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The Impact of New Social Media on Intercultural Adaptation

Rebecca Sawyer, University of Rhode Island

Abstract

New social media have become increasingly popular components of our everyday lives in today's globalizing society. They provide a context where people across the world can communicate, exchange messages, share knowledge, and interact with each other regardless of the distance that separates them. Intercultural adaptation involves the process of promoting understanding through interaction to increase the level of fitness so that the demands of a new cultural environment can be met. Research shows that people tend to use new social media to become more integrated into the host culture during their adaptation and to maintain connections to their home countries. This paper attempts to investigate the impact of using new social media on the intercultural adaptation process. In-depth interviews of international students in a U.S. university are conducted. Based on the results of the analysis, directions for future research in this line of research are also discussed.

Introduction

While cultures around the world value their individual traditions, beliefs, and norms that make them unique, social media links people around the world regardless of differences and geographical boundaries. According to Chen and Zhang (2010), "The compression of time and space, due to the convergence of new media and globalization, has shrunk the world into a much smaller interactive field." People across the globe can interact with each other within seconds of sending and receiving messages. New social media has brought people from different cultures

together in the “global village.” During intercultural adaptation, people use social media to learn about their host countries, establish and maintain relationships, and stay informed with events in their home countries. Communication and interaction are key factors that influence how social media impacts intercultural adaptation.

New Social Media

New social media is an important part of our lives because it promotes the interconnectedness and interdependence of our culturally diverse world. Media for social interaction allows for people to communicate and engage with information that is quickly accessible on the Internet. In today’s society, there is an increasing number of Internet users so new social media has become more popular in daily patterns and routines. The communication that occurs in these online contexts promotes interactive dialogues that build understanding of different points of view. “New social media means that everyone is a publisher and everyone is a critic” (Georgetown University, 2010). In social media, people have the opportunity to express their opinions to the public and participate in conversations and dialogue through a common virtual medium.

People use social media for many reasons. First, the need for connection and interaction with other people is evident. As supported by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, people desire to fulfill a sense of belonging through support from relationships with others. After obtaining physiological and safety needs, people strive to achieve Maslow’s third need of belonging. New social media provide this opportunity where people can communicate with others and belong to different networks via virtual communities on the Internet. In relation to interacting with others online, people use social media to gain knowledge and learn about different opinions and

perspectives of issues, topics, and events. Most importantly, new social media is used for socializing; it is a form of media that allows people to participate in conversations and online dialogue without being face-to-face with others.

Cultural differences influence communication, behavior, and values. “There are differences in the way that people who identify with different cultures, based on both national identity and gender, manage their communicative behaviors within SNSs [social network sites]” (Rosen et. al, 2010). These differences can be understood through Hofstede’s five dimensions and the Diffusion of Innovation Theory.

Hofstede’s cultural dimensions are power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term/short-term orientation. Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Individualism and collectivism refer to the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. Masculinity and femininity describe the distribution of roles between the genders; for example, assertive and competitive vs. caring and nurturing. Uncertainty avoidance deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, and long-term and short-term orientation illustrate the focus and values of a culture (Itim, 2009).

In relation to new social media, differences in individualistic and collectivistic cultures are apparent in users’ communication and behavioral styles. Rosen et. al (2010) describe how people from individualistic cultures focus on meeting new people and being seen by many people, rather than maintaining their already existing relationships. On the other hand, people from collectivistic cultures utilize social network sites to “maintain close relationships with a small number of ties instead of creating new connections with people” (Rosen et. al, 2010).

The Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DOI) explains how advancements and new ideas spread within a social organization. Five perceived characteristics affect adoption behavior: relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, observability, and complexity (Rogers, 1995). Social networking “is enabled by information and communication technology and heavily depends on continuous user participation” (Veltri and Elgarah, 2009). The diffusion of new social media across the world has different effects on individual cultures but ultimately promotes interconnectedness and understanding among global societies.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social networking sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007 in Veltri and Elgarah, 2009). Four popular types of social media and networking sites are Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and the iPhone.

