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Anna Rudisill

Western Michigan University, arudisill5@gmail.com

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Social Media In Big Business: An Autoethnography

Anna Rudisill

Western Michigan University

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the perceptions and experiences of those who professionally work with social media. While there is a plethora of research done on the impact and importance of social media in big businesses, there is a lack of information regarding those who create the content. This thesis is framed as an autoethnography, as I describe my personal experiences working with social media in a large corporation. To further my research, I also interviewed two colleagues about their experience. Through my research I found that social media employees go through a specific process when being implemented into their professional role. First, they must learn the responsibility that comes with posting for a large brand. They also must come to understand specifics such as the process their brand goes through in order to make a post, as well as becoming fluent in the social voice of their company. Furthermore, I learned that those employed in social media understand the growing importance of their job as social media continues to expand. I also came to the conclusion that social media professionals have a strong sense of brand loyalty and enjoy the ever-changing nature of their jobs. This research will be of great use to those who want to pursue a career in social media. Understanding the real-life experiences of social media employees will allow students to gain insight into future careers, far beyond the technical application of social media in big businesses.

## Introduction

Social media has taken the world by storm—especially the world of business. It is uncommon to find a large business that is not present on social media. In fact, nearly 83% of brands in North America use social media content as part of their marketing plan, and about 59% of American consumers interact with brands on social media at least once a day (Statistica, 2017). Organizations use this tool for many different purposes such as attracting new customers, promoting products, and driving loyalty (Bennett, 2014). Social media has become a necessity for big brands as well as smaller businesses.

There are many advantages to using social media for brands; it is a free service and gets the word out about your company on many different platforms with already-established audiences. Social media can be used to advertise as well as engage followers and fans in a way that is fast-paced and informal. Businesses use social media platforms not only just for advertising and paid content, but also for organic content and customer service. Most brands allow customers to contact them with concerns via social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Brands will then reply to these concerns quickly, allowing for immediate customer service (Bennett, 2014). Social media opens up a new world for the customer/brand relationship and makes things more personal on a level that was not possible prior to its inception.

Because of the reach and impact on the world of big brands, there is a lot of research supporting the advantages of social media. For example, there have been a number of research studies regarding social media communication for big brands. Westcott (2016) proved in a study that millennials are much more likely to be influenced by social media reviews and ads as compared to television ads. This study suggests that traditional advertising (i.e. television ads, radio ads, etc.) is important, but if a company is looking to attract a younger crowd, they must be

engaging consumers on social media (Westcott, 2016). Goh, Heng, and Lin (2013), found that engagement on a company's Facebook page can drive sales greatly, with an average of \$22 more spent by those who are a part of a company's Facebook page. However, Anderson, Goel, Hofman, and Watts (2016) examined viral Twitter events and determined that viral events had no link to popularity. The authors indicated that businesses should be wary of this and work on retaining their followers and consumer base, rather than trying to come up with viral content in order to maximize their social media presence (Anderson, Goel, Hofman, & Watts, 2016). The impact of social media in big businesses include reaching objectives such as increased annual sales growth, improved two-way communication between a company and its stakeholders, and enhanced product marketing (Nordmeyer, 2017).

While there is a plethora of research suggesting the necessity of social media in today's world of business, there is little research done on the behind-the-scenes side of the social media. The perception of those employed to work with social media is important because they are the content creators. These people are driving the messages brands put out on their social media sites. Understanding the experiences of those behind social media is needed as social media itself continues to expand. The purpose of this thesis is to delve into the world of those who work for social media and understand their experiences, perceptions, and integration into their current professional role. I completed a 12-week communications internship at a global pizza chain based in the Midwest, which I will be referring to as GPC (Global Pizza Chain) for the purpose of this thesis. During my internship at GPC, I learned a great deal about corporate life, community outreach, and of course, social media. I worked with social media on an almost daily basis, understanding the GPC brand voice and trying to create unique content around that. Learning about social media from within GPC gave me new perspective and insight into the

process of creating social media content. Assimilating into my role as a social media intern was an enormous learning experience. To gain more perspective, I kept a daily journal of my experiences at GPC as well as conducted interviews with two people from the GPC social media team. I will discuss my personal experience in the big brand world as well as the experiences of some of my colleagues in this thesis.

