



Targeting Young Adults: The Effectiveness Of Social Media Use For Local Businesses

By: Amy L. Bitner and **Pia A. Albinsson**

Abstract

Social media has been constantly evolving and growing in popularity since its development. Approximately 65% of adults are using some form of social media (Pew Research Center, 2015). Social media is also growing as a powerful marketing tool for many reasons, including its ability to reach a wide audience, provide immediate information, and build relationships. Research show that a majority of social media users think that companies should have a presence on social media and use it to interact with their consumers. Over half of current social media users feel a greater connection with companies they interact with via social media (Cone Communications, 2008). Social media is allowing companies to solve customer service issues immediately, gain feedback directly from consumers on their products or marketing campaigns, provide information on new products, and interact with consumers quickly and on a seemingly more personal level (Marginy Research Group, Inc., 2008). Companies can increase their engagement with consumers on social media through the use of polls, reviews, feedback, and contests (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

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Targeting Young Adults: The Effectiveness of Social Media Use for Local Businesses

Amy L. Bitner, abitner94@gmail.com
Pia A. Albinsson, albinssonpa@appstate.edu*

Introduction

Social media has been constantly evolving and growing in popularity since its development. Approximately 65% of adults are using some form of social media (Pew Research Center, 2015). Social media is also growing as a powerful marketing tool for many reasons, including its ability to reach a wide audience, provide immediate information, and build relationships. Research shows that a majority of social media users think that companies should have a presence on social media and use it to interact with their consumers. Over half of current social media users feel a greater connection with companies they interact with via social media (Cone Communications, 2008). Social media is allowing companies to solve customer service issues immediately, gain feedback directly from consumers on their products or marketing campaigns, provide information on new products, and interact with consumers quickly and on a seemingly more personal level (Marginy Research Group, Inc., 2008). Companies can increase their engagement with consumers on social media through the use of polls, reviews, feedback, and contests (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

A report on social media use by Marginy Research Group on Generation Y (2008, p.154) finds that brands should “establish an authentic, sincere, and socially responsible presence on the web.” The report simply advises companies to “just be real.” This is also supported by Bäckman and Bergström’s (2013) study on the use of Instagram in marketing, finding that users want to see unique and personal posts from the companies that they follow rather than pure marketing tactics. When generation Y and young adults follow company social media sites they are looking for inspiring posts that they can relate to. This research examines social media use and interaction between young consumers and local businesses. It specifically examines consumers between the ages of 18-24 and local businesses, defined as “privately owned businesses in the local area that are not chains or franchises.” The research question that guides this research is: Does social media interaction between young adults, ages 18-24, and local businesses lead to a perceived relationship with the company and does that affect purchase intentions?

Young Consumers

Young adults age 18-24 are included in the millennial generation, which currently makes up over 25% of the population of the United States (The United States Census Bureau, 2015). The purchasing power of this generation is continuing to increase. College students are reported to have around \$120 billion in discretionary spending, increasing 40% from \$86 billion on 2011 (Globe Newswire, 2012). These statistics make millennials a large market for businesses to target.

Millennials are characterized by being exposed to frequent technology at a young age as leading to their high social media use (Bolton, et al., 2013). Millennials are becoming more difficult for companies and marketers to reach. Due to the amount of advertising messages they are surrounded by daily, millennials are becoming avoiding traditional forms of marketing and advertisements (“The Marketing Society Forum,” 2016). For this reason, social media is a great platform to reach young consumers with advertising messages.

Conceptual Development

Social Media and Young Adults

Social media can be defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media has grown in popularity due to its “ability to provide a platform for information sharing, communication, and developing and maintaining relationships (Tuten, 2008). It is no surprise that young adults are using social networks more than older generations, making the medium an excellent way for marketers to reach an audience of younger adults. Young adults are the most likely demographic to be on social media, with approximately 90% of American young adults ages 18-29 using some form of social media (Pew Research Center, 2015). Research has shown that trends are shifting from the use of traditional advertising media such as television, radio, and print to online marketing (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This places a growing importance on the use of social media for marketers to promote their products, specifically to these younger generations.

It has been found that millennials prefer building relationships with companies over traditional forms of advertising (Carroll, 2015). Social media can be a valuable tool in building these relationships. The large amount of time young adults are spending on social media is a huge opportunity for marketers to reach this audience (Tuten, 2008). Social media marketing is increasing word of mouth in young consumers when young consumers post an image and tag a brand (Carroll, 2015). Young consumers are also finding out about more brands through their social media use (Carroll, 2015). This presents an even larger opportunity for companies to grow their businesses through social media use. We hypothesize the following:

H1: Young consumers who spend more than two hours daily on social media will perceive to have closer relationships with local businesses than young consumers who spend less than two hours.

After reviewing behavior on social media, we defined interaction to include the following six things (Liking/ sharing posts, taking surveys, giving feedback, gaining information, asking questions and commenting on posts) and therefore hypothesized the following:

H2: Frequent interaction on social media will lead to stronger relationships with local businesses.

H2a: Liking/sharing giveaway posts will lead to stronger relationships.

H2b: Taking surveys will lead to stronger relationships.

