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ARE UNIVERSITIES PROMOTING NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES IN ONLINE MBA PROGRAMS, AND SHOULD THEY BE?

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ABSTRACT

This study explores promotion of peer/professional networking opportunities in online MBA programs as compared with on-campus MBA programs through content analysis of the landing pages of 152 accredited MBA programs. Results of statistical analysis suggest that online MBA program marketers are not promoting peer/professional networking and relying heavily on promotion of program flexibility and value. This prompts a discussion of whether online MBA program marketers should promote networking more aggressively, whether the meaning of networking as applied to today's business world needs to be revisited, or both.

INTRODUCTION

With advancements in integration of online platforms in higher education have come the emergence and growth of MBA programs delivered in online-only and blended (online + on-campus) formats (Gee, 2019; Rapert et al., 2004). The online delivery format for MBAs has become a popular higher education program of study. This creates a venue for increased competition among universities offering MBAs, leading to varying degrees of flexibility, innovative program delivery, and program quality (Gee, 2019; Kim et al., 2005; Rapert et al., 2004; Ponzurick et al., 2000).

Students often elect to enter into MBA programs with the expectation of not only gaining credentials and skills that will lead to higher remuneration in the marketplace, but also of networking with peers who are or will become influential professionals (Blackburn, 2011; Kim et al., 2005; Rapert et al., 2004). Batista (2014) posits that the success of MBA graduates can be tied to a university's integration of networking opportunities into the MBA program, hinting at the need for extensive promotion of networking opportunities by MBA program marketers in pursuit of student enrollment. Yet, in a digital education format, interpersonal engagement necessary for peer and professional networking can be limited by challenges associated with communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Gherardi, 2009), connectivity (Siemens, 2008), and communication among geographically dispersed interrelations (Means et al., 2010).

In light of the efforts of institutions of higher education to increase MBA program enrollment in response to market demand (Kim et al., 2005), the question arises as to whether these institutions are promoting peer and professional networking opportunities for MBA programs delivered exclusively online. Moreover, a more pertinent question of whether institutions *should* be promoting networking for online MBA programs is worthy of deliberation.

This study aims to address these questions by exploring the marketing messages of MBA programs to identify evidence and to draw conclusions about the promotion of networking and other attributes of online MBA programs. This study first presents literature on online MBA delivery format, student expectations, and networking in MBA programs. The study's research methodology is then introduced, incorporating a discussion of the role of the online landing page in student perceptions and institutional positioning, as well as iterative categorization of the data retrieved from content analysis of the landing pages of 152 MBA programs. Results of quantitative analysis are then presented, followed by conclusions with implications for research and practice in the marketing of online MBA programs, with a specific consideration of information that may be applied in pursuit of a grounded antithesis to traditional perspectives on the role of networking in online MBAs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Higher Education and Online MBAs

Online education has emerged as the current basis for distance education (Ponzurick et al., 2000). This phenomenon at the higher education level is often associated with pressures to tackle questions of scale to achieve lower per-student cost (House-Peters, Del Casino, & Brooks, 2019; Scruton, 2018; Heyman, 2010; Guri-Rosenblit, 2006; Kim et al., 2005). This is further represented in the importance of online MBA programs as sources of university revenue, emulating a

customer-centric model where students' (as consumers) perceptions direct marketing messages relating to program quality factors such as delivery format (Rapert et al., 2004). US News & World Report (Usnews.com, n.d.) lists 301 U.S. institutions offering accredited MBA programs online in 2019. Thus, the prevalence of online-only or blended (online/on-campus) MBA programs is worthy of further exploration, specifically in relation to factors relating to student expectations.

Student Expectations

The importance of student expectations to the development, positioning and promotion of MBA programs is affirmed throughout the literature, with Rapert et al. (2004) suggesting that students “are the only direct, daily observers” of MBA program quality and, thus, the best source of judgment. Moreover, there are parallels between perceptions of a program and program satisfaction, such as skill orientation and participatory environment (Rapert et al., 2004). Indeed, students are the consumers of the programs, and, as such, student perceptions of program elements are central to MBA program positioning and promotion.

