

Social Media Connectedness of Mass Communication Students

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Abstract

This study explores findings from a study that examines the relationship between habits, social connectedness, and perceived usefulness of social media by mass communication students, when controlling for age, gender, college classification, ethnicity, major, primary social media platform, social media use, and time spent on social media each week. The results will focus on study participants’ college majors and their degree of agreement with statements in the survey.

Keywords: Social media, connectedness, students, mass communication, public relations

1 Introduction

The conventional discussion in today’s communication circles is that Millennials possess a unique competency in electronic communication and because of this, they can realize an array of accomplishments utilizing such technologies (Gorman, et. al, 2004). In *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069 (1991)*, William Strauss and Neil Howard ponder the habits and forces shaping the approximately 76 million Millennials born between 1982 and 2000. The authors posit that these Millennials will hopefully “act on vital issues their parents can only ponder” (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 342). But the underlying question remains, “Can and will this generation actually use technology to broaden their understanding and connectedness to the broader world?” The authors state in *The Next 20 Years: How Customers and Workforce Attitudes Will Evolve (2007)* that “Millennials will use their digital empowerment to build and maintain close peer bonds.” What are the implications of this connectedness?

Since the birth of Millennials, the world has seen the introduction of the first iPhone (2007), introduction of Gigabit Ethernet by such companies as AT&T and Google (now Alphabet), and public offerings of new social media networks including Snapchat and Instagram. Generation Y or Millennials are widely considered those born between the years 1982 - 2000. Generation Z, or those born since 2000 have never known a time without wireless Internet. It is widely believed that because of this ubiquitous use of social media, that they feel more connected and use social media frequently.

According to Pew (2016), 79% of all adults use Facebook. Further, by Facebook’s own measure, there are over 1.1 billion active daily users on mobile device (Facebook, 2017). The statistics for total number of active

users dwarfs even that figure at 1.28 billion users in March 2017 (Facebook, 2017). According to Pew Research (2016), 88 percent of 18-29 use Facebook, while those with some college (82%) and college degrees (79%) use Facebook.

On Instagram, a Facebook owned property, use for 18-29 was 59%, while those with some college was 37% and 33% for those with a college degree. It can be safely said that social media use is increasing in the United States. While it is true that most Americans and young college students are using Facebook (a form of social media), how does this near ubiquity of use between this target audience engage a true feeling of connectedness.

Edward Bernays, often credited as the father of public relations considered public relations as covering “three fields including information, persuasion, and integration” (Bernays, 1975, p. 2). In this sense, today’s students involved in the field of public relation are immensely familiar with using social media in context of information gathering and sharing.

2 Background

Shared experiences and the ability to feel in-touch, and perhaps eager to understand the larger world, can be described as connectedness. Therefore, social media is a conduit for feels of connectedness. As the social media universe expands, how do college students react to this growth? Sinclair & Grieve (2017) examined social connectedness in older adults and Facebook, found that social media “emerged as a separate factor to offline social connectedness,” however, the average age in this study was 61. Ahn & Dong (2013) examined whether social media use for seeking connectedness or for avoiding social isolation. In this S. Korean study, over 300 Korean adults were surveyed on their use of social media, face-to-face communication, social isolation and connectedness and their well-being. This study suggests that social media can be augment face-to-face

communication, but by itself, was limited to seeking connectedness to others. Venezuela, Park and Lee (2009) found that there was a positive relationship between college students' "use of Facebook and intensity of Facebook groups use" (p. 893) and students' civic and political participation. However, does use of social media.

Connectedness is also described to mean how the boundaries expand or "transcend the categories between 'us' and 'them' to achieve harmony." (Liu & Robertson, 2011, p. 37). In essence, this feeling of connectedness is what helps not only millennials, but society recognize our commonness and shared bonds.

Social Media and Connectedness

Knight, Rochon, and Hailey (2015) found that in helping students transition to a higher education environment, social media helped students become more proactive about contacting those members of the teaching staff that were present in the social media environment. Mostafa (2015) discovered that students who perceive themselves to be academically engaged on social media helps them to achieve their career goals. Skoric, Zhu, Goh, and Pang (2016) conducted a meta-analysis review of social media and citizen engagement and found that social media generally has a positive relationship with civic engagement and political participation.

3 Research Objective

The first phase of this study sought to answer if there is a difference in how students with different college majors and their view on social media and feelings of connectedness.

