Instagram vs reality: Exploring local culture through various lenses

Castledown

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Rather than viewing online and face-to-face learning as two dichotomous domains (Kessler, 2018), this study seeks to explore ways that social media can be used to support and facilitate face-to-face exploration and communication in target language environments. It also aims to help English language learners improve their ability to critically evaluate social media by comparing it to what they experience in-person. This study applied the concept of "social media pathways" (Yeh & Swinehart, 2024) through an experiential learning model to integrate an authentic social networking site, Instagram, into an ESL curriculum for a community engagement project promoting a deeper and multifaceted understanding of the target language community. This study employed a qualitative method approach, including seven international students' reflections, a post-task questionnaire, and focus-group interview data, to investigate how the assumptions made from Instagram compare with observations made in the field. The findings were then used to establish a "Model for Community Exploration within Virtual and Face-to-face Contexts" that adds to the experiential learning framework the additional stages of experimentation, reflection, and new conceptualization that take place when learners use social media platforms like Instagram to form assumptions about a community and then use in-person exploration to test those hypotheses.

Keywords: community engagement, experiential learning, Instagram, social media pathways

Introduction

Despite being "immersed" in a new environment, many international students find themselves isolated from the local target language community when

studying overseas (Ducate & Lomicka, 2017; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2010; Kusek, 2015; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). The lack of opportunities to participate in community events outside of the classroom and campus can lead to socializing predominantly with other international students from similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Kusek, 2015). The separation between locals and international students and the absence of wider community engagement can hinder students from not only immersing themselves in the target language community but also opportunities for valuable cultural exchange (Callaway, 2010; Czerwionka et al., 2015; Lee & Song, 2019). One way to enhance community involvement is to create opportunities for both international and domestic students to interact and communicate personally and build relationships within the local context; however, previous research also revealed that due to the linguistic and cultural barriers, it is challenging to create these place-based locations for such exchange (Stockwell, 2016). Given the findings from previous literature about how little interaction with and background knowledge about local communities international students can have, it is important for educators to incorporate multiple modalities of community engagement activities into the curriculum.

Rather than viewing online and face-to-face learning as two dichotomous domains (Kessler, 2018), this study seeks to explore ways that an SNS like Instagram can be used to support and facilitate face-to-face exploration and communication. This study applied the concept of "social media pathways" (Yeh & Swinehart, 2024, p. ii) through an experiential learning model to utilize authentic social networking sites (SNSs) into an ESL curriculum for a community engagement project. The term "social media pathways" refers to instances where "a learner or instructor uses social media to access authentic target language use, speakers (or writers, or memers), or communities" (Yeh & Swinehart, 2024, p. ii). SNSs such as Instagram often have place-based, user-generated content, allowing English language learners (ELLs) virtual pathways to learn about their local, physical communities in authentic ways. Authenticity here refers to "authentic social media" environments: "platforms and practices that are used in the digital wilds of the 'real world,' not limited to the fishbowl of the language learning classroom" (Yeh & Swinehart, 2024, p. ii). In this study, learners examine local communities first on an SNS (Instagram), then in person, and then compared their findings, with the goals of increasing learners' engagement in those communities and developing social media literacy skills in the process.

Literature review

Previous studies have investigated international students' language learning experience (Allen, 2010; Lee & Song, 2019; Schmidt, 2001) and cultural awareness development (Apgar, 2018; Czerwionka et al., 2015; Lomicka & Ducate, 2019; Watson et al., 2013) while studying overseas. Lomicka and Ducate (2019) utilized the pedagogical approaches of intentional noticing and reflective practice, which encouraged students to notice and document cultural values and

practices. The concept of intentional noticing offers opportunities for international students to experience a process of comparing and contrasting their observation between the host country and their home country. This process allows them to examine and reexamine their own knowledge and belief of the target language culture (Ducate & Lomicka, 2017; Nishio & Nakatsugawa, 2020), conceptualize their understanding of the sociocultural context (Lomicka & Ducate, 2019), learn to navigate the local community (Klimanova & Hellmich, 2020), have a positive impact on their linguistic and cultural awareness (Schmidt, 2001; Mitchell, 2016), and broaden their understanding of the world (Drewelow, 2013). The concept of reflective practice has been recognized by many scholars in the field including Kolb (1984) and Dewey (1938). They both emphasize that community is one of the crucial elements of the observation process of reflective practice, with Dewey claiming, "Reflection demands community and the diverse perspectives on practice that community brings" (Dewey, 1938, p. 233). It is essential to include community in the reflective process because it fosters sharing different viewpoints, experiences, and support. While previous literature on experiential learning framework shows inconsistent findings (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019), the current research project adds to the existing literature by creating a conceptual model that emerged from the results to demonstrate ways ELLs learn about the local community through a critical lens via an experiential learning cycle to explore user-generated content online and local communities in person.

