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### Are they even following us?: Using market research data to understand students' social media preferences

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# Are they even following us?

## Using market research data to understand students' social media preferences

Students'  
social media  
preferences

503

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is the exploration of students' preferred social media (SM) tools for receiving information about their academic library. The authors administered a questionnaire at their prospective institutions: the College of Staten Island (CSI), City University of New York, USA and the University of Western Ontario (UWO) in London, Ontario, Canada. The authors examine students' preferences for various SM tools, and analyzed the types of information students expect from the library's SM accounts. The authors argue that the library's SM postings should be curated based on market research that provides a better understanding of the target audience.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors explore the SM preferences of students at their prospective institutions. The authors examine the SM channels students visit and the types of SM content they wish to seek out. The authors ran the authors' study from September 1 through December 31, 2016. The authors used convenience sampling and a printed questionnaire to collect data from students in information literacy instruction sessions ( $n = 633$  at CSI,  $n = 602$  at UWO).

**Findings** – The authors found that more students (at both institutions) used Facebook and YouTube, as compared with other SM platforms. If they viewed their library's SM accounts, students from both institutions preferred to read about news and current events, followed by announcements about new library services.

**Practical implications** – The authors illustrate that conducting market research helps SM managers understand their target audience. Market research is the key to successful SM management. It also helps in the development of a marketing plan and provides insights on students' preferences regarding SM content.

**Originality/value** – This study compares students' SM preferences across two academic institutions from two countries, the USA and Canada. The authors wished to investigate the similarities and differences among these students' preferences.

**Keywords** USA, Canada, Academic libraries, Marketing, Social media, Students

**Paper type** Case study

### Introduction

Web 2.0 may have begun in the early 2000s with blogs and wikis, but over the last 15 years, social media (SM) tools (websites and applications) have lead the landscape in providing a means for two-way communication between the content producer and the consumer. Where once websites were a one-way communication medium, Web 2.0 tools have provided a means for users to interact and engage with each other. Web 2.0 enables online collaboration in ways that could not have been imagined. SM websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others would be "empty" without exchanges between content contributions and other SM users.

According to an early 2018 study by Pew Research, 70 percent of Americans use SM. YouTube is used by 73 percent of these users; use was most common among adults aged 18–24 (94 percent), 25–29 (88 percent) and 30–49 (85 percent). Facebook is also popular, being used by 68 percent of US SM users; adults aged 18–24 (80 percent), 25–29 (82 percent)

Dan Sich wishes to thank his colleagues at Western Libraries for their assistance in running the questionnaire.



and 30–49 (78 percent) were its greatest users. It was more popular with women (74 percent) than with men (62 percent). Other SM tools that are less popular with US SM users include Twitter (24 percent), LinkedIn (25 percent), Snapchat (27 percent), Pinterest (29 percent) and Instagram (35 percent). LinkedIn is used by 50 percent of American SM users with a college diploma or greater, vs only 22 percent of those with some college and 9 percent with no college education. Instagram is more with female (39 percent) than male (30 percent) Americans. Pinterest is more popular with female (41 percent) than male (16 percent) Americans (Smith and Anderson, 2018).

According to the 2018 SOCIALscape report on SM use in Canada, 91 percent of online Canadians use SM. In total, 86 percent use YouTube (49 percent at least weekly, 23 percent at least daily) (Pollara Strategic Insights, 2018). According to a 2017 Statista report, YouTube is used by 90 percent of 18–24 year old Canadians, 79 percent of 25–34 year olds and 64 percent of 35–44 year olds (Statista, 2018). In total, 80 percent of Canadian SM users have Facebook accounts. Facebook is most popular with those online Canadians aged 18–34 (89 percent) or 35–44 (87 percent). Facebook is used by 81 percent of Canadian women and 79 percent of Canadian men. In total, 45 percent of Canadian SM users use LinkedIn, 40 percent use Google+, 39 percent use Instagram, 36 percent use Pinterest, 35 percent use Twitter and 24 percent use Snapchat. Less popular among Canadians SM users are Reddit (7 percent), Tumblr (7 percent), Flickr (6 percent) and Meetup (6 percent). LinkedIn is slightly more popular with male than female Canadian SM users (48 percent vs 42 percent), and 58 percent of Canadian LinkedIn members are University educated. Instagram is more popular with Canadian females (41 percent) than males (36 percent), and Instagram is notably popular with Canadian users aged 18–34 (64 percent). Pinterest is more popular with Canadian females (50 percent) than males (21 percent), and with those in the 18–34 age category (43 percent) (Pollara Strategic Insights, 2018).

