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USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA POTENTIAL BY THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper is devoted to the issues of using social networking sites for the purpose of interpersonal communication, expanding social contacts and obtaining information about studies and university by the international students in Russian Federation. The modern digital environment of the higher education in Russia implies not only the use of the digital educational platforms, but also an interactive exchange of academic and organizational information. The best tool for such an exchange is social media, as it allows you to create interest groups (study groups), to exchange files, screenshots, photos and other personal and academic information with a designated by the user circle of people. In addition, social networking sites help classmates to maintain and expand social contacts, which is actual for students, especially those who have arrived to study from other countries. In our research we found out that foreigners consider social networking as a tool for communication with friends and relatives, and their use in the educational process is limited. We also made recommendations on the ways to attract the international students to the use of social networking sites in the educational process.

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1. Introduction

The digital environment is an integral component of education. Researchers identify two aspects of social networking sites in the life of young people. The first aspect is social inclusion and socialization, and the second one is the developmental and cognitive aspect.

The phenomenon of social inclusion involves the fact that social networking sites have an effect on the development of positive and negative interaction of a person with the world around him (Taie & Kadry, 2012). Traditionally users manage several social networking sites and this expands their information capabilities (Shi & Yu, 2017).

Unlike the face to face communication media reduces the manifestation of individuality, but doesn't completely level it down (Bashir & Bhat, 2016). The use of social media is not strongly marked as gender-sensitive or individually characterized. Social networks often help to solve some kind of internal or external issues.

However, the communication role of social networks is also quite high (Kesici, 2019). It can be clearly shown in the phenomenon of "network diasporas". Researches even propose the concept of network migration (Ponzanesi, 2020). This phenomenon is interesting and poorly studied. In our research we identify it as a factor of the inclusion of international students in to the social life of the university without the interruption from the home social environment.

This phenomenon is strengthened by the role of social networks as a tool for disseminating social justice strategies and involving young people in various social and civil projects (Nicholas, 2010), the high demand for social networks for small groups different from the main community (Carolyn et al., 2018; Guadalupe et al., 2015; Lauckner et al., 2018), their high value for maintaining a healthy psychological state of a person is mentioned and in this aspect we also point the important role of network diasporas, which provide new opportunities for emotional well-being, (Porat et al., 2018; Simoes et al., 2018) sharing experience and social circle expanding (Ponzanesi, 2020). All of the above leads us to the concept of digital social capital, which is formed in social communities and allows a person to expand their social capabilities.

The cognitive and informational role of network communication concludes that e-learning - obtaining information through social networking sites - is currently a key factor in the successful learning of students and schoolchildren (Rakic et al. 2020). Students, using electronic networks and electronic educational resources are more successful in their studies, as student's social media unambiguously contribute to a deeper understanding of learning tasks, make it possible to receive informational support from classmates or professors quickly (Rakic et al. 2020).

Professional platforms of a social networking not only expand the opportunities to obtain and share new knowledge, but also support the formation of professional affiliations, informal interactions, and reputation growth (Lin et al., 2017; Nicholas, 2010; Simoes et al., 2018). Social media is a serious step in the development of professional competencies and awareness of professional affiliation.

We underline the role of social networking in the higher education, since it is a step between secondary school education and practical activities and therefore includes elements of both theoretical development and the acquisition of practical skills (O'Hara, 2020) Thus, the researchers identify the role of social networking in the society and their impact on the young users as following: the expansion of

opportunities for social and professional contacts, for professional growth and academic success, the benefit of psychological well-being.

Despite the large number of papers devoted to the study of the digital educational space and social networking sites, the issues of the interaction of the international students in social networking sites are practically not studied, which causes the novelty of this research.

2. Problem Statement

To expand the definition of youth work practices and to define new technologies, the Council of the European Union has recently begun to use the term “smart youth work”. It includes the possibility to give access to information, services and non-formal learning through digital spaces, as well as access to continuing education for young people. The relevance of the research involves the fact, that modern society with its globalization, socially open digital space allows students to make the best use of their existing digital competencies, to develop additional learning and professional competencies.

Students use social media for both personal communication and educational purposes, and most successfully combine both. At the same time, the international students consider social networking as a low-budget tools for communication with their relatives, and don't use the entire educational and social potential of social networking.

3. Research Questions

Digital work with the students means the active use of digital media and technology, including social networking sites. Digital work with the students is not a specialized method of work and can be included in any interaction with the international students (interpersonal communications, information and counselling, research clubs, self-study work, etc.).

The hypothesizes of our study are 1) first of all, the international students use social networking sites to maintain contacts with relatives and friends; 2) obtaining information on issues of study and the organization of the educational process is an additional, not the main function of social networking for the international students; 3) the international students do not use (use little) the capabilities of social networking to expand social contacts.

