INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ADDRESSING CHALLENGES WHILE ABROAD

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ABSTRACT. Social media are now becoming necessary tools for researchers, teachers and students in seeking for information. Past research conducted on information seeking behaviour highlighted the challenges of the international students and how they used social media to overcome their challenges while being abroad in new culture and unfamiliar surroundings. In order to understand how international students cope with the various challenges that they are facing, a systematic literature review (SLR) study on their information seeking behavior using social media was conducted. Results show that international students actively use social media to seek for information. Their interactions with (i) online contents, (ii) fellow international students, (iii) local students, and (iv) the local community have benefited them in overcoming their struggles. This research contributes in enriching our understanding on the types of information sought by international students in the respective host country, the role of social media in supporting information seeking process and how best universities could provide the necessary support.

Keywords: information seeking, information seeking behaviour, social media, international students

INTRODUCTION

People seek information to fulfill their desired needs (Wilson, 1999) and they interact with some system to gain the information to satisfy their satisfaction (Wilson, 2000). International students encounter challenges when they come to a new country (Alavi & Mansor, 2011) and to address these challenges, they need to seek for the right information to solve their respective problems (Safahieh & Singh, 2006). Researchers (Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011; Shahraniza, Tengku, & Jalal, 2014) have conducted research on the topic of international students and identified the challenges (academic, culture, social and health) while being abroad. However, the potential role of social media in addressing the international students' challenges and as medium of information seeking have been given less attention (Kim, Sin, & He, 2013).

Past studies showed that people use social media mostly for entertainment, information seeking, information needs, social interactions and decision making (Kim, Sin, & Tsai, 2014; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Other than international trade and tourism, the tertiary education sector opened for international students typically bring in significant revenue for developed countries, hence contributing to the economic growth (Becker & Kolster, 2012; Chu, Chu, &

Jin, 2010; Lee, 2013; Naidoo, 2010). For the purpose of getting better tertiary education, international students leave their home country, temporarily move to other countries (typically more developed ones) and seek education in reputable universities.

A number of recent research have been conducted on the topic of information seeking in the digital age in the fields of social sciences, humanities, and management (Ge, 2010; Meho & Tibbo, 2002; Natarajan, 2012; Sheeja, 2010). However, there is a lack of study done on the role of social media in supporting information seeking of international students. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the role of social media by international students in addressing their challenges while being abroad.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article adopted the systematic literature review (SLR) technique (Kitchenham et al., 2008) as its research methodology. The authors went through four online databases (namely ISI Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Scopus, and IEEE) to find the relevant articles related to this topic. The main reason to use those four online databases is due to their extensive coverage on the topics of ICT, Information Systems including information retrieval and information seeking.

Two research questions were developed to facilitate the conduct of this study:

RQ1: What are the challenges faced by the international students while abroad?

RQ2: What types of interactions do international students make in solving their challenges while abroad?

Keywords and their synonyms (as shown in Table 1) were used in the search of the online databases with Boolean expression "(A1 OR A2 OR A3) AND (B1 OR B2 OR B3 OR B4 OR B5) AND (C1 OR C2 OR C3 OR C4 OR C5 OR C6 OR C7) AND (D1 OR D2 OR D3 OR D4)". The search process extracted a total of 409 articles. To gain more precise results, inclusion/exclusion criteria and quality assessment methods were performed. In the inclusion/exclusion criteria, the inclusion are the domain and research areas relevant to the research topic while the exclusion indicated that irrelevant domain and research areas were excluded. After applying inclusion/exclusion, we obtained 203 articles. In quality assessment, the strategy adopted was to find relevant material based on the title of the articles, reading the abstracts, evaluating the keywords, reading the articles' overview and then reading the entire article if they are found to be relevant). This method helped to evaluate most relevant articles and dropped 153 less and/or non-relevant articles. During this process, some articles were rejected due to duplication, deviating from the topic and/or lack of details described in the articles. At the end of the process, we obtained a total of 40 articles considered to be highly relevant with the topic of investigation.

Table1. Selected keywords and their synonyms

A1.Behavioral analysis	B1.Foreign Students	C1. Social technology	D1. Challenges
		C2. Social media	
A2.Information seeking	B2.Abroad Students	C3. Digital media	D2. Difficulties
		C4. Digital technology	
A3.Information seeking behaviour	B3.Sojourns	C5. Facebook	D3. Problems
	B4.Overseas Students	C6. Twitter	
	B5.International Students	C7. YouTube	D4. Hurdles

After completing the data collection process (i.e., the gathering of articles), analysis of the articles resulted in the synthesis of four high-level categories, namely challenges while

abroad, interactions with online content, interactions with fellow international students, interactions with local students, and interactions with local community.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following present and discuss the findings from the data synthesis process based on the categories identified:

Challenges while abroad

Some of the researchers elaborated the challenges encountered by the international students while they are abroad, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Challenges faced by international students

Reference	Country of Study	Types of Challenges
(Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011)	Malaysia	Academic adjustment, religion adjustment, personal adjustment, social adjustment, financial constraint and language adjustment.
(Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010)	Malaysia	Climate adjustment, culture adaption and language barrier.
(Wan, Md. Nordin, & RazalI, 2013)	Malaysia	Social–culture adaption and academic adaption.
(Shahraniza et al., 2014)	Malaysia	Adjustment problems and its effect on the academic performance.
(Baharak & Roselan, 2013)	Malaysia	General living adjustment, academic difficulties, socio-cultural difficulties and international service program.
(Smith & Khawaja, 2011)	Western countries	Adjustment problem, financial problem and acculturation stress.

