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Digital Marketing Soft Skills and University Students' Perceptions of Employability

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, the digital transformation of businesses has revolutionized the role of the digital marketing environment within organizations. Consumer behaviour has also fundamentally changed, affecting important requirements for marketing professionals, and therefore, new hard and soft skills are needed to become successful. In digital marketing, basic soft skills are increasingly becoming more valued by employers and are relevant factors affecting employability. Business graduate students need to develop appropriate skills to succeed in their career and to have a right balance of skills.

The aim of the study is to explore the gap between the most relevant digital marketing employability skillset and the perceptions of graduate university students based on the analytics of previous managerial quantitative research and the findings of the current research. A quantitative study was conducted to explore the perceived importance of soft skills related to employability and the difference between students work experience. The demand of soft skills courses focusing on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) demand was examined focusing on the most relevant soft skills in digital marketing.

Key findings of the research explored categories of the perceived importance of soft skills and differences between working students and their perceived skills and the usage of MOOCs. Implications of the results for further academic research is to explore gaps between students' perceptions of soft skills according to employability research on managerial requirements.

Keywords: competitiveness, digital marketing, digital skills, employability, soft skills

1. Introduction

Soft skills have become a field of increasing interest in the past decade in lifelong empowerment and lifelong learning. Skills are critical factors for competitiveness and employability for graduated students and wherever employees are on their carrier paths. Structural changes such as globalization, technological progress, digital processes and automatization require relevant new skills from marketing professionals. Participation in adult lifelong learning in a population aged 25-64, is a key indicator in the EU workforce strategy. In long term employability, the focus is on transversal skills, that may be the core success factor in the carrier path (EC, 2016).

Soft skills are described as skills “used to indicate personal transversal competences such as social attitudes, language and communication capability, friendliness and ability of working in team and other personality traits that characterize relationships between people” (Cimatti, 2016). In hiring situations, companies often like to hire employees who possess soft skills that relate well with the rest of the team, considering them to be a good cultural fit for the department or company (Schlee and Karich, 2010; Kenton, 2020). The research papers focusing on marketing soft skills have been published in journals dedicated to education in the past decade, and they have revolved around employability factors and desired skills in various marketing fields (Walker et al., 2009; Finch et al., 2013; Gregorio, 2019).

The basic theory of 21st Century Skills is based on the four Cs identified as basic skill categories: Critical thinking, Collaboration, Communication, and Creativity (Chiruguru, 2018), where the focus, in the case of the marketing professional, is mostly on Critical thinking (Osmani et al., 2015). In terms of marketing soft skills, Robles (2012) explored executive perceptions of the 10 most relevant soft skills, as perceived to be the most important by business executives: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. As the minimum skills required for a digital marketing job, Doyle (2019) listed the following skills: technical skills, MS Office skill, knowledge of statistical software, database analysis, meta skills by online marketing, oral communications, written presentation, team/leadership skills, time management, creative problem solving, statistics and quantitative analysis. In these lists, hard skills (technical skills, Software knowledge) are also highlighted as basic hiring skills for employers.

Bennett (2010) developed a list of 14 attributes to become successful in a marketing career and found that initiative, motivation, communication, IT, and presentation skills were the most demanded competences in the field of marketing. Other studies identified the relationship between technical aspects of hard skills and related soft skills (Alpert et al., 2009; Ackerman et al., 2003; Kerr and Kelly, 2017), and found soft skills effective to enhance hard skills. Basic soft skills were examined in the research of Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010 and Finch et al., 2013, which are highly valued by employers and are important predictors of employability. Wellman (2010) found work planning and prioritization, general and written communication, and office ICT applications the mostly searched attributes, while creativity and innovation, as well as attention to detail, are the top desired personality traits for marketing professionals. Based on this study, Gregorio et al., (2019) identified five employability skill categories and 29 skills and capabilities through a content analysis of job advertisements and a cross-country survey of marketing professionals (see Table 1). The five identified factors were listed in order of factor contribution of the factor structure, and basic soft skills were described as the most relevant employability factor.

