Settling in with Social Media
The role of social media during international students' freshmen year in the Netherlands

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SETTLING IN WITH SOCIAL MEDIA: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' FRESHMEN YEAR IN THE NETHERLANDS

ABSTRACT

International students start a new life in a new country with a new social network. Social media has the potential to aid this process. This study explores the role of social media in the settling-in phase of international freshmen in the Netherlands, offering a broad approach of the different ways in which university students use social media, as this approach seems absent from earlier research. The goal of this study was to distinguish the choice for and use of social media platforms, as well as look for possible cultural differences. This was done using a theoretical framework of the accumulation of social capital, Uses and Gratifications theory, one's social (student) identity, and cultural values. Five focus groups existing of international students in the Netherlands were formed. The results revealed four themes: convenience, socializing, risk reduction and barriers. Convenience was understood as the practicality and ease that social media brought during the settling-in process. Regarding socializing, face-to-face contact was preferred, yet social media was seen as a tool to make it easier. Social media was also used to reduce risk and gain a sense of comfort. Barriers existed in social media use in terms of differences in platform preferences and dealing with homesickness. No strong differences were found among cultural values.

KEYWORDS: *Social Media, Social Capital, International Freshmen, Cultural Values, Settling-in Phase*

1. Introduction

Many processes have contributed to a world in which more and more students are able to study abroad. These students arrive in a new city and country, having left behind friends and family to start a new life as a student abroad. Students have to confront cultural and language differences, inconveniences of relocating, and start a new social network. The much debated term assimilation, to which Carmon (1996) refers as a "process by which immigrants adopt the cultural norms and lifestyles of the host society in a way that ultimately leads to the disappearance of the newcomers as a separate group" (as cited in Maundeni, 2001, p. 225), will be used in a moderate sense to indicate a form of getting used to and adapting to the international student's new environment. Additionally, the term settling-in phase will be used, as used by Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley (2009), emphasizing the period that is characterized by "[beginning] to feel happy and relaxed in a new situation, home, job, or school" ("Settle in," 2007). During this phase one's social capital needs to be rebuilt in a new university-oriented environment, where one constructs a new social identity as a student. Within this process, this study chooses to focus on social media, as this phenomenon has impacted the way in which young-adults communicate and socialize (boyd, 2014; Schols, 2015). Here social media refers to online platforms for communication and content uploading (boyd, 2014), such as social networking sites, instant messaging platforms, and non-website-based alternatives (Correa, Hinsley & De Zúñiga, 2010). Research has shown that social media can play a role in building social capital (Steinfield, Ellison & Lampe, 2008). This study aims to explore what role social media plays in the settling-in phase of university students in the Netherlands. To do so, it focuses on international freshmen studying at Erasmus University Rotterdam exploring their dependency on social media in various areas of the student's everyday life. The research question is:

> *R1: What role do social media play in the assimilation of international students at Dutch universities from application to sophomore compared to face-to-face contact?*

This research question is broken down into three sub questions. First, it needs to be defined which platforms are used:

> *SQ1: What social media are used by international students for the purpose of assimilation in their freshmen year?*

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Next, it is important to distinguish why these platforms are chosen and how they are used:

SQ2: Why and how do international students use these social media and what purposes do they serve?

Finally, cultural proximity will be taken into account, as this may have an impact on this use. While awareness exist of the impreciseness and generalizing character of these labels, Asian and northwest European students will be compared to find if and how the findings are influenced by cultural backgrounds.

SQ3: To what extent do nationality and culture play a role in the use of social media in international students' freshmen years?

This study aims to help universities gain insight into ways in which they can reach and support their international students, which is crucial in times of growing internationalization among universities. Its explorative character and use of focus groups aims to offer in-depth information and diversity among social media platforms and functions. Finally, it does not intend to focus on one element in particular, but aims to discuss different aspects of the participants' lives, such as social, educational and practical aspects.

First, an exploration of the theoretical concepts will introduce the framework of this research, after which information will be provided regarding the focus groups and analysis. Following, four overarching themes will be presented and discussed in the results section. Finally, the results will be reflected upon, linked to previous research, and strengths and limitations will be discussed, offering ideas for future research.

2. Theory

This research is concerned with social media usage. In order to get a better understanding of that practice, the focus lies on why the students use social media. Uses and Gratifications theory holds that users actively choose certain platforms based on their motives (Ruggiero, 2000). Next, as social capital can be considered central to an effective and comfortable settling-in phase, this will be explored as a central concept. Additionally, it is important to understand the social identity of being a student in terms of one's role and self-presentation, as international freshmen are entering a new period in their lives. Moreover, the academic context in which social media use takes place is explored. Lastly, to explore differences among cultural groups, cultural values will be discussed in the context of the proposed research.

Social Media Motives

Central to the search for students' motives for choices of social media platforms is Blumler and Katz' (1974) Uses and Gratifications theory, which positions the user as an active agent in choosing a platform that fulfills their social and psychological needs (Ruggiero, 2000). This framework allows for an exploration of the multitude of ways in which modern day digital technology can be applied (Ruggiero, 2000). Boyd (2014) argues that "social media has reshaped the information and communication ecosystem" (p. 6), which distinguishes social media from other communication platforms, and states that the space in which social media communication takes place are "publics that are restructured by network technologies" (p. 8): networked publics. Previous survey research on students' motives has shown that, among others, these social media are often used for relationship maintenance and creation (Sheldon, 2008; Yang & Brown, 2013). Additionally, Nadkarni and Hofmann's (2012) review of earlier studies concludes that self-presentation is a central reason for social media use. In sum, the use of social media for specific purposes is an active choice of the student that might contribute to the reconstruction of new social networks for oneself in an online environment. This will therefore be further investigated and leads to the next issue: social capital.

