

# Hampton Roads: In Search Of A Social Media Identity



# HAMPTON ROADS: IN SEARCH OF A SOCIAL MEDIA IDENTITY

*You are what you share.*

– Charles Leadbeater, “We Think: The Power of Mass Creativity”

**T**ime passes quickly and there is no place where it seems to pass faster than the internet. Many companies that are an integral part of our lives did not exist 25 years ago. Amazon is 24; eBay, 22; Netflix, 21; and Google, 20. Compared to many social media companies, these internet giants are mature adults. Facebook, the current dominant force in social media, is about 14 years old. Twitter is 12, Instagram is 8 and Snapchat is a mere 7 years old. Social media undoubtedly impacts our lives, sometimes for the better by creating connections and fostering a sense of place. On the other hand, social media has led to online bullying, trolling and other malicious forms of behavior. One might say that with the good, comes the bad.

The number of social media consumers is staggering: 2.2 billion, 336 million and 191 million; these are the numbers of people, respectively, who actively used Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat in the first quarter of 2018. Eight hundred million people actively used Instagram in late 2017 and the total number of pictures posted on the platform to 40 billion. While some may find humor in restaurant patrons’ pictures of their food (pizza is the most Instagrammed food, by the way), these relatively new companies are serious business, with multibillion-dollar valuations, and often serve as the primary conduit for how we receive news and entertainment.

The Norfolk Police Department is an example of how to use social media to create a positive message. On June 18, 2018, the Norfolk Police released a lip-sync challenge video to the department’s Facebook page featuring a performance by officers and staff to the song, “Uptown Funk.” To date, it has been watched more than 75 million times and shared on Facebook more than 1.5 million times. Within two weeks, the viral video was highlighted in news coverage from “NBC Nightly News,” CNN, The Washington Post, People magazine and many other outlets. Other local police and sheriff departments followed suit with similar social media videos, raising the profile of their localities.

Most households in Hampton Roads are connected to the internet, with a growing number consuming content from their mobile devices. According



to the U.S. Census 2016 American Community Survey (ACS), 92 percent of households in Hampton Roads had one or more types of computing devices and 85.9 percent had an internet subscription. Of the 639,903 households, 514,513 had a home computer (desktop or laptop) and a mobile device (smartphone or tablet), while 74,048 households had only a mobile device. Almost all the households with internet had a broadband connection (85.6 percent); 70.8 percent had a wired connection; 12.4 percent had only a mobile connection; and 4.6 percent had satellite broadband. Given that the Pew Research Center recently found that 68 percent of Americans use Facebook and younger Americans are even more likely to also use Instagram

and Snapchat, most households in Hampton Roads (for better or worse) are consuming and producing content on social media.<sup>1</sup>

Just as the most popular content providers on these platforms strive to create and maintain an identity to attract followers, cities and regions also compete to attract businesses and visitors through social media. Is Hampton Roads ready for this challenge? **Over the past decade, Richmond purposefully developed an identity through three simple letters: R-V-A. Other cities, such as Austin, Texas (“The Live Music Capital of the World”) and Portland, Oregon (“The City of Roses”), have developed unique, quirky and nationally recognizable identities on social media. Curiously, these cities have adopted the same slogan: “Keep Austin Weird” and “Keep Portland Weird,” illustrating that uniqueness is not only a characteristic, but also a marketing tool.**

Tangible evidence of the value of social media to the regional economy comes in the form of trans-Atlantic cables being constructed in Virginia Beach. Microsoft and Facebook recently funded the laying of a new cable, known as Marea, which runs along the ocean floor from the resort city to Bilbao, Spain. It features transmissions “more than 16 million times faster than the average home internet connection, with the capability to stream 71 million high-definition videos simultaneously,” according to Microsoft. Marea will soon be joined by two other trans-Atlantic cables, to South Africa and South America, which will bring a number of high-tech jobs to Virginia Beach and establish the region as the mid-Atlantic destination for fiber and data. **Social media is more than pictures of cats and babies; it is providing new jobs and opportunities for Hampton Roads.**

This chapter examines the promise of social media for Hampton Roads. Setting aside the discussion (for now) of whether we should call home Coastal Virginia, Hampton Roads, Tidewater or one of the many other names that have generated numerous pages of print, we ask to what degree our region has a social media identity. We explore whether the evolution of other regions’ social identities were accidents or if a similar approach might be successful

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center (March 2018), “Social Media Use in 2018,” <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>.

for Hampton Roads. Lastly, we discuss what can be done to elevate the social media game in Hampton Roads.

## Facebook: The Current Dominant Player In Social Media

Mark Zuckerberg, Chris Hughes, Dustin Moskovitz and Eduardo Saverin launched “TheFacebook” in January 2004 at Harvard University to fill the need for a directory featuring student photographs and contact information. As registrations grew quickly, the site expanded its membership to Columbia, Stanford and Yale, and eventually to most universities in the United States and Canada. “TheFacebook” became “Facebook” in 2005 and by 2006, it had relaxed its registration restrictions so that anyone age 13 or older with a valid email address could become a member of the site.

