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## The Impact of Social Media on Intercultural Adaptation

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**Abstract:** Social media has become increasingly popular components of our everyday life in today's globalizing society. It provides 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 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 social media on the intercultural adaptation process. In-depth interviews of international students of a U.S. university are conducted. Based on the results of the analysis, directions for future studies in this line of research are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Social media, intercultural adaptation, intercultural communication, cultural differences

### 1. 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" (p. 14). People across the globe can interact with each other within seconds of sending and receiving messages. Social media has brought people from different cultures together in the "global village." During intercultural adaptation to a host country environment, people use social media to learn about their host countries, establish and maintain relationships, and stay informed with events in their home countries. Thus, it is important to examine the potential impact of social media on intercultural adaptation in order to better understand the role that new technology plays in the process of intercultural communication in this globalizing society.

### 2. Review of the Literature

In order to investigate the possible relationship between social media and intercultural adaptation, this section first reviews the previous research relating to the two concepts.

## 2.1 Social Media

Social media is an important part of our life 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 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. 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, which also means that at the same time, every person is a publisher and a critic in cyberspace (Georgetown University, 2010).

People use social media for many reasons. First, the need for connection and interaction with other people is evident. As supported by Maslow's (1954) 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: belonging. Social media provides 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, 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. As Rosen, Stefanone, and Lackaff (2010) pointed out, there are differences among cultures, and these differences affect the way people communicate within social networking sites. The cultural differences can be understood through Hofstede's five cultural dimensions and the Diffusion of Innovation Theory.

Hofstede's (2001) 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 social media, for instance, differences in individualistic and collectivistic cultures are apparent in users' communication and behavioral styles. As Rosen, Stefanone, and Lackaff (2010) described, people from individualistic cultures focus on meeting new people and being seen by many others, rather than maintaining their already existing relationships in social network sites. On the other hand, people from collectivistic cultures utilize social network sites to maintain relationships with close relatives or friends instead of developing new relationships with others.

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). Because social networking “is enabled by information and communication technology and heavily depends on continuous user participation” (Veltri & Elgarah, 2009, p. 171), the diffusion of social media across the world may show different effects on individual cultures and ultimately lead to the promotion of interconnectedness and understanding among global societies.

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social networking sites allow individuals to create profiles within the system, view others’ profiles with which they share a connection, and interact with others in the system. This description of social networking sites lays the foundation for how specific sites function. 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, 2011). There are over 800 million users in the world with a population of 6.9 billion, which means that about 1 out of 12 people has 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 75% of users are outside the U.S. (Facebook, 2011). If Facebook were a country, it would be the 3<sup>rd</sup> most populated country in the world, behind China and India (Grossman, 2010). This social networking among numerous countries enriches social life through ignoring the factor of distance.

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, p. 33). 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 the change of human society (Ostrow, 2010). The growth and development of YouTube have rapidly increased. In 2009, YouTube had over 78 million users (Lake, 2009). However, in 2011, there are over 490 million users worldwide (Elliott, 2011). Because of YouTube’s popularity, 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 issues and topics depicted in the videos.

Twitter is a form of social media that allows people to communicate information through microblogging. People use microblogging to share personal stories or events and seek information (Java, Song, Finin & Tseng, 2007). Twitter is a social-networking site created in 2006 to relay real time information to users. The platform of Twitter 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, p. 28). 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 life 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 communicating 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 even being 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 provides a place where people across the world can stay in touch and feel closer and more connected regardless of the distance that separates them. Social media has been rapidly spreading across the globe and gaining popularity in today’s society. While providing a common way of linking people together through knowledge, behavior, 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. Social media has provided ways in which people can communicate and interact with others across the world, without being restricted by the limitations of time and distance.

## **2.2 Intercultural Adaptation**

Intercultural adaptation is a process that requires people to change their ways of life and communication patterns in order to adjust to a new culture. Many people experience intercultural adaptation because cultures in our globalizing society are closely intertwined.

As Kim (2001) pointed out, “The multicultural world is enhanced by the experiences of sojourners, immigrants, and others who successfully make the transition from one culture to another” (p. xi). Intercultural studies focus on the interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds, and 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, p. 244).

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). 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. As Kohls (2001) indicated, culture shock is the “psychological disorientation most people experience when they move for an extended period of time into a culture markedly different from their own” (p. 91). 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 migration is beneficial. Learning as much as possible about the host culture and intercultural process significantly influences the adjustment and emotions. Furthermore, having control over emotions affects one’s ability to engage in learning and understanding while being more open and flexible in adjusting to living in another culture (Matsumoto, Hirayama & LeRoux, 2006).

