

Russian Students' Use of Social Network Sites for Selecting Universities Abroad: Case Study at the Russian State University for the Humanities

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores how undergraduate students from the Russian State University for Humanities used social network sites (SNSs) for their decision to transfer to higher education institutions (HEIs) abroad. Participants reported using specific SNS features, such as likes and shares, for measuring HEI rating and indicated that ability to use native language was among motivating factors for membership in a specific SNS. The reported benefits of SNSs included instantaneous connections with likeminded individuals, realistic visualization of campuses, and unbiased and multidimensional views presented by SNS members. One of the emerging findings was that participants with no connections abroad relied exclusively on SNSs for their college choice. Participants with connections abroad relied on the advice of their international contacts, and SNSs played a complementary role. HEI professionals may consider hiring and training international students to maintain consistent and meaningful content on different SNS platforms, particularly in their countries' specific SNSs.

Keywords: international students, Russia, social media, social networks

INTRODUCTION

According to an Open Doors report (Institute of International Education, 2020), the number of international students on U.S. campuses in the academic year 2018–2019 has reached 1,095,299, or 5.35% of the total student population. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) developed a push–pull model to describe motivational factors for foreign students to study overseas. The push factors are forces within a student’s country of origin that motivate that student to study abroad; the pull factors are forces that attract students to a specific country or particular higher education institution (HEI) abroad (Altbach, 2004; Chen, 2008; Falcone, 2017; E. S. Lee, 1966; M. Li & Bray, 2007; Mathew, 2016). Although HEI professionals have limited influence over push factors, a variety of pull-factor strategies can be used to inform international students about the various educational opportunities available to them, with one of the newer strategies being the use of social media.

The aim of this case study was to explore further the social network site (SNS) behavior of international students as it relates to college choice. Specifically, we wanted to determine which social media sites, if any, that students from the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) used to help them decide to transfer to HEIs abroad, as well as social media sites these students used to choose college activities. We also wanted to determine why the students elected to use these particular social media sites and how these sites helped with the students’ college selection. The study employed in-depth interviews. These detailed accounts of students’ personal experiences with social media should prove helpful to HEI enrollment professionals reaching out to international students and developing strategies to help them make better informed college choices. Efforts to develop a better understanding of the SNS behavior of international students can help in strategizing educational marketing, maximizing the value of SNSs as a recruitment tool, and ensuring that students make more informed choices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before we can begin to understand how international students use social media for their college choice decision, we first must define what social media is. There is an abundance of definitions provided by various dictionaries, as well as an abundance of opinions presented by members and creators of social groups. Although this public discourse could serve as the basis for a separate study, for the purposes of this work we adhered to the definition of social network sites created by Boyd and Ellison (2007):

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-private profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

The definition seems to be the most all-encompassing, as it addresses the debate about whether or not social networking represents one aspect of social media or whether social media represents one aspect of social networking (Cavazza, 2008;

Falls, 2008). It also implies the use of visible profiles and reveals a public display of connections, the potential for interactions, and the capacity to target specific ethnic, professional, political, age-related, linguistic, or other identity-driven groups (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

According to various sources, there are approximately 2.789 billion users of various SNSs in the world, representing 37% of the total world population. This number is changing constantly, which is a reflection of the dynamic nature of SNSs. Among the top SNSs are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (Smart Insights, 2017). Facebook has approximately 2.13 billion monthly active worldwide users, 50% of whom log on to Facebook daily, devoting 900 billion minutes per month to interacting with pages, groups, and events. Over 64% of active Facebook users across the world are between 16 and 25 years old (Noyes, 2019). YouTube—a SNS for watching and sharing original videos—exceeds 1 billion users and 4 billion views per day, and Instagram and Twitter have approximately 1 billion users each (Smart Insights, 2017).

Barnes and Mattson (2010) described two comprehensive nationwide studies that sought to analyze how college admission officers used SNSs in their recruitment of undergraduate domestic and international students. The 2007 study revealed that HEIs were surpassing Fortune 500 and Inc. 500 companies in “their use of social media to communicate with their customers (i.e., students)” (Barnes & Mattson, 2010, p. 2). The 2008 study confirmed this finding, as 85% of survey respondents admitted to using at least one form of social media.