An example of social media that promotes the exchange of messages between people across the world is Facebook. Facebook was created in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, whose mission was to bring people together with different backgrounds and encourage interaction (Facebook, 2010). There are over 500 million users in the world with a population of 6.8 billion, which means that about 1 out of 14 people have a Facebook account. One impact that social media has on intercultural dialogue is providing a common medium for exchanging messages, and many people around the globe can use the Internet to communicate and collaborate. There are more than 70 translations available on the site, and about 70% of users are outside the U.S. (Facebook, 2010). According to Mark Zuckerberg, “If Facebook were a country, it would be the 6th most populated country in the world.” This social networking among numerous countries

enriches social lives through ignoring the factor of distance. Social media brings people together with different backgrounds and encourages interaction.

YouTube is a video-sharing website that began in 2005 that “allows individuals to interact with the global community by viewing and sharing user generated video content” (Georgetown University, 2010). Because so many videos are shared by people around the world, traditional stereotypes of groups of people begin to decline. People have the opportunity to comment on videos and participate in discussions and conferences. Numerous people have used YouTube, and this innovation “became a driving force for change around the world” (Ostrow, 2010). YouTube has over 78 million users with over 150,000 videos uploaded daily (Lake, 2009). Many companies use videos to promote their business to other countries. This strategy provides businesses with the opportunity to market their service or product to potential customers spanning across greater distances. In regards to worldwide current events, people upload videos to the Internet for the purpose of entertainment, information, or persuasion. Some videos instigate controversy, and people across the globe can voice their opinions on the issue, which may contradict societal norms and stereotypes.

Twitter is a form of social media that allows people to communicate information through microblogging. People use microblogging to “talk about their daily activities and to seek or share information” (Java et al., 2007). Twitter is a social-networking site created in 2006 to relay real time information to users. “The platform was inspired by creator Tim Dorsey’s introduction of an SMS-based concept that allowed members of his then-company, Odeo, to keep tabs on one another. The name ‘Twitter’ ...is used to describe a short burst of inconsequential information” (Georgetown University, 2010). Many people follow friends, celebrities, and musicians on this site in which they feel connected and develop acceptance for

the actions and feelings of others. Twitter has influenced intercultural dialogue because many people worldwide are focused on the individual lives of others and have the desire for connection and knowledge of events. This example of social media has shortened the ties of distance into knowing exactly what someone is doing without physically communication face-to-face with another person.

Lastly, the iPhone is a device introduced by Apple in 2007 that combines the function of a mobile phone, MP3 player, and instant messenger (Nowak, 2008). The iPhone combines new innovative features, such as the touch screen and wireless Internet access, and it encompasses different applications that include Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. People can use the iPhone to connect with others on social media sites in a convenient, accessible manner; they can interact on the Internet without being face-to-face with others or even at a computer.

Intercultural dialogue is critical today in our globalized and blended world, where different cultures encounter each other daily, especially through social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and the iPhone. Turmoil and violence would exist unless people actively promote intercultural dialogue and communication competence to achieve harmony and understanding (Georgetown University, 2010). Social media provide a place where people across the world can stay in touch and feel closer and more connected regardless of the distance that separates them. New social media have been rapidly spreading across the globe and gaining popularity in today's society. While providing a common way of linking people together through knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes, a sense of belonging to a greater social network other than one's own local community is effectively created. The Internet exemplifies such a significant means in connecting to a diversity of people, places, ideas, and cultures. New social

media have provided ways in which people can communicate and interact with others across the world, without being restricted by the limitations of time and distance.

Intercultural Adaptation

“The multicultural world is enhanced by the experiences of sojourners, immigrants, and others who successfully make the transition from one culture to another” (Kim, 2001).

Intercultural studies focus on the interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds, and according to Gudykunst (2003), adaptation is a “dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to an unfamiliar cultural environment, establish (or reestablish) and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment” (Gudykunst, 2003).

The stages of intercultural adaptation are important to consider when drawing connections to social media use. The four stages are honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and biculturalism (Lysgaard, 1955 in Chen & Starosta, 2005). During the honeymoon stage people experience initial euphoria with being abroad in a different country. The crisis stage consists of hostility and frustration with living in an unfamiliar culture. Then there is gradual adjustment and recovery, and biculturalism is the full adjustment and adaptation. According to Kohls (2001), culture shock is the “psychological disorientation most people experience when they move for an extended period of time into a culture different from their own.” Culture shock is a distress that everyone feels during intercultural adaptation that can influence their communication and behavior.

