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Investigating the Role of Social Media during the Transition of International Students to the UK

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Abstract. It is well known that international students' transition from their home to the host country is accompanied by many challenges. During the transition period, students are more likely to be depressed, anxious, lonely and socially disconnected. Social media, with its informational and communication characteristics, may be an increasingly important aspect of the experience. During the student's life in the host country, social media may help them to maintain well-being and provide them with necessary information. Combining qualitative interviews with social media data analysis, this study investigates the role of social media in Saudi students' transition to the UK by focusing on its impact on their social connections.

Keywords: International Students, International Students' Transition, Social Media.

1 Introduction

Every year, millions of students leave their home countries to study abroad. The number of international students around the world has increased from 1.3 million in 1990 to 2.1 million in 2000 and to five million in 2014 [1]. This number is expected to keep growing, reaching an estimated eight million students by 2025. In 2016, the UK was ranked as the country with the second highest (after the US) number of international students, with approximately 430,000 [2]. Yet the transition of the international student to the new country to study is challenging. It is associated with many psychological stresses and varying depending on such factors as the student's attitude toward the new environment, their home culture and background and the host country. Social media may play an important role in easing this transition, e.g. providing social and academic information and connections. But much more needs to be understood about how students use social media at this point in their lives, including how this affects different nationalities differently.

During the students' sojourn, social media is used as a tool to seek information and to communicate [3]. It has been found that students who use social media are more academically engaged with the new academic system they encounter [4]. Furthermore, social media can help students to keep in touch with their family and friends at home [3,5]. However, there is a lack of research on the role of social media in supporting international students' transition. In addition, there is a lack of studies specifically

investigating social media's impact on international students' social connections. Social connections in this study are defined as the creation and maintaining of social relationships with families, friends and colleagues, as well as social interactions with other people for academic and non-academic purposes. Furthermore, the nature of social media and its expanding use means that it provides a potentially large body of research data. Using this data will offer new insights on this research topic [6,7].

Thus, using the lens of how social media is involved in international students' social connections, this study aims to fill a research gap by investigating the role of social media in the experience of Saudi students' transition to the UK. This aim will be achieved by applying a mixed methods approach, interviews and social media data analysis.

2 Literature review

It is a significant challenge for international students to start their sojourn in another country [8]. Adapting to university is a far greater challenge for them than for home students [9]. In addition to fitting into a new academic system, international students have to adapt to a new society, environment and culture [8,10,11]. For international students, the concept of transition "indicates the progression from familiar to the unknown and involves the adoption of new challenges culturally, socially, and cognitively" [13 p. 2]. It is very common for them to suffer from social and psychological issues (e.g., friendlessness, loneliness, loss of hope, sadness or stress) during their adjustment [9,13–16]. These issues are more likely to take place in the first six to twelve months (the transition period) [11,12].

Menzies and Baron [17] have proposed a simple model to describe the experience of transition based on its phases (see Fig. 1). They adapted their model from an earlier study [18] that investigated the "psychological adjustment" of professionals to a host country. The actual transition starts with the "pre-departure" phase when the sojourner anticipates the experience they are about to take [18,19]. This is followed by the "honeymoon" phase, which begins when they arrive in the host country. Students in this phase find themselves enthusiastic and eager to engage with the new place [17,18]. This phase can last from a few days to six months [20]. The student then moves to the "party's over" phase. In this phase, they start to feel culturally, environmentally and academically shocked, which can lead them to feel depressed and anxious [15–17]. Finally, the student moves to the "healthy adjustment" phase. This phase is when the student starts getting used to the new environment and returns to a normal mood [17]. This model could be seen as optimistic. Blue and Horizons [19] added another direction after the "party's over" phase called "crises", which occurs when the student fails in their experience and returns home. In order to reduce the culture shock and facilitate the students' adjustment, Gbadamosi highlights the importance of social connections with family and friends. He also stressed the importance of social media in establishing and maintaining these connections [21].

