

The Impact of Social Media on International Students: Cultural and Academic Adaptation

Abdulkarim Saleh Masoud Ali and Rahayu Ahmad
School of Computing, College of Arts and Sciences,
Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Malaysia

Abstract: Newly admitted international students always experience a certain period of discomfort as a result of the strangeness of the culture of their new environment. This discomfort is often traced to their cultural differences with the host country where they will have to spend a certain number of years as a student. This will require them to adapt both academically and culturally. In this regard, it is suggested that Social Networking Sites (SNS) be employed as cultural and academic adaptation tools due to its inherent power to allow members of the same or diverse cultures to interact, interrelate, build friendships and relationships, irrespective of their geographical backgrounds. Specifically, participating in social media can help students to engage in online with virtual communities as a way of knowing more and getting accustomed to the new culture that they are being exposed to and subsequently, instrumental for better academic performance. This study focuses on the international students of Universiti Utara Malaysia where 352 students were randomly selected to analyze the impact of the usage of social media by the international students and how it helps them to adjust culturally and academically. Firstly, this study explores gratification factors for Facebook. Secondly, it explains how different usage of Facebook may influence the cultural and academic adjustment of international students. Thirdly, the findings show that cultural adaptation through SNS is not statistically significant. Accordingly, recommendations are offered to ensure that the Facebook technology is effectively utilized for cultural adaptation. In addition, some limitations of the study are addressed.

Key words: Cultural adaptation, academic adaptation, Facebook users and gratification, online support group, Facebook, technology

INTRODUCTION

Newly admitted international students always have a certain period of discomfort due to their unfamiliarity with the culture of their new surroundings. This discomfort is often traced to their cultural differences with the host country where they will have to spend a certain number of years as a student (Talib *et al.*, 2014). Due to the importance of culture on individual traditions, it dictates their norms, belief and unique. This makes a sudden integration with such diverse and possibly conflicting cultures is always challenging (Talib *et al.*, 2014).

In this regard, it is suggested that students use Social Networking Sites (SNS) due to its inherent power to allow members of the same or diverse cultures to interact, interrelate, build friendships and relationships, irrespective of their geographical differences. SNS enable people to take part in online dialogues and be engaged with virtual communities to know more and become accustomed to the new cultures that they are being exposed to Sawyer (2011).

It is believed that SNS can guide new entrants, specifically international students in the academic and cultural adaptation process. The main aim of this study therefore is to ascertain the extent to which international students in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) employ SNS such as Facebook to establish a relationship, be it a cultural or academic relationship. The objectives of this study are:

- To analyze the usage pattern of SNS by international students of University Utara Malaysia
- To look into the impact of different usage of SNS on cultural and academic adaptation

To do this, the following research questions need to be answered:

- What are the different patterns of usage of SNS by international students?
- How do different types of SNS usage influence the cultural and academic adaptation process?

The significance of the study is that it will highlight patterns of Facebook usage and how it influences cultural and academic adaptation. It also explains the impact of social media on cultural and academic adaptation.

Literature review

Cultural adaptation: Mooij and Hofstede (2010) defined culture as the “collective programming of the brain”. Cultural adaptation can also be viewed as the “evolutionary process by which an individual modifies his personal habits and customs into a particular culture”. Moore (2010) referred this to gradual changes within a culture or society that occur as masses from different backgrounds participate in the culture and partake in their views and patterns. According to Dang (2014), culture is also identified as “the process to achieve social efficacy in a new environment by developing cultural communicative competence, functional fitness, psychological health and cultural identity, this adaptation process continues throughout the duration of intercultural contact. The ability of an individual or person to acclimatize to a culture from one that has been previously known and practiced by this individual or group of people for a significant period of time is known as cultural adaptation”.

In places with a new academic structure that is different from the student's home country, academic adaptation becomes necessary (Talib *et al.*, 2014; Sawyer, 2011). Rapid globalization has made SNS an increasingly popular component of the life of people. SNS provide a platform where communication, exchange of messages, sharing of knowledge and social interaction that defy geographical constraints and barriers can take place (Dang, 2014). According to Al-Rahmi and Othman (2013), social media has permeated all generations of internet users and it has become a popular tool for communicating, teaching and learning, especially in the student community, besides enabling cultural, intercultural and academic adaptation (Dang, 2014). Social media has over the years come to be perceived as a medium through which changes can be effected in the life of individuals and the society.