One may ask how the USA and Canada compare to the rest of the world in terms of SM usage. According to a 2019 Statista survey showed the highest levels of SM penetration (defined as “active accounts on the top social network in each country compared to population”) in the United Arab Emirates (99 percent), Taiwan (89 percent) and South Korea (85 percent). The USA and Canada ranked 15th and 19th, respectively, with 70 and 67 percent of “internet users [...] visiting social networking sites as of January 2019,” respectively. The global average was 45 percent (Statista, 2019).

### **Uniqueness of study/comparing institutions**

This is the first study that examines and compares SM preferences of students at two public institutions of higher education from different countries. The authors wanted to compare and contrast the SM preferences among American and Canadian college (universities in Canada) students to better understand how they use SM.

The two institutions are more alike than they are different. Both schools are located in suburban enclaves of the city and both serve commuter and residential students. Both campuses are sprawling in size – 204 acres for CSI and 422 for the University of Western Ontario’s (UWO) main campus – and there are many international students at each institution. Both schools offer degrees from Bachelor up to Doctorate level.

The College of Staten Island (CSI) is a four-year, public college of The City University of New York (CUNY). In 2017–2018 there were 13,559 full time equivalents (FTE). In total, 92 percent (12,485) of FTE were undergraduates (Office of Institutional Research, College of Staten Island, The City University of New York, n.d.).

The UWO is a public university in London, Ontario, Canada. In 2017–2018 there were 33,059 FTE on main campus. With three affiliated University Colleges, UWO had a total of 38,754 FTE. On main campus 25,835 FTE (78 percent) were undergraduates (Office of Institutional Planning and Budgeting, Western University, n.d.).

The CSI Library has been using SM since 2010 as a promotion tool. Two librarians manage the Library's Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. An SM policy document is loosely followed. For Twitter, one librarian posts original Tweets, while the other librarian retweets and engages with followers. All SM marketing endeavors are coordinated through the library's marketing and outreach interest group, which is chaired by the first author of this study.

At the time of the study Western Libraries had multiple Facebook and Twitter accounts covering various locations. Each account was managed by an individual or by a team. The university's Communications and Public Affairs unit has guidelines covering SM (Communications and Public Affairs, Western University, n.d.) including the use of perspective, language, hashtags and how to reply to comments.

### Goal/research questions

This study argues that market research data (from library users) are the best way to make informed decisions when posting on SM. Before the library creates and uses SM accounts, they should conduct market research to determine the types of SM tools their users access, the kind of information they seek and what they expect the library to post. This study examines the SM preferences among American College and Canadian University students. Students at two institutions, The CSI, CUNY and the UWO served as subjects for the study.

The authors investigate where and what these students would like to learn about their library via SM. In particular:

- What SM tools are students using?
- What SM tools would students use to follow the library?
- What kinds of information do students want to see from the library via SM?
- What kinds of information do not students want to see from their library via SM?
- What differences exist between two different institutions?
- How do gender and year of study make a difference?

The authors conducted a study in the form of a printed questionnaire. Students at both institutions ( $n = 637$  at CSI,  $n = 602$  at UWO) responded to the questionnaire. We looked for differences and similarities across institutions, genders and years of study. The authors will summarize the results and highlight interesting findings. For the purpose of the questionnaire, an SM tool is defined as one that "allows users to connect, communicate, and share multimedia via Web-based or mobile technology. This interaction is usually achieved through social networking sites and applications for mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets" (Lerner and Lerner, 2013).

### Literature review

There is much library literature that illustrates how librarians and library staff employ SM tools in their libraries (Bodnar and Doshi, 2011; Burkhardt, 2010; Fernandez, 2009; Khan and Bhatti, 2012; Kho, 2011; Nicholas *et al.*, 2011; Roblyer *et al.*, 2010). Many libraries create SM accounts as free marketing tools for promoting library services and resources, making announcements, advocating for the library or simply provide library hours. Many libraries have created SM strategies and policies or have created committees to develop a cohesive and consistent marketing message (Fernandez, 2009; Romero, 2011). Some librarians and library staff use SM tools such as YouTube for instructional purposes. There is much literature on the use of YouTube as the desired platform for the creation of instructional videos for Information Literacy instruction (Click and Petit, 2010; Duffy, 2008; Godwin, 2009;

Luo, 2010; Su and Kuo, 2010). Gerolimos (2011) examined users' comments on Facebook pages from a random sample of 20 American academic libraries, dividing comments into 22 categories (12 library-related and 10 non-library-related). The bulk of comments were complimentary (33 percent) or general responses to library posts (30 percent). Overall interaction on Facebook was observed to be very low. The author recommends composing posts that engage followers, rather than bombarding followers with too many posts of questionable relevance. He argues that unless user needs are assessed, libraries risk wasting effort on Facebook. Surveying library users can provide valuable information on the type of information users want from the library, and where they seek it.

