

**THE INFLUENCE OF THE INTERNET ON THE SOCIOCULTURAL
INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS: A STUDY ON ERASMUS STUDENTS
FROM ISCAP**

**A INFLUÊNCIA DA INTERNET NA INTEGRAÇÃO SOCIOCULTURAL DE
MIGRANTES: UM ESTUDO SOBRE ESTUDANTES DE ERASMUS DO
ISCAP**

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ABSTRACT: There are two issues which are essential in the understanding of the integration of student migrants. One is the occurrence of Internet-based practices concerning migration intentions and decisions. The other relates to a latent research hypothesis that the Internet and associated practices stimulate people's propensity to move.

Initially, we conducted a literature review, where we addressed several topics adjacent to the subject under study, and then surveyed a sample of approximately 90 people to see if the theory applied in practice.

Our study clearly demonstrates that most young-adult students, either ERASMUS students in Portugal or students planning to go on ERASMUS next semester, have adopted communicative practices that integrate the Internet into their migration decision-making processes - 56,3% of all recent movers retrospectively estimate that the Internet had an

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important impact on their choice of country to study in, and 73,3% of respondents who plan to move also seek move-related information.

Thus, after comparing the theory we read with the results of our implementation, we can affirm that the Internet effectively plays a determining role in the integration of the migrant community.

KEYWORDS: Social Networks; Internet; Integration; ERASMUS; Sociocultural; Migrants; Technology;

RESUMO: Existem duas questões que são essenciais para a compreensão da integração dos estudantes migrantes. Uma delas é a ocorrência de práticas baseadas na Internet relativas a intenções e decisões de migração. O outro relaciona-se com uma hipótese de pesquisa latente de que a Internet e as práticas associadas estimulam a propensão das pessoas a migrarem.

Inicialmente, realizou-se uma revisão da literatura, onde foram abordados vários tópicos adjacentes ao assunto em estudo, e então levantou-se uma amostra de aproximadamente 90 pessoas para comprovar se a teoria é aplicável na prática.

O presente estudo demonstra claramente que a maioria dos estudantes jovens adultos, tanto estudantes ERASMUS em Portugal como estudantes que planeiam participar em ERASMUS no próximo semestre, adotaram práticas comunicativas que integram a Internet nos seus processos de decisão migratória - 56,3% de todos os migrantes recentes estimam, retrospectivamente, que a Internet teve um impacto importante na sua escolha do país para estudar, e 73,3% dos inquiridos que planeiam mudar-se também procuram informação relacionada com a mudança.

Assim, depois de comparada a teoria lida com os resultados da nossa implementação, pode ser afirmado que a Internet desempenha efetivamente um papel determinante na integração da comunidade migrante.

KEYWORDS: Redes Sociais; Internet; Integração; ERASMUS; Sociocultural; Migrantes; Tecnologia;

Introduction

The present work comes within the scope of the Intercultural Communication Technologies course unit of the masters in Intercultural Studies for Business from Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto and aims to analyse the use of the internet and its influence on Erasmus students' decision to move.

The continuous development of new information and communication technologies is influencing and, therefore, changing the way of life around the world. While the effects of technologies like the Internet vary in detail from country to country, policymakers and citizens often face the challenge of shaping and participating in this development (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008). As these technological innovations spread, gain importance and change the public and private spheres, it can be assumed that the competence to use them increasingly determines the equality of opportunities and the level of societal integration. While this generally concerns all citizens, a case study of migrants is especially suited to distinguishing the role that these technologies, especially the Internet, play in the integration of and in information societies (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008).

Societies are increasingly faced with the question of how the Internet and its influence in many spheres of life is setting new conditions for equal opportunity. It is undeniable that the Internet can be not only an asset for organizing many aspects of life but an increasing necessity (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008). In many countries around the world, being “online” is becoming central to knowledge about one's environment, to retaining social contacts, but also to organizing one's life and participating in society in fields such as e-government, e-banking, or e-commerce as they keep developing (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008).

Furthermore, skills using these technologies have become a pre-condition for many jobs in these information societies (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008). This is generally true for all citizens, but even more so for migrants, who especially need information about their new environment and who often depend on their old and new social networks to adjust to the foreign country. (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008) The question of using or not using the Internet, therefore, has serious consequences for disadvantaged or minority groups, as it has the potential to improve their living conditions (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008). As Fairlie concludes, “the economic future,

education, community participation and political advancement for these disadvantaged groups may depend on access to computers, the Internet and broadband technology” (2005: 9).