Primary expectations of students embarking on MBA education cited in the research generally center around employment, career advancement, and higher pay, along with additional expectations relating to social impact and self-actualization (Ramlall & Ramlall, 2016). Prospective students have noted the expectation that an MBA will lead to a career where one can make an impact or make a difference (GMAC, 2016). Scruton (2018) finds that employers, program directors, and students often perceive MBA programs as primarily focusing on fostering leadership and management skills (Scruton, 2018). Additionally, networking opportunities that may support professional effectiveness have been presented as relevant to the decision of many individuals to pursue MBA education (Blackburn, 2011), even to the effect that students selecting top MBA programs of study value “who you meet” more than “what you learn” in program selection (Gee, 2019). This is consistent with Rapert, et al.’s (2014) identified parallel between participatory environment and student satisfaction. Further exploration of networking as a salient attribute in a student’s selection of MBA program is relevant to a comparative discussion of online and on-campus MBA programs.

The Importance of Networking

Networking in the context of MBA studies can be defined as “socializing in business school” and “membership in a learning community” (Batista, 2014); as “fostering social capital” (Tan & Ko, 2019); as forging “meaningful working relationships” and establishing “collaborative and long-lasting connections” (Niemi, 2016); and simply as “who you meet” in an exclusive program (Gee, 2019).

Batista (2014) suggests, after reviewing the MBA programs of universities that produce the most impactful graduates, that “the special advantage of an MBA program is the opportunity to develop leadership and interpersonal skills with a group of peers in a sequence of experiential courses informed by current research,” as well as “membership in a learning community and a network of alumni;” further suggesting that the best MBA programs are those that prioritize the fostering of interpersonal skills. While the platform upon which this cohort of peers is not expressly described here, the obvious advantage of learning interpersonal skills alongside those peers in physical proximity appears to be implied.

Professional networking is especially relevant to today’s competitive business environment with regards to “advancing a career, building relationships and getting knowledgeable about a

range of subjects” (Ibarra 2018). Niemi (2016) summarizes a myriad of sources, describing the benefits of professional networking as leading to “more job and business opportunities, broader and deeper knowledge, improved capacity to innovate, faster advancement, and greater status and authority,” as well as the benefit of improved quality of work and job satisfaction. Networking may also impact perceptions of connectedness and community (Ritter et al., 2010) and assessment of relatedness of similar or dissimilar business situations (Green & Smith, 2017).

Geographic limitations and psychological distance may be primary hindrances to the traditional approach to positioning, promoting (among institutions), and selecting (among students) online-only MBA programs with regard to the perceived opportunity to network with peers and professionals. House-Peter, Del Casino, and Brooks (2019) ask whether the purpose of distance education as a means of providing geographically and otherwise marginalized populations access to formal education is lost in the current online education model due to excessive focus on a cost-revenue model across universities. Furthermore, Scruton (2018) suggests that online MBAs are developed to mainly serve busy professionals who demand schedule flexibility, while Gee (2019) points to the growing affinity toward more flexible graduate business programs across the country, supporting the premise that geography constitutes a limitation to graduate business studies. Psychological distance may also stunt belief in the ability of online programs to provide a venue for membership in a learning community (Batista, 2014), successful communication (Means et al., 2010), meaningful collaboration (Niemi, 2016), or a participatory environment (Rapert et al., 2004). Psychological distance exists when a concept becomes abstract in an individual’s mind due to perceived social, temporal, or spatial distance (Han & Gershoff, 2018). Thus, while the online delivery format allows participants to bridge spatial gaps (geographic limitations), without a concrete cognitive perception of proximity, an individual may perceive others in the online environment as non-participatory, distant, and, therefore, non-inclusive in the individual’s network, creating, perhaps, the assumption that online MBA programs bestow students with a networking challenge.