Jacobson (2011) adapted a Hendrix *et al.*'s (2009) study of Facebook use by libraries to create a study of perceived vs actual Facebook use by libraries. The Hendrix *et al.* study investigated the use of Facebook by libraries and librarians, not by students. Jacobson analyzed 12 frequently updated library Facebook pages according to number of fans, fan messages, wall posts, photographs, events, total updates, days in existence and average time between updates. Facebook posts on these pages were assigned to tiers created by Hendrix *et al.* (2009) for their study. These tiers were not hierarchical and might be better understood as categories or types of posts. Most of these posts could be categorized as announcements/marketing, reference services and/or user forum, with few classified as event RSVPs or employee announcements. Ramsey and Vecchione (2014) coordinated a consistent, unified message to present via their library's SM presence. Google Calendar was used to track campus, library, local and national events and to schedule posts appropriately. Five major messages were posted per month. Google Drive was used to curate messages posted on library website and on multiple SM tools. Contributions were solicited from student library employees, who were required to follow library SM guidelines. Having numerous contributors helped increase college community engagement. While students were not surveyed as part of the study, it was noted that the introduction of student library employee posts to the library's SM accounts was accompanied by a 20 percent increase in "likes." Phillips (2011) conducted a content analysis of 439 posts from 17 Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois member library Facebook pages. Data, including status messages, "likes" and user comments, were collected over the course of three weeks. Status messages were assigned to seven categories including: announcements, library services, library core values, library promotion, intentional outreach, college messages and local news. User preferences were not addressed.

Jones and Harvey (2016) examined how students engage with the library by studying how they use SM in their personal lives, and their reluctance to use the library's SM. In an attempt to better understand what libraries were tweeting and retweeting, and interactions between libraries and their followers, the authors analyzed the Twitter feeds of 20 academic libraries over a two-week period. They also surveyed 58 academic libraries in the UK and students ( $n=498$ ) at an academic institution in the UK. Students replying to the questionnaire showed a preference for Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. They used SM to obtain information about the college or their instructors, not about the library. Students found their library's SM posts irrelevant, disruptive and too frequent. Students relied upon college e-mail, posters and the Course Management System instead of SM for information about the library. Very few of the libraries had surveyed students regarding their use of SM to obtain information regarding their library. Jones and Harvey conclude that libraries must survey their users regarding their needs as potential users of library SM, before libraries invest time their SM presence.

Sachs *et al.* (2011) attempted to use Facebook for outreach, engagement and marketing library services and resources. They also attempted to offer reference service and other help via Facebook, but were only successful in achieving the marketing goal. In their student questionnaire, they asked which of five SM tools students used. Sachs *et al.* distributed their

questionnaire in several ways, including via the library's Facebook page, which may have affected the results. From their analysis they conclude that the library needs to do more on Facebook to market library resources and search tips.

Wan (2011) suggests "posting more topics of interest to users." The study outlined in this article attempts to determine what types of information students wish to receive from the library via SM.

Brookbank (2015) points to the continual need for assessment due to changes in available SM tools and students' preferences for the same. She indicates that the use of SM tools may differ from one institution to the next. (The current study provides a comparison between two different academic institutions.) Her mid-2014 questionnaire was disseminated in several ways, including via Facebook and Twitter, which may have affected the results (2015).

### Methodology

The study ran in Fall 2016 (September 1–December 31) at both campuses. Both schools are public institutions in suburban settings. Methodology at both institutions was virtually identical. Minor differences in the questionnaires existed to accommodate local terminology. For example, at CSI "freshman" was used while at UWO "1st year undergraduate" was used. The CSI questionnaire mentions Staten Island, New York, while the UWO questionnaire mentions London, Ontario. These minor differences did not constitute a difference in methodology and did not prevent the comparison of data. At both institutions, a printed questionnaire was used. Convenience sampling was employed as in Sich and Polger (2018), since it was the best opportunity to gather the most respondents. Sessions were excluded when there was a graded "library assignment" related to the session. This helped avoid the pitfall of respondent bias or any perceived persuasion.

