
Transforming Online Ties in Tools for Entrepreneurial Learning Readiness in Small Transition Economies

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Abstract

Online social networks create the opportunity to increase and expand network ties, they provide a new channel that widens weak ties and intensifies stronger ties. Broad and diverse social network is linked to entrepreneurial success. Learning is an essential dimension of entrepreneurial network.

Entrepreneurs may benefit from expertise and they can exploit future entrepreneurial learning opportunities. This paper explores the entrepreneurial learning leverage that young students enrolled in higher education system can get from online ties in small transition economies focusing in Western Balkan region and more precisely in Albania comparing with a small-developed county such as Estonia. The paper explains how young student are ready to use online ties for entrepreneurial opportunity recognition. Further online learning strategies are explored through focus group analysis and blog analysis. Young students use online ties for entrepreneurial knowledge sharing. The study concludes with the suggestion of a typology of entrepreneurial learning orientation strategies.

Keywords: online ties, international entrepreneurial learning, knowledge sharing, learning strategies, learning tools

Introduction

Young students both in advanced market economies and in developing economies have integrated online social networking tools to their daily activities. These tools are not used just for leisure or relational activities but as well for academic and professional purposes. Online social networks have unused potential facilitating the process of creating and maintaining business relationships of young potential entrepreneurs. A new kind of ties emerge which are different from the offline ties because the relationship is maintained virtually and the geographical scope of this ties can be global.

Entrepreneurship networking is essential because it provides new entrepreneurial opportunity discovery and resource finding process for venture creation [1]. Online social networks and online ties can be part of the synergy of the learning process, especially for young students which are very familiar with online social networking tools. They however need deeper knowledge, how to relate their existing social networking practices to online networking tools that support discovering new entrepreneurial opportunities and knowledge that is relevant for entrepreneurial initiatives.

Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2012-2014 Estonian surveys have demonstrated the role of cross-border ties in developing ambitious internationally oriented entrepreneurial initiatives but also networking needs of early-stage entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs representing international growth ambitions and innovation focus have often relied on knowledge sharing with people

arriving from other countries while entrepreneurs that were domestically focused trust more their close friends and spouses as business knowledge sources [2].

In small transition economies such as Albania, online social networks are accessible from young students like in every part of the world. There is however lack of awareness for integrating them in the entrepreneurial learning process and personal self-development efforts. The aim of this paper is to study how online ties in the context of online social networks can contribute to online entrepreneurial learning, knowledge sharing and entrepreneurial learning culture for young students in small transition economy such as Albania, compared with a more developed economy such as Estonia. An exploratory study with young students from University “Aleksander Moisiu” Durres in Albania and Estonian Business School in Tallinn Estonia is presented. The study is focused in the research problem how online ties influence student entrepreneurial learning and how online ties can influence the establishment of an entrepreneurial learning culture.

A questionnaire was distributed to 130 young students in both countries during spring semester of the academic year 2016/2017, focus groups were applied in Albania during spring semester of the academic year 2016/2017 and the posts of the blog of the course Business in Virtual Networks at Estonian Business School were analysed for the year 2016 and 2017.

In the second section of the paper theoretical constructs are explained, research gaps are identified theoretical gaps in terms of online ties, entrepreneurial learning, knowledge sharing and entrepreneurial cultural context. Methodology of the empirical research and data analysis results are presented respectively in the third and fourth section, results are analysed in the fifth section concluding in the sixth section with discussion and conclusions.

Literature Review

Online ties as emerging social ties for youth entrepreneurship

Structural dimension of face-to-face social networks is related to the heterogeneity of network ties, which are a main feature of network structure. Network structure influences business development and entrepreneurial learning of young students because entrepreneurship is a situational exchange of resources and opportunities [3] and the relational dimension of face-to-face social networks (social network ties) influence business development [4].

The degree of the strength of a tie that can be defined as the intensity of interaction and the diversity of relationships or the amount of time emotional intensity and the reciprocal services that characterize the tie [5]. Face-to-face social network ties are divided in two main categories: weak ties or wider ties and strong ties. Strong ties usually refer to closer social interaction such as friends and family with whom there is closer emotional interaction and contact, [6] whereas with weak ties there is not close interaction. Weak ties seem to be less connected within face-to-face social network compared to strong ties. [7] focuses on weak ties as they can serve as a bridge of connection even between face-to-face social networks with strong ties. Recent studies on the role of weak ties have given evidence that information environments with rapidly changing information overlap between actors can diminish the information novelty enabled by weak ties. The meaning of novelty has to be however specified depending on the aims of networkers [8]. Social media allows online tie formation and connecting different networks without necessarily being linked to specific time or place [9]. That may be essential for early-stage cross-border knowledge sharing and business initiatives of young students.

