The use of social media: an exploratory study of usage among digital natives

David L. Williams¹, Victoria L. Crittenden²*, Teeda Keo² and Paulette McCarty³

¹ Coles College of Business, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, USA
² Carroll School of Management, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, USA
³ College of Business Administration, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Word-of-mouth has long been an important concept in marketing communications. In today’s world of Web 2.0, electronic word-of-mouth has materialized as a phenomenon of critical interest to marketers. Within the context of electronic word-of-mouth has emerged consumer-generated content in which consumers can quickly and easily create and distribute messages via the worldwide web. Given that today’s college students are considered digital natives and comprise the Generation C market segment, one might suspect that this group would be active in creating and disseminating product/service content within their social groups. This research reports on an exploratory study that examined college student behaviors in the vast world of social media. On the basis of a content analysis of self-report behaviors, these digital natives are content with current technology and capabilities for their general role as spectators. They appear content with what they know and what they are doing. The research raises identity questions as to who the active innovators in marketing’s social media ecosystem might be. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is experiencing a communication explosion, sparked by social media. This social media revolution has resulted in vast changes in the way consumers receive and use marketing communications. In particular, consumer-generated content has emerged as a phenomenon of interest among both scholars and practitioners of marketing. According to Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004: 2), consumer-generated media ‘describes a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues’. In conjunction with this social media revolution has emerged Consumer 2.0—a consumer who has grown up with brand new perspectives and redefined the interplay of communications, relationships, brands, technology and media’ (Mr Youth and RepNation Media, 2008).

In this paper, we examine this new breed of consumers, whom we refer to as ‘Digital Natives’, within the context of their actions in the extensive world of social media. These digital natives, today’s college students, are described as technologically savvy and the most visually sophisticated of any generation (Stamats, Inc, 2008). Specifically, we asked college students to identify social media platforms, providers, and behaviors, as well as explored in-depth the notion of consumer-generated content. To this end, the next section describes these digital natives in terms of age, spending power, and behavioral characteristics. Then we delve into Web 2.0 and its role with respect to word-of-mouth communications and consumer-generated content. After describing the underlying framework of consumer and technology, the methodology utilized in this exploratory research is outlined. The results of a content analysis of the data are then presented, and conclusions about the research finding and limitations are imparted along with some implications for public policy as related to the broader academic community.

*Correspondence to: V. L. Crittenden, Carroll School of Management, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA.
E-mail: victoria.crittenden@bc.edu

Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
DIGITAL NATIVES

The millennial generation is generally defined as those born between 1981 and 2000 (Steadman, 2008), and there are approximately 51 million millennial consumers in the USA with spending power expected to be $1.2 trillion by 2015 (Packaged Facts, 2010). The millennial generation is reported to be more technologically advanced than their predecessors (Blain, 2008). Although previous generations now recognize and appreciate the impact technological advancements have had on the workplace and their lives in general, millennials have always known and been immersed in technology. In sum, technology has always been a part of the millennial life and greatly affects how this generation lives and works (Wesner and Miller, 2008).

Within the generally accepted millennial age cohort has now emerged ‘Generation C’. Born after 1990, these Generation C consumers are truly digital natives. They are just now beginning to attend university and entering the workforce (Booz & Company, 2010). The key attributes of Generation C consumers are (Dye, 2007) as follows:

- They love content creation and mashing (mashing or mash-up is the combining of content material from multiple sources to create new content);
- They have the tendency to form active communities rather than remain passive, and as such, they gravitate toward social media sites where they can participate in discussions about different ideas and get involved in cultural conversations;
- They have a desire to be in control of their own lives;
- They are content with complexity; and
- They have a desire to work in more creative industries and be less restricted by rigid social structures.

No matter the label attached to this group, one characteristic that they share in large numbers is that they were born into a digital world and, as such, are frequently referred to as digital natives (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). Stamats, Inc. (2008), a higher education marketing firm, suggested that technology is as familiar as a knife and fork to this college-age market segment. Additionally, it was reported that this group is the most visually sophisticated of any generation, the group’s use of text messaging is up while their email usage is down, and 69% have cell phones that are used largely to receive and deliver content, watch videos, play games, and surf the internet (Stamats, Inc, 2008). Studies have shown that this digital generation prefers to stay connected and multitask through the use of technology (Rawlins et al., 2008).