4 Methods

This research examined participants' involvement with various social media platforms in social life, education, and communication with their peers and professors, and how that involvement influences their perception of a sense of communal belongingness or connectedness, personal growth. The Institutional Review Board Sam Houston State University, approved the study.

Instrument

The research questions were "What are the perceived usefulness of social media by public relations students?" This question was broken-down into seven specific statements and participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on Likert-type scale, ranging from *strong agree* to *strongly disagree*. The following questions were used:

1. Social media use has given me a deeper understand of important issues affecting me and my community.
2. Social media inspires me to see the world through the eyes of others
3. Social media helps me understand my connection to the community
4. Students who use social media are more concerned
5. Social media has an equalizing effect, allowing for a multitude of voices and opinions, and viewpoints to be heard
6. Social media will be helpful for me, professionally, in the future
7. Social media has and will continue to be a strong force for communication in my prospective career field
8. Two additional questions were asked as it relates to students perceived usefulness of social media in the context of their college environment. The following questions were used:

9. Social media helps me stay connected with my classmates
10. Social media helps me stay connected with my instructors

Participants were asked several demographic questions including age, race, gender, college classification, and major. Additionally, participants were asked about their primary social network, use of time spent on social networks each week, and their change in social media use from a year ago.

Procedures

Students were asked to participate in the survey through postings on this Blackboard accounts and via their university email. A solicitation script was sent to students via their email addresses and/or posted in Blackboard as an announcement. The purpose of the study, its benefits and risks, and its terms were entered in Qualtrics™, effectively allowing prospective participants full (and, if needed, repeated) access to all information concerning the study, along with an opportunity to agree to and enter and complete the study, or to anonymously withdraw from the study at any time. Participants consented to the research terms by voluntarily entering the survey, advancing through the self-paced and self-directed informed consent process, and entering an "agree to participate" statement at the end of the consent process. Responses were collected via an online survey designed and entered in Qualtrics™.

The nature of the study was exploratory; however, a mix of descriptive and inferential statistics are presented to analyze the data.

5 Results

Demographics

Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables. Categorical variables include student's gender, college classification, race, major, primary social media platform, and social media use. Continuous variables include participant's age. When helpful for clarity, data for continuous variables are presented in figures that represent frequencies while data for categorical variables are represented by tables. Graphs are provided for all variables.

The sample for this survey consisted of mostly mass communication students at Sam Houston State University. Of the 159 of surveys distributed, 22 were not usable. The final usable participant surveys were $N = 137$. The following section will provide the results for the descriptive statistics and the findings from the current study.

All tables and figures are in the section titled *Tables and Figures*.

Age

Table 1 provides the frequency of participants by age. Of the 137 participants, there were 65 who fell between 18 – 20 years of age ($N=65$, 47.45%), 61 who fell between 21-23 years of age ($N=61$, 44.53%), 9 who fell between 24-25 years of age ($N=9$, 6.57%), and 2 who were 26 or older ($N=2$, 1.46%).

Gender

Table 2 provides the frequency of participants by gender. Of the 137 participants, there were 47 females for 31.31% ($N=47$) and 90 males for 65.69% ($N=90$).

College Classification

Figure 1 is a bar graph distribution of number of students in the sample and their time college classification. For college classification, 25 or 18% were freshmen, 37 or 27% were sophomores, 39 or 28% were classified as juniors, 35 or 26% were seniors, and 0 or 0% were graduate students; one student was unsure of his or her college classification and represented 1% of those sampled.

Race and Ethnicity

Figure 2 is a bar graph distribution of number of students in the sample and their time race and ethnicity. Fifty-five or 40.15% of respondents were White, 33 or 24.09% were Hispanic/Latino, and 32 or 23.36% were Black/African American. Eleven or 8.03% of respondents were multiracial. Two respondents or 1.46% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and one respondent or .73% was Middle Eastern. Another two or 1.46% of respondents selected *Other*.

Major

Figure 3 is a bar graph distribution of number of students in the sample and their college major. Of those surveyed, four or 2.92% were journalism majors, eight or 5.84% were film majors, 52 or 37.96% majored in PR/Advertising, 21 or 15.33% majored in multi-platform journalism, nine or 6.57% majored in broadcast production, and 43 or 31.39% were classified as "other" (this could include students taking mass communication classes, but undecided or undeclared at the time of the survey); written responses for *Other* included history, two-dimensional studio art, agriculture, English, and communication studies.