**Facebook’s growth has been nothing short of phenomenal, increasing from around 100 million users in 2006 to more than 1.45 billion daily active users in the first quarter of 2018.**

Facebook’s market capitalization was \$570 billion in June 2018, up from \$104 billion at the time of its initial public offering in May 2012. Facebook’s meteoric user growth, however, is projected to slow in the coming years – not surprising, as its base currently exceeds 2 billion users. Nevertheless, the social media giant is quite adept at generating more revenue per user, with the consensus forecast being that earnings will grow at an average annual rate of 22 percent over the next five years.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Pew Research Center, 68 percent of the population (62 percent of men and 74 percent of women) in the U.S. say that they regularly use Facebook. While the perception in the popular media may be that young adults view Facebook as the social network for “old people,”<sup>3</sup> 81 percent of

<sup>2</sup> Estimate current as of Aug. 28, 2018, <https://www.nasdaq.com/symbol/fb/earnings-growth>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/12/facebook-is-losing-younger-users-to-snapchat-according-to-a-study.html?\\_source=twitter%7Cmain](https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/12/facebook-is-losing-younger-users-to-snapchat-according-to-a-study.html?_source=twitter%7Cmain) and <https://go.forrester.com/blogs/the-data-digest-among-youth-facebook-is-falling-behind>.

adults ages 18-29 use Facebook, compared to 78 percent of adults ages 30-49, and 41 percent of adults 65 and older. Teenagers, however, appear to be migrating to other platforms, primarily Instagram (owned by Facebook) and Snapchat.

## Twitter: 140 Characters In The Past, 280 Today

If Facebook is where one connects with friends and fellow classmates, Twitter is the social network that, by design, imposes character limits that focus the content of each post. Created in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone and Evan Williams, Twitter (whose initial project code name was “twtr”) was created to replicate text messaging in a social space. Instead of texting a friend or select group of friends, the Twitter user can broadcast (“tweet”) to an entire group of connected individuals (“followers”). Twitter initially limited posts to 140 characters, but recently expanded the limit to 280 characters.

Despite accusations that Facebook is becoming more like Twitter and vice versa, the two social networks are distinct. Twitter led the innovation of the hashtag, now an integral part of internet conversation, and the @ symbol for direct communication. While smaller than Facebook, Twitter has grown from 30 million active monthly users in the first quarter of 2010 to 336 million active users at the end of the first quarter of 2018. Activists and organizers have used Twitter to organize movements, sometimes to promote democracy (the “Arab Spring,”<sup>4</sup> protests in Iran<sup>5</sup>) and sometimes to promote more distasteful movements (the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017).

**Twitter, like other social media platforms, hosts a mixture of the serious and irreverent.** The most retweeted tweet as of June 2018 was “Help Me Please. A Man Needs His Nuggs.”<sup>6</sup> Carter Wilkerson, a high school student, asked, “Yo @Wendy’s, how many retweets for a year of free

chicken nuggets?” To which Wendy’s replied, “18 million.” After 3.6 million retweets, Wendy’s agreed to give Wilkerson a year’s worth of free nuggets. On a more serious note, a tweet by former President Barack Obama in the aftermath of the Charlottesville neo-Nazi rally in August 2017 – where the former president tweeted the Nelson Mandela quote, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion,” over a picture of Obama smiling at children looking out a window – has been “liked” 4.6 million times, making it the most-engaged tweet in Twitter history.

Twitter’s usage is significantly lower than Facebook’s, with only 24 percent of adults telling the Pew Research Center that they used Twitter as a social media platform. **Twitter usage tends to skew younger, with 40 percent of adults ages 18-29 using Twitter, compared to 8 percent of adults 65 and older.** Twitter usage also tends to spike during prominent events. This year’s World Cup, for example, resulted in millions of tweets. Prominent Twitter users can use the platform in an attempt to sway the national conversation, as evidenced by the active and undoubtedly influential posts by the current president of the United States, Donald J. Trump.

## Instagram: More Than Pictures Of Food

While Facebook and Twitter are based on the concept that written posts drive connections, Instagram is driven by the philosophy that visual information, specifically photographs and, over time, video, connects individuals. Founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010 and acquired by Facebook in 2012, Instagram has evolved beyond the original concept of posting static photographs. Users can now post video and create a carousel, or “story,” that melds photographs and video. Posts can be geotagged, captioned and filtered to alter the appearance of the original content. The use of filters has led to the “no filter” movement on Instagram, where users post pictures without a filter (although strategic lighting and other techniques are used to enhance one’s appearance).

4 <http://www.journalism.org/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings>.

5 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42566083>

6 <https://twitter.com/carterjwm/status/849813577770778624>.

