Navigating the Impact of Social Media on Cross-Cultural Learnings and International Mobility: Students' Perception

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Abstract

In an era marked by the pervasive social media, its evolution transcends from mere communicative instruments to becoming synonymous with communication. Considering that human existence today is heavily characterized by cross-cultural intersections, the present study discusses the transformative influence wielded by social media on the perceptual landscape of cultural distinctions. The study, therefore, is a comprehensive analysis of the impact of social media on the adaptation trajectory of 20 engineering students from India who travelled abroad to do their internships. This qualitative research delves into the role of social media in enhancing their Intercultural Competence when their leaving for the host country was confirmed and the role social media played while they started residing in the host country. Researchers have used the phenomenological approach of examining the data using the Deardorff Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (ICC), attempted to understand the existing presence of cross-cultural knowledge and the impact of social media in cross-cultural settings, and explored the need for structured cross-cultural education within academic programs. Results suggest that Social Media helps in early adjustment in the host culture through knowledge of tangible aspects but does not help much in learning the intangible aspects. Also, social media does not support for better internal and external outcomes, required for effective ICC. Hence, a well-structured cross cultural training is required in the academic programmes at tertiary level.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity, Social Media Impact, Deardorff Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence, International Student Exchange Programs, Cross-Cultural Training

Introduction

In the present era, globalization and social media have transcended the barriers and increased the interconnectedness. Social media (SM), as a vital tool for daily social interaction, has opened the door where individuals can interact with others on the web with ease. Individuals can access information and learn the points of view of others on diverse issues, subjects, and occasions. People, especially students who plan to travel abroad, use this easy access to information for forming perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes towards other communities and nationals. Recent researches have shown a rising trend of students' mobility across the globe for higher education, work experience, better skills, and research (Paige 2005; Chen & An 2009; Krzaklewska 2008; Eder et al., 2010).

The International Migration Report 2017-Highlights, published by the United Nations, reports that India was the largest country of origin of international migrants (17 million), followed by Mexico (13 million), the Russian Federation (11 million), and China (10 million). According to the Ministry of External Affairs report in 2022, 13,24,954I Indian students went for studying abroad, out of which 1,64,000 went to the United Arab Emirates, 55,465 to the United Kingdom, and 4,65,791 to the USA. Going abroad grapples most students with the fear of unsettlement and worries of not being accepted by the natives of other countries (Wells, 2014; Holland & Kedia 2003; Sachau et al., 2010). Due to lack of proper intercultural competence (ICC) training, students depend heavily on social media to explore facts and information about the host culture (Al-Jarf, 2020; Wu & Miller, 2021). Though social media is instrumental in the acceleration of globalization and internationalization, it does not necessarily provide authentic information that indirectly puts students at a risk of suffering from identity misalignment. Therefore, the study explores the interplay between the use of social media and their Intercultural Competence (ICC), and discusses how social media influences their ICC and argues that it is important to explore the need for cross cultural training at college and university level for equipping them with necessary ICC. Considering this background, the present study has focused on achieving the following objectives:

Research Objectives

- To examine the extent to which social media influences students and contributes to their cultural understanding or misconceptions.

- To understand whether there is a need for cross cultural training at college and university level.

Literature Review

In the present world, with the emergence of the internet, social media platforms are used as tools for enhancing intercultural understanding for smooth international mobility (de Wit, 2015; Hunt, 2016). These platforms offer more flexible, open, and diverse geographical, intellectual, and social avenues for interactions and learning. In fact, social media has become vital because of easy access, wealth of information, and relationship building (Chang, 2021; LaRose et al., 2001; Bregman and Haythornthwaite, 2003). The rising number of students, who go abroad for higher studies or industrial training or internships, also make use of social media for gaining information about other cultures for their smooth transition.