At both institutions, undergraduate and graduate students were targeted. Since CSI has a larger proportion of freshmen students, as compared to UWO, most of the Information Literacy instruction sessions were first year classes, and this was reflected in the composition of the CSI's sample. UWO's Information Literacy program targeted proportionately fewer first year undergraduate courses than CSI's during the period of this study; as a result, the questionnaire was not distributed to any first year undergraduate Information Literacy instruction sessions at UWO; hence, there were no first year undergraduate respondents. This is the only point where our samples differed. At both CSI and UWO the students filling the questionnaire were 18 years old or older.

The questionnaire was optional, and there were no incentives offered. At UWO, subjects were told that "The results of this research may influence social media practices in Western Libraries and other post-secondary educational institutions, and may benefit students by providing them with better library support." The questionnaires were anonymous and voluntary. Both authors received approval from the offices of human research ethics from their respective institutions (The Human Research Protection Program at CSI, Office of Research Ethics at UWO).

The questionnaire included six questions covering:

- (1) Which SM tools students used?
- (2) Which SM tools students would use to follow the library?
- (3) The kinds of information students would want to see from the library via SM.
- (4) The types of things students felt would be inappropriate for the library to share via SM.
- (5) Students' status (year) at college or university.
- (6) Students' gender.

The SM tools included: Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube and Flickr, with an option for others.

Data entry was conducted using survey software – SurveyMonkey at CSI and Qualtrics at UWO – with the data then exported to Excel for analysis. Our data analysis methods were identical.

**Results**

*Demographics*

At CSI there were 633 respondents. At UWO there were 602 respondents. Tables I and II provide demographic information.

The following differences in respondent demographics between institutions helped to inform any analysis.

At CSI 46 percent of respondents were freshmen, while at UWO 0 percent of respondents were first year undergraduate students; no Information Literacy instruction sessions for first year undergraduate students were targeted at UWO. At UWO most respondents were third (28 percent) or fourth (37 percent) year undergraduate students. At UWO 15 percent of respondents were graduate students, while at CSI only 3 percent of respondents were graduate students.

At both institutions, there were more female than male respondents. The percentage of male respondents (37 percent at CSI vs 41 percent at UWO) was approximately the same at both institutions. At CSI there was a greater percentage of female respondents (63 percent) than at UWO (58 percent). At CSI, two respondents to the gender question supplied a response that could not be coded as female or male; at UWO, there were six such respondents.

*A note on the analyses that follow*

All percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents who responded to the specific question, not the total number of respondents. In the analyses which follows, only differences of 10 percent or more will be commented upon. We will refer to these as “noticeable differences.” When comparing differences between institutions or genders, percentages for each group are compared. When comparing differences between years of study, the percentage for each the sub-group is compared to the average of the whole group.

**Table I.**

Gender across each institution

Gender	CSI (n = 633) (%)	UWO (n = 575) (%)
Female	63	58
Male	37	41

**Table II.**

Year of study across each institution

Year of Study	CSI (n = 633) (%)	UWO (n = 595) (%)
Freshmen/1st year undergraduate student	46	0
Sophomores/2nd year undergraduate student	17	16
Juniors/3rd year undergraduate student	13	29
Seniors/4th year undergraduate student	22	37
Other	n/a	3
Graduate student	3	15

*What SM tools are students using? and What SM tools would students use to follow the library?*

Full results are shown in Table III. At both institutions the highest usage was reported for YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter. Use of other tools was below 30 percent at both institutions.

Significantly lower numbers were reported when it came to following the library via various tools. While there is a similar trend compared to their preferred SM tools, there is one exception. While Facebook is a popular option for following the library, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter are not. Interestingly, while Twitter use was lower at both institutions compared to the other top 4 SM tools, it is a more appealing option for following the library than Snapchat, Instagram or YouTube. It could be that students who use Twitter might consider their library's Twitter feed a source of up-to-date information regarding the physical library (hours, study space). Other tools ranked as very poor choices for following the library at both institutions.

In response to "Other (please specify)" students listed numerous tools, many of which the authors would not consider to be SM tools. At CSI and UWO, respectively, the most common "other" SM tools used by students were LinkedIn (20, 29 percent), Google+ (15, 23 percent), Reddit (10, 23 percent) and Tumblr (10, 14 percent). Very few respondents at either institution would use any of these to follow the library.

*Comparing institutions*

A greater percentage of UWO students than CSI students used YouTube and Facebook, while a greater percentage of CSI students than UWO students would use Facebook to follow the library.

*How does gender make a difference?* At CSI a greater percentage of female respondents used Pinterest, Snapchat and Instagram, while a greater percentage of male respondents used Facebook. At UWO, a greater percentage of female respondents used Pinterest, Instagram and Tumblr. Full results are shown in Tables IV and V.