H2c: Giving feedback/reviews will lead to stronger relationships.

H2d: Gaining information on sales and promotions will lead to stronger relationships.

H2e: Asking questions about the company and their products/services will lead to stronger relationships.

H2f: Commenting on postings will lead to stronger relationships.

H3: Young consumer's interactions with local businesses on social media will lead to an increase in purchase intentions.

H3a: Liking/sharing giveaway posts will lead to an increase in purchase intentions.

H3b: Taking surveys will lead to an increase in purchase intentions.

H3c: Giving feedback/reviews will lead to an increase in purchase intentions.

H3d: Gaining information on sales and promotions will lead to an increase in purchase intentions.

H3e: Asking questions about the company and their products/services will lead to an increase in purchase intentions.

H3f: Commenting on postings will lead to an increase in purchase intentions.

H4: Young consumers' interactions with local businesses on social media will lead to feeling like they have access to information others may not.

H4a: Liking/sharing giveaway posts will lead to increased access to information.

H4b: Taking surveys will lead to increased access to information.

H4c: Giving feedback/reviews will lead to increased access to information.

H4d: Gaining information on sales and promotions will lead to increased access to information.

H4e: Asking questions about the company and their products/services will lead to increased access to information.

H4f: Commenting on postings will lead to increased access to information.

Social Media as a Marketing Tool

The use of social media as a marketing tool has grown in popularity in recent years due to an increase in social media use in general, technological advancements, as well as the cost effectiveness. Consumers are spending more time online, leading to the increase in use of social media for marketers as they are able to reach a greater number of consumers (Tuten, 2008). The increased use of social media for marketing is allowing companies to create their own content to interact with consumers at a low cost and without the necessary involvement of third parties, such as advertising companies or PR firms (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012).

Social media networks have two functions related to promotion: allowing companies to talk to consumers and allowing consumers to talk to each other (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The latter function makes social media networks very similar to traditional word of mouth promotion and is not under the control of the marketer. The two-way communication between companies and consumers via social networks allows companies to learn from their consumers through reviews and feedback, and allows consumers to easily speak directly with companies and gain more information on their products. Companies are using social media to increase interaction with their consumers and create long-term relationships of two-way communication (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012).

Research has also found that consumers believe social media to be a more trustworthy source than traditional corporate-sponsored communications, such as commercials and radio and magazine advertisements, showing that the use of social media can help to create a more authentic image for a brand (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). According to Tuten (2008), the most valuable social media activity is developing a brand profile. This allows companies to create an online brand personality with which consumers can interact, creating a more positive view of the brand.

Research Method

Study 1: Consumers

A survey was administered online using Qualtrics Survey Software. The survey contained questions regarding time spent daily on social media, which social media networks are used, and questions regarding the interaction with local businesses on social media. In total, 315 survey responses were collected. However, in the latter part of the analysis, N dropped to 178 as the survey eliminated people who did not interact with local businesses on social media. The research was conducted in a small university town in the Southeastern part of the United States. The survey respondents ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-five, with 28% being age 21, followed by 17% age 22, 15% age 19, and 15% age 20. Approximately 71% of respondents were female and 29% male.

Dependent Variables.

The dependent variables tested include relationships with companies interacted with on social media, increased purchases, and access to information. These variables were tested using the following questions, asking respondents to indicate their degree of agreement/disagreement on a five point Likert scale: “I feel like I have a relationship with the companies I interact with on social media.” “Interacting with companies on social media has led me to make purchases I would not normally make/increase my purchases.” “Interacting with businesses on social media gives me access to things, such as sales and promotions that others may not know about.”

Results.

The survey was completed by 315 respondents, 284 of which self-reported their time spent daily on social media. 7.4% reported spending 0-30 minutes on social media daily, 21.8% reported 30-60 minutes, 40.1% reported 1-2 hours, 23.6% reported 3-4 hours, and 7.0% reported spending over 4 hours daily.

The next set of questions regarded the frequency of use of different social media sites, with 293 completed responses. Regarding the use of Facebook, only 2 respondents (.70%) reported never using the site, 4.8% said rarely, 13.7% use it occasionally/sometimes, 46.1% use it a moderate amount, and 32.4% use it a great deal. Regarding the use of Twitter, 40.3% stated they never use the site, 20.5% rarely use, 14.3% use it occasionally/sometimes, 16.0% use it a moderate amount, and 8.9% use Twitter a great deal. 16.4% of respondents never use Instagram, 8.2% use the site rarely, 15.8% use it occasionally/sometimes, 27.4% use it a moderate amount, and 32.3% use it a great deal. With regards to YouTube, 4.5% of respondents never use it, 17.8% rarely, 33.6% occasionally/sometimes use, 25.3% use it a moderate amount, and 18.8% use it a great deal. Finally, regarding the use of the social media site Pinterest, 38% of respondents never use, 19.5% rarely use, 21.6% use occasionally/sometimes, 31.4% use a moderate amount, and 7.5% of respondents use it a great deal (See Appendix A for full results).