The increasing specialization of entrepreneurs and firms creates the necessity for more information and knowledge, which can be provided from online ties, and they can help to overcome

external business environmental shock. Networks are particularly important for small and medium enterprises and young entrepreneurs as they provide a unique opportunity to access business related information and knowledge sources [10]. Gathering information through social networks is usually a cheaper option [11], networks provide the conduct through which private information flows.

Developing both weak and strong ties for young entrepreneurs is crucial because as simplistic as it can be networking for and entrepreneur means basically making new “friends” or “contacts” or using the leverage that they can get from the current “friends” or contacts in order to advance in their business and achieve desirable results. The more developed is the network in terms of ties and particularity in terms of quality of ties the more beneficial it will be for the young entrepreneur rather than a less developed network [12]. Although only certain young entrepreneurs can recognize innovative and cross-border entrepreneurial opportunities. Usually those who succeed have previous information and social networks make it easy to obtain information that can require years [13]. For [14] strong ties are more beneficial for entrepreneurs from a point view of knowledge sharing because they imply trust but knowledge sharing opportunities for entrepreneurs can from other sources than family members or closer friends [15]. Stronger ties provide “economies of time” because they will reduce help to reduce the time spent in monitoring business opportunities. Strong ties are useful to entrepreneurs who face high degree of uncertainty and insecurity especially in developing countries or small transition economies because they provide protection. On the other hand, strong ties are vulnerable to external shocks [16].

The increasing use of internet intensified the virtual connection between people worldwide, in business entrepreneurs could benefit from larger circles [17] having as a consequence the formation of three categories of social capital [18]: network capital, commitment capital and participatory capital. It is supposed that generally internet can contribute to strengthen strong ties and wider weak ties.

Online social networks are as well one of the greatest consequences of the development of the internet, they provide an establishing, maintaining and mediating of relationships through online social media platforms that can be used for business purposes such as Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn or Instagram. [19] have pointed out found that Twitter users had the highest bridging social capital, followed by Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat, while Snapchat users had the highest bonding social capital, followed by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Bridging social capital can enhance discovering new business opportunities and concept whereas bonding ties may be needed at later stages of a new business initiative, when trust becomes essential for developing co-creative teamwork.

Online ties are related traditionally to virtual interaction, but they cannot be considered only as weak ties just because their virtual dimension as example LinkedIn second degree and third-degree contacts are an opportunity to wider weak contacts for entrepreneurial purposes [20]. An online tie can be strong or weak depending on the intensity of interaction and diversity of relationships that they provide, an offline tie that is related to face-to-face interaction within the network can be as well weak or strong depending on the intensity of interaction and the diversity of relationships [21].

Online ties can add value to establish, mediate and maintain core social relationships for young entrepreneurs [22] but there is a need of transference of experiences from offline to online context.

Broad and diverse online social network is crucial for entrepreneurial success; venture capitalists usually monitor online social networking platforms for entrepreneurial opportunities.

Another dimension that counts defining online ties as social ties that influence youth entrepreneurship is cultural context; perceptions around online social networks may vary in

different cultures, in individualist societies weaker ties are supposed to persist, in collectivist societies stronger ties are supposed to dominate [23].

Yet the online dimension refines the social dimension of the network especially for young entrepreneurs which can get leverage from ties in terms of knowledge, learning and business opportunities especially in small transition economies such as Albania because they act as bridges that are easier to build compared to a face-to-face context. Entrepreneurial knowledge sharing is a main advantage that young students benefit from online ties.

Entrepreneurial knowledge sharing through online ties

The emergence of knowledge-based entrepreneurship and the recognition of knowledge as one of the key factors that determines competitive advantage for entrepreneurs are making it crucial to understand and develop knowledge management tools that can be useful for the entrepreneur. One of the most relevant dimensions of knowledge management for the young entrepreneur involved in online social networks is knowledge sharing in order to find and use business opportunities.

Knowledge sharing is influenced by informal sharing context that includes personal relationships and networks [24]. Knowledge sharing process usually start with a process of storage [25], the personal dimension of knowledge sharing is empathized through face-to-face meetings, informal communication and it influences the way that entrepreneurs cooperate and communicate.

