The Impact of International Students’ Social Media Use on Their Intercultural Adaptation: Insights from In-depth Interviews

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Abstract: The existence of social media provides a convenient chance for people to communicate with their families or make new friends without the limitation of time and space, which facilitates the process of globalization to some extent. Recent research has demonstrated that many international students use social media to adapt to their new lives in foreign countries because it can help them connect with families and friends back home and in their host countries. This essay aims to explore the impact of international students’ social media use on their intercultural adaptation and provide valuable implications for language teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

Currently, social media is an integral part of our daily life. According to Sawyer & Chen, social media such as Facebook and YouTube transcend geographic barriers and cultural differences. For international students, social media is crucial because it provides them convenient means to connect with their families at home and their classmates in host countries, which is beneficial for their intercultural adaptation. Regarding the definition of intercultural adaptation, it means a process of changing some ways of life and communication patterns to meet the requirements of new environment, which involves increasing understanding through interaction. As more and more students leave their own countries and go to study abroad, it is necessary to research the relationship between social media and intercultural adaptation in order to provide more practical implications for educators and learners.

This essay aims to explore the impact of social media use on intercultural adaptation based on an in-depth interview of an international student. The first part reviews prior research on the relationship between social media and intercultural adaptation. Then, my own case study will be presented and analysed critically, including its methodology, methods, data analysis and findings. Last, I describe connections between previous research and provide some practical implications for language teaching and learning.

2. Literature Review

Given the significance of social media, scholars heavily researched the relationship between social media and intercultural adaptation and proved the existence of a strong correlation. In the study by Chen, he chose some mainland Chinese immigrants in Singapore through a nationwide telephone survey. As quantitative research, this study applied Ward and Kennedy’s Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) to measure the participants’ feelings when they were in a foreign country. The result demonstrated that social media significantly impacted the participants’ intercultural adaptation. In addition, social media helped them strengthen their relationships with their families or friends and establish the sense of community and belonging.

Furthermore, some scholars carried out their studies in more detail. They divided social media into ethnic media and host media. Ethnic media plays a vital role in promoting intercultural adaptation, especially when people first arrive in a foreign country. In the study of Lee and Tse, they examined the social media use among Hong Kong immigrants in Canada. They found that recent migrants use more ethnic media in their daily lives compared with long-term residents. Similarly, Park argued that immigrants are willing to read the newspapers in their language because it can meet their demand to express themselves in their mother tongue. However, depending on ethnic media alone is not enough for intercultural adaptation. As Kim pointed out, long term reliance on ethnic media among migrants impedes their adaptation because it only helps with immediate or initial environmental adaptation.

Meanwhile, host media can provide a good platform for international students to improve their host language in the host country, which is a prerequisite for effective communication with locals. According to Bennett et al., there is a relationship between people’s host language proficiency and intercultural adaptation; the more proficient someone is in a host language, the more likely they are to adapt.
In addition, some scholars studied the role of both ethnic and host media. Walker found that ethnic media has some positive influence on first-year immigrants’ adaptation only when they use some host media at the same time\(^2\). Therefore, for immigrants, using ethnic and host media simultaneously can promote better their intercultural adaptation process.

Although many scholars have studied the relationship between immigrants’ social media use and intercultural adaptation, some limitations necessitate further research. Most studies focused on general immigrants, with only a few studies involving international students. As temporary immigrants, international students are unique because they are studying abroad, functioning under high life and study pressure\(^3\). Moreover, most studies focused on communication competence, such as host language proficiency, when exploring the relationship between social media and intercultural adaptation. Only a few studies paid attention to the perspective of culture and identity. According to Belay, social media can form people’s new cultural identity, challenging their original identity to some extent\(^4\). Similarly, Phinney argued that cultural identity is dynamic and fluid instead of fixed\(^5\). Therefore, future research can connect more culture and identity and intercultural adaptation.

### 3. A Case Study

In order to explore the impact of international students’ social media use on their intercultural adaptation, a case study is introduced and analyzed critically in this part. The following questions guided this study:

What intercultural adaptation challenges do the international students encounter?

