

THE USE OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS BY POLISH FORMER ERASMUS STUDENTS: A LARGE-SCALE SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing role of online social networks in the life of young Poles. We conducted a large-scale survey among Polish former Erasmus students. We have received 2450 completed questionnaires from alumni of 115 higher education institutions all over Poland. 85.4% of our respondents reported they kept in touch with their former Erasmus colleagues. Unsurprisingly, it is the social networking website communication that largely prevails as the most frequent communication channel. Almost 2/5 of the study subjects considered it to be the most used in this context. We were interested in the patterns of use of social networking websites among our respondents. Although 10 social networks were included in the catalogue of answers, it turned out that only 4 of them played a significant role in our sample. The most popular was Facebook, which was number one in socialising with both local and international friends. LinkedIn and GoldenLine.pl were reported to serve mainly for professional purposes, including job searching and maintaining a professional network. The use of nk.pl was confined to contacts with local friends. 514 respondents, i.e. 21.7%, said they had created a group in a social networking website to keep in touch with former Erasmus student friends.

Keywords: online social networks; Erasmus; Poland; international student mobility; Facebook

INTRODUCTION

One of the principal tendencies in current university education is the internationalization process (Bryla 2012; Bryla 2010), which includes international student mobility. Poland, next to Turkey, is one of the most dynamic participants of the European student exchange programme Erasmus, even though certain obstacles to international student mobility persist (Bryla & Ciabiada 2014). A study period abroad is an important element of education, not only from the academic perspective, but also taking into consideration social, psychological, and cultural dimensions. We can also observe a rapidly increasing role of online social networks in education, job search and other areas of life of young Poles. This paper focusses on the use of online social networks among Polish alumni who took part in Erasmus a few years before. It is based on a large-scale survey, encompassing 14705 sent and 2450 completed questionnaires. In particular, we try to identify the relative importance and usage patterns of various online social networks in our sample as well as the role of these tools in communication of former Erasmus students with their Erasmus colleagues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication has an important role in life and especially in education. Nowadays, lots of people generally use technology for communication (Yalcin 2012). Web 2.0 technologies serve as a good learning tool in which the learners find the opportunity to practice language in a real-like atmosphere: the new medium (Tilfarlioglu 2011). Global virtual student teams may move international business education forward (Taras et al. 2013; Taras et al. 2012). With the transition to being a knowledge-based society, the Internet usage has become an irreplaceable part of life. As social networks have come into our lives, the internet usage has taken a different dimension. People can affiliate to social networks in order to make friends, exchange information, find partners, and to play games. Facebook is currently the most popular social networking service in the world. Facebook addiction levels of males are higher than those of females, and those of seniors are higher than those juniors, sophomores and freshmen (Cam & Isbulan 2012). Online social network usage purposes can be categorized under four categories, namely maintaining existing relationships, making new relationships, using for academic purposes and following specific agenda (Mazman & Usluel 2011). A positive and significant relationship was found among Facebook-related opinions stated by university graduates having an extravert personality as a result of data collected through the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised/Short-Form and Opinions of University Graduates about Social Networks data collection tools (Isbulan 2011). Social self-efficacy has a positive influence on social trust; social trust has a positive influence on social capital, and social trust mediates the relationship between social self-efficacy and social capital among Facebook users (Wu, Wang, & Liu 2012). The rapid development and expansion of the Internet and the social-based services comprised by the common Web 2.0 idea provokes the creation of the new area of research interests, i.e. social networks on the Internet called also virtual or online

communities (Musiał & Kazienko 2013). The institutions that have embraced social media say it has been well worth the effort, as they have engaged more prospective students and alumni using platforms that those constituents have already integrated into their personal and professional lives (Fernandez 2010).

It is Facebook that has become the most important social network in Poland. In late 2011, it overcame a national network called nk.pl as far as the number of real users is concerned. Nk.pl (previously called Nasza Klasa – *our class*, as it was first designed to connect former classmates) was created in 2006 and was the national leader until August 2011. The initial success of Nasza Klasa was analysed by A. Małachowski (2009). Facebook was created in 2004 in the United States of America, but played only a marginal role in Poland until 2010. During just 2 years its number of users soared 7 times to reach 11,725,422 in September 2011, which enabled it to take the position of the national leader according to the Megapanel PBI/Gemius research (**Figure 1**). The extremely high growth rate of the community of users was influenced by the evolution of Internet technologies, which were used as communication tools not only on computers but also mobile devices (*Facebook liderem...* 2011). Twitter, which is the second largest social network worldwide, is relatively less popular in Poland, with 1.2 million users in October 2011 (Internet Standard 2012: 10-11).