In 2009, there was an attempt to measure the return on investment of using SNSs for college recruitment. The study by Darrup-Boychuck (2009) demonstrated that it costs approximately \$200 to recruit one in-state student using traditional forms of marketing, \$500 to recruit one out-of-state student, and \$1,000 to recruit one international student. Meanwhile, the cost of such online promotions as pay-per-click, mobile marketing, and boosting was found to be \$119.50 per any enrolled student, regardless of the student’s county of origin. The cost of recruiting via SNSs, such as Facebook or Twitter, without boosting via ads, is nothing.

In the last several years, due to the strong proliferation of SNSs and the “wired generation” being among major targets of recruitment efforts, research related to the use of SNSs for college recruitment, including that of international students, has increased. Studies have examined the use of social media for HEI branding and its impact on student recruitment (Chang et al., 2015; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Rutter et al., 2016). For example, in the study by Rutter et al. (2016) of 60 HEIs in the United Kingdom, it was found that HEIs with stronger SNS interactions (Twitter and Facebook) had higher levels of student demand, suggesting that deliberate social media efforts compounded over several years could lead to the recruitment of higher quality students. A comprehensive quantitative study of the entire population of Canadian universities also researched the use of Twitter and Facebook and identified these platforms as being strong information-generating tools for students (Bélanger et al., 2014). Another study of social media marketing and its implications for higher education examined the use of a social media framework for student recruitment that includes electronic word-of-mouth promotion, social media campaigns, and Facebook marketing. The research by Beech (2015) at three UK universities

identified the positive impact of SNS interactions among enrolled students and potential international students on the international students' decisions to study overseas.

Other studies, however, have revealed that, although international students use some SNSs for their college search activities, they prefer traditional sources of information, such as family, friends, and HEI websites, with SNSs playing a complementary role (Vrontis et al., 2018; West, 2016; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014). Similarly, a National Association of College Admission Counseling report (Clinedinst & Koranteng, 2017) did not find SNSs to be among the top recruitment strategies for domestic or international students.

METHOD

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study. A qualitative approach is often defined as a quest for answering “how” and “why” questions in order to understand how people experience and interpret the world (Merriam, 2009). Such an approach assists in gaining a better, deeper understanding of human behavior, opinions, and experiences (Creswell, 2002)—all areas of human life that are difficult to quantify (Roshan & Deeptee, 2009). This study was designed to find out from international students how they searched for information about HEIs abroad, whether or not their searches include the use of SNSs, and why they did or did not utilize SNSs. We wanted to determine why students preferred certain SNSs and found some SNSs to be more useful for their college-choice searches than others. The most effective way to obtain this information was to listen to students' personal stories and ask follow-up questions to further probe and establish connections among topics (Queiros et al., 2017). The input of these students was expected to help create a comprehensive picture of their SNS experiences, behavior, and approaches, in addition to providing some direction for future research.

The study took place in Moscow, Russia. For over two decades, Russia has been among the 25 top countries sending students to study in the United States. Russia is also among the top countries experiencing a high SNS penetration rate. There are an estimated 70 million SNS users in Russia, or approximately 49.8% of the entire population and 68% of these users are between 18 and 29 years of age. Russians are ranked third in the world and first in Europe for the number of hours each user spends on SNSs (Clement, 2020; Melkadze, 2020)

Participant Selection

This study is focused on a purposeful sampling of and interviews with freshmen, sophomores, and juniors from RSUH who were at different stages of transferring to HEIs abroad to continue their higher education. Focusing on transfer students as a target for sampling served a twofold purpose. First, international transfers often look like traditional students, in that they are usually under 24 years of age, enrolled full-time, and not married; they have no children; and they are financially dependent on their parents (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Ishitani, 2008). This resemblance to traditional students was expected to give rise to similarities in the HEI selection process,

including the use of SNSs, between international students and domestic students. At the same time, international undergraduate transfers face multiple unique challenges. They typically are not eligible for many of the financial aid options that are available to domestic students, and receiving an education is more expensive for them because of high out-of-state tuition costs, the added cost of international airfare, and other nontuition-related expenses. Additionally, cultural differences can result in their misinterpreting college-related information, and difficulty dealing with a perhaps unfamiliar written language can hinder communication with HEI admission officials (E. J. Lee, 2016; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). These and other factors impact the choice of HEIs by international transfer students, but the use of SNSs can help overcome some of these concerns.