Primary Social Media Platform

Figure 4 is a bar graph distribution of number of students in the sample and their primary social media platform. Facebook was the primary social media platform with 38 or 27.74%. Twitter followed closely with 36 users or 26.28%, Instagram with 28 users or (20.44%), and Snapchat with 27 users or 19.71%. The remaining platforms consisted of Tumblr with three users or 2.19% and GroupMe at 1.46%. Three users or 2.19% indicated they did not use social media.

Social Media Use

Figure 5 is a bar graph distribution of number of students in the sample and their social media use. Amongst those surveyed, 58 or 42.34% indicated their social media use has increased. Fifty-two respondents (37.96%) said that their social media use has stayed about the same. Twenty or 14.60% users indicated their social media use has decreased and seven users or 5.11% indicated they were not sure whether their social media use has increased or decreased.

Time Spent on Social Media Each Week

Figure 6 is a bar graph distribution of number of students in the sample and their time spent on social media each week. Sixty-two or 45% of respondents indicated they spend 3 – 5 hours each week on social media; twenty-four or 17.52% indicated they spend 1 – 2 hours per week on social media; 20 respondents indicated they spend 6 – 10 hours per week on social media; 19 respondents indicated they spend more than 10 hours per week on social media. Ten or 7.30% of respondents indicated they spend less than one hour per week on social media and two or 1.46% of respondents indicated they do not use social media at all.

Statement 1: Social media use has given me a deeper understand of important issues affecting me and my community.

Approximately 70% of sample responded in agreement (*agree to strongly agree*) with Statement 1. Table 3 is a means table representing the distribution of means scores by major from Statement 1. When combined with major, public relations/advertising and multiplatform journalism majors tended to report stronger agreement ($M=6.10$) with Statement 1, than students who classified as Other majors ($M=5.26$). Notably, Film students rated the lowest agreement with this statement ($M= 5.13$).

Statement 2: Social media inspires me to see the world through the eyes of others

More than 46% of sample responded in agreement (*agree to strongly agree*) with Statement 2. Table 4 is a means table representing the distribution of means scores by major from Statement 2. When combined with major, public relations/advertising and multiplatform journalism majors reported lower agreement ($M=5.71$) with Statement 1, than broadcast production majors ($M=5.89$), but more than students who classified their major as Other ($M=5.26$). Notably, film students rated the lowest agreement with this statement ($M= 5.13$).

Statement 3: Social media helps me understand my connection to the community

Approximately 26% of sample responded in agreement (*agree to strongly agree*) with Statement 3. Table 5 represents the mean scores by major from Statement 3. When combined with major, journalism students rated highest agreement ($M=6.00$). Public relations/advertising majors reported the next highest agreement ($M=5.65$) with Statement 1, multiplatform journalism ($M=5.62$), broadcast production majors ($M=5.56$), and film students ($M=5.00$). Students who classified themselves as other majors ranked lowest in agreement with Statement 3 ($M=4.74$). Notably, film students rated the lowest agreement with this statement ($M=5.13$).

Statement 4: Students who use social media are more concerned

Approximately 16% of sample responded in agreement (*agree to strongly agree*) with Statement 4; over 31% *neither agreed nor disagreed* with this statement. Table 6 represents the mean scores by major from Statement 4. When combined with major, multiplatform journalism ranked the highest agreement ($M=4.90$) while public relations/advertising students responded in agreement with a median score of $M=4.35$. Film students ranked the lowest agreement of all students ($M=3.88$), and students who classified themselves as other, ranked the next lowest agreement ($M=4.16$) with Statement 4.

Statement 5: Social media has an equalizing effect, allowing for a multitude of voices and opinions, and viewpoints to be heard

More than 66% of sample responded in agreement (*agree to strongly agree*) with Statement 5. Table 7 represents the mean scores by major from Statement 5. When combined with major, public relations/advertising majors reported highest agreement ($M=6.19$) with Statement 5. Students with the next-highest agreement with Statement 5 include multiplatform journalism ($M=5.76$) and students who classified their major as Other ($M=5.58$).

Statement 6: Social media will be helpful for me, professionally, in the future

Over 57% of sample responded in agreement (*agree to strongly agree*) with Statement 6. Table 8 represents the mean scores by major from Statement 6. When combined with college major, journalism and public relations/advertising student ranked highest in agreement at $M=6.75$ and $M=6.06$ respectively.

Statement 7: Social media has and will continue to be a strong force for communication in my prospective career field

More than 70% of sample responded in agreement (*agree to strongly agree*) with Statement 7. Table 9 represents the mean scores (by major) from Statement 7. When combined with college major, journalism and public relations/advertising student ranked highest in agreement at $M=6.50$ and $M=6.48$ respectively. Students in who classified as Other, ranked lowest in agreement ($M=4.91$) with this statement.