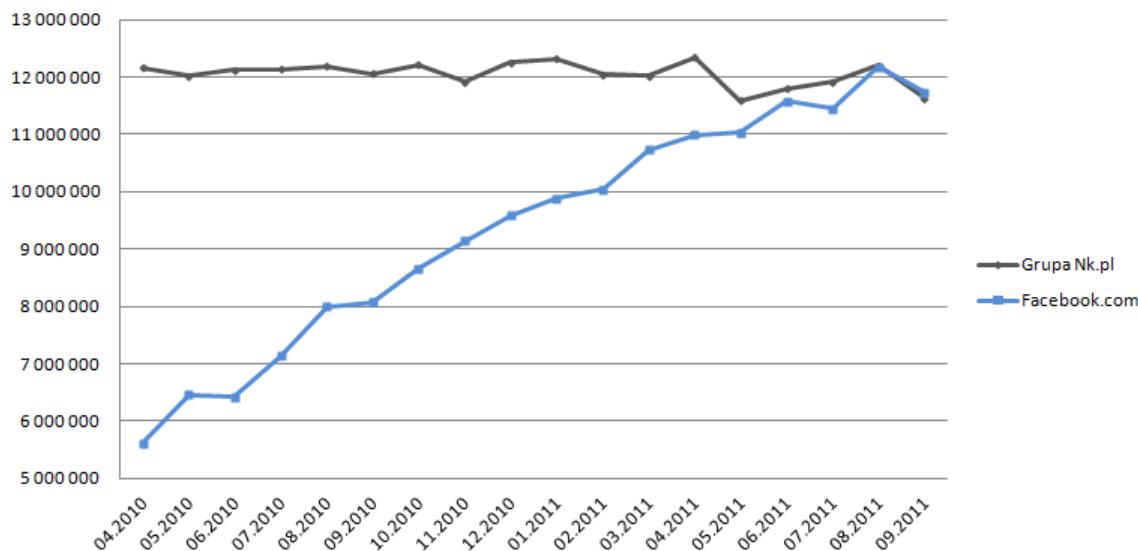


Figure 1. Evolution in the number of real users of facebook.com and nk.pl in Poland (04.2010-09.2011)

Source: (*Facebook liderem...* 2011)

Regarding social networks for professionals, the most popular one in Poland is called GoldenLine (belonging to one of the most powerful media groups in Poland called Agora SA). According to Megapanel data of January 2012, it had 2.1 million real users, whereas the world leader LinkedIn was used by about half a million of Poles. However, the position of LinkedIn is improving, as it set up a Polish version of the website in April 2012. It seems that both networks may survive on the Polish market, as they perform slightly different roles. GoldenLine is number one regarding headhunting on the national labour market, while LinkedIn is used mainly by foreign companies and Poles looking for a job in multinational corporations or abroad (Pajak 2012).

There are many Erasmus-related pages on Facebook. At the European level, it is worth noting: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Erasmus/37776696567> (Erasmus), which has 125,891 likes (on 10 August 2012), and <http://www.facebook.com/esn> (Erasmus Student Network) with 73,288 likes. At the national level in Poland, there are <http://www.facebook.com/erasmuspolska> (Erasmus Polska) with 3,544 likes and <http://www.facebook.com/ESNPoland> (ESN Poland) with 1,638 likes. Last but not least, there are numerous Erasmus student communities on Facebook at the university level, e.g. <http://www.facebook.com/esnul> (Erasmus Student Network Uniwersytet Łódzki) – 1,270 likes, and <http://www.facebook.com/ESNEYElodz> (ESN-EYE Łódz - Technical University of Łódz) – 1,757 likes, as well as other specialized pages, in particular those of international student offices, for instance <http://www.facebook.com/pages/International-Students-Office-University-of-Lodz/149602198427324> (International Students Office - University of Łódz) – 616 likes. Another Erasmus group exists on GoldenLine in Poland: <http://www.goldenline.pl/forum/socrates-erasmus-program> with 1,253 members.

Sample characteristics and selected results

We invited to take the survey all Polish students who had filled in their evaluation forms on the website of the Foundation for the Development of Education System regarding their Erasmus mobility for studies in 2007 (5942 study subjects) and 2008 (6635 study subjects). We added to the sample all graduates from the Faculty of International and Political Studies of the University of Lodz (2128 study subjects) in order to create a control group of internationally immobile students and some representatives of various age cohorts. Thus altogether we addressed our questionnaire to 14705 Polish students through the Internet professional survey service called moje-ankiety.pl in November and December 2012. We received 2450 completed questionnaires. Therefore, the response rate amounted to 16.7%, which may be considered a very good result for this kind of research methodology, taking into account the length of the questionnaire and the associated time and effort required to fill it in.