Experiential learning model

To provide a framework for ELLs to observe and reflect on their local communities, the present study drew on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model which proposes a four-step "cyclic process integrating immediate experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and action" (Kohonen et al., 2001, p. 27). Experience here refers to a new situation that an individual encounters or an existing experience that an individual needs to reinterpret. The second step of reflection refers to reflective observation of that experience to encourage more investigation of the inconsistencies between experience and understanding. Based on Kolb's (1984, p. 43) definition of abstract conceptualization, this step takes "the experience to a different level, involving the use and construction of theoretical models and concepts." Learners can conceptualize new ideas or modify existing concepts to show that they gained knowledge and growth through the experiences and reflections. The last step is action, which is also called the stage of assessment and application, where learners can apply the new ideas or concepts to the environments around them.

The experiential learning approach emphasizes that learning is a process in which knowledge is acquired by learners through the "transformation of the experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38) rather than transmitted directly from teachers. The notion of experiential learning challenges the traditional teacher-centered approach and promotes learners to be active agents in the learning process (Han, 2019; Mull, 2013). Previous studies have applied the experiential learning

model into project-based classrooms and focused on the practice of "here-and-now", experimentation, and reflection (Han, 2019; Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Lomicka & Ducate, 2019). This practice is important for learners to develop their learner autonomy and create their own hypotheses and evaluation through experience. The concept of "here and now" is a learning situation that requires learners to be involved in an immediate real-world context or simulated setting. After being exposed to these contexts, learners go through an experimentation process that requires them to actively create and expand knowledge by testing the hypotheses they made and investigating the truth of their assumptions. The last element of the practice is reflection, which allows learners to use the guided process to evaluate their observation and experience. While Kolb (1984) claims that effective learning occurs when all four steps of the learning cycle are executed, eventually, reflection is the key to enhance the value of a learning experience because it encourages learners to relate new ideas and concepts to their background knowledge, expand their perspectives on diverse themes, engage in conversations that they are interested in or curious about, and make learning more meaningful (Lomicka & Ducate, 2019).

Experiential learning pedagogy in CALL

Previous studies show that experiential learning model has been used in computer assisted language learning (CALL) context with positive learning outcomes (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019; Lai, 2013; Wach, 2015). In Lai's (2013) study, findings indicate that with the support of experiential learning pedagogy, learners' positive perspectives of autonomous learning increased over the course of the project. Learners were more motivated to integrate CALL resources into their study plans, and more inclined to critically utilize CALL resources. Studies also suggest that with the experiential learning cycle, learners are challenged by linguistic, intercultural, and content-related aspects of learning (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019). The learning cycle allows learners to alternate the process of their learning, search for solutions, and reflect on their lived experience (Guichon, 2009; Wach, 2015). Learners can not only enhance motivation, but develop their problem-solving skills, complex collaborative skills, communicative skills, and intercultural competence (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019; Mull, 2013). However, many research studies that have applied experiential learning pedagogy are mainly in teacher education, investigating how the use of this model in telecollaboration projects can foster pre-service and in-service teachers' development in intercultural communication competence or skills in designing telecollaboration tasks (e.g., Godwin-Jones, 2019; Grau & Turula, 2019; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker, 2013; O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019; Sadler & Dooly, 2016; Vinagre, 2017). Limited empirical research in the field of CALL has investigated language learners' learning experiences by applying the experiential learning model into the curriculum, either online or face-to-face settings (Han 2019).