At UWO, a greater percentage of female respondents reported that they would use Instagram or Facebook to follow the library. Full results are shown in Tables VI and VII.

*How does year of study make a difference?* At CSI: Facebook is popular with juniors; Twitter is not popular with seniors; YouTube is popular with juniors but not with graduate students; Instagram and Pinterest are less popular with graduate students; and Snapchat is popular with freshmen but not with sophomores. Full results are shown in Table IV.

At UWO: Twitter is less popular with fifth and sixth year undergraduate students; Snapchat is popular with third, fifth and sixth year undergraduate students, but not with graduate students; Instagram is less popular with graduate students; Pinterest is popular with grad students; YouTube is popular with fifth and sixth year undergraduate students. Full results are shown in Table V.

SM tool	CSI – SM tools used by students (n = 633) (%)	CSI – would use this to follow the library (n = 563) (%)	UWO – SM tools used by students (n = 601) (%)	UWO – would use this to follow the library (n = 559) (%)
YouTube	78	26	89	17
Facebook	77	66	96	47
Instagram	68	27	71	23
Snapchat	75	3	79	11
Twitter	45	32	36	24
Pinterest	25	3	28	1
Flickr	1	1	1	0

**Table III.**  
SM tool use by students, and preferred SM tools for following the library



In terms of following the library at CSI: YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat Pinterest and Flickr are popular with graduate students. Full results are shown in Table VI.

In terms of following the library at UWO: Instagram and YouTube were less popular with fifth and sixth year undergraduate students; Twitter was less popular with this group. Full results are shown in Table VII.

*What kind of information they would want to see from the library via SM?*

Full results are shown in Table VIII.

Of the 42 “other” responses submitted at UWO, there was a clear preference for getting up-to-date information related to the physical library (e.g. hours, study space). UWO students may be checking SM (Facebook, Twitter) to get up-to-date information on extended hours during exams, closures due to weather, etc.

**Table IV.**  
SM tool use by CSI students, by gender, year of study

SM tool	All (n = 633) (%)	Gender		Year of study				
		M (n = 234) (%)	F (n = 399) (%)	1st (n = 289) (%)	2nd (n = 108) (%)	3rd (n = 82) (%)	4th (n = 133) (%)	Grad (n = 17) (%)
Facebook	76	85	72	74	74	92	72	80
Twitter	46	45	46	51	48	40	36	0
Snapchat	25	18	28	40	3	17	15	0
Instagram	66	59	69	72	58	70	72	20
Pinterest	25	5	37	23	22	33	30	0
YouTube	76	79	75	79	77	92	77	20
Flickr	1	0	2	0	3	0	3	0

**Table V.**  
SM tool use by UWO students, by gender, year of study

SM tool	All (n = 601) (%)	Gender		1st (n = 0) (%)	2nd (n = 94) (%)	Year of study			Grad (n = 90) (%)
		M (n = 236) (%)	F (n = 332) (%)			3rd (n = 169) (%)	4th (n = 222) (%)	5th/6th (n = 18) (%)	
Facebook	96	96	95	n/a	98	98	95	100	88
Twitter	36	37	35	n/a	39	42	34	17	29
Snapchat	79	76	81	n/a	85	91	76	89	57
Instagram	71	61	78	n/a	78	76	70	72	58
Pinterest	28	5	44	n/a	36	25	21	33	41
YouTube	89	92	86	n/a	90	89	90	100	83
Flickr	1	3	0	n/a	0	2	0	0	4

**Table VI.**  
SM tools appealing to CSI students for following the library, by gender, year of study

SM tool	All (n = 563) (%)	Gender		1st (n = 258) (%)	2nd (n = 96) (%)	Year of study		
		M (n = 194) (%)	F (n = 369) (%)			3rd (n = 74) (%)	4th (n = 119) (%)	Grad (n = 16) (%)
Facebook	66	71	64	61	71	74	64	75
Twitter	32	36	30	35	29	35	24	50
Snapchat	3	2	4	5	0	0	0	25
Instagram	27	23	29	29	21	30	24	25
Pinterest	4	2	4	5	4	0	0	25
YouTube	26	29	24	27	29	22	21	50
Flickr	1	2	1	1	0	0	0	25

*Comparing institutions.* In terms of the kinds of information students want to see from the library via SM, based on institution: news, college news and Staten Island, NY news are more popular with CSI; information about new resources and services is more popular with UWO.

Respondents at both institutions were most interested in hearing about events. Posting more event information in a way that engages students may be a means of increasing the library's student followers on SM.