Academic adaptation: Social relationships amongst people play a pertinent role, especially among International students. International students battle a greater range of challenges in their efforts to adapt academically and culturally. It has been (Ellison, 2007) shown that international students do not receive adequate social support from local colleges and that SNS provide more support to them. International students face little difficulty in learning to adapt via. SNS. Academic educators are encouraged by NSBA (2007) to explore

different ways in which social media can be leveraged for educational purposes (Ellison, 2007). Further, studies have shown that social media is effective for student-teacher interactions since it allows the direct collaboration between students and their teacher which then builds a closer relationship (Cifuentes and Lents, 2011). Based on past research, students who utilize social media feel a stronger alliance with the community. One of the more popular SNS, Facebook is an important media of communication for many students. Facebook is a valuable tool that can be used to effectively help students to express their ideas and competence in education (Cifuentes and Lents, 2011). It is noted that “in traditional educational institutions, the common spaces used for this kind of informal communication are building halls and that the use of Facebook in distance learning environments creates virtual halls as meeting places with professors” (Hair *et al.*, 2014).

Bonding and cultural adaptation: Bonding is defined as “the experience and familiarity in particularized trust” (Matsumoto and Yoo, 2006). Family and friends are the closest partners to students regardless of their social bond (Ali and Kohun, 2006). Social media (Facebook) is the most frequently used media to communicate than other media. Many students use social media (Facebook) for task accomplishment, entertainment and building social bonds (Ward and Kennedy, 1999). Thus, the following is hypothesized:

- H_1 : the higher the usage of social media for bonding, the higher the cultural adaptation

Relationship convenience and its influence on cultural adaptation: Relationship convenience is the ability to develop communication competencies for the purpose of understanding cultures and collaborating freely in society. Emotional and relational convenience allows people to engage in better cultural adaptation. If the international students do not have relationship convenience, they may be unlikely to adjust well and be still lost in their habitual ways of behaving or interacting with people (Matsumoto and Yoo, 2006).

Relationship convenience influences developmental creativity and sensitivity. Social media can help international students to build their level of understanding the dynamics of differences in culture and ability to value diversity, develop cultural knowledge by establishing cultural reciprocity and learn to adapt culturally. This can enhance relationship convenience amongst students. These factors affect the level at which people learn and their communication competencies. Hence, students who use Facebook for

relationship convenience can improve their cultural adaptation process. This study thus hypothesizes that:

- H_2 : the higher the usage of social media for relationship convenience, the higher the cultural adaptation

Knowledge sharing in cultural and academic adaptation:

The ability of an individual or group of people to acclimatize to a culture from one that has been previously known and practiced by this individual or group of people for a significant period of time is known as cultural adaptation. International students face immense pressure to adapt in their 1st year. The feeling of isolation and being left alone by peers are major factors to be considered (Ali and Kohun, 2006). Knowledge sharing through social integration with students from different backgrounds allows international students to have better prospects of understanding and adapting to the new culture. Students who use social media for knowledge sharing may have faster cultural adaptation and integration. Thus, it is important to provide a mechanism for knowledge sharing among international students to increase their chances of adapting successfully (Ali and Kohun, 2006). In efforts to achieve this goal and elevate the level of cultural adaptation by the international students, it is pertinent to provide social support. This is where Facebook comes to play; it serves as a medium for promoting cultural and academic adaptation.

Students can use this virtual community as a forum to formally or informally share knowledge on issues of interest to them. Therefore:

- H_3 : the higher the usage of social media for knowledge sharing, the higher the cultural adaptation
- H_4 : the higher the usage of social media for knowledge sharing, the higher the academic adaptation

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a quantitative study and uses a questionnaire. Using the random sampling technique, the questionnaire was distributed to 352 international students in UUM and received a response rate of 57%. The questions that were used to gather the quantitative data were adapted from (Ward and Kennedy, 1999) and employed by the researcher to measure bonding, relationship convenience and knowledge sharing in relation to cultural adaptation and academic adaptation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The SPSS and SmartPLS were used for statistical analysis (Dang, 2014) which is a combination of two models, the measurement model and the structural regression model (Hair *et al.*, 2010). This mix-mode analysis of data was employed for data analysis. The data had no missing values.