Previous studies describe the beneficial effects that reflection within experiential learning can have for language learners (Ducate & Lomicka, 2016; Han,

2019; Mitchell, 2016; Schmidt, 2001). One study investigated how language learners in a study abroad program share their findings and reflections on social media like Padlet, thereby building a collaborative and co-constructive participatory culture online (Lomicka & Ducate, 2019). Through the experiential learning cycle, learners were able to examine and reexamine their own perspectives and cultures while learning ways to navigate the new sociocultural contexts in the target language country. The use of social media offered learners more opportunities to develop curiosity and awareness, as well as encourage them to compare and contrast similarity and difference among the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts. This learning experience encouraged them to confront differences (Ducate & Lomicka, 2017; Nishio & Nakatsugawa, 2020), expand their knowledge and understanding of the world (Mitchell, 2016), and broaden their perceptions and sensitivity to others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Czerwionka et al., 2015; Drewelow, 2013; Lee & Song, 2019; Jackson, 2008). While technological tools have been used in the experiential learning model to support learners' experience in study abroad programs (Han, 2019; Lomicka & Ducate, 2019); limited research applied authentic social media as a tool within the digital wilds for experiential learning.

Instagram vs. reality

The present study is inspired by the notion of "Instagram vs. Reality" aiming to explore ways to scaffold and guide our ELLs to learn about the local target language community through a critical lens exploring online social media content and visiting the community in person. Instagram is one of the most popular SNSs around the globe, with an estimated 1.21 billion monthly active users worldwide (Statista, 2023) and the report projected this number will increase to 1.44 billion by 2025, making up over 31 percent of global internet users using photo sharing apps on Instagram (Statista, 2023).

With the popularity of Instagram among teenagers and young adults, the freedom of creating one's own content can be a double-edged sword. The term "Instagram vs. Reality" is often used to describe users' tendency to post the "best" and "carefully selected" pictures to maximize attractiveness and appeal to other audiences by applying digital features such as filters and alteration (Dumas et al., 2017). This term is initially used to show ways Instagram photos are idealized which could influence body images and body satisfaction negatively, especially for young women (Cohen et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Such behaviors result in formulating a view of "what is normal, accepted, or unaccepted in the community" (Marwick, 2012, p. 384) and users learn to modify and adjust their postings accordingly which sometimes leads to deceitfulness. Although Instagram could potentially be beneficial for users to share their ideas and creativity, the content could be staged and unrealistic. Chua and Chang's (2016) study revealed that many users spent a lot of time arranging the angles and lighting, shooting multiple pictures, and editing the image with filters and software to create the "best" image representing themselves which could send a misleading message to the viewers and create a culture of

showing one's perfect lives (Victoria, 2019). While Instagram has become one of the main sources for young people to retrieve information and learn about new places and the community (Fornara & Lomicka, 2019), it is essential for educators to provide opportunities for learners to learn how to critically evaluate these sources and make intellectual decisions.

This study

The present study aims to help international students learn about the host country through experiential learning by exploring a local community through a variety of different lenses: analyzing SNS content, exploring the community in person, and interacting with members of that community. By utilizing an experiential learning cycle of doing, observing, evaluating, and planning (Kolb, 1984), international students are engaged in a holistic learning process that is multi-sensory and reflects on their lived experience (Kohonen et al., 2001; Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019). This experiential learning fosters international students' critical evaluation skills by promoting a deeper and multifaceted understanding of the sociocultural issues within a community. Inspired by the notion of "Instagram vs. Reality," this project-based study offers multiple forms of experience and critical reflection as pedagogical practice with student learning objectives focusing on how ELLs modify or create new knowledge and conceptualizations. The study aims to investigate the following research questions:

1. What kind of assumptions do ELLs make about a neighborhood after researching on Instagram, and what evidence do they use to frame their assumptions?
2. How do these assumptions compare with their findings after exploring the neighborhood in person and interviewing local residents?

Based on the results, the study contributes to the literature by proposing a conceptual model emerging from the data that describes how learners compare observations from experiential learning processes in multiple contexts.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted within an arts and media college in the Midwestern US. Seven students (male = 4; female = 3) majoring in cinema art and science were recruited, all from China. Participants aged 18 to 22 were English language learners (ELLs) who had scored between 77 and 110 on the iBT TOEFL enrolling in a US Academic Language and Culture class. We explained the objectives of the study and asked for the explicit consent of the students. Participants were not obligated to take part in this study to pass the course. Students were informed that they may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants will be anonymous, and their data results and personal

information will not be identified. Since this project is part of their course assignment, the instructor will evaluate and grade the assignments as part of the course work, but the grades will not be influenced by whether they choose to participate in the study or not.

