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Social media has enhanced integration between marketing and public relations. As such, public relations professionals have had to adapt and grow their knowledge and skillsets to stay relevant and current throughout the evolution of the digital landscape (Gesualdi, 2019). One of the growing areas of focus for public relations professionals has been customer service skills online. This specialization, often referred to as social care or social customer service, has been promoted and discussed heavily in industry circles and publications, but not in academic research. This study focuses on the survey results from 396 employers exploring the social media skills they most prefer university graduates to possess when entering the workforce. The results indicate that public relations and customer service are the social media skills most sought after by employers of university graduates ahead of proficiency in areas such as social media content production, strategy development and analytics. The potential implications of these findings to the public relations profession are examined and future research is also discussed.

1. Introduction

Social media are collaborative technological tools that have penetrated and altered workplace activities and interactions, allowing user generated content to be circulated and exchanged on an insurmountable scale (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Qin & Men, 2019; Yang & Kent, 2014). Since the late 1990s, studies (Coombs, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 1998) have examined the application of digital technologies to the public relations practice and have extolled the interactive capability of the Internet. Social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube have more than 4.4 billion monthly active users collectively (Facebook, 2019; YouTube, 2019). As such, entire generations have experienced social media as a ubiquitous part of everyday life. Yet, these demographically defined groups, often referred to as Generations Y and Z, are not always well defined in terms of their exact age parameters. However, Dimock (2019) from the Pew Research Center defines Generation Y (also known as Millennials) as aged 23–38 years and Generation Z, aged 7–22. In the context of our study, Generations Y and Z may be perceived as ‘digital natives’ and may be expected to be savvy users of digital technologies, while employers may have particular needs and expectations with regard to their online presence as well as work related digital skills (Echenique, Molias, & Bullen, 2015). Thus, the key question posed in this paper relates to employer expectations of university graduates’ social media skills. While academics increasingly engage students with social media within communication courses and incorporate social media courses across disciplines, employer perspectives and needs are often overlooked or assumed, despite the employment of candidates with social media skills increasing by 39% (McKinley Marketing Partners, 2018, p. 13).

This paper investigates how employers in Australia responded to the rise of social media, the emergence of new technology in the workplace and its impact on the hiring of university graduates. In this regard, employers of university graduates, from a range of sectors were surveyed to examine the areas of social media proficiency they considered important for entry level graduates. Earlier studies (Curtis et al., 2010; DiStaso et al., 2011) examined public relations practitioners’ use of social media and their tendencies to adopt new technology in everyday communication activities. This study however considered employer views on social media and graduate employability from a wide range of industry sectors. To gain a deeper insight into employer perceptions it is necessary to understand the concept of social media proficiency in a wider public relations context, particularly in relation to organization-public relations, public relations skills and previous research conducted into employer perspectives on university graduates’ social media skills.
1.1. Organization-public relationships

There is substantial public relations research that has focused on the organization-public relationships (OPR) perspective on social media (Kent, 2013; Namisango & Kang, 2019; Valenti, 2015). Social media has become a rising area of focus and specialization within public relations, and many have used the OPR perspective as their lens to explore how relationships are formed, maintained, and built between organizations and their publics. Studies utilizing this perspective have explored their work utilizing dialogic theory, community building, network analysis, and even touching on the area of addressing concerns from audience members online (ex. customer service) in crisis communications (Namisango & Kang, 2019; Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Yang, Kang, & Cha, 2015). Yet, when it comes to exploring customer service specifically, there is no dominant concept or definition in the public relations literature, and little research has been undertaken to explore the impact and execution of successful customer service ventures for organizations. Most of the insights gathered from customer service online has been through case studies and industry reports.

When exploring customer service within public relations the approach most aligned with this particular area of focus would be organization-public relationships, otherwise known as OPR. (Ferguson, 2018; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). The OPR perspective is integrated within the overall concept and approach to public relations. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) discussed how the term public relations focuses on:

“The research and practice of the discipline should focus on an organization’s relationships with its key publics, concern itself with the dimensions upon which that relationship is built, and determine the impact that the organization-public relationship has on the organization and its key publics.”

(Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 56).

While Ledingham and Bruning (1998) have traditionally viewed relationships as a result of the exchange of the organization-publics in a specific circumstance, there are other scholars that share a different perspective on relationships. Some researchers in the public relations field focus on relationships as being more of a mutually beneficial exchange that aligns expectations of both parties (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Sisson, 2017; Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017). There are many different output components of relationship management for public relations professionals, which was founded by the work of Linda Hon and James Grunig. Hon and Grunig (1999) discussed through their research on relationship management here were six elements of the relationships that do exist, including control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationship. OPR research has been a rising perspective of public relations in the research community. Over the past decade, most of the research focuses on OPR being multidimensional and have focused on certain measurement scales to measure these relationship dimensions (Broom et al., 1997). The potential for exploring OPR research as well by utilizing different methods and approaches is also a growing area of focus, since most of the studies have been empirical and quantitative in nature (Huang & Zhang, 2013).

There are some scholars who note that the relationship paradigm in public relations has been a dominant perspective in the public relations discipline (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Coombs and Holladay (2015) discuss in their article how there is an emphasis on organization-publics relationships, but not the overall focus of the outcome they have in place. While it is key to have a strong relationship with key audiences, the impact and result of these actions and how it translates into long term community building measures should be noted. In addition, concerns raised by Coombs and Holladay (2015) also address the notion of how identities affect the overall formation of close relationships, and the overall value. In customer service roles and situations, identifying the face behind the brand (ex. customer service representative) is not always apparent since the individual is presenting themselves on behalf of the brand, not as an individual public relations professional.

1.2. Public relations skills

The growing areas public relations professionals need to have under their belt as they enter the workplace has grown substantially over the years, especially in the digital skills areas (Freberg & Kim, 2018). One of the areas that is mentioned in the 2017 report from the Commission for Public Relations Education as a rising specialization and role for public relations professionals is customer service, especially when it comes to exploring customer service online (The Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018). The growing need for customer service skills and programs is not only being discussed in the industry, but as a rising skill to have in the workplace (Brunner, Zarkin, & Yates, 2018). The 2017 report from the Commission for Public Relations Education recommended public relations students more than digital skills, they need to understand how and why to use these certain tools for their public relations efforts (The Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018).

Customer service has been around and embraced in public relations for years and by the industry on social media but has yet to be analyzed from an academic research perspective. In fact, there is not a clear term for customer service roles within the public relations literature (Kim & Freberg, 2018). Yet, Kim and Freberg (2018) conducted a mixed method study exploring the nature of social care, as defined as being stakeholder engagement on social media channels that bolsters an organization’s credibility and reputation in order to develop loyalty and commitment from the public,” (p.4). Customer service in many ways shares some key concepts of OPR. Relationship management is a key part of customer service today, especially in digital spaces. Customer service online allows users to be able to foster some of these relationships in person with organizations in real time (Bowen, 2013; Sisson, 2017). It is not only important to have responses provided to audience members in real time but making sure these are personalized messages that deal with the situation in question carefully (Gingiss, 2016). With every touchpoint that is made in person or online, these publics have set expectations and perceptions of how the brand should and should not respond (Kim & Freberg, 2018). In addition, rather than having the relationship purely being transactional online, social care focuses on humanizing engagement and interactions online with key audiences (Kim & Freberg, 2018). This perspective is aligned with matching the expectations and perceptions of other researchers studying and exploring organization-public relationships (OPR) from this perspective (Broom et al., 1997).