Additionally, it was questioned whether (parallel) media consumption and contact with residents of the country of origin or receiving information about their events influence the integration process and, if so, positively or negatively (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008). All these issues can also be discussed concerning Internet use by migrants (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008). First, the central feature of the Internet is that of a database of information that far exceeds the informational potential of the classic mass media (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008). Secondly, regarding communication, this media also allows users to communicate directly with each other, which allows the relevance of this media concerning social communication to become even more obvious and vivid than before (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008). Thirdly, the characteristics and possible uses of this hypermedia go beyond information and communication, as it allows direct participation in social structures and online groups. Social and political participation is a third process generally considered central to the integration of migrants (Weiskopf & Kissau, 2008).

Our article is structured as follows: First, we elaborate on the role of Internet-based practices in a migration context and how migration can, in principle, be affected. This contributes to theoretical understanding by adding a new perspective to migration research and the study of ICT (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). Next, the explanation for the methodology used. Thirdly, we present our data; a survey of a representative sample of ISCAP ERASMUS students, ISCAP students planning to go to ERASMUS next semester, and ISCAP students who have no interest in moving. These groups were chosen because of the high level of internet usage, as they are all students. We then retrospectively investigate the extent to which the Internet was perceived to have affected their decision to move or not and whether or not they were expected to influence their future migration plans, connecting the first section of this paper to our survey analysis. In a final section, the conclusion, we discuss our main findings regarding the evolution of Internet-based practices and possible implications for migration decisions.

1. The potential role of the Internet in migration decision making

The Internet offers customized and continually updated data about opportunities and offices in distant places (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). It encourages distant personal contact and interaction through social media. Consequently, increasingly more consideration is being paid to the connections between Internet use and traditional physical forms of interaction and spatial movement (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013).

The context of migratory decision-making is complex, being structured by several drivers and reasons (Boyle, 2009; Cooke, 2008, Nedomysl, 2011). People migrate for professional and educational purposes, for domestic reasons, to strengthen social ties, to change homes, or to make a fundamental change in life (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). The so-called environmental motives, or search for new environments, are increasing its importance (Lundholm et al, 2004; Lundholm 2007b). Simultaneously, a few "inactive" factors are keeping individuals back: place-based connections and identities, dependencies on local social capital, and fixed ties to work and family (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013).

People's propensity to move is often about the balance between gaining access to better life opportunities elsewhere and the need for stability in a particular location. It can be argued that this balance is affected by the improved information provided by the Internet, including information that addresses the core reasons for migration (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013).

Relevant to this discussion is the notion that the Internet reconfigures access to other places and regions (eg, Dutton, 2009; Muhammad et al 2008) and that ICTs create new spatial conditions in which people can manage their lives (Janelle and Gillespie, 2004; Kesselring, 2006; Mokhtarian et al, 2004). Combined with extended networks of personal contact via digital media, people's ability to make more informed migration decisions, as well as more impulsive decisions, can increase (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). A recent qualitative case study gives some proof that the Internet assists individuals to find new jobs, better education and new housing, and to establish social contacts in a wider range of places farther than before (Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2013). In this way, the Internet can act as a driver of spatial mobility, making labour, housing, goods, and services markets perform more smoothly (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013).

Consequently, there is a reason to believe that the Internet can, in the long run, affect people's perception, decision-making, and behaviour in relation to the frequency, destination, and distance of migration. However, research on the links between Internet use and migration is sparse (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). Addressing this gap, the explicit aim of this article is to explore the evolution of Internet-based communication practices that can support people's spatial decisions and movements (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). An underlying hypothesis is that such practices affect and stimulate interest in migrating elsewhere, an influence that can also impact future behaviour. Our quantitative empirical study focuses on individuals' own reflections on how Internet use and migration practices are related, both concerning past practices and future intentions.

Addressing the potential relationships between Internet use and migration requires an initial understanding of the reasons for migration and the role of information in the decision-making process (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). In the vast amount of literature on migration, several theoretical perspectives make various assumptions as to the main motives that drive people's decisions of whether or not to move. Influential neoclassical theories and human capital approaches see migration as an individual strategy to earn greater income and/or improve employment opportunities and career prospects (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). Migration decisions are considered to be well-informed, rational choices between economic opportunities in various locations (Greenwood, 1975; Yankow, 2003).