Various studies have focused on the role of social media for the development of ICC. One such study has been done by Karakaş (2013), who investigates the intercultural attitudes of Turkish students in a UK university. The study employs Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) as a framework to analyze students' attitudes towards intercultural interactions. Results offer insights into the challenges and adaptations experienced by Turkish students in a foreign cultural context. Kim, Yun, and Yoon (2009) explore how the internet aids cultural hybridization and interpersonal relationship management among Asian international students in South Korea. Integrating a framework combining Hofstede's cultural dimensions and relational maintenance strategies, the paper highlights the internet's crucial role in fostering cultural exchange and interpersonal connections in a multicultural context. Another research critically how international students utilize social networking sites for everyday life information seeking (Sin et al., 2013). Employing the Information Grounds Theory (IGT), the study explores the informational value of these platforms. Findings reveal that social networking sites serve as crucial sources for students in navigating various aspects of daily life, showcasing their significance in information access and social integration.

A study done by Luthfia et al. (2019), examines how social media enhances intercultural communication competence among European students in Indonesia and Indonesian students in Europe. Using Byram's Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) framework, it analyses the impact of social media on cultural understanding and interaction. The study underscores social media's pivotal role in fostering cross-cultural communication skills among students from diverse backgrounds. Liu (2019) investigates the influence of social media in developing the ICC of Chinese people living in Sweden. This study adopts a mixed method, using a survey questionnaire followed by interviews. The researcher builds upon Fantini's four dimensions of ICC and derivates from his Intercultural Competence Scale (ICS) to examine how social media usage affects individuals' ability to effectively interact across cultures. Results suggest that while social media can enhance certain aspects of ICC, it may also pose challenges to intercultural understanding and communication.

Reflective analyses of the most literature in the domain focuses on how the social media plays a role in developing the ICC of students but these studies have not explored to what extent these media help in developing ICC, and whether these media help in learning both the tangible and intangible aspects as given in the Iceberg Model developed by anthropologist Edward Hall in 1976 (cited in Badham et.al., 2020). Moreover, the above studies have used the models which focus on the general perception, attitudes, and skills, but none of them have analysed the outcomes of the assessed perceptions, attitude and skills in their behaviour. Therefore, the present study explores the influence of social media by using the Deardorff's Pyramid Model as the theoretical framework, which includes not only knowledge, attitude, and skills, but also the internal outcomes (shift in mindset) and external outcomes (change in behaviour) (Deardoff, 2008).

Research Questions

✓ How does social media influence Indian students' perceptions about the host culture and to what extent does social media contribute to cultural understanding or misconceptions among students?

✓ Is there a need for a systematic training for Intercultural Skills for smooth internationalization and mobility?

Research Methodology

This section presents the description of various aspects of the context in which the research was conducted.

Research Setting and Participants

Since the intent of the present research is to understand the lived experiences of the student participants in using social media to build their perception about the host country culture and how far it helped in preparing them to adjust in their international mobility; the study, therefore, uses phenomenological approach. This approach aided in exploring what the student participants experienced, comprehending the meaning of their cultural understandings, and also focusing on their experience of phenomena. The research was conducted in one of the esteemed technical institutions of India. The snowball sampling was used to recruit the participants for the study. Researchers contacted the students, they had taught in the previous semesters and who were going abroad for their summer internships. They were requested if they would like to be interviewed for the current research. 20 students accepted the request and were interviewed once they returned from their foreign internships. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with these participants to understand the impact of usage of social media on their adjustment in their host country. The researchers adhered to the ethics of research and also asked for the consent from the students to use their interview data for publishing purposes of this research.

