

How Much is Too Much? An Analysis of Social Media Usage During Study Abroad Programs Focusing on Social and Environmental Sustainability

Muthusami Kumaran, Ph.D. (corresponding author)

(Assistant Professor, Department of Family Youth and Community Sciences
University of Florida, P.O. Box 110310, 3002 McCarty Hall D, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA)

Swapna Kumar, Ph.D.

(School of Teaching and Learning, College of Education
Norman 2423, PO Box 117048, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA)

Leela Kumaran, Ph.D.

(School of Teaching and Learning, College of Education
Norman 2423, PO Box 117048, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA)

Victor Harris, Ph.D.

(Assistant Professor, Department of Family Youth and Community Sciences
University of Florida, P.O. Box 110310, 3028 McCarty Hall D, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA)

Dale Pracht, Ph.D.

(Associate Professor, Department of Family Youth and Community Sciences
University of Florida, P.O. Box 110310, 3041 McCarty Hall D, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA)

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify how students used social media during their experience with study abroad programs that focus on social and environmental sustainability. Key research questions included: Did students and program faculty directors perceive social media as beneficial or challenging to program goal? How did social media contribute to the overall learning process? How can this knowledge inform the design and implementation of future study abroad experiences? Surveys were conducted with students participating in three study abroad programs in three countries with varying levels of internet access. We found that most students used social media as a familiar support system to help acclimate to a foreign land, through the formation of cohesive peer groups and establishment of communication channels with family and friends. However, both students and program directors acknowledged the challenges of social media dependency. We conclude that judicious use of social media, when coupled with conscious immersion into the local environment and culture can enhance study abroad programs; and offer suggestions for future program planning.

Key words :

Study abroad, social media, international education, cultural immersion, Social Networking Sites

Introduction

The growth of social media and other information technologies in the last two decades is unprecedented, with technology becoming an essential part of both social and academic life (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). A substantial proportion of university students are part of the 'millennial' generation that is adept at multitasking with multiple electronic devices; communicating, collaborating and learning with technology; and taking universal connectivity for granted (Taleb & Sohrabi, 2012; Tapscott, 1998; Tess, 2013). Social networks are communities formed on the web that people use to satisfy their need for attachment; with the virtual contact playing a significant role in satisfying this need in young people (Ozad & Uygurer, 2014). Facebook is the primary Social Networking Site (SNS) used by online adult social media users of 18–29 years to stay connected with friends and family in real time and to engage in Everyday Life Information Seeking (Duggan & Smith, 2013; Facebook, 2014; Sin & Kim, 2013).

Educators have attempted to capitalize on students' use of SNS in recent years to explore its potential for teaching and learning in different contexts (Brewer & Cunningham, 2010; Selwyn, 2009). A study abroad program implies the existence of a pre-set network of support through which the program is implemented. Sin and Kim (2013) suggest that the cross cultural adjustment during study abroad programs can be made easier through the use of SNS, a medium that is already favored by international students as they navigate the newness of a foreign land and use the connectivity with friends and family to provide support and understanding (Madden & Zickuhr 2011; Mikal, 2012; Sin & Kim 2013; Ding & Stapleton, 2015). While the connectivity can promote cross-cultural awareness, it can also allow long-range relationships to survive and thrive (Gilchrist, 2012; Nitzburg & Farber, 2013). According to Sin and Kim (2013) younger age groups and females tended to more frequently use SNS, an observation that is especially important in the study abroad context which has significantly more females than male representation (IIE, 2015). In this research we explore how SNS, specifically Facebook, was used by participants in three study abroad programs whose objectives were to provide a rich, context based academic and cultural experience to participants on location in a foreign country.

Study Abroad Programs

Fry, Paige, Jon, Dillow, and Nam (2009) attribute the increasing globalization and rapidly changing intercultural demography of the United States to

the ballooning interest in study abroad programs, both from student and institution perspectives. The Institute of International Education's Open Doors 2014 report (IIE, 2015) reported that in the 2012–2013 academic year, 289,408 students studied abroad for academic credit, an increase of 2% since the previous year. The report confirmed the increasing diversity of the destination countries and in numbers of participants who still make only about 10% of the student population. Short-term programs (ranging from 1–8 weeks) formed the bulk of the programs, with more than half the students opting for it rather than the traditional year-long programs (Donnelly–Smith, 2009; Mapp, 2012).

Each study abroad program is unique in its focus, expectations, and execution, with the additional constraints of the culture of the host country requiring suitable modifications of activities. Faculty led, content-focused short term programs are usually more narrowly targeted in their purpose, with clearly stated academic expectations and tighter activity scheduling. However, the common thread that underlies these and all other study abroad programs is the participants' personal development, strengthening world view, increasing adaptability, gaining appreciation of a foreign culture and way of life, and understanding differences and diversity (Goldoni, 2013; Fry et al., 2009). Goldoni (2013) states that through the forming of new friendships and relationships with the host culture, participation in community activities, and taking maximum advantage of the supportive environment offered by a safe and structured program, participants in a study abroad enjoy global citizenship. Study abroad allows students to explore new spaces, challenge themselves and their preconceived ideas, observe other people's practices with curiosity, and suspend judgment for the sake of learning without being afraid to encounter differences in traditions and unfamiliar values and customs (Goldoni, 2013).