WEB 2.0

The term Web 1.0 generally refers to the ‘old web’, where a majority of the users consumed content in a unidirectional framework. There is common agreement in the Web industry that the term Web 2.0 refers to platforms that are highly interactive and provide users with the ability to integrate different media within their content creation. Whereas Web 1.0 was characterized by one-way, passive communications, Web 2.0 is typified by a process in which people are simultaneously the initiators and recipients of information. Harris (2009) suggested that there are literally hundreds of different Web 2.0 platforms that enable this engaging, interactive process (e.g., social networking, text messaging, shared photos, podcasts, streaming videos, wikis, blogs, discussion groups). Popular providers of these communication platforms are as follows: Baidu.com, Blogger.com, Facebook, Flickr, Google, MySpace, QQ.com, Twitter, Wikipedia, Windows Live, Yahoo!, and YouTube (Alexa, 2010).

The platforms and providers enable the creation of opportunities for influence that did not exist a mere decade ago. For example, users spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook, with more than 30 billion web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, and other types of online content shared each month (Facebook Statistics, 2010). More than 24 hours of video are uploaded every minute on YouTube, and views now exceed two billion per day (YouTube.com, 2010). With billions of people creating trillions of connections through social media each day (Hansen et al., 2011), Web 2.0 has created the electronic version of word-of-mouth communications.

Electronic word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth is as old a practice as are people conversing with one another and has long been a key part of the marketing mix for companies (Schumann et al., 2010). In a Web 2.0 world of marketing, word-of-mouth occurs on all interactive digital media sites (Gil-Or, 2010). Although it is estimated that over 85% of the top 1000 marketing firms in the USA have some form of electronic word-of-mouth strategy (Wasserman, 2006), the persuasive power behind word-of-mouth communication comes when the reference giver has no stake in the business he or she is discussing. The receiver often gives more credence to these word-of-mouth messages because they are unlikely to be influenced by the business and because the discussant has no commercial self-interest (Cox et al., 2009).

According to Garretson (2008, p. 12), ‘Consumers increasingly use digital media not just to research products and services but to engage the companies they buy from as well as other consumers who may have valuable insights’. Accordingly, these consumer markets are not really about the messages but about conversations (Levine et al., 2001: 87):
Conversations are the ‘products’ the new markets are ‘marketing’ to one another constantly online. By comparison, corporate messaging is pathetic. It’s not funny. It’s not interesting. It doesn’t know who we are, or care. It only wants us to buy. If we wanted more of that, we’d turn on the tube. But we don’t and we won’t. We’re too busy. We’re too wrapped up in some fascinating conversation. Engagement in these open free-wheeling marketplace exchanges isn’t optional. It’s a prerequisite to having a future. Silence is fatal.

The consumers of media and marketing messages are described as intelligent, organizing, and more trusting of their own opinions and the opinions of their peers (Karpinski, 2005). Li and Bernoff (2008) go so far as to segment the 21st century interactive digital consumers according to five different types of social behaviors: Creators (e.g., publish, maintain, upload), Critics (e.g., comment, rate), Collectors (e.g., save, share), Joiners (e.g., connect, unite), and Spectators (e.g., read). Over two decades ago, Feick and Price (1987) referred to consumers who shared marketing information with their peers as ‘market mavens’. Today’s market mavens, however, interact in the marketplace via the creation of consumer-generated content such as videos, music, blogs, and ads and then disseminate that content on new web platforms (Chung and Darke, 2006). Thus, one would expect there to be multiple segments of market mavens within the digital natives’ marketplace—from those who create the content (Creators) to those who read the content (Spectators).

Consumer-generated content

According to Ertimur and Gilly (2010), consumer-generated content is a form of electronic word-of-mouth given that the resulting advertising is created by consumers and not considered commercially motivated. Basically, a consumer has an opinion about a product or service, and he/she shares those views, beliefs, and experiences with other people via the web (Ahuja et al., 2007). This user/consumer-generated content can appear in the form of online brand testimonials, product reviews, and/or user-generated commercials (Steyn et al., 2010). Oftentimes referred to as ‘customer evangelism’ (Muñiz and Schau, 2011), other names such as ‘homebrew ads’ (Kahney, 2004), ‘folk ads’ (O’Guinn, 2003), ‘open source branding’ (Garfield, 2005), and ‘vigilante marketing’ (Ives, 2004; Muñiz and Schau, 2007) have been used to represent consumer-generated content made possible by global telecommunications. Consumers are both empowered and liberated by the ability to both individually and collectively create, publish, and distribute messages via the web (Kozinets, 1999).

