

Research on Impact of Social Media on Cultural Adaptation among International Students

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Abstract: In response to the surge in globalization and the thriving higher education market since the 1970s, studying abroad has become an increasingly preferred choice. The global population of international students has witnessed a significant rise, with notable challenges faced by students, as highlighted in Chen's (2004) study on Chinese students in the 1990s heading to the United States. These challenges included difficulties in forming meaningful social connections with locals, hindering their integration into American society. The study explores the evolution of individuals' social media usage patterns when relocating to a new cultural milieu and its role in facilitating cultural adaptation among international students. Amid rapid transformations in today's media landscape, social media emerges as a central tool for information seeking, personal and emotional aspects, as well as professional endeavors. The paper delves into the intricate relationship between social media and cultural adaptation, investigating its impact on genuine relationships and its significance in the cultural assimilation of international students. Through a qualitative research design, the study utilizes in-depth interviews with Chinese and international students to unravel the complexities of social media's role in connecting, participating, and fostering emotional connections in the acculturation process. The findings shed light on the nuanced ways in which social media influences the lives of international students and its implications for their cultural integration.

Keywords: Social Media; Cultural Adaptation; Uses and Gratifications Theory

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, with the surge of globalization and the thriving higher education market, opting to study abroad has increasingly become a preference for many. The global population of international students has seen a significant rise. In a study conducted by Chen (2004) on Chinese students in the 1990s heading to the United States, challenges arose as they struggled to form meaningful social connections with locals, leading to difficulties integrating into American society. The vibrant party culture, direct social customs, and competitive academic atmosphere in Europe and the U.S. left Chinese students feeling like outsiders, compounded by the isolation of living alone in a foreign land and academic pressures.^[1]

However, in contrast to the previous century, today's media landscape is undergoing rapid transformations. In the era of information globalization, the communication patterns, rules, and structures of the world have silently evolved. Social media has seamlessly amalgamated various media forms, emerging as the go-to tool for information seeking, personal and emotional aspects, as well as professional endeavors, catering to the diverse needs of individuals.

This study examines the evolving social media usage patterns of individuals in new cultural environments and their role in cultural adaptation among international students. The exploration begins with defining "social media" and "acculturation," followed by outlining the research methodology. Subsequently, the findings will be presented, leading to a comprehensive discussion on the impact of social media on genuine relationships and its significance in the cultural assimilation of international students.^[2]

2. Literature Review

2.1. Culture and Acculturation

Culture, as defined by Berry et al. (1992), is the “shared way of life of a group of people” (p.156), encompassing “speech, material traits, art, knowledge, religion, society, property, government, and war.”

In a cross-cultural context, it is crucial to distinguish between two terms: acculturation and enculturation. “The former is the process that links developing individuals to their cultural contexts, while the latter is a process that individuals undergo (usually later in life) in response to a changing cultural context” (Berry et al., 1992, p.271). According to the same source, acculturation represents “a form of culture change resulting from contact with other cultures”(p.271). The writer further divides acculturation into perspectives such as contact and participation, attitude toward acculturation, behavior change, and acculturative stress. To narrow the focus, this paper concentrates on “contact and participation,” exploring how international students use social media to enhance communication and participate in their new cultural environment. In the subsequent section, the discussion will center on social media, drawing insights from existing literature regarding its role in fostering involvement or isolation. Additionally, an exploration of its impact on acculturation will be undertaken.^[3]

2.2. Social media

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between social media usage and acculturation. Notably, Manu et al. conducted a comprehensive study revealing that international students using social media tend to undergo mental and behavioral adaptation to the host culture during their studies in China (2023).

However, conflicting research suggests potential drawbacks. Primack et al. (2017) found a significant association between social media usage (SMU) and perceived social isolation (PSI). Young adults with high SMU levels reported higher feelings of social isolation compared to those with lower SMU, potentially increasing the risk of all-cause mortality (Steptoe et al., 2013).

While social media may contribute to isolation, the research in question aims to address a more specific inquiry: How does social media impact real relationships? Additionally, the study seeks to explore whether social media plays a role in the cultural acculturation of international students. To address these questions, interviews were conducted with nine individuals for the research. The following section will provide an explanation of the research methodology.

