With the rise of social media, university programs are searching for effective ways to prepare students to use social media (Fratti, 2013). This challenge is mirrored by professionals who are also seeking to better equip themselves (Brown, 2014). This study explored key elements that should be included in social media education through interviews with over 20 social media industry leaders. Findings provide extensive guidance for faculty who teach social media courses.

Keywords: Social media, social media pedagogy, public relations education
with the appropriate training and expertise, there seems to be a growing gap between the two in working toward this common goal. In fact, a recent study from the IBM Institute for Business Value found that 60% of academic and industry leaders believe that higher education fails to meet the needs of the industry (King, 2015). This is particularly true in the context of social media, which is constantly growing and evolving. As the technology continues to evolve and requires greater expertise to leverage it effectively, there will be an increasing need to design appropriate education processes for those wishing to engage professionally in the digital world. Finding a curriculum that is both fluid and reactive to the changes in the social media landscape, yet also based on fundamental principles and practices, is a growing challenge for the academy. In light of this, it seems reasonable to look to the industry as the litmus test for what social media curricula should contain.

While there are many suggestions and approaches for optimizing social media preparation, there has yet to be a single study that proposes a unified model for social media education. One recent study (Kinsky, Freberg, Kim, Kushin, & Ward, 2016) explored the use of Hootsuite University as a tool that can be implemented within social media courses. While this study contributed to understanding the benefits of training with a social media management tool, it did not explore the full scope of a social media curriculum. The current research is designed to address this gap in the literature by examining professional and academic beliefs about the core components of a social media curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rise of Social Media in Organizational Life
Organizations of all shapes and sizes have been impacted by the rise of social media. As a result, there has been a rise in public relations scholarship that addresses the implications of this digital influence (Wright & Hinson, 2014). One significant feature contributing to the rise of digital influence is that, through social media, messages can be amplified like never before. Thus, an organization’s reach, impact and influence have the potential to expand. But this only can happen when the organization successfully identifies and builds authentic conversations with key influencers within social media (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011).

Professional Resources for Social Media
To equip professionals for the influx of social media expertise required in today’s landscape, many resources have been developed. For example, Breakenridge (2012) provided guidance for public relations professionals wishing to understand how social media provide a unique platform for enhancing relationships with key publics. Another example is Kerpen (2011), who explored the relationships between the use of social media and being a truly likable organization that listens and develops two-way dialogue. A driving concept in most of these resources is that the power of social media rests in the ability to identify what publics are interested in and then to join that conversation, rather than trying to approach social media as a publicity platform (Macnamara, 2010).

Social Media in Higher Education
With classrooms filling with digital natives, the implications for social media within education have been felt for many years now. Tess (2013) pointed out that the “potential role for social media as a facilitator and enhancer of learning is worth investigating,” when he introduced a comprehensive analysis of the current role of social media in higher education classrooms by examining scholarship and through empirical investigations (p. A60). Tess concluded that the potential for educational impact through social media in college campuses is yet to be fully explored, citing several variables including the affordance of social media platforms and using social networking sites and course management systems.

The proliferation of social media in higher education within the established curriculum and the examination of it as a pedagogical tool has resulted in numerous studies. Marketing scholars, for example, have explored how marketing educators have been incorporating social media (Atwong, 2015; Muñoz & Wood, 2015; Neier & Zayer, 2015). In addition, many studies focus not just on a specific platform, but on student competencies required to use social technology in professional settings after college. For example, Anderson, Swenson, and Kinsella (2014) used social media to help conduct a crisis simulation within their course, allowing students to practice engaging in real time with crisis information over social media channels, develop decision-making capabilities and learn to effectively respond in a digital environment. These skills are needed by most entry-level digital marketing or communication professionals. One of the key findings from this experiment was the reaction of students. They reported that not only did they learn how to handle crisis situations better, but also that a learning environment where social media was implemented was particularly effective in boosting their comprehension of the competencies they were learning in the course.

