

The Impact of Social Network Sites Used by International Students in Education on Intercultural Communication in UK Universities

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Abstract. Social Network Sites (SNS) are commonly used by students not only to socialise but also to share educational information and facilitate academic discussions. Moreover, SNS has played an essential role in adapting to foreign cultures, and international students rely on SNS to establish connections with the host societies and their home countries. Thus, SNS have provided an important platform for facilitating intercultural communication. Since SNS are commonly used by international students, it is believed that SNS used for educational purposes have a significant impact on intercultural communication. This study explored the ways in which SNS are used for educational purposes by Chinese international students in UK universities, and how intercultural communication is formed via the exchanges between international students and local UK students on SNS. A survey was conducted, and the analysis of the results indicated that SNS have a significant impact on students' learning. However, the level of intercultural communication in relation to education was found to be limited.

1 Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) are online platforms that allow the generation and sharing of user-developed content and materials [1]. Examples of social media include Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, WeChat, and YouTube. Social media has become an essential part of people's daily lives as the number of social media users reached 5.17 billion in 2024 across the globe [2]. Among them, Facebook is the most used social media with 3.06 billion users in the world; the second most used one is YouTube; and Instagram comes third [2]. SNS which are primarily used for instant messaging, WhatsApp has up to 2 billion users, and WeChat has more than 1.3 billion users [2]. The main uses of SNS are to find and share information among users and stay connected. Users are allowed to share and access the content generated among users, and communicate with others through the messaging functions provided.

However, the purpose of using SNS has moved beyond socializing with others, seeking information, and having entertainment. As SNS become more and more available to people, SNS used for educational purposes have become a new common practice among students and academics. One of the most common uses of SNS among students is the dissemination

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of educational resources. Students and academics are able to upload and circulate educational resources with each other without the constraints of place and time. Another benefit of using SNS in education is that SNS helps students to stay connected to peers and teaching staff, and also plays a role in facilitating academic discussions. Furthermore, the vast global coverage of SNS has provided opportunities for users from different cultural backgrounds to communicate and interact, to generate and share content that can be accessed without the limits of geographical borders. For instance, SNS users in the UK generate and upload information about local events, and other users from other parts of the world find out about them and express their opinions on the platforms. Thus, SNS is believed to be one of the essential platforms for intercultural communication. International students studying abroad are key actors in shaping intercultural communication as cultural exchanges often take place in their interactions with the host societies. International students not only use SNS to stay connected to families and friends in their home countries, but they also tend to use SNS to socialise and maintain interaction in relation to studying among themselves and with institutions. Therefore, SNS plays an essential role in facilitating intercultural communication between international students and host societies.

Many studies have taken separate approaches to studying how SNS are used in education and the effects of SNS used by international students on intercultural communication. Thus, there is a gap in understanding what are the impacts of using SNS in education by international students on intercultural communication. As a result, this study aims to explore the two prospects with a more combined perspective. The population of international students studying in the UK universities reached up to 679,970 in 2021 and 2022 [3]. Moreover, among the large population of international students in the UK, China currently is the biggest market for international students [3]. Therefore, this study has an interest in understanding how SNS used by Chinese international students in education affects intercultural communication. The study will try to identify the ways in which SNS are used by Chinese international students for educational purposes. It also aims to evaluate the impacts of using SNS in education on intercultural communication, hence whether the use of SNS has encouraged or inhibited educational exchange between Chinese international students and students from other cultural backgrounds.

2 Literature review

Currently, numerous studies have specifically looked at the ways in which SNS are used in education, and whether SNS have helped or hindered students' learning progress and behaviours. One of the key functions of SNS in education is the dissemination of information between students. It has been found that easy access to learning materials on SNS plays an important role in effective learning, and students' active collaboration with each other also has allowed for better learning motivation [4]. A study also shows that the use of SNS has a significant impact on the interactivity between students and teaching staff, and students' engagement in collaborative study consequently improved the academic results [5]. Another study also indicated that SNS have a positive effect on students' learning self-efficacy, and the study suggested that using online materials together with the use of traditional classroom teaching would improve students' learning self-efficacy [6]. Some studies have investigated the use of specific SNS and their effects on learning. WhatsApp was found to be a supportive technology in education as its function in instant sharing of course material increased students' interest in the study topics [7,8]. However, some have indicated the downsides of using SNS in education. Nicholas C. Burbules warns that the reliance on SNS in education would potentially reduce students' ability to critically process information due to the easy access to information already existed on SNS, and the network built among students is susceptible to the issues of cyber-bullying, such as racism [9]. In summary, the current literature has an

extensive understanding of how using SNS in education has encouraged collaborative learning among students and academics and improved students' learning progress. The negative impacts are associated with the issues of reliance and cyber-bullying.