First, I present a discussion of relevant literature on social media and large brands. Then I discuss the methods I used to investigate the experience of the communicator. Then, I discuss my findings and the interpretation of the information collected. Finally, I will present a discussion of these findings and the implications going forward.

### **Literature Review**

A wealth of knowledge and research exists which demonstrates the effect of social media on big businesses. Social media is the most effective way to advertise a product or service both from a cost perspective and from an exposure perspective. Brands can use numerous social platforms to capitalize on improving audience insights, increasing the amount of traffic visiting their sites and improving customer service (Carbone, 2015). Given the existence of numerous social media platforms, the reach of advertising and interactive servicing for businesses has increased exponentially.

### **Importance of Social Media**

While conducting research on how social media relates to businesses today, I have found a wealth of information supporting social media's irreplaceable role in the corporate world. If increasing sales and maximizing growth is the primary objective of a business, organizations need to understand how to harness the power of the Internet through the various platforms of social media (Starak, 2016).

The most prominently used social media platforms include Facebook with 2 billion users, Twitter with 328 million users, Instagram with 700 million users and Snapchat with 173 million users (Statistica, 2017). Facebook is the most utilized of these sites but, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat can be more useful to businesses attempting to capture younger stakeholders as these sites are more popular among those under the age of 25 (Heath, 2016). Snapchat is the fastest growing social media platform, with Instagram and Twitter following closely, among teens (Heath, 2016). Twitter allows businesses to converse with their customers via 140 character tweets while Snapchat offers viewers a look into a company's day-to-day life. Instagram gives companies the opportunity to share interesting pictures and promote their product. These types of media make interaction more personal and give customers a way to reach out to a company in an informal, easy-to-access setting. Aside from this, many brands hop on specific "Twitter trends" such as the mannequin challenge, using memes to their advantage. This resonates with the millennial crowd and allows the brand to spread with retweets and likes (Nanji, 2017). When companies and businesses use social media in this way in order to influence potential customers, they can be more successful, especially among millennials and young people (American Press Institute, 2015).

### **Social Media Target Audiences**

Prior to social media, it was a challenge for organizations to target specific groups of consumers with radio, television, and print ads not to mention the cost of advertising in all these arenas (Heath, 2016). However, with social media, brands can use analytic tools and digital marketing agencies to utilize the data allowing them to be able to speak to their target audiences exclusively via various social media platforms and at a much lower cost (Bekoglu & Onayh, 2016). Brown and Fiorella, (2013) discuss a variety of ways businesses and corporations use

social media to enhance their brand with target audiences. They suggest that brands can assess what type of consumer they would like to target and use tools such as Facebook Custom Audiences to reach these people. Facebook Custom Audiences is a service that allows brands to easily tailor who will see their advertisements on Facebook. Brown and Fiorella say that using targeting social media can influence potential customers to think of the brand in a positive light and make purchases. Moreover, Brown and Fiorella believe that in order to operate successfully in today's marketplace, businesses must adapt and tailor their social content to fit new and ever-changing standards so they can increase customer engagement and grow their base.

Digital marketing, promoting products or brands through various forms of electronic media, allows a business or brand to customize their message for specific audiences. For instance, the content of an ad on Facebook might be a bit different than the content used on Snapchat since the user profiles of these two platforms generally tend to be a bit different in age, behavior or expectations. As previously mentioned, Snapchat is the fastest growing social media platform and it is particularly utilized by those under the age of 25 (Heath, 2016). A more directed example of targeting through digital media was used by STA Travel, a youth-focused travel company (Adweek, 2015). They used an "Offerpop quiz" to interactively discern which of five travel categories their users belonged to and based on their responses, the company received a wealth of personal data. This allowed the company to send targeted ads featuring likely travel destinations to specific customers. STA Travel found this campaign to be very effective (Adweek, 2015). According to a study done in Turkey (Bekoglu & Onayh, 2016), digital ads are on the rise, growing 15-20% annually and are predicted to continue to increase over time. In order to manage this complex, dynamic web of social media options, some businesses are



creating positions such as “social media expert” or “community manager” whose job it is to oversee the social presence of the company and initiate Internet engagement.