In addition, communication is an important feature in this intercultural process. Since numerous people migrate to study, work, and live, talking with others before and after is

beneficial. Having as much knowledge possible about the host culture and intercultural process influences the adjustment and emotions. “Emotional regulation allows individuals to engage in clear thinking about intercultural incidents without retreating into psychological defenses. If sojourners do not have the ability to regulate or control their emotions, they will be unlikely to adjust well because they will be locked into their automatic or habitual ways of thinking and interacting with the world” (Matsumoto et. al, 2006). Having control over emotions affects the ability to engage in learning and understanding, while being more open and flexible in adjusting to living in another culture.

“Only through global communication competence can people from different cultures communicate effectively and productively in the globalizing society” (Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2005). Global communication competency is an important ability to develop in order to help us understand other cultures and communicate successfully in today’s society. Competence involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects in relation to the four dimensions of global communication competence: global mindset, unfolding the self, mapping the culture, and aligning the interaction (Chen, 2005).

A global mindset involves broadening one’s perspective and having an open mind about different ways of life. In this process, one must have the desire to want to learn more, gain further knowledge, and think critically about cultural differences. “Unfolding the self is a process of transforming and moving oneself from the lower to higher level of the developmental ladder of human beings” (Chen, 2005). The empathy that is incorporated in this dimension influences the development of sensitivity and creativity. These traits encourage learning and increase global communication competence. Mapping the culture entails comparing our own culture to another and examining the similarities and differences. There may be bewilderment

and frustration when we become aware of the differences, but after analyzing the different aspects it is important to immerse ourselves into the other culture and try to understand their society. Lastly, aligning the interaction contributes to the ultimate goal of successfully interacting and demonstrating cultural adroitness, the ability of interactants to execute communication behaviors to elicit desired responses in a global communication environment without violating their counterparts' norms and rules (Chen, 2005). Effectiveness and appropriateness are two important components in this process in order to be flexible and manage interaction and changes. Thinking globally has become such an integral part of our lives in today's globalizing society as we have become more interconnected and interdependent with cultures around the world (Vicere, 2004).

Consequently, the Internet has become one of the most popular media used by immigrants, where they can electronically communicate with their family and friends in their native countries as well as with the local people in the host countries. In an online environment, the host social communication and the ethnic social communication are important components that can facilitate or impede adaptation (Chen, W., 2009). Social media has a social, physical, and cultural influence on intercultural adaptation. This study examines how Internet usage of social media sites impacts the adaptation process for international students at a university in the United States.

Methodology

In order to discover the impact social media have on intercultural adaptation, I conducted interviews of ten international students at the University of Rhode Island who were undergraduate and graduate students. These participants were born in another country other than

the United States and have had the experience of adjusting to life at the university. The participants were recruited by email through referrals from my faculty sponsor, peers, and friends of the interviewees. The interviews were designed to see how the students use social media to adapt to life in the United States and maintain connections to their home countries. Observing the role and purpose that social media plays in international students' lives, questions were asked regarding how social media influences their adjustment to the U.S. culture, relationships, sense of community, and their overall fulfillment and satisfaction. Table 1 shows the participants' demographic information.

Out of the 10 participants of the study, 6 of them were male and 4 were female. 4 of the participants were undergraduate students between the ages of 21 and 23. 3 participants were graduate students between the ages of 24 and 29, and 3 participants who were graduate students did not disclose their ages.

The amount of time that the participants have been in the United States ranges from 3 months to 12 years. Half of the participants have been in the U.S. for a length of 3 to 5 years (25-48 months). The participants in my study were from countries around the world: 5 from China, 1 from Hong Kong, 2 from India, 1 from Spain, and 1 from Sweden.

Table 1. Participants' gender, age, length in the U.S., and home country.

Gender	Age Range	Length in U.S. (in months)	Home Country
Male: 6	18-20: 1	0-24: 3	China: 5
Female: 4	21-23: 3	25-48: 5	Hong Kong: 1
	24-26: 1	49-72: 1	India: 2
	27-29: 2	73-96: 0	Spain: 1

	Undisclosed: 3	97-120: 0	Sweden: 1
		121-144: 1	

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves examining the patterns that emerge from the interviewees' responses to the questions. The following 11 questions were asked to the participants of the study in which the conclusions are drawn from.