Schau et al. (2010) suggest that members of brand communities are capable of creating content. Thus, regardless of whether firms and marketers like or dislike consumer-generated content, all indications are that such content, via consumer-generated advertising, is here to stay (Berthon et al., 2008). Consumer-generated content is attracting the attention of marketing professionals and researchers for a number of reasons (Steyn et al., 2010). First, the cost differential between content created by a professional agency and that created by a user can be quite large. Second, unconventional consumer-generated content can break through the media saturation that is prevalent in today’s environment. Third, electronic word-of-mouth can move much faster to the consumer than traditional advertising. Lastly, a skilled consumer may offer a more compelling message that has more credibility than a company-generated message.

Given that today’s college students fall squarely in the domain of Generation C, the current research sought to explore student usage of social media from a marketing perspective. Given the profile of the Gen C consumer, one would expect this segment to be highly engaged in electronic word-of-mouth via content creation and sharing. Several research questions guided this exploratory research. One, we sought to focus and structure students’ thinking on both social media platforms and providers. That is, what platforms and what providers do students tend to use? Two, we asked students to think of their social media behavior within the context of a social media ecosystem and provided the five major categories within the ecosystem for descriptive purposes. This led to the second research question. Where in the social media ecosystem do students in a marketing class reside? Finally, we wanted to understand actual usage as related to consumer-generated content. Although it appears that this age group is technically capable of content creation, it is not clear that these students are necessarily using their skills for marketing purposes. The third research question explored recall regarding a consumer-generated message. That is, are students recalling the content of consumer-generated messages? Finally, the fourth research question centered on the creation and dissemination of a consumer-generated message. Are students creating and disseminating their own messages?

METHODOLOGY

Although research has provided usage data on younger millennials with respect to digital tools (e.g., percentage with cell phones) and online usage (e.g., percent online, text messaging up while email is down, percent of female/male bloggers), today’s college students, the true digital natives (Booz & Company, 2010), provide a unique opportunity for
studying usage practices as related to web-based social interactions. From a platform perspective, what platforms and providers are most popular among college students? What social behavior do college students exhibit in the capacious world of social media actions? What are college students doing as related to consumer-generated content?

Because the objective underlying these questions was to acquire a process description that analyzed the enactment of particular social behaviors, a qualitative, exploratory methodological approach was undertaken (Mariampolski, 2001). Qualitative research, such as that used here in the form of content analysis, allows the exploration of social phenomena without explicit expectations (Schutt, 2006).

Sample

Data were collected from a convenience sample of millennial-aged undergraduate college students at a large northeastern university in the USA. All were students in their first marketing class, Principles of Marketing. The youngest student was 19 years old, and the oldest was 21 years old. In total, 74 undergraduate students comprised two different sections of the course. To protect the confidentiality of the student subjects, no demographic data beyond age (to ensure that we were capturing only respondents in the millennial group) were monitored. Although this was restrictive as far as traditional statistical testing, the intent here was not to explore differences between and among subgroups of college students. Rather, the purpose was to explore social media behaviors in detail as reported by each of the students.

Analytical technique

Content analysis, one of the most popular analytical techniques in cultural studies and mass communications research (Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994), was deemed the most appropriate analytical technique for exploring process descriptions within the cultural phenomenon of social media. Although the same type of data could have been derived from personal interviews with college students regarding social media behaviors, content analysis enabled the collection of data from a much larger sample set within a short period of time (Mariampolski, 2001). As a data-oriented qualitative technique, content analysis uses standardized measures so as to metrically define units and use the metrics to compare across documents (Berelson, 1952).