4. Purpose of the Study

Our objective is to define the role of social networking in the lives of the international students studying at Cherepovets State University.

5. Research Methods

There are many definitions of social networking, but they can all be reduced to two concepts. The first is used in the narrow sense as a technical communicative function. The second considers the social networking as a digital space filled with diverse content, having its own social audience and allowing social contacts in the digital field (Taie & Kadry, 2012). The second definition reflects the meaning and value of

social networking in the modern digital space most fully, and leads us to the question of identifying the role of social networking in three aspects: applied, cognitive and social.

Applied approach is aimed to analyze the possibilities of using social networking in a specific educational and life situation: education at a higher school in a foreign language, support in solving life problems in a foreign country. The cognitive aspect contains two components: 1) meeting with the social networking and their capabilities and 2) the use of social networking as a source of educational content. The social approach lies in the “social networking” concept and represents the use of the communicative capabilities of networks, the establishment and maintenance of social interactions.

Studies devoted to the analysis of digital space and social networking are often based on the research of social networking sites, blog statistics, educational platforms and websites (Kesici, 2019; Kross et al., 2013; O’Hara, 2020; Rakic et al., 2020; Shi & Yu; 2017). These approaches to the study of the discussed issue are justified when we want to get a statistical visualization of the use of digital space.

At the same time, these methods of studying digital space are not suitable for understanding motives (reasons for treatment). Therefore, to study the qualitative aspects of working in social networking, various types of surveys are used, interviews (Guadalupe et al., 2015; Lauckner et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2017; Nicholas, 2010; Ponzanesi, 2020; Simoes et al., 2018).

We conducted our research at Cherepovets State University (Vologda region, Russia). There are 112 international students from 16 countries among about 6000 domestic students. At the first stage, we used observation and free interviews.

At the university, various forms of the digital interaction are applied in the learning process, and social media is widely used by students and professors to transfer and disseminate academic and social information related to the organization of studies at the university.

The reason to start this research was a number of the reports from classmates and professors about the low involvement of the international students in the exchange of information in social networks. The working hypothesis of the pilot study was that the international students do not use the cognitive potential of social networking sites. The pilot study involved 27 students from Armenia, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Within the interview with the students, as well as the monitoring of their activity in the university groups (which were created by classmates to exchange academic information), the working hypothesis was fully confirmed. However, it was revealed that the international students actively use social networking sites to maintain personal contacts. As a result of the pilot study, we have formulated a refined hypothesis and selected the research tools: continuous questionnaire.

The research involved 112 students of the Cherepovets State University, foreign citizens aged 17 to 25 years. Among them there were 25% women and 75% men. An equal number of students study in the first, second, third and fourth years. The majority of students (56%) are from Tajikistan, 8% from Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, 3% from Syria each, and 11% (1-2 students) from Belarus, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Nigeria, Tunisia, Finland, Sri Lanka, Ecuador. Students filled out questionnaires personally, since we were not sure that we would be able to attract 100% of respondents during online surveys.

The questionnaire consists of three blocks: the first is aimed to study the awareness and practice of using social media and includes following questions: which social networking sites were familiar for you /

used before arriving to Russia; what new social networking sites did you find / begin to use after arriving to Russia; why do you need social networking sites. The second block is aimed to study what kind of role social media plays in maintaining and establishing contacts with relatives, classmates, and university staff and included questions: do they allocate and how much time is allotted for communication in social media; is there enough time for communication in social media; do you use social networking for contact's expanding with peers, classmates, staff; will you become a user of another social networking site if it's opportunities will be interesting for you; do you strive for an active communication with a wide range of friends and new people in social media. The third block of questions is aimed to study the use of social networking in the educational process and includes questions: the use of social networks in obtaining information about the educational process, obtaining academic materials; what issues determine the use of the social media: personal, entertaining, organization of education process, academic information. For the analysis purpose, the data was presented both numbers of people and percentage.

6. Findings

The answer to the first question - how well students are familiar with social networking sites -, showed that not all students used a wide range of networking media before study. Answering these questions, respondents had the opportunity to choose any number of answers. So, while studying, 41% of respondents started using Twitter, 7% discovered Instagram, and 12% became the user of VKontakte. Also, 14% of students were previously unfamiliar with the social networking sites represented in Russia (Table 1). Assessing the capabilities of social networking sites, every participant could easily find an answer. All 100% of students noted messages with friends, posting photos or images, commenting. About half of the students chosen file sharing, sharing personal information. Unfortunately, the remaining seven positions scored from 9% to 32% of the election. Thus, most international students are not familiar with the full range of social networking features.