Finally, students from RSUH were selected due to personal connections established there with the Deputy Director of the Russian-American Academic Center, Dr. Marina Kaul. Russia is often identified as a relationship-based country (Gesteland, 2002); indeed, personal connections play a key role there in gaining access to students and doing research. The main campus of RSUH is in Moscow; it also has nine branch campuses in the Moscow region and 21 campuses throughout Russia (Russian State University for the Humanities, 2012). As a Fulbright specialist at RSUH, Dr. Rekhter delivered a lecture course at the main Moscow campus to undergraduate students of the Art History, Management, Philology, and Psychology departments, which establish the relationship with Dr. Kaul.

To obtain a sample of students who were at different stages of transferring to HEIs abroad, we created a questionnaire that highlighted steps typically taken by students who are interested in transferring to HEIs abroad. The questionnaire also included a question related to students' information-gathering behavior (Appendix A). This questionnaire was emailed to a total of 201 students in the departments of art history ($n = 14$), management ($n = 62$), philology ($n = 61$), and psychology ($n = 64$). Students were asked to return their answers electronically at their earliest convenience. Approximately 48% of the students responded ($n = 96$) within the first 2 days. Eight email addresses were invalid, and the emails were automatically returned as undeliverable. After 7 days, a second email was sent to the remaining 97 students who had not responded. Within the next 2 weeks, 43 more responses were received. Overall, the response rate was 72% (139 respondents).

Among the 139 students who responded, 13 were selected for an interview because they answered positively at least one of the first seven questions in the questionnaire. This indicated that these students were at some stage of transferring to HEIs abroad and thus met the purposeful sampling requirement of talking only to students who were in the process of transferring to HEIs abroad. Student use of SNSs was not taken into consideration when selecting students for the study—only their intent to transfer to HEIs abroad and their actions related to doing so. Each qualified individual received an invitation for an interview. Invitations included available time frames for the interviews, information about the interview location, and a 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. After several attempts to reschedule, this student ultimately withdrew from the study.

Another student took over 11 weeks to schedule his interview and was interviewed approximately 2 months later than the entire group. Among 12 students who completed an interview, eight reported transferring to different HEI abroad and four reported researching colleges and majors in the HEI abroad for the purpose of transferring. There were four female and eight male students—three freshmen, five sophomores and four juniors—representing four departments: management ($n = 7$), art history ($n = 2$), philology ($n = 2$), and psychology ($n = 1$).

Individual interviews conducted in English were the main source of data for this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The decision to conduct interviews in English was related to the fact that transferring to a HEI abroad requires a certain level of English language proficiency or at least efforts to reach this level. Students who were not able to participate in the interview in English were too early in their transfer abroad processes for their answers to be considered valuable sources of information. Some interview participants said their English was weak, but despite this self-evaluation they were able to carry on an intelligent and informative conversation.

We conducted all interviews and used the interview questions as a guide for a semistructured interview (Appendix B), which offered some uniform structure but also an opportunity for a more conversational approach to probing participants for additional details. All interviews, with the exception a student who took 2 months to schedule an interview, were conducted face-to-face. The last interview was conducted via Skype. One of the authors conducted all the interviews. Each participant was assigned a code name to protect his/her confidentiality, but some participants proposed code names for themselves. The data analysis procedure was informed by the work of Creswell (2002) and Patton (2002). Each interview was audio- and videorecorded to capture the content and the nonverbal communication and undertones of each discussion. Transcription of the recordings was completed immediately after each conversation.

Sample Limitations

A limitation of this qualitative study is that the data were collected from a small sample size of 12 participants, which limits data validity, reliability, and the ability to generalize findings or apply them to larger populations. Validity was ensured using the technique known as saturation, “in which the interviewer begins to hear the same information he/she has already obtained from previous interviewees” (Alsaawi, 2014, p. 152). Data analysis revealed that certain themes, comments, and reflections were repeated by participants, either all of them or groups of several, until the information “saturated” into recurrent themes that formed the “results” of this inquiry. We also relied upon respondent validation. Immediately after the file transcriptions were completed, the files were sent to the respondents for their review and feedback on how well the researchers captured their responses. After analyzing and summarizing the findings of each interview, the respondents were emailed again with the aim of “member-checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings” (Creswell, 2002, p. 196).