The strength of ties can affect knowledge sharing; stronger ties would lead to interaction that is more frequent and would facilitate the process of knowledge sharing [26]. Sharing knowledge with weak ties would to an access of new and unique knowledge because weak ties provide information and knowledge that goes beyond the social circle [27] and even the level of interaction is low knowledge sharing still can occur [28].

Online social networks are perceived as new emerging paradigm in knowledge management.

Online social networking tools enable the entrepreneur to share knowledge and to get expertise in the virtual context thus such networks can be defined as e-participation platforms that encourage collaboration, socialization, openness, creation and knowledge sharing among a community of users [29]. Online social networks provide communication, connecting, collaboration; compelling and combining additionally online social networks provide transparency and authenticity [30] which can facilitate entrepreneurial knowledge sharing process for the young students in the context of a small transition economy.

For the young students it is crucial to determine knowledge sharing priorities in online social networks according to the different stages of its entrepreneurial projects and to the entrepreneurial orientation. The co-creative entrepreneur prefers to share knowledge in networks which allow access to open innovation, imitative entrepreneur prefers to share knowledge will closer strong face-to-face ties and individualist entrepreneur does not rely much on networks as possibility of knowledge sharing [31]. Entrepreneurial knowledge sharing process in online social networks in the context of higher education institution is associated with young student learning.

Entrepreneurial learning in online social networks: a matter of “strength” of online ties?

Online social networks are popular and accessible from everyone, they provide new opportunities for preparing learners in the 21st century through facilitating knowledge sharing but as well, they enhance collaboration [32]. Online social networks through distance interactions allow the accumulation of content of the time, which creates a sort of collaborative knowledge.

Online social networks provide unique learning environments through better communication and collaboration [33].and individuals need to rely on non-formal learning approaches through the

development of learning networks. Young student as digital people use online social networks for learning [34], they have access to a kind of knowledge and experience that they cannot have through formal education classroom methods on entrepreneurial learning [35].

The features of online social networks facilitate delivery, development and management of learning process. Digital natives process information and knowledge differently from previous generations in e-participatory learning environments, they exhibit specific preferences in learning in online social networks which includes quick and easily accessible information [36] with an immediate feedback [37].

Online social networks are used both to maintain existing contact and to create new contact, in terms of online ties, online social networks provide new ways to connect with digital natives who share their interest and their goals. Young students who rely only in strong ties for learning purposes will be deprived from knowledge and business opportunities that come from weaker ties that might be in online social networks.

More recent research in learning in online social networks shows that in order to enable individuals to learn in the context of online social networks, relationships build within the online social network context and the online social network itself should topic-based and with simple peer-to-peer relations [38]. Formal and non-formal education should enable young students to get to know entrepreneurial learning opportunities from online social networks as benefit of the quick digitalization process and it provides a new flexible way of learning that can be accommodated by the young entrepreneurs, online ties can be a learning intermediary.

Methodology

The aim of this exploratory research is to determine how online ties can influence online entrepreneurial learning within the context of online social networks in small transition economies in Western Balkan Region in Europe such as Albania that can be classified as high context, collectivist society.

Young students in Albania are digital born young people part of the global digital village but in Albania there are still problems of digital divide and digital policy gaps as in most countries in the region but efforts are being done in terms of raising community awareness. Online social networks can be an educational tool for entrepreneurial learning that can compensate traditional curricula offered formal higher education institutions. Entrepreneurial learning through online social networks is an unexplored phenomenon in the context of Albania but it can be a leverage for young students from online social networking. Online social networks can widen the learning opportunities and can make young students more connected especially in the context of small transition economies. Comparison can be made in order to share examples of best practices of the use of online social networks for entrepreneurial learning from Estonia, which is a small country in Europe but part of OECD and European Union with several achievements in terms of digitalization, digital policy, innovation and entrepreneurship policy.

In this study, mixed-methods are used. The sample of the study is composed by 130 young business students enrolled at the third year of Bachelor Degree and first and second year of Master Degree at the University “Aleksander Moisiu” Durres and 43 young students enrolled at 2nd and 3rd year of Bachelor Degree in International Business at Estonian Business School, in Tallinn Estonia.

Triangulation is conducted through gathering primary data through the distribution of a survey to young business students in Durres and in Tallinn during the spring semester of the academic year 2016/2017. Four focus groups composed of young business students were realized in Durres

during the spring semester of the academic year 2016/2017 and secondary data from the course Business in Virtual Networks which contains students posts dating from the year 2010 but for this study posts of the year 2016 and 2017 were taken into account, in total for this time period there are 130 post from students.