TABLE 1. THE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLSET OF MARKETING GRADUATES IN IMPORTANCE

Type of soft skill	Soft skills
Basic soft skills	Flexibility, Teamwork, Interpersonal skills, Initiative, Motivation, Oral communication and presentation skills, Stress resilience
Digital and technical skills	Knowledge of social media, Knowledge of Mobile, Knowledge of E-commerce, Knowledge of Analytics and real time practices, Knowledge of Internet & software knowledge, SEO & SEM
Core marketing skills	Planning, organization and time management, Content creation across channel, Creative thinking, Precision and attention to detail, Sales knowledge and management skills, Ability to manage multiple marketing tasks
Analytical skills	Data-driven/data-oriented, Good conceptual and analytical skills, Statistical knowledge, Problem-solving, Critical thinking, Ability to synthesize information into meaningful and actionable reports
Customer insights skills	Knowledge of company and of its customers, Knowledge of research methods, Knowledge of customer touchpoints and journey, CRM and relational skills

Source: own compilation based on Gregorio (2019)

Because of the increasing number of versatile data sources, digital marketers seek employees being able to handle multiple digital tools. Bobbitt et al. (2000), Gonzalez-Padron and Ferguson (2015) and Key et al. (2019) found that teaching innovations, such as in-depth experiential learning projects, provide a way to accomplish learning experience and at the same time, they bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in case of marketing students. The most frequent digital marketing skills (see Figure 1.), mentioned in job advertisements are: Google Ads, Google AdSense, Customer Segmentation, Differentiation, Ability to Meet Deadlines, Adaptability, Collaboration, Conducting Meetings, Decision Making, Multitasking, Organizational, Presentation, Problem Solving, Taking Initiative, Teamwork, Thriving in a Results Driven Role, Time Management, Verbal Communication, Working Independently, Omnichannel Marketing, WordPress, HubSpot, Moz Pro, SEMrush, MailChimp, Synup, Yext, Directory Listings, PPC Bidding (thebalancecareers, 2020).

Examining open education initiatives such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and OERs (Open Educational Resource), World Economic Forum compiled the most in-demand hard and soft skills of 2020 according to LinkedIn global database. The 15 hard and soft skills that are most likely to get employees hired in 2020 are in parallel with the 4Cs. The most in-demand soft skills in 2020 according to LinkedIn data are creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability and emotional intelligence (WEF, 2020). Staboulis and Lazaridou (2020) found the reason for the high demand for MOOCs soft skill courses was "... they offer the ability to form strong network aspects of connection between people and institutions in terms of creating, sharing and enhancing knowledge, services and skills in effective ways".

business language courses in November 2020. In MOOCs, demand for online courses for soft skills has shown an increasing demand in the last years.

In October 2020, 648 results for soft skill filtering were found on Coursera while in November, 653 soft skill courses were available. The TOP courses on Coursera in November 2020 are listed in Table 2.

TABLE 2. THE TOP COURSES IN NOVEMBER 2020 ON COURSERA

Course	Enrolled students
Learning How to Learn: Powerful mental tools to help your master tough subjects	2 642 061
Successful Negotiation: Essential Strategies and Skills	944 423
Creative Thinking: Techniques and Tools for Success	124 220
The arts and science of relationships: understanding human needs	115 632
Teamwork Skills: Communicating Effectively in Groups	108 075
Business English Communication Skills	77 050
Leading People and Teams Specialization	70 391
Presentation Skills	61 046
Converting challenges into opportunities	53 409

Source: own compilation based on Coursera (2020)

On Udemy, more than 10 000 soft skill courses were available both in October and November 2020. The most fragmented and popular categories were leadership, with 321 courses and communication with 291 courses in November 2020. There were versatile industry specific courses for both topics. Interviewing skills, negotiation and emotional intelligence were also in the TOP category during these months. Entrepreneurship and conflict management were very popular as well, with more than 50 000 enrolled students per month. Within leadership courses, 321 courses were available most of them with high ratings. The most popular leadership course had 1 777 enrolled students. In terms of communication skills, the most popular was “speak confidently and be from the elite” course, which counted 11 178 students.