This process of checking, comparison, and rechecking helped to identify and address inconsistencies and possible research biases. Additionally, a negative case

analysis was conducted as yet another tool to verify the validity and trustworthiness of the study (Padgett, 1998). After the analyses were completed and common themes and ideas emerged, we reexamined each interview to confirm that the emerging themes were actually applicable to all 12 interviews or groups and that no disconfirming evidence was missed. Finally, although we collected data from students from a single university, the range of students from which the sample was selected included students from four departments who fairly accurately reflected the undergraduate population at RSUH (Seidman, 2013).

RESULTS

To Use or Not To Use?

An unexpected result of the interviews was that, based on their reported usage of SNSs for choosing a college abroad, the respondents could be divided into three groups: (a) did not use SNSs, (b) relied exclusively on SNSs, and (c) relied on both SNSs and other sources. All respondents who reported not using SNSs for their college choice activities had local sources of information they trusted—a fiancé from the United States or local friends or relatives—or they had the opportunity for college visits. The interviews with these students revealed that those who had friends, relatives, or other sources of guidance abroad were less likely to use SNSs for their college choice activities.

Respondents who reported relying solely on SNSs for their college choice activities had no connections abroad and had never traveled to foreign HEI campuses. These respondents also demonstrated the highest level of dissatisfaction with traditional sources of information. Among the reasons for their dissatisfaction were the perceived aggressive nature of conventional sources of information and the one-sided presentations of HEIs. As described by the respondent known as Philosopher:

The [HEI] websites ... all these smiles, testimonials, pictures, virtual trips, YouTube videos ... They are inexcusably too much. Too much pressure and too much artificial cheerfulness ... [The promotional materials on the websites] are overwhelming and ridiculously obtrusive.

This respondent had a similar perception of international college fairs:

This was a circus-like, very frustrating experience. The glossy brochures and these cheap, glitzy trinkets. The representatives seem to care solely about obtaining [visitors'] e-mails. They would hunt [people] into their nets later. It's all fake; not for me.

This respondent also emphasized that the use of traditional sources of information, such as websites, required prior knowledge of the institution. Philosopher's explanation was the clearest:

I trust you realize how universities and universities' websites are discovered. If I have not heard of Indiana University, I would not search for it. I can't search for something that doesn't exist in my head. It is like ... students from

Indiana would never look for a university in, um ... Tula, because they probably don't know of this Tula place or of universities in Tula. They [websites] are passive and, as such, more or less useless. And I am dubious they are regularly updated. I see no indication of expeditious nature and diligence in updates.

For respondents with no relatives or friend abroad or who lacked opportunities to visit U.S. campuses, SNSs became the only sources of reliable, truthful, and useful information (according to the respondents). All of them emphasized that without SNSs they would never be able to study abroad, or even consider the possibility of doing so. As Polyglot said: "No decisions can be made without information and SNSs are like windows into the unknown ... VKontakte or Facebook, they let us talk to different people and learn from them."

The third group of respondents seemed to combine the use of SNSs with a variety of other sources. American had an aunt who worked at Stanford, and he relied upon her advice as his primary guidance; however, he also used SNS groups to connect with students at several universities to learn more about campuses, academic expectations, and social life. Musician combined information from SNSs with information found on HEI websites and visits to the United States. Newlywed Husband and Newlywed Wife used SNSs to complement college visits they had made, and they relied on the advice of American friends that one of them met while participating in the Foreign Language and Area Studies Program in the United States. Prodigy and his family visited colleges in the United States, and he also utilized the advice of faculty members he found through SNSs. Sponge Bob had spent 11 years in the United States, from the ages of 4 to 15. After returning to Moscow, he visited the United States several times and conducted college visits; knowledge that he obtained through conversations with college advisers, relatives, and local students was complemented by information available on institutional SNSs.