1. Do you use social media? (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, iPhone) How often?
How much time?
2. What purpose do social media have in your life? How involved are you with social media sites?
3. Before you arrived in the U.S., did you use social media to connect and become more familiar with the culture? What kind of interactions? With whom? What did you learn?
4. Do you feel that your social media use helped you to be more prepared in adjusting to American culture?
5. Do you feel that your social media use helped you to overcome stereotypes or biases towards the U.S. culture?
6. Do you feel that your social media use helped you to make American friends? How about with non-American friends?
7. What adjustment challenges (i.e., culture shock) did you face when you came to the U.S. and how did social media help you overcome them?
8. Do you feel satisfied or fulfilled after using social media? Please explain.

9. In your opinion, generally what are the advantages and disadvantages of using social media?
10. How do social media contribute to your sense of community in both your host and home culture?
11. Is there anything else you would like to say about social media and intercultural adaptation?

Results

In relation to each of the questions asked about social media and intercultural adaptation, I found similar themes among the answers of the participants. The results are supported by direct quotations from the interviewees' responses.

Q1: All of the participants that were involved in the study used social media. They used Facebook, Twitter, Skype, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Google. Since Facebook is banned in China, Renren (formerly known as Xiaonei, which translates to "on-campus network") and QZone are popular social networking sites in China. Orkut is a social networking site owned and operated by Google, and even though it is not popular in the U.S., it is well-known and frequently used by people living in India. In addition, I found that Spain's geographic social networking site is called Tuenti. This site is referred to as the "Spanish Facebook" and comes from "tu entidad," meaning "your entity."

Most of the participants use the social networking sites multiple times a day, and some log in weekly to communicate with friends and family. A few sites are checked a couple times a month just to get updates and check the news. The amount of time the interviewees spent on

social networking sites varies from about 5 minutes when checking updates to a few hours if they are talking to friends.

None of the interviewees discussed the popularity or their personal use of the iPhone. Many people today have Internet on their phones, providing another means of connecting and socializing with people in a convenient way. However, the participants did not include this in their discussion of their social media use.

“I use Facebook to communicate with friends all around the world, except my friends in China. We use Renren instead; it’s like Facebook because Facebook is banned in China. A lot of American students who study Chinese also use this one, and I probably use Renren more than Facebook because a lot of my friends back in China have it” (Interviewee C).

“I have accounts on almost all the popular sites- Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and of course Gmail. I log in multiple times a day, totaling about an hour” (Interviewee D).

“Mostly, I use Facebook everyday for about 15 minutes on average. I spend more time on it when I am chatting with my friends” (Interviewee I).

Q2: The participants of my study used social media sites to communicate with their friends and family and to stay in touch with people whom they cannot talk to face-to-face. Staying connected to people that they do not talk to or see often is important for the relationships in order to maintain contact and connection. Additionally, social media sites are used to share information, news articles, photos, resources, and links.

The degree of how involved people are with social media sites varied; some participants were more passive with interacting online, while others were very active users who communicated frequently.

“When I use Renren, I share a lot of articles. Most students are very critical about the government, and we share pictures and news links on what’s happening in China. Personally, I use QZone to talk to my family, but I don’t post anything on that site because it’s censored by the government. With my friends, I use Renren, which is the campus network where we share a lot of information and sources” (Interviewee A).

“As far as interactions go on Facebook, I don’t interact much; I only observe. For example, on Twitter I follow a couple of links that I’m interested in. So similarly on Facebook, there are many people who update and post interesting news and videos, and if I feel like replying or commenting I will, but mostly I just observe. There is another social media site that I use, Orkut; it’s not very popular in this part of the world, but people use it to interact with others, share photographs, etc. This is a medium for me to not extend my boundaries but to strongly maintain my connections. I still observe people in my network. I’m a limited user of these things, but I’m content with what I have” (Interviewee D).

“I use social media to feel connected to people that I don’t talk to or see that much. I also use it to keep in touch and be updated with my friends and family. I don’t even use email that much anymore; I just send a private message through social media sites. I probably use social media more to stay connected with people back in Spain” (Interviewee F).

Q3: Before the international students arrived in the U.S., they had only a few contacts, along with professors, and they communicated through email. In this respect, social media did not play a prominent role in developing relationships; however, social media was still used to become more familiar with the culture through talking with their friends about the cultural experience.

