

Place, Prestige, Price, and Promotion: How International Students Use Social Networks to Learn About Universities Abroad

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This qualitative study aims to explore the social media component of international students' college choice process for studying abroad. One of the emerging pieces of evidence was that participants applied social media specific criteria, such as the number of "likes," the number of followers, and the ratio of followers to following to rank Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and measure their prestige. Another emerging finding was that participants with no connections abroad relied exclusively on social media for their college choice decisions and without social media would not even consider an option of transferring abroad. Videos and pictures offered by social network sites (SNS)

provided emotional benefits by helping "to see" an unknown reality, develop sense of belonging, diminish apprehensions of moving abroad, and solidify the choice of HEI, while traditional sources of promotion, such as websites, were perceived as not trustworthy. Higher education professionals could hire individuals with proven expertise in social media to create consistent and meaningful content on different social media platforms to connect with potential international candidates.

Keywords: social network sites, social media, international students, higher education marketing, recruitment, admission

According to the Open Doors report (IIE, 2017), the number of international students on U.S. campuses has reached 1,078,822 people or 5.3% of the total student population. These students differ from domestic students—their family support is a thousand miles away, they have to learn a new culture, and they are not eligible for the same financial aid options as local students—just to name a few differentiators (Lu, Mavondo, & Qiu, 2009). Moreover, their college choices and decisions are based on the limited information they obtain while still at home, which poses unanticipated obstacles upon enrollment and, in some cases, may prevent them from persisting academically (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006).

Recently, social media or social network sites (SNS), the terms are often used interchangeably, seem to start playing a decisive role in helping international students with their college choice decisions. These sites create the ground for quick access to information and enhance communication among international students, local students, and representative of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) abroad, which determines the goal of this study to shed additional light on the use of SNS by the international students in their college choice decision process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). To reach this goal, we would like to learn about what information provided by SNS possibly channels international students' college choice. Learning about the role of SNS in the college choice decision from personal students' perspectives and experiences could assist professionals of HEI in choosing more influential SNS and in creating SNS content that could make international students college choice better informed and more accurate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To learn about international students' process of choosing universities in the United States, it is important to recognize that some of them, particularly undergraduate students, enroll as transfer students. Transfer students can be divided into two categories: horizontal—those transferring from one four-year institution to another—and vertical—those beginning their education at a two-year institution and then transferring credits to a four-year institution (Cuseo, 1998; Ishitani, 2008; McCormick & Carroll, 1997). According to research by Cohen and Brawer (2003) and Ishitani (2008), the majority of international undergraduate transfer students are horizontal transfers and, as such, often look like traditional students: They are usually under 24 years of age, enrolled full-time, unmarried, have no children, live on campus, and typically financially dependent on their parents. These resemblances to traditional students could lead to some similarities between international students' selection processes of HEIs in the US and those of domestic students. At the same time, international undergraduate transfers face challenges that are different from the challenges faced by domestic students. They are typically not eligible for the same financial aid options that are available to domestic students while education in the US for international students is more expensive (Lu, Mavondo, & Qiu, 2009). There are also cultural differences, dissimilarities in the

etiquettes of written languages and oral communication, issues related to transferability of academic credits and of a transfer process overall.

Several theoretical models can describe international students' college-choice process. The most widely used is the Push-Pull Model (PPM) (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The “push” factors include political, economic, and social motives that encourage students outflow from their country of origin (Chen, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992; Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007). Among them are political repressions, inadequate financial rewards associated with obtaining a higher level of education, an undeveloped or underdeveloped country's economy and low financial wealth, low per capita income, lack of educational opportunities, social inequalities, low quality of education, and a low priority placed on education by the country's government (Bodycott, 2009; Chen, 2008; Lee, 1996; Lee et al., 2006; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992). The most common push factor is a home country's lack of capacity for higher education. Indeed, the global demand for higher education is “projected to grow from 97 million students in 2000 to 263 million in 2025” (Ruby, 2005, p. 234), making access to higher education opportunities more restricted and uneven among individual countries and entire continents (Blight et al., 2000). These push factors, individually or combined, motivate students to leave their country and look for educational opportunities overseas.

The “pull” factors are forces that attract students to a specific country; they include higher quality of life, more lucrative economic rewards associated with obtaining education in this specific country, ease with which a visa can be obtained, and the overall awareness related to the host country in the student's country of origin (Altbach, 2004; Chen, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992).