Based on the literature, the question of whether students who choose online education demonstrate the assumed expectation of networking opportunities embedded in an MBA program is perhaps less relevant, therefore, then the question of whether institutions can and should rely on this expectation in positioning and promotion of MBA programs to attract students. A 2018 Statista survey finds scholarships/grants, year-round study option, self-paced courses, and faster course completion time to be the most relevant selection criteria for student enrollment in online academic programs, whereas academic engagement with other students is one of the least salient attributes (Clement, 2018). Peer/professional networking, however, is not included as a selection criterium in this survey, yet the results suggest that financial access/value, speed, and flexibility are primary benefits of the online delivery format. Niemi (2016) suggests that while most MBAs are cognizant of the value of networking, they find it “taxing and often distasteful.” Further, Rubin and Dierdorff (2011) point to the “devaluing of management education” in MBA programs in favor of catering to student expectations (including networking opportunities).

In this vein, the current study explores an array of attributes, including flexibility/convenience and program value, in comparison to networking, to identify their relative importance in the positioning and promotion of online and on-campus MBA programs of US institutions. The following section introduces the methodology for this study.

METHODS

The primary research question involved in this study surrounds universities' response to assumed student expectations of networking opportunities in online-only, as compared to on-campus, MBA programs, as presented in messages identifying program promotion. Furthermore, this study questions the validity of the university response to student interest in peer and professional networking in online MBA programs through content analysis of promotional cues, framed based on Schreier's (2012) approach to concept-driven (defining concepts in advance, based on the literature) coding of content. Thus, institutions' reliance on the promise of networking in MBA program promotion constitutes the basis for this study's research question of whether there is a significant difference in promotional cues relating to networking among online and on-campus MBA programs and what implications are indicated thereof.

While there does not appear to exist a robust repository of primary data representing current MBA students' *perceptions* of the actual status of program benefits (such as networking), a robust exploration of the messages universities employ to recruit for MBA programs can be conducted vis-à-vis a comprehensive survey of MBA program websites. According to Ashburn (2007), universities employ their websites as tools for realistically and truthfully articulating MBA program content and status, as well as to attract prospective students. Institutional websites are intended to represent and communicate the identity and position of the university and academic programs to an unlimited number of individuals across an international landscape (Hoggatt, 2008), while prospective students take the information on the institution's website as the first, if not only, impression of the university/program and associated tangible qualities and content (Adelman, 2006; Schneider & Bruton, 2004). Institutional marketers, then, promote benefits on the program website to attract prospective students while program administrators attempt to deliver program content consistent with those promoted benefits. Consequently, with the objective of understanding potential differences in the promotion of peer and professional networking opportunities between online and on-campus MBA programs, this study analyzes the content expressed within the institutional websites of evaluated programs with a fair amount of confidence.

Therefore, this research aims to answer the following alternative hypothesis:

H₁: There is a statistically significant difference in the prevalence of messages related to networking between online and on-campus MBA programs as presented on program websites.

This study engages data such that the evidence either satisfies the null condition where there does not exist a statistically significant difference, or fails to satisfy the null condition where a significant difference exists, therefore qualifying the use of networking messages in promotion of online MBA programs. In anticipation of the presence of common cues relating to attributes other than networking on program websites of online as compared with on-campus MBA programs, the following secondary alternative hypothesis is also explored:

H₂: There is a statistically significant difference in the prevalence of messages related to other (non-networking related) attributes between online and on-campus MBA programs as presented on program websites.

Consistent access to messages (cues) relating to MBA program content is readily available on the online landing page for each university's MBA program, where networking and other program benefits are presented through broadly varying conceptualizations in text, images, video, and voice. This constitutes the need for qualitative exploration of these conceptualizations prior to coding cues relevant to networking (and other program benefits) for quantitative analysis. A mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches is optimal for studies exploring a latent construct like networking (Low-Choy et al., 2017). Specifically, this study applies the iterative categorization approach to support content analysis for greater consistency in coding for quantitative analysis (Neale, 2016).

Thus, the process engaged to identify data relating to this study's hypotheses is as follows: 1) Observe online landing page of MBA programs; 2) Employ iterative categorization to identify cues relating to peer and professional networking, as well as other potential program benefits; 3) Code the cues by online and on-campus MBA program for quantitative analysis; and 4) Engage quantitative analysis to identify statistical significance.