2.3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, focusing on in-depth interviews with a targeted sample of participants. The primary participants consisted of 7 Chinese international students and 2 International students, chosen purposefully due to their cultural perspective. Additionally, two international students from diverse backgrounds were included to provide a comparative element. The interview protocol was designed to explore participants’ preferences regarding social media platforms, the purposes for which they used these platforms, and the ways in which social media influenced their real-life relationships.^[4]

The interview questions were crafted to elicit detailed responses, including inquiries such as “What is your preferred social media platform?” and “How do you use social media to enhance your real-life relationships?” Drawing inspiration from Guo (2023), the collected data underwent a systematic coding process. This method facilitated the identification of patterns and themes, allowing for a nuanced analysis of the information gathered. The aim was to discern the impact of social media on the interpersonal relationships of Chinese international students and, by including a comparative perspective, to identify potential cross-cultural variations. This approach ensured a comprehensive exploration of the research questions and provided a robust foundation for drawing meaningful conclusions.

3. Results & Analysis

3.1. Social Media: Connecting, Participating, Adapting

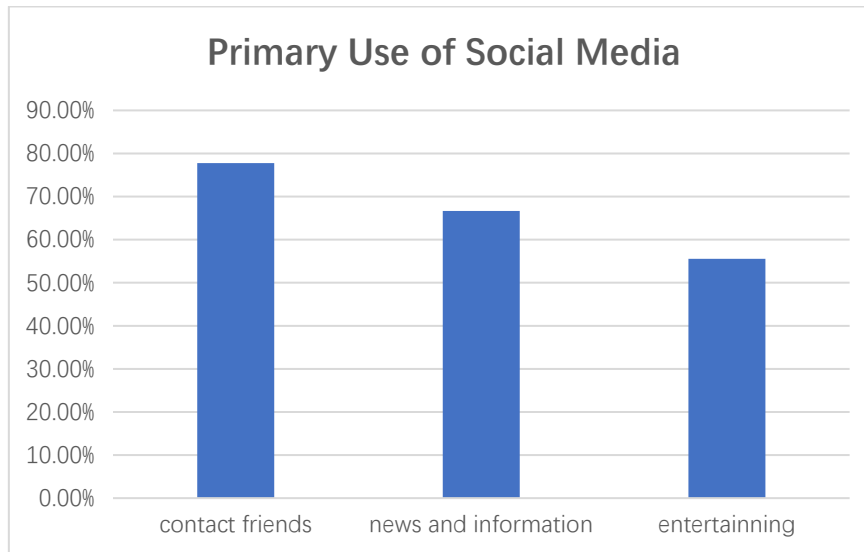


Figure 1: How interviewed international students use social media for socializing, news, and entertainment.

Looking at the chart (Figure 1), it's clear that most people use social media to stay in touch with friends, whether they're in China or the U.S. According to some interviews, social media is handy because it helps overcome the challenges of distance and time. It's a convenient way to communicate with friends and family back home. Some folks also use it to plan events or hang out with friends. They create group chats with people from their culture, making it easier to adjust to a new place. One person mentioned, "Social media may not help me adapt directly, but it sure helps in organizing events with friends who make adapting easier."

From this, it seems like social media isn't the main factor in helping people adapt to new surroundings, but it acts more like a moderator, helping to maintain relationships. It also provides a lot of information, like notifications, event details, and news. Chinese students, for instance, prefer using WeChat for important info instead of email. For those off-campus, staying updated on events is crucial for socializing and making friends. As one interviewee said, "I pick events I'm interested in, go there, and find people with the same interests, making it easier to make new friends."