Finally, when international students select a foreign country where they will be studying, “pull” factors, associated with a specific Higher Education Institution (HEI) come to play. These factors can be described by a Four “P” model: place, prestige, price, and promotion (Mazzarol, & Soutar, 2002). Place includes HEIs' physical and academic environments and conditions, perceived academic rigor, and faculty involvement (Chen, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2005). Prestige is an HEI ranking (Lee et al., 2006). Price covers monetary and social costs, such as “fees, living

expenses, travel costs, crime, safety, and racial discrimination” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 84). Promotion is “referrals or personal recommendations that the study destination received from parents, relatives, friends and other ‘gatekeepers”” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 85).

In this study, we focus on learning how international students from Russia used SNS to research four Ps—place, price, promotion, and prestige—as it relates to college choice decision. For over two decades Russia has been among the top 25 countries of origin for international students (IIE, 2018). Also, according to the Statistics Portal (2019), a statistic aggregator that provides statistics and data within 60 industries and 50+ countries, Russia is among countries with high SNS penetration rate. There are an estimated 73.1 million SNS users or approximately 51.9% of the entire population, and 68% of these users are between 18 to 29 years old. Russians are also third in the world by the number of hours each user spends on SNSs (comScore, 2013; The Statistics Portal, 2017). The most popular SNSs in Russia are VKontakte (“In Contact” or “In Touch”), Odnoklassniki (“Classmates”), YouTube, and Facebook (Редкая марка, 2012; The Statistics Portal, 2019). As for the SNS proliferation, there are approximately 2.789 billion users of various SNS in the world or 37% of the total world population (Statistics Portal, 2019); 64% of these users are between 16 and 25 years old. Among top SNS worldwide are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (Smart Insights, 2017; Noyes, 2018, Statistics Portal, 2019).

Research Questions

The study aims to answer the following questions: (1) what features of various SNS students named useful for their college choice activities and why they declared these features to be effective; (2) for what type of information students were searching SNS; and (3) how students were conducting searches on SNS.

METHODS

Qualitative Research

A qualitative research approach, individual interview, was selected for this study. Qualitative research is often defined as a quest for answering “how” and “why” questions (Merriam, 2009) and assists in gaining a better, deeper understanding of human behavior,

opinions, and experiences (Creswell, 2002). This was precisely the goal of this study—to gain a better and deeper understanding of different SNS features as they relate to students' college choice. The only way to obtain this information was by hearing students' voices and personal stories (Creswell, 2002). These detailed interviews helped develop an understanding of what SNS content and features students themselves considered effective for their college choice activities.

Study

This study is focused on a purposeful sampling of and interviews with freshmen, sophomores, and juniors from a Russian university, who were in the process of transferring to HEI abroad. The university was selected due to the personal connections established there with leadership of the Russian-American Academic Center. Russia is often identified as a relationship-based country (Gesteland, 2002); personal connections play a key role there in gaining access to students and doing research. The university is a system-wide school with its main campus in Moscow, nine branch campuses in the Moscow region, and 21 campuses throughout Russia (Dies Academicus, 2012). As a Fulbright specialist, one of the authors delivered a lecture course at the Moscow campus to undergraduate students of Art History, Management, Philology, and Psychology departments.

Researchers co-created a questionnaire that highlighted different steps that students, who are interested in transferring to an HEI abroad, typically take (see Appendix A). Second, we used the listserv with email addresses of freshmen, seniors, and juniors of mentioned above four departments and sent an e-mail with the questionnaire to all the students on these listservs: Art History (14 e-mails), Department of Management (62 e-mails), Philology (61 e-mails), and Psychology (64 e-mails), a total of 201 email addresses. Approximately 96 students (48%) replied within the first two days. Eight e-mail addresses were invalid, and these e-mails were automatically returned as undeliverable. After seven days, a second e-mail was sent to the remaining 97 people. Within the next two weeks, 43 more responses were received. The response rate was 72% or 139 answers.

Third, the answers were analyzed to find students who were in a process of transferring to an HEI abroad, i.e. were eligible for study participation. Among 139

respondents, 13 students were identified as being at different stages of transferring to the HEI abroad and, therefore, qualified for the study. Each of the qualified individuals received an individual invitation for an interview. Invitations included available timeframes for the interviews, interview location, and the Research Informed Consent Form.