Based on these results, Facebook and Instagram are used most often by young adults ages 18-24. Pinterest and Twitter were both reported to never be used by over a third of the respondents, with a majority of other respondents using only rarely or occasionally. A majority of the respondents using YouTube use it only occasionally/sometimes. Respondents also listed any other social media sites they use regularly, with the majority listing Snapchat (62) and Tumblr (44), as well as LinkedIn (14) and YikYak (11).

Respondents were also asked whether they interact with local businesses on social media networks. 61% of the sample (178 people) responded yes and 38.8% (113) responded no. Following this question, respondents were asked which local

businesses in the Boone area they normally interact with. The top five businesses listed were as follows: Appalachia Cookie Company with 61 mentions, Boone Belles with 25, Comeback Shack with 19, Appalachian Mountain Brewery with 14, and Mast General Store with. Similarly, respondents were asked which social media networks they use the most to interact with the local businesses. The findings were as follows: 93 people responded with Facebook, 70 with Instagram, and 17 with Twitter. Approximately 22.4% of respondents listed more than one social media network in their response.

The next set of questions regarded the frequency of various types of engagement with local businesses on social media. 43.9% of respondents reported occasionally liking/sharing giveaway posts, 17.8% reported rarely, and 15.9% reported frequently. With regards to taking surveys, 24.7% reported very rarely, 36.7% reported rarely, and 27.2% reported occasionally. Regarding giving feedback/reviews, 38.6% responded rarely and 27.8% responded occasionally. 40.8% of respondents reported gaining information on sales and promotions frequently and 28.7% occasionally. Regarding using social media networks to ask questions about the company and their products/services, 43.7% responded rarely and 32.9% responded very rarely. 41.4% also reported rarely commenting on postings and 29.9% reported very rarely (See Appendix B for full results).

Based on these results, young adults report using social media mainly to gain information on sales and promotions, occasionally to like or share giveaway posts, but rarely to take surveys, give reviews, ask questions, or comment on postings. When asked of which other ways they interact with local businesses on social media, responses included looking for discounts, finding out if special events are happening, and looking at restaurant menus.

Hypotheses Results

The final set of questions regarded the level of agreement that social media interaction has on the previously mentioned dependent variables. Respondents were asked if they share/repost content from local businesses to their own social media profiles, with 30% agreeing, 24.7% disagreeing, and 22% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Respondents were then asked their level of agreement that social media interaction has led to an increase in their purchases, with 45.3% agreeing, 28% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and 15.3% disagreeing. When asked their level of agreement that interaction with businesses on social media gives access to things, such as sales and promotions, others may not know about, 59.3% agreed and 29.3% strongly agreed. Finally, respondents were asked their level of agreement that they have a relationship with the companies they interact with on social media. 34.7% neither agreed nor disagreed, while 28.7% agreed and 24.7% disagreed.

Using a t-test with the independent variable being amount of time spent on social media daily (1= 0 minutes-2 hours, 2= 3 hours-over 4 hours) and the dependent variable “perceived relationship,” therefore hypothesis 1 was not supported ($t=-1.102$, $p=.272$). The amount of time spent daily on social media has no impact on feeling like one has a relationship with local businesses they interact with on social media.

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if frequency of various interactions on social media significantly predicted perception of a relationship with companies (H2), $R^2=.129$, $F(6,140)=4.613$, $p=.000$.

Interaction	β	T-value	P-value
a. Liking/sharing giveaway posts	.048	.574	.567
b. Taking Surveys	.067	.759	.449
c. Giving feedback/reviews	.097	1.007	.316
d. Gaining information on sales/promotions	.219	2.622	.010
e. Asking questions about the company	.044	.486	.628
f. Commenting on postings	.138	1.531	.128

The results of the regression analysis indicated a linear relationship and that the six predictors explained 13% of the variance in the dependent variable “perceived relationship.” It was found that frequency of gaining information on sales and promotions is a significant predictor of perceiving to have a relationship with companies on social media, thereby showing partial support for hypothesis 2.

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if frequency of various interactions on social media significantly predicted increased purchase intentions (H3), $R^2=.204$, $F(6,141)=7.279$, $p=.000$.

Interaction	β	T-value	P-value
a. Liking/sharing giveaway posts	.066	.835	.405
b. Taking Surveys	.004	.049	.961
c. Giving feedback/reviews	.053	.580	.563
d. Gaining information on sales/promotions	.318	3.997	.000
e. Asking questions about the company	.121	1.420	.158
f. Commenting on postings	.139	1.618	.108

The results of the regression indicated a linear relationship and that the six predictors explained 20% of the variance in the dependent variable “increased purchase intentions.” It was found that frequency of using social media to gain information on sales and promotions is a significant predictor of increased purchase intentions, therefore hypothesis 3 is partially supported.

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if frequency of various interactions on social media significantly predicted feeling like one has access to information that others may not know about (H4).

Interaction	β	T-value	P-value
a. Liking/sharing giveaway posts	.162	2.111	.037
b. Taking Surveys	.080	.985	.326
c. Giving feedback/reviews	-.139	-1.561	.121
d. Gaining information on sales/promotions	.462	5.986	.000
e. Asking questions about the company	.026	.311	.756
f. Commenting on postings	.002	.023	.982

The results of the regression indicated a linear relationship and that the six predictors explained 25% of the variance in the dependent variable “access to information” $R^2=.253$, $F(6,141)=9.313$, $p=.000$. It was found that frequency of gaining information on sales and promotions, as well as frequency of liking/sharing giveaway posts, are significant predictors of feeling like one has access to information that others may not, showing partial support for hypothesis 4.