Statement 8: Social media helps me stay connected with my classmates

Over 69% of sample responded in agreement (*agree to strongly agree*) with Statement 8. Table 10 represents the mean scores by major from Statement 8. Journalism students ranked highest in agreement ($M=6.75$) and public relations/advertising students ranked second-highest in agreement ($M=5.65$).

Statement 9: Social media helps me stay connected with my instructors

Only 29% of sample responded in agreement (*agree to strongly agree*) with Statement 9. Table 11 represents the mean scores by major from Statement 9. Journalism students ranked highest in agreement ($M=5.75$), while public relations/advertising students ranked lowest in agreement ($M=3.94$) of all students sampled.

6 Discussion

The preliminary results from this study examining the social media use of mass communication students and their feelings of connectedness found that amongst these students, public relations students did not rank highest overall in their agreement with connectedness. When looking at mass communication students in aggregate, a few significant observations were made.

Journalism students ranked highest in agreement on five of the nine statements, including helping them understand their connection to the community, how social media could be helpful to them professionally in the future, their belief that social media will be a strong force for communication in their prospective career field, their agreement that social media helps them stay connected to classmates, and their agreement that social media helps them stay connected with their professors. Social networking site discussions involving politics have also been found to have a positive impact on civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, 2012). Perhaps journalism students, seeing various community conversations from a first-hand perspective, find a higher relationship to the communities they cover and spur them to more feelings of engagement and connectedness. Journalist also share curiosity to investigate and report on the world around them (Niblock, 2010) perhaps making them keenly connected. The implication being that social media is another tool to affect that connectedness.

While it was initially thought that public relations students would rank highest amongst all categories because of their interaction with subject matter and classes that stress teamwork, community engagement, and openness to new ideas, the study found that PR/advertising majors ranked highest in agreement on only one question being that social media use has given them a deeper understanding of important issues affecting them and their community. Cell phones, have been found to open doors to foster relationships and access to membership in a community (Wei, 2006). By extension, those apps running on these phone foster that membership connection, but perhaps not to the oversized degree we would expect with public relations students.

On question nine, the question that dealt with social media and feelings of connectedness to their instructors, public relations/advertising students rated lowest amongst all students. Social media has limits for academics related to delivery and cultural resistance (Manca, 2016), and Tweeting was not related to interpersonal relationships between students and their instructors (Evans, 2014).

7 Limitations

Of note in this study is the small sample size ($N=137$). Additionally, no instrument reliability tests were conducted which would need to be conducted to determine reliability of the instrument and before any true inferences, regarding the data collected, could be made.

No longitudinal data was collected and so the information gathered is a one-time snapshot without the benefit of a pre-test administered to see if there has been a shift in these perceptions about social media use over time.

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9 Tables and Figures

Table 3

Statement 1: Social media use has given me a deeper understand of important issues affecting me and my community analysis by major

| Field | Mean | Std Deviation | Variance | Count |
|--------------------------|------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Journalism | 6.00 | 0.71 | 0.50 | 4 |
| Film | 5.13 | 1.83 | 3.36 | 8 |
| PR/Advertising | 6.10 | 1.08 | 1.16 | 52 |
| Multiplatform Journalism | 6.10 | 0.97 | 0.94 | 21 |
| Broadcast Production | 6.11 | 0.74 | 0.54 | 9 |
| Other | 5.26 | 1.45 | 2.10 | 43 |

Table 4

Statement 2: Social media inspires me to see the world through the eyes of others analysis by major.

| Field | Mean | Std Deviation | Variance | Count |
|--------------------------|------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Journalism | 5.75 | 0.83 | 0.69 | 4 |
| Film | 5.13 | 1.05 | 1.11 | 8 |
| PR/Advertising | 5.71 | 1.12 | 1.24 | 52 |
| Multiplatform Journalism | 5.71 | 1.16 | 1.35 | 21 |
| Broadcast Production | 5.89 | 0.74 | 0.54 | 9 |
| Other | 4.74 | 1.50 | 2.24 | 43 |

Table 5

Statement 3: Social media helps me understand my connection to the community analysis by major

| Field | Mean | Std Deviation | Variance | Count |
|--------------------------|------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Journalism | 6.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 4 |
| Film | 5.00 | 0.87 | 0.75 | 8 |
| PR/Advertising | 5.65 | 1.22 | 1.50 | 52 |
| Multiplatform Journalism | 5.62 | 1.13 | 1.28 | 21 |
| Broadcast Production | 5.56 | 0.83 | 0.69 | 9 |
| Other | 4.74 | 1.45 | 2.10 | 43 |