CSI respondents were more inclined to want (library) news from their library via SM. This may reflect a need for CSI freshmen to become familiar with their new surroundings; almost half of the respondents at CSI were freshmen.

UWO respondents were more inclined to want information about new resources or services from their library via SM. This may be due to the fact that a greater percentage of graduate students and third or fourth year undergraduate students responded at UWO as compared to CSI. These "upper year" students may be more aware of the breadth of library services and resources, and of the need to stay up-to-date regarding both.

*How does gender make a difference?* In terms of the kinds of information CSI students want to see from the library via SM, based on gender: news and new services were more popular with male respondents; events were more popular with female respondents. Full results are shown in Table IX.

In terms of the kinds of information UWO students want to see from the library via SM, based on gender: events, new resources and services, university news and course-related information were more popular with female respondents. Full results are shown in Table X.

*How does year of study make a difference?* In terms of the kinds of information CSI students want to see from the library via SM, based on year of study: news, college news and Staten Island, NY news were unpopular with graduate students; events were popular with graduate students, not with sophomores; new resources were popular with graduate

**Table VII.**  
SM tools appealing to UWO students for following the library, by gender, year of study

SM tool	Gender			Year of study					
	All (n = 559) (%)	M (n = 212) (%)	F (n = 318) (%)	1st (n = 0) (%)	2nd (n = 92) (%)	3rd (n = 156) (%)	4th (n = 205) (%)	5th/6th (n = 15) (%)	Grad (n = 85) (%)
Facebook	47	42	52	n/a	54	47	43	47	48
Twitter	24	23	25	n/a	24	28	22	7	19
Snapchat	11	12	10	n/a	10	13	10	13	9
Instagram	23	15	28	n/a	26	29	17	33	19
Pinterest	1	0	1	n/a	1	0	0	0	4
YouTube	17	21	14	n/a	15	13	19	27	21
Flickr	0	0	0	n/a	0	0	0	0	1

**Table VIII.**  
Kinds of information students would want to see from the library via SM

Kind of information	CSI (n = 616) (%)	UWO (n = 582) (%)
News	70	53
Events	70	66
New resources	45	63
New services	45	64
College news/University news	71	55
Staten Island, NY news/London, Ontario news	42	20
Course-related information	51	51
Other	0	7

students, seniors and juniors, but not with sophomores; new services were popular with juniors, not with sophomores; college-related information was popular with seniors, not with graduate students. Full results are shown in Table IX.

In terms of the kinds of information UWO students want to see from the library via SM, based on year of study: events and new resources were popular with graduate students; new services were popular with fifth and sixth year undergraduate students; course-related information was popular with second year undergraduate students. Full results are shown in Table X.

Neither of these differences is surprising. Second year undergraduate students may expect more than third or fourth year undergraduate students or graduate students in terms of having course-related information (e.g. course readings) pre-packaged for them. If the UWO questionnaire had reached any first year undergraduate students, it may have revealed that they wanted course-related information as well. Graduate students likely understand that they are expected to find information sources on their own and might appreciate SM posts regarding new information resources.

*What is not appropriate for the library to share via SM?*

An open-ended question enabled respondents to add comments regarding what they did not want the library to share via SM. For the purposes of this study, the authors sorted comments into themes.

**Table IX.**  
Kinds of information  
CSI students would  
want to see from the  
library via SM, by  
gender,  
year of study

SM tool	Gender			Year of study				
	All (n = 616) (%)	M (n = 222) (%)	F (n = 394) (%)	1st (n = 277) (%)	2nd (n = 107) (%)	3rd (n = 83) (%)	4th (n = 132) (%)	Grad (n = 17) (%)
News	70	79	68	71	65	79	66	60
Events	70	64	77	74	55	71	74	80
New resources	45	52	44	39	23	67	58	80
New services	45	52	42	45	23	63	53	40
College news	71	79	68	74	68	63	76	40
Staten Island, NY news	42	43	41	43	35	42	50	20
Course-related information	51	48	53	48	45	54	61	40

**Table X.**  
Kinds of information  
UWO students would  
want to see from the  
library via SM, by  
gender,  
year of study

SM tool	Gender			Year of study					
	All (n = 582) (%)	M (n = 231) (%)	F (n = 323) (%)	1st (n = 0) (%)	2nd (n = 91) (%)	3rd (n = 164) (%)	4th (n = 216) (%)	5th/6th (n = 18) (%)	Grad (n = 87) (%)
News	53	51	53	n/a	52	50	53	50	56
Events	66	59	71	n/a	66	60	65	72	76
New resources	63	58	68	n/a	68	60	57	67	79
New Services	64	58	70	n/a	66	63	59	89	71
University news	55	48	61	n/a	58	57	53	56	51
London, Ontario news	20	18	22	n/a	23	19	18	22	23
Course-related information	51	45	56	n/a	62	54	44	44	49

At CSI, 147 responses were categorized as follows: personal information (123), “inappropriate” (17) and advertisements (7). Students also commented that they would rather use the college and library websites to learn about the library, than follow the library’s SM accounts. This is supported by the fact that most of CSI Library’s Facebook and Twitter followers are community members, College faculty or College administration, not students.