Small Business Social Media Use

Because extant research on social media use by local and small businesses is limited, this study focuses on small local businesses. A study done by Broekemier, Chau, and Seshadri (2015), with specific regards to small business-to-business enterprises, found that many small businesses do not use social media as they believe that other forms of promotion are more important and that it is too difficult and time consuming to update social media platforms. The researchers state that small businesses should be made more aware of the benefits of using social media to increase brand awareness and expand their geographic reach at a low cost. They suggest that small businesses put more effort into building relationships with customers and their target market through social media platforms. This can produce the type of relationship that typically results from face to face interactions with salespeople at a lower cost to the company. According to Quesenberry (2016), social media can be a cost effective way for small businesses to create the same level of awareness as companies with larger advertising budgets.

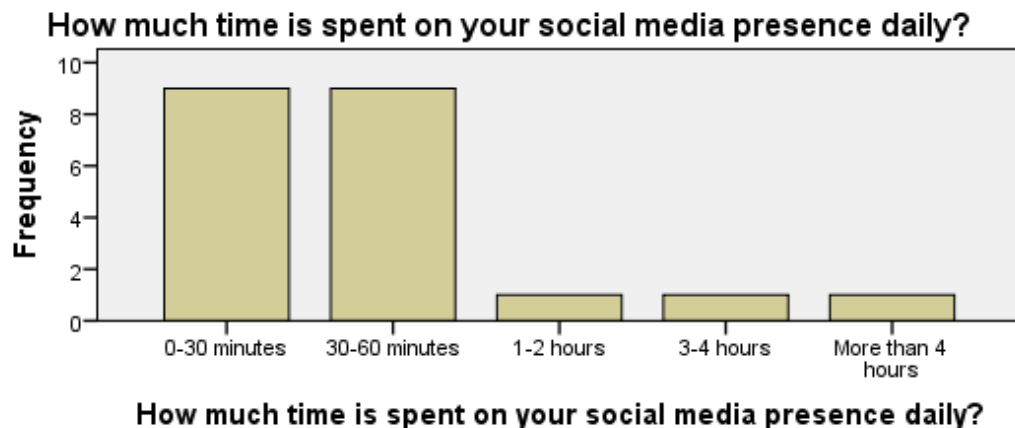
Study 2: Local Businesses

A survey was administered online using Qualtrics Survey Software. The survey contained questions regarding which social media networks are used by local businesses, type of content posted, time spent managing their social media presence, and whether they find one social media network to be more effective than others. Responses were solicited by contacting approximately 40 local businesses in and

around the same Southeastern university town as in Study 1 via email as well as visiting some in person. In total, 22 survey responses were completed. A majority of the businesses have a single location, with only two responding as having two stores. Approximately 35% of the businesses have less than 12 employees, 35% with 13-39 employees, and 30% with 40 or more employees. Of those who responded regarding the industry they are in, 8 are restaurants, 5 are in retail, 2 are non-profits, and 3 are in other industries.

Results.

When asked if they use social media networks to market their business, only one local business responded “no.” Businesses were asked to list the social media networks they use with 17 using Facebook, 15 using Instagram, and 9 using Twitter. Approximately 94% of businesses listed more than one social media network. The next question asked businesses to select the type of content they post on their social media networks, with 22 posting pictures, 18 posting special offers, 20 posting informative statuses, and only 2 posting surveys and polls. Other content types mentioned were employment information and related articles. When asked if they share/repost content from their customers’ social media to their business profiles, 20 responded yes and only 2 responded no. The next question regarded daily amount of time spent managing their social media presence, with 9 businesses responding 0-30 minutes, 9 responding 30-60 minutes, and one business responding to 1-2 hours, 3-4 hours, and more than 4 hours (see figure below). When asked who manages their social media presence, the majority said the owner, manager, or employees. Only one company stated that a third party manages their social media presence.



The next question asked if businesses find one social media network to be more effective than others, with 16 saying yes and 6 saying no. Of those who responded, 12 said they find Facebook to be more effective and 5 said that they find Instagram more effective. When asked why they find these networks to be more effective, businesses cited reasons such as the ability to reach more people, directly target their

regular customers and followers, no cost, and the appeal to young audiences. Some businesses stated that they find Facebook to be more effective because you are able to post a variety of content, rather than just pictures.

Discussion

Of the six types of interaction/predictors, only using social media to gain information on sales and promotions was found to significantly predict a relationship between young consumers and local businesses they interact with on social media. This builds on previous research stating that over half of social media users feel a greater connection with companies they interact with via social media (Cone Communications, 2008), testing specific forms of interaction and finding that the other forms were not significant predictors of a relationship with local businesses on social media and young consumers.