Social media also helps spread news, giving people topics to discuss. Even if someone doesn't follow news channels, they might get involved in discussions about events like the Gaza tragedy because friends posted about it on Instagram. In terms of entertainment, people use platforms like Douyin to watch and share videos. Sharing daily life on the internet also allows international students to see what others are up to.^[5]

To sum it up, social media plays a key role in connecting people and helping them participate in various aspects of life, from events to discussions and entertainment. This connection is crucial for acculturation, making it easier for individuals to adapt to and embrace a new culture. But during this process, what apps do they use—ones popular in the new cultural environment or the ones they used in their home country? What habits or usage patterns do they exhibit with these apps? These questions lead to next part of the discussion.^[6]

3.2. Social Media: Bridging Cultures through Emotional Connections

In the interviews, it was observed that individuals tend to maintain their social media habits from their home countries after relocating abroad (Table 1). For instance, Latinos prefer using WhatsApp to stay in touch with fellow Latino international students here and to connect with their families back home. Similarly, individuals who favor Facebook for communication with their home-country friends continue to do so, even after making new friends in the new country. Chinese students universally opt for WeChat, which becomes even more prominent post-arrival as it provides a crucial platform for Chinese students to communicate and navigate unfamiliar situations.

Table 1: Culture Background-Based Preferences for Social Media Platforms

Number(culture background)	Preferred Social Media Platform
1(Latino)	Instagram, WhatsApp
2(Asian)	Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook
3(Chinese)	WeChat, Weibo
4(Chinese)	WeChat, Weibo, Douyin
5(Chinese)	Douyin
6(Chinese)	WeChat
7(Chinese)	Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Wechat
8(Chinese)	WeChat, Weibo
9(Chinese)	WeChat, Snapchat

These platforms not only aid in finding like-minded individuals but also in maintaining a sense of identity and sharing daily life experiences. However, while social media connects them to their home culture, it can create a discrepancy between the online information received and the real-life experiences, resulting in a sense of detachment from reality. Moreover, the shift to American popular social media platforms poses challenges as they're unfamiliar with the norms of sharing and interaction, leading to a struggle to find an audience and establish a self-identity. For instance, when the individual posted photos on Instagram for local friends, they were asked why they hadn't tagged them. The truth is, the person was not familiar with what "tagging" meant. There are these unspoken rules or features on social media that we international students are not clued in on. This uncertainty makes us less confident about sharing things on American social media. This dilemma raises questions about the role of social media in aiding cultural adaptation. Despite its connectivity, the discrepancy between their original social media usage and the new cultural context may hinder its efficacy in facilitating cultural integration for international students. Nevertheless, it remains a question whether students can discern these discrepancies among social platforms. The examination of their evaluations regarding these social platforms will provide answers in the third segment of the analysis.^[7]

3.3. Decoding Social Media Sentiments: Exploring Attitudes and Self-Regulation

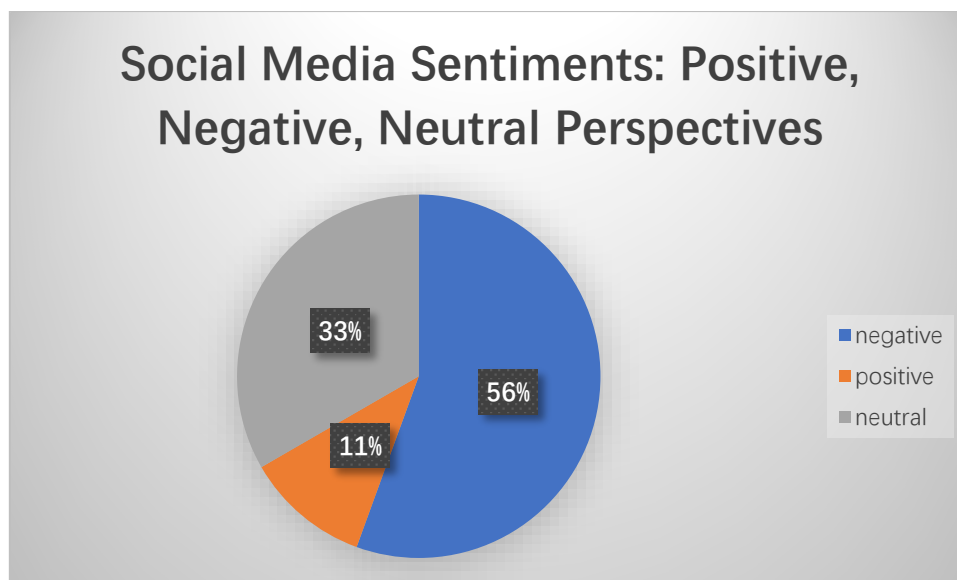


Figure 2: Distribution of Sentiments in Social Media Usage: Negative 56%, Positive 11%, Neutral 33%