Table 6

Statement 4: Students who use social media are more concerned analysis by major

| Field | Mean | Std Deviation | Variance | Count |
|--------------------------|------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Journalism | 4.75 | 1.92 | 3.69 | 4 |
| Film | 3.88 | 1.05 | 1.11 | 8 |
| PR/Advertising | 4.35 | 1.21 | 1.46 | 52 |
| Multiplatform Journalism | 4.90 | 1.31 | 1.71 | 21 |
| Broadcast Production | 4.44 | 1.26 | 1.58 | 9 |
| Other | 4.16 | 1.40 | 1.95 | 43 |

Table 7

Statement 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Social media has an equalizing effect, allowing for a multitude of voices, opinions, and viewpoints to be heard analysis by major

| Field | Mean | Std Deviation | Variance | Count |
|--------------------------|------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Journalism | 5.50 | 1.12 | 1.25 | 4 |
| Film | 5.25 | 1.56 | 2.44 | 8 |
| PR/Advertising | 6.19 | 0.79 | 0.62 | 52 |
| Multiplatform Journalism | 5.76 | 1.15 | 1.32 | 21 |
| Broadcast Production | 4.78 | 1.62 | 2.62 | 9 |
| Other | 5.58 | 1.50 | 2.24 | 43 |

Table 8

Social Media Connectedness of Mass Communication Students

Statement 6: Social media will be helpful for me, professionally, in the future analysis by major

| Field | Mean | Std Deviation | Variance | Count |
|--------------------------|------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Journalism | 6.75 | 0.43 | 0.19 | 4 |
| Film | 5.63 | 1.11 | 1.23 | 8 |
| PR/Advertising | 6.06 | 1.12 | 1.25 | 52 |
| Multiplatform Journalism | 5.52 | 1.22 | 1.49 | 21 |
| Broadcast Production | 5.11 | 1.20 | 1.43 | 9 |
| Other | 5.12 | 1.32 | 1.73 | 43 |

Table 9

Statement 7: Social Media has and will continue to be a strong force for communication in my prospective career field analysis by major

| Field | Mean | Std Deviation | Variance | Count |
|--------------------------|------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Journalism | 6.50 | 0.87 | 0.75 | 4 |
| Film | 6.00 | 1.12 | 1.25 | 8 |
| PR/Advertising | 6.48 | 0.77 | 0.60 | 52 |
| Multiplatform Journalism | 6.29 | 0.70 | 0.49 | 21 |
| Broadcast Production | 5.78 | 0.79 | 0.62 | 9 |
| Other | 4.91 | 1.41 | 1.99 | 43 |

Table 10

Statement 8: Social media helps me stay connected with my classmates analysis by major

| Field | Mean | Std Deviation | Variance | Count |
|--------------------------|------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Journalism | 6.75 | 0.43 | 0.19 | 4 |
| Film | 5.63 | 0.70 | 0.48 | 8 |
| PR/Advertising | 5.65 | 1.25 | 1.57 | 52 |
| Multiplatform Journalism | 6.10 | 0.97 | 0.94 | 21 |
| Broadcast Production | 6.22 | 0.63 | 0.40 | 9 |
| Other | 5.74 | 1.06 | 1.12 | 43 |

Table 11

Statement 9: Social media helps me stay connected with my instructors analysis by major

| Field | Mean | Std Deviation | Variance | Count |
|--------------------------|------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Journalism | 5.75 | 2.17 | 4.69 | 4 |
| Film | 4.38 | 1.58 | 2.48 | 8 |
| PR/Advertising | 3.94 | 1.59 | 2.52 | 52 |
| Multiplatform Journalism | 4.24 | 1.87 | 3.51 | 21 |
| Broadcast Production | 4.89 | 1.52 | 2.32 | 9 |
| Other | 4.49 | 1.90 | 3.60 | 43 |