Other perspectives emphasize the importance of non-economic factors in determining migration decisions (Courgeau, 1995; Golledge, 1980; Graeme, 2007). Empirical research continually demonstrates that migration patterns are also strongly influenced by social networks, environmental considerations, and location-specific contexts (Fischer and Malmberg, 2001; Lundholm, 2007b; Warnes, 1992). These are complex factors and their relative weights change over a person's lifetime (Beige and Axhausen, 2006; Niedomysl, 2011).

Regardless of the reasons that should trigger or constrain people's decisions to move, those decisions are always shaped by people's access to information about opportunities in multiple locations. In reality, the information available is not perfect or impartial (DaVanzo, 1981; Gibson et al, 2010). Furthermore, information gathering is a costly activity (in terms of time, money and cognitive effort), explaining, for example, why many potential migrants may only consider one or a few destinations. For a few years, however, the Internet has provided an alternative way to access relevant information; an alternative that could affect or even

potentially transform migration decision-making (Kuhn and Skuterud, 2000; Stevenson, 2009; Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2013). As an information node and channel, the Internet is characterized by large volumes of information, easy access anytime and anywhere for most people, low transaction costs, high interactivity, and often instant updates or feedback.

Information can be customized on-demand and matched with individual preferences regarding core reasons for migration, such as labour markets, housing markets, education, available leisure options, local environmental features, and in principle local social networks and contacts for almost anywhere. This could reduce the friction of distance and encourage migration, change the intensity and distance of migration, and change the ranking of motives and preferences (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). Focusing on decision-making practices helps to improve our understanding of the role and implications of Internet use.

Halfacree and Boyle (1993) state that the decision to migrate is not made while the rest of life is put on hold. Migration decisions are based on actions and activities in time and space, not contemplation, and these practices crucially involve information gathering, social communication, and interaction with others (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). These activities take place in social settings and routines of everyday life and are central to exploring, fulfilling, and implementing the potential migrant's aspirations, plans, and decisions for change (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013).

It is reasonable to believe that Internet-based practices play an increasingly vital role in these activities. The Internet has dramatically changed the way people access information and provides central support for many life decisions, particularly among young people (when leaving high school to continue their studies, plan longer international trips or look for a job) (Frändberg, 2010; Thulin, 2004). A recent study of international migration demonstrates that the Internet plays a crucial role in producing images of new possibilities, lifestyles, and places, fuelling movement aspirations and desires (Burrell and Anderson, 2008). An important question is whether this development also changes more profoundly our perceptions and understanding of a place.

According to Dutton (2009), the Internet "reconfigures" access to people, services, and information in two important ways (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). First and foremost, it changes the way people do things, such as seeking information and communicating with others (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). Second, the results of these activities also change fundamentally: the type of information we obtain and how often, what we know and understand, and the people

and places we meet and keep in touch. As information flows more freely online, even across regional and national borders, making it much easier to explore employment and education opportunities and attractive places of residence, it is reasonable to assume that individual migration horizons will expand.

Changing people's understanding and knowledge of places, activities, and online routines can thus affect their migration propensity, frequency, and destinations and change their motives for migrating (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). Certain migration motives can be encouraged and strengthened by frequent and continuous updates of information, alerts, or feeds about employment, housing, and education opportunities in specific desirable locations and environments (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013).

Research further demonstrates that information circulating through social networks and personal contacts is of particular importance when people make important life decisions (Castells, 2007; Cross et al, 2001; Niles and Hanson, 2003). Regarding migration, social networks often involve the dissemination of information and personal images, ideas, and conceptions from elsewhere (Axhausen, 2008; Stjernström, 1998).

The Internet allows people to have a more socially and spatially extended network of friends, family, and colleagues to contact when considering their "dreams" or intentions to move (Larsen et al, 2007; Wellman, 2001). These online networks are extremely valuable in the pre-migrant phase, for example, to gain specific knowledge of local places and opportunities or to get help finding an apartment (Hiller and Franz, 2004). Overall, there is some evidence that the evolution of Internet-based practices for social interaction can increase people's understanding, awareness, and curiosity about other places, broadening their spatial horizons and conceptions (Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2013).