From a practical point of view, the most interesting question for us was for what purpose and how the international students use social networking sites (Table 2). The majority of respondents (87%) allocate special time for this on a daily basis, and this is commendable, since it is more difficult for an international student to participate in the educational process than for domestic student, primarily because of the language barrier.

Table 01. Students' experience in social networking and its capabilities

Social Media Use	Number of students (pers.)	Student's response rate (%)
Which new social networking sites have you discovered after you was enrolled in the University?		
Twitter	45	41
VKontakte	8	7
Instagram	14	12
All networks were previously unfamiliar	16	14
What opportunities does a social networking open for users?		
Messaging with friends	112	100
Search for people by a given profile	21	18
Personal account management	36	32
Search for information on the given parameters	10	9

Posting photos or images	112	100
Files exchange	63	56
Providing information about yourself	24	21
Getting answers to questions	12	11
Commenting on diaries, posts, photos	10	9
Getting personal information about other users	51	46
Creating and managing your own communities	18	16
Publishing audio or video materials	112	100
Do not have an answer	0	0

Two-thirds (68%) noted that they have enough communication with loved ones on social networking, which is also very good, since the international students find themselves in a more different environment from the usual environment than domestic students, including and nonresident. The students' desire to maintain a familiar social environment is expressed in the fact that less than half of them (40%) are located in a wide circle of social networks. The other half is satisfied with the inner circle of communication and does not seek to expand it through the Internet. The desire to tell friends and relatives about themselves is also manifested in the fact that the majority of respondents (62%) prefer to post their own photos and news than to read other people's posts. Thus, international students make extensive use of social networking to maintain interaction with relatives and their familiar circle of contacts, while social networking opportunities are less widely used to expand the circle of social contacts.

As for the use of social networks for educational purposes, as a positive point it should be noted that 100% of users participate in their study groups accounts, organized in VKontakte by each university study group and in which all students are registered in the first days after enrolment.

Table 02. The purposes of social media use by the international students

Social media use	Number of students (pers.)	Student's response rate (%)
Do you take particular time to communicate on social networking sites?	97	87
Is it enough for you to communicate with your relatives on the social networking sites?	76	68
Will you become a user of another social networking site if it interests you with new opportunities?	90	80
Are you striving for active interaction with a wide circle of friends in the social media?	45	40
Would you rather make your posts than read other people's posts?	69	62
Do you attend groups related to education?	27	24,5
Why did you visit your page last time?		
a) For academic purpose	21	19
b) For personal issues	91	81
Do you use social media to get information from professors, tutors?	13	12
Do you use social networking sites to get information on home tasks, schedule, debts?	27	24
Do you share files, photos, etc. on social media?	36	32
Are you a member of your university group on social networking sites?	112	100

However, other indicators related to the activity of the international students in study groups rarely reach 30%. These indicators are confirmed by the question: why did you visit your page for the last time - where only 19% of students visited their page for study purpose, and 81% - for personal issues. We can conclude that there is insufficient use of the social media potential for organizing studies and obtaining academic information by the international students.

7. Conclusion

Social media plays an important role in the lives of the international students, supporting their adaptation. It helps not to lose the connection with the relatives, who stayed in their home country. At the same time, with the increase of the digitalization of education, the information, posted on the university's networks, as well as in the student study groups, can provide significant support in the learning process, especially for the international students, since they better perceive printed information, and if something is not clear to them, they can use the services of electronic translators. Unfortunately, the proportion of students using social networking sites on the issues related to the educational process is rather small. This suggests that the international students studying at Cherepovets State University do not sufficiently use the potential of social media to facilitate and optimize their studies, and it is necessary to expand the work on promoting the role of social networking sites in education for the international students.

Thus, our hypothesis was fully confirmed. The international students willingly use social networking to maintain contacts with family members, and this really provides them with significant moral support. But at the same time, the international students are not particularly interested in the social content of other users, and only half of them consider the social media as a tool for expanding social contacts. An even smaller number of students, less than a third, use social networking sites to obtain information about the university and study. Perhaps the reason for that is the fact that some of the students, before arriving to Russia, were not familiar with all the social networking sites, represented in the Russian Federation and were not aware of their social and informational capabilities. In essence, a network is a convenient and cheap analogue of a phone or mail for them, through which they can contact relatives and friends, discuss the events, happened in their life with a limited number of users. In light of the identified problems, the task of departments, responsible for the work with international students is following: both staff and professors, working with the international students, should engage them in solving educational problems through social networking sites. It is also possible to attract domestic students to become tutors for the international students and supervise them through the capabilities of social media in receiving academic information.

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