All 13 students elected to participate in the interview. One student was interrupted by a phone call 15 minutes into her interview and had to leave. Twelve students completed their interviews; their demographics, majors, and self-reported transferring statuses are presented in Table 1. Each participant was assigned a code name for confidentiality protection, and one participant proposed a code name for himself. Based on the data obtained from the admission office, the sample demographically matched the students' population of the four departments from where it was collected; most of precisely matched students' demographics of the Department of Management. However, the sample wasn't reflective of the university's student population, where the ratio of male to female students is 44.2% to 55.8%. Data were obtained from the director of admissions.

Individual interviews conducted in English were the main source of data for this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The interview questionnaire was used as a guide (Appendix B) to make the interviews more uniformed yet conversational.

The data analysis procedure was informed by the work of Creswell (2002) and Patton (2002). Each interview was audio and video recorded to preserve the content as well as the nonverbal communication and undertones of each discussion; the transcription was completed immediately after each conversation. Transcribed files were sent to the participants for review. After summarizing the findings of each interview, files were e-mailed to participants again for "member-checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings" (Creswell, 2002, p. 196).

Table 1
Participants' Background Information

Name	Gender	Year of Study	Major	Reported Transferring Status
American	Male	Sophomore	Clinical Psychology	Researching colleges and majors in the US
Bride	Female	Sophomore	Philology	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Expert	Female	Sophomore	History of Art Museology	Researching countries and universities to transfer
Musician	Male	Junior	Public Administration	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Newlywed Husband	Male	Junior	Public Administration	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Newlywed Wife	Female	Junior	Public Administration	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Novice	Male	Freshman	Public Administration	Transferring, Fall of 2014
Optimist	Male	Junior	Marketing	Transferring, Fall of 2014 or Winter of 2015
Philosopher	Male	Freshman	History of Art	Researching countries and universities to transfer
Polyglot	Female	Sophomore	Human Resource Management	Researching colleges and majors in the US
Prodigy	Male	Freshman	Philology	Transferring in the Fall of 2015
Sponge Bob	Male	Sophomore	Public Administration	Transferring in the Fall of 2014

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

RESULTS

Type of information on SNSs used by students for their college choice: Four “P”s

Place. The most common reasons for respondents’ use of SNSs included the opportunity to learn about an unknown place. This helped to diminish the fear of being different while developing a sense of belonging. For instance, reporting on his use of Instagram for HEI search, Philosopher shared:

I loathe being out of place. Nothing is more humiliating than being treated as weird and strange alien. Instagram surreptitiously tells you what to do. You simply look

at pictures of people and, if you are attentive, you will see what [to] wear for different occasions, where they eat, what they eat. They wear sandals and shorts in winter. I am glad I saw this, [I] don't want them to think: "Oh, look at this Russian idiot in his fur coat!"

American was of a similar opinion: "If I saw pictures of certain places, if I knew people who posted [these pictures], I'm more comfortable with [my] choice of [HEI], because I am already familiar with these surroundings..." He emphasized that it was particularly beneficial for those who didn't have a chance to travel abroad and visit different campuses. Expert connected his excitement about studying abroad with the info she received through Instagram. "[I] see students go to a football game. See their faces, they chant, they have these same sweaters [sweatshirt]. I feel the energy. And I want it, too." Polyglot explained how daily blog of a biker who attended the University of California, Santa Barbara, helped her to see the entire campus and, finally, select this university as her HEI of choice: "I feel like I know this campus; I saw pictures of every corner of [this] university. And I am like... I belong there, stop searching." Sponge Bob selected his future apartment by reviewing pictures of apartments his friend sent through WhatsUp and VKontakte. Novice reported that he and his father were following the SNS pages of Seattle Central Community College and through these sites, Novice learned "how this college looks like, how students look like." Other respondents also admitted that pictures and videos provided by SNS made them excited and less apprehensive about their decision to leave Russia to continue their education and about colleges of their choice.

Respondents reported that visuals offered by SNSs assisted in choosing a HEI or in solidifying a choice of HEI. These videos, pictures, and description of a specific place provided emotional benefits by helping "to see" an unknown reality, to develop a sense of belonging, diminish apprehensions of moving abroad and solidify the choice of HEI.

Prestige. Discussions related to HEIs' prestige revealed that respondents used SNS' specific features for measuring HEI prestige and ranking. Among these criteria were the number of followers, the number of likes and the ratios of followers to following SNS of specific HEI's enjoyed.