Instructional instrument

The instrument used in this research was a written assignment distributed electronically to all enrolled students approximately 3 weeks prior to the first class meeting with the completed assignment due 5 days before the first class. By requiring the completion of the written assignment prior to the start of the semester, the data were not unintentionally tainted by classroom prompts about digital media and marketing. As such, the students had no idea as to the professor’s interests in digital media nor had they been exposed educationally to how marketers use digital media in the marketing mix. (See Appendix A for the assignment distributed to the students.) Motivated by the literature on social media, the assigned questions focused the student respondents on coding categories that facilitated the content analysis (Mariampolski, 2001). Additionally, a written assignment such as that used here enabled the students to tell a story about their social media usage experiences. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1994), experiences are the starting point and key term for all social science inquiry, and storytelling through the written word enables the respondents to essentially relive their social media experiences thus offering a rich set of data for examination.

RESULTS

The 74 student submissions were coded by two independent coders. The qualitative coding utilized the predetermined coding categories embedded in the assigned questions. This allowed the coders to tag segments of interest and, thus, mitigated the need for achieving intercoder reliability as would have been required otherwise (Sayre, 2001). There were four major segments of interest: social media platforms, social behavior, consumer-generated message viewership, and consumer-generated message creation.

Social media platforms

Social media technologies have engendered radically new ways of interacting (Hansen et al., 2011). As mentioned previously, there are literally hundreds of different social media platforms. So as to prompt student thinking about platform and avoid confusion over terminology, the following social media platforms were offered to students as examples to prompt their thinking: social networking, text messaging, shared photos, podcasts, streaming videos, wikis, blogs, and discussion groups. In addition to discerning the platforms used by this group of college student consumers, respondents were asked about particular providers. Provider examples included Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and Digg. Again, company examples were given so as to clarify what was meant by the question.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the social media platforms utilized by the students. The platforms
used by at least 50% of the students were social networking, text messaging, and streaming videos. Not surprisingly, 96% of the students are active in social networking with Facebook and Twitter, the providers of choice for social networking activities. Usage was difficult to assess because no parameters were given to the student. That is, some students reported usage in terms of number of minutes (especially easy to do because cell phone records often show per minute usage of platforms), whereas others made broader time-related comments such as daily or monthly. Regardless of the time element of usage, students offered comments such as ‘I am addicted to social media’, ‘Everyone uses social media’, and ‘I use social media much less than most people’. Thus, it is appears that individual students have developed their own metrics for what is too much and more/less relative to others.

Although one might think that text messaging would be the platform used most often by students owing to its ease of accessibility on most cell phones, only 70% of the students reported using text messaging. Because ‘text messaging’ was in the content prompt, it would seem that students who text message would have easily thought to include it in the response. Thus, this relatively lower usage rate would appear to be accurate from a self-report perspective. With that said, however, the students who do engage in text messaging appear to be avid users. For example, some students cited daily usage ranging from 20 to 100 texts per day, others reported sending/receiving 2000 to 3000 texts per month, and some reported their usage in terms of hourly ranging from 1 to 4 hours a day.

Fifty-eight per cent of the students reported using streaming video as a social media platform. However, 72% of the students noted YouTube as a provider, thus making interpretation based on the numbers somewhat difficult. Because it is clear that streaming video is one of the top three media platforms and YouTube is one of the top three providers, it could be that students do not necessarily see streaming video as a social media platform for personal usage if they do not necessarily create streaming video. For example, many cell phones and cameras have video capability, but students may not be using the capability for sharing material about themselves or their friends. Viewing streaming video posted on YouTube by unknown creators may not strike the student as necessarily an act of social media.

Table 1 provides the breakdown for other social media platforms and providers. Although not making it into the 50% or above category, 46% of the students engage in blogging. However, the time spent reading/writing blogs was not that high. Only 3% of the respondents reported using blogs daily, with weekly being the most likely occurrence. Provider-wise, Blogspot, and Blogger were mentioned as the blog providers utilized. Only one of the 74 responding students in the current research mentioned podcast as a social media platform used currently. This low reported usage is interesting when compared with the data reported by Zahay and Fredricks (2009) in which 87% of students in a post-use evaluation provided positive comments about the use of podcasts for educational purposes. This lack of use as a social media tool suggests that students may see podcasts as more of an educational tool than a social, interactive tool.