So far, we've identified several arguments as to why the Internet can have implications for people's long-term mobility decisions (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). Facilitating more effective migration planning and implementation, as well as broadening perceptions of place and opportunity, Internet-based information and contact can stimulate dreams and aspirations for moving to other places, including more distant places (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). Furthermore, reconfiguration of access to extended spatial information can change people's long-term mobility decisions and affect their preferences and reasons for migration. However, continuous virtualization can also have effects that point in other directions.

Theoretical approaches initially developed to understand the implications of ICT for daily mobility and travel (Hjorthol, 2002; Mokhtarian and Salomon, 1997) suggest that Internet use can also suppress migration. (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013) Increasing virtual access to people and activities elsewhere could, in principle, allow people to remain settled (Kesselring, 2006; Muhammad et al, 2007; Ory and Mokhtarian, 2006). Teleworking combined with long-distance commuting can, for example, be a substitute for migration. In addition, the Internet and mobile phones can help maintain regular social contact with friends and family who live far away (Axelsson, 2010; Diminescu, 2008; Komito, 2011). ICTs could, therefore, in principle, encourage and repress the desire to migrate (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013).

Finally, it is also possible that the evolution of Internet-based practices and mobility strategies will not have profound implications for people's migration decisions: The Internet might be used simply as a tool for more effectively implementing migrations decisions that would have been made anyway (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013).

2. Methodology

The need for a survey arose due to the group's need to clarify its doubt as to whether the Internet has an influence on the socio-cultural integration of migrants. Thus, the group opted for quantitative research and created an online survey in Google Forms, which would be sent to current ISCAP students, whether they were ERASMUS students or not. Therefore, we counted on the support of the internal communication media of ISCAP, such as the Academic Division and COMAP (Committee for International Students) to disseminate an email with the survey link. It is also important to mention that before the survey was applied, the questions were read by professor Sandra Ribeiro, who thus gave us her approval. After this approval, the group applied the survey.

Thus, the students were contacted via e-mail, asking to participate in the collaboration of a survey. After answering the Socioeconomic and Geographic background factors section and the General questions section, which had questions regarding their access to the Internet and if they used it daily, the respondent would be directed to the section of "Erasmus student in Portugal", "Planning to go on Erasmus next semester", or "Not interested in moving", according to their chosen response. This selection allowed the group to filter the respondents so that their answers could be better analysed due to its division, since the group had the participation of 82 respondents, which demonstrates to be a significant representation for the study.

Regarding the first group, Erasmus students in Portugal, the questions focused on the perceived role of the Internet for the move, how often they searched for some topics related to moving, whether the Internet influenced the decision to move and, if so, if it facilitated it. Finally, it was questioned what means were used to seek information.

The second group focused on the students who planned to move next semester and the questions were whether, for the time being, they were seeking information, how often they sought information and what was the perceived role of the Internet for the move. The last question was an open answer question, contrary to the previous ones that were of selection, because it was necessary to know if the desire to migrate had been strengthened by the Internet, providing an explanation.

The third and final group was aimed at people who did not plan to move, either because they never had any interest or because they changed their minds. This group also proved to be important to better understand if the Internet had any influence on this decision. Therefore, the questions were the same as those asked to the previous group.

3. Survey Analysis

The conclusions derived from our survey concern two main issues. One is the occurrence of Internet-based practices in regard to migration intentions and decisions. The other relates to a latent research hypothesis that the Internet and associated practices stimulate people's propensity to move. (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013)

Concerning the first issue, our study clearly demonstrates that most young adult students, either ERASMUS students in Portugal or students planning to go on ERASMUS next semester, have adopted communicative practices that integrate the Internet into their migration decision making processes – from the formation of vague plans and thoughts to more active plans and actual moves. 56,3% of all recent movers retrospectively estimate that the Internet had an important impact on (See Annex 1), and 77,8% say that it facilitated their recent decision to move (See Annex 2). Information seeking is a topic that 10 out of 16 ERASMUS students claimed to have searched several times per week (See Annex 3). Issues concerning education, housing, living costs, culture, and entertainment are the factors with the most weight in the decision of the country to study abroad for ERASMUS students (see Annex 4) and education, business/work, housing, living costs, and leisure activities for students who plan to go on ERASMUS next semester (see Annex 5). However, respondents who are not interested in moving selected Business/work and education as the most influential factors when choosing a country to study in (see Annex 6). Furthermore, results also show that Internet-based practices are integrated into young people's prospective migration intentions and plans. There are indications of a positive, reinforcing relationship between how much information a group seeks on the Internet, and how active their plans to move are – beyond the trivial observation that people who plan to move also seek move-related information, namely 73,3% of them (see Annex 7).