“I only knew a Chinese American living in California at the time, and we used MSN to talk a bit. He helped me to adjust to the American culture” (Interviewee C).

“A few years ago I didn’t use social media, so I communicated with my professors through email” (Interviewee H).

Q4: The interviewees’ social media use helped them to be prepared in adjusting to American culture. Social media sites fostered connections and created awareness of different aspects of the culture, and some people used social media for entertainment in order to understand these contexts.

“My interactions with others were limited and social media increased my awareness. For example, when I was in India, I didn’t know what Halloween was. It was a Western thing and I didn’t really care or understand until I talked to people about it. And Christmas...it’s a festival, we all celebrate it, but when I came here, I saw how a lot of people go shopping on Black Friday. The only way I understood was watching videos and using social media to learn about the importance of the holidays and appreciate what other people do” (Interviewee D).

“I used Facebook more so I could get to know more people so that I could be more prepared for life in the U.S. A while ago I didn’t know what “lol” meant so I had to ask people. With the help of Facebook and Renren, I learned what was going on in the U.S.” (Interviewee H).

“With Facebook, I did become more involved and in touch with my friends and social activities before arriving in the U.S. These sites gave me a better idea of how American people think and talk, so it helped me become more prepared in adjusting to the culture” (Interviewee I).

Q5: From the responses of the interviewees on whether social media helped them to overcome stereotypes or biases towards the U.S. culture, there were mixed answers. Some participants felt that social media both strengthens and weakens stereotypes because some sites advocate overcoming stereotypes, while others are geared towards ostracizing groups and promoting the stereotypes. For example, some videos on YouTube directly make fun of cultures, which consequently spreads the biases. On the other hand, some videos acknowledge cultural differences and demonstrate the purpose of informing an audience that is unfamiliar with certain norms, traditions, practices, beliefs, etc.

Also, some of the interviewees expressed caution while viewing videos or participating in discussion groups focused on stereotypes. They were aware that different viewpoints exist and that it is important to be critical and skeptical of the sources so one can create a wider world-view perspective.

Lastly, one international student that was interviewed expressed how she did not have preconceived stereotypes of the U.S. culture, and so social media had no effect on overcoming stereotypes or biases.

“It certainly helps other people understand different ethnicities and cultures. There are some videos on YouTube, for example, that are geared towards stereotypes and making fun of other people. So, it is a good way to let people understand that there are cultural differences” (Interviewee B).

“I don’t think that the videos on YouTube maintain or emphasize stereotypes because people trust what they want to trust” (Interviewee C).

“I generally watch videos and see if things are contradictory. I look at multiple views. However much we try not to stereotype, we still have perceptions of certain groups; it’s a psychological perception that we cannot change so we must be cautious” (Interviewee D).

“This question assumes that we all have stereotypes and biases of Americans before we came here, which I really didn’t have” (Interviewee I).

“In my opinion, social media reinforces the stereotypes, especially of the ignorance of Americans, but that’s just the stereotype; not every person thinks that way” (Interviewee J).

Q6: When asked if social media use helped the interviewees make American and non-American friends, the responses that I received were inconsistent. I have come to the conclusion that the source of the discrepancy was from the wording of the question; social media does not necessarily help people *make* friends- I found that from the international students that I interviewed, social media helps to *strengthen, build, and maintain* friendships and already existing relationships.

However, there were 2 interviewees who made friends online with people whom they have never met before on social media sites and sites where people play online games together. These interviewees have met people online but do not consider them “friends.” I found that the term “friend” can be considered ambiguous. Many people have hundreds of “friends” on social media sites, but they may have only met those people once and are just acquaintances. So when everyone is considered a “friend” online, the term “friend” acquires a different connotation, and some people have the desire to “friend” people they know, whether they are close friends or not, and expand their networks.

“If you want to make friends, you still need to go out and make friends in real life and not just rely on the Internet. Social media doesn’t help me make friends; it strengthens friendships” (Interviewee C).