Instagram had 800 million active users monthly at the end of 2017 and some believe it will exceed 1 billion active users in 2018.<sup>7</sup> **When the Pew Research Center surveyed adults in early 2018, 35 percent responded that they used Instagram on a regular basis. Seventy-one percent of adults ages 18-24 use Instagram, followed by 54 percent of adults in the 25-29 age range.**

Singer Selena Gomez had the most followers on Instagram in June 2018 (138 million), followed by professional soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo (129 million), singer Ariana Grande (122 million) and singer Beyoncé (116 million).

**For those unfamiliar with Instagram and who may question the value of posting pictures online, it should be noted that Facebook was widely lauded for having purchased Instagram for only \$1 billion.** By 2014, Citigroup estimated that Instagram would be worth \$35 billion if it was a stand-alone company.<sup>8</sup> By 2017, Eric Jackson, an opinion contributor for Forbes magazine, argued that Instagram would likely have a market capitalization north of \$100 billion (if not \$200 billion).

Why is that, you ask? Instagram skews younger, has sustained a remarkable growth rate and is the communication medium of choice for many celebrities and sports stars to connect with their fans. Instagram can also be used to build social identity for cities and regions. **The RVA hashtag (#RVA) had more than 3 million posts by the start of this summer, compared to about 385,000 for Hampton Roads. New York City (#newyork), as a matter of comparison, had over 67 million posts, so there is room for growth.**

## Snapchat: It's Young, It's Hip, It's What?

The newest entrant into the social media space, Snapchat, takes a different approach to social media than Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Founded in 2011 and relaunched in 2012, Snapchat has focused on being a

<sup>7</sup> <http://mediakix.com/2017/11/instagrams-one-billion-users-milestone/#gs.cRsXhL0>.  
<sup>8</sup> <https://dealbook.nytimes.com/2014/12/19/citigroup-says-instagram-is-worth-35-billion>

conversational rather than transactional medium. Snaps (short texts and videos) are automatically deleted after viewing, while unviewed snaps are deleted after 30 days. In fact, according to Snapchat, “Delete is our default.”<sup>9</sup> **This a conscious departure from other social media platforms, where users might find that past posts influence their current lives in unexpected ways.**

Snapchat’s growth, however, mirrors that of the other social networks, expanding from 46 million daily active users in the first quarter of 2014 to 191 million daily users in the first quarter of 2018. Snapchat skews younger than the other networks, with 78 percent of adults in the 18-24 age category reporting that they used Snapchat. For teenagers, Snapchat is rated as their favorite app and typically viewed as the “most fun” to use. In September 2017, users spent an average of 34.5 minutes a day on Snapchat (2.5 minutes per day more than Instagram) and sent about 34 messages a day via the app.<sup>10</sup> One can also view activity through the “Snap Map,” which provides a sample of snaps that are geolocated and heat mapped, so users can see the intensity of snaps at a given point in time (but be quick, since snaps disappear over time).

Given that Snapchat posts do vanish, one might surmise that the multimedia-messaging app is primarily used for private conversations – that is, posts and pictures that one likely would not want to become public. However, research suggests that the primary reason for using Snapchat is not privacy, but rather ease of use and entertainment value. A 2014 study of Snapchat users found that while 14.2 percent had sent sexually related content at some point in time, only 1.6 percent used Snapchat primarily for this reason. What was the main reason individuals gave for using Snapchat? “Funny content” was cited by almost 60 percent of respondents.<sup>11</sup>

While Snapchat and Instagram users skew younger than those on Facebook or Twitter, there appears to be substantial reciprocity across the platforms. As Table 1 shows, the 2018 Social Media Use Survey by the Pew Research Center found, for example, that 48 percent of Snapchat users also use Twitter, 77 percent also use Instagram and 89 percent also use Facebook. **If one**

<sup>9</sup> <https://support.snapchat.com/en-US/a/when-are-snaps-chats-deleted>.  
<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/09/daily-beast-snap-users-spend-more-time-on-app-than-instagram.html>  
<sup>11</sup> <https://homes.cs.washington.edu/~yoshi/papers/snapchat-FC2014.pdf>.

desires to market a city or region, then social media needs to be part of the strategy; however, there is not one platform to rule them all.

**TABLE 1**

**RECIPROCITY ACROSS SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, 2018**

	Use Twitter	Use Snapchat	Use Instagram	Use Facebook
Twitter	--	54%	73%	90%
Snapchat	48%	--	77%	89%
Instagram	50%	60%	--	91%
Facebook	32%	35%	47%	--

Source: Pew Research Center, "Social Media Use in 2018"

## Hampton Roads: One Virtual Region?

When Jared Beasley moved 10 years ago from Kansas City, Missouri, to southeastern Virginia for graduate school, he was immediately taken with the area, particularly when he viewed it through his camera lens. As the owner of Istorica, a digital marketing firm in Norfolk, Beasley sought ways to promote his nascent photography and digital design business. "I had gotten on Instagram and hated it," Beasley said. "It was just my friends posting pictures of their feet, or their food, or putting a crappy filter on a sunset. But then I started making friends who are photographers and they were like, 'You've got to get on here, there's some real quality content, and a cool community.'"

