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POSSIBILITIES OF USING ONLINE NETWORK COMMUNITIES IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS TO DEVELOP PROFESSIONAL SKILLS IN STUDENTS

POSIBILIDADES DE UTILIZAR COMUNIDADES DE RED EN LÍNEA EN EL PROCESO EDUCATIVO PARA DESARROLLAR COMPETENCIAS PROFESIONALES EN LOS ESTUDIANTES

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the study is to provide theoretical substantiation for the expediency of an online community for customer communication to train undergraduate students in tourism for professional interaction with consumers of tourist services. Through the methods of systemic analysis and theoretical generalization, the study analyzes scientific perspectives on using social media communities to train future specialists in the framework of higher education. The paper presents the results of a survey of university teachers on using social media communities to train tourism specialists to professionally interact with customers. The article also reports the results of a survey of tourism students on the advantages of using social media in vocational training. The authors substantiate the expediency of creating a virtual community in the form of an online community for communication with potential clients for practical training of future tourism specialists for professional interaction with clients.

Keywords:

Students, tourism specialists, virtual community, professional interaction with customers, online community.

RESUMEN

El objetivo del estudio es fundamentar teóricamente la conveniencia de una comunidad en línea para la comunicación con el cliente para capacitar a estudiantes de pregrado en turismo para la interacción profesional con los consumidores de servicios turísticos. A través de métodos de análisis sistémico y generalización teórica, el estudio analiza perspectivas científicas sobre el uso de las comunidades de redes sociales para formar futuros especialistas en el marco de la educación superior. El artículo presenta los resultados de una encuesta realizada a profesores universitarios sobre el uso de comunidades de redes sociales para capacitar a especialistas en turismo para que interactúen profesionalmente con los clientes. El artículo también informa de los resultados de una

encuesta realizada a estudiantes de turismo sobre las ventajas del uso de las redes sociales en la formación profesional. Los autores fundamentan la conveniencia de crear una comunidad virtual en forma de comunidad en línea para la comunicación con clientes potenciales para la formación práctica de futuros especialistas en turismo para la interacción profesional con los clientes.

Palabras clave:

Estudiantes, especialistas en turismo, comunidad virtual, interacción profesional con clientes, comunidad online.

INTRODUCTION

Education in Russia is currently going through a dynamic change that guides higher education towards increasing the efficiency of vocational training of competitive specialists. Amid the ongoing economic, political, and sociocultural transformations and the dynamic development and technologization of the tourism sector, there is more and more urgency to the issue of quality of service in the tourism industry. Consequently, of major importance is the level of training of qualified specialists for tourism as an important component of the Russian system of higher education, the key indicator of which is the realization of effective professional interaction. This draws special attention to the training of tourism specialists who would be able to successfully interact with various groups of clients.

The development of demand for tourism specialists implies a focus on highly qualified specialists in this sphere who are skilled in information and communication technology (ICT), have comprehensive and in-depth professional knowledge and abilities, and can continuously expand and update their knowledge to prepare for professional interaction with clients. These competencies help the specialist to not only take actions, convince, and make decisions, but also create a favorable business atmosphere and understand the needs of tourism service consumers. The objectives of improving the organization of tourism specialist training and developing their professional and business qualities are topical for further development of the tourism industry and the development of Russia's education system in the new transitional conditions.

Due to the rapid development of ICT and strong interest in them among students, teachers actively implement innovative teaching methods, using the latest ICT, Internet services, and virtual educational (learning) communities (Bochkareva et al., 2020; Eflova et al., 2023).

It should be borne in mind that the Internet is a means and environment outside of society if society is understood as a system of institutions. Society as a normative structure does not function in the process of Internet communication. Nevertheless, the Internet is an environment where virtual communities develop, acting as alternatives to real society. Furthermore, not only society but also the person spawned by it is subjected to virtualization (Turanin & Posokhova, 2023).

Studies indicate that in the developed digital world, an adult spends an average of more than 6 hours per day watching various digital media. This indicator has doubled in the past 10 years. The activity of modern Internet users is centered around visual content, exchanging and classifying it, and creating content in the form of reposts, fan art, memes, reviews, and ratings (Evdokimova & Ustinova, 2021).

The tourism sector is information-intensive, as it is characterized by a variety of business relations with partners, individualization of tourism services, technological improvements, and high competition. Virtual communities have great potential for the training of tourism professionals, as they attract students by their ease of use, technical accessibility, ability to participate in communication, and the presence of feedback from community members (Belenkova et al., 2022).