On LinkedIn, where online courses are led by real-world professionals, within the 16000 online course soft skill categories, the “Leadership developing program”, the “Master In-Demand Professional Soft Skills” course, and the “Developing your emotional intelligence” course were the most popular ones with 376 513 viewers.

“Building resilience” and “Critical thinking for better judgement and decision-making” were also highly rated with 192 123 and 96 490 viewers respectively. In terms of communication, “Communicating with Confidence Course General”, “Influencing others”, and “Public speaking” had outstanding demand.

FIGURE 2. DEMAND GROWTH FROM SEPTEMBER 2019 TO SEPTEMBER 2020



Source: Coursera Impact Report (2020)

Coursera was founded in 2012. In 2020 Coursera has 59 million enrolments globally, and altogether there have been more than 13 million learners in Europe in 2020, which reflects a 137% increase (see Figure 2). EdX, the world's largest MOOC platform, had 25% increased certificate rates and 17% increased pass rates in 2020.

3.2. Perceptions of soft skill importance

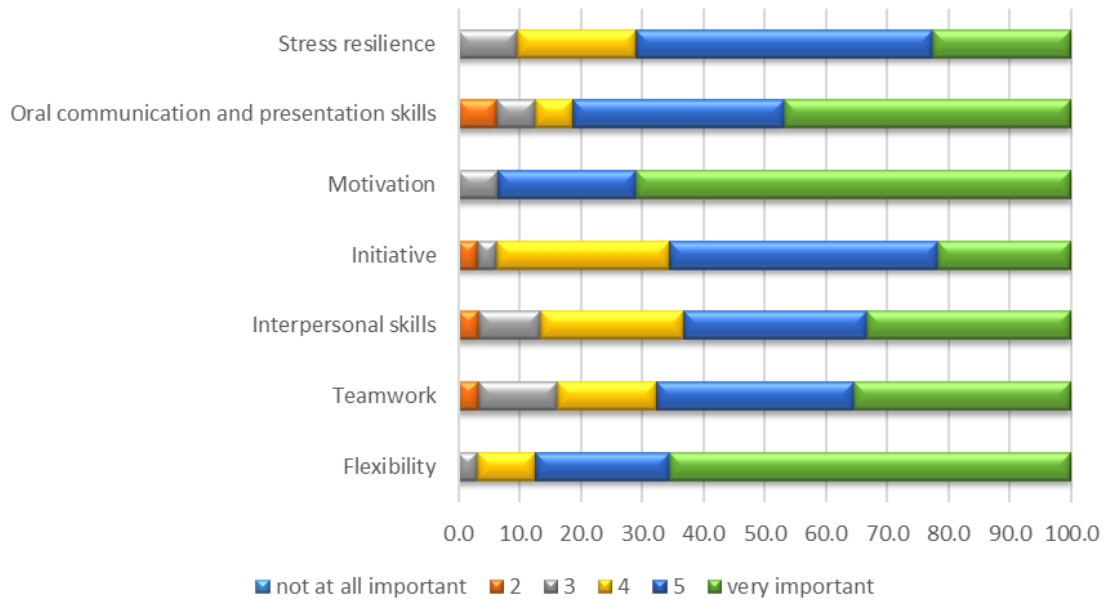
A survey was conducted in 2020 to investigate the perceptions of soft skill importance among university students. In the sample, 31.2% of the participants had regular work experience (full time 15.6% part time 15.6%), 21.9% had casual work experience, 18.8% took part in internship programs and 28.8% were students without former work experience.

In the first section of the analysis, the results are presented based on university students' perceptions on employability within the five skill categories. In the second section, the significant difference between students with regular work experience and casual or no former work experience, is described. The difference between the two segments in usage of MOOC platforms is shown in the third section.

3.3. The importance of basic soft skill perceptions on employability

The survey results (Figure 3.), suggest that motivation, flexibility, oral communication, and presentation skills are the most important soft skills, while stress resilience, teamwork, initiative and interpersonal skills, seem to be less important factors of employability for the respondents.