Beasley soon noticed an opening for an Instagram "hub" – a community of common interest. **He reached out to local photographers on Instagram and asked them to share their best pictures of the region through the hashtag #757collective. The initiative has blossomed, with numerous contributors sharing their best photos. In June 2018, there were more than 144,000 posts**

**using the #757collective hashtag and more than 30,000 followers of the 757collective Instagram account.** "This area has so many unique spaces, but also the history, and all of the coastal areas," Beasley said. "I thought (#757collective) was just a way to compile it in one place."

The technological function of hashtags – which started on the social media site Twitter but have spread to every social platform – allows for the creation of an instant community, unified by a common phrase. Placing a pound sign in front of a word or phrase turns it into a clickable link, which can take users to other accounts posting content with a similar theme. Photographers wanting to feature their work through #757collective can simply tag their photos on Instagram with the hashtag. That allows Beasley to view an array of images spotlighting the region, and to select the best for the #757collective Instagram account.

#757collective grew rapidly in its first year, but growth has plateaued, as "organic" producers of Instagram content (i.e., those who do not pay the social media company money) are finding their posts featured less often in users' timelines – the rolling list of posts that users see when they log into Instagram. "I think one of the difficulties is that these are platforms that we don't own, and why should we give free exposure to people because they like my page. I'm afraid that's where Instagram is going to go," Beasley said. Beyond the evolving architecture of the sites – which has been raising the ire of social media users for several years – Beasley noticed something else when he surveyed the local social media landscape. "There don't seem to be many, if any, sites like #757collective, which reflect the region as a whole. I think it's super-problematic. It speaks to how our cities run."

It might be the lack of a unified name. In his first "State of the Start-up" presentation in 2015, Zack Miller began with an anecdote about this region's challenge in finding a collective identity. The founder of local business accelerator Hatch and author of the forthcoming book "Anomaly," Miller showed his audience which terms were being typed most often into the Google search engine. The terms "Norfolk" and "Virginia Beach" dwarfed every other locally sited search, including the regional names Hampton Roads, Coastal Virginia and Tidewater. "The event wasn't about the naming stuff, but afterwards that's all people talked about," Miller said.

Graph 1 presents weekly Google trends data for the last five years. We compared searches for Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Williamsburg with searches for Hampton Roads. A value of 100 represents the peak popularity of the term. **It should be no surprise that Virginia Beach's search popularity climbs in the spring, peaks mid-summer, declines in the fall and troughs in the winter. Norfolk's popularity appears to be more consistent over time, though less than for Virginia Beach during the summer. Williamsburg is less popular than Virginia Beach or Norfolk, and the term Hampton Roads is searched-for the least among the group.**

Jerry Davis has been working in advertising and branding for nearly 50 years, founding Davis Ad Agency in 1976. His former firm used to represent a professional hockey team based in Norfolk. At that time, the region was known as Tidewater. "Their wives couldn't even find Tidewater on a map," he said. That identity problem persisted with the rollout of the Hampton Roads moniker in the 1980s. "When I travel, and people ask where I'm from, I never say Hampton Roads. Never," he said.

**Why does a name matter in the social media world? The algorithms used by the sites, and the grouping functions such as hashtags, rely on a unified nomenclature. A family doing online research for a beach vacation will likely search using Virginia Beach and may miss attractions situated in other Hampton Roads cities.** The net result is that each city in the region tells dozens of stories largely connected to other communities in Hampton Roads. The city names have far more recognition outside the region, but using them instead of a regional moniker robs the region of opportunity to present a unified social media identity.

To illustrate this point, we examined tweets from June 17 to June 24, 2018, to answer two questions: (1) how often did any of the Hampton Roads hashtags (#HRVA, #HamptonRoads, #COVA) appear relative to the Richmond (#RVA) hashtag and (2) what was the sentiment underlying the tweets about Hampton Roads and Richmond. Sentiment is a measure of the positivity or negativity of a piece of text. Messages with positive sentiment have scores closer to 10 and measures with negative sentiment have scores closer to

1.<sup>12</sup> "Rainbow," for example, is classified as one of the happiest words in sentiment analysis, while "earthquake" is noted as one of the saddest words. **Tweets using the Richmond hashtag #RVA appear almost seven times more frequently on Twitter than tweets using any of the three Hampton Roads hashtags. However, the mean and median sentiment of tweets using the Hampton Roads hashtags is slightly higher (mean - 5.99 ; median - 5.94) than the mean and median sentiment of tweets using the Richmond hashtag (mean - 5.92; median - 5.88). In other words, posts about Hampton Roads are slightly more positive than those about Richmond; however, there are many more posts about Richmond than Hampton Roads.**