These common themes in study abroad program goals imply that, especially when in an unfamiliar location, the participants remain open and receptive to the new culture and surroundings, and not only face the culture shock but also embrace and absorb it. This requirement of partial or complete immersion appears to contradict the core idea of social networking – to keep in touch with the familiar. In the study abroad context, social media can actually help build a sense of community, reduce culture shock, and promote cross-cultural awareness and adjustment due to connections with the familiar as well as connections with new friends in the host country (Huesca, 2013; Klein, 2008; Madden & Zickuhr, 2011; Sandel, 2014; Sin & Kim, 2013). However, the availability of advanced communications has also been found to have a negative influence on cross-cultural experiences and

excessive social media use was found to reduce the learning gains from cultural immersion during study abroad programs (Huesca, 2013; Magnan & Lafford, 2011; Woolley, 2013).

The need for having to choose the when, where, why, and how of SNS in relation to study abroad programs forms the background of the current research. The study attempts to analyze the use and impact of SNS on three study abroad programs, offered through the same department and institution, but to different destinations – ranging from Asia to Latin America to Europe. The students' and faculty members' use and perception of the role of SNS before, during and after the study abroad experience were investigated, with a view to evaluating its usefulness, and also help inform future program planning.

Study Abroad Programs in this Research

The three short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs that are the focus of this research were offered in India, Costa Rica, and Germany by faculty in a social sciences department of a major university in the southeastern United States. Academic focus areas of the programs were non-governmental organizations and development (India), sustainable agriculture and development (Costa Rica), and family and cultural diversity (Germany). All the three programs were based on strong academic foundations, with study topics aligned to the local contexts of the host countries. In addition to being immersed in the foreign culture just because of their physical presence, the programs intentionally included student visits to historical and cultural landmarks; their indulging in local cuisine; and meeting local peer groups. All three program directors saw their programs as being immersive, and placed much emphasis on the value of the interactions with locals to receive the maximum benefit of the experience. While the programs encouraged the use of social networking to build community, help transition, and ease homesickness of the participants, the use of SNS was not seen as "required" to deliver the program goals; and hence was not formally incorporated into the curricula.

The programs in India and Germany were developed and marketed in collaboration with the university's International Center, while the Costa Rica program was developed by a consortium comprising of three universities. All three programs were open to students from various academic disciplines at the university and from other universities. The following are brief descriptions of these three programs and the use of social media during the programs:

India

The overall theme of this five-week, six-credit study abroad program was non-governmental organizations and development. The course offerings included a three-credit Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) course and another three-credit course NGOs, The Field Study. The first course provided students with basic information on NGOs across the world, their varieties, scope, impacts, management styles and issues; and had a set of pre-departure assignments, a required text, lectures, and class discussions. The second course provided students a hands-on opportunity to observe the operations of fifteen Indian NGOs each providing a different service, such as education, health care, youth development, environmental conservation, and disaster management; and compare the services to those they were familiar with either at home or in other parts of the world. NGO field visits were interspersed throughout the five-week duration of the program in four major cities of India. The program also included excursions to cultural, historical, archeological, architectural and tourist locations in the cities of Chennai, Delhi, Jaipur, and Pondicherry. Prominent universities and colleges in these cities hosted program participants with accommodation and opportunities for interactions with local students.

Students were given three extensive face-to-face pre-departure orientations between January and May before the program began in Summer: focused on Indian history, culture, people, and society; information on the cities, NGOs, and historic and other monuments visited during the program; and details of the course work and travel arrangements respectively. The orientations were planned with the intention of making participants aware of the behavioral norms and expectations in India which were sometimes starkly different from those observed in the USA. Most of the students in the group met each other for the first time during the initial orientation, and were encouraged to get to know and interact with each other through a private group page on Facebook. Interested and available parents were involved in the second orientation where the director announced that he would be sending microblogs and picture attachments through Twitter every day for the entire duration of the program. By the third orientation, all students were actively networking through the group Facebook page.

Costa Rica

This four-week, six-credit program was hosted by the Earth University in Costa Rica, a world leader in sustainability studies. The overall theme of the program was sustainable agriculture and development. Students gained knowledge

on community outreach, leadership, and civic engagement through course work and field visits to rural communities. They witnessed local farmer cooperatives that were partners of Earth University, implementing sustainable agriculture, environmental stewardship, and social justice. Course work also covered sustainable rural tourism and eco-tourism to promote income generation for agricultural communities.