Social Capital

When someone migrates, social capital is lost and needs to be rebuilt in the new country. Social capital refers to the importance of connections and networks within the one's life as a form of resources that are to a certain extent needed for different purposes (Putnam, 2000). Today, the Internet is increasingly regarded as social capital improving (Kraut et al., 2002;

Steinfield et al., 2008). While Putnam's (2000) definition depends on offline local networks, Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue that in today's 'networked individualism' one is able to connect personally to others via social media. This makes it easier to create and maintain relationships with a variety of different intensity networks that in return give access to information, trust and support (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Schols, 2015).

New social capital is created through new relationships. Social networks exist out of strong ties, such as friends and family, weak ties, such as acquaintances, and latent ties, referring to those to whom one is unknowingly connected (Granovetter, 1973; Haythornthwaite, 2002). Notably, Granovetter (1973) argues that weak ties can play important roles in personal networks and community organizations, as one can use weak ties towards certain aims. A student network, for instance, could be considered an instant network of weak ties. In the age of social media, offline and online networks are no longer found to be strictly separate: social media are often used to maintain and even strengthen offline relationships among young adults (Reich, Subrahmanyam & Espinoza, 2012; Awan & Gauntlett, 2013). Yang and Brown's (2013) survey among undergraduates found that Facebook works as an important platform for relationship creation and maintenance. Barkhuus and Tashiro (2010) argue similar findings to be the result of students' nomadic lifestyles. Moreover, Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe's (2010) survey study showed that access to a large network of ties and information seeking practices on social media could lead to high social capital among undergraduate students. In order to settle in and create a sense of belonging at a new university, social media, and the networks that they facilitate, can thus play a crucial role (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield & Fiore, 2012). It is thus central to define how students use social media to supplement their lack of social capital.

Studies found social media can also bridge old and new environments (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Hossain & Veenstra, 2013). Maintained social capital entails one's maintained connection "with members of a previously inhabited community" (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1143). Ellison et al. (2007) found that undergraduate students maintained relationships with old high school friends through social media, which decreased feelings of "friendsickness" (p. 1164). Hossain and Veenstra's (2013) survey study, however, found that there was no strong difference in amount of relational maintenance on social media between American and international graduate students based on geographical distance. Maintained social capital thus seems to play an important role, but not only for international students. All in all, social media can be used to maintain and create new social capital. However, as

freshmen enter university as new students, it is important to look at the role of their social identity and the university setting in their process of settling in.

Social Identity & Student Context

When international freshmen arrive, they find themselves in a new social environment and in a new phase of their lives. One's position as a student, including networks and context, can be argued to be a foundation for their social identity. Boyd (2008) argues that social identity partly unfolds on social media. Using a Goffmanian perspective, boyd (2008, 2014) argues that the presentation of the self in a networked environment is a form of impression management, where the individual aims to communicate a certain image of her/himself, which is understood in, in the case of this study, a university context. Moreover, ideas and expectations exist on the collective of which the individual aims to be part – in this case of students – and social feedback helps the individual to adjust (boyd, 2008, 2014) – helping to successfully present and negotiate one's position as a student. Moreover, specific audiences are imagined when publishing material on social media, and certain platforms may therefore be used for specific audiences (boyd, 2014) – adopting one's self-presentation to this imagined audience. Analyzing undergraduate's Facebook walls, Selwyn (2009) found that this use focused on the "'identity politics' of being a student" (p. 157) and argues that social media can function as a way to engage with peers with a student identity, functioning as a "relatively closed 'backstage' area" (p. 157) to negotiate one's role as a student.

International freshmen are introduced to a new university and its new online environment, which may be a large part of the place where self-presentation and the negotiation of the student role takes place. Additionally to the use of platforms for one's self-presentation as a student, research shows that social media can be used more practically for a variety of educational uses (Bosch, 2009; Lampe, Wohn, Vitak, Ellison & Wash, 2011). The Lampe et al. (2011) survey on education-related uses of Facebook found that it was a tool for purposes such as social communication, educational collaborating with peers, and contacting professors. A qualitative exploration of educational Facebook use by Bosch (2009) found that Facebook was a central element to students, through academic Facebook groups, where Facebook friends helped by answering questions, finding materials, and even share notes, and where one could easily connect to tutors and lectures. Social media can therefore be argued to be central to a university student's life. In sum, one's social identity and the educational context of an international student's life can be central determiners in one's social media use and will therefore be taken into account. Nevertheless, while all these students may share the

(international) freshmen identity and the university-context in which their lives takes place, differences in cultural backgrounds should be taken into account.

Cultural values and communication

International students can have various cultural backgrounds. Earlier survey studies found that cultural backgrounds can shape students' choices for and uses of social media platforms (Kim, Sohn & Choi, 2011; Saw, Abbott, Donaghey & McDonald, 2012) and can play a role in their settling-in phase (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim & LaRose, 2011). Hofstede's (1984), and Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov's (2010), cultural dimensions approach such intercultural differences, which can function as points of reference for this study's possible differences found among cultural groups. Hofstede (1984), however, is criticized for his notion of national cultural homogeneity, which clashes with the existence of the heterogeneity of different groups (Dorfman & Howell, 1988; Redpath & Nielsen, 1997). Connecting to that is the idea that cultures are not restricted by a nation's borders and that therefore the nation-state is not the right unit of analysis (McSweeney, 2002). However, this research rather takes a larger group of countries with a relative cultural proximity, which softens this strictness of the national borders. Moreover, the cultural dimensions will be used as guidelines in understanding cultural differences, instead of testing them along hard measures. This research is informed by three of findings by Hofstede et al. (2010) because of their expected impact on social media use: the distinction between individualist cultures that are more focused on the individual and collectivist cultures that focus more on their own group (individualism versus collectivism), cultural differences in dealing with power inequality (power distance index), and cultural differences regarding avoiding uncertainty (uncertainty avoidance index). These can be, for instance, interpreted in terms of participation in new social media, contact with non-peers, and the extent to which one uses social media to avoid uncertainty. Additionally, Trompenaars' (1993) idea of specific versus diffuse culture is used, which focuses on how cultural values may alter the amount of information that is expressed publicly by looking at to what extent topics are considered private. While Hofstede (1996) criticizes this dimension for its partial likeness to his individualism index, the dimension ties in precisely with the specific element of public versus private that is of great importance in a networked society that shares information via the Internet. All in all, these cultural values could potentially explain differences in social media use and will therefore be taken into account in this analysis of this research.