Social behavior

Hanna et al. (2011) describe the transformation of consumers from passive bystanders (i.e., where traditional media is controlled by the advertiser in a firm-consumer monologue) to hunters (i.e., where viewers seek out company-created internet-based marketing campaigns and the consumer controls the interactivity) to active participants in the media process (i.e., where consumers create, consume, and share messages). This transformation has led to what Schultz (2007) described as a social media ecosystem. In the current exploratory study, students were asked to describe their social behavior within the social media ecosystem. To provide context, the five social behaviors identified by Li and Bernoff (2008) were defined, and students were asked to denote within which category each resided and why. Additionally, the segments are not

---

**Table 1 Social media platforms and providers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Number of students*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social networking</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text messaging</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streaming videos</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared photos</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikis</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion groups</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video communication</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Providers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shutterfly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikipedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flickr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogspot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The column does not total to 74 because students could be users of multiple platforms and providers.*
mutually exclusive as students could see themselves engaging in more than one category.

As noted in Table 2, 80% of the students see themselves as Spectators when it comes to social media behavior. That is, they are avid readers of content and are happy to let others create and disseminate the messages. This makes sense when one thinks about the YouTube viewership noted previously in that students enjoy viewing the contributions posted by others. The Creator and Joiner segments came in second behind the Spectators. Forty-two per cent of the students publish, maintain, and upload content to social media sites, and 42% also connect and unite with others on social media sites. This is not surprising given the impact that Facebook has on the students included in this study. Close behind this group is the Collector segment at 40%. These students save and share information found on social media sites. Finally, only 31% of the students consider themselves Critics in the social media world. Thus, students are less likely to engage in commenting or rating than other activities. This is consistent with the lower than average blogging activity noted previously, as Harris (2009) suggested that blogs are an important platform for commenting in the social media ecosystem.

### Consumer-generated message viewship

Agichtein *et al.* (2008) illustrated usage statistics in terms of the number of clicks on a particular item. In this study, however, we were not attempting to discern the actual statistics for a particular piece of online content. Rather, the intent was to tap into the students’ general recall of consumer-generated content. Miller (1956) differentiated between long-term memory and working memory and suggested that working memory had limited capacity with mental activities imposing a cognitive load on an individual. Because the written assignment was for a class and limited in length (as well as only minimal weight in the final grade), it was expected that students would not spend a lot of time thinking and exploring consumer-generated content that they had viewed previously. Rather, the expectation was that students would recall (or not) something viewed and respond to the question.

Eighty-nine per cent of the students could recall seeing a consumer-generated message during the past year. Of these, the majority (70%) was product-related messages, 16% were about a service, and 14% fell into the ‘other’ category. In the ‘other’ category were consumer-generated content about an event such as a charity fundraiser or sporting event, a movie, the boycott of government body scanners, and self-promotion for a career.

An interesting observation in the data is the unclear understanding about consumer-generated content. Several students referenced friends who made Facebook postings/endorsements about a product where it was a part of the summer job responsibility to generate awareness/buzz via social media. The conflict here is that if the content is created at the desire of the company as part of a job, then it is not necessarily consumer-generated content in the true sense of the phrase. Although the provider used is not owned by the company nor does the company have to pay the provider (e.g., Facebook) to post the content, the source of the content is not doing it of his or her own accord. Interestingly, this reveals that many companies are leveraging the students’ online networks and expertise in social media to the company’s advantage.

### Consumer-generated message creation

With the advent of consumer-generated content, marketing communications about a product or company are no longer under the purview of the marketing department. The various social media platforms enable anyone to share his or her thoughts and ideas with a large audience. One would expect that today’s college students, as members of the digital generation, have engaged in the creation of their own social media message about a product or service. The intent of the fourth question, therefore, was to gather information on the message and how it was disseminated. Thus, students who had created content were asked to describe the creation, whereas students who had not created content were asked to think about what they might do.

Sixty-nine per cent of the students in the two sections of Principles of Marketing have created their own social media message. All but one of these creations was disseminated via Facebook. The social media messages included event promotions for charities, nightclubs, campus organizations, sports teams, celebrations, and trips. Other messages were product/service reviews/promotions, restaurant reviews, and work requests. Interestingly, the social media message that was not disseminated via Facebook was created by the student as a part of his/her job. The message was created with iMovie and was disseminated on YouTube. However, this raises the
question again as to students’ understanding of consumer-generated content. Instead, students use their own social media network to fulfill the requirements of the job. This reinforces the fact that companies have learned to utilize the social media ecosystem to tap into the consumer marketplace in which ‘billions of people create trillions of connections through social media each day’ (Hansen et al., 2011: 3).