The role of virtual communities is also significant for the development of modern tourism: almost all tourism enterprises have their accounts on social networks, where they present their services (Burkaltseva et al., 2023). Active communication of community members, their regular participation in community events, high motivation, and common interests make virtual communities an indispensable tool for learning, particularly for future tourism specialists. Therefore, it is an important task to teach students to competently engage with potential consumers of tourism services and to properly present and process information, including through virtual communities.

The problem of vocational training of specialists in tourism has always been drawing great research attention. There is a substantial body of research on such aspects as the vocational training of staff for the tourism industry (Nikolskaya et al., 2022), the features of practical training of tourism specialists (Nikolaeva et al., 2023), and psychological and pedagogical problems of interaction and communication in the sphere of tourism (Cheremisin et al., 2022).

Introducing ICT into educational problems is covered in research by Mohammad Anwar et al. (2021; Pisarevskiy et al. (2022); and Kotlyarova et al. (2023). Studies by Belous et al. (2021); Zotova et al. (2022); and Gadzaova et al. (2023), have made a great contribution to the study of opportunities to use virtual communities in education. Virtual

communities in this case are defined as social communities of people *"growing from the network, where a group of people maintain an open discussion of an issue for long enough and do so in a human enough way to form a network of their personal relationships in cyberspace"*. (Georgieva et al., 2023, p. 114)

At present, virtual communities are the most common means of organizing the information space at universities. They represent the totality of connections between teachers and students who have something in common (shared goals, interests, views, activities, hobbies, problems, etc.) and interact in the virtual space (Moglan, 2014; Vasilev et al., 2016). Virtual network communities belong to the category of self-developing self-regulated social structures. The general principle that defines the nature of the development of a social system in cyberspace consists in its striving to maintain integrity and increase the efficiency of communication processes.

A variation of a virtual community is a virtual learning community. It functions as a virtual social space on an information technology platform where people with a common goal come together to interact to acquire and/or share knowledge (Nikolaeva et al., 2023). Moglan (2014), sees a virtual community primarily as a *"social community of individuals in the virtual space of the Internet network who have common goals, objectives, needs, and interests, participate in joint discussion, and solve learning tasks based on their own experience".* (p. 184)

The main purpose of a virtual educational community is to improve the level of knowledge of its participants within the framework of formal/informal education, in particular, to improve their professional qualifications (Burkaltseva et al., 2023). Members of educational communities share resources, experience, and methods, participate in activities inherent to this community, and discuss professional problems while observing certain rules of information culture (Nikolskaya et al., 2022).

A virtual community also implies interdependence of its participants, who coordinate and harmonize their joint activities through Internet technologies. In this process, they expand their level of understanding, awareness, knowledge, and experience. In this connection, it is advisable to use virtual communities in the educational process (Pisarevskiy et al., 2022).

As pointed out by Georgieva et al. (2023), virtual learning communities form the corresponding virtual learning environment, in which it is possible to create and use various information resources, to learn by using certain technological tools. Innovative tools are constantly being improved, developed, and supplemented. Moreover, the process of cooperation between the participants has no

limitations in time or space. All participants in the learning process are allowed to become a part of polysynchronous professional cooperation, to not only develop their personal skills and improve the level of teaching and learning, but also make their contribution to shared developments in any educational areas, acquire and develop ICT skills and competencies, and gradually create a virtual educational space on a global scale (Zotova et al., 2022).

We believe that students' participation in social media communities can be one of the tools in training modern specialists. The analysis of professional literature demonstrates a lack of studies devoted to the issue of using social network communities for communication with clients to train future tourism specialists for professional interaction with the consumers of tourism services. These factors determine the relevance of the present study.

The goal of our research is to provide theoretical substantiation of the expediency of utilizing an Internet community for communication with customers to train tourism specialists for professional interaction with tourism service consumers.

In connection with the research goal, we aimed to answer the following research question: Do teachers use virtual communities in social networks in the educational process to develop tourism specialists' readiness for professional interaction with consumers of tourism services?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The theoretical foundation of the study was provided by scientific research on using virtual communities in social networks for educational purposes, as well as the organization of the pedagogical process with the use of ICT in higher education. The selection of studies was carried out at the first stage of the study using the Web of Science and Scopus international databases with a restriction on the date of publication to no more than 10 years ago.

Analysis of scientific sources employed the methods of systemic analysis and theoretical generalization. To answer the research question of whether teachers use virtual communities on social networks in the educational process to develop students' readiness to professional interaction with consumers of tourism services, we conducted a survey of 61 teachers who trained tourism specialists in the city of Moscow. The sample included 29 teachers from the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA), 18 teachers from Russian State Social University (RSSU), and 14 teachers from the Moscow University of Humanities and Economics (MUHE).