In conclusion, in migrating social capital is severely decreased, but can be partly maintained and rebuilt using social media. The context of studying at a university contributes to one's 'student' identity, and in return this social identity also may affect the individual in their presentation of themselves to the outside world. Maintaining contact and building social capital – whether online or offline ties – can be done through such media. However, what social media platform is chosen remains an active choice of the user, as is the way in which it is used. Cultural values may contribute to these choices and the way in which social media is used to build social capital in this all-new environment. Together, these elements may all contribute to the settling-in phase of international students in a new country.

3. Method

Focus groups

Not much is known about the role of social media in the settling-in process of international freshmen in the Netherlands. Therefore this research aims to study this phenomenon in an explorative manner. Focus groups enable such explorative research and the search for meaning (Gilbert, 2008). While earlier studies have mainly focused on surveys, it was chosen to conduct focus groups, as they enable the facilitation of conversations and discussions about otherwise possibly inaccessible topics, or issues that may be overlooked, and may help to create diverse responses (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Gilbert, 2008). They aimed to explore common experiences of students in-depth, whilst focusing on the interaction between participants concerning the topic (Gilbert, 2008). The reflective self-reporting aids in conveying the perception of the participants regarding their process from arrival and unfamiliarity, and their use of social media to the more established situation in which they most likely find themselves at the time of the focus groups.

Participants

Five focus groups with each five or six participants were conducted. The participants were freshmen from four international bachelors at the Erasmus University Rotterdam who started their studies in September 2015, meaning that they had a fresh memory of their process of settling in. In order to compare culturally different groups, the groups were composed of Northwest European students and Asian students. Grouping these students together helped establish a sense of common ground, and helped the researcher find similarities and differences between these cultural groups. The participants were recruited in cooperation with the bachelor programs. After the initial process of targeting them via classes, e-mail and official Facebook groups, snowball sampling was used to further expand the number of participants. Of the 26 participants, 18 were women and 8 men. The ages ranged between 18 and 25. More information on the participants can be found in Appendix A.

The focus groups lasted 2 to 3 hours and took place at the university campus. They were be led by the researcher, recorded on video and transcribed verbatim afterwards. Notes were made to capture atmosphere and events. The focus groups started with an association activity where pieces of paper contained a number of purposes (such as education, social, and information) on which participants were asked to stick on a post-it note with a social media platform they would use for this purpose. This was done to help start dialogue and work towards the content of the topic list, based on the approach by Jansz, Slot, Tol and Verstraeten

(2015). The researcher reviewed the similarity of answers and offered participants the chance to respond or elaborate. While moderating the discussion, the researcher kept the topic list in mind when asking questions to keep the conversation on topic, as it was aimed to have a group conversation. The topic list can be found in Appendix B.

Sensitizing concepts

A series of sensitizing concepts, based on the discussed theory, were used as a basis for the analysis. In this research social capital was divided into the loss, accumulation and maintenance of social capital. The loss of social capital was understood as losing previously built strong and weak ties, through which accompanying help and support may seem absent. The social capital accumulation was indicated by the new creation of relationships – weak or strong ties – and becoming part of groups and networks. The social capital maintenance was understood as maintaining and improving existing relationships and recurring communication and presence on social media.

The concept of student identity was understood and divided in terms of peer contact, student-professor and university contact, self-presentation, and student life. Where peer contact was indicated by various ways of communication with peers – whether in terms of classes, groups, or individually. The student-professor and university contact was indicated by type of communication between student, professor and university officials, but also the sense of trust and power relations. Self-presentation was understood in terms of deliberate choices in (public) expression of the self. Various elements connected to settling-in at a new university, such as housing, student events, and a sense of belonging to the city, were considered to represent student life.

Finally, the cultural values were partly connected to the previous concepts. The differences between individualism and collectivism were understood in terms of focusing on peers of one's own culture versus openness to other cultures. Power distance was understood in terms of the type of contact which one had with individuals with different power relations. Uncertainty avoidance was indicated by avoiding risks and insecurities in one's settling-in process. Specific versus diffuse was indicated by the extent to which one chooses to share information about their lives. However, these dimensions were open to interpretation.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using a combination of Boeije's (2002) constant comparative method (CCM) and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, because of CCM's

comparative character that fits with the need for the international comparing and contrasting, and the explorative systematic character of thematic analysis. The analysis of this research included four steps, where the answers were first compared and contrasted within each focus group, after which the focus groups were generally compared to each other in order to establish an oversight of the findings of all groups combined. Next, the focus groups with similar cultural backgrounds were compared. Finally, the northwest European groups were compared to the Asian groups to search for differences between these groups. The first step resulted in 285 codes that were informed by the sensitizing concepts. For further defining and substantiating of codes in the second step, the codes were related to each other and six themes were created with numerous subthemes, and through rearranging and selecting were brought back to five. The concepts that were provided in this step were used in the triangulation process within and among the cultural groups. Finally, the themes were further defined, combined and clarified to create the final four themes.

Reliability & Validity

Techniques used to ensure reliability and validity were negative case analysis and thick description (Shenton, 2004). This was done through the discussion of uncommon yet discussed instances and the in-depth discussion of findings. Next to that, as part of the CCM method, triangulation through the comparison of the Asian and northwestern European groups further stimulated this. Important to note is the central role of the researcher in qualitative research (Christians & Carey, 1989). As a student, the researcher/moderator also possessed a student identity. While this helped create a relative understanding of the topics and issues discussed, it was taken into account that such a feeling of shared experiences could also create a disjuncture in understandings, and therefore additional attention was paid to prevent misunderstanding during the focus groups.