Giving reviews/feedback was not found to be a significant predictor of any of the dependent variables, nor was taking surveys. This contradicts previous findings that polls, reviews, and feedback can increase engagement with consumers on social media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). However, liking/sharing giveaway posts was found to significantly predict feeling like one has access to information others may not, supporting research that contests can also increase engagement in consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Increased purchase intentions was found to be affected by the frequency of using social media to gain information on sales and promotions, supporting previous research that special offers and promotions can be used to incent purchases and increase word of mouth (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012).

Increased frequency of using social media to gain information on sales/promotions and to like/share giveaway posts were both found to be predictors of feeling like one has access to information that others may not know about. This supports previous Instagram specific research that users are responsive to “back stage” content (Bäckman & Bergström, 2013). Our findings extend previous research and may be generalized to other social media platforms.

Conclusion

The study examined young adults’ social media use and their interaction with local businesses. Results show that the frequency of use of social media to gain information on sales and promotions significantly predict the perception of a relationship with local businesses, increase purchase intentions in young consumers, as well as feeling like one has access to information that others may not. Local businesses should focus mainly on posting information on sales and promotions as well as contests and giveaway posts to increase engagement with young consumers. These were found to

predict a perceived relationship with local businesses, which is valued by young consumers. Other forms of interaction were not significant predictors of relationship, access to information, or increased purchase intentions in young consumers. Local businesses do not need to spend as much time on the other forms of content, as they were found to have little effect on young consumers. Males and females are equally responsive to local businesses on social media, meaning that businesses should place an equal focus on targeting both genders. There is also a large potential for using other social media platforms. For example, respondents mentioned both YouTube (N=129) and Snapchat (N=62) and other social media platforms they use often, while only one local business stated that they currently use YouTube and only one has plans to use Snapchat in the future. Because social media is constantly evolving and trends are constantly changing, there is a huge potential for local businesses to expand to other platforms to reach a larger part of their target audience.

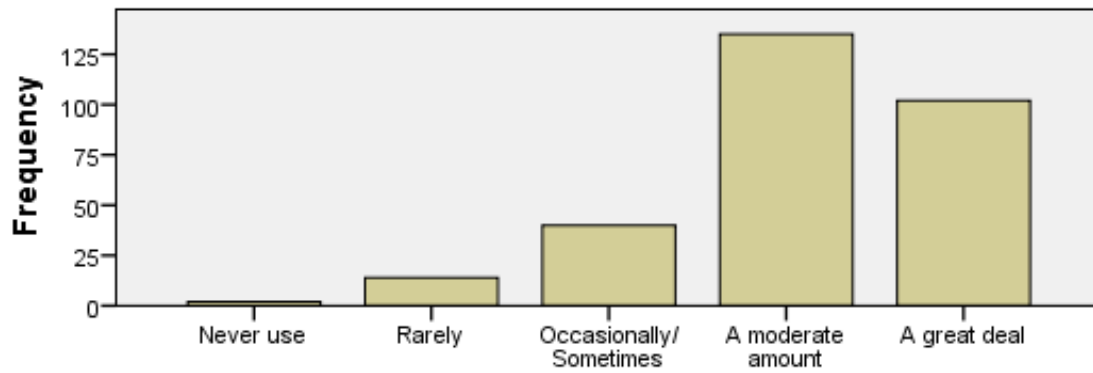
Limitations and Future Research

The survey used a convenience sample using mainly students on the university campus of one small town in the Southeastern United States. A majority of the respondents were females, with only 29% being male. The survey responses available for the latter part of the analysis also dropped significantly as 38.8% of respondents answered “no” to the question “do you interact with local businesses on social media networks?” However, the sample size was still large enough to generate significant results. Due to the continually evolving nature of social media, it is difficult to collect data on all of the emerging and trending platforms. For instance, in this research, Snapchat, LinkedIn, and Tumblr were not included in the survey though many respondents mentioned them as social media networks they use often.

Future research could look at the perception of reliability and authenticity of local businesses’ social media profiles, as well as the amount of trust consumers have in businesses they interact with on social media. Other under-researched platforms should also be studied, such as Snapchat, due to the constantly evolving nature of social media. Mobile application use is growing in popularity and is something that should be researched as well.

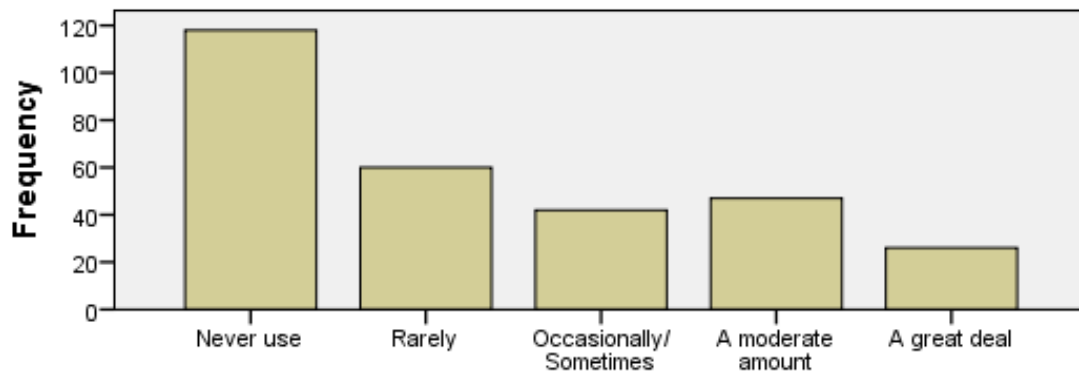
Frequency of Young Adults' Social Media Use