“First of all, it is my cultural upbringing that I’m not very comfortable with social media. I am very comfortable with people who I know; that’s how I accept friends and interact with people. When I meet people online who I never met in person, I see if they have genuine intentions when we communicate. My usage is less because of my reluctance to the medium. On social media sites, we have thousands of ‘friends.’ If you look from a sociology perspective, when they define a friend, who is a friend? A person who you meet, interact with, and share ideas...these are just some of the characteristics of a friend. The main problem is that people don’t differentiate between a friend and an acquaintance” (Interviewee D).

“Not really. I think I use social media more to keep in touch with people back in Spain than I use it to connect to people here in the U.S. It’s probably because of my situation; I have always been at URI, so most of the people who I spend time with are here. Most of my connections come from the university. I also have more friends in Spain than I do here” (Interviewee F).

Q7: The international students faced adjustment challenges, like culture shock, when they arrived in the U.S., and social media helped to overcome the challenges. The interviewees used social media to become more integrated into the new culture with mailing lists and social groups online. Social media sites were used to understand cultural differences and the local, everyday life, especially seen through photos of social events. Lastly, social media was used to help the international students with the English language, especially the slang and common phrases.

“It was a new environment that took time to get used to. We had a mailing list that included all of the Chinese students studying at the university, so basic communication occurred online with this group. A few Americans were on the list as well, and they organized parties and events for the Chinese students. It was a social media group that was smaller than Facebook” (Interviewee A).

“I experienced culture shock. When I first came here, I went to gatherings and parties, which sometimes were at the bars. I felt uncomfortable because I didn’t go to the bars in China, but it’s different here because it’s more common for students to go to the bars. It’s not wrong and it’s not right; it’s just different. I understand it now because I looked at a lot of pictures on Facebook and other social media sites and I think, ‘Ok, most people do that; it’s common here’” (Interviewee C).

“The first thing I found was that it was hard to understand the language. I spent a lot of time with the books because I couldn’t understand anything from class. I think social media helped me because after coming here I started talking to people and I came to know the differences, so I became adjusted to the culture. I would have to say Facebook helped me, from the language perspective, learn the short, slang words and shortcuts, especially when people post things on their walls” (Interviewee E).

Q8: The analysis from the interviewees’ responses reveals that they feel satisfied and fulfilled after using social media. Social media keeps people in touch with each other, and it is very convenient for communication purposes. Most of the participants felt that it was satisfying to stay updated with their friends’ and families’ lives, even though they may be in different countries. However, one point was brought up that sometimes people spend too much time on social media sites to where it can become addictive because people have the desire to constantly

be aware of what people are doing; so, it is important to balance how much time one spends on social media sites.

“I would have to say social networking and social media sites are very convenient to people all around the world. I can’t see how the younger generations could live without them” (Interviewee C).

“I’m satisfied with what I use. I control it and am not impulsive. There has to be some sort of benefit when I post things: to educate or to entertain” (Interviewee D).

“It’s good to see what people are doing, but other times I feel like I waste so much time. You need to balance how much time you spend on social media sites. You can’t rely solely on social media when building relationships” (Interviewee G).

“Social media is a comfortable way to communicate with people when you can’t call them on the phone or see them face-to-face” (Interviewee H).

Q9: Even though social media have become prominent in society and integrated into our everyday lives, there are advantages and disadvantages of using social media. Social media sites are convenient and efficient to communicate with people around the world. The online social sites instigate learning through the exchange of messages and the sharing of links, information, and resources. They are online sources where people can stay socially connected to their friends, family, peers, and acquaintances.

On the other hand, there are many disadvantages of using social media. First, privacy becomes an issue because people post and share personal information on the Internet, and anybody can view the sites. Considering the information that can be shared publicly and the information that should stay private is important. Also, social media can become time-consuming and addictive when people develop the habit of always talking to people on the

Internet for long periods of time. Lastly, social media sites present a barrier to communication because even though the Internet is a convenient and efficient medium to converse, emotions, feelings, and facial expressions are lost during communication. People are unable to see how others react to their messages and hear their tones of voice because they are not speaking face-to-face, and messages may be impersonal when sending them online. Emoticons have been developed to portray emotions, but the delivery of expression and instant reaction cannot fully be conceived.

“There are a lot of advantages. You can really share interesting news and be updated with what is happening in the world. The disadvantages come with the privacy issue. I think people should think before posting things. Particularly, from my personal view, I’m not comfortable with sharing my personal things with anyone except my close friends, not on social media sites” (Interviewee E).