2369 of our study subjects studied abroad for at least a semester or trimester, whereas 81 did not take part in such mobility. Out of the 2369 study participants who had had a study period abroad, 82.6% studied abroad once, 14.5% twice, 2.1% three times, and 0.7% more than 3 times.

27.7% of our respondents in the former international student mobility sample were males, and 72.3% were females. In the control group, there were 79.0% of females and 21.0% males. This result may be due to several factors, including the higher participation of women in university education and their higher propensity to take part in surveys.

We have obtained answers from former Erasmus students representing 115 Polish higher education institutions. Therefore, our sample is very diverse and resembles very well the general population of all Polish outgoing Erasmus students. Unsurprisingly, the ranking is led by the biggest state-owned universities. The top 5 include: University of Warsaw, Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan, University of Lodz, University of Wroclaw, and the Jagiellonian University of Cracow. The third rank of the University of Lodz stems partly from its remarkable performance within the Erasmus programme and partly from the extension of our sample to other age cohorts from the Faculty of International and Political Studies. It is also worth noting the high positions occupied by technical universities, including the Technical University of Lodz, which was the 6th regarding the number of respondents. We were unable to identify the home university of almost 6% of our respondents due to incomplete data, ambivalent abbreviations, mistakes, and deliberate refusal to provide the information.

22.3% of the internationally mobile Polish students in our sample took part in their mobility at the Bachelor level of studies, 78.2% at the Master level, 4.6% at the doctoral studies level, and 4.1% said it was another level of studies (including 5-year studies leading to a Master, engineer studies, medical studies, non-degree studies, postgraduate studies, MBA, MFA, after completing studies in Poland, study sessions/certificates, a language course, a college, secondary school, a thematic Socrates course, a summer school, a research scholarship).

The study participants carried out their international student mobility usually in 2007 or 2008, which stems from our sampling method. The year of mobility ranges from 1997 to 2012 due to the inclusion of various age cohorts from the University of Lodz, with the vast majority of students taking part in Erasmus in 2007 and 2008.

Table 1. Our respondents by international student mobility host country

Host country	Rank	Number of respondents	%
Germany	1	261	11.02
Spain	2	181	7.64
France	3	173	7.30
Denmark	4	150	6.33
UK	5-6	108	4.56
Portugal	5-6	108	4.56
Finland	7	100	4.22
Belgium	8-9	95	4.01
Italy	8-9	95	4.01
Sweden	10	81	3.42
Netherlands	11	78	3.29
Czech Republic	12	69	2.91
Turkey	13	60	2.53
Austria	14	52	2.20
Greece	15	42	1.77

Slovakia	16	39	1.65
Hungary	17	29	1.22
Norway	18	28	1.18
Lithuania	19	21	0.89
Slovenia	20	20	0.84
Bulgaria	21	19	0.80
Ireland	22	13	0.55
Latvia	23	8	0.34
Estonia	24-25	6	0.25
USA	24-25	6	0.25
Cyprus	26	5	0.21
Canada	27-29	3	0.13
Romania	27-29	3	0.13
Russia	27-29	3	0.13
Iceland	30-32	2	0.08
Malta	30-32	2	0.08
Switzerland	30-32	2	0.08
Belarus	33-37	1	0.04
China (Hong Kong)	33-37	1	0.04
Japan	33-37	1	0.04
Syria	33-37	1	0.04
Ukraine	33-37	1	0.04
Not identified	x	502	21.19
Total	x	2369	100.00

Source: own research

The main destination countries for the student (first-time) mobility of our study subjects were: Germany, Spain, France, Denmark, UK, Portugal, Finland, Belgium and Italy (**table 1**). In total 37 host countries are represented in our sample, as it concerns not only Erasmus mobility, but all kinds of student mobility. Nevertheless, Erasmus accounts for a vast majority of destination countries mentioned by our respondents.

Table 2. The duration of the international student mobility

Mobility spell	Fraction
For the first time	
Less than a semester	0.033
A semester	0.629
A year	0.310
More than a year	0.022
For the second time	
Less than a semester	0.030
A semester	0.055
A year	0.044
More than a year	0.041
For the third time	
Less than a semester	0.007
A semester	0.006
A year	0.006
More than a year	0.012

Source: own research

Our respondents reported having taken part in international student mobility, which lasted (for the first time) usually a semester (62.9% of answers) (**table 2**). Less than 1/3 of the study subjects studied abroad for a year, and only 2.2% spent there more than one year. As far as the second and third-time mobility is concerned, its duration tends to be longer, but these are relatively rare cases.