The questionnaire contains 24 questions that combine open-ended questions, Likert scale questions and closed questions. There are questions about online ties and entrepreneurial learning outcome from online social networks. Students were also asked to assess their online social networking priorities and their online social networking skills priorities. Survey serves just to identify the general trends; there was a need to study in-depth online social networking ties, online social network learning and online social network knowledge sharing through focus groups and posts of the blog of the course Business in Virtual Networks.

Focus groups in Durres were organized with three groups of eight students each from the 3rd year of Bachelor Degree in Business Administration and 2nd year of Master Degree in Business Administration based on the fact that Entrepreneurship and Small and Medium Business Management is part of the course curricula and on the fact if they had some kind of participation in informal events connected to youth student entrepreneurship such as Startup weekends, they were moderated by an external moderator other than the lecturer in order to not bias the process.

were to be effective focus group questions were open-ended and they moved from general to more specific questions about online social network usage in general, entrepreneurial learning in general, the influence that online ties have in general for students and more specifically for entrepreneurial learning and how the cultural context accommodated knowledge sharing in online social networks.

Secondary data were collected from the posts of the blog of the course Business in Virtual Networks at Estonian Business School. Students posted and commented each other posts on the use of online social networks focus on a large amount of specific and specialized online social networks that does not include traditional online social networks with massive use such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram or Google+, an emphasis is put on advantages and disadvantages of these networks for entrepreneurial purposes. 130 posts where analyzed.

Data analysis

The questionnaire was used to determine general trends or online networking orientation of young students in Albania and in Estonia, the leverage that this study gets from the questionnaire is a description of general trends in online social networking ties. General descriptive statistics are presented in order to identify trends.

Focus groups were recorded, transcribed and translated from Albanian into English, data were coded using axial coding, codes were organized in themes and themes were organized in global wider themes. The most important step of data collection is encoding which consists in creating codes and organizing them in wider themes (Florentine, 2006). The encoding can be theoretical, thematic and global analysis. In this study was used thematic encoding. There were identified 40 codes and 4 themes.

Posts from the course Business in Virtual Networks were analyzed creating codes and organizing codes in themes and themes in wider themes. There were identified 20 codes and 2 main themes.

Results

Results from survey

Online ties versus Face-to-Face ties related to business opportunity recognition and knowledge sharing were compared based on questionnaire results. In Table 1, trends in using online social networks to find and discuss about business ideas of young Albanian students and young Estonian students are compared considering the fact if students in both countries will have intention to start their entrepreneurial project abroad. The scale of measurement in the survey was a five-point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree and 5=strongly agree, mean is used to compare the two groups. As it is shown in the table, young students in both countries tend to rely equally to face-to-face ties and online ties. The most relevant face-to-face tie for Albanian students who want to start their entrepreneurial project abroad is students from other universities and mentors whereas for students in Estonia who want to start their project abroad the most relevant face-to-face tie mentors followed by friends. For Albanian students who do not want to start their entrepreneurial project abroad the strongest face-to-face tie is entrepreneurs followed by mentors and in Estonia close friends followed by entrepreneurs. Online social networks are perceived almost equally in both countries having a mean score that varies from 3.5-3.6 between neutral and agree. Table shows as well that family is a face-to-face tie that is not so preferred for entrepreneurial purposes by students in both countries. In Estonia, students will rely more experienced to their closest circle such as friends whereas in Albania students will rely more entrepreneurs. Mentors are an important face-to-face tie in both countries, there is no huge difference between online, and offline ties preferences.

Table 1. Comparison Online Ties vs Face-to-Face Ties for Young Albanian and Young Estonian students based on their willingness to start their entrepreneurial project abroad

| Online Ties vs Face-to-Face Ties for Entrepreneurial Readiness | Young Albanian Students | | Young Estonian Students | |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| | Willing to start business abroad 35 individuals | Not willing to start business abroad 57 individuals | Willing to start business abroad 16 individuals | Not willing to start business abroad 22 individuals |
| Family | 3.7 | 3.3 | 3.7 | 3.4 |
| Close Friends | 4 | 3.6 | 3.9 | 3.9 |
| Students in my university | 3.5 | 3.2 | 3.7 | 3.8 |
| Students in other universities | 4.4 | 3.3 | 3.2 | 3.5 |
| Entrepreneurs | 4 | 4.3 | 3.7 | 4 |
| Mentors | 3.8 | 4 | 4.2 | 3.9 |
| E-mentors | 3 | 3.8 | 3 | 3 |
| Online Social Networks | 3.6 | 3.4 | 3.5 | 3.5 |