Facebook



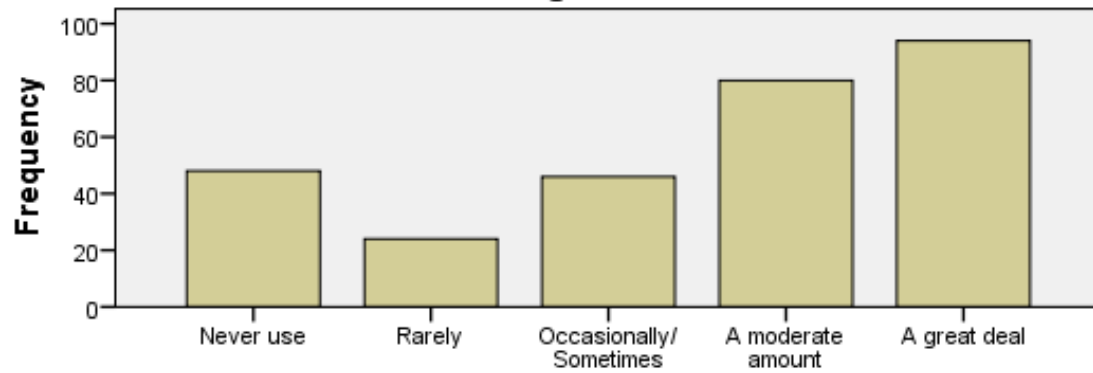
Facebook

Twitter

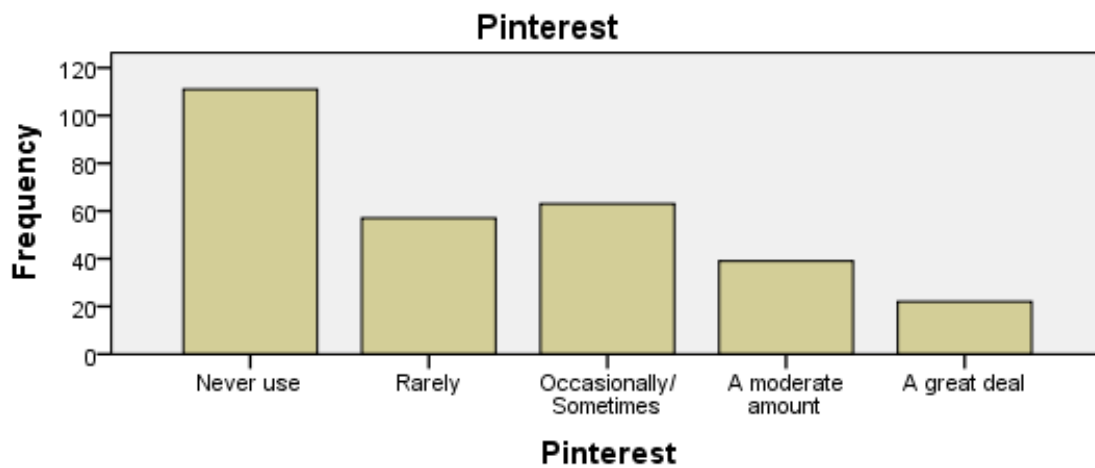
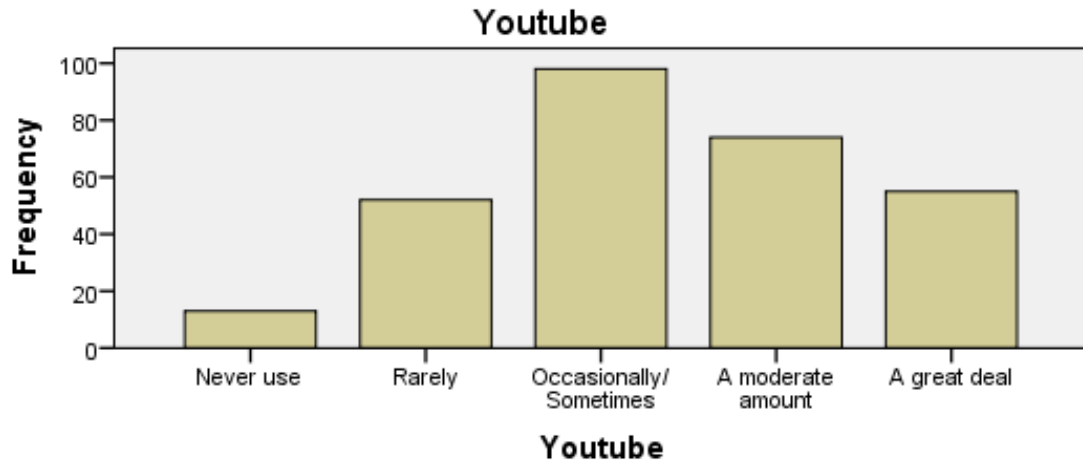