During the four weeks, students resided at two Earth University Campuses as well as participated in home stays in order to become immersed in the communities. This provided them the opportunity to learn about the cultural differences between students attending Earth University, and in local communities. Students from several universities worked together to evaluate the conditions of the communities that Earth partners with, and developed a plan to assist the University in working with the communities to strengthen their capacity. The Experiential Learning Model was used as the teaching foundation for the course and students reflected on the experiences they encountered through daily guided journal entries and discussion sessions. During this program, social media usage was encouraged, along with the establishment of a Dropbox account through Earth University for creating files and sharing pictures. Students created their own Facebook group to keep connected during and following the experience.

Germany

The Germany study abroad program was a four-week, six-credit program in Frankfurt designed to promote students' knowledge of culturally diverse families in the United States and in Europe. Students also had the option of earning an additional one credit with two weeks of guided travel, so that their credits from the program could be applied to an International Studies undergraduate minor. The course work focused on the strengths of families from diverse populations and identified differences and similarities between various local cultures and the dominant culture. The European University Viadrina campus hosted the students for accommodations, cultural learning, and opportunities to interact with international students on and off campus. Professors from the European University Viadrina also presented lectures on topics about the European Union, politics, economics, health, and related family issues. Students were also required to "give back" by participating in service learning, primarily through their involvement with K-12 students in the German school system.

Students received three pre-departure e-mails before the program began that included an overview of the program, the expectations and syllabus that would guide the courses and travel, and cultural sensitivity and competence training. Students used social media to interact between themselves and

to provide updates on course requirements and intercultural events.

Methodology

This research sought to answer the following questions using a Posttest-then-Retrospective-Pretest design survey instrument:

1. Which social media platform do participants use most in the study abroad program? In what ways and to what extent do they use those social media?
2. To what extent did participants find networking and information exchanges using social media beneficial or challenging?
3. In what ways does social media contribute to the overall learning process in the study abroad program? Additionally, interviews with the three program directors were conducted to seek answers to the following question:
4. What benefits and challenges do faculty perceive in using social media for study abroad programs?

A survey instrument containing 24 items that used a 1-4, 1-5 and 1-6 Likert Scale responses was developed for the participants of the three study abroad programs, and approved by the university IRB. The 24 items pertained to respondents' type and extent of social media usage in general; levels and characteristics of social media engagement with other participants, family and friends before and during the program; and the effects of social media on the overall learning environment. The social media or technologies included in the survey were based on the literature reviewed, but also provided students with opportunities to include technologies not already listed. Four open-ended questions at the end of the survey were designed to elicit respondents' perspectives on their study abroad experience and purposes for using social media during the program. The survey was administered to all participants of the three study abroad programs immediately after the conclusion of each program while the participants were still in their respective host countries. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with the three study abroad faculty directors who travelled with participants for the entire duration of their programs. The interviews sought to understand the directors' perspectives of the effects of social media on study abroad students' experience and program learning goals. Thus, this research utilized both qualitative and quantitative data from student participants and faculty program directors to gain better answers to the posed questions.

Results

A total of 31 participants including 13 participants from the India program, 12 participants from the Germany program, and 6 participants from the Costa Rica program completed the survey. The results of the survey are reported here along with relevant data from the interviews with the three directors in three sections below: (a) students' use of social media during study abroad programs; (b) benefits of social media during study abroad programs; and (c) challenges of using social media during study abroad programs. An additional theme that emerged from interviews with faculty, their own use of social media during their study abroad programs, is included as a fourth section.

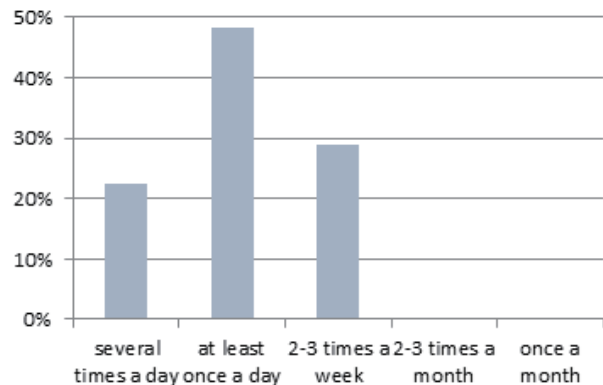
Student use of social media during study abroad programs

Study abroad participants (n=31) used Facebook (38%), Skype (24%), Google+ (6%) and Twitter (6%) and other social media sites such as Whatsapp, Instagram, and Viber (25%) to connect with friends and family during the programs. When asked about the most used form of social media, participants ranked Facebook (76%) highest, followed by Skype (15%), and Google Plus (3%). Facebook groups were formed by the study abroad groups to India and Germany in preparation for the program. Faculty directors of these programs stated that before, during, and after the trip, participants used their Facebook groups extensively to network and share information with their peers. Laptops were a requirement or recommended for the Costa Rica and Germany programs. Although they were not a requirement for the India program, most students brought their laptops, and a few desktop computers were made available in the hostel and hotel for part of the India program. Therefore, it was not surprising that 49% of students reported using a laptop to access social media while 41% reported using a smartphone. Five percent of students reported using desktop computers and 5% a lightweight tablet (iPad).