### **Social Media to Drive Sales**

Westcott (2016) studied the buying habits of millennials in relation to social media. After surveying more than 2,000 consumers in the U.S., it was revealed that 71% of those aged 19-25 are more influenced by online reviews and social media ads than television ads. This study indicates that there is value in combining traditional marketing techniques with social media. However, the 2016 Deloitte study states that the younger the consumer is, the more likely social media will influence them. Westcott (2016) stated that:

[The] always-connected consumer is driving cultural changes... These behavioral changes combined with the shift towards mobile-based consumer experiences are disrupting traditional business models—while at the same time paving the way for newer opportunities for technology, media, and entertainment companies to adapt and evolve.

This research provides proof that businesses need to evolve and make themselves present on social media in order to reach younger consumers, due to the value millennials place on social media (Westcott, 2016).

Goh, Heng, and Lin (2013) take a detailed look at how Facebook influenced sales. They measured which customers saw which posts and comments, and then performed some statistical analysis and categorization on this data. In the study based on 14,000 consumers, it can be definitively said that if you joined a company’s Facebook page, you spent about \$22 extra on that company. The study suggested that the interactions that took place on the page played an important role in this discrepancy. It was found that “broadcasting” on Facebook (i.e. posting without interactions) did nothing for sales. However, the positive interactions had on the page

took full control and influenced people to buy. This study's data shows that brands can greatly increased their sales if they use Facebook correctly and drive positive interactions on the page (Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013).

### **Social Media as a Form of Social Proof**

The vast, far-reaching social environment that the Internet has affords businesses an unprecedented opportunity to reach more people and those people, in turn can reach each other regardless of their physical proximity. Brown and Fiorella (2013) point out that social media gives consumers access to attitudes and recommendations of their most engaged peers. "Today, you face a brutally tough, maddeningly elusive new competitor: the "wisdom of crowds," (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p. 14). Consumers talk to each other about a brand or a product, and influence each other's opinion of said brand or product even if they live on opposite sides of the world. This word-of-mouth effect has exponentially increased the influence of messages sent out via social media and thus, the power it has over purchases being made (Bekoglu & Onayh, 2016).

Lee (2011) discusses the positive influence created when someone finds that others are purchasing a particular product. She labeled it "social proof" which is synonymous with Brown and Fiorella's "crowd wisdom". Cialdini (2009) takes a closer look at the principles of persuasion and the importance of social proof. "One means we use to determine what is correct is to find out what other people think is correct. We view a behavior as more correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it," (Cialdini, 2009, p. 116). Social proof is not a new phenomenon as McDonald's first used it by hanging a sign "Over 1 Million Served" implying that a million people are eating their hamburgers and a million people cannot possibly be wrong (Lee, 2011). This technique was fairly effective in 1955, however in the age of the

Internet, it has become the greatest force in the marketplace (Starak, 2016). Starak suggests that social proof could single handedly make or break a business. Understanding how to manipulate and leverage this aspect of social media is a necessity for businesses in today's world.

Anderson, Goel, Hofman, and Watts (2016) studied looked at “viral” social media content in an attempt to understand why events spread through Twitter. They looked at approximately one billion events through the lens of Twitter. They found that the correlation between virality and popularity was relatively low at 36%. This means that just because one tweet or event was “viral”, it does not mean the person or account referencing it is popular or highly followed. This study found that retention is far more important than virality. Retaining your audience on Twitter will allow you to slowly expand your network with individuals who are more targeted. The study indicates that big businesses should take this information into consideration when trying to build their social networks—being consistent is the most important factor when trying to engage via social media (Anderson, Goel, Hofman, & Watts, 2016).