In addition to exploring the ways social media help prepare students for professional competencies and skillsets, many scholars have also examined the ways college students use social media and the implications of these patterns of use for the higher education environment (e.g., Hosterman, 2011; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010; Kassens-Noor, 2012). For example, Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert (2009) explored the experience of college students who use Facebook for networking. Other examples include a study by Anderson and Swenson (2013) that explored ways to equip students for the professional expertise they will need using Twitter. What comes to light when examining this literature is that there are two seemingly large categories of scholarship dealing with higher education and social media. The first deals with social media platforms and real-world applications, such as a crisis-simulation experiment. The second deals with social media platforms used to create classroom learning environment and cultures.

Real-World Application and Classroom Culture. Of the two larger sections of social media research focusing on higher education, research involving real-world applications of social media and learning competencies for students is somewhat less developed. This may be due to scholars’
emphasis on the implications of social media for higher education rather than on the competencies gained by students who engage in social media assignments. However, studies that have opted to focus on the real-world application of technology have reported significant findings for student learning. For example, Anderson et al. (2014) immersed their students in a crisis simulation that not only forced students to learn about crisis management, but to use social media as the tool with which they could respond and assess crisis communication in the digital environment. This approach mirrors what they will be expected to do in the real world and thus builds not only crisis competencies but also tools to enhance their effectiveness.

The other vein of research into social media and higher education focuses not on application but on learning environments that are created through technology. Carpenter and Krutka (2014), for example, explored the way educators are using Twitter, a micro-blogging platform, to build a community. Rather than focusing on students using the tool as a way to illustrate their competencies, this research explores the creation of an environment that is dynamic, responsive and inclusive for students and educators. Gant and Hadley (2014) examined microblogging’s potential to create heightened engagement, to encourage transactional learning and to help with retention of class content. Whether focusing on social media applications or the environment the media can create, educators have also identified the need to explore the impact on credibility based on the use of social media in a college environment.

**Faculty Credibility and Social Media.** With a long body of research supporting the connection between faculty credibility and student learning, it is no surprise that professors are concerned about the potential impact of technology on perceptions of their expertise (Martin, Chesebro, & Mottet, 1997). Teven and McCroskey (1997) reported that faculty credibility is based on three main dimensions: competence or expertise, trustworthiness, and care for students. Educators are still exploring the practices and pedagogy approaches that best display those three dimensions via social media. That may be why the Pearson Learning Report (Pearson Learning Solutions, 2013) found that professors have “concerns about privacy, both for themselves and for their students, and about maintaining the class as a private space for free and open discussion,” when integrating social media into courses (p. 3). DeGroot, Young, and VanSlette (2015) tackled the issue of faculty credibility related to Twitter use. They found that a professor’s profile and Twitter content did influence students’ perception of the faculty member's credibility and evaluations of the course. However, they noted that a potential mediating factor could be the fact that the “student’s perception of an instructor on Twitter may be indicative of his or her differences in preferred learning and teaching philosophies” (p. 15). While there is still much to learn about how to integrate social media in applications and to create culture in courses as well as the impact to a faculty member’s credibility, many institutions have begun offering classes either entirely dedicated to social media, or courses with large portions focused on social media. Thus, a final area to review is the development of social media curriculum.

**Current Standards of Social Media Education**

Due to the ubiquitous nature of social media use among students and within education, it is to be expected that research has been growing on the topic. Davis, Deil-Amenn, Rios-Aguilar, and González (2012) explored the role of social media in higher education by looking at the type of technology available, the impact of technology perils of social media, and implications of the platforms. They predicted that future research with social media would need to explore the impact of technology on student learning and ways to accurately assess information (pp. 23-24). Taking a larger perspective on the general competencies required, Lipschultz (2015) provided insight into how educators can equip students to understand important components of social media such as key concepts and theories and applications to professions such as journalism and public relations. A number of scholars have explored specific components related to social media and digital technology instruction such as writing (Carroll, 2014) and ethics (Drushel & German, 2011). Even with the growing body of research, no study has proposed a unified model for a social media curriculum, in spite of the fact that social media courses are strongly recommended (Brodoc, 2012). In light of this gap in research, the current study was designed to explore the following questions:

**RQ1:** What key concepts do professionals believe should be taught in an undergraduate social media course?

**RQ2:** How can social media courses prepare students to be leaders within the social media environment?

**RQ3:** What is the value of a social media mentor for professionals entering into the field?

**METHODS**

To address these questions, 20 industry professionals were interviewed. Social media as an industry is largely led by professional needs and changes, which are often then reflected in the academy. Because this sector is led and influenced by practice and not existing curricula, which often lag in reflecting the current state and needs of the industry, it was determined that professionals would be the best group of individuals to speak to current needs within the industry and the educational expectations of those they plan to hire.

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who had strong experience within social media in a professional setting, often serving in a managerial or senior position. These professionals represented a variety of sectors including agency, corporate and nonprofit organizations. A mix of face-to-face, phone and in-person interviews were conducted based upon availability and geographic limitations. In the event of phone or in-person interviews, transcripts were made for later analysis. Participants were all 18 years or older and resided in the United States. While most of the participants consented to be identified, some asked to remain anonymous in the final manuscript and will be identified as Participant A, B, etc.

Participants were recruited based on their interaction with social media at a variety of levels within an organization. The breadth of experience of these participants provided rich content from which to draw conclusions. Participants included individuals such as Michael Brito, author and speaker on social
media; Michael Stelzner, from Social Media Examiner; Melissa Agnes, crisis communications specialist; Deirdre Breakenridge, social media expert and author; Dennis Yu, from Blitzmetrics; Whitney Drake, from General Motors; Seth Grugle, from Ogilvy PR; Samantha Hughey, from Team USA; and Amy Gerber, from the American Red Cross. A wide range of professionals from a variety of organizations were purposefully selected in order to have represented voice within this study. The researchers interviewed nine women and 11 men who participated in this research. Five are employed at agencies, three at nonprofit organizations, three own their own consulting businesses, and nine work at large organizations or corporations. Everyone who was interviewed has a role or responsibility working in social media.

The researchers used semi-structured interviews to be able to expand or follow up on any areas with participants worthy of further exploration (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interview protocol began with a discussion of what should be included within social media education and continued into questions involving leadership, mentoring and the role of faculty.

To analyze the interviews, two researchers read through the transcripts and independently, qualitatively coded the transcripts for the emergence of themes. This was done using the Glaser and Strauss (1967) constant comparison method. Using a qualitative, grounded theory approach is particularly appropriate for this study due to the limited research that currently exists involving perceptions of industry professionals toward social media curricula. After discussing the initial themes, the researchers again independently reviewed the transcripts. Considering the research questions, the researchers established and refined the initial themes based on evidence from the transcripts in the form of quotes using an open-coding procedure (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Finally, the researchers discussed the coding and any inconsistencies that arose in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the category coding. From this discussion, a coding scheme was created and the researchers revisited the data to ensure consistent coding of the transcripts. Lastly, the researchers reconvened to confirm findings.

RESULTS

Based on the interviews conducted among the 20 social media professionals for this study, several themes emerged from the research questions.

Key Concepts for Students to Have

Business principles in social media. Michael Brito stated, from his role as both a professor and practitioner, that students “know how to use the tools, personally. What I try to do is show them this is how it is important from a business perspective.” Dennis Yu, a data analyst for Blizmetrics who works with clients like Facebook, Golden State Warriors, and Rosetta Stone, reiterated this point and noted that students (and professors) need to look at the company picture of how social media is used as a business practice:

> When people talk about social media, they are thinking about blogging or Twitter as opposed to as a process of integrating across different functions within the company. It’s almost like putting the chicken before the egg. The companies don’t know how to define it, and the programs do not know what to offer. You look at all of these programs out there and there is no way to define this monstrous beast.