General statistics relating to graduate business programs were first gathered. MBA program legitimacy is best achieved through accreditation by one of the broadly recognized accrediting bodies for business education (Hunt, 2015). For this reason, only universities currently accredited by one of the three broadly accepted accrediting bodies (AACSB, ACBSP, and IACBE) for business schools and programs are included in this study. The current study includes accredited business programs in US universities only, constituting a potential limitation to the results. A review of the three accrediting bodies at the time of this study shows that in the United States, there are 529 universities with AACSB business schools (57% of total), 714 ACBSP programs representing 259 universities (28%), and 140 IACBE business departments/schools (15%), for a total of 928 U.S. universities with accredited business programs (AACSB.edu; ACBSPsearch.org; IACBE.org). Moreover, universities with accredited business programs are spread throughout the South (37%), Northeast (24%), Midwest (24%), and West (15%) regions of the United States (US Census Bureau Map, n.d.).

A robust sample was obtained by sorting the universities by accrediting body, region, and name, numbering the institutions, and then applying a random number generator algorithm without replacement to get a random sample of 152 institutions representing each accrediting body roughly consistent with proportion of institutions by accreditation. Universities that do not offer an MBA were excluded from the sample and replaced. The sample, therefore, includes 87 AACSB institutions (57%), 41 ACBSP institutions (27%), and 24 IACBE institutions (16%); representing 52 (34%) South, 39 (26%) Midwest, 34 (22%) Northeast, and 27 (18%) West region institutions.

The 152 institutions' online landing pages were scanned for cues in text, images, video, and audio. Furthermore, to maintain consistency while observing MBA landing pages, the landing pages were accessed from a single device, using a single web browser, by inputting: "XYZ University MBA" into the search field, and following the first listed hyperlink representing the university's captive (.edu) MBA landing page. Only text, images, video, and audio presented on the landing page of each university were evaluated in the iterative categorization process of this study. Framing of networking cues in this study follows Table 1 below.

Table 1: Framing of Concepts

<u>Search</u>	<u>Source</u>	<u>Iteration</u>	<u>Basis</u>
Researcher	Website text; Graphic-integrated text; Website audio; Website audio/video	“network(s)”; “networking”; “membership [+] community”; “relationship(s); “meet”; “connection(s)”	Batista (2014); Niemi (2016); Gee (2019); inferred intention of iteration through researcher’s subjective evaluation of content [Although minimized to avoid misinterpretation of intention, subjective evaluation in this study represents a potential limitation]

Due to the randomness of the methodology’s sample selection, the delivery format of the MBA program in each university in the sample was unknown prior to qualitative examination of the university’s landing page. Delivery format of MBA programs is qualified as exclusively online (delineated in this study as “online MBA”) or not exclusively online (delineated in this study as “on-campus MBA”). The on-campus MBA program delineation includes those programs delivered fully on campus or with a required on-campus residency component. Of 152 programs observed in the study, 94 are on-campus MBA programs (not exclusively online), and 58 represent online MBA programs (exclusively online). The relative imbalance between on-campus MBAs and online MBAs included in this study’s sample is a potential limitation to the results.

RESULTS

In this section, analysis and results of networking cues among universities in the sample, along with other explorations, are presented. To identify potential differences in networking messages (cues) among online MBA programs and on-campus MBA programs, iterative categorization was engaged by reviewing the online landing pages of 152 universities representing different U.S. regions and business program accrediting bodies. The following Table 2 is an overview of descriptive statistics from the data, presented by variable.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	Online Networking	Online Flexibility	Online Value	Online Global	On- Campus Networking	On- Campus Flexibility	On- Campus Value	On- Campus Global
N	58	58	58	58	94	94	94	94
Sum	80	178	75	78	238	160	52	178
Mean	1.38	3.07	1.29	1.34	2.53	1.7	0.553	1.89
St. Dev.	1.73	2.25	1.89	1.99	3.11	1.94	1.14	2.99
Max	7	9	8	8	11	8	6	17

Among on-campus MBA programs, 238 cues relating to peer or professional networking were observed, with a mean of 2.53 (st. dev. 3.11) cues, where a maximum of 11 cues was observed on a single institution's landing page. Among online MBA programs, 80 networking cues were observed, with a mean of 1.38 (st. dev. 1.73) cues (max 7 cues).

