

## Social media use among international students

Holly Kathleen Hall and Thillainatarajan Sivakumaran

Arkansas State University

### ABSTRACT

International students often feel disconnected from their home country while abroad and they may also choose not to stay in contact with friends and professional contacts made during their foreign study experience. Social media may be a method of addressing some of these issues. Social media are being utilized with increasing frequency by students from around the world and hold the potential to support international students in relationships and connections before, during and after their study abroad experience. This paper aims to evaluate social media use by students studying abroad and specifically focuses on rural, regional universities in the United States.

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### Introduction

Recruitment of international students is a key element in the strategy of many of today's colleges and universities in order to deflect increasing budget cuts (Choudaha and Chang, 2012). Students in today's universities are increasingly participating in study abroad programs. The Institute of International Education in the United States reported study abroad participation rates have tripled in the last twenty years (2011). Study abroad is no longer just for the elite classes, but many students who study abroad are from countries where they have the financial ability to pay for it (Fischer, 2011). The environment is competitive, meaning universities have to be nimble and proactive when it comes to attracting students for study abroad experiences (Choudaha and Chang, 2012). Social media are seen by some university officials to be essential in marketing and recruiting international students today. When budgets are tight and slick brochures fail to draw students into study abroad programmes, social media appears to be an inexpensive and effective way to reach the target audience (Woodhouse, 2014).

In addition to the use of social media in marketing and promoting study abroad programs, they can connect students, their classmates and the schools they attend. Without establishing relationships, study abroad can be an isolating experience for students. Social media are therefore also seen as a way to engage students while they are in their study abroad program. A survey in Australia noted that international students spend a third of their wakeful time on social media (Purnama, 2012). Social media can also be used as a connection point to family and friends while the students are away from home. Similarly, it can serve as a connection once the students return to their native country. Students can keep in touch with their institution and friends made during their study abroad experience. This paper will examine the role of social media by students studying abroad. Students have been surveyed to assess what social media platforms are used and how students used them before, during and after their study abroad.

## **Beyond recruitment**

Social media has vast potential for recruiting students to study abroad programs in an inexpensive and interactive way (Social Media and Beyond, 2011). Some universities are recognizing this, but perhaps not using the medium to its fullest potential. Some universities use Facebook, for example, as a webpage with email capabilities rather than as a place for interactive dialogue (Wheeler, 2012). A company in India called Erudient tested the university social media ecosystem by sending Facebook messages to 162 universities in eight countries (Wheeler, 2012). About half of the universities responded within three days. Many of the responses simply referred the requestor back to the university website, which highlights lost opportunities for meaningful interaction (Wheeler, 2012). One suggested use of Facebook in the recruiting arena is to permit students to apply to the university directly from Facebook, allowing for automated uploading of personal information (Wheeler, 2012).

The key is that the recruitment effort on social media should be a dialogue instead of a one-way conversation. Universities need to strategically decide who is delivering the message in addition to what the actual message needs to be. Too many administrative or authoritative voices on a social media site aimed at students can actually inhibit interactivity (Wheeler, 2012). For example, David Joiner, director for global engagement and leadership at the

University of Wisconsin-Madison, encourages universities to use social media as a way to highlight what American university student life is all about: ‘There’s always an opportunity to tell your story. The best way to tell your story is on social media platforms... You think about how you provide international students with high quality experiences...that can be captured by cell phone cameras’ (Arnett, 2012). Brock University, in Canada, understood the need to meet students on platforms that resonate with their target audience. They created a page on Renren, the Chinese version of Facebook, where they answer questions and recruit prospective students –in Chinese - a gesture that is appreciated by the target audience (Choudaha and Chang, 2012). Using students rather than staff members to post on social media also makes a difference in the effectiveness of the message delivered. Once students reach the campus, social media take on a new realm of potential uses. Sheffield Hallam University in the United Kingdom, for example, uses podcasts to provide traveling directions and instructions for passing smoothly through immigration. Once students are on campus, social media can help them by providing real-time answers to frequently asked questions (Whitehead, 2011).

A survey of international students studying in Australia noted that the top motivations for using social media were chatting with friends and staying in touch with family (Saw et al., 2012). In South Korea, however, students coming from other Asian countries were found to have small social networks and less motivation to reach out and cultivate relationships during their study abroad programme (Kim, Yun and Yoon, 2009). The students’ focus was heavily placed on a particular degree programme, and they felt reaching out to create new friendships would take too much time and effort. Their use of the internet was geared more toward gathering information to complete class assignments. The online relationships they did foster focused on getting information for daily living such as where to eat, what to do with free time and finding inexpensive ways to call home (Kim et al., 2009).

In terms of using social media for educational purposes, about half of the students surveyed were at ease connecting with university or faculty social media sites (Saw et al., 2012). Some

researchers have found that students who use social media are more likely to return for their sophomore year. These students were the ones who showed more connections/ followers/ friends and posts on their social media sites (Chapman, 2010). Engagement through social media between students and academic institutions often leads to enhanced acclimatization and a greater level of commitment to the university. Students who participate in regular interaction with peers on social media tend to be more satisfied with university life (Yu et al, 2010). Some students are very optimistic about the potential for education-related use of social media (Roblyer et al, 2010). Among the activities students suggest social media can be used for include peer mentoring (Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006), peer-coaching (Parker, Hall, and Kram, 2008), and orientation practices (Yu et al., 2010).