Other professionals noted that there were specific areas of business that needed to be emphasized even more. Samantha Hughey, Audience Engagement Editor for Team USA, said:

> I think a lot of students are missing out on the fundamentals of marketing and advertising. While many believe that traditional marketing is dead – that people are no longer taking out ads in magazines and instead are turning to social media, which is the case, however, the general concepts and ideology behind the creation of great plans still resonates from those core courses.

Social creativity. Another area that was discussed among the professionals was this notion of having social media classes focusing on the art (creativity) as well as the science (analytics). Hughey emphasized strategic thinking:

> Students need to be aware of this and need to hone other crafts that will make them assets in those people’s eyes. Whether that be graphic design, research, video production, photography – have something (and something amazing) that you can also bring to the table. Also, students need to understand that if they are going into the field of social media it has to be for more than just because they love Instagram. A lot of what I am currently doing is the strategic thought process behind things – I don’t Instagram very often. Had I gone into this field thinking that’s all I would be doing I would be bummed.

Seth Grugle, a public relations professional at Ogilvy PR in NYC, agreed that the point is to be creative not only with the content that is being produced, but to be creative by looking outside of the PR field itself. Grugle stated:

> I still believe, and this may be because of my background in PR, but the strongest social media campaigns start outside of social media. The first thing is to not just start on Twitter, you want to start with the end result. Always think of your sphere.

Professionals noted the importance of both creativity and writing. Carly Visbal (Giving Children Hope) emphasized that writing is both necessary and
sometimes challenging to do when it comes to social media. According to Visbal, "Learning to write in a concise yet in a persuasive way is different than other writing practices taught traditionally. A challenge to working in social media is maintaining creativity while balancing time management of a fast pace profession."

**Analytic and paid media capabilities.** The links between return on investment and analytics are also important elements to consider in the classroom. Shonali Burke, a public relations practitioner and consultant, emphasized the importance of understanding measurement and the power of analytics in social media. When teaching key metrics and analytics, the professionals discussed different approaches. Michael Brito, who is a social media strategist and adjunct professor, discussed how he approaches his classes when covering paid media and analytics:

I talk heavily about paid media, and going to the back end of the Twitter ads and Facebook ads and show them. They are actually responsible for finding a local business and manage their content over the course of the semester. A lot of it is instructional up front, and practical for the last two and a half months of school, and it is coaching.

**Writing capacities.** Like public relations courses, writing is a key skill needed for success in social media. Michael Stelzner stated that it’s not only about writing in general, but writing in different ways and on different platforms for different purposes: “Every student should write different kinds of updates: to entertain, sell, share others' content. I would want them to get experience in different content for different purposes.” Dan Natsika of Discovery Cube LA/OC made a similar conclusion:

I think it all comes down to writing. It’s kind of like when you’re in advertising and you have to make a billboard: if you can make a clear ad and a clear call to action, then you generally start with that for everything else. I kind of view it the same way. It’s a clear message and call to action. I would say writing is always a big part of social media.

As reiterated by other professionals, writing content for multiple platforms and for emerging platforms that are currently being used by industry professionals is important to address in classes. In addition to traditional writing assignments in class, such as maintaining a personal blog, Burke recommended delving into writing for multimedia platforms and participating in Twitter chats to get hands-on experience with the platforms: “Doing a Periscope or going on to Blab. I think it is important to get their hands dirty.”

**Benefits of Having a Social Media Class for Students**

**Hands-on experience.** Whitney Drake, who works at General Motors in the Social Care division, discussed how having hands-on experience is essential if you want to have a position working in the field. However, having the ability and willingness to continue to learn is another element that is important. Drake said:

From a practitioner’s perspective, it is evolving and we do not want people to join our team who are not constant learners. Because you can’t sit on your laurels and be like, oh, I learned social media in school and I am done! It’s not going to stop. I think it is important to communicate these messages loud and clear and say – what I am telling you now may not be the same in five days, and it is up to you to continue to learn that.