As many as 85.4% of our respondents reported they kept in touch with their former Erasmus student friends. 13.8% answered negatively, and the question did not apply to 0.8%.

Table 3. The ways of keeping in touch with former Erasmus friends (fractions)

Contacts	R	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Social networking website communication	1	0.576	0.114	0.064	0.031	0.012	0.010	0.033
E-mails	2	0.250	0.137	0.137	0.092	0.054	0.060	0.097
Face-to-face contacts	3	0.117	0.073	0.126	0.106	0.098	0.118	0.182
Phone calls	4	0.054	0.044	0.082	0.076	0.071	0.121	0.344
Other	5	0.027	0.012	0.011	0.014	0.002	0.004	0.113

Notes: 7 – the most frequent; 1 – the least frequent or none; R – rank

Source: own research

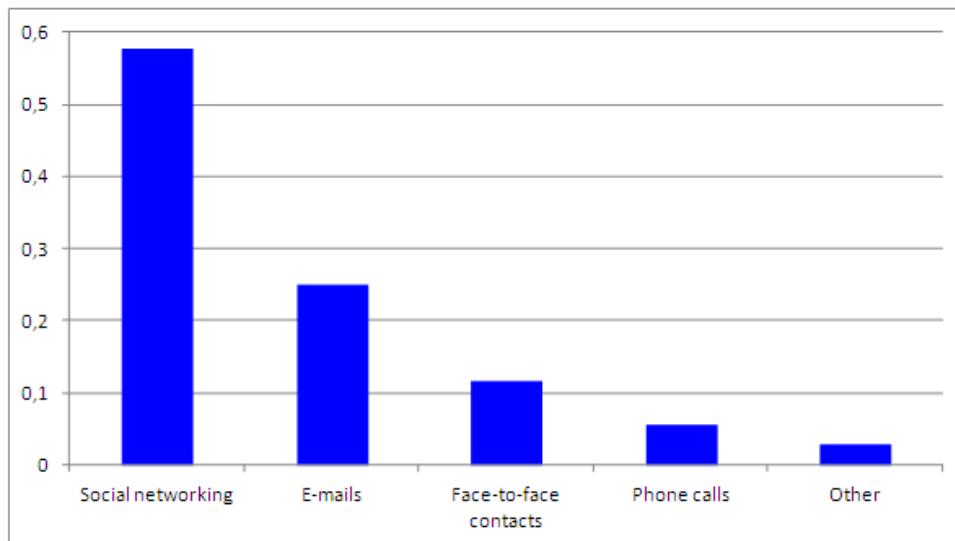


Figure 2. The most frequent ways of keeping in touch with former Erasmus friends (fractions)

Source: own research

We asked the Polish respondents how they kept in touch with their former Erasmus friends (**table 3, figure 2**). Unsurprisingly, it is the social networking website communication that largely prevails as the most frequent communication channel. Almost 2/5 of the study subjects considered it to be the most used in this context. It was followed by e-mails. Face-to-face contacts and phone calls play a much less important role in this regard. The other options mentioned spontaneously by some respondents included Internet chats (including Skype and MSN), holiday postcards, traditional letters, text short messages sent by phone (SMS), and common journeys. However, the key role of online social networking should be emphasised.

Table 4. The use of online social networks by purpose (fractions)

Social networking website	PURPOSES				
	Educational	Socialising with local friends	Socialising with international friends	Job searching	Professional network
Facebook	0.157	0.784	0.852	0.038	0.098
LinkedIn	0.030	0.022	0.044	0.173	0.266
Twitter	0.013	0.011	0.015	0.003	0.016
MySpace	0.006	0.004	0.010	0.001	0.003
MyYearbook	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000
SunSpace	0.000	0.001	0.001	0.003	0.005
GoldenLine.pl	0.030	0.022	0.008	0.184	0.223
Nk.pl	0.004	0.161	0.009	0.001	0.003
Xing	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.008	0.010
Tuenti	0.001	0.001	0.005	0.000	0.000
Other	0.005	0.006	0.010	0.003	0.008

Note: fractions of all those who took part in international student mobility (2369 study subjects)