Teachers were asked the following questions:

1. Do you use virtual communities to train students for professional interaction with clients?

2. Do you develop educational and methodological support to introduce and maintain virtual communities?

In addition, to learn which social networks are favored by students, a survey of 229 students from the identified higher education institutions was conducted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are derived from a questionnaire survey of teachers and students. The survey questions were designed to determine whether teachers use virtual communities to prepare undergraduate tourism students for professional interaction with customers.

The results of this survey are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Distribution of teachers' responses about the use of virtual communities to train tourism specialists for professional interaction with clients, %.
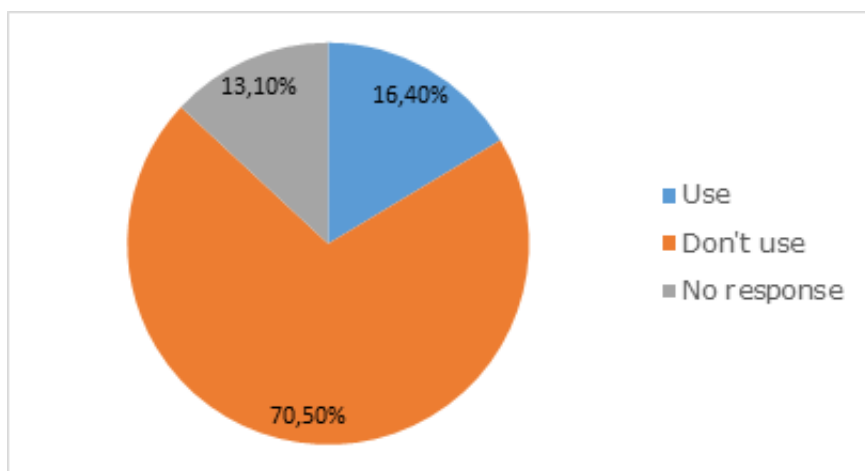
Source: Preparation of authors

The introduction of new ways and means of learning requires the development of appropriate educational and methodological support. Therefore, it was important to find out whether teachers are developing such support to introduce and support the operation of virtual communities. The responses given by teachers are analyzed in Figure 2

Figure 2. Distribution of teachers' responses about developing educational and methodological support to introduce and maintain virtual communities, %.
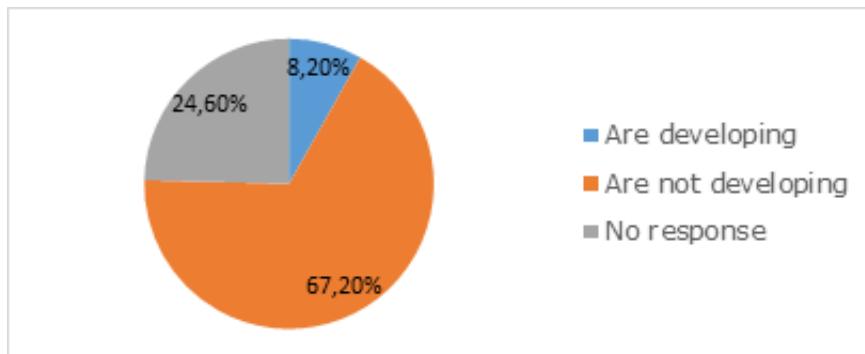
Source: Preparation of authors

In addition, the study included a survey of students about the relevance of using virtual communities for communication with customers on social networks. Students were asked to choose the most optimal social network to create such a community. The results of the survey are reflected in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Distribution of students' choices of a social network to create a virtual community, %.
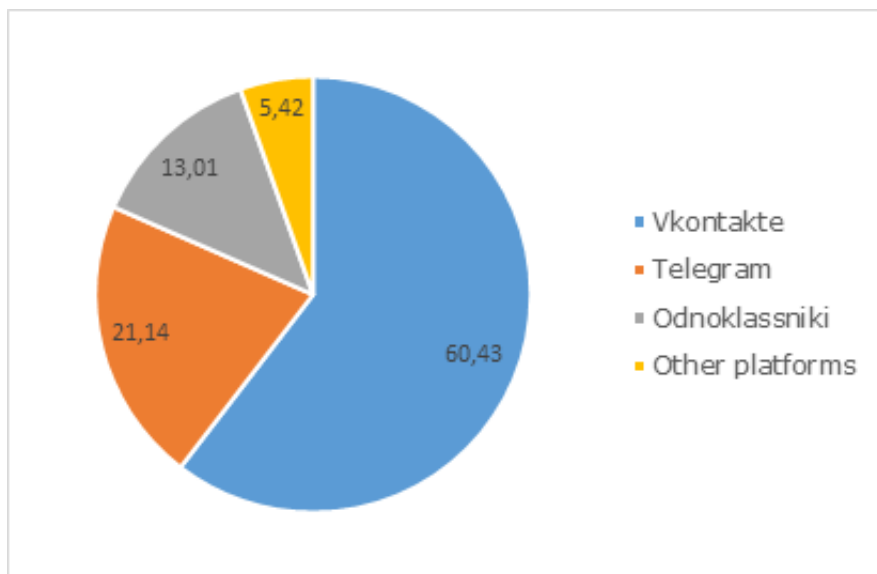
Source: Preparation of authors