Figure 1

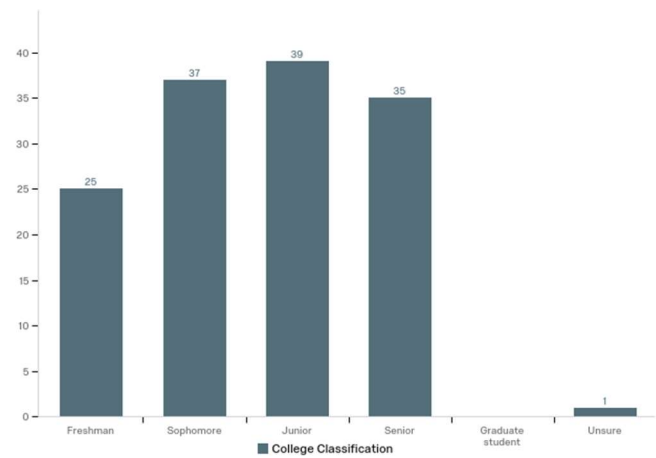


Figure 2

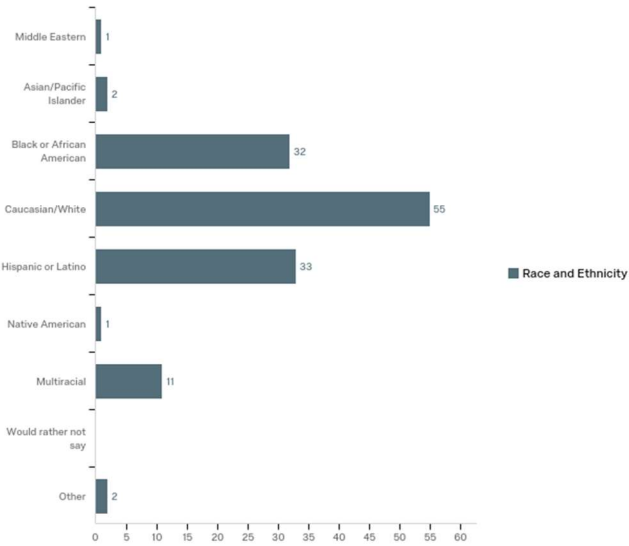


Figure 5

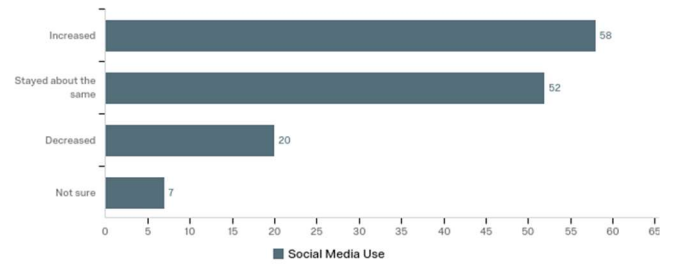


Figure 3

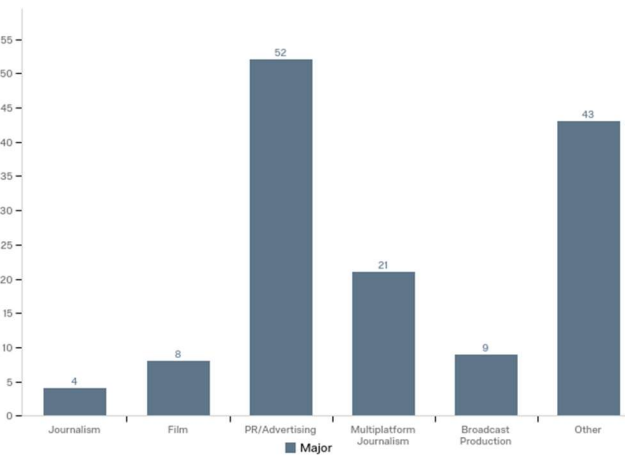


Figure 6

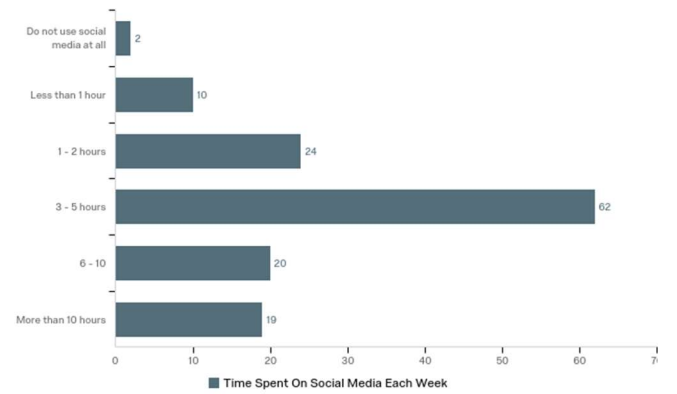


Figure 4