At UWO, 77 responses were categorized as follows: advertisements or spam (18), “inappropriate” (10), London, Ontario news (1), too many posts (8), non-library content (7), non-UWO content (7) and personal content (7). Respondents to this question seemed to want content to be relevant to the library, first and foremost.

## Discussion

### *Highlights and interpretation*

Various results of the analyses stand out and invite interpretation. Facebook is where we are most likely to gain followers. At the same time, the authors note that it is not required that users “follow” the library in order to view any of the content.

Student use of Facebook was higher at UWO than at CSI, but CSI students were more likely to follow the library on Facebook. This may be due to differences in content type, frequency of posting, intended audience, style or approach. Answering this question goes beyond the scope of the current study.

At the time of writing this, Facebook is no longer the most popular SM tools among American teens. A 2018 Pew survey found that only 51 percent of American teens use Facebook, while 85 percent use YouTube, 72 percent use Instagram and 69 percent use Snapchat (Anderson and Jiang, 2018). As such, the library should diversify its investment in various SM tools, and be prepared to be fluid in its SM tool choices. Being wed to a particular SM tool or three may result in decreasing return on invested effort.

Twitter use was not as high as Facebook. At both institutions the use of Twitter was relatively low, as were the percentages of respondents who would follow their library via Twitter. Perhaps another SM tool (e.g. Facebook) is fulfilling respondents’ information needs. Users can search for and find library tweets without following the library on Twitter.

At both institutions, a greater percentage of female respondents used Pinterest. Librarians and staff posting to Pinterest may wish to consider this when deciding what to promote via this particular SM tool.

The SM tool landscape is changing constantly, and to navigate these changes libraries must persist in following reports and consumer trends to take us where these changes are leading. There may also be lessons to learn from the corporate sector’s use of SM, in where and how to engage with users. Doing these things will help ensure that libraries are making the most of any potential marketing outlets.

Only at UWO was there a noticeable difference in what SM tools male and female respondents would use to follow the library, with a greater percentage of female than male respondents including Instagram or Facebook.

At both institutions, use of specific SM tools varied with year of study.

At CSI, graduate students seemed more inclined to follow the library via SM, as compared with other students. No such trend was noticeable at UWO.

Between institutions, a greater percentage of UWO respondents used YouTube or Facebook, while a greater percentage of CSI respondents would use YouTube, Facebook or Twitter to follow the library. It may be worthwhile to examine and compare how the libraries at each institution are using each of these tools, in order to understand these differences. Answering this question goes beyond the scope of this study.

Despite YouTube’s popularity as a source of video entertainment, students are unlikely to use its subscribe feature as a means of obtaining academic help. In the end, it is “views” that measure success in YouTube.

While many respondents (75 percent at CSI, 79 percent at UWO) reported that they used Snapchat, few (3 percent at CSI, 11 percent at UWO) said that they would use Snapchat to follow the library. As reported by Sich and Polger (2018), we determined that creating a library Snapchat presence is not likely worth the investment.

Similarly, while many respondents (68 percent at CSI, 71 percent at UWO) reported that they used Instagram, few (27 percent at CSI, 21 percent at UWO) report that they would use Instagram to follow the library. At the time of this study, Western Libraries did not have an Instagram account. In Fall 2016, Western Libraries began exploring a potential solution for obtaining Instagram followers: posting content via the main UWO Instagram account. There are many libraries in the world with Instagram accounts. These libraries know that their students use Instagram, but they should determine what library-related information students want via Instagram before attempting to create a robust Instagram presence. Students may, for example, be interested in posting photos of their friends in the library, or other images of the library; libraries may provide incentive for this sort of activity in the form of a contest.