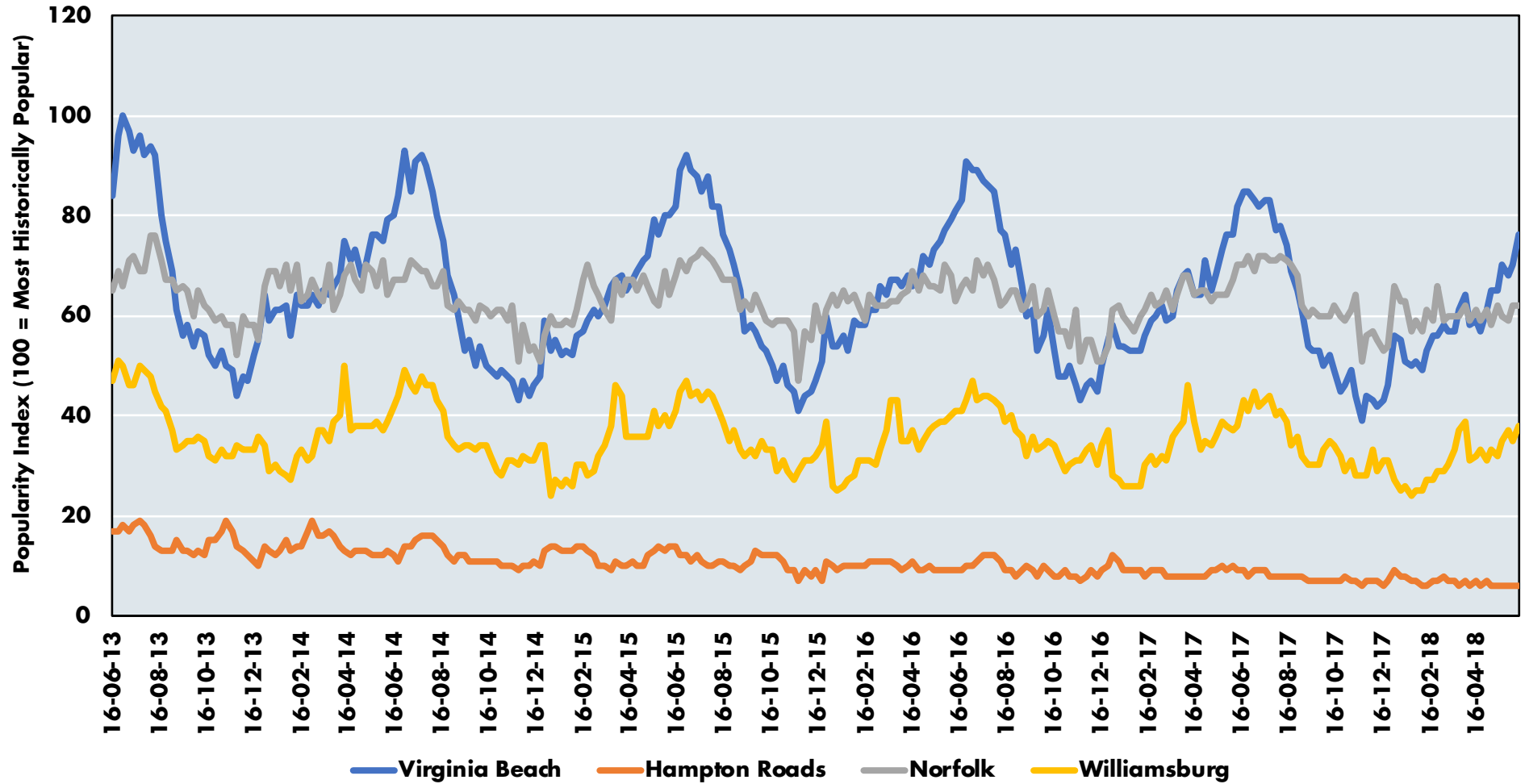
When Beasley started #757collective, none of the amalgam of names created for this area appealed to him, leading to his decision to use the region's telephone area code as an identifier. He finds it frustrating that there is no consistent voice in social media for southeastern Virginia. "I think it's super problematic," he said. "If you were an alien and you came to this region and compared it to other regions, you'd be kind of blown away about how the cities don't work together." Hatch's Miller said the habit of changing names to represent the region makes it even worse. "We constantly throw a new bowl of spaghetti against the wall. We're two or three years into COVA (Coastal Virginia), and people are already, 'Oh, we're done with this.'"

For the Hampton Roads Economic Development Alliance (HREDA), effective social media use helps sell businesses outside the region on the value proposition of relocation to Hampton Roads and local businesses on the value of expansion in the region. Chad Matheson, HREDA's director of business intelligence, says a lively social media presence could aid greatly with the brand sentiment of the region. "I think one of the strengths of social media is that it's agile and flexible. You can have micro-strategies around geographic elements of the community. I think that's a great benefit of the way social media can brand the region as a whole," Matheson said.