An essential second issue concerns whether and to what extent the Internet enhances people's actual tendency to move elsewhere. Our results show that 66,67% of students planning to go on ERASMUS next semester state that the Internet really enhances their interest in migrating, while 8,33% isn't sure about it and another 25% claims it has no impact at all. Our results further indicate a reinforcement tendency: people intensively using the Internet to obtain information about places to which they wish or plan to move also report that this Internet use intensifies their intention to move. At a more general level, it seems appropriate to view the

Internet as an enabler or catalyst rather than an out-and-out causal factor of change in a wider process of migration stimulation. (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013) Migration is primarily driven by deeply rooted needs and motives related to essential spheres of an individual's life and wellbeing, rather than by sheer information about possibilities. (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013)

Thus, after comparing theory we read with the results of our implementation, we can affirm that the Internet effectively plays a determining role in the integration of the migrant community.

Conclusion

After this study, we can conclude that social networks, in general, in our study, play an important role in the integration of migrants in foreign countries.

Initially, we conducted a literature review, where we addressed several topics adjacent to the subject under study, and then surveyed a sample of 82 people to see if the theory applied in practice. With this number of participants, it was possible to obtain a very representative study.

Societies are increasingly confronted with the question of how the Internet and its influence in many spheres of life are establishing new conditions for equal opportunities. It is undeniable that the Internet can be not only an asset for organizing many aspects of life but also a growing necessity.

The Internet offers personalized and continuously updated data about opportunities and whether it is jobs or social events.

It encourages personal contact and interaction at a distance through social media. Consequently, more and more consideration are being given to the connections between Internet use and traditional physical forms of interaction and spatial movement.

Social networks can be the first step in a relationship and are therefore very important in any kind of integration, be it social or cultural.

The willingness of people to move is often about the balance between access to better life opportunities elsewhere and the need for stability in a particular place. It can be argued that this balance is affected by the improved information provided by the Internet, including information that addresses the main reasons for migration.

Nowadays, a person makes a decision based on research, which for the most part takes place online, when it comes to emigration, it is natural for people to research the countries they intend to emigrate to, and in such cases, social networks play a determining role, as they show opinions and feedback from migrants living in foreign countries.

There is reason to believe that the Internet may, in the long run, affect people's perception, decision-making, and behaviour regarding the frequency, destination, and distance of migration.

This study attempts to understand how evolving Internet-based communicative practices might influence decisions and plans concerning moving to another country, namely ERASMUS students. Our approach concentrates on recent movers and stayers' own perceptions of the role of the Internet: perceptions that also might come to affect their future migration behaviour. (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013). The quantitative research we conducted through the online survey allowed us to gather sufficient data to validate the key issues (see page 15-16, chapter 3) which we proved and clarified in the third chapter of this paper.

Thus, after comparing the theory we read with the results of our implementation, we can affirm that the Internet effectively plays a determining role in the integration of the migrant community.

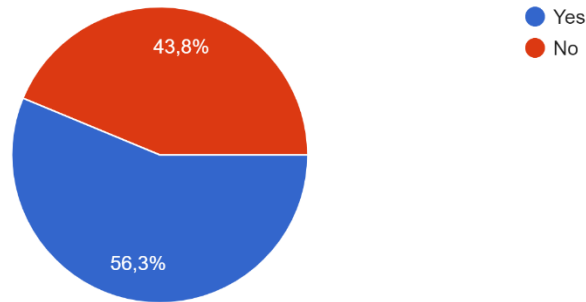
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Appendices

3. Did the Internet actually influence the decision to move?

16 respostas

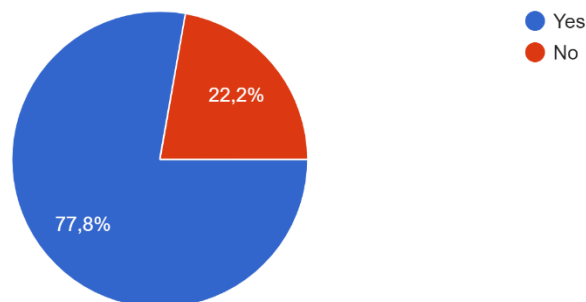


Appendix 1- Did the Internet actually influence the decision to move?