## Methodology

This paper aims to gauge social media use by students studying abroad in a rural, regional university in the United States. The university is host to students from approximately 58 different nations. A survey was administered through Survey Monkey at a rural, regional United States institution of higher education. The survey was e-mailed to currently enrolled, degree seeking international students. The survey questions gathered information about the type of study abroad program, the duration of the program, the use of social media, the effectiveness of social media to stay in touch back home, make friends in their host country as well as logistical questions such as how often they used social media on a daily basis. Responses were gathered from approximately 27 students who came to the institution from a variety of countries.

## Findings

International students (68 per cent of the student population) studying in a rural regional higher education institution in the United States learnt about their study abroad programmes by using social media tools. Seventy six per cent of them stated that they have completed at least 1 year studying abroad. Sixteen per cent stated they had completed at least one semester studying abroad while the remaining had completed either a two-week or less programme or one month study abroad programme. Ninety six per cent of the surveyed students stated they had reliable access to the Internet to check social media sites (Figure 1).

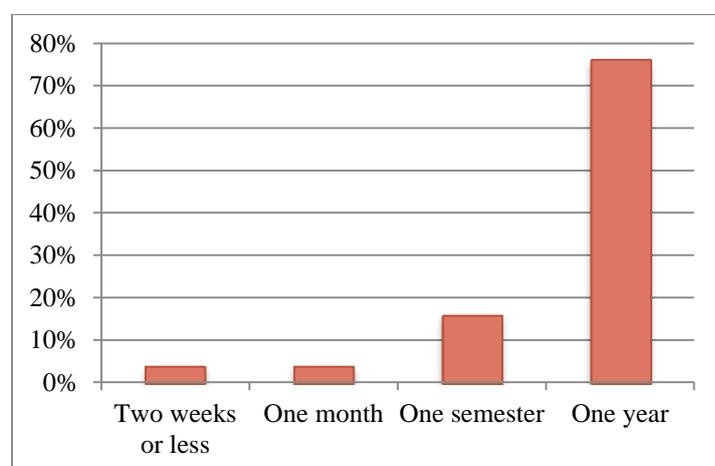


Figure 1: Time spent abroad

Among the international students surveyed, 91 per cent stated that they used social media to stay in touch with family and friends back home. The most commonly used media to keep in touch with family and friends were email (79 per cent) and Facebook (70 per cent). Twitter (25 per cent) and Instagram (20 per cent) were the other two prominent ways international students used to stay in contact with family and friends (Figure 2). Sixty five per cent of the students also indicated that using social media avoided problems with their parents since they could report on activities they engaged in while studying abroad. In contrast, thirty-five per cent stated it did get generate some family concerns. Facebook and YouTube posts were the reasons they faced distress or unease at home. As for frequency of use, sixty six per cent of the international students stated that they used social media tools to stay in touch with family and friends on a daily basis. While 16 per cent stated they use it 3-4 times a week, 8 per cent stated they use it 5-7 times a week and another 8 per cent stated every other day use to stay in touch with family and friends.

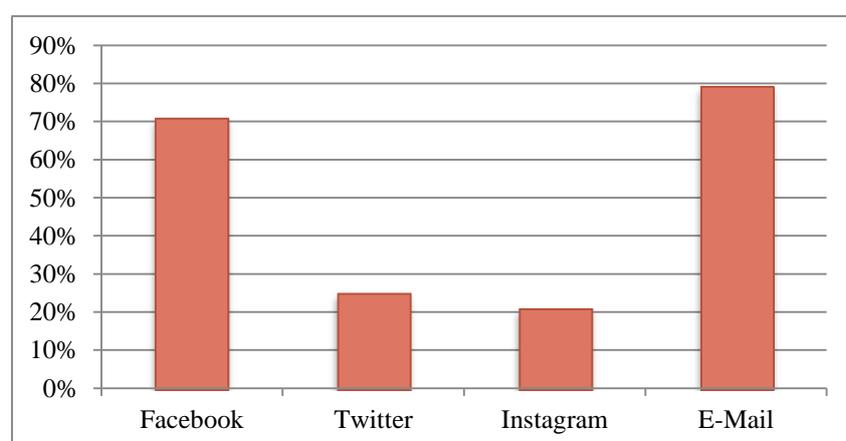


Figure 2: Most common used means for staying in contact with family and friends

An overwhelming majority (79 per cent) stated that they used social media to make friends in their host country. Eighty three per cent indicated that by using social media it was easier for them to communicate with friends that they made in their host country. According to 63 per cent of the participants, the use of social media helped improve their English communication skills. When asked how it helped improve their English communication skills, international students stated it helped them to understand native slang, new phrases, allowed them to communicate more frequently, and increase their vocabulary. Ninety five per cent of the international students stated that they still use social media to stay in touch with their new friends and host families once they went back home.

## Conclusions

While the sample size was small, and further study is needed to generalize patterns and trends, this study indicates that international students are using social media in a variety of ways to help them adjust to living in a foreign country during their study abroad experience. Social media marketing by institutions of higher education has led to international students finding information about study abroad programs through social media sites. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are some of the ways international students are learning about study abroad programs. International students studying abroad use social media such as Facebook, email, Twitter and Instagram to stay in touch with family and friends back home. They also use these sites to make friends in their host country. This helps them learn common

slang/phrases and provides them a convenient way to communicate with friends in their host country. In addition social media sites also allow them to stay in touch with their host country friends once they go back home.

Universities should capitalize on these findings to help international students feel more welcome, to help them integrated into the community and to continue the connection with students after the study abroad experience ends. They can also use the findings to cultivate study abroad students as “ambassadors” for the university around the world.

#### CONTACT THE AUTHOR

[hollyhall@astate.edu](mailto:hollyhall@astate.edu)

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