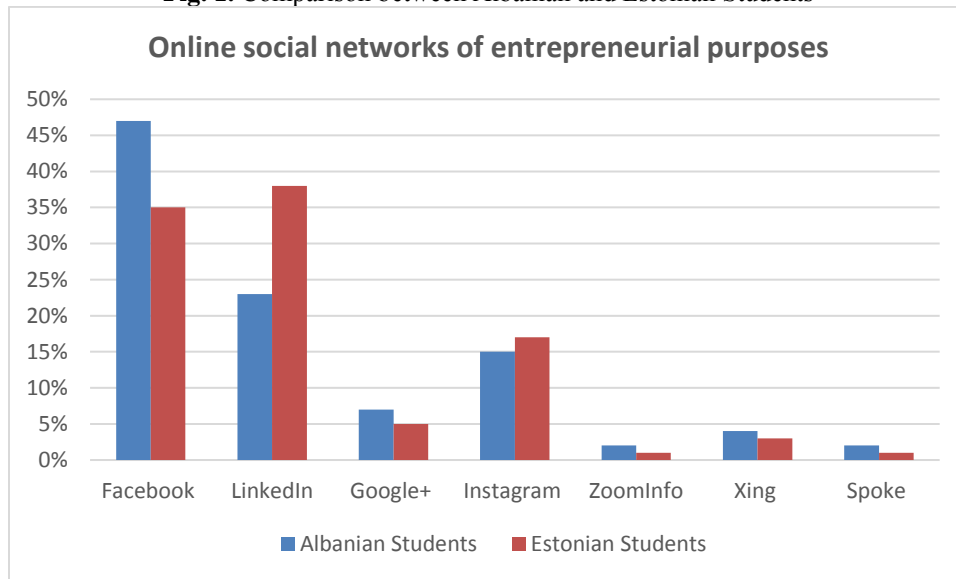
In Table 2 Online Ties and Face-to-Face Ties are compared for Young Albanian Students and Young Estonian Students based on their previous entrepreneurial experience using means of the sample. As it is shown in Table 2, there is not significant difference in terms of using networking ties for entrepreneurial purposes between those who already have entrepreneurial experience and those who do not have entrepreneurial experience. Young students tend to rely on mentors and entrepreneurs in both countries. Young Estonian Students who have already entrepreneurial experience use more than the other sub-groups in both countries online social networks as online entrepreneurial ties.

Table 2. Comparison Online Ties vs Face-to-Face Ties for Young Albanian and Young Estonian students based on their entrepreneurial experience

| Online Ties vs Face-to-Face Ties for Entrepreneurial Readiness | Young Albanian Students | | Young Estonian Students | |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| | Entrepreneurial Experience 11 individuals | No Entrepreneurial Experience 82 individuals | Entrepreneurial Experience 18 individuals | No Entrepreneurial Experience 19 individuals |
| Family | 4 | 3.4 | 3.5 | 3.4 |
| Close Friends | 4.4 | 3.7 | 3.9 | 3.9 |
| Students in my university | 3.5 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 3.9 |
| Students in other universities | 3.4 | 3.4 | 3.3 | 3.5 |
| Entrepreneurs | 4 | 4.5 | 4 | 3.9 |
| Mentors | 4 | 4 | 4.1 | 3.9 |
| E-mentors | 3.7 | 3.7 | 3 | 3.2 |
| Online Social Networks | 3.5 | 3.4 | 3.8 | 3.6 |

Online networking priorities for business purposes

Fig. 1. Comparison between Albanian and Estonian Students



47% Students in Albania prefer using Facebook for entrepreneurial purposes, 38% Estonian students prefer LinkedIn. This is due to the notoriety of LinkedIn as online social network in Albania. Instagram is it is becoming a relevant online social network used for entrepreneurial purposes in both countries respectively for 15% of Albanian students and 17% of Estonian students.

Instagram as online social network offers the possibility not just to visualize experience in online social network but it is becoming a network where online ties can become effective for business purposes. Students in both countries tend to not prefer other online social networks for entrepreneurial purposes.