“You can learn a lot of things through social media, even if you’re not face-to-face with people. However, there’s a barrier between interactions. When you chat online, it is efficient, but you can’t see each other’s facial expressions or gestures” (Interviewee G).

“Social media is a good way to communicate with other people, share information, and stay connected. Even the site LinkedIn is helpful for people who are graduating and looking for jobs. However, there are disadvantages. Some people spend too much time on social media sites. I’m not sure where I read this, but social media can become harmful- I’m not sure if that’s the right word- for the new generation because people spend too much time on the sites, and it becomes addictive. It is important to stay connected and learn important news and information on the sites, but it is more important to not overuse the social media sites” (Interviewee H).

Q10: Social media contributes to one's sense of community both in the host and home countries of the international students. The participants of the study belong to social groups in the U.S. and in their home countries, maintaining contact with friends and family in the U.S. and abroad. One way that the participants maintained a sense of community through social media in the U.S. is through groups on social media sites that reflect their interests. They communicate with people who they meet at the university and use social media to build relationships and feel part of the URI community, along with the U.S. culture as a whole.

In order to maintain a sense of community and belonging with their home countries, the interviewees maintain contact with the people they knew from their home countries and followed news articles to stay informed with current events. Overall, specific social media sites contribute to feeling a sense of community in different countries. For example, since Facebook is banned in China, international students from the country use Renren to maintain a sense of community back in China, while simultaneously, they use Facebook to maintain bonds and connections with people in the U.S.

"I use Renren because it originated from the campus network and I can talk to my friends in China. I share videos, articles, and pictures with my friends so that we can still keep up with what's going on in each other's lives. In America, I also use Facebook, which makes me feel like I'm part of a bigger family of people all over the world" (Interviewee C).

"I use social media to maintain contact with people here and in India. After coming to the U.S., I started using social media so I never lost contact with my old friends or family in India. I know what's going on here and in the U.S. because I follow the news and talk to people on social media sites" (Interviewee E).

“I think I belong to both communities even though I’m separated from my home country. I use social media to keep in touch with people in both cultures, but our relationships aren’t completely based on the communication we have over social media and Facebook” (Interviewee F).

“Social media increases my sense of community because when I’m in one country, I still feel like I’m part of the other as well” (Interviewee J).

Q11: When asked if there was anything else the interviewees would like to add as a final note about social media and intercultural adaptation, many interesting points were brought up that should be noted in the study. First, social media have become an integral part of our lives that the distance among cultures has been decreasing. Because of this process, social media has positively impacted intercultural adaptation.

“Social media helped me a lot to get adjusted to American life to overcome the cultural gap. We have social media in China, but it was difficult to adjust to the American social community; there’s a different sense of humor, different interests, and different backgrounds. Social media helped to make my transition easier” (Interviewee C).

In addition, differences exist among cultures and generations in their social media use due to different societal norms and traditions, the development of technology, and innovation.

“There is a huge difference in the way social media is used across cultures due to the different ways people are brought up. I feel that the boundaries are thinning across cultures over the generations. This thinning of boundaries causes cultures to be more similar because of Westernization and modernization, so in this way, social networks and intercultural adaptation have grown. If you look at the diffusion of social networks across cultures where there is Internet, it has been pervasive. So over time, I don’t think that social networks and cultures will

be homogeneous; there will be heterogeneity. The way cultures use social media to adapt to lifestyles in other countries are different” (Interviewee D).

“My parents have different opinions on social media. It’s common for our generation to use social media to connect with each other, but my parents feel differently; they value face-to-face communication more. I have a cousin who is addicted to social networking; he never spends time with his friends and just chats with them online. My cousin likes to live in his own virtual networks. He’s more active in talking to people online than in real life; he’s a quiet, shy boy, but online he’s very active and social” (Interviewee G).

Lastly, social media helped international students learn the language and ease the adjustment in adapting to the university life in the U.S. The interviewees felt that social media was a great way to stay connected to in both the U.S. and their home countries. Social media strengthens the links among people across the world, creating an environment for learning and understanding.

“From my personal perspective, social media really helped me to understand the language better. From the cultural perspective, I saw a lot of pictures on Facebook, which illustrated what life was like in other cultures” (Interviewee E).