Demographics of the study: In terms of gender of the respondents, 52% are male and 48% are female. The age category of respondents is as follows: 18-25 years (32%), 26-35 years (44%); 36-45 years (17%) and 46-55 years (7%). With regards to racial composition of the respondents, Asians comprise the highest with 56%; followed by Arabs with 27%; Africans with 16% and Europeans with 1%.

As for educational qualification of the respondents, those with the Bachelor's degree constitute 29%, the highest number of respondents is those with a Master's degree with 44% and those with PhD are 24%. A total of 3% of the respondents fall under the 'others' category of educational level.

The demographic information of membership of respondents in the Facebook groups shows that respondents who belong to groups on the basis of university groups is 6%, educational groups is 9%, the highest percentage of respondents belong to the tool groups at 54%, the school group is next at 25%, course group at 5% and others at 1% of total respondents. The respondents were asked about the rate of their activity on the Facebook group. It is observed that only 39% of the respondents could be seen as very active in their respective group with them being active several times a day while 22% of the respondents visit the page once a day and thus active group page users. About 10% of the respondents visit the group page only once a week; 22.0% of the respondents are seen as inactive in their page because they visit the page once a month while 7% of the respondents are dormant on the Facebook group page because they visit it less than once a month.

Research finding: For the purpose of clarity, the results of this study are divided into two domains, i.e., measurement model (reliability, internal consistency and convergent and discriminant validity) and structural model (significance values and R^2 values).

Assessment of measurement model: Assessment by the measurement model involves determining individual item's reliability, internal consistency reliability, content validity, convergent validity and discriminant validity (Hair *et al.*, 2014; Henseler *et al.*, 2009) as shown in Fig. 1.

Table 1: Structural model assessment (full model)

Hypotheses/Relationship	Beta	SE	t-values	Decision
H ₁ : bonding->cultural adaptation	0.007	0.079	0.091	Not supported
H ₂ : relationship convenience->cultural adaptation	0.308	0.074	4.148	Supported
H ₃ : knowledge sharing->cultural adaptation	0.486	0.061	7.952	Supported
H ₄ : knowledge sharing->academic adaptation	0.366	0.078	4.679	Supported

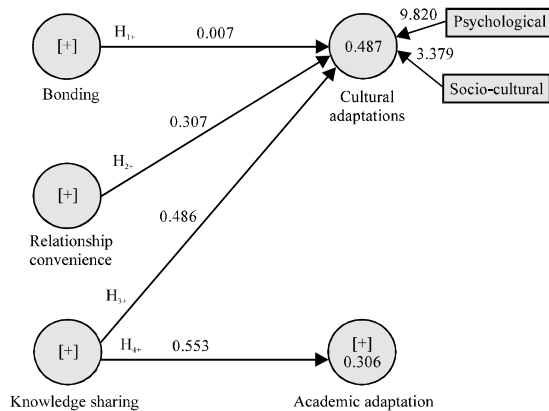


Fig. 1: The measurement model

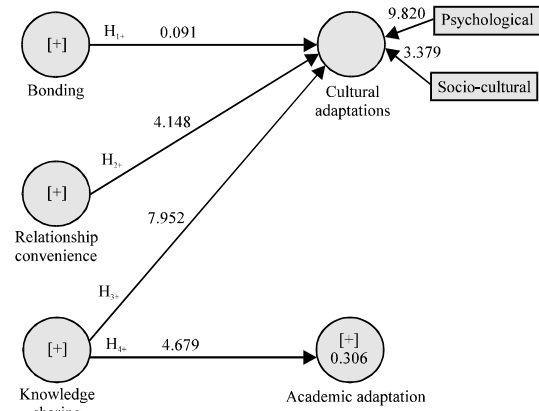


Fig. 2: The structural mode

Assessment of the structural model: According to the suggested t-value (Ali and Kohu, 2006), the relationship can be considered significant when a value is 1.96 or above. Thus, there is no relationship between bonding with cultural adaptation as the value is not significant (below 1.96), therefore, there is a weak relationship of bonding with cultural adaption. The impact of convenience and knowledge sharing is significantly positive on cultural and academic adaptation. However, in the context of cultural adaptation, the psychological effect is greater than the socio-cultural effect (Fig. 2).

The preceding chapter presents the findings from the field which shows the result of both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The findings generally show the different usage of SNS can support international students in their cultural and academic adaptation. Except for one, i.e., the assumption that a relationship exists between bonding and cultural adaptation which is not significant as the relationship is weak, all the other findings support the hypothetical assumptions of the researcher. The hypotheses on academic adaptation and the relationship with SNS are significantly strong for the researcher to conclude that a relationship exists between these variables.