### **Social Media as a Networking Opportunity for Businesses**

Conventional marketing and communications techniques have been vastly altered by the advent of the Internet and social media platforms. In addition to targeted marketing and crowd wisdom behaviors, social media is affecting established hiring methods. Griffith looks at social media and businesses from this angle. Griffith suggests that social media is not only crucial for business growth among customers, but it is also very useful in the process of finding new employees. Griffith examined Facebook and LinkedIn in that context. LinkedIn is a different type of social media with a website that is generally not for social use as its purpose is to create a professional profile and allow connections to be made with other people in similar career fields. Professional skills such as Excel, public speaking, and writing may be added to a profile to

highlight areas of specialization. Griffith (2011) makes the point that LinkedIn is a great way to recruit new employees because it directly lists who and what a possible candidate knows and can do. This allows companies and businesses to locate potential employees that might be valuable team members, whom they likely would not have found using conventional methods. Facebook is also useful for this purpose because it is a conversational social media site that offers a comprehensive profile of a person. Many companies and businesses are checking potential employees' Facebook pages before hiring them in order to judge their character and make sure that their business will be well represented. By using social media to their advantage, businesses and companies nowadays will be able to make the most out of the hiring process and ensure that each potential employee is the best fit for their company (Griffith, 2011). Once again, the importance of social media as a useful and necessary tool in the current corporate environment is illustrated.

### **Gaps in Corporate Social Media Research**

Although there is considerable research and evidence supporting the importance of social media from the corporate perspective, there is little to no information from the communicator's perspective. Communicators are the ones behind big brands, driving and creating the content that is seen daily. Given the broad reach of their efforts, those who determine what is seen publicly are influential in driving and shaping an organization's brand. If the job is performed well, it can further sales for a brand as well as increase engagement among its potential consumers (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). However the communicators themselves have rarely been investigated. Understanding the integration process of the communicators' experience is integral to higher education because it will prepare future drivers of content for the professional world. Without

exposure to the experience of content creators, we may not be as mindful about the communicative choices that inform social media decisions.

Those who work directly with social media in their professions have a unique understanding of the inner-workings of mediated communication and the effects it has on business, both positive and negative. They have an appreciation of analytics and inside information on what to post as well as when and where to post it. These employees know how to adjust messages for different social channels, how to be comical or serious, and how to tweak messages to increase engagement. Those working with social media must post regularly for their brand on all social channels, but they may also have unique tasks such as keeping up with trending topics and monitoring viral jokes. Their job is to maximize positive “buzz” around the content they create and ultimately, promote their brand successfully.

Social media is intertwined with business and that relationship continues to deepen. Those people who are employed as communicators have a very pivotal role to play as they are responsible for managing content that is continually viewed by the public at large. Therefore, it would be beneficial to understand the communicators’ personal experiences and shed light on their perceptions when they enter the professional world. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016), there are currently about 230,000 public relations specialists employed in the United States today and that number is growing annually. The Bureau of Labor Statistics also states that there are about 225,200 people employed in marketing positions in the United States, and that number is increasing annually as well. New positions such as “social media expert” and “social marketer” have been created to accommodate this expanding field to be able to deal with enhanced social media channels. Social media jobs are looking at a projected 12% growth rate because of the increasing prevalence of social media in businesses (Rohampton, 2016). This

results in a large number of communicators releasing messages into the world on a daily basis. If we want to properly educate future communicators, we need to conduct research focused on who communicators are and how they do their jobs. Insight into current communicators' perceptions and on-the-job experiences will help educate future communicators.

### **Filling the Gap**

In my thesis, I will attempt to help fill in the gap between the numerous reach studies that demonstrate the effects of social media on businesses and the limited number of studies focused on the communicators whose job it is to implement the facets of social media in such a setting. In order to understand the experiences of the communicators who actually drive the content, I will explore two research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What is the assimilation process like for new content creators for social media in a big business?

**Research Question 2:** What is the lived experience of social media content creators in big businesses such as GPC?

### **Methods**

This study uses two methods: autoethnographic methods in the form of a self-journal and in-depth interviews with two full-time social media peers at GPC.

### **Participants**

In order to gain knowledge about the communicator's preconceived perceptions and actual experiences, I interviewed two social media employees at GPC. The interviewees were required to have experience working with social media and creating content in a professional setting. There were no other specific requirements needed in order to participate. I chose two participants with whom I worked closely that made up the social media team at GPC. Both

participants were white females, with average age of 26. I will refer to them as Sarah and Julie for the purpose of this study. I also consider myself a participant in my study, as I am framing my research around my own personal experience working with social media at GPC as well.