<sup>12</sup> An increasing number of high-stakes decisions are now made based upon predictive models of publicly available sentiment data. The most common source for such predictions is currently Twitter, due to its public nature, large user base and high accessibility by both academic and industry researchers. For more information see: Gore, Ross Joseph, Diallo, Saikou and Padilla, Jose, "You are what you tweet: Connecting the geographic variation in America's obesity rate to Twitter content," *PLoS one* 10.9 (2015): e0133505.

GRAPH 1

GOOGLE TRENDS POPULARITY, JUNE 2013 – JUNE 2018



Source: Google, June 2018



However, branding an entire region with a universal name that is recognized and resonates nationwide requires consensus. Jillian Goodwin, HREDA's director of marketing and communications, noted, "What we've discussed is, it's about brand. **In order to sell something, people have to know what you're selling. ... Social media, that's going to be one of the first things that they see, the digital presence.** Having a cohesive, clear and strategic plan on how we are presenting ourselves that way, it's like baiting the hook. Get them interested, get them at least starting a conversation."

## Building A Regional Identity From The Ground Up

**There are efforts to speak with one voice for the region, organized by active social media participants in the community. The Hampton Roads Social Media Collective is a group of residents who work in or are active consumers of social media.** Co-founder Sarah Hill said the group seeks to be of service to the region, businesses and its members. "The ultimate goal is to unite Hampton Roads residents working in the social media space, whether they're running an account for their neighborhood book club or heading up a marketing effort reaching hundreds of thousands of people," Hill said. "The collective is also designed to complement the businesses and professional organizations in the area to demonstrate adoption of new technology, job opportunities and growth, and provide support for an emerging professional workforce." The group has about 200 members, but its founders are hoping it replicates their experiences with social media coalitions in other regions – where online connection leads to in-person gatherings.

For local companies like digital ad agency Grow, social media is a conduit to the world. "We would not exist without connective technologies like social media," founder and CEO Drew Ungvarsky said. "What we need is clients to want to work with us, and we need the world's best talent, especially, to be aware of us and to want to work with us. And even move from the far

reaches of the planet to Norfolk, Virginia." Ungvarsky is eager for other companies to discover that downtown Norfolk, where Grow is located, and other communities within the region are ready to shine. "This is a market of 1.7 million people. I hope the secret gets out to the Googles and the Microsofts of the world that this amazing talent base is here."

Part of the challenge is that social media is a fragmented space. "The reality is that most of the rest of the world knows Virginia Beach. A few less of them know Norfolk, and then it's a massive drop-off beyond that," Ungvarsky said. "We have to lean into our strengths, and we're talking about creating a national and international brand, and that's Virginia Beach and Norfolk." Jerry Davis of Davis Ad Agency put it more succinctly. "If I were king, I would dump the Hampton Roads name tomorrow, and I would find something that was more descriptive of this region, and I would promote the hell out of it. Social media could be invaluable for that."

## Can We Learn From Others?

Skeptics about the idea of regionalism in Hampton Roads suggest coming together under a social media common moniker that everyone uses and recognizes is impossible. However, across the country, abundant evidence exists to contradict that claim. Diverse communities have formed a collective online identity that pierces through the clutter – using single terms like #Vegas, #ATX (for Austin, Texas) and #Portland.

Fewer than 100 miles away, residents of Virginia's capital have long informally referred to Richmond and its surrounding communities as RVA (an abbreviation for Richmond, Virginia). Lucy Meade, director of marketing and development with Venture Richmond (a nonprofit that links businesses and community leaders with the city of Richmond), enlisted the Brandcenter at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2010 to develop a universal brand utilizing those three letters.

**At the time the brand platform was rolled out in 2011, only 19 business names started with the letters RVA, according to Virginia's State Corporation Commission statistics. Now**

**the prefix is used for hundreds of companies, nonprofits and public-sector organizations. RVA bumper stickers adorn cars and office doors wherever Richmond natives end up. Contributing to the success of the brand was the fact that when it was created, it was accompanied by a license for that logo to be used for personal, organizational and commercial use.**

On social media, the hashtag #RVA is used across social media platforms. Since it contains only three letters, #RVA can easily be broken into subcommunities by simply tacking a phrase onto the hashtag – like #RVATraffic or #RVASchools. “I think the reason RVA works is it is just an abbreviated version of Richmond, Virginia. It’s not really a moniker. It’s just a couple of letters,” said Zack Miller of Hatch.