FIGURE 3. THE IMPORTANCE OF BASIC SOFT SKILLS

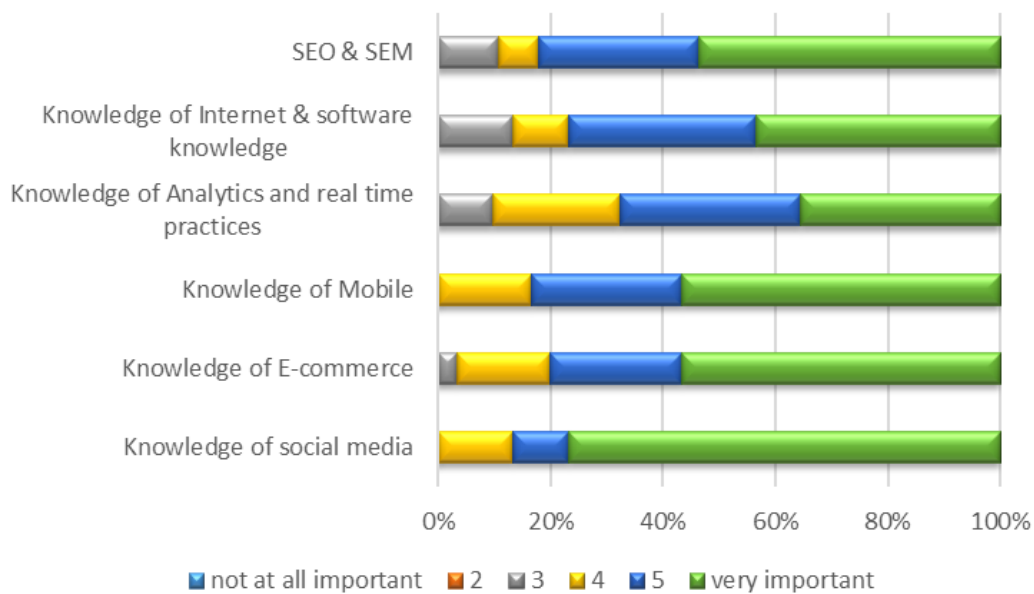


Source: current research

3.4. The importance of digital and technical skill perceptions on employability

The most important digital and technical skills were the knowledge of social media and mobile, SEO & SEM, knowledge of E-commerce and Internet & software while the knowledge of analytics and real time practices were less important. Seventy two percent of the respondents believed the knowledge of social media to be very important (see Figure 4.).

FIGURE 4. THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL AND TECHNICAL SKILLS



Source: current research

3.5. The importance of core marketing skill perceptions on employability

Among the core marketing skills (see Figure 5.), creative thinking is thought to be the most important employability skill for 91% of the respondents, while precision and attention to detail seem also very important or important for 81% of the respondents. Precision and attention to detail were also considered to be very important or important factors of employability. Sales knowledge was mentioned as the least relevant skill with 30% “not important” or “less important” answers (Median 4, Mean 4.45 on 6-point Likert scale). Precision and attention to detail also seem to be less relevant skills for employers; roughly 53% perceived it to be very important skills.

FIGURE 5. THE IMPORTANCE OF CORE MARKETING SKILLS (%)