### **Procedure**

**Interviews.** Prior to conducting research, I secured a letter of support from GPC allowing me to conduct research on sight for this study. I then secured HSIRB approval from Western Michigan University. I emailed two social media employees (Sarah and Julie) at GPC requesting their participation in my study by way of individual interviews. I also attached the informed consent document as well as a copy of the questions to be used so they could make an informed decision as to whether or not to participate. Both participants agreed to take part in my study and interview times were set up. I interviewed them separately, allowing for a one-hour interview on different days.

Before conducting the interviews, I gave no specific instructions to the participants, other than simply to describe their answers in detail. In these interviews, I asked a series of thirteen pre-meditated questions, some about the function of social media in a professional setting and some about personal experiences and perceptions relating to their socialization and integration into the current jobs they held. I asked follow-up questions and allowed myself to probe for greater understanding if I had further questions after they answered the initial questions. Example questions from the interviews include “Where did your career begin,” “What do you like about social media, personally and professionally,” “Was social media always something you were interested in doing, especially in a professional setting,” and “What is the typical process you go through to make a post on any platform for your company?”

The interviews took place on sight at GPC in quiet, private conference rooms. They were informal in nature and were conducted in a conversational way allowing the participants to communicate freely. Both interviews were voice-recorded using my iPhone and were transcribed at a later time. Sarah's interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and Julie's interview lasted approximately 17 minutes. After the interviews, I transcribed the recordings. Sarah's interview was about five pages single-spaced and Julie's interview was about three and a half pages single-spaced.

**Journal.** For the purpose of this study, I also created a personal journal documenting my experience in the corporate world working as a social media intern. I wrote for about 5-10 minutes each day after work, detailing what I did that day as well as new information I came across or learned. This journal was done on my home laptop and has entries from May 15, 2017 until August 4, 2017. In total, there are 48 entries that result in 12 pages of single-spaced text..

### **Analysis**

I used the constant comparative analysis method (Fram, 2013) to analyze the data in my study. This holistic method where all the parts are organically intertwined proved very useful. For my research, I systematically applied inquiry through the means of formal interviews, observing my colleagues and reviewing notations in my personal journal. My research attempted to access the inner world of perception of all three participants (including myself) in order to find meaning and patterns in the social process. I did not start with a designated hypothesis to be proven or disproven but rather let the information learned led me to an outcome.

In order to make sense of the data I collected, I used selective coding. Selective coding is "the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and



development,” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). For my data, I narrowed my research down to the major categories I wanted to focus on. I chose the categories perception, experience, and personal stories. Next, I went through the transcript of each interview, as well as my personal journal and highlighted areas, which fell into the core categories. I then went on to write down the themes I noticed when looking over the highlighted regions.

In the formal interviews as well as casual interactions with my coworkers, I learned much about the world of social media in a corporate setting including the growing impact it has on business, the significance of creating an appropriate social voice and consistent messaging, as well as how to properly apply social media in a corporate setting. I also learned that social media communicators in general felt that they had not been adequately prepared for the realities of their jobs prior to their immersion into the corporate world, a sensation that I myself experienced during my 12-week internship. From my research, I deduced that, given the increasing influence of social media on business and the expansion of this field of study, it would be helpful if more practical application information could be added to the communications curriculum.

### **Findings and Interpretation**

#### **Research Question 1**

The first research question I focused on for my study was: What are the socialization and integration processes like when one becomes a content creator for social media for a big brand such as GPC? I gained insight on this topic through my personal immersion into the role of a social media intern and from experiences revealed by my colleagues during their interviews. When reflecting on my research through both the interview process and personal journaling, I found three points that were consistent across all of my research. As content creators are integrated into their role at a big brand, they are surprised by the amount of responsibility that

comes with working for a large company and they come to realize the impact they can have on both the brand and social media as a whole. Next, they must come to understand the procedure that needs to be followed before the brand allows them to post on social media. This process is different at every company, but with a larger company, there is a structure in place and specific steps must be strictly adhered to. Finally, they must learn the social voice of the company they work for. Every large brand has what's called a "social voice", which is simply the way they choose to portray themselves on social media, and it must be consistent across all platforms. Social media employees must fully learn how their brands communicate before creating content themselves.