4. Results

Four themes with subthemes emerged from the focus groups. These deal with the role that social media plays and the platforms that are used in settling in and obtaining social capital. When present, cultural differences are distinguished. First, 'Convenience' deals with practical uses of social media and some platforms' central role in students' everyday lives. Second, 'Socializing' focuses on the act of building and maintaining relationships themselves, but also focuses self-expression on certain platforms. Third, 'Risk reduction' focuses on how international students used social media to avoid uncertain situations. Finally, 'Barriers' discusses the obstacles encountered on social media in the process of settling in.

1. Convenience

The perhaps biggest function of social media that came to the fore is that of convenience, which refers to practicality and ease in use. Using social media for convenience in terms of settling in therefore meant that it eases the process and offers various quick and effective possibilities, such as a quick access to contact individuals, groups and events. This section also discusses instances of social convenience in terms of making connections and serving as a common platform. However, the effectiveness of social media in terms of building and maintaining relationships will be discussed in the next theme.

The centrality of convenience: Facebook and WhatsApp

Facebook and WhatsApp were considered central platforms to everyday living and functioning with peers in the Netherlands. 19-year-old female Christina explained: "[First] I contacted my housemates through Facebook, and now we have a WhatsApp group to talk about the little things that need to be done in the house." This demonstrates how Facebook and WhatsApp are essential platforms in daily life. Other social media often focused less on convenience. Facebook showed a decline in social content, as 18-year-old female Jess explained: "I don't think that many people post like photos and things they do on Facebook anymore. Like now that there's Snapchat and Instagram. Like Facebook is mostly just for information [than] … post stuff. I just share posts." 19-year-old male Henry argued:

> [N]obody says like "oh, today I've been reading my book, and then I've done this … and cooked with my sister." I mean nobody shares [this] and like Facebook works with this personal data, and if nobody shares personal data on Facebook then Facebook is not as valuable as it could be.

This focus on convenience seems to point towards the recent discussion surrounding Facebook's context collapse, where people no longer use Facebook for personal story telling and in-depth socializing, but rather focus on sharing content that is already available (Efrati, 2016). Nevertheless, convenience-focused platforms are not excluded from social and entertainment purposes by any means, as will be discussed later.

A central function of convenience was the use of Facebook and WhatsApp as a tool for micro-coordination. 19-year-old female Petra argued: "[F]or me it's just a tool to communicate in order to meet in real person." Social media helped to coordinate where and when to meet, and to adjust and respond accordingly – even functioning as a tool to coordinate school projects. It brought participants to the point where they could communicate face-to-face, which was considered a better way of socializing, as will be discussed in the section 'Socializing'.

Facebook as the central hub – a must

Participants often started talking about social media without clarifying that they were talking about Facebook – suggesting that talking about social media automatically refers to this platform. As an exception, 25-year-old male Mark explicitly stated that he did not have Facebook. 18-year-old female Fiona's reaction demonstrates discomfort surrounding this idea: "Everyone assumes that everyone has also Facebook. … So if you don't have it, you're like 'wow, what happened to you?' … [E]veryone, everything is going on there. … And if you don't have Facebook no one knows anything." Moreover, one can say that Mark's emphasis on his absence from Facebook stressed that having a Facebook account is a common assumption. Facebook was talked about as *the* central platform, the hub in a large network of social media, and being part of it is very important, if not a must. Participants argued that they could not live without social media – and in particular Facebook – as everything they know would be impossible without it.

Facebook was considered especially convenient for two phenomena. Firstly, Facebook can be seen as a central platform in education. 18-year-old female Jess demonstrates this: "[Student representatives] share summaries on [the Facebook group], or past exams or whatever information. And if you are not on it, you're just missing out on all of that and … I personally don't think it's possible." She demonstrates the importance of a platform, as well as the convenience that it brings. Participants noted there were multiple education-oriented groups on Facebook: those including and excluding teachers or staff, as well as separate

individual groups. They served multiple functions: to share information and materials, to post summaries, to ask questions, to work on projects, and to be informed about important updates such as schedule changes or information from professors. Facebook did not replace SIN-online or Blackboard, which are the university's official platforms of distributing information, but was rather a platform where additional information and materials were posted that were considered highly important. These social media are therefore central to the life of a student.

Secondly, Facebook also served an important function as an (social) event planner and finder. These events ranged from various parties, to lectures, to other events. 21-year-old male George explained how this works and helped him:

> [Events are] all over Facebook. … And then once you, say you click you're 'interested' so you can maybe think about it, … the event stuff comes up and … [t]here's more information, like, they provide on it, which you can think "Okay, that looks good." … [T]hat's really helpful. I just clicked on a lot of those events, so to… help me settle in and meet new people.

As he argues, events can be tools to meet people and settle in. People may post them in specific groups or even invite one another. It not only provides convenient information, but it also shows who is going, it updates one on changes, and offers the opportunity to invite others. Many associations and organizations seem to make use of this, and therefore news about an event spreads fast and to a large audience.

Facebook as a phonebook, one's friend list as an address book

Using social media for matters of convenience is strongly intertwined with its social functions. 19-year-old female Blair discusses working with people she hadn't met before:

> [When you have to initiate] contact, … all you have is a name. … [Y]ou don't know their cellphone number, so you can't really use WhatsApp either. So Facebook is kind of how like a group is kind of formed, and then you kind of set up a time to meet so you can kind of know … everyone's faces.

Adding to this she discussed a frequent argument of not having one's phone number: "Sometimes we switch to WhatsApp, once we have everyone's phone numbers, but I think Facebook is like the first step always." She argues that Facebook makes it easy to orient and make oneself familiar with names and faces. While WhatsApp is a much-used platform, this

requires having one's phone number. However, on Facebook one does require earlier contact. Facebook can be seen as one big platform full of latent ties, a large number of weak ties, and a selective number of strong ties. With every person one adds, one adds someone to their network of weak ties, and collecting them in one's friend list makes sure that they are not lost and easy to reach. It functions as an address book where it is easy to find, add and contact people. This network building can be seen as setting the foundation of one's social capital. This leads to the next theme: socializing.