Entrepreneurial learning in online social networks (Facebook vs LinkedIn).

Fig. 2. Facebook online learning priorities comparison

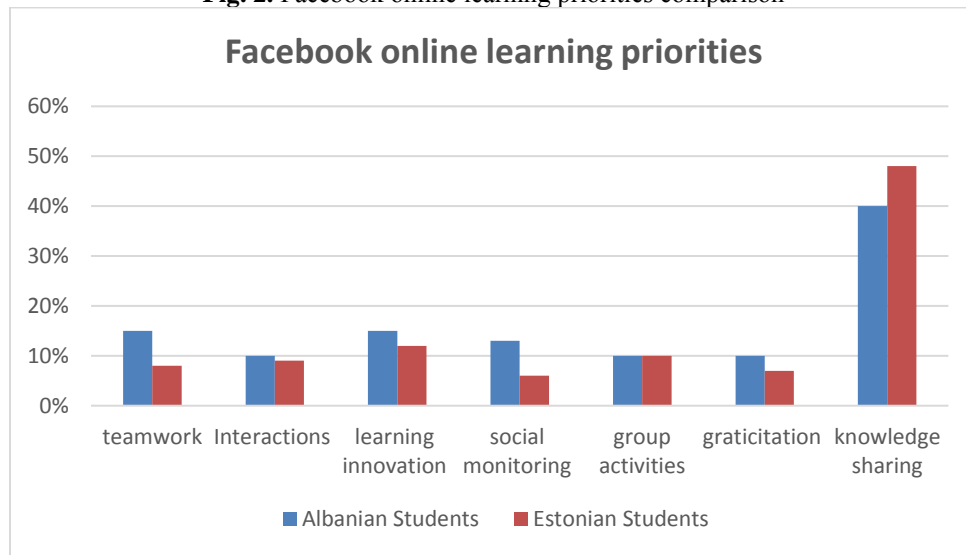
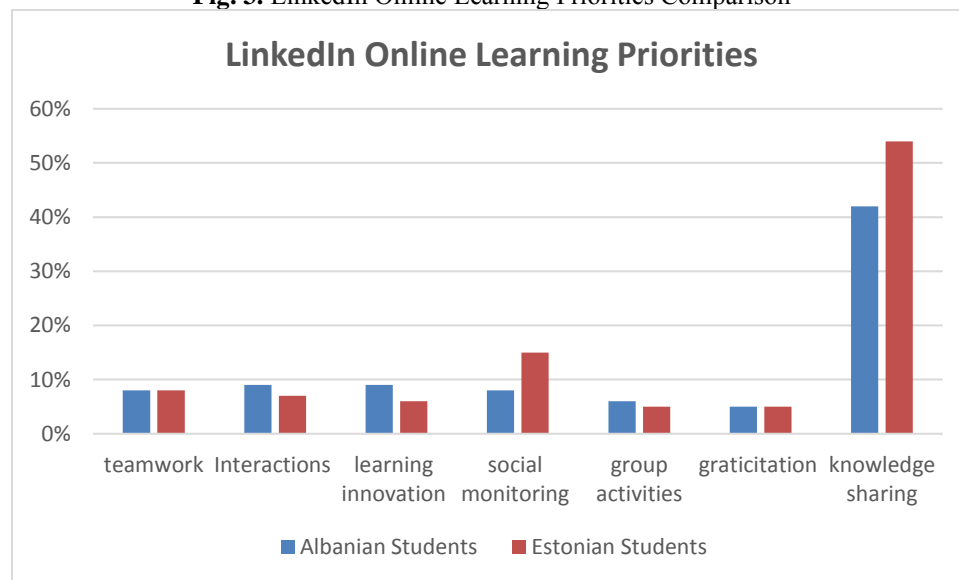


Fig. 3. LinkedIn Online Learning Priorities Comparison



Knowledge sharing is the main reason that facilitates learning process in Facebook and in LinkedIn I both countries although 52% students in Estonia prefer to share knowledge through LinkedIn. Social monitoring is more effective in Facebook as learning priority for 13% of Albanian students and for 16% of Estonian Students is more effective in Facebook. Teamwork is more relevant in Facebook as a learning priority for Albanian students compared to Estonian students; this can be due to the informal perception of the configuration of this online social network.

Learning innovation is more relevant in Facebook for students in both countries. Interaction is more important in Facebook compared to LinkedIn for Estonian students, for Albania student interaction, as entrepreneurial learning priority is the same in Facebook and LinkedIn. Group activities are more important in Facebook for students in both countries with 10% respectively.