The keywords search (as per Table 1) yielded challenges mostly related to the Malaysian context of international students. Based on this initial findings, it can be deduced that there are limited number of studies have been conducted in the context of other countries pertaining to the challenges encountered by international students.

Interactions with online contents

Online contents can be anything found online on social media (as this is the main interest of this study) such as interactions with the contents posted on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn. It is discovered that contents made available on social media is a source of information for many university students to enhance their learning as well as to help them in navigating life while being abroad (Tess, 2013). People gain various information seeking about health issues from different sources of social network sites like Facebook, Myspace or Twitter (Reaves & Bianchi, 2013). Some positive factors such as sense of belonging, perceived usefulness and perceived entertainment value cause the intention to seek and share with the weak tie (i.e., people with weak or no previous relationship) (Park, Gu, Leung, & Konana, 2013). Nowadays, social media has become an important part of life because of the instantaneous source of information from the vastly available contents (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2010). With the help of social media, students perceived and gain useful material which help them in

their academic quest as well as in addressing everyday challenges (Vrocharidou & Efthymiou, 2012) in addition to allowing the students to connect with the informal and formal setting learning environment (Wodzicki, Schwämmlein, & Moskaliuk, 2012).

Social media is a rich source of information for research, information exchange and public engagement (Robillard et al., 2013). Madden and Zickuhr (2011) reported that 83% of Internet users within the ages of 18–29 used social networking sites (61% of those on a daily basis). Interactions with the online contents assist international students in adjusting to local cultures and customs, provide them help in understanding the local settings and norms, establish social bonding, and overcome loneliness (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Arteaga Sánchez, Cortijo, & Javed, 2013; Ellison et al., 2010; Gray, 2003; Hussain, 2012; Oh, Lauckner, Boehmer, Fewins-Bliss, & Li, 2013; Wohn & Larose, 2014).

Interactions with local students

Rienties & Nolan (2014) conducted study on international and local students' friendship network in the U.K and found that with the passage of time, they learn culture of each other and build relationship. Some researchers (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2010) showed that international students, which have more local friends, can help them in better adjusting to the local environment compared with those who could not establish any local friends. This can be translated that interactions with local students play an important role in helping the international students to familiarise themselves and overcome challenges while being abroad. When international students use different online technologies for interactions with their local friends such as Facebook, Twitter or even email, it enhanced their well-being by getting accustomed to the local culture, and develop confidence in their academic performance (Garrett & Cutting, 2012).

Interactions with fellow international students

International students also built their relationship with co-national and multinational students. They share their experiences with each other through Facebook, Instagram or Twitter and make a broad friendship network. The interactions with fellow international students affect positively in removing their homesickness and create opportunities to learn or experience new culture. Studies shows that some international students feel embarrassed and self-conscious about their accent but when they speak or interact in a multinational environment, they can improve their accent (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Authors (Ellison et al., 2010; Hendrickson et al., 2010) called this situation as the building of "social capital" and creation of "social binding" of the international students when they network with other international students.

Interactions with the local community

Not only interacting with fellow international students and local students help the international students to overcome their problems. It is discovered that interactions with the local community also plays an important role for the international students. Universities typically provide good opportunities to become acquainted or socialise with the local community via social events. Zhou, Jindal-snape, Topping, & Todman (2008) proposed that teachers and institutions make it a policy such that international students are given chances to engage with the local community around them in order for the students to feel at home and embrace the local culture more comfortably. Thus, given the international students have strong social interactions with the local community, it affect positively on their self-confidence as well as on their academic performance (Wan et al., 2013).

Based on the presented findings above, it can be deduced that the research questions were answered as follows:

RQ1: What are the challenges of international students while in abroad?

Table 2 above summarises the challenges typically encountered by international students. The majority of the researchers discussed the adjustment problems in terms of the academic, cultural, social and health. While minor problems include surviving financial difficulties, understanding local language(s), and getting accustomed to the local methods of teaching and learning.

RQ2: What types of interactions do international students make in solving their challenges while abroad?

The majority of the research explored that social media play an important role as rich source of information for international students. Online contents provide international students with relevant information to solve their problems by providing guidelines, material and suggestions. Friendship with the local students also helps them to adopt in new environment successfully. Institutes and teachers provide friendly environment. In all of these communications, social media (i.e Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and e-mail) play an important role to provide platform for interactions at anytime and anyplace (O'Farrell & Bates, 2009) with fellow international students and the local community.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that international students interact with the online contents, local students, fellow international students and the local community to solve their challenges while abroad. For communication with thems, social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, email and to some instance, LinkedIn) play an important role to address their challenges on academic matters, culture, social and health issues. Further study is to conduct an empirical data collection utilising survey and data analytics of social media data (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) to find out empirically significant relationships between information seeking through social media and international students in overcoming their challenges while abroad.

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