A Student's t test to compare sample means of online MBAs (n=58) and on-campus MBAs (n=94) yields a statistically significant difference in mean scores of networking cues between online MBAs ($\bar{x}=1.38$, $s=1.73$) and on-campus MBAs ($\bar{x}=2.53$, $s=3.11$), where the T stat (2.935) is well within the range of rejection in the t distribution when observing a two-tail critical t (1.976) at 99% confidence ($p<.01$). Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, and we accept the alternative hypothesis that there is a statistically significant difference between the means – the instance of networking messages is significantly higher for on-campus MBA program landing pages than for online MBA program landing pages (see Table 3).

The results of initial statistical analysis confirming the alternative hypothesis provide significant evidence that on-campus MBAs promote networking to a greater extent than online MBAs. Furthermore, if the program web page is the primary source of prospective students' perceptions of a program's benefits (Adelman, 2006; Schneider & Bruton, 2004), then it is safe to say that these results provide sufficient evidence to suggest that on-campus MBA program marketers expect to attract prospective students with the promise of networking as compared with online MBA program marketers.

To further understand the results, consideration was given to the variance in networking cues based on a cross-study of accreditation and geography – factors potentially impacting the variance in means across online and on-campus MBAs. Tests of ANOVA to identify these differences reveal a significant difference in variation around the mean in networking cues across accrediting standards ($F=5.43$, critical $F=3.06$, 151df) at 99% confidence ($p<.01$) in the model. This result likely arises from the relatively higher prominence of networking cues in MBA program landing pages of AACSB schools ($\bar{x}=2.69$, $s=3.11$, $n=87$) as compared with ACBSP schools ($\bar{x}=1.43$, $s=2.06$, $n=41$) and IACBE schools ($\bar{x}=1$, $s=1.32$, $n=24$). This is further evidenced by the fact that 46% of ACBSP and 46% of IACBE institutions observed offer online MBA programs, whereas only 32% of AACSB institutions observed offer online MBA programs. The broad variance (9.66) and standard deviation in networking cues included on AACSB institutions' landing pages, however, skews the results enough to suggest that accreditation *alone* is not a primary factor of differentiation surrounding the prominence of networking cues. Tests of

ANOVA by geography show no significant variance by region ($F=1.43$, critical $F=2.67$, $p=0.238$), suggesting that the mean of networking cues does not vary significantly based on the geographic location of the institution within which the MBA program is offered. Thus, the results indicate that the statistical significance in the prominence of networking cues in online and on-campus MBA programs is not impacted by geography but is moderately impacted by accrediting standard, driven primarily by the dominance of on-campus programs offered at AACSB institutions.

Evidence of the continuing growth of online-only higher education, specifically at the graduate level (NCES, 2019), contradicts to some extent the degree of relevance of networking as a salient attribute in students' selection of MBA program. Furthermore, this study's initial results suggest this to be similarly true with online MBA programs. As such, further qualitative exploration was conducted to include non-networking related cues in iterative categorization, in accordance with the second hypothesis (H_2) of this study. This exploration yielded common cues on institutions' landing pages, including cues relating to "global", "flexible (convenient)", and "good value", and their respective various iterations. Here, another limitation should be noted, in that the author assigned iterative categories to those cues which, in qualitative evaluation, are both used commonly across multiple institutions' landing pages and presented as appeals within landing page contents.

To identify differences in cues relating to global, flexible, and value in online and on-campus MBA programs, t-tests of differences in means were conducted with the quantitative data retrieved through the iterative categorization process.

Statistics summarizing t-tests for the four iterative categories identified in this study, including Networking, Global, Flexible, and Value, with means, T-stats, critical values of t, and two-tailed p-values presented in Table 3.