1.3. Employer perspectives on university graduates’ social media skills

While it has been established that social media is an important technological tool for public relations practice (Cheng, 2018; Graham, Avery, & Park, 2015), research has not looked at how social media extends and penetrates beyond the public relations and marketing spaces. For example, Freberg and Kim (2018) explored industry perceptions of social media professionals in relation to their expectations of social media proficiency of university graduates, but the study did not extend to other professions. The Freberg & Kim (2018, pp. 385-386) study found that industry professionals perceived “marketing and public relations principles, writing, analytics and crisis (management),” as the most important social media skills and knowledge for university graduates to have when entering the workforce. In fact, an undergraduate degree in public relations has also been cited as a common requirement to obtain an entry level position within the field (Australian Government, 2020). Additionally, a recent study (Meacham & Ross, 2020) in the UK informally examined employer expectations of social media skills among university graduates and used the findings to present case studies of how industry expectations can be incorporated into the classroom. The Meacham and Ross (2020, p.1) study found that
competence in using technologies such as: “Dropbox, Google docs, Facebook and Facebook groups, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, Blogs and also mobile apps,” were highly sought after by employers of university graduates.

Our study differs from the Freberg and Kim (2018) and Meacham and Ross (2020) studies because it explores the perspectives of a much larger sample of employers from a wider range of industries located across Australia. Furthermore, it uses an online survey to ask the following research question:

**RQ1.** What do employers perceive to be the most important areas of social media proficiency for university graduates entering the workforce?

### 2. Material and methods

#### 2.1. Participants

Our study was part of a wider investigation, which used a cross-sectional survey that targeted Australian employers. Only employers of university graduates were eligible. A third-party database containing Australian employers of university graduates who had provided permission to receive communication such as online surveys was used to recruit participants. Four hundred and fifty participants undertook the survey, of which 29 participants specified that they were located outside of Australia and were subsequently removed. Of the 421 responses within the Australian sample, 25 responses were incomplete and therefore removed. Overall, 396 Australian surveys were included in the analyses resulting in a completion rate of 94.1 %. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 65 years ($M = 42.78, SD = 11.90$), with a gender split of males = 46.5 % and females = 53.5 %. Additional demographic data are presented in Table 1 at the end of the paper. Retail and Consumer was the industry with the greatest representation in the sample with nearly a quarter of participants and middle management was the most represented professional position level with nearly a third of participants.

#### 2.2. Procedure

An online survey was developed using Survey Monkey specifically for this study because surveys employed in previous similar research did not individually address all specific areas being investigated. The design was informed by a literature search that identified key areas of interest and was further developed based on the strengths and limitations of previous research (Freberg & Kim, 2018; Meacham & Ross, 2020; Benson, Morgan, & Filippaos, 2014). In addition, a Research Advisory Group comprising relevant academics, Work Integrated Learning experts, and industry and student representatives was consulted as part of the research design process. Participants, as prospective employers of university graduates, were asked to rank which social media knowledge and skill areas they believe are most important. The four options were: public relations and customer service, social media content production, social media strategy and social media analytics. Furthermore, participants responded to 22 individual items referring to the aforementioned categories of social media knowledge and skills, using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 7 = strongly disagree). Participants were presented with a statement about specific graduate attributes that could be required for employment in their business or organization and asked to indicate to what level they agreed with that statement. Seven items related to public relations and customer service, six items related to social media content production, five items related to social media strategy and four items related to social media analytics. Reliability analysis of the 22 items was conducted, resulting in Cronbach’s $\alpha = .97$.

#### 2.3. Data analyses

Data were initially analysed using descriptive statistics. To identify data patterns and groups of participants with similar agreement about graduate attributes with regard to social media skills, cluster analysis was performed. Cluster analysis enables the identification of subgroups from a sample, demonstrating which participants share patterns, in this case agreement, on a set of variables (Bolin, Edwards, Finch, & Cassady, 2014). A group-based orientation approach subsequently facilitates further investigation of the identified clusters, to determine if there are any meaningful or distinct patterns among the groups (Bolin et al., 2014). Two-step cluster analysis was carried out to categorize participants into different groups for each separate SM category, therefore four analyses were conducted. This was decided as the four SM skills categories were ranked in order of importance, and we wanted to investigate whether this affected cluster homogeneity. Two-step cluster analysis is suitable when the number of clusters is not known in advance (Tkaczynski, 2017). After clusters were created from the sample, group comparisons were conducted. Descriptive analysis was employed to describe the characteristics of each cluster, and tests of differences using independent t-tests (age) and crosstabs with chi-squared tests of contingencies were conducted (gender, position level and industry sector). For all analyses, significance was set at $p < .05$.