Working for a big brand comes with a lot of responsibility and the way you represent the brand in all aspects matters, but most especially when working directly with the brand's social media. "It's so much more responsibility [working at GPC], which is a good thing and it's more impactful. You are able to impact the end product because you know the brand best," Sarah stated in her interview. "You hear horror stories of people on social media who are not careful and maybe they post a personal (inappropriate) photo on the brand's Instagram page, so I think there are a lot of times when it comes down to the brand's employees and team," said Sarah. Sarah suggested that inappropriate use of social media regarding your brand can be deadly. In fact, both of my interviewees related a story about a fellow pizza company that used a social media trend in the wrong way. This brand took a trending topic on Twitter about domestic violence and related it back to pizza. Both Sarah and Julie were in disbelief that a brand would post that. Julie suggested that being careful, understanding your brand's core values and acting responsibly is a top priority when working with a big brand's social media. Julie stated, "There's a lot more risks with a larger corporation. There's a lot more eyes on us". In my own experience,

I quickly learned the responsibility of posting for a large corporation. One of my jobs at my internship was replying to positive tweets about GPC. I had an experience where I misread a tweet from a customer and replied in a way that did not make sense. I was quickly told to delete the tweet and scolded by the other members of the social media team. They told me that anything posted on the GPC Twitter can easily be misconstrued, even something as miniscule as a positive Twitter reply. It is crucial to the integration process when coming into a social media role to understand the gravity of the job you are charged to do.

The process of making a post on any social channel for a brand is much more involved than I anticipated prior to my time at GPC. Because social media postings are second nature to the majority of millennials, it did not occur to me or my intern colleagues that the approval process would be so involved. Although I was not responsible, I also learned that others in marketing collaborate with a third party in order to determine the best times and days to post. A number of departments had to see and bless the content before it could be posted. Posting is a collaborative process. In her interview with me, Julie reiterated, "Collaboration is number one and is a key at GPC when creating social media content." It was crucial that I understood this before going forth and creating my own content for social media channels. The social media process at GPC consisted of identifying the goal of the content to be created, creating that content in collaboration with other social media employees, running it by the advertising team for approval to ensure brand voice is properly being portrayed, and then allowing legal to have final approval to avoid any issues with copyright. Unfortunately, this long process can cause problems and even stifle creativity. This was an issue I dealt with when taking summer-themed photos for GPC's social media with the plan to post them the following day as a celebration of the summer solstice. I got the photos approved by Sarah and Julie, however, they had to send the

photos to the other departments in order to get the approval we needed prior to posting. This process was long and took a lot of time, sending the post to many different marketing executives followed by the legal department. We almost were not able to post the photos for the summer solstice because of the process. Initially, I was confused and frustrated by the seemingly inefficient way GPC's posting process operates. The process was new to me and I had not expected such an extensive procedure went into a simple Twitter or Instagram post. As time went on, I got used to the process and tried to be proactive with ideas for posts. Learning the steps of posting taught me to think ahead and not expect the process to go quickly. Learning these procedures was part of my own personal experience when being integrated into the GPC company culture. Understanding this process and how it is implemented differently for different companies is integral to having a successful social media experience in the business world.

Finally, I found that it was extremely important to learn the brand's social voice during the integration process as a social media creator. Each brand is so individualized when it relates to their particular social voice. Sarah noted that GPC has a very specific social voice and cited other brand's well-known social voices, citing Wendy's as an example. "Wendy's is a great example of social voice because they are consistently known for being the most sarcastic brand on social media. Because of their sarcastic voice, they have greatly increased engagement on Twitter," said Sarah. "Our social voice is much more casual, millennial-speak. We stay up to date on the lingo that people have on social media and crack jokes when we can. We have been very successful with this voice and we plan to continue to use it to our advantage. It's really important to stay consistent with our voice when we use social media," said Julie. Sarah and Julie are very serious about the social voice at GPC and carefully look over every post to make sure it is in line with the GPC brand. They taught me and my fellow interns how to speak in the