The number of SNS users across the globe has doubled in the last 7 years, from 2.73 billion in 2017 to 5.13 billion in 2024, and it is estimated to go up to 6.05 billion in 2028 [2]. The vast coverage of SNS has enabled communication to take place without the limits of space and time, and online networks and communities have deepened social; cultural; economic; and political exchanges. Migrants and international students are often seen as two groups who have a direct role in contributing to the cultural exchanges with the host societies. The use of SNS by students was found to support intercultural competency, in which students would be able to establish awareness of foreign cultures [10]. According to the Migration Data Portal, there were over 6.4 million international students globally [11]. The large population of international students has resulted in a growing interest in understanding the effects social media sites have on the ways international students interact with the host society. Social interactions and exchanges of educational information took place between international and local students, and academic interactions in a more personalized way occurred in Facebook interest groups [12]. A study on international students in the U.S shows that communication on SNS helped them to stay connected and build a sense of community [13]. The study further points out students tended to stay connected to people in their home countries upon their first arrival to seek comfort in a new environment, and as they spent more time in the U.S, the tendency towards connecting to people in the U.S increased. Furthermore, researchers indicated that social network sites have been used to initiate interactions with the host society, and yet reliance on using social network sites to connect with families and friends in home countries may have inhibited the process of adaptation. The study has provided institutions with insights on how institutions could develop initiatives to support students' cultural adaptation and well-being [14]. There is no doubt that SNS acts as a bridge connecting international students and the host countries, providing a platform for exchanging social and educational matters.

The existing literature indicates that SNS are helpful in students' learning progress, and they have a significant role in facilitating intercultural communication in terms of helping international students in the process of adapting to the local culture of the host societies. However, there is a gap in understanding whether the use of SNS by international students specifically for educational purposes has an impact on intercultural communication. Therefore, this study will build on the existing concepts, and extend further by focusing on Chinese international students in the UK universities. It will first identify the ways in which SNS are used by Chinese international students in the UK universities, and it will try to determine whether SNS have a significant impact on students' learning progress. Then, this study will further determine whether SNS has supported or hindered intercultural communication with relevance to education.

3 Methodology

This study used a quantitative research method. The research invited participants who are identified as Chinese international students studying in UK universities to complete a set of survey questionnaires. The purpose of the survey was to get a general sense of the participants' habits of using SNS and their views on using SNS to communicate with other students. Participants were asked to answer a questionnaire of 15 questions. The questions were focused on the types of SNS used by the participants for educational purposes such as sending and receiving educational resources; having discussions; and asking and answering course-related questions. The participants were also asked how often they use SNS for educational purposes, and how effective they find using SNS to communicate with other students.

Moreover, questions were designed to gather participants' views on communication with other Chinese international students and local students respectively. Thus, the questionnaire also included questions on the difficulties they have had when using SNS to communicate with other Chinese international students and local students.

In terms of personal data collection and privacy, it is important to safeguard participants' privacy during and after the research. This study will not collect or use any personal data such as participants' names, ages, and gender.

4 Results

A total of 150 participants submitted their answers to the survey questionnaire. The survey included questions focusing on the habits of using SNS in education and communication with other Chinese international students and local UK students on SNS.

All the participants were first asked about the SNS they use. Instagram was the most popular SNS used by the participants, with 86.7% of the participants selecting the option, whereas Facebook was the least commonly used as only 6.7% of the participants selected the option. As for SNS primarily for instant messaging, WeChat was more preferred than WhatsApp, 80% of the participants selected WeChat compared to 40% for WhatsApp. Other than the six popular SNS listed as the options in the questionnaire (Facebook; Instagram; WeChat; WhatsApp; TikTok; and X), 33.3% of the participants also listed "Xiaohongshu" as one of SNS used. Almost all participants had study groups on SNS, and only 10% did not. Participants were asked about whether the study groups also included academic staff such as tutors; instructors and professors, and two-thirds of the participants did not have any academic staff in their SNS study groups.