2. Socializing

Social media also served a social function. Participants held specific conceptions about how these platforms function in socializing, of which many were intertwined with reasons of convenience.

Online versus offline socializing

Certain conceptions and experiences regarding preferred social media use for socializing came to the fore during the discussions. However, there was some disagreement among the participants regarding personal use and preferences. 19-year-old female Amber missed the orientation event and knew no one at the beginning: "[It] was really scary, and I kind of just like somehow got to know this like one group of girls and then they put me in their WhatsApp group … and … from there … started adding people on Facebook. … [I]f I hadn't been put in that WhatsApp group …, it would have taken so much longer." 22-year-old Joanna disagreed: "I don't find this that helpful, because then you can keep in touch with people, but that's not really the people that you end up being your group at some point. … But really after time, you go out and you meet people in bars and pubs… " To this Amber responded: "I'm not comfortable with [that]. So like most of my closest friends here, it's because of … the WhatsApp group. It's because of meeting them in the [student housing] once and adding them on Facebook and then [message them] 'Hey, are you going to that party? Like let's go together'." This discussion shows the different preferences of meeting and socializing with people. Although some had met people online, the majority of participants argued that it was preferred to meet someone face-to-face. One can thus argue that, functioning as the address book of a student's social life, Facebook and other platforms tie in as people add one another on social media to be able to remain in contact. In strengthening relationships similar preferences for face-to-face communication were present, where social media mostly served as an important tool of convenience. However, in

maintaining, social media helped through its 'address book' function and regular conversations on instant messaging platforms. Social media did not replace face-to-face socializing, but merely added a dimension and made it easier. In doing this it complemented each other.

Virtual communities and maintained ties

Sometimes one was not able to meet and maintain relationships face-to-face, such as in the case of virtual communities or distant ties. 20-year-old female April talks about her experiences in a virtual community: "[Y]ou just share interests with people who like the same thing. … [H]e or she can be in America, in China or anywhere. But you're like all online, and you feel that you've known each other for such a long time." As April argues, using social media for socializing was considered a good or accepted way in these cases. Nevertheless, even though social media was considered the most practical way to keep in touch with distant ties, many preferred to meet up when possible as this was considered the best way of building and maintaining relationships. As 19-year-old male Henry noted: "[T]he true friendships are made … when you are interacting with someone you've really seen."

It came to the fore that strong ties at home were often maintained with the help of social media. 20-year-old April demonstrates how intensive this contact can be: "[I]t's like … twenty-four seven all the time, for me. Literally, just like always talking to my mom and dad … on WeChat. … [A]nd once a week we would like Facetime a bit. But then all other times [we're] just like texting." In this case, family was contacted through Facetime and the Chinese platform WeChat. Video and text platforms were often used for this purpose. Keeping in contact with friends was done through social media groups or individual social media contact. For instance, 22-year-old female Joanna used "WhatsApp. Facebook sometimes," while 19-year-old female Christina used "[a] bit more WhatsApp and Skype from time to time. Also Snapchat a lot. Just to see a little of what they're doing." While contact intensity differed among participants, having this possibility helped preventing homesickness to a certain extent, which will be discussed in 'Barriers'.

Self-expression

It emerged in the discussions that the way in which one expressed oneself could depend on the platform as well as the audience. While participants argued to want to stay as close to themselves as possible, 22-year-old female Mia argued:

I feel like it depends a lot on which [platform]. Cause on Facebook I have lots of pressure, even from the people who … I'm friends with. Cause in Facebook I'm friends with people … I'm not really [close] friends with. …. And I feel like there's much more judgment there than in Instagram, where I'm only with like closer friends, or Tumblr where like non of my friends may follow me, but they're only like Tumblr followers.

Mia's example stresses different ways of approaching self-expression through the presence of different types of ties. This can also be addressed through the function of the platform. As 21-year-old male Kendrick argues: "I think it also depends on the platform. I think if you would go to my Instagram, you would find out way more about myself." 20-year-old female Chloe agrees: "I think there was a shift like between Facebook and Instagram. Because like Instagram is purely a social platform, although like on Facebook you can have like more … groups and like more practical stuff to do on it. And so it has become less social." One could therefore argue that the changed function of the platform, the strength of ties, and the expectations that are connected to them, may impact the way in which one expresses oneself. In terms of expressing one's identity, one thus tried to stay close to oneself, yet chose to share or not on certain platforms.

3. Risk reduction

Throughout the focus groups a number of issues came to the fore regarding reducing the amount of risk using social media to ensure a form of security and certainty. Risk can be understood as the possibility of ending up in unpleasant and unprepared situations that jeopardize a comfortable way of settling in.

Orienting

Orientation – getting a sense of the new environment and peer group – was a recurring theme. While not everyone extensively oriented before hand, a number of participants seemed to attach a lot of value to it. 18-year-old female Clover touched upon two frequently discussed ways:

I think watching video … is more visual than [when] you just read … on a website [or] something, because it's [written well] for the school. So I use YouTube, and then Instagram. I used a lot of hash tags [on] Instagram to see how real the photos [were]. And then I Skyped with … [a] Vietnamese friend who studies here to get the real experience like that.

As the example shows, in choosing the university and getting familiar with a new country, city and surroundings, a number of participants stressed the convenience of visual orientation, by means of hash tags or geo tags to get real life impressions of real students. It was a way of knowing what to expect when arriving in the Netherlands – from a new city to student life. Moreover, a number of participants stressed the importance of talking to someone with first hand information about studying in the Netherlands. So did 19-year-old female Christina:

> I went on Instagram and put the hash tag [studies]. And with the like photo's that they posted, and I found this one girl … and so I messaged her and I was like: "Hey! I'm like concerned doing [this studies]. Do you mind talking to me about it?" She was like "Sure! Give me your Facebook." And then we talk and she answered all my questions.