Procedure

The study adapted Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model and applied the cycle of immediate experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization in its pedagogical design.

Step one. Before assigning students into groups, the class introduced the history of Chicago and the subculture of Chicago neighborhoods. Participants were then assigned into three groups, each selecting a different neighborhood in Chicago that embedded the subculture of the community. The three neighborhoods that were chosen by the students were Lincoln Park, Boystown, and Hyde Park.

Step two. Participants first explored the online content related to the neighborhood they chose on Instagram. Participants' search strategies included identifying keywords and hashtags for the neighborhood they will be visiting, screenshotting images and captions for records, and following popular Instagram accounts so that they received updated posts or upcoming events of the area.

Step three. In this stage participants completed their first online reflection, where they describe what they learned about the neighborhood from Instagram: the assumptions they now have about the neighborhood, and the specific evidence from Instagram that informed those assumptions. Participants were required to complete a total of two reflections. Reflection I was completed at this stage, Step 3, to develop their hypotheses. Reflection II was completed in Step 5 to compare previous assumptions with new data which will be introduced later.

Step four. This stage is an experimentation process that requires participants to actively create and expand knowledge by testing hypotheses they made and investigating the truth of their assumptions. Participants visited the neighborhood they selected and conducted observations of the community and interviewed the residents. Before visiting the community, each group worked together to design their checklist for observation regarding what they want to confirm based on their hypotheses, and their interview questions for the residents.

Step five. This stage is the second round of reflection (Reflection II) that encourages participants to seek inconsistency between what they saw online and in person. This stage of the reflection allows participants to use the guided process

to evaluate their observation and experience. Students worked on the draft and outline of their final presentation about their findings.

Step six. Participants presented their reflections through a multimodal presentation with video production introducing the neighborhood, reporting their findings of evidence after visiting the neighborhood, and discussing whether their findings confirm their assumptions. In the presentation, participants concluded how they modified existing concepts after their experience, experiment, and reflection.

Data collection

This exploratory qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998) was designed to examine how their initial observations and assumptions from Instagram compared with what they experienced in-person. Merriam (1998) proposed that qualitative method design should be emergent with recurring dynamic processes of data collection and analysis. The present study gathered the following data sources: two online reflections and one post-task questionnaire per student and three focus group interviews.

Reflections

After final grades were submitted at the end of the semester, the online reflections from seven participants were downloaded from the learning management system, Canvas. Participants had been prompted to answer reflection questions and form their assumptions (see Appendix A for reflection template) based on the Instagram content they encountered before visiting the neighborhood.

Post-task questionnaire

A post-task questionnaire was used to gather the following information: (1) What are participants' perspectives on how accurate they think their assumptions are about the neighborhood as well as the people, culture and customs in the neighborhood comparing to the reality when they visited; (2) What evidence they found on Instagram and in the actual neighborhood visit that led to consistent or different understandings of the neighborhood. The design of the open-ended questions offers insights into participants' perspectives of their experiential learning.

Focus group interview

Three 30-minute focus group interviews were conducted after the semester ended. All seven students agreed to participate in the interview and attended with their group partners. The interview questions focused on what participants' perspectives on using online and in-person exploration to learn about

local communities, and what participants found challenging and what strategies they used to overcome these challenges.

Data analysis

All qualitative data including participants' online reflections, post-task open-ended questionnaire, and follow-up focus group interviews were analyzed based on Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2020) a priori and open coding. The "first cycle" list of codes was generated from the research questions and literature review (Miles et al., 2020, p.64). The data were first coded deductively according to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning themes of (1) immediate experience, (2) reflection, and (3) abstract conceptualization (Lomicka & Ducate, 2019), and then further used open coding for the second cycle which is an inductive method to accomplish two important elements: It allows researchers to make comparison and ask questions based on the theme that merged and allows researchers to find the patterns of the data systematically, and categorize the data around commonalities so that the themes emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two researchers coded separately and had meetings to discuss the data and coding process to ensure equal depth to capture the important factors and not "force-fit the data into preexisting codes" (Miles et al., 2020, p.74). Further, Patton's (2015) approach for in-depth analysis "recognizing process, outcomes, and linkages" was employed (p. 564).