How does the international students’ intercultural adaptation process be impacted by their social media use?

#### 3.1 Methodology

This qualitative research used interviewing as the method for data collection. According to Kvale, compared with questionnaires, interviewing is more suitable for eliciting narrative data and exploring participants’ views and feelings in more depth\(^6\). Therefore, in this study, choosing to interview is beneficial for analysing participants’ feelings of using social media and adapting to their new environment.

#### 3.2 Participant

Considering this was a mini project, two participants were interviewed to gather in-depth data, although the small sample limits the study’s transferability. There was one female and one male participant. Both are Chinese international students. Among the two participants, one was a female approximately 23 years old (Interviewee A) and the other a male around 26 years of age (Interviewee B). They had been in the UK for almost seven months.

#### 3.3 Procedure

The participants were recruited by email. During the interviewing, participants were answered open-ended questions about their social media use and intercultural adaptation. Questions included but were not limited to social media’s purpose and influence, intercultural adaptation challenges, and the impact of social media on their transition. In addition, participants provided consent for their interviews to be recorded and transcribed. Both interviews were approximately 40 minutes and were conducted in English.

#### 3.4 Results

Regarding the data analysis, the study applies thematic analysis. According to Guest et al., thematic analysis is an effective method to analyse qualitative data\(^7\). In this study, through organising the participants’ transcripts and reading through them, the researcher found some repeated characteristics. Later, the researcher searched for themes, reviewed themes and defined themes. This section presents an analysis of the participants’ interview responses to questions about social media use and intercultural adaptation, organised by theme. A whole discussion will be presented in the next section.

#### 3.4.1 Use of Social Media

Both participants use social media almost every day. For interviewee A, she thinks social media is very convenient and useful in her daily life because social media lets her communicate with others. She described using social media to connect with others by attending local activities and learning about the area. Interviewee B shared how he uses social media to message and socialise with family and friends. In addition, he uses it for learning and foreign language acquisition. The following are the excerpts from the participants’ answers:

“Actually, I almost use social media every day because it really plays an important role in my daily life. I use WeChat to connect with my families and friends in China. I use Facebook to attend many interesting activities. Social media can provide me much convenience and bring me much happiness in my spare time.” (Interviewee A)

“I like using social media to send some messages to my families or friends. Sometimes, I watch some language learning videos from YouTube, which are very interesting and easy to understand.” (Interviewee B)

#### 3.4.2 Intercultural Adaptation Challenges

Both participants experienced some challenges when studying in the UK regarding the intercultural adaptation challenges. Interviewee A struggled with foreigners’ accents and adjusting to the local’s eating habits. At the same time, Interviewee B found the different teaching and learning styles between China and the UK difficult. The following are some excerpts from their answers:

“I indeed met some intercultural adaptation challenges especially in the beginning time when I came to the UK I
could not fully understand the local people’s meaning when I went to buy something because many of them speak so fast and have some accents.” (Interviewee A)

“I met some intercultural adaptation challenges when I came to the UK. I was surprised to find that there are many differences of learning styles between China and the UK. It was difficult for me to adapt to this teaching pattern at the first time.” (Interviewee B)

3.4.3 The Positive Impact of Social Media on Intercultural Adaptation

Regarding the impact of social media, both participants think that social media use positively influences their intercultural adaptation. Interviewee A chose to communicate with her friends through social media. Interviewee B watched some videos on YouTube and learned many discussion skills. Below are some excerpts from their answers:

“When I met some challenges on intercultural adaptation, I talked it to my friends through social media. Gradually, I can communicate with local people fluently and enjoy the local food very much.” (Interviewee A)

“I tried to adapt to this different class atmosphere. I watched many videos on group discussion from YouTube and learned many discussion skills. Later, I began to enjoy discussing with my group members because I think it is a good chance to share our ideas and learn from each other.” (Interviewee B)