While some appreciated ascribed contact persons or did not feel the need for this type of contact, Christina's example shows a way in which some people went looking for extra (human) sources of information on social media – to get a non-biased image and information. This first hand information helped reducing the risk of coming here, and helped getting information on what life would be like.

Housing

When discussing the ways in which one found a room or apartment, many argued to have used specific housing service sites, such as Housing Anywhere or Nestpick. As 18-year-old female Jess experienced:

> I did look on the Facebook group, but … it was really hard to get your hands on them. … [I]t didn't feel as like secure as like a platform that is specifically for housing. … I used Nestpick to find my room. And it's verified, … so you know that it's real and it's not a scam. … But then on the other hand you have to pay more, cause there's fees and stuff, and on Facebook there isn't.

Jess demonstrates how participants praised these Facebook groups for being free and readily available, but were critical of trustworthiness and the speed with which to get a room. There was some urgency among some students to get a room, due to for instance late admissions, and people preferred to contact the landlord and be sure of getting the room. Here using social media meant a riskier situation in terms of verification and security than its alternative of

service oriented websites. In this case social media therefore rather enhanced risk. Nevertheless, some had (successfully) used social media for this purpose. 20-year-old female Chloe said: "I was already friends with second years …, so they put me in these housing groups on Facebook and that's how I found the room, because it was so efficient." Moreover, some indicated wanting to use Facebook for finding a room in the future.

Emotions

It became apparent in the discussions that risk in the socializing process was also reduced by circumventing emotionally difficult situations. For example, social media could be a way of preventing embarrassment. 19-year-old female Petra illustrated: "I still am using Facebook to remember people's names, cause sometimes like you hear it, … but then you're like 'What?' and then you stop asking, because you think you're being rude. But it's like 'Oh, can I have your Facebook?' and then you just see the spelling." Here social media gave a source to fall back on and prevented a socially awkward situations. Frustration was also expressed through social media. 20-year-old female April discussed conflicts with roommates: "[When] someone just leaves their dishes in the sink for like two days or so. And then people will just take the photo and say: 'Okay, whose dishes are these!'" 19-year-old female Blair had such an experience with school project members: "When someone needs to get their part [of the project] done and you don't want to tell them to their face. … You're like 'Hey! You need to get this done like by tomorrow!'" Here risk was reduced by avoiding face-to-face confrontations. All in all, social media was used to prevent unpleasant confrontations, aiding in a feeling of safe socializing.

Finding comfort

Social media brought a form of comfort as a result of reducing risk. 21-year-old male George talks about Facebook groups where peers introduce themselves: "[P]eople [are] asking like similar questions to what you're thinking, … people with similar worries and stuff. So it shows … you're not the only one experiencing that, … So it makes you feel like a bit more … comfortable and stuff. … Especially in like the first few weeks." These student groups brought comfort through sharing one's student identity with a large peer group online. One could share questions, concerns, frustrations, homework and materials. These introduction pages, as organized by the faculty, were a common phenomenon. 22-year-old female Mia explains:

[W]hen we got like accepted, they send that message that "Hey, we have made you a
Facebook group and join here." … [T]here was this girl who added like everyone to her
friends … [and] I was like "Hey, are you going to study the same thing? Cause you added me
as a friend" and then … we talked and we met, so she was kind of like my first friend.

While not everyone participated, it did help others to get a sense of who would be their future
peers and classmates. As Mia's example shows, it gave them the possibility to interact and
orient beforehand. Social media served as a platform where students helped each other out in
groups, convenient information was posted, social events were promoted, but also the place
that the faculty used to post relevant information and promote events.

4. Barriers
While previous themes have showed that social media can strongly benefit the settling
process in many ways, there were also some social media-related barriers to overcome.

Platforms
Not everyone was used to the frequently used platforms in the Netherlands. Especially
in the case of Asian students, this was quite common. Asian social media platforms, such as
WeChat, Kakao Talk, Line, and Weibo, were commonly their original platforms of
communication. 18-year-old female Clover shared her experience: "I feel that if I [won't]
adapt to [WhatsApp], I will be missing out, because [here] they communicate that way. If you
don't want to, you will be crossed out the group." As Clover demonstrates, one had to switch
platforms when coming here. This connects to the earlier theme of Facebook as a must. What
is more, some platforms are banned in certain countries. In China, for instance, one does not
have (legal) access to Facebook, among others. This extends the gap towards one's initial
orientation of the country, the university, and their peers, as one may not be able to participate
in socializing and orienting activities before the start of the academic year. Primarily for
Asian participants, the gap in platforms separated lives. 20-year-old male Jasper explains:

[F]or Chinese I speak Chinese, I use the Chinese software, and for here I use the English
software. So I just separate two different worlds, two different lives, with different language.
… [A]bout my studies or my life here, I would talk with my friends here. … [I]f I'm unhappy
or if I'm sad, I will talk with my best friend in China.

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As Jasper's explanation shows, this can be argued to create a separation between people in two parts of the world, as well as of two cultures. While often Asian-oriented platforms were used to keep in contact with people in and/or from one's home country, platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp were needed to keep in contact with peers in the Netherlands. This separation of lives and the switch to different platforms emphasizes a gap between maintained and newly built social capital.

Dealing with a fear of missing out & homesickness

Social media played an important part in dealing with homesickness and with having a fear of missing out on what was happening back home. 21-year-old male Kendrick argued: "For me it's not really missing people, because I feel like through social media we're really connected and I really know what my close friends- what's going on." This show how contact with ties back home – maintained social capital – enables people to see what is going on at home, which resulted in a sense of not missing out as much. However, social media also reinforced this homesickness and fear of missing out. As 19-year-old female Christina argued: "I miss [my friends' house parties] a lot. And then it's always on Snapchat and I'm just like [sigh]." Because one is confronted with everything that is happening through social media on a daily basis, it sometimes resulted in feeling sad that one is not there.