Results

After examining ELLs' online reflections, post-task questionnaires, and focus group interviews through a priori and open coding, the findings of the study show how combining multiple sources of information, both online and in-person, enabled ELLs to reflect on their exploration with growing awareness of local cultures and more in-depth understanding of the complexity of the neighborhood.

Assumptions framed by ELLs

To examine the first research question regarding the assumptions ELLs make about a neighborhood after researching online and the evidence they use to frame their assumptions, the study collected ELLs' online research notes in response to the prompt (1) "Describe some things you see and read about the neighborhood when you search for it on Instagram," and the question (2) "Based on what you saw, what are some assumptions you can make about this neighborhood?"

After coding responses to the first question, five themes emerged from the data regarding what participants saw on Instagram that informed the assumptions they made: (1) aesthetics/geography (n = 6); (2) people/activities (n = 6); (3) abstract concepts (n = 3); (4) food (n = 2); (5) limited to no evidence (n = 2) (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Evidence found on Instagram by ELLs that informed their assumptions

Themes	Types of evidence
Aesthetics/geography (n = 6)	aesthetics of neighborhood; geographic elements of photos; park land; scenery; views
People/activities (n = 6)	activities observed in photos; families spending time together; fitness; popular former resident; racial demographics of people in photos
Abstract concepts (n = 3)	"diverse community", based on many factors ("art, culture, sports and more, with a young, vibrant population); neighborhood pride; saw mostly positive things
Food (n = 2)	pictures of food
Limited-to-no evidence (n = 2)	NA

Again, five common themes of assumptions were generated by the participants: assumptions about (1) demographics of residents (n = 4); (2) quality of the neighborhood (n = 4); (3) geographic and visual layout (n = 4); (4) characteristics of residents (n = 3); and (5) local culture (n = 3). Table 2 outlines the common themes and some examples of the types of assumptions participants made.

Table 2. Assumptions framed by ELLs

Themes	Examples of assumptions
Demographics of residents (n = 4)	racial demographics; socioeconomic status
Quality of neighborhood (n = 4)	housing prices; safety; types of housing; generalizations like "good neighborhood"
Geographic and visual layout (n = 4)	aesthetics/views: green space, lake views; different areas within the neighborhood (business districts, entertainment districts, cultural and educational districts and residential areas)
Characteristics of residents (n = 3)	friendly environment for LGBTQ+ community; fans of famous resident (Obama); "happiness index is very high"
Local culture (n = 3)	food scene; frequent activities/events; history of neighborhood

To illustrate some of these assumptions and the evidence that informed them, ELLs discussed in their reflections about the evidence they found in two different aspects related to "demographics of residents": (1) racial demographics, and (2) socioeconomic status (SES). For example, one of the members from the Hyde Park group talked about how this neighborhood seemed to be "a racially diverse community that is full of art, culture, sports with a young and vibrant population." She explained in her reflection the evidence she found on Instagram showed more people of color in the images and artwork such as paintings and statues that are from different cultural backgrounds, especially African American art (see Figure 1).
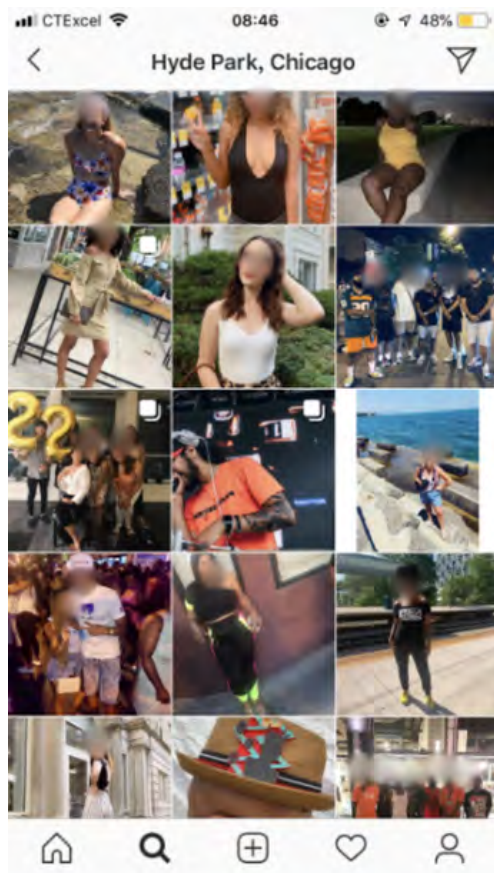
Figure 1. Evidence found for "racial demographics" on Instagram