Table 3: T-Test Output

Iterative Category	On-Campus mean	Online mean	T-Stat	Critical T	p
Networking	2.53	1.38	2.94	1.98	$p<.01^{**}$
Flexibility	1.70	3.07	-3.84	1.98	$p<.001^{***}$
Value	0.55	1.29	-2.69	1.99	$p<.01^{**}$
Global Themes	1.89	1.34	1.36	1.98	$p=0.177$

Results of two-sample t-tests for means reveal a statistically significant difference in the means of cues relating to "flexible" ($p<.001$) and cues relating to "value" ($p<.01$), but no significant difference in cues relating to "global" across online and on-campus MBAs. The negative test statistics for the significant factors "flexible" and "value" (-3.835, -2.691, respectively) reflect on-campus MBA mean cues relating to flexible ($\bar{x}=1.702$, $s=1.939$) and value ($\bar{x}=0.553$, $s=1.142$) as compared to online MBA mean cues relating to flexible ($\bar{x}=3.069$, $s=2.467$) and value ($\bar{x}=1.293$, $s=1.892$).

In this vein, it can be said that program flexibility and value are salient attributes online MBA program marketers rely on to attract prospective students, whereas they are less important than networking in attracting students to on-campus MBA programs. In fact, iterations of flexibility appear more prominently (with a higher mean in online MBAs than networking cues in

on-campus MBAs) and more consistently (51 of 58 online MBA programs observed included flexibility cues) than all other factors considered. This is not a surprise, as an evident appeal to online MBA programs is the convenience and flexibility offered in an online-only delivery format.

Further, ANOVA was conducted on the significant variables Networking, Flexibility and Value within groups for online and on-campus MBA programs, yielding a significant difference in the means ($p < .001$) for both. This result provides further evidence of the heavy use of Networking cues over other cues on the landing pages of on-campus MBA programs, and the heavy use of Flexibility and Value cues over Networking cues on the landing pages of online MBA programs.

DISCUSSION

This study compares the relevance and prominence of peer/professional networking in the promotion of online and on-campus MBA programs through analysis of the landing pages of 152 accredited US MBA programs. Results provide sufficient evidence to suggest that there is a significantly greater use of networking cues in promotion of on-campus versus online MBA programs. Furthermore, statistical analysis identifies a significant difference in prominence of cues relating to flexibility and program value, indicating higher anticipated consumer use of these factors as appeals in online MBA program selection as compared to on-campus MBA program selection. Statistical analysis finds no significant difference in the mean use of cues relating to global themes, suggesting randomness of this variable across institutions within the sample.

The fact that results of statistical analysis indicate a significantly higher use of networking messages to promote on-campus MBA programs while simultaneously indicating a significantly higher use of messages relating to flexibility and value to promote online MBA programs leads to two conclusions.

First, it may be concluded that institutions offering online-only MBA programs face untapped potential in attracting students seeking peer and professional networking opportunities. It should be noted that the statistical significance relating to networking is impacted somewhat by the prominence of networking cues on the MBA program landing pages of AACSB accredited universities offering on-campus programs, which may be seen as an indicator of the confidence in the resources available to these universities allowing them to promote networking opportunities freely. According to (Hunt, 2015), both the ACBSP and IACBE accreditation standards were developed to qualify the educational standards of universities without the abundance of resources enjoyed by many AACSB institutions.

This conclusion is worthy of further exploration, as networking is considered an expected benefit of MBA programs (Tan & Ko, 2019; Gee, 2019; Niemi, 2016; Blackburn, 2011) and related to activities that foster the development of marketplace skills such as standing out, leadership, and the ability to respond to change (Joyner & Mann, 2011). Results of the current study provide some amount of evidence to support the need for business schools representing all accreditation standards to consider improving in the presentation of messages and, thus, program content relating to peer/professional networking opportunities of their online MBAs in order to compete with on-campus MBAs. Discourse on overcoming this challenge can be approached by exploring alternative methods of offering quality networking opportunities to a virtual community. These are presented below.

Virtual Teams – Collaboration through virtual teams that include peers within the program (Ergulec, 2019), MBA students in sister institutions abroad (Neiva de Figueiredo & Mauri, 2013), or industry executives and professionals (Kim, Liu, & Bonk, 2005) does not require geographic proximity and creates opportunities for students to expand peer and professional networks regionally and internationally. Universities should take care to make sure that working in virtual teams is perceived by students as promotional – relating to growth, advancement, and accomplishment, rather than simply obligatory (Niemi, 2016).

