks at the workplace as an emerging professional.

> *I just remember like taking from that, but I think the main thing is when you go into those sorts of situations is to be yourself and like, sort of fake it 'til you make it with confidence. I think that set me apart just because I had confidence in the skills that I had worked hard to learn and I was really proud of myself. I think just bringing in energy was what set me apart from others* (Digital Content Creator, Episode 16).

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Eighty-five per cent of interview participants advised on the benefits of completing internships while studying, the graduates directly related internships to better job opportunities, again confirming the importance of gaining practical experience while studying at university. Finally, 17% of graduates provided advice to current students on the importance of continuous learning and professional development for better career choices after graduation.

Discussion

Our study of 100 graduates who studied social media at a regional Australian university revealed several key findings that provide valuable insights into social media education and graduate employability. First, graduates identified time management and teamwork skills developed through group assessments as the most beneficial aspects of their university education for their current careers. Second, graduates expressed a need for more practical training in social media advertising, analytics, networking skills and opportunities to build professional confidence. Third, graduates strongly recommended that current students gain practical industry experience through internships and work-integrated learning opportunities while studying to facilitate a smoother transition to the workplace.

The findings from our study align with Human Capital Theory's emphasis on education as an investment that enhances graduates' professional capabilities and employment outcomes. Graduates consistently emphasised the value of practical, transferable skills that directly contribute to workplace productivity, a central tenet of HCT as described by Boon et al. (2018) and Nadezhina and Avduevskaia (2021).

Time management and teamwork emerged as the most valuable skills gained during university studies. While these foundational skills extend beyond social media education specifically, they represent essential human capital that enhances workplace productivity across disciplines. The graduates' emphasis on these skills demonstrates the broader contribution of university education to building transferable competencies, supporting HCT's focus on developing workplace capabilities (Moreno-López et al., 2022).

The results indicated that graduates particularly valued university experiences that provided opportunities for collaborative learning and practical application. Whether through group assessments or projects involving real clients, graduates appreciated learning approaches that simulated workplace environments. This finding reinforces the importance of experiential learning in social media education, where theory and practice must be effectively integrated to prepare students for rapid industry changes. The strong correlation between industry experience and positive employment outcomes aligns with HCT's proposition that practical skill development enhances individual economic value (Sotula & Anning, 2022).

A significant finding specific to social media education was graduates' expressed need for more practical training in social media advertising and analytics. Nearly all participants (99%) mentioned that learning paid social media advertising would have been beneficial, while 29% wished they had received more training in social media analytics. This finding highlights opportunities for curriculum enhancement in these technical areas that are highly valued in the digital industry. From an HCT perspective, addressing these gaps would further enhance graduates' industry readiness and economic potential.

Beyond technical skills, graduates emphasised the importance of developing professional confidence and networking abilities. Many reported struggling with self-confidence when required to perform unfamiliar tasks in their early career roles. Additionally, 60% of graduates wished they had received more guidance on professional networking while at university. These findings align with HCT's broader conceptualisation of human capital as encompassing both technical and interpersonal competencies that contribute to workplace success (Moreno-López et al., 2022).

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The thematic analysis revealed a strong relationship between graduates' university experiences and the advice they offered to current students. Graduates consistently recommended that current students develop time management and teamwork skills, build professional confidence, maintain authenticity, and cultivate a positive attitude. Most importantly, 85% of graduates advised students to pursue internships and work with real clients while studying, recognising these experiences as providing significant advantages in the competitive job market.

When comparing our results with previous research, we found that graduates highly valued ongoing education and professional development, consistent with HCT's emphasis on continuous investment in human capital. While our findings regarding the need for practical social media advertising skills, analytics training, networking opportunities, and confidence-building did not feature prominently in previous research, they align with the broader theme of misalignment between university education and industry needs identified by Childers (2022), Freberg and Kim (2018), and Crittenden and Crittenden (2015).