Students at both institutions were most interested in learning about events. Female respondents were more interested in events, and there were more female than male respondents. That students want information about events, rather than about library resources and services that might help them succeed academically, might cause libraries to ask whether or not they should be engaging with SM at all. Some libraries host or promote events in the library, on the campus or in the broader community, sometimes in collaboration with the local public library or community agencies. Events such as yoga, meditation and therapy dog visits during final exam period appeal to a wide audience. These events may contribute to more socially engaged students who are able to develop skills that contribute to academic success (Caruth, 2018; Johnson and Stage, 2018; Santiago *et al.*, 2019; Whitley and Burger, 2019). If the library sees their forays into SM through the lens of events-planning, community-building and student engagement – rather than collections marketing – they will be more readily rewarded by the student response to their efforts.

After events, students at UWO next most often selected new services and new resources, followed by university news and (library) news. New resources and services rank the lowest at CSI. It is tempting to look to the demographics of the two populations to explain these differences. CSI's least represented students (graduate students and juniors) were among those most interested in new resources (80 and 67 percent, respectively). CSI's juniors were among those most interested (62 percent) in new services. That is to say, CSI students most interested in new resources and services are underrepresented by the questionnaire population. However, there was a similar underrepresentation at UWO. Graduate students at UWO were among those most interested in new resources (79 percent) but constituted only 15 percent of respondents. Fifth and Sixth year undergraduate students at UWO were among those most interested in new services (89 percent) but constituted only 3 percent of respondents. It is interesting that the UWO respondents who were least interested in new resources and services – the third and fourth year undergraduate students, together forming 66 percent of respondents – were still almost as interested (57–63 percent) in new resources and services as CSI's juniors. It is tempting to hypothesize that Western Libraries' users may be better informed regarding the meaning and/or importance of new library services and resources.

Approximately half of respondents at both institutions were interested in course-related information.

#### *Market research and next steps*

Using student data culled from the questionnaires, these findings can be used to help drive SM tool choices and posting behaviors. An evaluation of students' SM preferences will inform the authors' libraries' choice and use of SM tools, including the nature of the content shared.

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Conducting market research is crucial before posting to SM. Many libraries have the best intentions in wanting to connect with their users in order to communicate their value and promote their services, resources and events. To do so without studying who visits their SM accounts and what these visitors want or expect to see could be considered “upside down marketing.”

Since marketing decisions should be data driven, market research is essential in order to learn about an audience. The combination of primary data (collected from library users via a survey) and secondary source data (e.g. Pew Research) can reveal the SM habits of college (or university) students.

Market research can lead to more efficient campaign planning, and inform decisions when creating a SM marketing plan. It informs the updating of library SM guidelines and policies, and assists in library strategic planning. SM managers and teams can save time by engaging in the type of market research outlined in this study. It supports more thoughtful, selective and efficient SM posting.

SM managers seeking to improve library services would be wise to engage with their users, though this goes beyond the scope of the current study. Perhaps in the future, the authors may study the comments on their libraries’ various SM channels to further understand their users’ expectations of the library.

### **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

“Following” the library is not required in order to view any of the library’s SM content. If the authors run this questionnaire again, they might alter the language of the second question to “Would you use this tool to find library information or content?”

If the authors run this questionnaire again, they may consider updating some of the SM options. One limitation with the first two questions is that one could not possibly include all SM tools in the list. We identified other limitations as described by Sich and Polger (2018).

Closer examination of library SM followers may reveal that students’ intent differs from the reality. It might also reveal that what draws students’ attention to library SM posts is different from what students say they want to hear from their libraries. This sort of analysis may be explored at some point in the future.

### **Conclusion**

This study illustrates the importance of conducting market research to inform decisions before engaging in SM marketing activities. Library staff may think they know what their users want to see on SM channels, but making assumptions can result in poor decisions that do not serve users’ best interests. Marketing activities should be based on data-driven decisions. Much of the literature discusses user-centered library services. Asking users what they want prevents waste and increases productivity. Without taking this step of consulting with users, even the most well-intentioned SM posts will be uninformative and will usually result in an inappropriate use of staff resources. This study sheds light on the value of market research and the importance of discovering library users’ expectations (if any) of the library’s SM channels.

In this study, the authors examined students’ SM tool and content preferences, as they relate to library services and resources. The authors compared these preferences at two similar academic institutions from two different countries to determine if students’ SM practices differed between country. No substantial differences were found between these two groups’ preferences. Statistical evidence of how students’ SM preferences differ between institutions, according to gender and across year of study, can help libraries make more meaningful postings that are impactful and user-centered.

Future studies may wish to focus on differences in students’ preferences between private vs public institutions, urban vs suburban campuses. The findings from this study can

propel further, similar research examining specific segments such as international students, LGBT users, users with disabilities, graduate students, faculty or alumni. Studying these particular groups can better inform how to market to them via SM.

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