One of the respondents, American, illustrated this by pointing out that Harvard's Facebook account had 3.3 million likes, while, for instance, Purdue University had 164,000

likes. The difference in likes, he emphasized, was particularly striking because the size of the student body at Harvard was smaller than that of Purdue and, as such, it was also indicative of HEI higher standing. Another respondent, Expert, explained that if a HEI's SNS account had substantially more followers than people they followed, it was a good indicator of this institution's recognition: "People follow it because they actually want this institution's news in their feed." She asserted that almost every student, at least subconsciously, looks at these numbers and ratios.

According to the respondents, another ultimate measure of the HEI's prestige was the ability of international graduates to find good jobs after graduation. Respondents described how they manipulated SNS to find this information. For instance, they searched LinkedIn for graduates of foreign origin with good jobs. One of the respondents, Newlywed, stated: "The more foreigners [with good jobs] from some university you see, the better. It means that people who went to this university find jobs, often in the US. It is a great way to evaluate where the opportunities for foreigners are better, I mean in what college." Respondents also watched different TED podcasts paying attention to the universities the TED speakers had attended. As American said, "These people are on TED! They must have attended good universities. I want to go to the same university."

Respondents measured the worthiness of different HEIs through traditional measures, such as opportunities after graduation, and searched SNSs for this type of information. The emerging evidence is that they applied SNS-specific criteria, such as the number of "likes" that HEI social network accounts enjoyed, the number of followers, and the ratio of followers to following to rank HEI and measure their prestige.

Price. Respondents reported searching university SNS for information about scholarships and financial aid. They made inquiries at different social media groups on Facebook, they also searched Facebook and Twitter using hashtags #scholarships, #scholarshipsusa, and #scholarshipsforforeigners; neither activities resulted in acquiring useful information. Respondents admitted having similarly dissatisfying experiences with the HEI websites.

However, respondents with connections abroad were able to receive some useful price-related advice from their contacts. For instance, Bride's fiancé advised her to defer her admission to Arizona State University (he was a Ph.D. student there) for one year,

because in a year she would qualify for in-state tuition, which was lower than if she would have started now. Novice received advice from family friends to start his education at the community college, as a more cost-efficient option. Sponge Bob, the only respondent with US citizenship, consulted with his stepfather in Portland, Oregon, friends and families in US, and admission officers from several colleges. Because of his ACT score (32), he was advised to apply for financial aid and various scholarships; he was awarded a substantial scholarship by Baruch College. This scholarship majorly influenced his decision to transfer there.

Respondents with no connections abroad reported relying solely on the information provided by SNS, including information about financial aid and scholarships. They also said that SNS helped them to learn about other financial opportunities. Newlyweds reported learning from the virtual SNS friends that having a job at the dormitories would allow them to live at the dormitory free of charge. Expert and Polyglot reported that friends from SNS told them that they would be able to find work on campus, which would offset their expenses. Protégé revealed that through searches on Facebook he met MIT and Princeton faculty members of Russian descent and they advised him to participate in international math and linguistics Olympiads because these competitions provided cash awards.

None of the respondents admitted that the cost of education and other expenses associated with studying abroad would preclude them from transferring, but talked at length of the financial sacrifices their families were prepared to make. Similar to traditional horizontal transfers, respondents reported relying on their families for financing their education. Neither SNS nor websites provided substantial information about scholarship and financial aid. Respondents with connections abroad obtained some advice about reducing the cost of education from families and friends, respondents with no connection abroad relied solely on advice received through SNS. None of the respondents reported “shopping around” for less expensive educational options; they also didn’t say that the cost of education will change their decision to continue their education abroad.

Promotion. Similar to previous responses, respondents with connections abroad received promotional advice from their contacts and followed these recommendations. American selected his major and a HEI based on his aunt’s recommendations. The Bride

followed recommendations of her American fiancé. Novice's choice was influenced by his parents' friends in Seattle. Musician picked a HEI in Florida, the area where friends of his family lived, but his choice of major was channeled by the advice he received on SNS. Newlywed Husband was advised by the host family where he lived during his study abroad while in high school and by the high school college counselor; his wife followed him. Optimist spent several summers as a camp counselor in Hungary. Opinions of his fellow-counselors and friends guided Optimist's decision-making process. Sponge Bob had lived in the US from the age of 4 to 14 and then again during his senior year in high school. He relied on the advice of the friends, family and on-campus visits. An active user of several SNS, he nonetheless felt that campus visits and personal contacts with advisors, faculty, admissions officers, and friends offer the best "promotion" for making a decision about what college to attend. In his opinion, social media sites are most useful after these steps are taken and work best as a complementary source of information.