GPC social voice. When I began my internship at GPC, I had a meeting in which the social media team first exposed me to the social voice for GPC. They put me through an exercise where I was tasked with finding ten tweets and/or Instagram postings where people were talking about GPC in a positive light, and to come up with a unique response. I was not allowed to actually post any of these responses, as this was just for practice so I could come to understand GPC's social voice. I came up with ten responses, showed them to the social team and they gave me feedback about what improvements I could make regarding the brand's social voice. After a few rounds of this, I was given the okay to start posting responses. The social media team felt I had come to satisfactorily understand the brand's social voice. This exercise is done with all their new social media interns and employees in order to ensure the voice is kept appropriate and consistent. I fully understand the necessity of consistency when it comes to a brand's social media channels. However, I feel that being so rigid with social voice stifled my creativity. I felt slightly restricted and unable to come up with original content for GPC's social media channels and it was discouraging.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question I considered during this study was: What is the perception of social media content creators in big businesses such as GPC? Again, to answer this question, I drew upon my personal experience and journal as well as the two interviews I conducted at GPC. I found that while the perceptions of social media employees tend to be different based on individual experiences, there are three areas of consistency that I noticed when looking at my research. First, content creators know that their job is of great importance due to the increasing prevalence of social media and its growing impact on the world of business. Secondly, they feel

a sense of brand loyalty and overall commitment to the brand they work for. Finally, those employed in social media roles enjoy the fast-paced atmosphere that comes with their jobs.

Social media is a rapidly changing field due to the exponential growth of the digital world. As a result of this, social media jobs within brands is ever more important and the number of jobs within these brands is growing at a fast pace. “There is always a new update and new platforms and new trends. Platform to platform, over time, things have completely changed. And the platforms people spend time on are changing too. It will be interesting to see new platforms emerge in the future,” said Sarah. “Social media is something that I enjoy and works well for me because it is constantly changing,” said Sarah. Sarah suggests that she enjoys being constantly challenged to complete different tasks on a daily basis. She mentioned that she likes learning new things, which is conducive to a social media job. I, too, feel this way about the growing world of social media. I use social media everyday in my personal life and I like watching it change and learning to change with it. I am excited to be on a career path that will allow me the opportunity to work with social media in a professional setting in the future, just as I did at GPC. I am looking forward to the new jobs social media will create. In the world of business, social media content creators know they must keep up with the ever-changing nature of the Internet and conform accordingly. They know how crucial it is to build the best relationships possible with customers through social media, otherwise there can be consequences. “Sometimes it’s the difference in losing a customer forever or keeping them forever,” said Julie.

Loyalty to the brand you are representing on social media is crucial and it should be important to those who create the content for it. Both Sarah and Julie were so passionate about the GPC brand and mentioned how that helped them create “crave-worthy” content for their brand on social channels. After working at GPC for a short time, I wrote in my journal that

committing to the brand and loving it furthers the brand and that is the whole point. The all-in, positive vibe you feel for your product makes for the production of much better content. GPC was a very positive place to work. Almost everyone who works at GPC is a die-hard fan and that atmosphere was inspiring and exciting for me. Being around people who loved the product and the mission of the brand made me want to create the best content possible to help our customers love the brand as much as the employees. Along with brand loyalty, social media content creators must develop and implement a strategy that makes sense for the brand's social presence. "You have to have a strategy. You see some brands that are just on social to be on there. It's annoying and it doesn't make sense and it's not fit for the right platform. In that case, maybe it's better to not be on it," said Julie. Loving the brand and planning the best possible methodology to support that brand is an important part of a content creator's perception of the job.

The final and most positive thing I concluded after reviewing my research is that those working in social media enjoy the dynamic, fast-paced atmosphere their jobs provide. "I wanted a career that wasn't the same thing every day. One day, I might be at my desk all day responding to people online and the next day I might be in the test kitchen taking photos for Instagram postings or I might be attending a social media conference to learn more about best practices or I might be collaborating with coworkers. Every day is different and it keeps you on your toes," said Sarah. There are a variety of tasks in the world of social media, as I experienced myself. I went on multiple off-campus photo shoots and attended small conferences. I worked with trending topics and would be assigned to go take photos for a trending topic which would be posted that same day. When reflecting upon my time at GPC, I can definitively say that working with social media was my favorite part. The climate of social media is exciting and interesting and it kept me feeling creative and eager to learn. I enjoyed being kept on my toes with content

creation from day-to-day. Keeping up with this fast-paced world was enjoyable and unique compared to other more sedentary office jobs. I concluded that most social media employees have a positive perception of their jobs.

