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Understanding Students' Perceived Benefits of International Multicourse Collaborative Projects

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Understanding students' perceived benefits of international multicourse collaborative projects

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Background. Collaborative learning allows students to develop not only knowledge but also interpersonal and communication skills as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills (e.g., Looi, Chen, & Ng, 2010). Collaborative learning in an international setting enhances students' learning by broadening their scope of knowledge and applications (Chen, Hsu, & Caropreso, 2006). Social technologies (e.g., social network sites [SNSs]) benefit instructors and students by facilitating knowledge exchange, improving apprehension, and fostering socialization and community among students (Ryan, Margro, & Sharp, 2011). Thus, an international multicourse collaborative project (IMCP) was developed to provide students with an opportunity to understand the unique retail systems and diverse consumer demands in different countries and to develop the students' communication skills by collaboratively working with members from different cultural backgrounds using Facebook as a communication tool. The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of the benefits of IMCP.

Theoretical Framework. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) define social capital as "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit" (p. 243). Social capital has multi-dimensions, including cognitive and relational dimensions, which influence the development of new intellectual capital (i.e., knowledge and knowing capability of a social group). Social capital exists in relationships created through exchange and is a valuable source of information benefits (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Therefore, in IMCPs, students' existing knowledge and capability to solve the problems may create new intellectual capital (e.g., learning outcomes) through the process of exchange among group members.

Implementation. This project involved students in two retailing courses and two merchandising courses in the U.S. and S. Korea. The students' task was to develop business plans and merchandising strategies to expand their assigned business into the U.S. or S. Korea. In each course, four groups were created and each group worked on a different retailer. In the first part of the project, students conducted in-depth market research for the assigned retailer in the home country. Through the project Facebook, students shared their projects with students in other courses. Based on the information from the first part of the project, students in each country conducted an in-depth analysis of different cultural environments and potential competitors in the country to enter and created entry strategies. Each group developed an audio-recorded PowerPoint presentation, converted it into a video, and uploaded it to the project Facebook. Students used Facebook to post questions, feedback, or comments.

Method. Students in the four courses participated in the survey: 33 students enrolled in visual merchandising and global retailing courses in a Southeast university in the U.S. and 63

students enrolled in fashion buying and merchandising and fashion retailing courses in S. Korean universities. The survey included questions asking about students' perceptions of the benefits of the IMCP (open-ended question), satisfaction with the project (a 5-point Likert-type scale), and demographic and course information. It was conducted in class after the final project presentation. Bilingual faculty members created the questionnaire in English and Korean.

Results. The respondents were 22 years old on average, mostly female (73%), and juniors or seniors (82%). Students tended to be satisfied with the project and to consider that the outcomes of the project exceeded their expectation ($M = 4.0$). To identify emerging themes, students' comments on the benefits of the project were coded by two researchers. Discrepancies between coders were solved on a consensus basis. Among U.S. students, the most frequently mentioned benefit was related to *cultural understanding* (51.5%; “[The project] gave us insight into the culture and society of another country which was really awesome.”). Other themes include *understanding the different fashion industry and market in S. Korea* (24.2%; “It was neat to learn about the fashion industry in another part of the world. It was very different from ours and I enjoyed a look inside what it is like”), *providing an opportunity to interact and communicate with students in another culture* (24.2%), and *using Facebook as a communication tool* (3.3%). Among Korean students, the most frequently addressed benefit was *learning a different perspective through communication and interaction with U.S. students* (39.7%; “It was a great opportunity to communicate with U.S. students and compare different perspectives”). Ten out of 63 (15.9%) students mentioned *the use of Facebook as a communication tool* as a benefit of the project (“I was able to use Facebook usefully and immediately notice when someone uploads information such as projects or feedback”). Other benefits identified were *understanding the U.S. fashion industry* (14.3%) and *cultural understanding* (7.9%).

Discussions and Future Plan. This study identified students' perceived benefits of IMCP using Facebook: (1) understanding different cultures, (2) understanding the fashion industry in different countries, (3) communicating and interacting with students in different cultures, and (4) using Facebook as communication tool. It is interesting to note that *understanding a different culture* was the most frequently mentioned benefit among U.S. students, whereas *communicating and interacting with U.S. students* was the most frequently addressed among Korean students. We will continue to implement this project with different courses and different countries while incorporating SNSs. Future IMCPs may use Instagram, a more visual-driven SNS format.

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