Gratification is more important in Facebook for students in Albania with 10%, for students in Estonia there is no difference between Facebook and LinkedIn.

Overall, from the survey, in both countries, students do not make a significant difference between online and offline ties for entrepreneurial opportunity recognition in online social networks, for starting a new entrepreneurial project or for sharing business ideas. Online social networking preferences for entrepreneurial purposes in both countries are dominated by Facebook and LinkedIn followed up by Instagram.

As learning priorities, they focus in knowledge sharing process, teamwork, social monitoring and interaction in Facebook and LinkedIn that are connected to online ties. In focus group and blog analysis is explored further how online ties can be explored further for entrepreneurial learning purposes in online social networks and how differently young students can strategically learn through online social ties compared to face-to-face ties and how these ties can affect entrepreneurial culture.

Focus Group Results

Four main themes were identified after encoding process:

Theme 1: Online entrepreneurial ties

Participants of the focus groups did not make any distinction between online and offline ties for entrepreneurial purposes. As a participant would mention

“...it is true that at the end of the day the interaction is virtual but what you get from the network after all is real, if there is something interesting to discuss about entrepreneurial projects than why not...”

Although participants in the focus group assume that in Albania, we prefer face-to-face contact traditionally but due to the specific business environment of the country that is small economy still in transition young students would rely to also to entrepreneurial opportunities that come from online ties. One participant took as an example that many of the events where he participated with his business idea were found by him through Facebook rather than from his daily interaction with his face-to-face ties.

Online ties cannot be categorized as online social ties within the context of online social networks for the young student but those ties in the context of entrepreneurial learning can be defined as online entrepreneurial ties, which are a complement to face-to-face entrepreneurial ties.

Theme 2: Learning through online entrepreneurial ties in different online social networks

“...you can get the information you need everywhere, but yet depends on the network and on how well do you know the network...”

Participants in the focus group admitted that online social networks are overloaded with information, yet it is important in the process of entrepreneurial learning to assess entrepreneurial knowledge learning priorities before you undertake the learning process. It is easy and costless to share knowledge in online social network but it is important to make an assessment of entrepreneurial knowledge expertise in online social networking. “... it is about to know what do you know already and what do you what to need to know from the network, and if there is any kind of expert in the network...”. For some kind of knowledge about certain business ideas or when there is the pre-start phase of the entrepreneurial project Facebook is better, a simple status update is very useful, to get more formalized knowledge and expertise LinkedIn is more useful, it is like

a business card network. Yet for those young people who are more involved into e-commerce or visual project, Instagram is more useful. Online entrepreneurial ties are useful in any case.

Theme 3: Entrepreneurial strategic learning and entrepreneurial learning strategies

“... learning in online social networks means that you cannot be egoist and you are not alone”

commented one of the participants. Online social networks facilitate distant virtual collaboration.

Entrepreneurial strategic learning means learning efficiently (costless and in real-time) for young students and effectively (when it is needed). Although there is a distinction between being a constant entrepreneurial learner in online social networks through permanently and collaboratively e-participating and sharing entrepreneurial knowledge in online social networks and relying constantly in online entrepreneurial ties or casual entrepreneurial learner in online social networks who takes advantage of learning through online entrepreneurial ties according to environment and opportunities.

Theme 4: Online entrepreneurial learning collaborative culture

Online entrepreneurial learning is perceived as a complement to traditional entrepreneurial learning in higher education institutions. There is a lack of entrepreneurial culture in Albania, this is due to structural problems caused by transition by as well for participants it is matter of national culture that traditionally is not oriented towards entrepreneurship. Although establishing an entrepreneurial culture is, feasible and entrepreneurial, learning and transferring best practices can make this process possible. Accordingly, participants agree that online learning and international online entrepreneurial ties and entrepreneurial collaborative orientation can influence positively the establishment of such entrepreneurial culture.

Results from blog analysis

Two main themes were identified after the analysis of the posts in the blog.

Theme 1: Online entrepreneurial knowledge

The most interesting outcome from the analysis of the post in blog of the course Business in Virtual Networks is the variety of the networks analysed apart from the traditional networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn; there are different interesting online social networks useful for entrepreneurial knowledge even if they are not designed specifically for entrepreneurial knowledge. The majority of post about online social networks analysis for entrepreneurial purposes were other networks and not the traditional networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn.