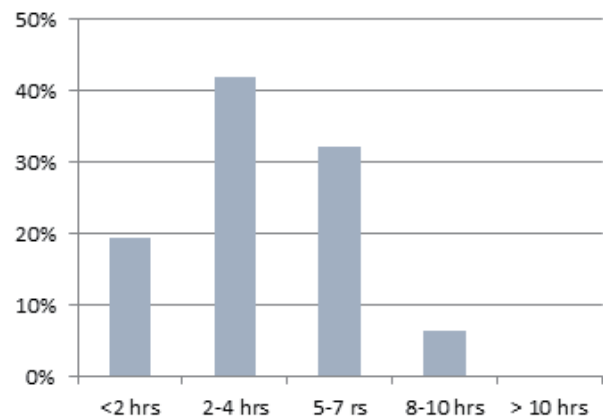
The majority of students (48%) reported using social media at least once a day during their study abroad programs, with the others using it 2–3 times a day (23%), and two–three times a week (29%) (Figure 1). When asked about the number of hours in the day that they were on social media, 42% stated that they used social media for 2–4 hours a day, with another 32% reporting 5–7 hours a day and 19% less than 2 hours (Figure 2). On a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being 'strongly agree', the mean rating for the statement "At times, I feel that I spend more time than I should on social media" was 3.84, while the statement "I feel I should spend more time than I do on social media" received a mean rating of 2.0 (Table 1). This reflects the participants' feeling that

their use of social media was higher than it should have been while being abroad for their programs.

The student data corresponded to faculty comments about how students were in touch with family and friends through Facebook and other social media. One faculty member commented, "Any moment you were online then there would be Skype access... they took their laptops almost everywhere," while another reflected that "they got carried away, spent more time than they should" on social networking. Two of three faculty members viewed the 2–4 hours online on a daily basis as impacting the cultural experience, given that students had structured classes, and there were travel and immersion activities scheduled for each day. One elaborated, "you might be fixated on the technology or the communication when maybe you might be riding the bus and could be looking at the scenery. Per se, not that they have to look at the scenery, but there might be some things that were missed in the whole experience because they were still engrossed on social media." Another faculty member said, "It bothered us that they don't live in reality. They like to live in this virtual world that is definitely taking their time away from the maximum effect they could have had in that country."



〈Figure 1〉 Frequency of social media use during study abroad



〈Figure 2〉 Number of hours spent on social media during study abroad per day

Benefits of social media during study abroad programs

All the participants in this study found their study abroad experience meaningful, with 77% rating it as extremely meaningful, 19% rating it as very meaningful and 3% as somewhat meaningful. The results of students' and faculty perceptions of the contribution of social media during the study abroad program are presented here with two areas of focus – the value of social media before travel to the host country, and during students' stay in the host country.

The value of social media before travel to the host country

All three program directors used e-mail as the main means of communication during the orientation phase of their study abroad programs. The program director for India described the process as follows,

We had three orientations prior to departure. At the first orientation, we asked a student to form the Facebook group – for coordinating, getting to know each other well, and making travel plans together. We encouraged everyone to join the Facebook group for networking. The Teaching Assistant for the program communicated with students and provided information on enquiries in the Facebook group for everyone's benefit. So, social media was key in that group cohesion and group formation.

While setting up a Facebook group ahead of time was strongly encouraged in the India study abroad program, Costa Rica and Germany programs encouraged networking before travel, but mainly used e-mail for orientation purposes. Students' perceptions of the value of social media in program preparation reflected these differences. Students' mean rating in the India study abroad for networking with peers using social media before the program began was 4.31 compared to those of Germany and Costa Rica students at 3.92 and 1.67 respectively (Table 1). The value of these social media interactions in preparing for the program was rated highly by students in the Germany and India study abroad ($M=4.58$ and $M=4.38$ respectively) compared to Costa Rica ($M=2.33$). Mirroring students' responses to the survey, the faculty members who led the India and Germany study abroad programs found the Facebook groups to be very important in organizing and preparing students before travel to the host country. The program director for India stated,

The first orientation and interactions began in January. By end of January, they were all in the Facebook group. When they came for second orientation in early March, they were all Facebook friends, had met informally, had lunch on campus, all through the Facebook connection. They were

very thankful that the group was formed. It became very important when they were prepping for the travel plans. Many posted schedules, airline ticket prices, coordinated travel, and other schedules.

Likewise, the faculty member for Germany found the Facebook group important before travel because he wanted students to “communicate through it” and “to merge and bond as a group,” but he did not want to be a part of the group. Overall, the results indicated that both participants and program directors highly valued the community creating benefits of social networking before travel to the host country.