Face-to-Face Elements – Including face-to-face elements in online MBA programs may serve to create practical networking opportunities. Some institutions in this study incorporate varying modes of in-person networking with peers, such as through a pre-program or pre-graduation weekend on campus; and with professionals, such as through on-campus forums or invited guest speakers (which can be simultaneously web-cast). Some studies have found that a combination of online and face-to-face experiences leads to better learning outcomes among students without a perceived difference in learning quality (Means et al., 2010; Ritter et al., 2010).

Virtual Networking Training – Online MBA programs may benefit students by incorporating support for student training in the use of virtual networking tools. Camplejohn (2019) identifies a heavy majority of buyers, executives, and salespeople who depend fully on their savvy with the development of strong virtual networks to succeed – indeed, to survive – in the marketplace.

This could extend beyond the concept of networking and span other attributes identified as relevant to the success of current MBA graduates, such as strategic communication skills (Rennie et al., 2018), mindfulness (Kuechler & Stedham, 2018), or global competence. Within the 152 landing pages observed in this study's sample, an average of 1.78 cues relating to global themes is observed; and some institutions have more than 10 cues relating to global themes, with one institution including 17 messages promoting global themes in their MBA program. McCormick and Stephen (2016) suggests that graduate business students should be exposed to global and cross-cultural issues through immersion, diversity of students and faculty, and program content, finding that graduate business students feel that they have necessary skills to succeed in a global business environment “after taking an internationally themed graduate course, or after participating in a study abroad program”. While the factors online MBA programs depend on to attract students are heavily dependent on external advancements in technology (impacting flexibility) and the marketplace's price elasticity of demand (impacting value), global themes can be incorporated into MBA program content and promoted with adjustable impacts on program cost.

The second conclusion points to the question of whether the definition and associated value of networking needs to be re-visited, as the traditional concept of networking may have potentially less importance to prospective students of online MBA programs, assuming university marketers present messages on MBA landing pages reflecting consumer response. Students in online MBA programs may rely on their existing virtual networks to the extent that the valence of a network associated with an MBA program is less intense. Indeed, many universities are recognizing the

value of recruiting students that already have extensive virtual networks, asking students to include recommendations via social media platforms in their business program applications (Peruta & Shields, 2017; C.S-W, 2015). Further research may be needed to determine the extent to which students who choose online programs have established virtual networks and/or value the connections made with an MBA cohort.

Additionally, exploration of the core definition of networking in the messages on MBA landing pages is warranted. On-campus programs may be promoting “old networking”, defined more in the context of a more traditional approach; whereas, online MBA programs may not need to promote networking through messages referencing “old networking”, but, rather, create the assumption of participation in “new networking” simply by way of the word “online”.

Considering social capital in the modern context, in which bridges with those outside of a nuclear relationship group and links with people outside of one’s current professional and social strata (Keeley, 2007) are augmented via social media-based networking. The emergence of Gen Z students as primary participants in MBA programs creates a new forum for catering to students who give ultimate weight to the prominence of social media in their perceptions of business program value (Giunta, 2015). Furthermore, the current generation uses social media in pursuit of more effective relational points of connection (Iheanyi-Igwe & Veach, 2018). While geographic proximity to social capital may continue to have high relevance in executive MBA programs (Han & Liang, 2015), a definition of networking in the context of activities relating to the development of social capital among non-executive MBA students by no means requires physical proximity of the actors (Tan & Ko, 2019). In this vein, online MBA program marketers should not promote networking in the traditional sense to attract prospective students.

Promotion of peer/professional networking as a benefit of MBA programs may simply continue as a distinguishing factor between on-campus MBA programs and online MBA programs, providing program marketers with a clear targeting strategy for prospective students. Thus, as to the question of whether networking *should* be promoted, and in response to trends in virtual networking and social capital, online MBA program marketers should incorporate evolving expressions of networking, rather than traditional definitions, in program marketing. The conclusion that evidence supports these two implications points to the need for further study in this area.

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