### **Discussion**

When I started my internship, I did not necessarily know what to expect. The initial premise for this study was going to be directed at the importance of social media in big businesses. However, as I became immersed in the corporate world and began to learn the integration process one must go through to work with social media, I decided to take my thesis in a slightly different direction and focus on my personal experience working at a big brand. Drawing on my time as an intern as well as the research I conducted, I came to the realization that the integration process into the world of social media presents a steep learning curve for those who pursue such a career. Posting to social media seems like an easy, simple activity, but in the corporate world, one must understand the responsibility that comes with posting in the name of a big brand, they must learn the procedures their company goes through in order to post, and they must master the social voice of their organization. When looking at how those who work with social media perceive their role, I found that they understand the importance of their roles as it relates to their company, they tend to be loyal and committed to their brand, and they enjoy the fast-paced atmosphere that is inherent in the field of social media.

Prior to my time at GPC, I learned much about the practical application of social media in my communication courses. Knowing how to properly use social media is a skill that is crucial to getting a social media job. I also knew how important social media has become to big businesses and there is a wealth of research backing that statement. As previously stated, we know that well run Facebook pages can dramatically increase sales (Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013). We also know



that the younger the person, the more likely that social media is the best tool to use to influence them (Westcott, 2016). These studies show that social media is absolutely crucial to businesses in this day and age. However, if a social media employee does not understand the process they will go through when being implemented into their role as well as the experiences they can expect to have while in said role, they may not perform as well in their position.

The information I found from interviews conducted with colleagues was consistent with notations from the personal journal I kept during my internship. These sources provided an understanding of how social media employees are integrated into their professional roles and the perceptions they have of their current positions. There is definitely a learning curve when being socialized into the role. One must learn the ins and outs of the brand by familiarizing themselves with things such as the process it takes to make a post and the social voice of their company. It seems as though my social media coworkers and I share similar integration experiences and perceptions of our jobs. My study revealed that those who work in social media believe their jobs add value and can have a significant impact on the companies for whom they work.

There has been little examination done on the subject of my study, therefore I believe that the new information I am presenting could be integral to the education of future communicators. Higher education covers the technical application of public relations tools such as social media, which is the basis of being able to get a job, but it does not fully equip the student to transition into the corporate world. Without understanding both aspects, we may not be as mindful about the communicative choices we make once in the industry. From my personal experience, I can attest that I had no expectation of what it would be like to apply the skills I had learned during my communication education. I knew nothing about what an actual social media job might entail, and I believe that lack of knowledge set me back for the first couple of weeks of my

internship. That is why I believe this information is so crucial for future social media interns and employees. My findings illustrate the need for exposure to the socialization process when embarking on a new corporate job. I believe that teaching students about the integration process they will likely go through will lead to a smoother transition for them and a better understanding of the experiences they can expect to have.

This study will have an impact on the world of communication because the area of examination is novel. However, one of the limitations of this study is that it was conducted with only three subjects' experiences. As a result, it is not comprehensive in nature and cannot be applied to everyone. I believe this new information raises more questions about the experiences and perceptions of social media communicators and is only the tip of the iceberg so to speak. It illustrates the gap between an educational foundation and an actual corporate experience and opens up an avenue for future research. Additional studies should include social media employees from all types of businesses in order to be more complete and provide more conclusive and reliable results. From the findings of this study, I believe it can be surmised that the gap between general knowledge and practical application exists in other industries as well. I believe that teaching students more about the actual socialization process they may go through when getting integrated into a new position in the professional world is crucial and would enhance the education process. Students are taught in a classroom setting the technical aspects of their field, but if they never learn how that information will be implemented into the professional role they desire, they will have a much harder time acclimating to the business world. Studies similar to this one should be conducted in all industries to improve the educational experience and increase the probability of success for future employees.

The information learned from this study is just the beginning for research of this nature, for communicators and for people in all industries. I am hopeful that my research will lead to additional studies being conducted focusing on the experiences of people in the professional world. If this information is used accordingly, I believe future communicators will have a more seamless transition into their corporate roles. My internship at GPC was an extraordinary learning experience and one that opened my eyes to so many things, both professionally and personally. I would like to see the research I conducted during my time at GPC used in higher education classrooms to enhance the knowledge of people who may be starting their first internship or full time job as a communicator.

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