The value of social media during students' stay in the host country

In all three programs, SNS was primarily used for networking and setting up/maintaining social relationships. Eighty-six percent of students agreed that they used online audio/video to connect with family and friends during their study abroad experiences. Skype was the technology most used for this purpose (51%), followed by Facetime (19%) and Google Hangout (14%), and other technologies (16%) such as Viber, Oovoo, and Facebook messaging cited by participants. All three faculty members found social media crucial in combating students' homesickness when being away from family, friends and their familiar culture; and in allaying parents' fears and keeping them informed about their travel and activities during the study abroad. One faculty member reflected, “I think that if we didn't have it, it would really be tough, because of their need to stay connected with everybody back home.” He continued to elaborate,

As long as they feel that they have that secure base at home, and they can stay connected, then then they have this secure base from which to explore this new environment. But if that was interrupted, ...that would be tough...We have had them in tears.

Students in all three programs strongly agreed that they were able to share valuable information about the host country and about subjects they were studying with their friends and family ($M=4.19$ and 4.06) (Table 2). In comparison, they did not perceive the postings of their family and friends to be as valuable for their learning ($M=3.33$ and 2.83) (Table 1). In general, students used social media to post information ($M=4.17$) as opposed to seeing what others are posting (2.17). In addition to connecting with friends and family in the United States and sharing information about their study abroad topics and host country, students also used social media to connect with people in their host countries. As one faculty member put it “Everyone is on Facebook,” so students were able to connect with people in the host country before they arrived

there, communicate with the travel coordinators or hosts, and with their potential roommates. This was especially useful to the programs where travel plans needed to be made in advance by participants. Two of three faculty members found SNS invaluable for communication and connection with the local culture. According to the program director for Costa Rica, students in the program also connected with people they met locally via social media. He said,

That created an interesting dynamic, with the people they were meeting there and continued to meet along the way. Students talked about how they were adding friends from Costa Rica to the Facebook page including the students they met there. They were not housed in the same dorm areas and so continued their friendship with these people even after the trip. So social media became a tool to link everything.

Likewise, the program director for Germany stated,

One very nice thing is that it really connects them to the people at the university where we are studying, the host and the travel coordinator. They would constantly post things back and forth. They used the Facebook group private page as a blog and it enhanced the experience. Some students posted videos that connected to the experience and suggested that they all view it and so on. I didn't create it as a structured log although it became one.

Social media connections with people in the host countries continued after the study abroad program, with students being connected and communicating with the host institutions in both Germany and Costa Rica after the program. They also continued to stay in touch with each other and local contacts informally through Facebook. One faculty member also found it especially important that the group had formed without any formal prompting:

The Ah-ha moment after we have had this conversation was that social media served as a tool that did help the process and was initiated by the students themselves. They found the need to still connect and continue to be connected and they did it on their own. The whole group was connected. I was included and so was the other instructor. They found the need to create a page even without being told to. It just happened and it is such a natural thing to be connected and be part of a community and part of a group.

Not all observations were completely positive, with one faculty member remarking:

I feel that they were more focused on taking pictures to post on Facebook in the evening, rather than true engagement and involvement. They were more interested in showing off to their friends as to the exotic places they were visiting... we could sense they were taking pictures to maximize their ability to tell friends about how wonderful they were doing.

(Table 1) Participants' perceptions of Social Media contribution to learning
(Likert Scale, Strongly agree = 5; N= 31)

	India Mean	India SD	Germany Mean	Germany SD	Costa Rica Mean	Costa Rica SD	Total Mean	Total SD
At times, I feel that I spend more time than I should on social media	4.00	0.71	3.67	1.07	3.83	0.75	0.75	0.86
At times, I feel that I should spend more time on social media than I actually do.	2.00	0.91	2.33	1.07	1.33	0.52	2.00	0.97
Through social media, I had built connections with my fellow study abroad group members before the program began	4.31	0.63	3.92	0.79	1.67	1.67	3.65	1.23
Social media interactions with my fellow study abroad group members were very helpful in preparing for the program	4.38	0.65	4.58	0.51	2.33	0.82	4.06	1.06
I was able to share valuable information about the study abroad host country's culture and travel with my friends, family, and others using social media	4.08	0.95	4.50	0.80	3.83	1.33	4.19	0.98
Postings of my family, friends, and others on the study abroad country's culture and travel in social media helped me understand them better	3.25	0.75	3.42	0.79	3.33	0.82	3.33	0.76
I was able to share valuable information on the study abroad subject/ topics using social media with my friends, family and others	4.08	0.64	4.08	1.00	4.00	0.63	4.06	0.77
Postings of my family, friends, and others on the study abroad subject/topics in social media helped me understand them better	2.92	0.79	3.00	0.74	2.33	0.52	2.83	0.75
I like to share a day's activity (travel, site seeing, tours etc) during the study abroad program at the end of the same day	3.23	1.30	3.42	1.51	3.33	1.03	3.32	1.30
I use social media primarily to post information I want to share	3.23	1.42	4.00	0.74	4.17	0.41	3.71	1.10
I use social media primarily to see what others are posting	3.31	1.18	3.33	0.65	2.17	0.41	3.10	0.98