### 3. Results

Social media knowledge and skill areas were ranked in order of importance. Public relations and customer service were ranked the most important by almost half the sample, social media content production followed, with almost a quarter of the sample ranking it as the most important. Social media strategy was ranked most important by less than 18 % of the sample, and social media analytics was ranked as most important by only 10.7 % of the sample (see Table 2 at the end of

| Cluster 1 | Cluster 2 | Cluster 3 | Cluster 4 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Public relations and customer service | Social media content production | Social media strategy | Social media analytics |
| 49.2 | 22.5 | 17.6 | 10.7 |
revealed that age was significantly different, $\chi^2 = 2.82, p = .005$, with cluster one being older ($M = 41.61, SD = 11.61$) than cluster two ($M = 40.79, SD = 11.33$). Gender was also significantly different, $\chi^2 = 5.99, p = .014$, with cluster one having more women (58.30%) than men (41.70%), whereas cluster two had more men (54.36%) than women (45.64%) with cluster 2 generally not agreeing that public relations and customer service skills were important.

No significant differences were found between industry and professional position level. The average age of Cluster 1 was slightly older than Cluster 2 by 3.37 years. Please see Table 3 at the end of the article.

### 3.3. Social media strategy

Two-step cluster analysis yielded two clusters, based on similarity of responses to the five statements regarding social media strategy. Cluster one represented 47.5 % ($n = 188$) of the sample, and cluster two 52.5 % ($n = 208$). Silhouette measure of cohesion separation was good (0.6) and ratio of cluster sizes was 1.11. Predictor importance revealed that all questions had good predictor values from 0.79 to 1.0. Mean scores of both clusters for the five statements are presented in Table 3 in comparison to total sample mean scores. In general, cluster one agreed strongly with all statements regarding social media strategy compared to cluster two, who generally did not agree with the statements. Comparison of the clusters revealed that gender was significantly different, $\chi^2 = 7.26, p = .007$, with cluster one having more women (60.64%) than men (39.36%), whereas cluster two had more men (51.75%) than women (48.25%). No significant differences were found between age, industry and professional position level.

### 3.4. Social media analytics

Two-step cluster analysis yielded two clusters, based on similarity of responses to the four statements regarding social media analytics. Cluster one represented 55.8 % ($n = 221$) of the sample, and cluster two 44.2 % ($n = 175$). Silhouette measure of cohesion separation was good (0.7) and the ratio of cluster sizes was 1.26. Predictor importance revealed that all questions had good predictor values from 0.88 to 1.0. Mean scores of both clusters for the four statements are presented in Table 3 in comparison to total sample mean scores. In general, cluster one agreed more strongly with all statements regarding social media content production compared to cluster two, who generally did not agree with the statements. Comparison of the clusters revealed that gender was significantly different, $\chi^2 = 6.05, p = .014$, with cluster one having more women (60.71%) than men (39.29%), whereas cluster two had more men (51.75%) than women (48.25%). No significant differences were found between age, industry and professional position level.

### Table 3

| Mean score whole sample | Mean score Cluster one | Mean score Cluster two | Predictor importance |
|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Public relations and customer service | 3.13 | 1.94 | 5.11 | 1.0 |
| Relationship management | 3.07 | 1.90 | 5.01 | 0.95 |
| Copyright | 2.80 | 1.64 | 4.72 | 0.93 |
| The impact of defamation | 2.88 | 1.73 | 4.81 | 0.86 |
| Ethical social media practices | 2.86 | 1.7 | 4.79 | 0.84 |
| Customer service | 2.98 | 1.83 | 4.89 | 0.77 |
| Influencer marketing/relations | 3.37 | 2.32 | 5.11 | 0.69 |
| Social media and content production | 3.48 | 1.80 | 4.72 | 1.0 |
| Social media strategy | 3.56 | 1.94 | 5.01 | 1.0 |
| Social media marketing | 3.68 | 2.16 | 5.06 | 0.93 |
| Social media advertising | 3.52 | 2.02 | 4.87 | 0.90 |
| Business strategy development | 3.50 | 1.96 | 4.89 | 0.86 |
| Social media analytics | 3.48 | 2.03 | 4.78 | 0.79 |
| Social listening | 3.45 | 2.04 | 5.24 | 1.0 |
| Social media monitoring | 3.48 | 2.11 | 5.21 | 0.94 |
| Social media measurement | 3.50 | 2.12 | 5.24 | 0.93 |
| Social media analysis | 3.53 | 2.16 | 5.26 | 0.88 |