Three respondents with no connection abroad viewed SNS as the only source of "promotional materials." According to their responses, activities on SNSs connected them with people who they would never have had an opportunity to meet, due to geographic distances and other factors. These SNS friends willingly shared their knowledge about HEI, and offered to continue helping when respondents would come on campus. For instance, Prodigy connected through Twitter and Facebook with Russian, American, and foreign students who studied at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia University, and Princeton University. Informal conversations with these students helped him to receive answers to questions related to topics such as these institutions academic standards, academic rigor, libraries, internships, research projects, and opportunities to do research as part of the curriculum. Based on the virtual conversation, he reported developing a stronger understanding of the academic environment suitable to his needs. Prodigy felt that recommendations he obtained from SNS community were less biased, less commercial, and, as a result, more trustworthy and accurate than information presented on HEI websites.

American and Polyglot commented that SNSs helped them to find good friends in the US who were even willing to host them when they would first arrive on campus and that also helped to solidify their decision what HEI to attend, because they "already had

friends there.” Expert and Philosopher, who had no connections abroad, were building their knowledge of the HEI abroad only by manipulating SNS. According to the Philosopher, the opinions of SNS communities made his choice of HEI more accurate and clear.

There are many posts and stories where people share their sagas of conquering the West: how they adjusted to food, how much money one needed to survive, what were the professors’ expectations, how accepting professors were of foreigners, how easy or hard it [was] to fit in. The official sites of universities will probably have no such posts, but SNS would engage in exactly this type of discussions because the messages are written by average people about their everyday lives... You read blogs, communicate with other students, and you are able to construct an opinion at what university students are most stressed, about the caliber of students and professors at different [universities], about the competition, about where you, as a human [being] belong.

Consistently, respondents found promotions provided through SNS conversations and posts to be more reliable and timely than the info they found on HEI websites.

Philosopher comment is the most reflective of these feelings:

Have you ever taken a scrupulous look at websites? Don’t you find them sterile? Beautiful places, beautiful faces, beautiful snowy smiles, vacated of any traces of reality. Reality is different I would much rather attend a university with which I’m familiar through people, even if I met them in the virtual world, and not through inanimate booklets and nicely edited website photographs. These people are real or can become real, the marketing materials are just a polished, fake life.

Respondents with connections abroad received promotional advice from their contacts and followed these recommendations. Respondents with no connections abroad relied solely on information from SNS; contacts they have met on SNS turned into real friends, whose advice they have trusted. Respondents also shared I mistrust to “official” sources of promotions, such as websites.

DISCUSSION

Prestige

Previous literature suggests that the selectivity of an HEI and its reputation, as perceived through various systems of ranking and rating, impact international students' choice of a specific HEI abroad (Clark, 2007; Lu et al., 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Morgan, 2010; Williams, 2008). However, this was not the case in this study. Only three study participants stated that they were aware of the *U.S. World and News Report* rating system, and only one—Prodigy—was interested in elite, higher-ranked universities. The interviews with other participants revealed no knowledge of or interest in the traditional institutional rankings and ratings provided by the *U.S. World and News Report*. However, they were not completely oblivious to the fact that HEIs had different levels of status and prestige—but instead of following the traditional system, respondents reported developing their own systems of rating and ranking that were heavily influenced by and reflective of the ratings and rankings criteria specific to different SNSs. Respondents searched for and took notes of the numbers of “likes,” numbers of “followers,” and the ratios of “followers” to “following” the various SNSs of HEIs demonstrated.

This is interesting evidence and it could be researched further. When international students' use of SNS rating and ranking is better understood, it could be employed by HEI practitioners to increase HEIs' visibility and attractiveness overall and to target students from Russia in particular.

Price

The price international students pay for studying at an HEI abroad and its influence on international students' college choice has been discussed over the years by many researchers (Kamal Basha, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2016; Lei & Chuang, 2010; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Sia, 2010; Singh, 2016). The respondents of this study also reported searching for information related to financing their education and the cost of living abroad. The study determined that, while various SNSs provided a plethora of information about the cost of education, cost of living, and other expenses, respondents were unable to obtain additional knowledge about scholarships and financial aid. Some of the respondents reported researching HEIs' websites and being disappointed to learn that the emphasis was on self-funding.