Research Data Collection

As mentioned above, the researchers employed semi-structured interview schedule. The idea behind integrating this method into the research was that there is no fixed answer to any question and to understand holistically every variable of the research, we need to elicit different perspectives, if any. Therefore, we used semi-structured interview method.
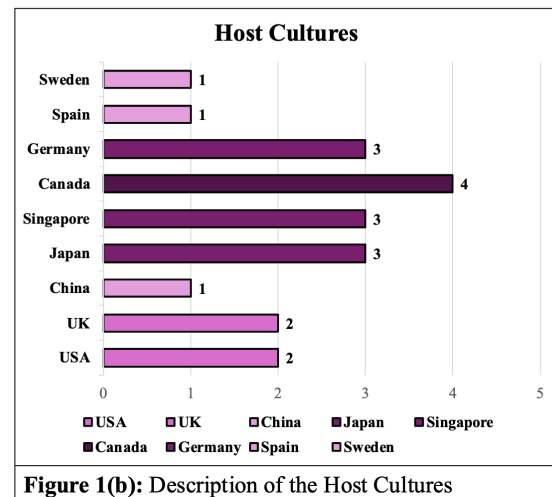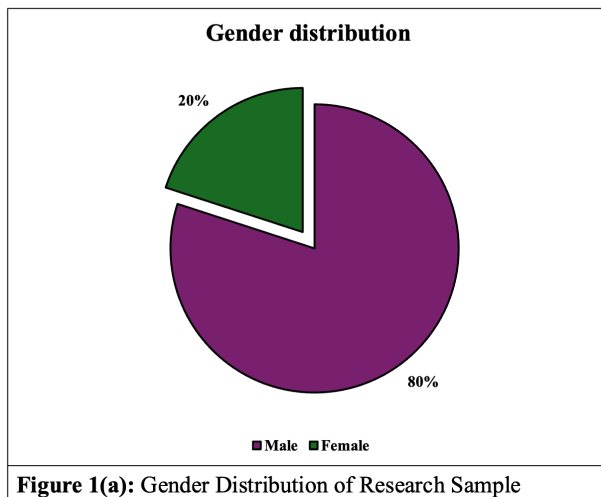
Research Data Analysis

Once the data was collected and transcribed, the researchers used the Interpretative Phenomenological analysis for analysing the data. For this purpose, the researchers read and re-read the transcripts to form the emergent themes and subthemes to discuss the findings of the research (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006; Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Findings and Discussions

This section of the study outlines the profiling of the research participant group, followed by findings and ends with the comparative analysis of cultural dimensional learning of students before going to their host country and while staying in the host country.

The participant profile for this research is displayed in the figure1 given below. Out of 20 interviewees 16 students were males (80%) and 4 were females (20). The figure 1(b) exhibits the number of student participants went to different countries.7 students went to European countries (35%) whereas 6 students went to North American countries (30%) for their internships. A small percentage of students went to China (5%), Japan (15%) and Singapore (15%).

Figure 1(a): Gender Distribution of Research Sample

Figure 1(b): Description of the Host Cultures

The preliminary analysis concluded that each respondent consumed at least 1.5 to 2 hours of social media content to learn about the host country's culture. They explained that social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, to name a few, are their first stop to search about the host country even before browsing about it on web browser, such Google, Bing, etc. For them, these platforms are helpful not only to build connections with the host country people before they left India and during their stay in the host country, but also it helps in providing familiarity with the surrounding and events of the host country through host culture photos and videos, and interactions with local people. Participant 2 shared,

> *When I got to know where I will be going, I first used Instagram to learn about the host culture. I followed some of the accounts which were giving information such as places to visit, food to explore and how to speak small sentences in German. These were quite helpful. Although, I didn't even remember those sentences when I went there but it was helpful to make me confident that I will be fine there.*

80% of the respondents informed that social media helped them collect information about things to do and places to visit before they reached their host cultures. These contents or interactions happened through social media, with host country citizens were mostly intended to understand the "tangible aspects of the host culture" such as availability of food variety, accommodation options and official formalities required to be done for being in the host country. Participant 3 explained, "*Social Media was a helpful tool for me to know the general information such as food choices, language, places and how safe it is for the foreign travellers*". One of the students (Participant 10) who went to China for internship shared,

> *The use of Instagram and Wechat was most helpful to me. People in China, not most of them speak English, so I was able to connect with the other foreign students coming to China for the same programme. This way, I was able to build a friendship with them even before reaching there.. Even our programme coordinator encouraged and organized Zoom weekend meetups so that we know each other even before we meet each other in-person. But I felt really uncomfortable as I could not understand why they expected to conform to the project manager's views, even if those were not doable.*

Thus, we found a unanimous agreement among the participants towards the fact that social media can act as an initial information provider but not as an aid to help them have an in-depth understanding about foreign culture.