Twitter

Instagram



Instagram

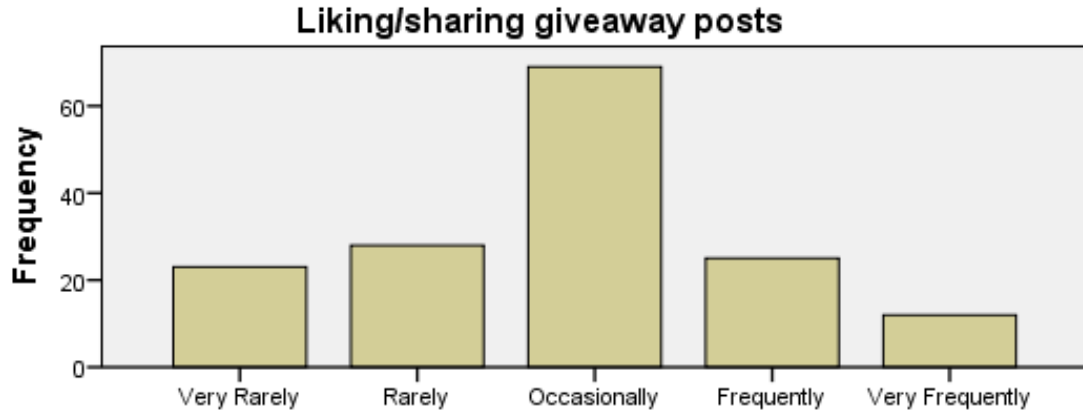


Results of Open ended question: Other Social Media Networks Used

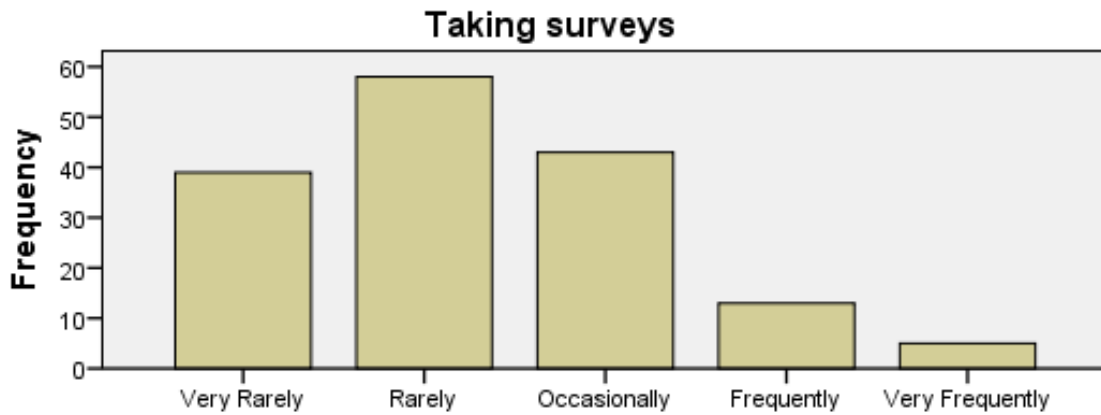
SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORK	FREQUENCY
Snapchat	62
Tumblr	44
LinkedIn	14
Yik Yak	11
Reddit	10
Vine	7
Imgur	4
Soundcloud	2
Buzzfeed	2
Ello	1
Whisper	1
WhatsGoodly	1

Appendix B

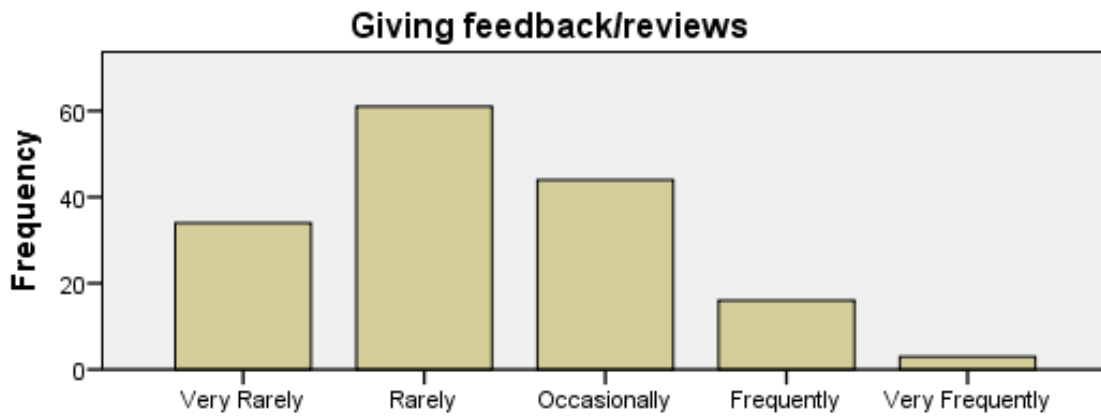
Consumer Results of Open Ended Question: How often do you engage in the following with local businesses on social media?