However, it is interesting to note that none of the respondents shared that the cost would preclude him/her from transferring to a HEI abroad. Also, there was no direct evidence that they were “shopping” for a HEI with a lower tuition cost or searching SNSs for these data. Perhaps they were unaware that different HEIs may have different tuition rates. Or, perhaps they were from more affluent families, as several participants mentioned the financial support they planned to receive from their families. However, there were several participants who brought up the brunt of financial sacrifices their families were willing to make for them. It seems like future research about variations in the financial backgrounds of families could be useful for understanding international students’ decision-making processes as they relate to transferring to HEI abroad. It could also be coupled with learning more about international transfer students’ attitudes toward the cost of education abroad.

Participants of this study reported looking for career-related information. An employment prospect after graduation—value for money—is often among factors that have been known to shape international students’ choice of what institution to attend while studying overseas (Bodycott, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010). The literature shows that “Approximately 90% of immigrant visa beneficiaries for employment purposes already live in the U.S., and most are international students on Optional Practical Training (OPT) or H01B visas” (Banjong & Olson, 2016, p. 8). In their search for career-related information, study participants seemed to rely exclusively on SNSs because they considered the opinions of SNS members more “real” and objective opposite to data presented on the HEI websites. This reflected their skepticism to everything “official,” that is, information generated through more structured or government-sponsored channels, which seems to be a rather typical attitude of people from countries plagued by state corruption. Three participants created an elaborate system for extracting information from SNSs, which, they believe, helped them to obtain a more objective picture of the employment opportunities for international graduates of different HEIs.

Promotion

The emerging findings of this study confirm earlier findings (IIE, 2004; Mathew, 2016; Murphy, 1981) that highlighted the influence of parents and friends on international

students' decision-making process to study abroad and select a HEI. One of the respondents, Novice, had his parents make all of the decisions for him. Prodigy's father played a collaborative and guiding role for his son. American's aunt influenced his choice of a major and a HEI. The parents of Musician indirectly guided his decision-making behavior, the Bride's fiancés played something similar to a "paternal" role guiding his fiancé decisions, as did the Hungarian friends of the Optimist. One of the respondents—Newlywed—had his host family (from his time as a foreign exchange student in the US) assist in his decision-making process.

Five participants had no personal connections abroad. In the pre-SNS era, their exposure to international HEIs would be limited to college fairs and contacts they would be able to establish through this channel. For students like Philosopher, the situation would be exacerbated by the challenges presented by the face-to-face interactions. The availability of SNSs offered more channels of information for them, allowed to develop relationships with virtual friends and receive "promotional" advice and information from them without ever leaving their comfort zone. These virtual friends, like real-life friends, answered various questions, described HEI policies, helped in making additional connections, provided referrals, and, overall, made conversations personal and responsive to a prospective student's specific needs.

On the one hand, this finding is congruent with previous research that described the important "promotional" role family and friends play in international students' college choice decision-making process. On the other hand, it assists in discovering a new population of international students who would not even consider attending an HEI abroad, if not for the connections they were able to make with the help of SNSs. This population has not and would not be discovered, if not for insights shared by the respondents during the interview.

There seems to be a dearth of research related to the role virtual friends (i.e., friends who met exclusively through SNSs) play in international students' college choice decisions, particularly among students with no direct connections abroad.

Place

Many studies assert that social networking exposes students to different social norms, allowing them to obtain useful information, foster relationships with other, and

develop multiple connections before arriving on campus (Chen, 2013; Hampton, 2016; Kisang, 2010; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). Several studies have focused on the use of Facebook by international students to build social networks before arriving on the international campus (Johnston et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2013; Li & Chen, 2014).

One emerging finding of this study relates to how the use of all types of SNSs allows students to develop social ties even before arriving on the international campus. Through SNSs, respondents communicated with representatives of different campuses while they were still living in Russia. They asked questions about campus culture, interpersonal relationships, fashion, food, and even attitudes toward international students; they made these inquiries as often as they desired and without encountering any cost. All of the respondents revealed that they were able to establish some form of social networking and build some social capital before arriving on campus abroad.

This information represents an important step in addressing limitations that afflict international students abroad, which, according to previous research, can lead to feelings of isolation and depression, thereby diminishing students' educational experiences and developmental opportunities (Huntley, 1993; Terzian & Osborne, 2011; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). Based on the responses of students, early interactions through SNSs seemed to reduce anxiety, create a sense of belonging and familiarity with the environment of a foreign campus, prior to arriving on campus.