Mean scores: 1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree.
analytics compared to cluster two, who generally did not agree with the statements. Comparison of the clusters revealed that gender was significantly different, $\chi^2 = 5.62, p = .018$, with cluster one having more women (58.82 %) than men (41.18 %), whereas cluster two had more men (53.14 %) than women (46.86 %). No significant differences were found between age, industry and professional position level.

3.5. Analysis to identify differences between agreeing and disagreeing participants

Analysis to identify the characteristics of participants who agreed compared with those who did not indicated that there was not any significant difference in industry, position level, gender or age (except in response to public relations and customer service). There is not a definitive answer to explain this. A possible factor may be the sample size in relation to industry. Namely, the Retail and Consumer Industry sector represented more than 23 % of the overall sample which may have skewed the results somewhat.

4. Discussion

The results from this study indicated that public relations and customer service skills were the areas of social media proficiency of greatest importance to the employers of university graduates. Nearly half the overall sample (49.2 %) ranked public relations and customer service skills as most important in comparison to the other areas of social media proficiency. The significance of this area of social media proficiency is made even more apparent when considering that the area of social media proficiency ranked as second in importance by employers (social media content production) attracted support from less than a quarter of the sample (22.5 %) and less than half of the result recorded for public relations and customer service. It is also clear that due to the shift to online operations for many organisations in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, public relations and customer service skills facilitated by social media have become of even greater importance to reassure and strengthen Organization-public relations.

Organization-public relations (OPR) has been the lens in which this study has used to analyze the relationship between public relations and customer services. OPR is the appropriate lens to explore here due to the foundation and commitment to fostering authentic, interactive, and timely communication between all parties across different channels of communication, including social media. OPR does focus on the overall commitment to personal and structural efforts by the organization (similar to what customer service offers to public relations) can help provide opportunities to foster stronger relationships (Bruning & Galloway, 2003). Public relations should embrace social media as a relationship management tool to help customer service efforts due to its two-way symmetrical communication (Namisango & Kang, 2019). Successful customer service on social media needs to be interactive. Previous research is shown the importance of interaction online and how this can help organization-public relationships between audiences and groups (Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013). This study will help add to the established literature already focused on OPR’s role in examining social media practices in public relations. However, this study specifically will add to the understanding of best practices pertaining to the frontline brand and customer service efforts for public relations.

The strong preference from the sample towards public relations and customer service skills could mean firstly that employers of university graduates require staff who know how to interact with customers and represent their organization in a positive way on social media. While the other areas of social media proficiency: social media content production, social media strategy and social media analytics may be helpful skills to have, they generally do not require two-way interaction between an employee and an organization’s external publics and stakeholders. Essentially, these interactions can have a direct impact on an organization’s reputation and its bottom line. Negative customer experiences can be shared widely in the form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on social media as well as being witnessed by other social media users. Both instances have been found to influence prospective customers’ purchasing decisions (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017). An employee who is required to interact with external publics and stakeholders on social media is performing the role of “boundary spanner” by being the human conduit, facilitating communication and relationship building on social media between the organization and those external to it (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2012; Kent, Sommerfeldt, & Saffer, 2016). This notion also aligns with the literature that approaches social media from an organization-public relationships (OPR) perspective (Kent, 2013; Namisango & Kang, 2019; Valenti, 2015). It seems that employers want university graduates who can develop positive relationships with and provide quality customer service experiences for external publics and stakeholders.