In the third segment, insights on individuals' perspectives regarding social media were gathered from their verbal expressions. Responses were categorized into negative sentiments if participants directly conveyed dislikes, perceived time wastage, or found it useless. On the positive side, expressions of obtaining useful information, such as travel or skincare tips, were considered. For those who didn't express a clear opinion or showed uncertainty upon inquiry, their stance was classified as neutral.

Examining the chart(*Figure 2*), it becomes evident that nearly 50% of respondents did not convey

negative judgments about social media. Among those expressing negativity, reasons included the perception that social media wastes time and contributes to feelings of jealousy and reduced confidence.

Notable contrasts emerged, including one respondent emphasizing the importance of offline communication over socializing on social media. He said, "The most helpful thing for me in adjusting to this new environment and everything is my friends. And the best way to strengthen friendships is spending time with them in person" Additionally, participants engaged in self-regulatory activities, such as deleting certain applications or strategically placing social media on less noticeable sections of their cell phones, indicating a proactive effort to reduce usage.

After these three analytical sections, social media appears more complex. What significance does social media hold for international students, and how can the optimization of its usage be achieved? These questions will be thoroughly examined in the upcoming section.

4. Discussion

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is employed to analyze observed patterns in social media usage among international students. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) introduces how individuals use media to satisfy their needs and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Within the realm of social media, this theory posits that people select specific platforms to fulfill distinct needs, such as information, entertainment, socialization, or personal identity.

However, social media not only satisfies people's needs but also extends and augments them. For instance, social media enables a "mental presence" without physical presence. One of the interviewees exemplified this by following an individual on Weibo, observing her pursuit of a master's degree and job application. Despite being continents apart, she stays connected to this individual's daily life, fostering a sense of shared experience. Social media networks facilitate connections, enabling engagement with experiences beyond one's immediate vicinity.

For international students, despite geographical distances, social media serves to stay connected with friends from their home countries and find peers who share similar cultural backgrounds. Whether Chinese, Malaysian, Taiwanese, or American, the use of WeChat aligns individuals with a common cultural sphere—the Greater Chinese cultural realm. Similarly, WhatsApp users may originate from Latin America or Europe, while Telegram users could be from Russia. Social media functions not just as a communication tool but also contributes to the formation of self-identity, a significant aspect for international students in establishing belongingness and survival.

Once international students establish a firm self-identity, integrating into the local culture becomes pertinent. Besides language, social media usage habits significantly contribute to this integration. For instance, when international students mentioned their use of Snapchat to American friends, a prevalent social media platform among U.S. youth, some were surprised. This sparked more conversations and facilitated new friendships.

However, why do some hold negative perceptions of social media despite its myriad benefits and indispensability? Traditionally, offline interactions were perceived as more genuine due to the ability to perceive and feel others physically. Offline conversations, enriched with body language and eye contact, provide a depth of information that online interactions lack. Hence, individuals might deem social media ineffective in aiding their adjustment in the U.S., believing that one cannot fully understand the country through social media alone before experiencing it firsthand. As one interviewee remarked, social media serves as a secondary tool, and he said, "if you want to make friends, you need to go out and interact with people."

In discussing the "contact and participation" facets of acculturation, the potential for addressing contact needs through social media is evident from part one. However, regarding "participation," there is a sense of skepticism. Social media represents another cultural realm that necessitates time for adaptation. It is not merely a tool but an additional "cultural world" that requires exploration and learning. The more international students acquaint themselves with this world, the better equipped they become to navigate and thrive in new cultural environments.

The article endeavors to unveil the diverse role of social media, portraying it not merely as a tool but as a symbol of cultural unity and a space that demands adaptation. Anticipations for future research include a deeper exploration of its effectiveness, impact on real relationships, and influence on cultural adjustment.

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