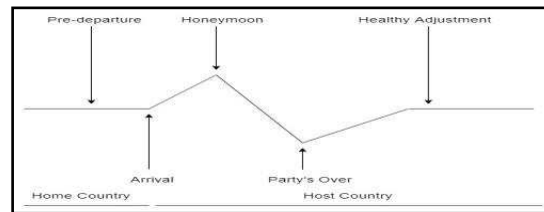


Fig. 1. Students' Adjustment to the Host Country. Adapted from [17]

Zhao has [3] argued that social media has played an important role in the experience of studying abroad for international students. He reported that social media helps students to find information relating to their academic and daily life during their time abroad. It has also been reported that virtual communities can be very helpful in providing international students with “sociocultural skills”, “psychological well-being”, “relational bonds” and “informational needs” [7]. Martin and Rizvi [22] argued that for Chinese and Indian students in Australia, social media positively facilitated their engagement with the new society and environment. It was being used as a tool for exploring the new culture and places, which increased their sense of belonging. Forbush and Foucault-Welles [4] found that, for Chinese international students in the US, social media had a positive impact not just on their academic engagement but also on their social engagement. During the student's life in the host country, social media is also helpful in keeping them socially connected with people both in their host and home countries. Students usually tend to make online connections with co-national friends, international friends and domestic friends [23,24]. Thus, different studies have shown the impotence of social media on international students' life abroad, however, there are some important gaps in the literature which need to be covered, particularly with a consideration of certain host countries and students' nationalities.

Sleeman, Lang and Lemon conducted a systematic review of the literature related to overseas students and their academic and personal use of social media and other technologies. They noted that only two of the studies were conducted in the UK. Furthermore, they recommended that future studies focus on cultures that have been “less researched” [25]. This prompted the idea of considering Saudi students in the UK as a population for this study. There is a high number of Saudi students in the UK: in 2016–17, there were more than 8,000 Saudi nationals at UK higher education institutions, yet there are few published studies on their experience [26]. Furthermore, social media in Saudi Arabia is heavily used, with 75 per cent of the population being active users in 2018. The country is ranked as having the fourth highest number of active users of Twitter [27,28]. Both these factors will allow us to gain new insights into the observed phenomenon. In addition, there is also a shortage of studies that consider the use of social media by international students and its effects on their social connections during their transition.

Thus, this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by (1) enriching the understanding of the role of social media in the experience of international students' transition, and (2) focusing on the aspect of social connections.

3 Methodology

This study will take a mixed methods approach for collecting its data within a sequential exploratory design [29]. Two forms of data will be used. The first is data from semi-structured interviews, which represents the qualitative part, while the second is Twitter data, which represents the quantitative part. The interviews will be conducted and analyzed first and based on the outcome of this analysis, the quantitative instrument will be developed and Twitter data will be collected and analyzed as a second method. At the end, a joint interpretation and discussion of the results of the two methods will be developed.

Thirty Saudi students in the UK will be interviewed. Students will be sampled according to the following criteria: (1) Saudi nationality; (2) use of social media; (3) study in the UK for a long-term course (e.g., undergraduate, postgraduate, or English language course leading to higher education); (4) in their first year in the UK; and (5) Arabic as their first language. The interview data will be thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's steps for analyzing qualitative data [30].

Researchers in many different areas of study have exploited social media data as a source of data for their research [6]. Using this kind of data for the study of transition has been recommended by recent research [7] yet no published studies in [25] has applied this approach before. In this study, and building on the results arising from the interviews, the quantitative phase will involve collecting and quantitatively analyzing Twitter data. A Google form will be created and distributed to Saudi students in the UK asking those who use Twitter to enter their Twitter handles and other main details (e.g., date of arrival, age, and level of study). Timelines for students who have completed the web form will be retrieved using Twitter API and the Python programming language [31]. These timelines will then be analyzed using quantitative content analysis, according to which they will be coded based on their content, replies and mentions over the transition period. Numerical statistical data about codes, diagrams representing these codes, and how the codes fluctuated over the transition time will be expected as outputs of this phase. The main aim of applying the second method is to extend, confirm and quantify the results of the interview analysis by investigating a larger population of students and observing practical examples.

Fully informed consent will be gained from all participants, and data will be anonymized and stored securely. According to Twitter's Terms of Service, there are no legal issues with retrieving Twitter posts for research purposes, since the user has already agreed to that when they signed up to the platform [32]. The user's identity will be anonymized and, if necessary, their posts will be paraphrased before being

presented. This study will follow the ethical policies of the British Psychological Society and the University of Sheffield [33,34].

4 Contribution

This study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by enriching the understanding of the role of social media in the experience of international students' transition, through a focus on their social connections. Studies of transition in the UK are relatively rare, and this will be the first such study considering Saudi students' experience in the UK. This study will also make a methodological contribution by combining social media data analysis with qualitative data analysis. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no studies on the relationship between social media use and international students' transition has applied such a retrieval of a social media content to be used as research data.

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