Furthermore, university graduates with knowledge of public relations particularly in relation to strategic communication, reputation management, issues and crisis management may be an asset to organizations that can leverage those skills to use social media more proactively to effectively communicate with publics and stakeholders and identify and manage issues and crises if they arise. The results also indicated that greater numbers of women and older members of the sample deemed public relations and customer service to be the most important area of social media proficiency when compared with other survey participants. This may be due to a larger representation of women in public relations and customer service roles within Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Fitch & Third, 2010) and possibly an older demographic having a greater understanding of and sense of familiarity with the concepts of public relations and customer service than the other areas of social media proficiency presented in the survey. However, participants’ area of professional expertise was not captured which presented a limitation in providing a deeper insight into the professional context from which they were responding.

Additionally, social media content production, social media strategy and social media analytics ranking much lower in terms of importance to employers of university graduates may suggest a lack of understanding of what these areas involved and their benefits. The sample was generally split between agreeing and disagreeing on all other proficiency areas except for public relations and customer service. Social media analytics ranked last with only 10.7 % of participants rating it as most important, suggesting a lack of understanding of the advantages of using social media data to guide corporate practices such as continuous improvement. This result is in line with a study by Macnamara (2011) who found that only 22 % of organizations in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Hong Kong reviewed quantitative social media data and only 12.5 % of organizations conducted qualitative analysis on social media content.

The findings from our study are in line with some of those from Freberg and Kim (2018) where social media professionals identified public relations principles and crisis (management) in the most important skills for university graduates to have when entering the workforce. However, social media professionals in the Freberg and Kim (2018) also cited marketing, writing and analytics as important skills for graduates which did not rank as highly in our study. Again, this may be because our sample included employers of university graduates from a wide range of industries and position levels and did not focus on social media professionals specifically. In fact, the area of professional expertise was not captured in our study, and as such, our sample may not have possessed an in-depth understanding of the social media proficiency areas presented in our survey.

The findings from our study have highlighted the need for universities to prepare graduates who are proficient in public relations and social customer service. While public relations education can focus on skills such as strategic communication, reputation management and issues and crisis management, it seems that social customer service should be added to this suite of expertise. Furthermore, the breadth of
our study suggests that teaching university students about public relations and customer service principles should not be limited to public relations or marketing students. This is a sentiment that has been echoed by university students themselves. A study by Sutherland and Ho (2017, p. 265) found that 43% of a sample of undergraduate students from a range of disciplines ranked “General communications and public relations training” second in a list of preferred social media pedagogy. Social media is being used by a multitude of disciplines and industries and the knowledge of how to use this technology to serve, engage and build relationships with publics and stakeholders on a human level is no longer confined to the realms of marketing and public relations. Our study has suggested that employers seek graduates from all disciplines who have this expertise above all other areas of social media proficiency. The demand is clearly there from industry and from students, now it is up to universities to respond if they are not already doing so. This could involve embedding public relations and social customer service principles throughout higher degree offerings, a core course for all students or a series of short courses or online modules to help students prepare to meet industry expectations as highlighted by this research. However, it is also worth noting that while the employers in our study preferred public relations and customer service skills, the other categories of social media proficiency are of critical importance to develop in university graduates. Some employers in our study may not have been entirely familiar with the other areas of social media proficiency. This is why it is important for educators to coach students to frame their skills to match the criteria of employment opportunities.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the perceptions of 396 Australian employers in relation to what they deemed to be the most important areas of social media proficiency for university graduates entering the workforce. The results suggested that employers perceived public relations and customer service skills as the most important social media skills that university graduates should have when beginning their careers. This finding further legitimizes public relations as an area of scholarship in Higher Education and recommends social customer service skills to become a consistent part of university curriculum for undergraduate students. Further research would capture this data and broaden the scope of the study to additional countries to compare if the findings are similar or different. Also, a longitudinal study may identify trends or evolution in industry preferences in terms of the areas of social media proficiency of university graduates. Overall, this study highlighted inter-personal skills in the form of public relations and customer service competence are of greatest importance to employers of university graduates, ahead of technical and strategic areas of social media proficiency.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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