Some respondents described themselves as passive users of SNSs, in that they read what other users posted but did not ask questions or offer comments. Others described themselves as active users; in addition to reading other people's posts, they actively asked questions, participated in discussions, and shared personal opinions (Table 1). Based on the respondents' responses, active use of various SNSs was linked to a respondent's perceived proficiency in English. Perceived inadequacies in English proficiency seemed to prevent some respondents from actively seeking information on non-Russian-language SNSs. For example, in explaining her use of social media, Expert stated: "I would read other people[']s posts, but would not ask questions. My English isn't good enough. I don't want to look stupid or miss [something]." Bride shared this feeling: "I need to improve my English to feel ... good. If I post on my VKontakte wall, it is natural, because it's in Russian." All participants expressed awareness that the active use of SNSs offered the opportunity to acquire more information. At the same time, they also observed that the passive use of SNSs was ideal for introverts and for people who were uncomfortable initiating conversations. According to the respondents, without SNSs these types of individuals would never be able to obtain enough information to even consider transferring abroad.

Table 1: Students' Self-Reported Use of Social Network Sites for Choosing a College

Social network site	Active users	Passive users	Total
Vkontakte	7	5	12
Facebook	5	6	11
Instagram	8	0	8
Twitter	3	3	6
Blogs	1	5	6
YouTube	0	4	4
LinkedIn	0	3	3
Google+	0	3	3
Askbook.me	2	0	2
DeviantArt	0	2	2
Quora	1	0	1
TED	0	1	1
Tuinti.com	1	0	1
Vimeo.com	0	1	1

Note. Active = Social network site is used to actively post questions, comments, links, and other materials; Passive = social network site is used to read other people's questions, comments, links, and other materials. Respondents could select more than one SNS.

Which SNSs Did Students Use for Their College Choice Activities?

Vkontakte

The most popular SNSs among respondents were VKontakte, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and blogs (Table 1). All respondents attributed the popularity of VKontakte to three factors: ease of use, participation by members of the Russian community, and content that reflects the needs of the Russian population. As Expert stated: "VKontakte all posts [are] in Russian, only people who live in Russia or know Russian can post there. It's about what's close to me, in my home." Optimist highlighted the convenience of conversing in Russian:

I stay in line in *столовая* [cafeteria] and I hear a buzz ... Someone [made] a comment, post, something ... I read or comment right away. Because it's in Russian, I don't have to think or anything. English, it's, you know, it [is] like work for me. I have to think ... Grammar, spelling, how to say this, how to say that. I have to think. VKontakte. I just type, no extra thinking, easy.

Although some respondents were complimentary of VKontakte, others found VKontakte constricting. Prodigy stated: "VKontakte is ... you know how they say ... in Russian for Russians by Russians. For some people, it is great, for me, it's not so great. I mean, the site offers only one view." Novice offered a similar opinion and noted that his family friends in Seattle recommended avoiding information obtained from VKontakte because of its biases. Philosopher emphasized that, although all

Russian students used VK for social interactions, “to learn more about higher education abroad, one has [to] go above and beyond this media. VKontakte is language constricted and, as such, of course, is limited to the Russian users exclusively; obviously, its contributions are skewed.”

Facebook

Facebook was almost as popular as VKontakte because of the versatile and multidimensional input from users of many countries. Polyglot reported conversing on Facebook with like-minded students from different countries and receiving valuable advice from them, and she stated: “Many of them were like me, foreigners. They really knew what I would need, as a foreign student.” Musician shared a similar experience: “There were more people on Facebook who knew things, had experience, knew colleges and stuff from all over the world.” American also emphasized that Facebook has a more heterogeneous population:

VKontakte is for us [Russians]. Facebook brings everyone in. I am in Russia, you [are] in US, another man [is] in Australia, we speak English; we are friends here. Even Russians who live outside [of] Russia, they bring different flavor, if you wish, to a conversation. They [are] more worldly.

Prodigy also emphasized that the multinational population of Facebook encourages participants to use English as a common language and promotes the mastery of English, whereas the use of VKontakte prevents people from mastering English because they can write exclusively in Russian. Some respondents admitted that they avoided active use of Facebook because they were uncomfortable writing in English, even though they realized that this behavior constricted their access to information.