56,3% of responding ERASMUS students claimed the internet did influence their decision to move, while the remaining 43,8% claimed it did not.

3.1 Did the Internet facilitate the decision to move?

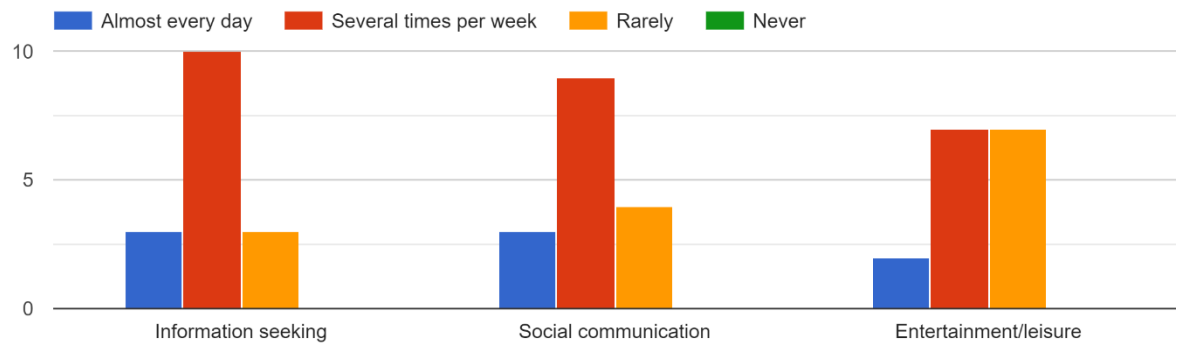
9 respostas



Appendix 2- Did the Internet facilitate the decision to move?

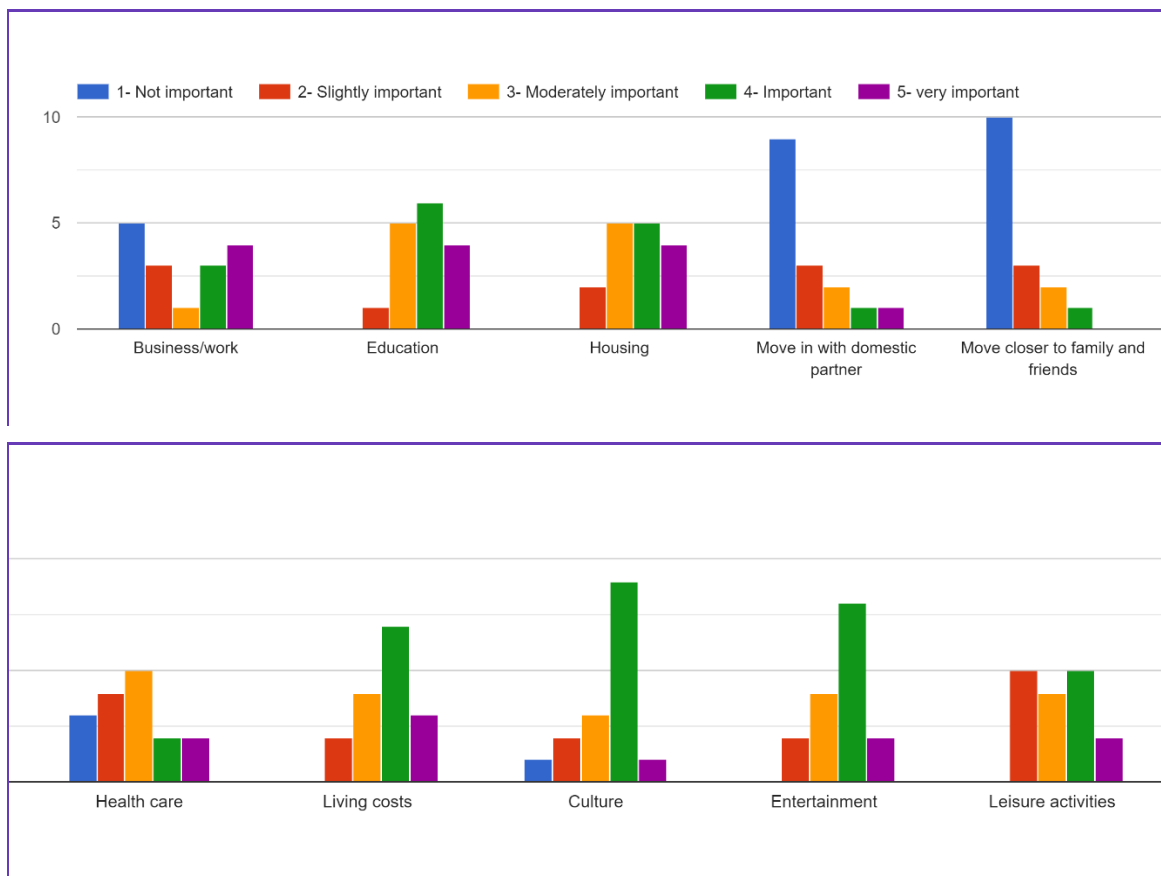
Here, the results are more conclusive: even though only a slim majority (56,3%) of the ERASMUS students said the internet influenced their decision to move, there is a larger percentage of ERASMUS students claiming the internet made the decision to move easier. From that, we can conclude that while it's not always directly responsible for the decision to move, the internet is useful, and it is often used to facilitate that same decision.