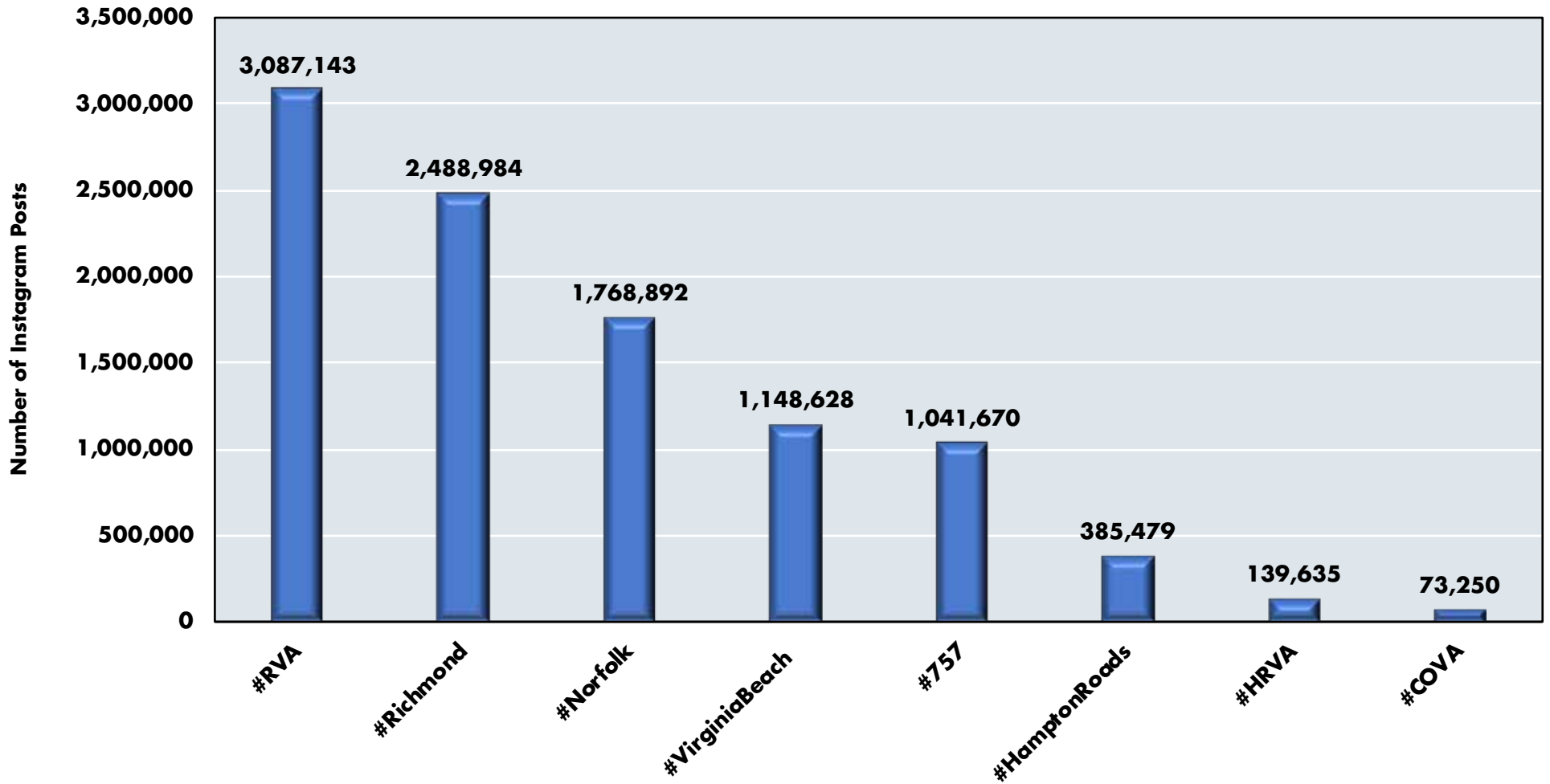
The proof is in the data of just how powerful the brand has become. On Instagram, a running tally of the number of times a hashtag has been used is available publicly at a single click. In Graph 2, we illustrate the number of posts with specific hashtags on Instagram. Since hashtags began to be used on Instagram in 2011, #RVA has passed 3 million uses in public posts, nearly double the amount of times the hashtags #HamptonRoads, #HRVA, #NFK and #757 have been used combined. Usage of the hashtags #Norfolk and #VirginiaBeach nearly equals that of #RVA. In a demonstration of the appeal of the state capital brand, #RVA has also been used more than #Richmond as a hashtag. Also, it must be noted that Norfolk and Richmond are city names that exist in other geographic locales, which would increase the number of hashtag mentions, and 757 can also be used as a hashtag for an airplane.

Grow’s Ungvarsky yearns for Hampton Roads to come up with its own version of #RVA. “It would really help if we could come up with a better way to describe this place. Richmond and the RVA movement synthesized both the great change that’s happening in that city and gave people a way to talk about it. We’ve got a lot of great change happening here in this city, and the others in the region, and we don’t have a great way to talk about it yet.”



**GRAPH 2**

**TOTAL POSTS ON INSTAGRAM WITH AT LEAST ONE HASHTAG (#), AS OF JUNE 14, 2018**



Source: Instagram, 2018

# Leading By Example: How Organizations In Hampton Roads “Win” On Social Media

Despite not having the synergy that exists with a unified brand across social media platforms, there are many examples of local companies and organizations that are increasing in exposure, profile and business on social media. Here are four examples of local entities that are “killing the game” on social media. (There are dozens of other Hampton Roads social media stars that could easily be featured in this space.)