Finally, homesickness tended to be a somewhat stronger and more central theme among Asian participants. While northwest European students also dealt with it, Asian participants brought to the fore that for them the culture shock was stronger, and therefore the way in dealing with one's new life a little harder. Those who were able to occasionally meet maintained ties face-to-face expressed less homesickness; yet Asian students in particular were more dependent on social media for socializing with maintained ties because of geographical distance. Social media can therefore be said to indirectly have a slightly more important role for Asian students.

5. Conclusion

This research has focused on what role social media play in the settling-in process of international freshmen at Dutch universities. Using focus groups, this study found that students use various social media in their freshmen year to help them establish themselves in a new country. Facebook and WhatsApp can be seen as two central platforms, but among others, Instagram, Snapchat, and platforms tied to one's home country were also used. While Facebook has been recognized as a central platform in many studies (Ellison et al., 2007; Yang and Brown, 2013), WhatsApp is less central in this area of research.

It was found that platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, while inherently social, were used as platforms of convenience, referring to practical uses of platforms that do not refer to the act of socializing but rather to other functions that social media can fulfill. This importance of convenience confirms findings by Kim et al. (2011) and Awan and Gauntlett (2013). However, Facebook fulfilled most functions and was central to students' lives – from event planner, educational information page, to 'phonebook', of which the first two were also found by Bosch (2009). Having an account therefore seemed a must and central to one's position as a student. Participating can be said to lay the foundation of one's accumulation of social capital through accelerated and eased social networking.

In socializing, social media functioned as an important tool, yet it did not replace face-to-face contact. Offline contact often preceded online contact, as was found in previous studies (Ellison et al., 2007). However, it did replace face-to-face contact when it was more effective or appropriate to do so, especially when physically meet up was impossible. The building of social capital is therefore aided by, but not entirely based on social media. Moreover, different platforms are linked to different ways of self-expression, based on the purpose and the type of ties that are linked to it. Additionally, social media can both give information on what is happening at home, but also deliver the feeling that the individual is missing out – serving as ways to conquer as well as worsen homesickness.

Social media also contributed to a sense of comfort and risk reduction in participants' first year in a new country, through orienting and preparing before coming, but also in communicating when in the Netherlands, and finding comfort in different forms of support found online – the latter being in line with findings by DeAndrea et al. (2012). As an exception, social media were oftentimes avoided to find housing, where specialized platforms were used instead. Nevertheless, social media thus eased the process of settling-in in terms of comfort.

In contrasting the groups culturally, only few differences were found. Often Asian students used Asian-oriented platforms in one's home country and to remain in contact with family and friends at home, connecting to findings by Saw et al. (2013), whereas the platforms used by northwest European students were often similar to the platforms used to connect to peers in the Netherlands. This finding suggests that differences in social media use for maintained ties versus ties in the host country can increase the gap between two countries or cultures, separating lives not only through language or social networks, but also platforms of interaction. Aside from this difference, homesickness seemed slightly stronger among Asian students, having fewer opportunities to connect face-to-face. Nevertheless, differences regarding cultural values, as taken into account, were therefore not found.

Discussion

The focus group discussions showed that the EUR participants had a lot in common with participants in previous research. They helped cover many areas, and recognition found among group members at times sparked enthusiasm. Variety in the groups created discussion that showed differences among individuals. Noteworthy is that the age of the researcher/moderator gave participants a tendency to assume that she knew what they were talking about. Future research would benefit from having a moderator that does not belong to the peer group of the participants. Nevertheless, the discussion of the issue at hand proved fruitful in terms of distinguishing the roles that social media can play during international students' freshmen year.

This study also had limitations. First, this explorative study only covered four programs at one university. While this was done to focus on international programs, this gives a limited insight, potentially specific to the norms used at the EUR. Further exploration of this phenomenon on a larger scale will provide a more clear sense of to what extent these practices are locally bound or internationally applicable. Moreover, although not the focus of this research, it was taken into account that studies found gender differences in social media use (boyd, 2008; Correa et al., 2010). No clear indications of gender differences were found in this research, which could be the result of the uneven distribution of gender among the participants or the group-oriented conversation that, despite its diversity, also generalized the discussion at points. Furthermore, convenience was found as a central theme in this research. This theme needs further in-depth exploration through interviews or surveys in order to get a better understanding of the many ways in which convenience is central to social media use in this context.

Finally, while earlier studies suggest differences between cultural groups (Kim et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2011), this was not distinctly present in this study. A possible explanation for this could be that a general international student identity overruled the importance of cultural values, as one is set in a new environment. Taking boyd's (2008, 2014) perspective of identity, it can be argued that fitting the student identity may have greater importance than sticking to cultural values. An international student would adapt to the Rotterdam environment of international students, as a way to 'survive' socially. Conducting interviews or surveys at one's home country, and repeating this after a year in the host country has the potential to show differences and changes in use. Conducting this research in multiple countries may help to ensure that these are not national or local student identities.

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Appendix A: Overview Respondents

Information Participants Filtered

Pseudonym	Program	Age	Gender	Country	Group
Laura	IBCoM	20	Female	Singaporean	1
Petra	IBA	19	Female	Japanese / Thai	1
Logan	IBACS	21	Male	Vietnamese	1
Clover	IBCoM	18	Female	Vietnamese	1
April	IBCoM	20	Female	Chinese	1
Joanna	IBACS	22	Female	German	2
Christina	IBCoM	19	Female	German	2
Mia	IBACS	22	Female	Finland	2
Amber	IBACS	19	Female	French Belgian	2
Nora	IBACS	20	Female	German	2
Patrick	IBA	21	Male	Swedish	3
Chloe	IBA	20	Female	French	3
Agathe	IBA	18	Female	French	3
Mark	IBACS	25	Male	German	3
Fiona	IBACS	18	Female	German	3
Kendrick	IBCoM	21	Male	German	3
Blair	IBA	19	Female	Thai	4
Lisa	IBA	20	Female	South Korean	4
Kathy	IBA	18	Female	Malaysian	4
Jasper	IBEB	20	Male	Chinese	4
Christine	IBEB	22	Female	Chinese	4
Jeremy	IBACS	22	Male	British	5
Anouk	IBA	19	Female	French	5
Jess	IBA	18	Female	German	5
Henry	IBA	19	Male	French	5
George	IBACS	21	Male	British	5

Appendix B: Topic List

<div align="center">Topic List</div>

The day before:
- Send a message the day before reminding people of the focus group.