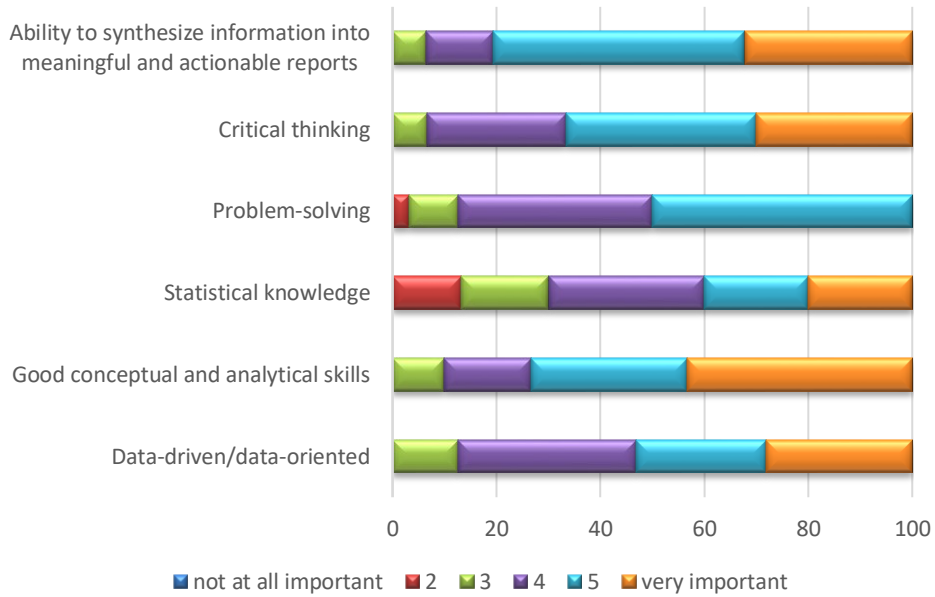
Source: current research

3.6. The importance of analytical skill perceptions on employability

The ability of synthesizing information into meaningful and actionable reports, good conceptual and analytical skills and critical thinking, were the most important skills for the respondents. Problem solving and data driven/data-oriented thinking were rated less important (see Figure 6).

The analytical skills were valued at a lower rate compared to the other groups of skills. Especially, only 18% of the respondents rated the statistical knowledge to be important and 18% very important.

FIGURE 6. THE IMPORTANCE OF ANALYTICAL SKILLS (%)

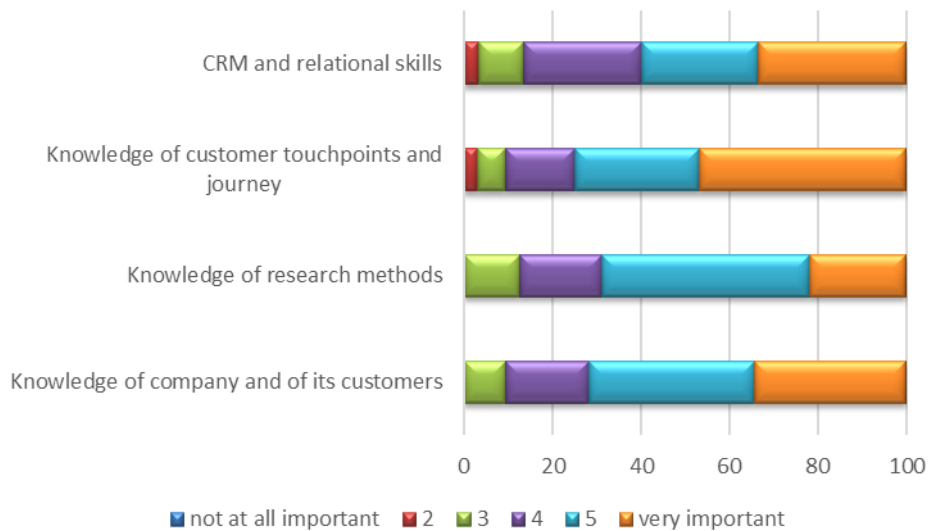


Source: current research

3.7. The importance of understanding customer insights

Among the customer insight skills, knowledge of a customer’s touchpoints and journey, of the company and its customers and research methods, were almost equally important skills for the respondents. While CRM and relational skills were rated lower (see Figure 7.).

FIGURE 7. THE IMPORTANCE OF CUSTOMER INSIGHT SKILLS (%)



Source: current research

The ratings of those respondents who work was significantly higher than those who did not, for the following skills: creative thinking, statistical knowledge, sales knowledge and management skills, CRM and relation skills and initiative.

An outstanding result of the study describes that knowledge of customer touchpoints and journey, statistical knowledge and good conceptual and analytical skills show a significant gap between previous managerial research of Gregorio et al., (2019) on employability and the perceptions of university students on employability skills.