Source: own research

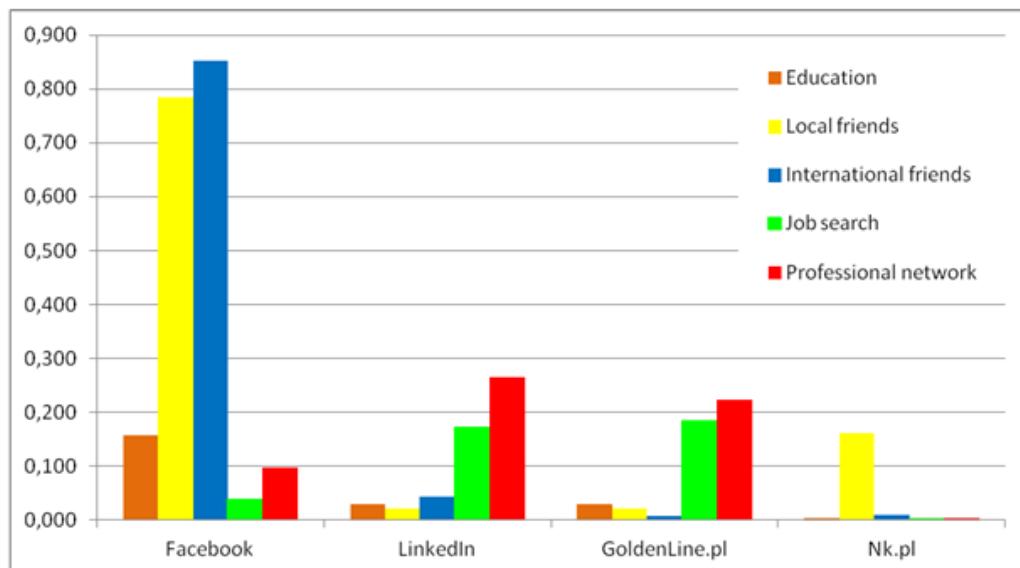


Figure 3. The use of principal online social networks by purpose (fractions)

Note: fractions of all those who took part in international student mobility (2369 study subjects)

Source: own research

We were interested in the patterns of use of social networking websites among our respondents (**table 4, figure 3**). Although 10 social networks were included in the catalogue of answers, it turned out that only 4 of them played a significant role in our sample. The most popular was Facebook, which was number one in socialising with both local and international friends. LinkedIn was reported to serve mainly for professional purposes, including job searching and maintaining a professional network. The same was true for a Polish social network called GoldenLine.pl, the popularity of which was similar to LinkedIn. The fourth website called Nk.pl was used to keep in touch with local friends. We may expect that the popularity of global social networks will grow much more dynamically than their national counterparts. Twitter obtained less than 2% of users in each purpose category, but its prospects seem favourable. Educational purposes were not very common for any network, with the highest share of Facebook. The other online networks included in our question (MySpace, MyYearbook, SunSpace, Xing, and Tuenti) received only marginal attention (all functions below 1%). The respondents could supplement the catalogue with other networks they used, but very few took advantage of this possibility, which suggests that our analysis is complete. The few spontaneous additions included: Academia, Couchsurfing, Draugiem.lv, Google+, MeetUp, Mendeley, Netlog, Pininterest, Pracuj.pl, Profeo.pl, Reddit, Research Gate, StudiVZ, Tumblr, Viadeo, Vkontakte.ru.

As many as 514 our respondents, i.e. 21.7%, said they had created a group in a social networking website to keep in touch with former Erasmus student friends. 73.7% answered negatively and 3.7% mentioned it did not apply.

In the control group of students who did not engage in international mobility, Facebook is much more often used to keep in touch with local friends (72.8%) than with international friends (53.1%). It indicates an impact of the former international student mobility on the intensity as well as patterns of use of social networks.

CONCLUSION

Participation in international student mobility constitutes an important element of university education. However, its role extends far beyond the period of studies. It concerns both an enhancement of various competencies and skills and building a network of international friends. In 2012, we addressed our survey to all Polish alumni who took part in Erasmus in 2007 and 2008. A vast majority of our respondents reported they kept in touch with their former Erasmus colleagues. Unsurprisingly, it is the social networking website communication that largely prevails as the most frequent communication channel. Almost 2/5 of the study subjects considered it to be the most used in this context. The most popular online social network in our sample was Facebook, which was number one in socialising with both local and international friends. LinkedIn and GoldenLine.pl were reported to serve mainly for professional purposes, including job searching and maintaining a professional network. The use of nk.pl was confined to contacts with local friends. Over 1/5 of our study

subjects said they had created a group in a social networking website to keep in touch with former Erasmus student friends.

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