The results of the study indicate that only 16.4% of university teachers use virtual communities to train undergraduates in tourism for professional interaction with consumers of tourism services. This fact raises the need to create a virtual community in the form of an Internet community for communication with customers in the social network "VKontakte" to improve the effectiveness of the educational process. This will encourage future tourism specialists to develop and improve ICT literacy, professional ethics, communicative competencies, etc.

The purpose of this Internet community for communication with clients is to develop communication skills as a factor in professional interaction with clients. The community members can be both students and other users of the social network.

In accordance with the purpose of the community's operation, it should address the following tasks:

- development of students' communicative competence using professional interaction in the online environment (Evdokimova & Ustinova, 2021);
- deepening of students' knowledge about the rules of professional communication (Mohammad Anwar et al., 2021);
- application of business communication skills by students to solve problem situations in communication (Nikolskaya et al., 2022);
- improvement of speech culture and business etiquette (Kotlyarova et al., 2023);
- the study of the features of professional interaction to achieve mutual understanding in the professional sphere (Ushakov et al., 2022).

To achieve these objectives, the community page should offer theoretical materials, practical advice, exercises, video materials, etc.

The described capabilities of virtual communities in social networks are consistent with the results of prior studies (Belenkova et al., 2022; Gadzaova et al., 2023), which note that virtual educational communities are characterized by the following features:

an intensive communication process that promotes the development of interpersonal communication skills, enrichment with ideas, and knowledge sharing, giving a deeper understanding of the educational content;

high motivation for learning and the development of a sense of personal responsibility for group learning activities;

enrichment of learning experience, acquisition of experience of group learning and communication with other people, combination of learning and personal experience in a social context;

participants overcoming the feeling of loneliness and isolation, gaining a sense of belonging to a collective, and providing mutual emotional and psychological support;

learning through work, practice, and socially significant experiments;

accumulation of new knowledge through communication with others based on cooperative learning methodology.

Active communication of community members and their regular participation in community events, high motivation, and common interests make virtual communities an indispensable tool for learning. Moglan (2014), points out some significant advantages of introducing virtual communities in learning: access to certain knowledge and the development of new knowledge, personal growth and development through socialization, joint performance of tasks, and joint activities.

Notably, universities in the USA began to actively experiment with the introduction of social networking services into the educational process starting from 2007-2008. In 2-3 years, an overwhelming number of educational institutions created official accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, believing this experience to be a successful marketing step. Online communities of teachers and e-learning specialists began to appear (Georgieva et al., 2023). Virtual social networks have proven to contribute to the development of e-learning and education in general, as they offer new technical and methodological solutions (Mohammad Anwar et al., 2021). Researchers suggest that efforts in developing the organization and methodological support of e-learning should focus on popular social networks rather than on learning management systems, which are inflexible tools (Zotova et al., 2022).

It can be predicted that the proposed Internet community for communication with clients will promote the improvement of communicative competence, personal and professional communication, and the readiness of tourism specialists for professional interaction with consumers of tourism services, as well as improve their skills in the use of media resources. Virtual communities as a form of active learning allow converting hobbies and personal interests into professional interests.

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of scientific publications on the incorporation of virtual communities into the educational process showed that they are successfully used and researched as a form of training. The introduction of various Internet technologies into the educational process of universities supports the development of students' information culture and professional communication skills, which is especially relevant for future tourism specialists.

Modern Russian research and educational and methodological literature hardly consider the use of virtual communities as a component in the educational and cognitive activity of tourism students. This demonstrates that Russian specialists underestimate the educational potential of this instrument.

The survey of teachers regarding the use of virtual communities to train tourism specialists to professionally interact with clients indicates that most teachers do not apply this form of communication in the educational process, even though participation in virtual educational communities inherently imitates professional activity and promotes the development of personal interests.

We believe that the creation and operation of a virtual community in the form of an Internet community for communication with customers will boost the efficiency of professional training of tourism specialists. This tool will provide for the development of their communicative competence and personal and professional communication skills, as well as skills in preventing and solving problems in interaction with tourist service consumers.

Among the limitations of the study is the fact that the research base is limited to three universities. Further study of the problem of using virtual communities in the process of students' training should focus on analyzing the effectiveness and relevance of content materials and participants' activity.

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