Matt Kelly, who is a PR and social media specialist at Golin, shared his experiences getting hands-on experience in student agencies and how these experiences have translated to the current landscape:

While at Eastern Illinois University and Ball State University, I participated in the student-run firms. This was a great experience, because it allowed me to serve real clients. Luckily, we didn’t encounter many difficult situations or crises. But what if we did? Instead of a high-level crisis like a product recall or negative story going viral, what are some situations an entry-level person might find themselves in more regularly? A measurement report went out, and the client found a mistake. What do you do? You posted errantly from your personal account to a client account. What now? Weekly problem-solving workshops from real-world examples might help students prepare for what they’ll surely experience in the field.

Professionals who were interviewed discussed the power and great learning experience that is involved with working with real clients for class and providing insights, research, and creative proposals for them as part of the overall learning experience. Jeff Kallin, who is in charge of the Clemson Athletics Digital and Social Media team, discussed his continued involvement with higher education classes:

We do not lose sight because we are an institution of higher learning. The fact we have our students who are closely working with us, it’s been very empowering and it’s so integral to us. We are able to do the training and content creating ourselves, and work with our students and be able to mentor them. . . . is huge. Having your content market create your content is golden.

**Exceptional content creators and storytellers.** Students need to have the opportunity to not only be tested on the key trends, terms, and concepts
related to social media, but according to the professionals interviewed, they need to be exceptional storytellers and content creators across different platforms and channels.

As Breakenridge discussed in her interview, this could be the deciding factor between candidates for a job:

The students who stand out are the ones who can easily build blogs, create different social media visuals (memes, infographics, etc.), know how to write for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. They are storytellers through different media. I also look for students who are active on social media because this shows their knowledge/proficiency, as well as the breadth and depth of their own digital footprint. I may also give an assignment to test a candidate’s level of EQ (Emotional Quotient) in handling sensitive situations on the company blog or in social media communities. It is important to test different situations and how they would handle customers and other stakeholders.

Stelzner, founder of Social Media Examiner, reiterated this point by stating:

Thought leaders will always be content creators. They will be the podcasters, bloggers, and video people. They will be creating content and that’s one thing that most people have no clue how to do. If you can create content, then you can very rapidly become a thought leader.

Along with creating content, discussing the application of how content creation can benefit from understanding key theoretical frameworks and how they could be applied strategically are other factors that came to mind among the professionals.

Amy Gerber of the American Red Cross noted:

I think it would be helpful to flesh out best practices with real-life case studies—transition the academic into application. Given that information and situations move so quickly in the social realm, it’s important that students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that will help them be more nimble when they find themselves managing official brand channels.

In addition, Jeff Kallin said that having the opportunity to work with classes to help create content and stories has been greatly beneficial for both his team and for the students. In fact, one of the tests his team does when interviewing students to be part of the Clemson Athletics social and digital team is to create a story:

One of the ways we audition students is to ask them to create. If we have three students to work with us in video, we have to say—you three go shoot and tell a story of this event and then submit. We can tell what they do and how their work flow is. You are going to have to create content. About social media in general, I think some of it is framed in an intimidating way and it is important to empower them to create so many opportunities and content on a daily basis. Take advantage of it. Get a website and get on Adobe’s Creative Cloud services and mobile platforms. You have so many tools at your disposal and the war is in content. People are trying different ways to connect with consumers. How are people going to find you with your content?

Melissa Agnes, a social media and crisis communications keynote speaker and consultant, also supported this perspective and stressed the importance of taking a leading role in creating and sharing content with others:

The ones who are using it well are the ones who truly, truly understand its purpose. If you look at the leaders out there who are leading the way with their organizations and utilizing social media in brilliant ways, they understand the purpose. That it is a means to an end. When I look at crisis communication, what differentiates these people from the herds or people who are just using it . . . the difference between leaders and followers is looking beyond the tool and platform and seeing the purpose behind it and the opportunities it presents.