According to Chen and Starosta (1996, 2005), in order to successfully communicate with people from different cultures, one must cultivate the ability of global communication competence. 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, p. 7-8). 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 & Starosta, 2005). Effectiveness and appropriateness are two important components in this process in order to be flexible and manage interaction and changes.

Chen’s global communication competence model demonstrates the importance of expanding our ways of thinking to incorporate more complex qualities. 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). Social media allows for this ability to be practiced by individuals across the globe in order to better understand those from different cultures. This provides an opportunity for observing the role social media plays in the process of intercultural adaptation.

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 & Starosta, 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.

### 3. Methodology

In order to explore the impact of social media on intercultural adaptation, in-depth interviews were conducted in this study. Qualitative research interviews obtain insight through conversation, so not only is the content level of meaning portrayed, but the relationship level is conveyed as well. This methodology is useful in understanding participants' experiences, allowing the interviewer to obtain in-depth responses to questions (McNamara, 2007). The qualitative method of conducting in-depth interviews provided the study with detailed information about the individuals' thoughts and perspectives on the impact social media has on intercultural adaptation.

#### 3.1 Participants

Ten international students enrolling in a mid-sized university in the northeastern region of the United States participated in this study. These participants were born in countries other than the United States and have had the experience of adjusting to life at the university. Table 1 shows the participants' demographic information.

Out of the 10 participants, 6 of them were male and four were female. Four of the participants were undergraduate students between the ages of 21 and 23. Three participants were graduate students between the ages of 24 and 29, and three 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 three months to 12 years. Half of the participants have been in the U.S. for a length of three to five years (25-48 months). The participants in study were from the following countries: five from China, one from Hong Kong, two from India, one from Spain, and one from Sweden.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

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	

### 3.2 Procedure

The participants were recruited by email through referrals from faculty members, 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' life, 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. The interviews took place in offices and the library on campus, and each interview lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. They were conducted in English, and all the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### 3.3 Instrument and Data Analysis

Data analysis involves examining the recurring themes that emerge from the interviewees' responses to the questions. The instrument used to collect information in the interviews contains 11 questions regarding the use of social media and intercultural adaptation. The questions of the instrument used in this study are shown in the Appendix.

## 4. Results

This section reports the summaries and recurring themes among the answers of the participants in relation to each of the questions asked about social media and intercultural adaptation. The following describes the summaries and recurring themes of each question with typical examples to illustrate the responses given. An overall discussion of the results of the 11 questions is made in the next section.

### 4.1 *Q1: Use of Social Media*

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, 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. A few sample answers are as follows:

*“I use Facebook to communicate with friends all around the world, except with 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 every day for about 15 minutes on average. I spend more time on it when I am chatting with my friends” (Interviewee I).*

#### **4.2 Q2: Purpose of Social Media**

The participants in the study used social media sites to communicate with their friends and family and to stay in touch with people whom they cannot communicate with 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. As Interviewees A and F mentioned,

*“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).*

*“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).*

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. For example,

*“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. I’m a limited user of these things, but I’m content with what I have” (Interviewee D).*

#### **4.3 Q3: Social Media Use Prior to Arrival in the U.S.**

Before the international students arrived in the U.S., they had only a few contacts, including professors, and they communicated through email. In this respect, social media did not play a prominent role in helping to develop relationships before arriving in the U.S.; 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).*

#### **4.4 Q4: Social Media Use and Adjustment to American Culture**

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. Below are three sample answers.

*"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. 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 to 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" [laugh out loud] 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).*

#### **4.5 Q5: Social Media Use and Stereotypes**

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 spread 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.

*"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).*

*"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).*

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.

*“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).*

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.

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

#### **4.6 Q6: Social Media Use and Friendships**

When asked if social media use helped the interviewees make American and non-American friends, the responses were inconsistent. The source of the discrepancy might be from the wording of the question; it is plausible that social media does not necessarily help people make new friends, but only help to strengthen, build, and maintain friendships and already existing relationships.

*“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).*

*“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 here, 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).*

However, there were two interviewees who made friends online with people whom they have never met before on social media sites. These interviewees have met others online but do not consider them “friends.” As Interviewee D recounted,

*“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).*

#### **4.7 Q7: Adjustment Challenges and Social Media**

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.