For the students who had not ever created a social media message, the expected message content was not different from that of the students who had created messages already. Facebook was the most popular presumed means of creating and disseminating messages. However, this group of students anticipates utilizing a wider variety of both platforms and providers. For example, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and blogs were referenced. Yet, it may be that the hopes and desires outweigh the abilities possessed by students, particularly because they have not engaged in the practice already. Owing to familiarity and experience with Facebook, it might still become the default platform provider of choice once the creation and dissemination process began.

CONCLUSION

The overall intent of this exploratory research was to examine a variety of electronic word-of-mouth within the Generation C market segment, the segment often referred to in the popular press as digital natives. The metrics derived from the content analysis provide insight into platforms, providers, and self-report categorical social behaviors. Social networking, text messaging, and streaming videos were used by over half of the sampled students, with Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, the dominant providers. Overall, the students saw themselves largely as Spectators in the social media ecosystem.

Interestingly, although the students in the sample group fall squarely within the domain of Generation C consumers and digital natives, the use of electronic word-of-mouth within this sample group was notably surprising by its relatively low existence. That is, whereas students use a variety of social media for interactive communication, word-of-mouth as understood within the context of marketing communications was not necessarily evident in the data and stories provided by the students. Whereas the quantifiable results via the content analysis suggested that around half of the respondents viewed themselves as content creators, the stories in the written assignment offered a slightly different version of what was occurring. That is, the stories were very basic with a focus on sharing personal content (e.g., photos) on Facebook or accessing YouTube for viewing purposes. Although a few students noted postings of product/service promotions or reviews, most stories about content creation resided largely in two areas. Students would use social media to promote campus events, or they reported using consumer-generated content as a requirement of their jobs. However, content created to satisfy company expectations is not the intent of consumer-generated content, and using social media for event invitations is not equivalent to active engagement with the consumer marketplace. Yet, the fact that many of the students in this sample used their social media ecosystem to promote products or services for the companies for which they worked suggests that companies are tapping into these social networks and using them to their advantage. However, the risk is that the potential for persuasive power in this electronic word-of-mouth network will be diminished long term if the reference giver does have a stake in the business (Cox et al., 2009).

Additionally, we saw very little reported activity in social media sites where the students could truly engage in discussions and conversations with peer consumers. At the same time, only about half of the popular providers identified by Alexa (2010) were represented in the data. That is, Baidu.com, MySpace, QQ.com, Windows Live, and Yahoo! were not mentioned by any of the students as current social media providers. Although some sample bias might be evident in the results because Baidu and QQ are largely Chinese social networking sites, it appears that this particular group of students limits themselves to the popular, yet traditional, providers such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Again, this likely reinforces the notion of the student’s use of social media for personal sharing and/or event notifications.

Although not derived specifically from the content analysis, these findings highlight an interesting area for future examination with regard to whether or not these digital natives are also the market segment engaged in content creation within the purview of marketing communications via electronic word-of-mouth. For example, the students in the current sample group appear content with the basics of social media platforms and providers, and they are not engaging beyond a basic level of social activity in the ecosystem. They appear content with what they know and what they are doing. Thus, one has to wonder if the active participants and creators of content in marketing’s social media ecosystem are different from the digital natives found in today’s college student population. The research raises identity questions as to who the active innovators in social media might be—if not the digital natives of the millennial generation.

Public policy implications

As noted and, not surprisingly given the location of the sampled students, the most social interaction occurred on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.
Inasmuch as this is a community of students and educators, it is imperative that universities help their students understand the long-term impact of their social media postings. Crittenden and Klepper (2010) provide examples of student social networking postings that have become awry and led to potentially harmful results for both the students and university relations with it broader community of stakeholders. While the rules or laws surrounding social media sites are still being defined, students need support and guidance with respect to the rules of online netiquette.

To this end, Crittenden and Klepper (2010) suggest several rules of netiquette:

i. Postings should not depict or describe potentially offensive conduct.

ii. Students should consider the true implications of ‘freedom of speech’ (e.g., attempt to predict the negative consequences of a social media posting).

iii. Postings should pass the ‘public versus anonymous’ acid test (i.e., would the author want his/her name attached to the posting for the entire world to see?).

iv. Personal social media comments should be posted only via private Internet service providers (i.e., posting via the university server can blur the line between a personal posting and university governance).