Trend forecasting and strategic thinking. Professionals repeatedly emphasized the strategic thinking component in social media, incorporating the idea of trend forecasting. Agnes, for example, explained:

We share with students about great ways to use social media but we’re not teaching them that in every step of the process we should ask “what is the worst that could come of this” so we can mitigate the risk. Employers want to have professionals who understand the consequence of actions prior to finding themselves in uncomfortable situations. At the same time, strategic thinking is more than just avoiding threats. It is also about taking advantage of opportunities.

Luke Cheng, a social media strategist at OMD Entertainment, emphasized the importance of knowing nuances so that practitioners can take advantage of the creative potential on platforms: “We need to have an understanding of what we are actually doing and what we are doing that no one else can do.” Professionals look for strategic thinking and trends forecasting in individuals who seem to manifest these qualities in their personal social media habits. Natsika pointed out: “One of the things I would say is important is to be in the know and be progressive in what is happening across the board and in different platforms.” Kristi Torrington, a social media professional working at WestLIVING, also said students can illustrate strategic thinking
The Value of the Mentor for Students in Social Media

Mentorship. Among the professionals interviewed, many discussed the growing emphasis of mentorship not only for the future generation of professionals, but also a willingness to take advice and mentoring from those coming up in the ranks. Matt Kelly of Golin pointed out that these relationships are “mutually beneficial for students and professionals. Students learn the nuances of working in their prospective fields. Professionals gain knowledge of millennial behaviors and platforms, and a new perspective.” Even at large, global corporations such as General Motors, mentorship is an important skill for both professionals and students. Drake mentioned how you have to “make yourself available” and how this practice is being implemented not only in the course she teaches, but also how she approaches her team at GM.

Industry Experience and Social Connectors. Other professionals mentioned the benefit of having a professor in the social media course serve as a social connector, bridging both practice and research into the class by bringing in guest speakers. These guest speakers, as Hughey discussed, allow students to get a real-world sense of the field as well as provide a window into networking. Some of these connections come with industry experience, which is a key attribute for a professor teaching social media. Being able to bridge the gap of knowledge and making connections in the classroom has an impact on the mentorship opportunities available for students. Kelly agrees: “Professors should either have practical experience themselves in corporate/agency settings, bring in professionals, or both. A professor teaching social media should be a connector, bridging the gap between students and professionals.”

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The current state of social media education is in a point of transition. Students are facing constantly changing expectations and ever-demanding skillsets in order to excel and meet the needs of corporations, agencies, and practitioner needs.

State of Social Media Education

Public relations education and programs have been routinely evaluated and researched over the past several decades (e.g., Commission on Public Relations Education Professional Bond Report, 2006). Expectations for what needs to be taught in social media classes should be fluid and evolving as new platforms, tools, programs, and needs are in demand. Some of the skills such as paid media, business acumen, and marketing are all traditional concentrations in public relations programs.

The growing expectations for content creation, storytelling, and analytics are areas that need to be further developed and enhanced relative to social media courses. Research has explored the use of certain assignments in social media classes like certification programs provided by Hootsuite University (Kinsky et al., 2016), infographics (Gallicano, Ekachi, & Freberg, 2014), Twitter chats (Fraustino, Briones, & Janoske, 2015), and blogs to name a few. However, exploring and experimenting with new assignments in social media classes that tie into these skills and specific areas within social media could be beneficial for the educator and professional community.

Another theme that arose from this study is the fact that some practitioners in this research study discussed not only the possibility but also the willingness to collaborate and be part of social media classes. This participation ranges from being clients for proposal projects and campaigns to actually co-teaching the course. Future research could explore the different ways in which educators can create more of a fluid approach to the curriculum to address growing needs and expectations from practice while staying true and aligned with the program’s and college’s learning objectives.