Regarding the assumption based on the observation of SES, another participant who researched the Lincoln Park neighborhood said, "My assumption of Lincoln Park is that this is a rich and beautiful neighborhood, and the majority of the residents are white people," because while he was scanning through all the pictures on Instagram, the majority of the people were white. Further, he explained the assumption of why this could be a wealthy area was based on his observation of the brands and clothing people wore, the vehicles they drove, and the activities they engaged in around this neighborhood such as having leisure time to go to fancy restaurants or fitness centers (see Figure 2).
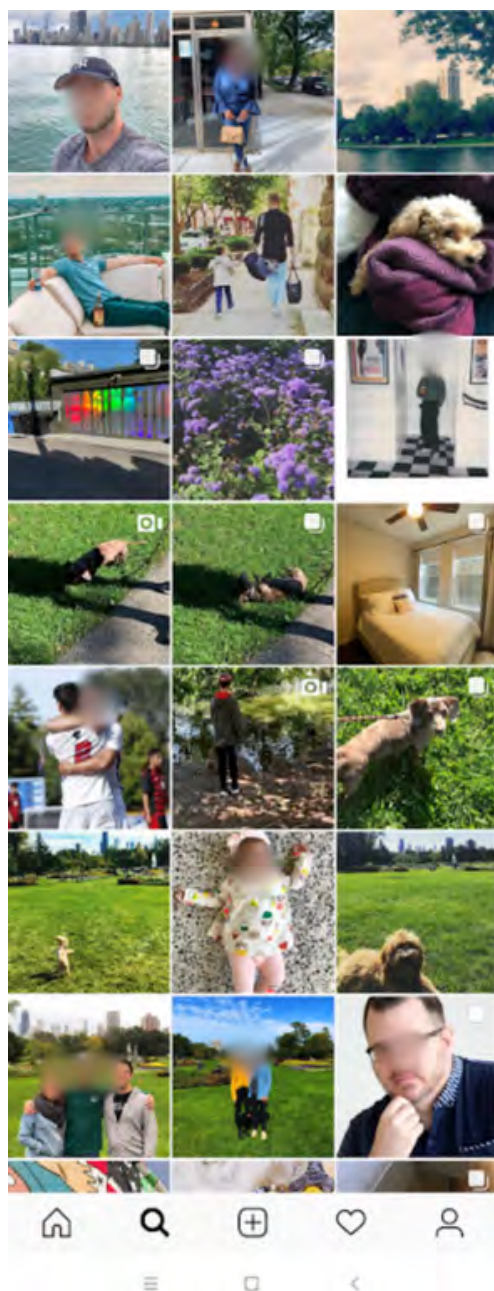
Figure 2. Evidence found for "SES" on Instagram

In addition to "demographics of residents", there are another two assumptions that illustrate how students thought about the neighborhoods based on what they saw online: "quality of the neighborhood" and "geographic and visual layout". ELLs discussed in their reflections about three types of evidence they thought related to the "quality of the neighborhood": (1) housing prices; (2) safety; and (3) types of housing. For the assumption of "geographic and visual layout", two aspects were reported: (1) aesthetics/views (i.e., green space, lake views); and (2) different areas within the neighborhood (i.e., business districts, entertainment districts, cultural and educational districts and residential areas).