Limitations and future research

As an exploratory research project, the information reported here was obtained from a convenience sample. Although nonprobability samples are common in marketing research, the usage responses reported here cannot be construed to be representative of digital natives as a whole (Lamb et al., 2011). Important to future research is to compare students from a variety of colleges and universities (e.g., public versus private, geographic dispersion). Additionally, the analysis here was conducted without regard to any discerning characteristics about the sample group.

Future research should examine the data and look for differences between and among a variety of demographic characteristics. A number of studies suggest a disparity by gender with respect to computers and technology (Kim and Bagaka, 2005). In particular, Morrison and McMillan (2010) found gender differences in the posting and using of consumer-generated content (i.e., males were more likely to post and females were more likely to use). Thus, segmenting the data based on gender would allow for statistical testing of differences between males and females within the five social behavior segments. Following Morrison and McMillan (2010), one would suspect males more likely to be Creators and females more likely to be Spectators.

Major area of academic concentration would also be an interesting variable for examination. In research conducted by Educause, a student’s major was an important predictor of classroom technology use (Kvavik, 2010). Thus, one might surmise that the same difference would be found with the use of social media. In line with major area of study, it would also be informative to know whether students have taken information technology and/or computer science courses, as knowledge in certain areas might predispose students to particular platforms and providers. With regard to platforms and providers, content prompting did occur so as to provide examples to students as to what was meant by a platform and a provider as it was suspected that the general population might not think in terms of such differences. However, this might have unintentionally biased students toward particular purveyors.

It would also be worthwhile to look for differences across years of study. Included in the current sample are sophomores, juniors, and seniors. According to the description of a digital native, the greater use and variety of social media would occur among the younger students (i.e., sophomores in this case). At the same time, however, Morrison and McMillan (2010) found that those looking for employment were more likely to post on social media sites. Combining this line of thinking, we would expect sophomores and seniors to use social media more than juniors.

Finally, with respect to demographics, the current study did not take into account different ethnicities or countries of origin represented in the data. The qualitative nature of the data collection process and analysis via the written assignment and content analysis process did not enable the collection of such data. Future research should account for such national effects so as to see if there are country differences in the use of particular platforms and providers and in the creation and dissemination of content.

REFERENCES


The use of social media


O’Guinn TC. 2003. (Brand) community support for the (brand) orchestra. Presentation to the Marketing Science Institute Conference on Brand Orchestration, Orlando, Florida.


Stamats, Inc. 2008. Students of today are tomorrow. Report prepared for the Board of Trustees, Lyon College, Batesville, Arkansas.


APPENDIX A

Assignment: the digital generation

Stamats, a research group, said that technology is like a knife and fork to today’s college student. Labels, creatively using ‘digital’, have been applied to your age group (e.g., ‘Digital Natives’ and ‘Net Generation’). Marketers, of course, are extremely interested in college students and their use of technology because college students, as consumers, comprise a large demographic in the marketplace.

You are to write a 500-750 word document that addresses the topic of ‘The Digital Generation’. In this written assignment, I’d like you to be sure to address the following questions:

1. There are literally hundreds of different social media platforms (e.g., social networking, text messaging, shared photos, podcasts, streaming videos, wikis, blogs, discussion groups) at your fingertips. Which of these social media platforms do you use and about how often do you use each? Of the engaged platforms, which particular providers do you use (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Digg, etc.)?

2. How would you describe your social behavior in marketing’s social media ecosystem? That is, are you a Creator (i.e., you publish, maintain, upload), a Critic (i.e., you comment, rate), a Collector (i.e., you save, share), a Joiner (i.e., you connect, unite), or a Spectator (i.e., you read)? Why do you see yourself in the particular category of consumer?

3. Today’s social media technology has made it possible for consumers to create and share their own marketing messages. Can you recall a consumer-generated message that you have seen in the past year? If so, what was the content of the message (e.g., product, service, etc.)?

4. Have you ever created your own social media message about a product or service (referred to as ‘consumer generated message’)? If so, what was it about and how was it created and disseminated? If you have not ever created and disseminated your own social media marketing message, think of a product or service for which you would like to engage in your own social media marketing process. What would the message be about and how would you create and disseminate the message?