Challenges with using social media during the study abroad program

Students' dependency on social media made it difficult for them and for program directors when reliable internet access was unavailable. According to faculty members, some students who had not previously travelled without family demonstrated anxiety when Internet was inaccessible. Although faculty tried to arrange internet access, even if briefly, this was not always possible. Students had no access to the internet when in remote or rural areas of Costa Rica and India. Internet access was more widespread in Germany. In India, electricity blackouts at certain times impeded Internet access while in Germany and Costa Rica, the connections could sometimes be slower than what students were used to and their computers would freeze due to the inability of the connections to handle the information exchange.

This non-reliability of access was reflected in the mean ratings for India ($M=3.13$) and Germany ($M=3.00$) for the item "Spotty or no internet connection during study abroad upset me" (Table 2). Faculty also reflected that students "didn't like it if they didn't have Internet access. They didn't like it if it was slow... this was a frustration. No question about it." One faculty member commented that informing students during orientation that the Internet could be problematic did not help much, and their frustration spilled over to their interactions with other participants, affecting group dynamics. On the other hand, according to one program director there was a positive outcome in terms of cultural immersion because, "It was a definite eye-opening experience that other countries do not have the same speed that we have." An additional challenge with using social media to organize and communicate during the Germany study abroad, which allowed for customized travelling, was that all students were not included in conversations about excursions or activities, creating inter-personal tensions and the feeling of exclusion which had to be mediated by the faculty.

Students were conscious that the time they spent on social media could take away from the study abroad experience and cultural immersion in the country, as reflected in their mean rating ($M=3.52$) for the item "The more time I spend on social media, the less time I can spend on cultural immersion in the host country." While they did not agree that their own social media use could be distracting to their classmates ($M= 2.29$), they were more likely to agree that their classmates' social media use could be distracting for them ($M=3.06$),

and that some of their peers were obsessed with using social media ($M=3.55$) (Table 2).

Faculty comments, as mentioned earlier, indicated their ambivalence about students' use of social media during the study abroad program. The three programs differed in the way the travel and local arrangements were set up. The Costa Rica program was developed by a consortium, with students staying at two different campuses and also at separate homestays. In the Germany program, students were hosted by a European university and could also earn extra credits with personal, separately planned travel. The India program was highly structured with pre-planned time schedules throughout the program, and all students experiencing identical boarding /lodging options wherever they travelled. When seen through these programmatic lenses, it is clear why SNS and the connectivity they afforded were seen either as beneficial or as a distraction. A program with tightly planned schedules seeking to maximize local experiences is more likely to view copious social media usage as a distracting influence rather than an enabler. However, it is interesting that while all three program directors acknowledged the necessity of the medium for emotional stability, they pointed out that the dependence on and excessive use of social media could have affected the depth of the students' immersion in the culture of the host country.

Program directors' use of social media during the study abroad program

The program directors' use of social media varied, ranging from using only email to keep up with work to prolific use of Twitter to keep followers abreast with the program activities. Only one of the three program directors was part of the Facebook groups created by the participant students, and followed their photos and quotes. The other two preferred not to be involved in the group conversations. While one director did not have a Facebook account, the other commented, "I am obviously on my Facebook account to stay connected at home. I Skype with my family and individuals at home, and with the department by email."

The program director of the India study abroad program did not have his own Facebook account but "learned to tweet just for this purpose". He posted Twitter messages every day during the entire five weeks of the program, most of them with picture attachments. His total of 163 tweets, mostly with pictures were directly related to the program and travel of the group. His first tweet ("Count down

begins for the big trip to India. Pic from the final orientation... INDIA....HERE WE COME!”) was sent almost a month before the program start date; and his last tweet (“Nandri (thanks) folks, for following the adventures of UF in INDIA. Vanakkam! Until next time, I am signing off.”) was posted on the final day of the program. The Twitter account had 35 followers, mostly parents and friends of participants, and colleagues of the director. These ‘daily dose’ of twitter feeds and pictures of the group resonated well with parents and followers. Parents of participants sometimes responded to tweets and also sent emails of appreciation for the connectivity afforded to them through the tweets.