For example, one student who researched Lincoln Park reported his assumptions that "Lincoln Park is a very safe and nice neighborhood to live in and the quality of life is very good; however, it also costs a lot of money. Lincoln Park is very expensive!" He explained his assumptions were based on the images and comments on Instagram, namely, aesthetics of neighborhood, geographic elements of photos, park land, scenery, and views. He said that the neighborhood seems to be very safe because he saw pictures of families with young kids picnicking at the park, and the landscape is very clean and well-maintained. Another student stated in his reflection that most of the houses he saw in the pictures were high-rise apartments and some of them had beautiful lake views. However, some students also wrote in their notes that they saw many different types of housing styles and conditions. Students in the Hyde Park and Boystown groups talked about the variety of housing pictures they saw online, with a Hyde Park student reporting her assumption that "The SES varies in this community. My hypothesis is based on the housing price, condition of the houses, and how well the parks and streets were maintained in the area."

Revisiting Kohonen et al.'s (2001) experiential learning model, these examples highlight how ELLs gained "immediate experience" by researching local communities on social media and then the stage of "reflection" to develop their hypotheses and assumptions. Students were aware that the world they are experiencing online at this moment could be like "looking through the looking glass" and that their assumptions could be misleading or completely inaccurate. During the online research learner training, ELLs practiced how to critically evaluate information, review credibility of sources, and compare and contrast information from different sources to make intellectual decisions (Victoria, 2019). This critical evaluation is strengthened even further by the following stage of in-person exploration.

Instagram vs. reality: Comparing assumptions with the local community

To answer the second research question regarding how these assumptions compare with ELLs' findings after exploring the neighborhood in person and interviewing residents, the study analyzed data collected from post-task questions and focus group interviews. Two questions intended to help students critically reflect on their findings and synthesize all the information they collected included (1) how accurate your assumptions about the people, culture, and customs in the neighborhood compared to the reality when you visited; and (2) what did you find that was consistent between the online and in-person exploration, and what evidence contrasted each other?

The results contained 16 instances where participants displayed this full experiential learning cycle. While nine out of 16 assumptions were confirmed, seven assumptions were modified. In Table 3 the authors present three examples of assumptions that were confirmed, along with the theme of the assumption and evidence that participants observed in-person that confirmed their assumptions. Table 4 presents assumptions that were modified: the assumption, the theme, evidence that went against the assumption, and the "new

conceptualization" that students gained through this process. We then analyze two examples of assumptions (SES and characteristics of residents) that were modified, to illustrate how participants' views changed between the two contexts.

Table 3. Examples of assumptions confirmed

Immediate experience: Assumptions made after researching on Instagram	Theme of assumption	Reflection II: In-person exploration
Lots of community activities in Lincoln Park	**Quality of neighborhood:** Safety; generalizations like "good neighborhood" **Local culture:** Frequent activities/ events	Saw families doing free pumpkin carving activities in the community
Learning atmosphere is very strong in Hyde Park	**Geographic and visual layout:** Cultural and educational districts	Saw lots of people studying on the lawn on the weekend
Saw many gay bars in Boystown on Instagram, friendly community, pride parade, everyone had a good time	**Characteristics of residents:** Friendly environment for LGBTQ+ community; happiness index is very high	Saw people hangout at bars and dancing on the bar table having fun

Table 4. Examples of assumptions modified

Immediate experience: Assumptions made after researching on Instagram	Theme of assumption	Reflection II: In-person exploration	New conceptualization
People who live in Lincoln Park are wealthy, or have good jobs	Demographics of residents: SES	After talking to the realtor in an open house, ELLs found out many people rent apartments and can't afford to buy houses here. The housing market is not good	Better understand the demographic of the residents: young professional renting apartments instead of rich people buying houses
Saw predominantly one racial group in photos online in Lincoln Park	Demographics of residents: Racial demographics	Found more racial diversity in person	Neighborhood is more racially diverse than initially thought from online photos
Photos online were avantgarde and trendy in Boystown	Characteristics of residents: Fancy outfits	People there are not always avant-garde	Neighborhood is not as trendy as initially thought