Along with expectations for what should be covered in a social media class, certain assignments and exercises were also recommended. The highest priority mentioned by the practitioners was the importance of hands-on experience. This hands-on experience can range from having guest speakers come to class, speak through a video conference call system like Skype, Blab, or Google+, or serve as a client or judge for a social media client proposal project. These guest speakers can provide insight as well as be a connection for the students to reach out to during and after the class for guidance and advice on projects and internship possibilities. Agencies, small businesses, and large athletic teams are waiting for the opportunity to work with students and allow them to get hands-on experience in social media. Educators could further explore individual assignments through research to determine the effectiveness of each assignment, application of learning objectives, and overall application of the experience from classroom to the workplace.

Mentoring and being connected with the industry were two apparent themes that emerged from the data among the practitioners. Mentoring was mentioned frequently by the professionals in this study. Having educators who help guide students not only in the class, but help them make established connections with the industry are becoming a necessity in social media classes. Professors are not only expected to mentor in the traditional sense, but also to take on the role as a social connector for students and the professional community online as well.
One of the conclusions from this research is the growing emphasis on the role of the social media professor. Few studies have explored the role of the professor in a social media classroom. The respondents in this study discussed how the professor needs to have real-world experiences and to be connected with the social media community. In response to growing expectations and new demands, professors today may feel overwhelmed.

Future research could potentially explore the different characteristics, skills, attributes, and experiences professors of social media need to have in order to be successful. In addition, there is a growing trend of adjunct professors teaching these courses who are a bridge between research and the practice that brings a new dynamic of the hybrid professor.

Higher education is facing challenges because of the emergence of social media as a pedagogical tool, the development of new technologies, and greater expectations from the industry. These particular challenges are also opportunities to explore new approaches to ensure that students entering the workplace in public relations and social media are fully prepared, not only in the tools, skills, and knowledge within social media, but also in the behavior of becoming lifelong learners who strive to take the initiative to become the best they can be.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of social media education are evolving and ever changing. Social media education is a rising discipline and specialization within public relations research and a growing interest among brands, practitioners, and agencies that wish to recruit the best talent into their own communities. The constant push and discussion of new emerging tools, platforms, and skills might result in a constant fear of missing out (or FOMO) for programs, departments, and professors. This study hopes to contribute to a clear direction for where higher education and social media courses need to go in the future, how to best prepare students for the workplace, and how to create a stronger bridge between educators and practitioners in public relations.

Finally, this study highlights the value of encouraging social media educators to share their best practices and strategies for education (Weede, 2016). While there seem to be many reports that indicate social media education is lagging and missing key competencies, it is more important than ever for educators to continue to share resources and pedagogy in order to improve all of higher education in the area of social media.

There were several limitations to this research study. First, the professionals who were interviewed for the study ranged across different industries, and they were all highly invested in social media practice or consulting. This study did not interview professors who teach social media courses. Further research should reach out to professors who are currently teaching social media courses at the university level. Interviews were only conducted to gauge what practitioners would consider to be a strong social media curriculum as well as what skills and areas needed to be added to the current curriculum program at respective universities, but there were no actual syllabi or examples shown to the professionals in this case. With this in mind, future research could explore a content analysis looking into common themes in established social media classes to determine which assignments, topics, skills, learning objectives, and outcomes align with the expectations from educators and practitioners in this area.

References


Next Generation Pedagogy: IDEAS for Online and Blended Higher Education 8. 2. FUTURA process. The FUTURA project was exploratory in nature. It started with a search for broad themes in innovative practices and original approaches to teaching in distance higher education (HE) institutions worldwide. The goal is to foster collaboration between academic and professional experts while providing students with an applied learning environment. Key benefits of this initiative for students include connecting to people, opportunities and projects, and obtaining support to build sustainability skills, or to frame and initiate a project. Projects begin with an idea or need for change. A project coordinator then works with the initiator to develop the proposal and structure it. Social sciences and humanities teachers provide students with frequent opportunities to practise their skills and apply new learning and, through regular and varied assessment, give them the specific feedback they need in order to further develop and refine their skills. By assigning tasks that promote the development of higher-order thinking skills, teachers help students assess information, develop informed opinions, draw conclusions, and become thoughtful and effective communicators.