In their study of Chinese students, Li and Chen (2014) found that "the use of both the host country and home country SNSs, especially the host country SNS, is strongly related to bridging social capital but not related to bonding social capital in the US" (p. 121), due to those values that can only be obtained through face-to-face interactions. It would be interesting to conduct another study in order to learn about "bonding social capital" and Russian-speaking students' behavioral adaptation after arriving on international HEI campuses. In addition, the rapid advancements in SNSs may offer yet other new forms of communications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this research could be of practical use to HEI professionals. First, practitioners could create and maintain institutional alumni groups on LinkedIn. The

information furnished by these group members can answer some of the “employment after graduation” questions and student inquiries related to “value for money.” Second, practitioners who work in community colleges or in more cost-effective HEI can use SNSs to highlight cost advantages offered by their HEIs. Third, universities can employ international students to generate consistent and meaningful content on different SNS. The SNS content these individuals generate could be instrumental in making international students’ college choice best tailored to their needs and personalities. Besides, this content can help international students in gaining social capital, which could positively affect international students’ ability to persist.

As SNSs continue gaining popularity, it also could be helpful to update college application materials to include SNSs as one of the referral choices; it would allow enrollment professional to strategize their recruitment efforts. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, meaningful conversations on various SNS platforms with trustworthy individuals to whom international students can relate could bring on campus large population of international students, for whom SNS is the only source of information about HEI abroad. Finally, although the study is limited in its generalizability, its rich content opens opportunity for future research.

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Online Connections

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Appendix A

Questionnaire for Purposeful Sampling of Students Who are at Different Stages of Transferring to Higher Education Institution Abroad

I am interested in participating in this study (mark if you are).

Participant Questionnaire

NAME _____

Cell phone _____

E-mail _____

Year of Study _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3

1. I recently have taken a TOEFL test (mark one): Yes No

My score is _____

2. I am scheduled to take a TOEFL test (mark one) Yes No

Date and Place _____

3. I recently attended an information session with the representatives from any of the organizations below (mark appropriate)
 - American Councils
 - International Education Fair in Radisson Slavyanskaja
 - ICEF Information session
 - UGRAD Program
 - Information sessions offered by representatives of a Foreign University/s (please provide name/s of these university/s _____)
 - Other (please specify in the space provided _____)
4. I participated in the English Language program abroad Yes No
Name of the institution _____
5. I participated in the FLAS program Yes No
(if answered “yes”, please answer the next question)
6. I participated in FLAS program and have taken an SAT/ACT while there. Yes No
SAT/ACT Score _____
7. Have you already applied to a higher education institution abroad? Yes No
8. Are you in a process of deciding what higher education institution abroad to apply?
Yes No
9. What tool(s) you were using to search for higher education abroad? (You can mark more than one tool from a list below).
 - Attended information sessions offered by different colleges
 - Attended other information sessions (please specify)
 - Searched Internet for information about different colleges
 - Searched social network sites for information about different colleges
 - Talked to faculty who worked at different colleges abroad
 - Talked to friends, acquaintances, family members...
 - Other _____

Appendix B

Guiding Questions for the Interview

1. A brief explanation of the study
2. Tell me about yourself
3. Tell me more about your plans to transfer
4. What made you decide to transfer to a university outside of Russia?
5. Where you are now in your transferring process?
6. What factors are you considering as you decide what university to attend?
7. How are you collecting information about universities abroad?
8. Can you tell me what sources of information you used?
Depending on the answer, I will probe more and ask: “Have you used any other sources of information? Why?”
9. In your answers, you have mentioned using Social Network Sites (*I expect respondents will mention it because this is purposeful sampling and students are invited to participate based on the survey’s results*). Can you explain why you are using them?
10. Can you tell me more about the different features of SNS?

11. How were these features helping your search?
12. What do you think of different SNS? What you like or dislike about them? Why?
13. Can you describe college-related information you were finding on SNS?
14. Can you tell me more about college-related information you were found in other sources?
15. What do you like and dislike about all these sources of information?
16. When do you think about all of the information you have received or sought out what has been the most influential in your decision –making?
17. Can you explain “Why”?
18. If someone asks you what source or sources of information he or she should use to find about colleges, what would you recommend?
19. Can you tell me why?