## VIRGINIA AQUARIUM & MARINE SCIENCE CENTER (MORE THAN 117,000 FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS)

Whether it’s video of an octopus exhibit yet to be opened, or a nest of sea turtles hatching near the Virginia Beach facility and struggling to reach the sea, the interactive video programming produced by the aquarium has attracted a worldwide following. Public relations manager Matt Klepeisz said they receive check-ins from around the world for their virtual exhibits. “Social media is absolutely integral to the planning and execution of our public relations and marketing efforts,” he said. Klepeisz added that the aquarium can track the success of its social media promotions directly via click-throughs on social media advertisements. But indirectly, the benefits of social media outreach have been realized as well. “We had hundreds of visitors inquiring about our octopus exhibit after we posted a video on our Facebook page. That exhibit hadn’t even opened yet,” he said.

## WILDERNESS CULTURE (MORE THAN 2 MILLION FOLLOWERS ON INSTAGRAM)

Alex Martin founded Wilderness Culture after relocating to his Virginia Beach hometown from New York City, where he had opened an advertising business.



A community of outdoor enthusiasts committed to exploring, sharing and preserving wilderness, Wilderness Culture attracts supporters who provide striking photographs from scenic hot spots around the world. It has an avid following on Instagram, and has branched into branded merchandise, outdoor equipment and expeditions.

## NORTH END BAG CO. (INSTAGRAM-BASED BUSINESS)

The hotly competitive fashion industry is difficult to break into for a small, family-run business. However, the North End Bag Co., which has a small store at the north end of the Virginia Beach oceanfront, has built a loyal following and a customer base that reaches across the United States by marketing its canvas and leather beach bags on Instagram. Selling craftsmanship, sustainability, fashion and a beach lifestyle, the company has utilized Instagram to identify and cultivate a market since opening in 2012.

## SALVATION ARMY HAMPTON ROADS AREA COMMAND (FACEBOOK CAMPAIGN)

The Salvation Army Hampton Roads Area Command developed a program in 2016 using social media to raise awareness of its red kettles among millennials. The marketing department, overseen by Jamila Walker, created

#RedKettleReason757. When area residents would come across a red kettle and make a donation, they were encouraged to take a selfie next to the kettle (or a bell ringer) and post it on social media using #RedKettleReason757. The social media campaign garnered attention in the local media and has continued since its inception. **Not only does the hashtag promote awareness of the Salvation Army's red kettles, it also localizes the social media campaign with the "757" area code, and engages participants by encouraging them to actively post a campaign to their network.**

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Social media is not going away, even if some platforms may fall out of favor (Myspace, anyone?). Global social media revenue for 2016 was \$26.9 billion, a figure poised to rise to \$39 billion by 2019. The economic social media spinoffs are exponentially larger. A forthcoming study in the Journal of Intercollegiate Sport surveyed football fans in the Southeastern Conference who posted tailgate food pictures on their Instagram pages. The researchers uncovered a tremendous vein of nostalgia that ran through these social media users – one that football programs can mine to increase engagement and fan spending. **Hampton Roads high schools, colleges and universities offer local examples of how institutions successfully engage with alumni and fans on social media. Leveraging this experience to engage and attract visitors to our region will be an important part of a future campaign to promote regional identity.**

Clearly, there are many success stories in the social media world from which we, as a region, can benefit. What, then, should we do?

- **Come up with an identity and stick with it** – Social media is a platform for storytellers, and this region has a vibrant story. Many local entities are creating rich, impactful social media content, but it is less likely

to show up on the radar of an outsider unfamiliar with the names used to identify the region. We would be well served to find our own unified content aggregator. **If something does not work, discard it and try again.**

- **Optimize the platforms** – There are best-case examples in every sector of individuals and organizations using social media to its full extent. Social media should be dynamic and represent the contributions of the residents, businesses and governments of Hampton Roads. **Instead of spending years to develop the "right" strategy, start now and course correct over time.**
- **Put someone in charge** – If volunteer organizations like #757collective and the Hampton Roads Social Media Collective don't have the reach or clout required to create a cohesive local social media voice, task an organization with community-wide reach to lead the initiative. "You have to have somebody assigned the duty of doing that," said Davis Ad Agency's Jerry Davis. "It's just hard for any individual company or organization to assign responsibility and invest the money in the effort when you have your own personal self-interest to take care of." If everyone is responsible, no one is responsible.
- **When we agree on a strategy, get the community on board** – Sites like Facebook and Instagram allow for themed filters to advocate causes such as autism awareness or cancer care. Local organizations and companies can use their own network of friends and followers to organically create a local social media community, using the tools that the platforms currently possess. Matt Klepeisz of the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center said his organization would love to partner with a "social local" initiative. "If someone is coming here to go to the beach, or Colonial Williamsburg, we all stand to benefit." **Collaboration unifies the message and allows each community to remain unique within Hampton Roads.**

The opportunity is there; now it's time to get social. We have a story to tell.