

Chapter 63

The Influence of Social Media on International Students' Global Life Satisfaction and Academic Performance

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have investigated the impact of socialization agents (social media) on domestic university students' academic performance and psychological well-being, while the influence of these agents on the increasing population of international students at universities in the United States (US) remains understudied. The current study examined international students' (N = 331) global satisfaction with life as a mediator in the relationship between general social media use (and Skype™ use) and academic performance. The results indicated that both mediation models were supported. Social media and Skype™ use were positively predictive of satisfaction with life, and there was a positive relationship between satisfaction with life and academic performance. These findings have implications for university staff and administrators who need to be aware of the positive influence social media use has on international students' perceptions of their experiences, which in turn can positively impact their academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the numerous sociological, psychological, and academic challenges, the number of international students in the United States (US) is increasingly evident. For instance, 582,996 international students came to the US in the 2001/2002 academic year, and this number increased to 886,052 by 2013/2014 (Institute of International Education, 2014). As evidenced above, there has been significant

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growth in the number of international students traveling to the US to pursue higher education. Even though international students have physically crossed the boundaries of their homes to study in US colleges and universities, there is still a desire to stay connected to their homeland. Various social media communication technologies such as Skype™ keep them linked to their friends and families in their home countries. The aim of this study is to understand if global satisfaction with life is a mediator in the relationship between general social media use (and specifically Skype™ use) and academic performance for international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students

The definition of an international student in the United States of America (USA) is a “person who is not a citizen, national, or permanent resident of the USA and who is in this country on a visa or temporary basis and does not have the right to remain indefinitely” (Council of Graduate Schools, 2013, p. 2). These students represent diverse geographical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Research suggests several factors contribute to their journey to a host country. The primary reason for most international students to leave their home countries, friends, and families and move to the US is education. As two examples, many Asian and African international students come to the US to obtain a quality education (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). For some of these students, family expectations influence their decisions (Pimpa, 2005). For example, Pimpa (2005) found that Thai families placed a strong emphasis on foreign education. Other factors such as political and economic instability, lack of educational opportunities, and financial and academic resources provided by the host country contribute to their decisions to study abroad (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Upon arrival, international students may encounter several challenges. They are faced with new rules and regulations, different teaching styles, language barriers, cultural differences such as food and etiquette, and overall changes in environment. For many of these students, English is not their primary language, and they were raised with different religious, cultural, and educational values. Compared to domestic students, they have unique needs that vary based on their “year in school, level of study (undergraduate or graduate), immigration status, age, gender, country of origin, and educational background” (Andrade, 2006, p. 149). Research suggests that many international students often find it difficult to comprehend certain topics or subject matter and participate in class due to language barriers (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Heggins & Jackson, 2003). Language barriers also prevent students from easily communicating with classmates which oftentimes leads to seclusion (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Lee, 2008).

In addition to navigating cultural differences, international students feel pressure to achieve and maintain a higher level of grades and other academic goals (Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Pimpa, 2005). The emotional toll of distance and separation from their familiar home environment can lead to various psychological issues, which compounds the task of academic maintenance. Thus, if international students are unable to adjust, this may result in loneliness, homesickness, depression, stress, anxiety, alienation, isolation, and the loss of identity, status, and self-value and other psychological problems (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Harper & Quayle, 2009; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Lee & Rice, 2007; Li et al., 2010).

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