Liking/sharing giveaway posts

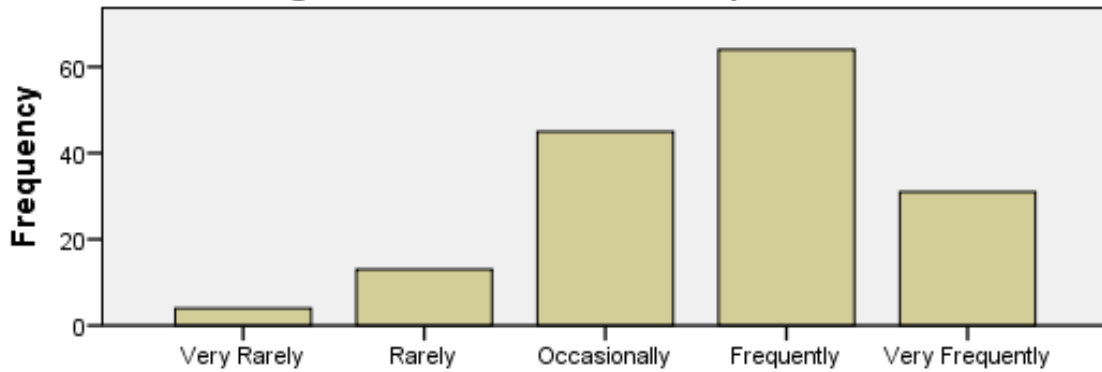


Taking surveys



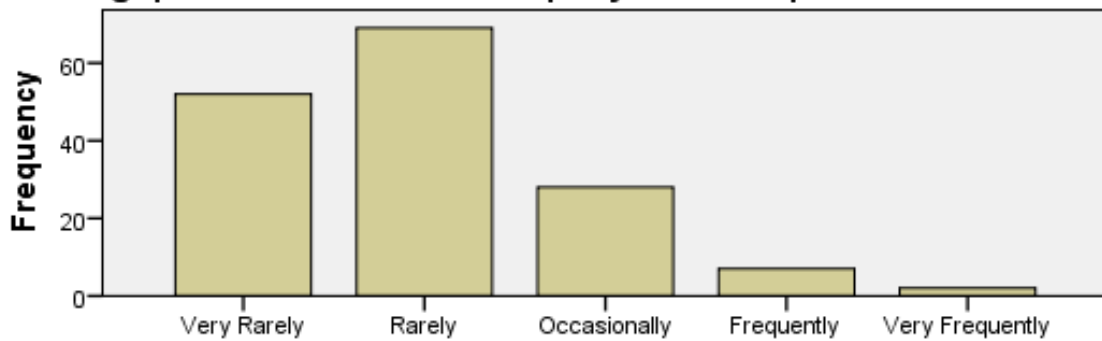
Giving feedback/reviews

Gaining information on sales and promotions



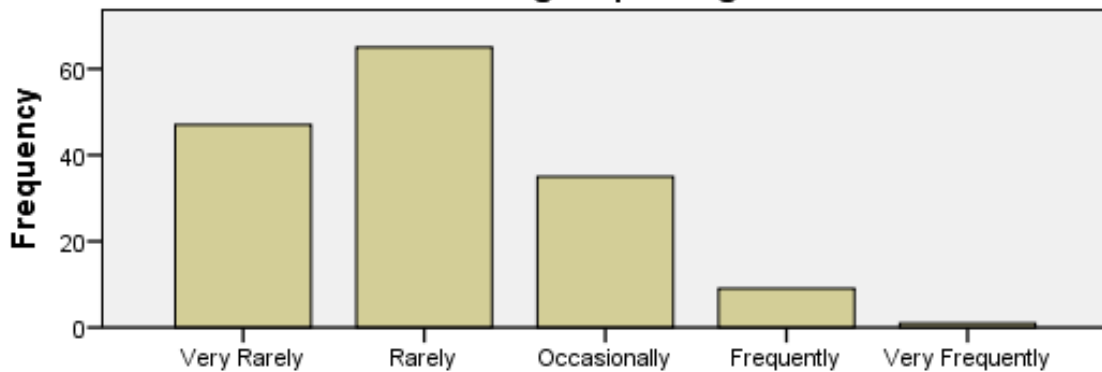
Gaining information on sales and promotions

Asking questions about the company and their products/services



Asking questions about the company and their products/services

Commenting on postings



Commenting on postings

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Keywords: Social media marketing, internet marketing, social media, millennials, young adults, local business

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners: Social media is becoming a more powerful tool to reach young consumers who have a high purchasing power and an increasing ability to block out traditional forms of advertisements, making it an effective tool for small local businesses. Social media is constantly growing and evolving, creating a huge opportunity for businesses to interact with young consumers.

Author Information:

Amy L. Bitner is a graduate of Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration in Marketing. She is currently a Master of Business Administration Candidate at College of Charleston in South Carolina.

Pia A. Albinsson (PhD New Mexico State University) is Associate Professor of Marketing in the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University. She is the Secretary of Society of Marketing Advances and serves on the editorial review board of *Journal of Consumer Marketing*.

TRACK: Internet/ Social Media Marketing