2. How often did you search for any of these topics during your research?



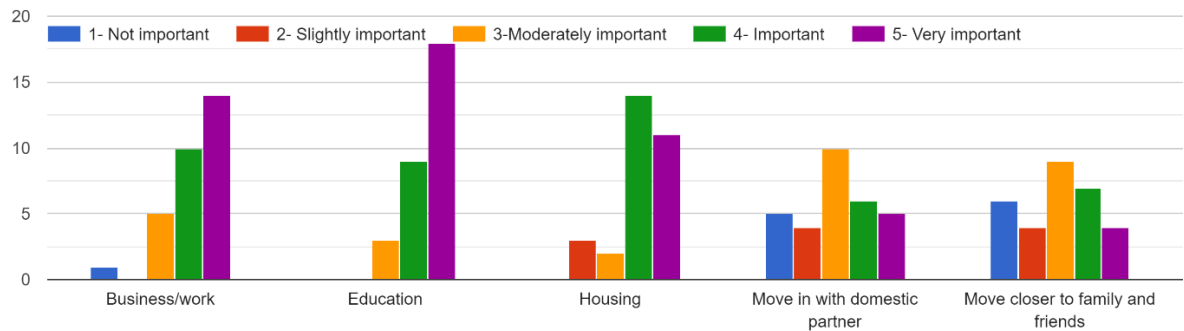
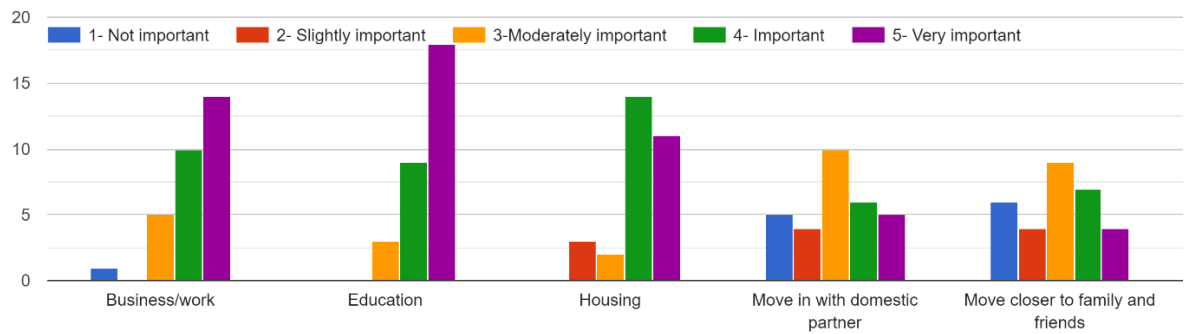
Appendix 3-How often did you search for any of these topics during your research?

The less searched topic by ERASMUS students was entertainment/leisure.