Our study specifically identified areas where social media education could be strengthened to better prepare graduates for workplace demands. While graduates expressed they would have benefited from more training in social media advertising and analytics, they also emphasised the value of gaining practical industry experience through work-integrated learning opportunities. This finding reinforces previous research by Freberg and Kim (2018) that highlighted the importance of practical skills development in social media education, particularly in analytics. However, our study specifically adds new dimensions by highlighting graduates' emphasis on the need for social media advertising skills, teamwork capabilities, networking opportunities and confidence-building – areas not prominently featured in previous research.

The distinction between our findings and those of previous studies may be attributed to our exclusive focus on graduate perspectives, rather than incorporating the views of educators, current students or employers as in previous research. By centring graduate voices, our study offers unique insights into the lived experiences of those who have navigated both university education and workplace transitions in the social media field.

Recommendations

Our study builds on existing evidence that social media education lacks practical skills development, particularly in the form of analytical and social media advertising skills, which signals a critical curriculum gap. These findings have profound implications for social media education at the university level. To address this, universities should revisit and re-design course offerings to include comprehensive modules on these skills. Collaborations with industry professionals can aid when designing courses that are not only theoretically sound but also practically applicable.

This research also reinforces the idea that university students gain more relevant knowledge when placed in a real-life learning environment. Given the number of participants reporting the benefits of internships and their direct impact on employability, the integration of practical, industry-relevant experiences within the curriculum is crucial for preparing graduates for the ever-changing landscape of the digital profession. Incorporating internships, real-life projects and collaborations with businesses and organisations into the curriculum can provide students with a hands-on understanding of the challenges and dynamics of the digital workspace. The identification of time-management and teamwork skills as fundamental assets suggests a need for a pedagogical shift toward more collaborative learning approaches within the curriculum. Universities should consider fostering cultures across all disciplines, not only in social media education, to encourage greater opportunities for teamwork, both in assessment-based and practical learning settings to align educational outcomes with industry expectations. Moreover, the emphasis on confidence-building, networking skills, authenticity and having a positive attitude underscores the importance of a holistic skill development. Integrating these skills into the curriculum across disciplines will contribute to producing graduates

who are not only social media proficient but also equipped with the soft skills necessary for success in the dynamic field of social media.

Limitations

While the sample was of a significant size, this study included graduates from only one university. This posed an obvious limitation. Further research could include and compare graduate perceptions of social media education from universities around Australia or even internationally to assess graduate perceptions across various regions and cultures. Although our findings suggest significant gaps in practical skills development, particularly in digital advertising and analytics, it is important to acknowledge that these deficiencies may be specific to this university's curriculum rather than indicative of social media education more broadly.

Conclusion

Our study, underpinned by HCT, explored three key research questions through the perceptions of 100 graduates from a regional university in Australia who studied social media. In addressing RQ1 regarding beneficial skills and knowledge gained at university, graduates overwhelmingly valued real-world experiences through internships, group-work and time-management skills. These practical experiences provided the sample with tangible capabilities that directly translated to workplace success. For RQ2, which examined skills and knowledge gaps in their university education, graduates identified significant deficiencies in digital advertising capabilities, networking skills and confidence-building. The stark gap in digital advertising knowledge particularly highlights a critical area for curriculum development in social media education. Finally, RQ3 sought advice for current students, with graduates emphasising the fundamental importance of gaining practical industry experience while studying and developing strong teamwork capabilities. This advice reinforces the value of experiential learning in preparing graduates for workplace success. Overall, this study has confirmed the need for a greater focus on students gaining real-world experience, opportunities to build team-work skills and a greater understanding of digital advertising within social media courses within a Higher Education environment. This knowledge will better equip educators to design and deliver social media pedagogy (and pedagogy in general) that aligns more closely with industry expectations, increasing graduate preparedness and employability in the process.

Contributions against CReDIT

K.S.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Project administration; K.M.: Software, Data Curation, Visualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

1. The last time I saw you at (university name) in (year), please share with me your career journey from then until now.

2. What has been the best piece of advice that you have received during your career journey?

3. What set you apart from other graduates you were competing with?

4. What did you learn at university that has helped you the most?

5. What skill didn't you learn at university that you have needed?

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6. Tell me the best social media related thing you have learned in the last two weeks?

7. What advice would you give to other social media students about how to succeed professionally?

8. Who do you like, share and follow?

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