Bonding and cultural adaptation: Social media (Facebook) are used mostly to communicate frequently than other medium. This frequent use goes a long way to strengthen the familial relationship that exists between people that share same culture of some familial relationship.

The hypotheses test data revealed that bonding has a weak relation with cultural adaptation ($\beta = 0.007$, $T = 0.091$). This is because half of the students or respondents representing (52.5%) only bonded people from the same cultural background (Table 1).

The implication of this finding is that the international students tend to make friends with the people with which they share the same cultural affiliation, probably by having established cultural and familial links before coming to the new environment.

Relationship convenience and cultural adaptation: The social relationship between and amongst people play a significantly crucial role in cultural adaptation and is important for the international students. The hypotheses test data analysis established a significant relationship between the relationship convenience and cultural adaptation between the international students in the university, $\beta = 0.308$, $T = 4.148$). This is reflected by 74% of the total respondents forming a bonding relationship on the basis of some existing relationships. From the respondent views, the convenience to communicate with one another through the Facebook, communicate support their cultural adaptation. This study finding is aligned with Raacke and Raacke (2010).

In their study, a vast majority of the college student employs this concept to remain positively connected to one another when they ask questions in their simple everyday transactions. This relationship has no requirement such as tight friendship or familial relationship requiring serious commitments. Albeit the

casual relationship or convenience of relationship formed on social media, the interactions help in their cultural adaption process.

Knowledge sharing and cultural adaptation: For the international student, the importance of knowledge sharing cannot be overestimated for so many obvious reasons, chief amongst which is the need to access basic knowledge of the local area. Without acclimatization, this goal is not be possible. The importance of social media in this regard is of prime importance as it provides the easiest source of gaining knowledge; this makes the social media such as Facebook very helpful to the international students as it is free and easily accessible. Knowledge sharing can be defined as one unit (individual, group, department or functional area) which is affected by the experience of others (Argote and Ingram, 2000).

The hypothetical assumption “the usage of social media for the knowledge sharing for higher cultural adaptation” being statistically significant at ($t = 7.95$) has been accepted based on the result of structural models (Kim, 2000).

Knowledge sharing and academic adaptation: Knowledge transfer will be successful if there is cultural alignment between the sender and the recipient (Lucas, 2006). This result has led to the acceptance of the test of the hypotheses above as “the higher the usage of social media for knowledge sharing the higher the academic adaptation” has been accepted because the ($\beta = 0.366$, $t = 4.67$). This result is in consonance with the previous studies (Argote and Ingram, 2000; Lucas, 2006; Ryan *et al.*, 2011) which found that the individuals are ready to share knowledge with those in the same or similar culture using social media. The adaptation was used to indicate the intercultural processes that individuals experience in order to manage and cope with their new environment. Furthermore, the outcomes of researches show that the social media is effective in student-teacher interactions since, it allows the direct collaboration between the students and teachers that builds a close relationship (Cifuentes and Lents, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The usage of the social media for the purpose of knowledge sharing and academic adaptation is significant. International students in UUM have so far employed the social media to share knowledge about their academic work both as individuals and as members of groups. The usage of social media for relationship convenience has

facilitated sharing information, strengthened ties amongst themselves and reduced their sense of alienation at being so far from home.

More effort should be geared towards developing an ICT-enabled platform that can encourage bonding for the cultural adaptation of the international students. This can certainly boost the international standing of UUM as one of Malaysia’s premier providers of higher education.

IMPLICATIONS

This study has several implications. Despite the presence of a large number of international students in UUM and the availability of a robust internet facility, the usage of the SNS has only effectively facilitated bonding between students of the same background. The SNS technology has not effectively facilitated intercultural bonding between Malaysians and international students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings clearly show that cultural adaptation through Facebook usage has continued to take place only amongst those who are from the same culture and share the same historical and religious background which subsequently has led to academic adaptation being easier for them.

SUGGESTIONS

It is therefore, suggested that the international and Malaysian students leverage the social media for cultural and academic bonding more than they are currently doing now. For future studies, it is recommended that more studies be conducted in order to understand why international students are not adequately utilizing the social media for cultural adaptation. Fundamentally, it is important that opportunities be created for international and Malaysian students to continue their interaction via SNS.

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