<Table 2> Challenges with Social Media use during the study abroad program

	India Mean	India SD	Germany Mean	Germany SD	Costa Rica Mean	Costa Rica SD	Total Mean	Total SD
Spotty or no internet connection during study abroad upset me because they prevent me from connecting to social media	3.15	1.21	3.00	1.35	3.33	1.63	3.13	1.31
The more time I spend on social media, the less time I can spend on cultural immersion in the host country	3.62	1.26	3.83	1.11	2.67	1.21	3.52	1.23
Sometimes my engagement with social media can be distracting to my fellow study abroad classmates	2.15	0.99	2.33	1.15	2.50	1.05	2.29	1.04
Sometimes one or more of my study abroad fellow classmates' engagement with social media can be distracting to me and other classmates	2.92	1.04	3.00	1.13	3.50	1.05	3.06	1.06
Some of my study abroad classmates are obsessed with their social media entries	3.85	1.07	3.17	1.11	3.67	0.82	3.55	1.06

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to identify a) the extent and ways in which social media platforms were used by participants during their study abroad program experience; b) how their use of social media was beneficial or challenging; and c) whether their use of social media contributed to the learning process.

Successful study abroad programs need personal and cultural preparation, along with preparation for engagement (Goldoni, 2013). Using the social media platform of preference such as Facebook and Twitter to form bonds and close knit groups between participants prior to departure can build a program where the participants can provide support to each other from the start. But the task requires creative harnessing of technology's positive contributions, and discipline to regulate their threats (Huesca, 2013). All students surveyed for this research strongly indicated the usefulness of connecting to each other before departure to the host country, some more strongly than others, indicating that this was the strongest benefit of networking to them. The directors echoed these sentiments unanimously. However, that positivity changed when social media was perceived to be used in excess during the program. While students in this study considered their own use of SNS as essential and appropriate, they were equally prone to judge their peers' use of the same as excessive or annoying. Program directors appeared to notice 'excessive' internet usage when students chose to spend time on their devices rather than engage in planned local activities; or it reflected in lowered energy levels due to lack of rest time.

Students mainly used Facebook to connect with friends and family during their study abroad program, corresponding to Duggan and Smith's (2013) assertion that 81% of online adult social media users between the ages of 18–29 use Facebook as their primary SNS. Students rated the value of their social media as high and important to their learning in the study abroad experience. They used social media to stay in touch with family and friends in their home country, thus combating homesickness and sharing their experiences on a daily basis. They also connected with people in the host country via social media, sometimes using it to stay in touch after the program completion. Mikal (2012) states that study abroad participants use SNS to ease their initial transition, build cultural inlets into host culture, and maintain a 'placeholder' in their relationships at home; with students reporting stress if they were not able to maintain a presence on their regular networks. In this study, 32% of students used social media 5–7 hours a day and 42% 2–4 hours a day during their study abroad program. All three program directors felt that the excessive time students spent in the virtual world of social media kept them physically present but separate from their group and local surroundings. A consistent pattern of such use throughout the

program contributed, they felt, to the retention of their old habits and distancing from the culture they were immersed in – which defeated the original purpose of any study abroad program. While program planners saw some benefits to social media use during the transition period, consistent dependence on SNS throughout the program was perceived as taking away from engaging with each other, the host culture, and other program activities or getting some much needed rest. Given the time and effort expended to provide students with study abroad learning experiences, the concern was that the “continuous partial attention” (Linda Stone in Mikal, 2012) with students continuously straddling real and cyber space, and consequentially showing limited engagement with an activity could negatively influence the interactivity and group dynamics between participants and directly impact the benefits of the program.

Reactions from the Twitter followers indicated that they relied on the consistent communication, even if minimal and generic, to keep abreast with the group’s activities and this was sufficient to ease any concerns of safety and status. Daily and direct communication with the participant, while desirable, was not demanded; indicating that it was not the pressure from family/friends that kept participants hooked on to the internet.

Successful study abroad experiences include building relationships with locals, establishing cross-cultural friendships, and participating in local community activities – all of which give direct support to the acquisition to global citizenship skills (Goldoni, 2013) that are critical in today’s environment. The conflict between the benefits of familiarity provided by new communication technologies or social media, and the disadvantages of not engaging with the host culture (e.g. television, language, customs) is a major challenge for study abroad programs. Mikal (2012) points out that the internet is changing the nature of study abroad from process to product, with the focus shifting from long-term goals like cultural learning to short-term practical ones. He further opines that the core difference between a study abroad and tourism is the leaning towards cultural and functional goals respectively. It is therefore obvious why program directors feel that all their goals are not being met because of the prevalence of the internet. But this study also reveals that the students themselves are conscious of the fact that their engagement with social media, if excessive, could diminish the local experience; allowing for some possibility that restricted usage

will be accepted. The study’s results also reflect the negative correlation reported by Magnan and Lafford (2011) between heavy online social network usage of sites such as Facebook, and study abroad program satisfaction among student participants.