*“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 small, social media group” (Interviewee A).*

Social media sites were used to understand cultural differences and the local, everyday life, especially seen through photos of social events.

*“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).*

Lastly, social media was used to help the international students with the English language, especially the slang and common phrases. In today’s society, people use texting slang on social media sites to shorten the time it takes to relay messages, and the slang words and abbreviations have become integrated into our daily conversation.

*“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).*

#### **4.8 Q8: Satisfaction and Fulfillment from Social Media**

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’ life, even though they may be in different countries. Some examples are:

*“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).*

*“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).*

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.

*“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).*

#### **4.9 Q9: Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Media**

The results show that even though social media has become prominent in society and integrated into our everyday life, 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, 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. The following answers illustrate these points.

*“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. 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).*

#### **4.10 Q10: Social Media and Community**

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 campus 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. This is shown in the following answers from three interviewees.

*“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 life. 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 in India 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).*

#### **4.11 Q11: Final Thoughts on Social Media and Intercultural Adaptation**

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 has become such 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. 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; they value face-to-face communication more. I have a cousin who 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 tool to stay connected to people 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; and I would recommend using social media, from my personal experience, in adjusting to life in the U.S.” (Interviewee H).*

## **5. Discussion**

The answers from the interviewing questions provide rich information regarding the relationship between the usage of social media and intercultural adaptation. For the purpose of this study, three key concepts can be drawn from the answers, including connection/relationship, adjustment, and community.

The results of this study emphasize the importance of how seeking connections on social media sites impacts 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 overcoming adjustment challenges and establishing a sense of community.

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 serves 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 of and recognizing the different impressions create a wider world view.

Connection/relationship also influences 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.

Figure 1 shows that a model can be used to demonstrate the potential relationships between these concepts, in which 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.

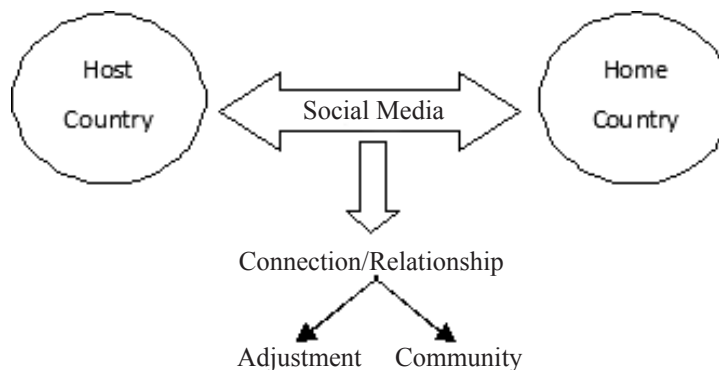


Figure 1. A Model of the Relationship between Social Media and Intercultural Adaptation

Two additional findings of the study are worth discussing here. First, the pattern that emerged from the interviews of the study was the correlation between the amount of time spent in the U.S. and social media usage. When the students first arrived in the U.S., they used social media more to stay connected with people in their home countries because they experienced culture shock, and communicating with people who they were familiar with provided them with a sense of comfort in the new environment. However, as the students' length of time in the U.S. increased, their social media usage was directed more towards communicating with people in the U.S. because the students formed relationships with people in the host country, and they used social media to maintain these relationships and become more integrated into the new culture. This shift in social media use illustrates the impact social media has on intercultural adaptation. Second, the results show that the term "friend" can be considered ambiguous in cyberspace. 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.

Finally, there are a few limitations of the study. First, only 10 international students were interviewed in this study. Interviewing or surveying a larger number of students or expanding to universities across the country would be beneficial in creating a greater understanding of the relationship between the usage of social media and intercultural adaptation. 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 has on intercultural adaptation.

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Guo-Ming Chen is Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Rhode Island. He was the recipient of the 1987 outstanding dissertation award and the founding president of the Association for Chinese Communication Studies. He served as Chair of the ECA Intercultural Communication Interest Group and the co-editor of *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*. In addition to serving as an editorial board member of several professional journals, presently Chen is the Executive Director of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies and the co-editor of *China Media Research*. His primary research interests are in intercultural/organizational/global communication. Chen has published numerous articles, books, book chapters, and essays. Those books include *Foundations of Intercultural Communication*, *Introduction to Human Communication*, *Communication and Global Society*, *A Study of Intercultural Communication Competence*, *Chinese Conflict Management and Resolution*, and *Theories and Principles of Chinese Communication*.

### Appendix

#### Interview Questions

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?