Upon grouping the responses of the students and categorizing them, it was found that social media helped them i) places to visit, ii) food variety, especially for the students who were vegetarian, iii) mode of transport and maps, iv) discussion about what to expect when one reaches the host country, v) make connections with the host country citizens and/or others coming from other countries for the same internship, vi) learning language to understand or to speak and vii) host country culture and values. When we take into consideration the components of Deardoff's pyramid model of intercultural competence and aligned these categories, these seemed more reflecting the first and second components of the pyramid – Requisite Attitudes and Knowledge Comprehension.

To comprehend the phenomenon of context better, the researchers enquired on social and professional situations that might have hindered intercultural communication. The students shared that the social media provided information about the host culture which was inconsistent from what the reality was in the host. Participant 6 expressed,

> Social Media was helpful to know dos and don'ts about the host cultures so that we do not offend them, unintentionally. But it could not help me understand how we should behave in different situations in the host culture.

Further he added,

> In UK, when I was not able to understand the route of subway to take to reach my accommodation location. So, I asked a lady who was waiting. When I asked her, her first response was, "Can you be polite while speaking?" I was surprised and felt anxious that how can I offend someone like that. I said to her, "I am polite. What have I done to make you feel like that? She again repeated to me to be polite to her. After I enquired her one more time, she said, "Can you not say please?" At that moment, I realized what went wrong in my conversation with her. Such social etiquettes are taught, even social media would highlight it but such things you understand once you learn about the other culture more in-depth or when you have undergone a basic training to understand different cultures.

With the help of Table 1, the difference between the perception formed before leaving India and during their stay in host country can be observed. The participants explained in their individual interviews that most of the information they acquired from social media about the host country was basic. Although social media did help them, but they learnt more about the host culture after going there. Participant 12 stated,

> I knew before going that Swedish people don't speak much. But when I went there, I found them as similar to us, Indian. They were very humble, kind, and approachable. They love to speak but they always explain themselves in small sentences, unlike me who like to be as detailed oriented as possible. So social media did not help me in understanding whether they are not speaking to me because they are not interested or explained their point in small sentences.

Table 1 illustrating students' perceptions about their host culture before leaving India and during their stays in host countries.

Table 1: Students' perceptions about their host culture before leaving India and during their stays in host countries

Host Country	General Perception about the country before the stay	Perception about the country during the stay
United States of America	It was a clean, technologically advanced country and a highly individualistic nation with high crime rates.	It has mixed working styles, depending upon the individual. Serious about keeping working hours and leisure hours separated.
Germany	Mechanical Engineering has a high developed status. It is a highly monochronic culture. People are passionate about cars and beer.	It is highly advanced in technology. They ask lot of questions to make sure everyone is on the same page.
Canada	People would be helpful and polite. A lot of Punjabis reside there. Cheaper than the USA.	It is a diverse country but more than Punjabis residing there. The weather conditions are brutal, but people are more conservative by nature.
Singapore	Multicultural Community, disciplined, efficient public transport, legally strict	People have very efficient working styles. They work but then off working hours enjoy their personal lives. Very safe. Lot of focus on health
Japan	Technologically advanced. Hard working society with high moral values. Polite people. Love their heritage and food. Expensive.	Strong hierarchical system of communication. Difficult to communicate in English. Very Polite and patient people.
China	Hard working people, Negative impression that they don't treat Indians well. Not very friendly, majorly non-vegetarian and sea food	Hierarchical system of communication. Difficult to communicate in English. Reserved people, as they do not open up quickly. Workaholic.
Spain	Good architecture and a collectivist and vibrant culture. Value their heritage	Jovial people who give importance to relationships over work. Polite and very helpful. Loud and boisterous
Sweden	Conservative and disciplined, sprawling spaces, speak less	People talk less and like their privacy, but everyone was very approachable and humble. Huge personal space, strict laws
United Kingdom	They are very cultured and reserved people. Status conscious dry humour	People were always presentable. They reciprocate your behavior style. Sense of personal space, queuing etiquette, and addressing people with their first names