“Social media is a good way to stay connected to people in the U.S. and back in your home country so you can be aware of what’s going on here and back home. It’s good to link people across countries so that they can understand each other. For people who are travelling to another country, social media is a good place to learn about the host culture, and I would recommend using social media, from my personal experience in adjusting to life in the U.S.” (Interviewee H).

Discussion and Conclusions

Connections and Relationships

The results of this study emphasize the importance of how seeking connections on social media sites impact intercultural adaptation. From the participants' reports, one can infer that people strengthen, build, and maintain relationships through social media. The interactions and conversations establish interconnectedness, which is an important component for communicating with people in the host and home countries. These connections and relationships are important for (1) overcoming adjustment challenges and (2) establishing a sense of community.

Adjustment

Adjustment is an essential factor in intercultural adaptation, and social media influences this process. Before arriving in the U.S., the participants spoke about using some social media to become more familiar with the American way of life and to understand cultural norms and traditions. Social media serve as a place for interaction and conversation in order to get in touch with contacts abroad in the U.S. (i.e., faculty and students) and ask about the intercultural experience.

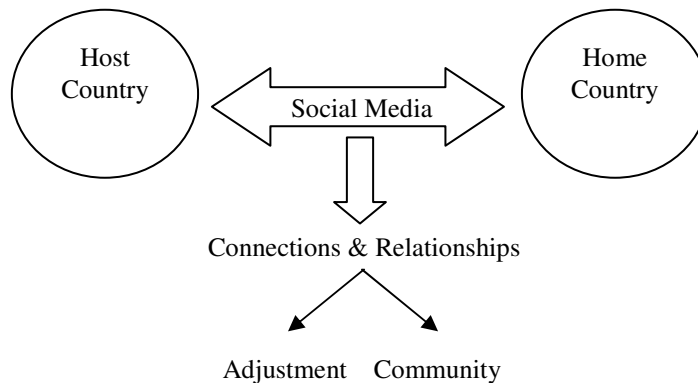
Furthermore, becoming aware of stereotypes is part of the adjustment process. Whether social media helped the interviewees to overcome stereotypes or just reinforce them, the interviewees acknowledged the stereotypes and biases and could shape their perceptions around the multiple sources. The information on the different points of view was available to them, and simply being aware and recognizing the different impressions create a wider world view perspective on cultures.

Community

Connections and relationships also influence one's sense of community while adapting to a new culture. After arriving in the host country, the interviewees met people in the U.S., and they used social media to connect to the individuals. Forming these relationships created a sense of belonging and integration into the new culture, and social media contributed to this development. Simultaneously, keeping in touch with friends and family back in one's home country is just as essential. Social media provides an outlet where people have the opportunity to communicate with friends and family in order to stay updated, aware, and informed of current events. Participants spoke about how social media helps them feel like they are still part of their home country even though they may be across the globe in their host country. Social media sites exemplify resources for how people can foster a sense of community and feel like they belong to multiple cultures.

Throughout my research, the recurring themes of connections, interactions, and relationships were illustrated and influenced how the interviewees overcame adjustment challenges and established a sense of community and feeling of belonging in both the host and home countries. Figure 1 demonstrates the correlations between these concepts. Social media connects people to their host and home countries, and from their social media use, relationships are strengthened, which helps people to overcome adjustment challenges and establish a sense of community and belonging.

Figure 1. Social media and intercultural adaptation



Limitations of this Study and Directions for Future Research

There are several aspects in which this study was limited. However, these limitations suggest a direction for future research. First, due to time constraints, I only interviewed 10 international students at URI. Interviewing a larger number of students or expanding to universities across the country would be beneficial in creating a greater understanding of my research. In addition, the majority of the interviewees were from Asian countries. For further research, international students from a wider range of countries around the world could be interviewed in order to gain a broader perspective of social media and intercultural adaptation from a more diverse population. Also, the age range of the participants could be expanded to include more people, and not just those adjusting to university life. Older and younger generations could be studied, in addition to the working class and people moving to the U.S. for reasons other than education, such as business. Lastly, Americans could also be interviewed in order to learn about how their social media use impacts intercultural adaptation in other countries, which then can be compared and contrasted with people coming to the U.S. There is

great potential for studying and interviewing people across the world to further understand the influences social media have on intercultural adaptation.

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