3.4.4 Ethnic Media and Host Media

Regarding the preference of ethnic media and host media, the answers of two participants are a little different. Interviewee A tends to use ethnic and host media to communicate with her family and friends. Furthermore, compared with host media, she prefers ethnic media because it is more related to her ethnic identity. Interviewee B also uses ethnic media to communicate with his family, but he often uses host media such as YouTube to learn. Compared with ethnic media, he prefers to use host media because he thinks it is more practical and can help him adapt to foreign life better. As Interviewee A and Interviewee B mentioned,

“In my daily life, I tend to use ethnic such as WeChat to connect with my families and use host media such as Facebook to communicate with my foreign friends. Actually, compared with host media, I prefer to use ethnic media. I feel that ethnic media is related to my ethnic identity because when I type my mother tongue, I have more sense of belonging.” (Interviewee A)

“I use both ethnic media and host media in my life. I use ethnic media to communicate with my parents. In addition, I like watching videos from YouTube. Compared with ethnic media, I prefer to use host media because it can help me adapt to the foreign life better.” (Interviewee B)

3.4.5 Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Media

Both participants think social media is a double-edged sword with advantages and disadvantages. They recognize that social media can connect people regardless of distance and provide a source of information. However, the participants acknowledge the presence of limitations and drawbacks. People can easily become addicted to social media, causing them to lose precious time. The following are the excerpts from the two participants:

“Social media has many advantages, which can avoid the limitation of space and distance and provide a convenient life for us. To be honest, there are indeed some disadvantages. For example, sometimes I cannot be concentrated on my study because of social media and I am easy to spend much time watching some interesting videos.” (Interviewee A)

“I think social media can link the people who are in different places, which is an amazing thing. It can provide much information and resources for us. But it is a double-edged sword. People are easy to be addicted to it and waste much time. Therefore, I think it is important to use social media reasonably.” (Interviewee B)

3.5 Discussion

This case study shows that international students’ social media use positively influences their intercultural adaptation. International students experience many challenges upon arriving in their host country, ranging from communication barriers to lifestyle changes, which can cause much stress. These students are also pursuing academic studies in their host country alone, having left their friends and family at home. Therefore, international students benefit from opportunities that provide language learning, communication, and relationship building while adapting to their new home and lifestyle, which participants explained that social media could provide. There were three main findings.

First, social media use positively influences intercultural adaptation by providing a platform for communication and relationships. International students are still learning the language of their host country. They can use social media to expand their vocabulary to improve communication with locals since social media provides a platform for communication and relationship building. This study found that social media use reduced some of their anxiety.

Second, ethnic media is associated with developing a sense of belonging and helping them adapt to their new environment because it is related to their ethnic identities. Third, host media provides a wealth of knowledge and valuable information. From host media, international students can learn about the culture of their foreign country, which helps facilitate adaptation. Overall, using ethnic and host media can promote international students’ intercultural adaptation process. However, through interviews, the disadvantages of social media are also acknowledged, mainly that social media can easily become addictive, costing these students valuable time for studying and socialization.
This case study presents some practical implications for educators and learners. In order to promote international students’ intercultural adaptation, educators should guide them to gradually adapt to the new teaching pattern and give them some suggestions for group discussion. In addition, educators should encourage international students to express their ideas bravely and focus on the meaning instead of accents when they communicate with others. For international students, they should have a positive attitude towards cultural differences. Then, they can make full use of social media. Through social media, they can seek suggestions from their parents and friends, which help them reduce stress and anxiety. Moreover, they can also gain much knowledge and information from social media to better adapt to the new environment.

4. Conclusion

This essay focuses on the relationship between international students’ social media use and intercultural adaptation. Through a case study, the findings demonstrate that international students’ social media use positively impacts their intercultural adaptation from the perspective of communication, ethnic identity, and knowledge. Therefore, international students should utilise social media when studying abroad. However, they must balance their time on social media with their other priorities to minimise the potential drawbacks of social media, namely overuse and overreliance.

References