Researchers, then enquired about the students' views regarding their stay in the host countries, with an intention to understand about their adjustment pattern in the host countries. 16 participants (80%) found the adjustment to the new culture very difficult. They found it challenging to become self-reliant and independent while settling in the host country. They enlisted that the absence of helping hand to take care of them, prepare meals, clean their living spaces and clothes, and the like, made living in the new culture not as easy as they thought it to be. Beside this, there were many "non-tangible aspects of the culture" they learnt while staying in the host country. Based on the close analysis of the interview transcripts, we have grouped their responses under different components of Deardoff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competences, as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Responses under different components of Deardoff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence

Requisite Attitude	Knowledge and Comprehension	Skills	Internal Outcomes	External Outcomes
Learnt the social, cultural, and political facts	Food- types and places, transportation, places to visit, and official procedures for immigration and work	Learned about the language difference		
On working days, work over leisure is priority whereas on weekends, party culture is highly prevalent (USA, Germany, Spain, Singapore, Canada, and UK).	Nuclear family structure with less bonding specially in the USA and Germany	Got to learn generic social norms and taboos for weddings and giftings		
More prevalent individualism and privacy are priorities in Western cultures.	People adhere to rules sincerely, both in personal and professional spheres, in the USA, Germany, as compared to China and Spain.	Subtleties of language of friendship, face saving in case of Chinese and Japanese culture, tolerance and acceptance are hard to develop.	Culturally specific expressions can be learned through social media but their appropriate use in a context, and time are something hard to learn.	

Effective scheduling, punctuality and efficiency in work in Germany, USA,UK and Sweden.	All cultures give importance to time, but Western cultures such UK, USA and Canada consider time as money which should be used optimally.			
	Some of the countries such as China and Japan operate on hierarchical kind of communication and believe in respecting the authority.			

Therefore, from the students' responses, we made a comparison of their learning before reaching their host countries and after they reached their respective host countries. From the analysis, it can be observed that the tangible aspects were easily learnt by the students with the help of social media, whereas the non-tangible aspects such as cultural tradition, values, beliefs and norms of the cultures were difficult for them to learn. They could learn only through their personal exposure with the cultures., which involved lot of risks and challenges. The analysis has been done using the Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence and the findings show that the social media is instrumental in equipping the student participants for enhancing their knowledge and attitude, but hardly have they learnt the skills, internal outcome, and external outcome.

Furthermore, we found unanimous agreement among students when we probe whether there is a need for a cross culture skill course in their curriculum. They expressed that if they were taught how to understand and explore a new culture in their academic program, they would have appreciated and adjusted to the host culture better. One of them (Participant 13) expressed,

> *I regret for not enrolling in the Cross-Cultural Skills course, being offered as an elective. If I had done my systematic intercultural training, I would have been to understand people of the host culture and my employers better and would have been mindful about my actions and their impact on their behaviours.* [Another participant (Participant 17) expressed,] *Having such courses help us learn about the other cultures and behaviours of those people better. Everyday, I was always surprised with the similarities in the behaviours of Spanish people with ours but simultaneously I would always find differences too. Since now I have enrolled in Cross cultural skills course, I hope it will help me with a lens to look at such similarities and differences better without any judgement and appreciate both the cultures.*

To summarize, social media is an instrumental tool for fostering intercultural attitude, increase knowledge and awareness of new cultures. However, the findings in this study, in relation to Deardoff's Pyramid Model of ICC, suggest that role of social media in development of ICC is primarily restricted to first two levels (attitude formation and knowledge acquisition) when researching new culture before immersing oneself. Consequently, social media lacked in its capacity to bringing in substantial change in the intercultural behaviour and sensitivity among Indian students towards the host cultures.

Conclusion

The present research highlighted that despite their exposure to social media inputs, the Indian students faced significant challenges in adapting and navigating workplaces communication norms, expressing appropriate emotions and etiquette, and understanding the social traditions and values of the host culture. The study, hence, is a valuable contribution to the field of intercultural communication skills as student participants have unanimously felt a need for offering such courses at university level aiming at nurturing and fostering ICC in students to better equipping them to adapt, appreciate, and integrate in the host country culture. The study recommends that providing structured cross-cultural trainings, has become indispensable in the present global interconnectedness. The provision of ICC education underscores the importance of preparing students for their future global academic and professional environments, and successful cross-cultural interactions and experiences.

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