In room:
- Set up the table with some drinks, snacks, pens, post it notes, and forms.
- Install cameras. Make sure they're recording.

Introduction
- Welcome
- Explain purpose
- Explain rights and rules (Right to stop or not answer; Video recording; Focus on personal experiences; Talking in turns; Talking to each other; And no right or wrong answers.)
- Define concepts
- Short introductions (if not done beforehand)
- Consent forms

Introduction activity: Association interaction
- Explain the purpose of the assignment.
    - Piece of paper with number of purposes provided by the moderator, and each participant is asked to put a post-it note with a social media platform name (two platforms maximum) they would use for that purpose below.
- Ask if everyone has put on their platforms.
- Make an inventory by discussing the post it notes and grouping them together.
- Place the notes in a position where everyone can see and consult them throughout the focus group.

The questions in the right-most column are suggestions for questions or topics to be covered.

1	Let's go back to when you enrolled for the studies you're currently doing. Comparing the platforms you were using back home to those you are using now: What is the difference in what and how?	
2	I'd like to talk about your enrollment. How did you use social media during that period? → First steps to new start; loss of social capital; start of rebuilding social capital; student identity.	
a	Orienting/Choosing/Enrolling in University	• What role did social media play in orientating, choosing and enrolling in University? (ask friends / use websites / tests / tips) • Did you connect to people from the university beforehand? How did you do this?
b	Exploring the country	• How did social media help you explore the country? (Tips / help / directions / groups)
c	Introduction / orientation events	• How was social media part of orientation events? • What did you learn about social media used in The Netherlands? / Were you introduced to new platforms? • How did social media play a part in meeting people during these events? • How did you connect and/or talk to people on social media during this time?
3	How did you use social media for finding a room? → Dealing with limited social capital; student identity; setting up the basis.	
a	House	Finding and renting • What part did social media play in finding a room? • To what extent was it important to know people to get a room?
b	(Moving) → part of housing	Help from others / services • How important was social media in times of moving? (friends / family / services?) • On your own? Friends? Family? Services? • (Also, for instance, furniture via second hand pages on social media).
4	(How) did you use social media for exploring / connecting to student/study/hobby/sports associations or local organizations? → Student identity; accumulating social capital; cultural values.	
a	Neighborhood	Assimilation in the neighborhood • How did you connect to roommates and neighbors? • How important is this? (Friendship? Feeling safe?) • How did it affect settling in? (easier, harder?)
b	Student / study associations	• What role does social media play in study or student associations? • What role does it play in their events?

c		Hobbies & Interests	(Sports / activities / passions / volunteering) • What role does social media play in hobby and interest groups? • What role does it play in their events? • What purpose does social media have in creating relationships?
d		Language learning	Learning Dutch or other languages? • What role does social media play in learning a new language? (For instance, Dutch) • What purpose does social media have in creating relationships?
5		How did you use social media for meeting people? → Creating friendships (creating and strengthening ties); cultural values; first step to social capital; start of a network.
~		Distinguish between: meeting, establishing and maintaining relationships.	

a		Importance	• What role does social media play in making new friends?
			  o Meeting
			  o Establishing / building
			  o Maintaining
			• What barriers/obstacles were there?

b		Other countries *If not covered at the beginning	International students or Dutch students • How does social media impact your relationship with people from other countries than your home country? • How is your social media used influenced by people from other countries than your home country?
c		Own country *If not covered at the beginning	• What platform do you use with peers from your home country, and why?
d		Language	Selection of medium on language? • Platforms other than English? • Platforms in Dutch?
e		Easy or not?	How easy is this – better than meeting physically? • So: in case of an introverted personality, to what extent do social media make contacting others easier or more difficult than doing so face-to-face? • What is it like in going a step further by establishing and maintaining these friendships?
f		Maintaining	• How important are social media to you? Could you do without? (FOMO)
6		How did you use social media for maintaining contact with people back home? → Maintained social capital; relationship maintenance; loss of social capital.
a		Homesickness	Dealing with loved ones / own culture far away
b		Old friends	Connecting to / missing old friends • How do you keep in contact with your old friends from back home?
c		Family	Connecting to / missing family

			• How do you keep in contact with your family?
d		Importance	• How important is maintaining this contact? • What do you feel you get out of maintaining this contact?
		Connecting two worlds/lives	• Fear of Missing Out? • Projecting an image on SNS.
7	How do you use social media for school purposes? → Educational purposes; student identity; weak ties (classmates, professors, staff) and tie development.		
a		Contact with professors	• Do you connect to professors online? • How do you deal with this? • What platforms would you use? • Do you think you can be friends with professors on social media? Are you? Why?
b		Classmates	• Do you connect to your classmates? • How strong is the bond? • Do you have a specific social medium that you use as a group? • What would happen if you couldn't be part of that platform? Is that even an option?
c		Projects	Use of social media for group work • What platform? • Who suggested it? (On who does it depend?) • Did you become closer to people? • How does it affect the projects itself?
d		Homework / Research	• Discussing homework with classmates or using it to find answers. • Do you use social media for research purposes? (use social network to fill in questionnaires, etc.)
8	- Shortly summarize and discuss. - Is there anything that you find important that we haven't discussed? - Thank for participating, inform about the outcome and gift cards.		