In terms of using SNS for educational purposes, including sending and receiving course-related materials; engaging in discussions with other students; and asking and answering course-related questions. The survey results showed that all participants either "always" or "sometimes" sent and received course materials by using SNS. More than half of the participants "always" discussed coursework on SNS. As for asking and answering course-related questions, more than half of the participants either "always" or "sometimes" asked or answered questions via SNS. In general, almost all participants found using SNS for educational purposes "helpful" to "extremely helpful".

In relation to communication on SNS for educational purposes with other Chinese international students and local UK students respectively, participants were asked how often they use SNS to communicate with other students; whether they find using SNS effective; and the difficulties they have experienced during the encounters on SNS. The results indicated that more than half of the participants either "always" or "all the time" used SNS to communicate with other Chinese international students. In contrast, only around 46% of the participants either "always" or "all the time" used SNS to communicate with other local students. In terms of the effectiveness of using SNS for communication with other Chinese international students, over 70% of the participants found it either "effective" or "extremely effective", and only around 6% of them found it "not effective". Similarly, over 70% of the participants found using SNS to communicate with local students "effective", but fewer participants found it "extremely effective". Finally, 27% of the participants selected that "language difference" was a challenge experienced, and 15% of the participants selected that "disagreement" was a challenge. Even though "language difference" was not selected as a barrier experienced by the participants when communicating with other Chinese international students, "disagreement" and "cultural differences" were the common challenges selected by the participants.

5 Discussion

The results gathered from the survey provided a basic understanding of the habits of using SNS by Chinese international students for educational purposes and the role of SNS in communicating with other students. Two key aspects can be drawn from the results, the use of SNS by Chinese international students in UK universities for educational purposes was found to be helpful, and the use of SNS has a role in facilitating intercultural communication. Thus, this study believes that there is an impact of using SNS for educational purposes by Chinese international students on intercultural communication.

In terms of using SNS for educational purposes, the results of this study concur with the findings from the current literature, which show that using SNS in education is a common practice among students. Moreover, having SNS study groups is another common practice among students. Paralleling the findings in [5], the use of SNS allows students to stay connected, not only socially but also academically. The academic connection is created by the actions of dissemination of resources, participation in discussion, and seeking and giving answers to coursework. However, the academic connection tends to be limited to peers as the finding of the study indicated having academic staff in study groups as a rather less common practice. Although this study finds that using SNS in education is beneficial to students' learning, engaging in a respectful discussion can be challenging. As mentioned in Burbles' article [9], using SNS to share opinions could lead to disagreement, and this issue is also reflected by the findings gathered from the survey. The level of academic engagement through SNS however was not significant in this study as the participants expressed that differences in values and backgrounds could be the difficulties preventing them from discussing freely via SNS.

As for intercultural communication, the use of SNS in education provides a platform for Chinese international students to interact with local UK students. Since this study specifically focuses on the impact of SNS used for educational purposes on intercultural communication, it did not explore how SNS are used as a platform for international students to socialise with local students. The current literature has demonstrated how SNS have helped international students to adapt to the cultures of their home societies [12,13]. This study has found that SNS have allowed intercultural communication to take place in the form of educational exchanges as most of the participants found using SNS to communicate with local UK students "effective". However, the level of academic interactions was found to be limited. One of the reasons is likely due to the language differences. It is believed that while virtual academic networks among Chinese international students are readily available, therefore the need for establishing ones with local students would be lessened. Moreover, another key aspect hindering discussion with local UK students is related to the differences in cultures and political views. Again, paralleling the concept established in [9], using SNS as a platform for academic discussion is prone to disagreements, and cultural and political backgrounds could often contribute to disagreement.

6 Conclusion

In summary, this study has explored the ways in which Chinese international students use SNS for educational purposes. It was found that students mostly use SNS to stay connected with each other and be updated with the course progress through the practice of sharing educational resources. The impact on students' learning is mostly positive. However, the level of academic engagement via SNS is rather limited. Since having academic staff was not considered a common practice, and thus educational exchanges mostly take place among students. This study also has found that academic discussion on SNS could be hindered by language differences and issues related to disagreement. In terms of intercultural

communication, there is no doubt that SNS have provided a platform allowing Chinese international students to communicate with local UK students for educational purposes. In contrast, this study has found that the impact on intercultural communication is limited. However, it is believed that differences arising from languages, cultural, and political backgrounds are the challenges hindering more extensive educational exchanges between international students and local students.

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