It is possible that the differing student and faculty perception of the purpose of social media colors their beliefs about the value and role of social media in learning. Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty (2010) reported that students perceive social media as more instructional and education-friendly than faculty who perceive it to be more of a social engagement. There is no doubt that the time spent on social media that provides social safety and helps students maintain their native habits and lifestyles when abroad (Curran, 2007) is a loss of valuable time that can be spent engaging with the host culture. Huesca (2013) describes this well, “the hours spent chatting online, listening to a homegrown playlist, or watching television reruns take time away from conversing with a local friend, hearing a native song, or learning an indigenous dance or game.” Mikal (2012) warns against the continuous engagement with home culture, stating that this will encourage retention of ethnocentric worldview and thus defeats the basic purpose of a study abroad program.

In the three programs under study, the use of SNS to further academic learning was not formally incorporated into the curricula. Directors primarily saw social media as crucial in the initial transition, in helping to maintain emotional stability, and in making local arrangements when needed. Students used their personal networks to converse and share experiences/learning with family and friends. Social media was also used largely for functional goals – to make customized travel arrangements as needed, and to plan meetings and conversations with locals. The most SNS interactions created a safe personal space for the students from where they could explore the new surroundings.

In preparing students for what can and should be powerful, transformative experiences, study abroad program directors, course coordinators, and instructors take the roles of facilitators, guides, and coaches who assist students to acquire knowledge and awareness of, as well as sensitivity and empathy toward, both the home and host cultures (Goldoni, 2013). While doing so, they can also guide students’ use of social media for learning during such experiences. Martinsen (2011) reported a unique insight that cultural sensitivity tended to increase with increased time spent with native speakers, but only up to a certain

point. Study abroad participants needed to “step away” from the target culture for period of time to increase inter-cultural sensitivity. The prevalence of SNS almost necessitates that a program weave social networking based deliverables into their requirements, making the time spent on SNS more valuable and relevant to the goals of the program.

Value of the findings: The findings from this study are noteworthy for future study abroad program planning, especially for faculty-led, content focused study abroad programs. There are significant and tangible benefits from encouraging social media usage to build relationships between participants at the pre-departure stage, and between participants and trusted locals in the destination country. A familiar, cohesive group offers its members the support needed during their transition to a foreign culture. Communication with family and friends stabilizes the participants and allows them to freely express their true feelings. However, in highly structured and tightly planned programs, three levels of which were seen in this study, excessive use of time on social media takes away from the time already slotted for other immersion activities. Non-availability of stable internet connections disturbs the mood of social media dependent participants, causing tension and other adverse effects within the group. Making participants aware in advance of the social norms of the virtual and physical world in the host country, and the preferred time to be spent on SNS can help set a balance that keeps all stakeholders happy. Pre-departure orientations must include a discussion of this topic and the outlining of safe and allowable practices.

While social media can be woven into the study abroad curricula (examples of several focus fields are discussed by Brewer and Cunningham, 2009), the three programs under study here relied on a deep immersion of the student in the local culture. They saw social media as the primary provider of emotional support and social engagement. But given the copious use of SNS, it is more practical for study abroad programs to devise ways in which to harness its ubiquity to support program goals. An interesting use of social media in this context could be to set up assignments that require a participant to maintain and submit records of answers to host country-related questions posed by friends at home. A local mentor could be part of the conversation. Such a practice would force deeper thought and research, pushing the participant to a deeper understanding of the host country. Such semi-structured conversations could serve two purposes: (1) drawing strength from being in

touch with friends at home; and (2) together with them, broadening a study abroad experience, by being the person on site to seek out the answers. Encouraging picture blogs and experience postings on group pages could stimulate a healthy and meaningful conversation among the participants, even if electronic. The conversations would provide insight and evidence for the cultural immersion of the group, with members being encouraged to connect with local contacts for clarifications or explanations. Pre-planning for this eventuality will ensure that the tasks are aligned to program goals, can be documented, and are acceptable to all stakeholders.

Conclusion

Whether heralded or demonized, the fact that the use of social media is here to stay cannot be ignored. Even the strongest critics of the excessive use of social media acknowledge that it is useful and supportive, provided it is used judiciously. More often than not, the argument boils down to the “how”, “how much”, and “when” of social media use, rather than a discussion of whether it should be used or not. The results from this study indicate that the individual nature of a study abroad program, especially the level of structuring, determines what is considered as ‘optimal’ usage of SNS. As Mikal (2012) asserts, students nowadays not only choose “where, when and through whom to seek support; but also where and when to engage in the target culture”.

While study abroad programs can offer a rich, yet structured, environment for students to learn life skills, millennial students and their families increasingly demand relevant, engaging, educationally strong programs, tightly coupled with safe locations and frequent contact with each other (Curran, 2007). While the use of social media may not be readily seen as useful in the delivery of study abroad program goals, it is wise to devise ways to harness the global connectivity and make it relevant to the program content. Guidelines for safe and appropriate use in the host country need to be in place and discussed in pre-departure orientations and communications. Devising safe, legitimate, and creative ways to integrate social media into program deliverables will ensure that the expectations of all stakeholders – participants, organizers, and institution(s) – are met.

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