One example mentioned is Digg which is a news aggregator and selects stories for internet audience.

“By using Digg, you can acquire business-related knowledge, since it includes nearly all trending issues that people find important. As Digg users can add friends to their networks, it is a social network as well. One can for example promote their blog through Digg. If you share lots of articles that others find worthwhile through your blog on Digg, you can attract traffic to it.”

Some examples are more local such as Jam (Facebook) in France that is a virtual assistant that any student dreams to have, jam has even a feature for the creation of a new business, or Investly in Estonia or crowdfunding websites such as start next in Germany.

Theme 2: Online ties as a matter of connection

In the blog students posted frequently analysis of the apps that people use for the daily communication such as What's App or Messenger. Those apps have a main advantage connectivity and getting real time feedback from online ties, although What's App is more private because it involves phone number sharing. Messenger feature added value to Facebook.

“Using also Facebook Messenger a group can be connected 24/7 if needed”.

Groups can be used in professional and job offering/seeking purposes. Usually in these groups there are limited number of members who are able to add new members or one can apply a membership which is then evaluated. These groups utilize transitivity and composability.”

Online social networks imply connectivity and collaboration. Some online social networks in blog posts were perceived as more as facilitators for face-to-face ties such as for example Slack that allows the creation of online working spaces.

Discussion and Conclusions

Online social network ties emerge as online entrepreneurial ties that determine entrepreneurial opportunity recognition with a not very significant distinction from face-to-face ties in both countries. There are no significant distinctions between students in both countries in terms of using online social network ties and face-to-face ties in terms of entrepreneurial opportunity recognition if willingness to start and entrepreneurial project abroad or entrepreneurial experience are taken into consideration. Results were confirmed by focus groups and blog analysis which precise that online social networking ties can be online entrepreneurial ties for young students in Albania and in Estonia complementing and facilitating collaboration through face-to-face strong or weak ties.

Facebook and LinkedIn are the main online social networks used for entrepreneurial learning purposes by young students in Albania and Estonia. Young students in Albania tend to prefer Facebook and young students in Estonia tend to prefer LinkedIn. This is due to the perception and notoriety of these networks in both countries. Facebook usage in Albania is very expanded especially among young students and it is perceived as a “all in one” network, LinkedIn is more popular and more functional in Estonia and it is considered a more dedicated network towards professionalism. Albanian young students barely know LinkedIn and its functionalities.

Knowledge sharing, teamwork, social monitoring, interaction, connectivity and collaboration are the main learning priorities through online social ties. Students define online entrepreneurial learning in online social networks as complementary learning method of traditional entrepreneurial learning. Thus, online entrepreneurial learning strategies such collaborative learning strategy and casual learning strategy can lead to the creation of online entrepreneurial culture especially in the case of Albania but there should be more awareness towards non-traditional and complementary entrepreneurial learning methods. Online entrepreneurial learning can contribute to establish a new entrepreneurial learning culture that influences entrepreneurial readiness especially in Albania.

The main assumptions of this exploratory study are:

Assumption 1: There is no distinction between online social ties and face-to-face ties for entrepreneurial opportunity recognition for young students in Albania and Estonia.

Assumption 1a: Online social ties complement face-to-face ties for entrepreneurial opportunity recognition for young students in Albania and in Estonia.

Assumption 2: Online ties are connected to online entrepreneurial learning in online social networks.

Assumption 2a: Assessing learning priorities is crucial for online collaborative learning for young students.

Assumption 2b: Online entrepreneurial learning creates online entrepreneurial learning culture and environment complementary to traditional entrepreneurial education especially in transition economies.

The main limit of this study is the sample itself as it is composed only by young students enrolled in the higher education system in a small transition economy such as Albania and a comparison with Estonia which a small developed European Country.

There could be suitable for further research to operationalize some of the themes identified as variables and further study factors of online entrepreneurial learning and online learning ties in terms of empirical quantitative research in order to determine to what extent network ties determine online entrepreneurial learning and online entrepreneurial readiness.

In order to have more outcome in terms of online ties in youth entrepreneurial projects and sharing of best practices and knowledge, there could be interesting to build some kind of joint virtual action learning project that involves online teams and study how online team ties because young students in both countries influence knowledge sharing for entrepreneurial projects and business opportunity recognition and development. Online entrepreneurial learning can further contribute to the evolution entrepreneurial education in any cultural context and can establish a new flexible entrepreneurial culture which combines formal and informal learning strategies.

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