Instagram

Eight respondents reported using Instagram for their college search. They all agreed that Instagram offered an unprecedented visualization of places and events on university campuses that helped dissipate their fears and discomfort associated with the unknown. Instagram was also easier to use. As Optimist said: “Instagram is a very popular and easy media. All you do is upload pictures and videos.” Another reason for the popularity of Instagram was the limited need to write in English and the very simplistic nature of searches that usually resulted in satisfactory results. The most active college-related searching was carried out through the use of hashtags. Expert explained: “Use hashtag with the name of the university you want and you will see thousands of images of everything. Easy.” Nonetheless, respondents found Instagram’s focus on pictures limiting. Polyglot stated: “You can’t post links [on Instagram]. Very short descriptions or no description, lots of commercial marketing ... I mean, it’s great, but it’s, sorry, stupid.”

Twitter, Blogs, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Others

Eight respondents—American, Expert, Newlywed Husband, Newlywed Wife, Polyglot, Philosopher, Prodigy, and Sponge Bob—read blogs as part of their college search activities and praised them for being educational, detailed, visual, and entertaining. American summarized the common opinions:

You can always find a blog written in Russian or in a language you know. [There are] blogs about everything: travel blogs, car blogs, politics, music, education ... They may be biased, but they give you [info] from an average [person's] viewpoint. Many bloggers [are] true experts. Day by day they write about what they have passion [for]. [They are] passionate and knowledgeable.

The same group of respondents, excluding Philosopher, had Twitter accounts. Twitter was praised as a quick way to stay connected to world news, to access links to full-length articles, to follow life events from multiple perspectives, and to utilize hashtags for quick search options. However, respondents found the original 140-character limit to be restrictive, and they did not like having to go to different sites, such as <http://t.co>, to shorten weblinks to a length of 23 characters, for example. (In 2017, the Twitter character limit was increased to 200 characters.)

Only Newlywed Husband and Newlywed Wife were members and users of LinkedIn. They praised it for providing unique information about employment opportunities after graduation—a very important feature they could not find at other SNSs. Several respondents acknowledged the large volume of video resources available on YouTube. Sponge Bob commented that “everything you want is on YouTube ... lectures, presentations, everything, in any language you want.”

DISCUSSION

Participants with no connections abroad relied exclusively on SNSs for their college choice decisions, and studying abroad would be inconceivable for them without the presence of SNSs. Participants with connections abroad primarily relied on the advice of their international contacts, but SNSs played a supportive role. Traditional sources of information, such as college fairs and promotional materials, were perceived as being too aggressive and one sided, but SNSs were viewed as being more objective and multidimensional.

Ironically, VKontakte was praised and criticized for the same features—all conversations are in Russian, and the users are predominantly from the Russian-speaking population. On one hand, it makes VKontakte easier for Russian speakers to navigate and relate. On the other hand, VKontakte offers a more homogeneous and narrow array of opinions and suggestions. Facebook was praised for the heterogeneous demographic composition of its users, which provides access to a greater variety of opinions and information from people from different parts of the world. At the same time, the necessity to write in English, even though there are Russian language groups and users, made respondents perceive Facebook as more challenging to use and, as such, less popular.

Instagram's popularity was rooted in its simplistic nature, its ability to visualize the unknown, and the opportunities to post in Russian or avoid writing altogether. At the same time, Instagram's focus on pictures and the inability to post and share links were viewed as limitations. Twitter, blogs, LinkedIn, YouTube, and other less popular SNSs were praised for having the same features as the more popular SNSs: ease of use, visualization of content, variety of opinions, and timeliness. Their limited popularity was attributed to the fact that they served more specialized and smaller audiences and that some of their features were more difficult to navigate.

According to the respondents, the Russian language seemed to be the major determining factor for using specific SNSs, because communicating in Russian was easier and more convenient for active SNS use, such as asking questions and participating in discussions. Additionally, respondents seemed to prefer SNSs populated by people from Russia, which not only made it easier for them to communicate and exchange information but also provided common ground for analyzing and understanding the content. Other perceived positive characteristics of SNSs included ease of navigation and ability to visualize content (Instagram, YouTube), presentation of a broad spectrum of opinions (Facebook, blogs, Twitter), quick reply time (VKontakte, Facebook, Twitter), and the vast variety of informational resources available on all of the SNSs.