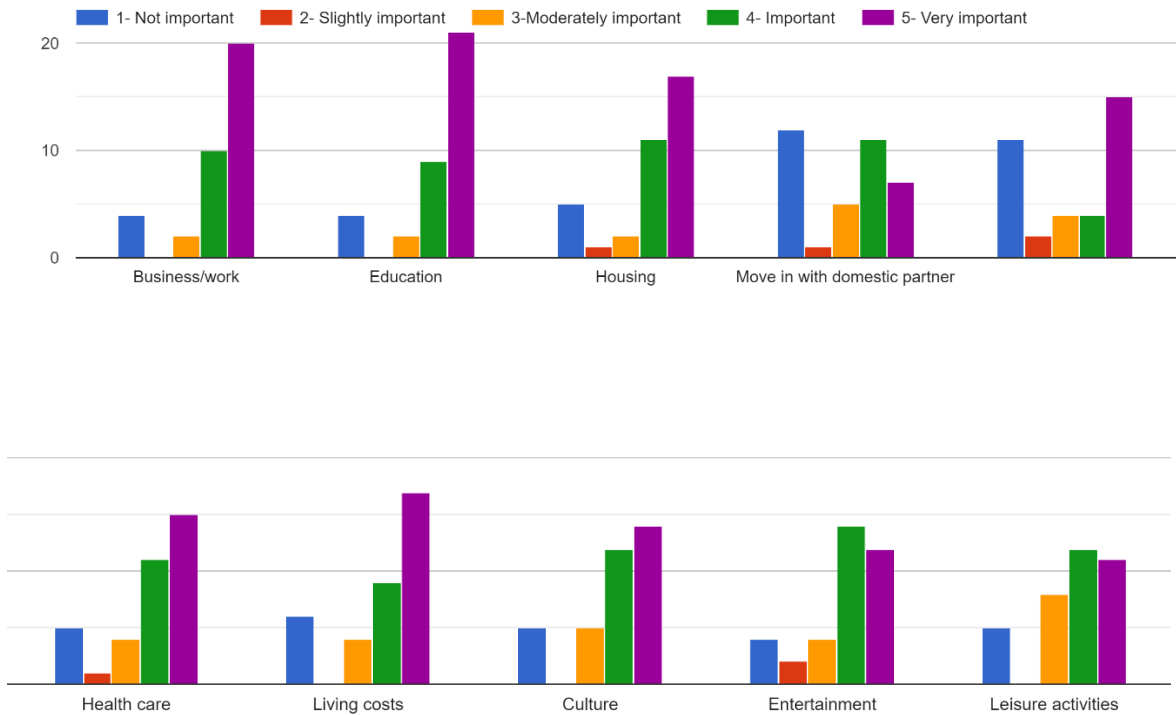
Appendix 4- Most important factors in the decision of ERASMUS students

The most important factors in the decisions of ERASMUS students to move to the country they chose were education, housing, living costs, culture, and entertainment. The less important were the opportunity to move in with the domestic partner, the opportunity to move closer to family and friends, and health care. ‘Leisure activities’ and ‘healthcare’ were the most divisive factors.



Appendix 5- Most important factors in the decision of students planning to go on ERASMUS next semester

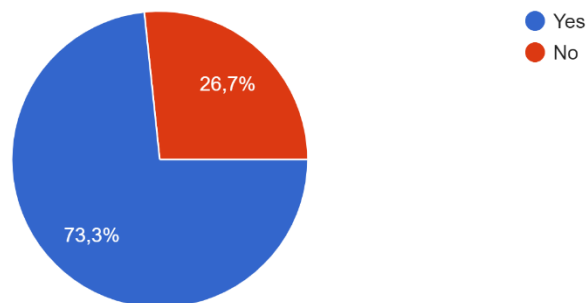
Among students planning to go on ERASMUS next semester, the most important factors in their choice of the country to study abroad were education, business/work, housing, living costs, and leisure activities. Comparing with the answers of Erasmus students, health care, living costs, business/work and proximity to the domestic partner, family, and friends have a much larger weight in the decisions of students in Portugal.



Appendix 6- Students not interested in moving

Respondents who are not interested in moving selected Business/work and education as the most influential factors when choosing a country to study in.

1. Are you seeking information at the moment?
30 respostas



Appendix 7- Are you seeking information at the moment? Students planning to go on ERASMUS next semester

73,3% of students planning to go on ERASMUS next semester were seeking information at the moment they were responding to the survey, while 26,7% were not.