3.8. Difference between the perceptions of the respondents with or without working experience

A correlation study was performed on the differences between the responses of the respondents with working experience and the ones without former working experience. Twenty-nine soft skill categories were analysed with crosstabs.

A significant difference between the group with working experience in the categories ‘important’ and ‘very important’ was detected for the skills listed in Table 3.

TABLE 3. SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENT SEGMENTS

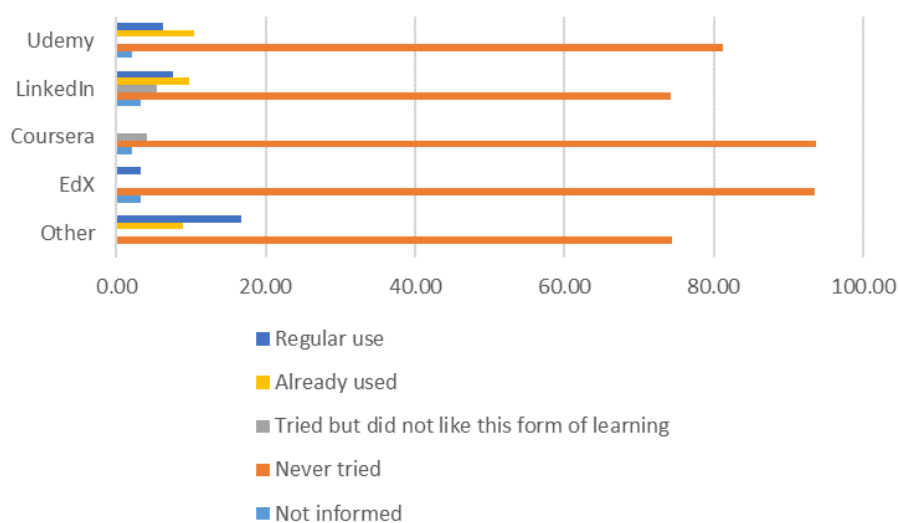
Soft skill	Gamma value	Significance
Motivation (basic skill category)	0.437	0.006
Stress resilience (basic skill category)	0.287	0.038
Content creation across channel (core skill category)	0.444	0.004
Precision and attention to detail (core skill category)	0.313	0.034
Knowledge of research methods (customer insights skill category)	0.268	0.036
Knowledge of customer touchpoints and journey (customer insights skill category)	0.378	0.003

Source: current research

3.9. Usage of MOOC platforms

The respondents of the research were asked about their habits of using MOOC platforms. Figure 8 summarises the results of the survey. Among Hungarian university students, LinkedIn and Udemy are the most popular platforms.

FIGURE 8. USAGE OF MOOCs PLATFORMS



Source: current research

There were several references to other platforms; these are mainly offline courses on software. Different software categories were mentioned: Python, data-visualisation, Photoshop courses were popular mostly in the segment with regular work experience.

4. Conclusion

Soft skills are more difficult to quantify than hard skills and it is more difficult to predict how these skills will affect the suitability in the workplace. In the field of digital marketing, employability has become an issue since there are broad mismatches between the acquired graduate skills from university and the required skills by employers. The process of transition from university undergraduate to marketing professional is a crucial stage in the development of a digital marketing career and soft skills are key factors to become successful in their entire career path.

The first main finding of the research is that the transition from marketing graduate to employee is based on transferable soft skills, because digital marketing professionals face different technologies and multiple marketing fields in their carrier. There is a gap between previous managerial the research results and the current findings in the importance of analytical and core marketing skills and its impact on employability.

There is a significant difference between student segments with different work experience in predicting soft skills related to employability. Students with regular work experience found motivation, stress resilience, contents creation across channel, precision and attention to detail, knowledge of research methods and knowledge of customer touchpoints and journey, the most relevant soft skills of employability.

The demand for developing soft skills is emerging globally in the past few years on the most popular MOOCs and OERs, which offer specific industrial knowledge for the fields of business and engineering. It seems that respondents of the current survey did not utilize various platforms to develop their soft skills; less than 10 % of the students use MOOC platforms regularly for developing personal skills. Mostly, students with work experience attended courses on analytical or visual software.

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