When speaking about SNS limitations, respondents were cognizant of the fact that strictly Russian language SNSs, such as VK, have a more homogeneous membership and, as such, provide somewhat limited content. Participants preferred utilizing SNSs with a more global membership, such as Facebook or Twitter, because such SNSs could assist them in obtaining more multidimensional information. Another feature of some SNSs that was perceived as negative was their significant reliance on writing, such as blogs or Quora; using such sites was viewed as being too demanding and time consuming. Respondents discussed SNSs that aim their content at specific population groups based on people's interests (e.g., DeviantArt) or age (e.g., AskBook); they thought this approach was limiting and diminished the potential popularity and membership of such SNSs.

The SNS usage reported by RSUH students in this study is similar to the 2013 findings by the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research ([ECAR]; Dahlstrom et al., 2013) and the 2014 and 2017 National Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology (Brooks & Pomerantz, 2017; Dahlstrom & Bichsell, 2014). Among the sites referenced by the ECAR were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. These findings were also similar to those of Saw et al. (2013), who reported that Facebook and Twitter were the most popular SNSs among international students, followed by YouTube, LinkedIn, and Google+, a prioritization that is similar to this study's findings. Saw et al. (2013) reported that, in their study, all participants who were of Chinese origin belonged to the Chinese SNS Renren similar to the membership of this study's participants in the Russian SNS VKontakte. Both networks—Renren and VKontakte—are regional and, as such, predominantly serve populations of their respected countries using these countries' languages, which limits participants' access to contacts and information. The study by Lin et al. (2012) of international students at a large Midwestern university found that 71 out of 195 study participants "indicated Facebook as their primary SNS and 60 participants indicated

other SNSs as their primary SNS, which include Orkut, Friendster, Xiaonei, Cyworld, QQ, Wretch, and Mixi” (p. 429). It is important to note that at the time the article was published, Orkut was a very popular SNS in both India and Brazil, Xiaonei was a popular Chinese SNS, Cyworld was a top South Korean SNS, Mixi was a top Japanese SNS, and Wretch was the largest SNS in Taiwan. In 2013, however, Yahoo shut down Wretch, and Mixi morphed into a gaming platform. In 2014, Google shut down Orkut and Google+, Xiaonei morphed into Renren, and Cyworld ended its service, losing out to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

On one hand, the findings by Lin et al. (2012) were similar to the findings of our study, which demonstrated the preference of Russian students to utilize the Russian SNS VKontakte. At the same time, it is apparent that local SNSs often lose ground to the social media giants, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, steering participants toward the use of these global SNSs. Additionally, studies have shown that membership in more global SNSs allows students to obtain information from a variety of sources and develop multiple connections before arriving on a foreign campus (X. Li & Chen, 2014). Aside from local SNSs, Facebook has been viewed by international students as the most useful for building social networks and fostering relationships (X. Li & Chen, 2014; Lin et al., 2012), which was the case with the population we studied.

CONCLUSION

Recommendations

First, HEI practitioners should consider developing a fluency in local SNSs, such as VKontakte or Renren, because these SNSs enjoy a very large membership representing millions of people. Because the content of these SNSs is not in English, it would be beneficial for HEIs to generate content for country-specific SNSs in their native languages (perhaps utilizing the services of international students to do so), thus broadening the appeal of these HEIs.

Second, although many universities have fully staffed admission communications and marketing and communication teams, recruitment and admission professionals at a large number of smaller universities are charged with many different responsibilities, which makes it difficult for such staff to acquire the skills necessary to navigate local SNSs. This limitation, too, could be overcome by utilizing the services of international or domestic students, such as through work-study programs or on a freelance basis, to generate content and communicate with potential students. Such students would be able to generate content in the language specific to each SNS and would be trained to discuss such topics as application requirements, financial issues, living conditions, and other topics in which international students have shown interest. The other recommendation relates to content, which should be timely, relevant, and student-centered to increase the visibility of HEIs, dispel myths, build interest in HEIs, counter any negative comments, and create a platform for admissions-related conversations. In summary, admissions personnel should become the family and friends that international

students are seeking to provide them with the necessary guidance to assist in their college choice.

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