Challenging misconceptions and stereotypes

The first example in Table 4 illustrates how students had their assumptions challenged, in this case related to the idea that "residents who live in Lincoln Park are wealthy or have good jobs." To critically evaluate this assumption, the group members purposefully visited the open houses around the neighborhood and conducted interviews with the realtors and potential buyers because

the evidence they generated from online search was based on housing prices, safety, and types of housing. Students reported in their focus group interview that they were very excited and motivated to find out if their hypothesis was accurate. After the neighborhood visit, they discovered most of their assumptions were correct including the assumptions of "quality of neighborhood," "geographic and visual layout," and "local culture" (see Table 3); for example, Lincoln Park is a safe and lively neighborhood. The scenery and landscape were beautiful, and since they visited the area around Halloween many events were hosted in this community, such as pumpkin carving, trick or treating, and a corn maze in the zoo. However, one student mentioned in the focus group interview that "I think landscaping and entertainment are more 'superficial' things we can find on Instagram but after interviewing the realtor, we found out that there was information that was 'hidden' in the real world." He talked about the findings of their interview with the realtor that this neighborhood attracts many young urban professionals, and he learned the term "Yuppie" (for Young Urban Professional). This demographic is not able to afford the housing price in this fancy area so most of them are renting studios or one-bedroom apartments. The assumption of this area as a very wealthy neighborhood is accurate but most of the residents ended up moving away after they were looking for a single-family home in the suburbs. This cycle of learning provides more opportunities and an arena for multiple layers of reflections and reconstructing concepts makes learning more meaningful and allows students to become an active agent during the exploration process (Rourke & Kanuka, 2012).

The second example in Table 4 illustrates ELLs' misconceptions of the residents in the Boystown neighborhood. While the evidence they found online showed that the culture in the neighborhood was avant-garde and trendy with a lot of fancy night clubs and famous brands of clothes, what people wore on the street was very casual and not as fancy as they saw online. One student from the Boystown group talked about the interview they conducted with an older gentleman who has lived in Boystown for more than thirty years and is also a member of the LGBTQ+ community. "After the visit and the interview, we found out that the neighborhood is not as 'glamorous' and 'loud' as we described in the assumption. The old gentleman is very kind and very welcoming to share his stories." Students reported how the gentleman told them the history of the LGBTQ+ community and movements in this area and how they had come a long way. "It seems like the neighborhood went through a lot of dark times, but we couldn't really sense it when we visited because the community seemed so peaceful nowadays. We also learned about the term 'gentrification' during the local resident interview," said the student. Another student also talked about the concept of gentrification and was surprised that this urban area has been changed by wealthier people moving in and transformed into what they see today. She reported in her focus group interview that,

> We thought we would see a lot of people hanging out in the bars or clubs
> with loud music and fashionable outfits. We did see some people dancing on

the bar table which was so much fun. However, the majority of the places we visited were very quiet and peaceful. Maybe it's because it is a late after-noon. There is still a lot of beautiful street art and we saw the iconic rainbow crosswalk.

Students reflected on the information they gathered and modified their assumptions. In the focus group interview, they reported that they were stereotyping the neighborhood because when they saw all the pictures of the pride parades and party images on Instagram, they imagined the neighborhood was going to be very colorful, loud, and lively. However, after their visit, they were able to access more insightful information and gain perspectives from the local residents and expressed how much they enjoyed walking around the community because of the unique local stores. Integrating local residents' and informants' interviews in the project fostered another layer of opportunity for ELLs to verify and reconceptualize their assumptions and explain their point of views and intercultural experiences (Furstenberg & English, 2016; Klimanova & Hellmich, 2020; Ozdemir, 2017). This finding also supports the previous studies that the representations of content on social media such as Instagram could be partial and sometimes misleading (Chua & Chang, 2016; Victoria, 2019). Creating con-cepts of "perfect lives" or "most exciting lifestyles" has become a cultural norm on platform like this; therefore, how educators can facilitate and provide an arena for students who are new to the target language environment to explore and critically evaluate these sources so that they are able to confirm their infer-ences or seek more information to challenge misconceptions (Furstenberg & English, 2016; Oliver & Cook, 2015).

Discussion

Previous scholars suggest that ELLs' assumptions may be affected by their pre-vious individual experience, background knowledge of the target culture, and sociocultural experiences (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014). While going through this experiential learning cycle, ELLs were challenged by not only linguistic and intercultural aspects of learning, but also problem-solving and critical think-ing skills to confront differences as well as complex collaborative and com-municative skills to recognize their misunderstanding so that they can further reconceptualize their ideas and perspectives (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019; Mitchell, 2016). Once ELLs' knowledge and understanding of the world have been expanded, they become more sensitive to the diverse cultural and lin-guistic contexts around them and more aware of the value, rules, customs, and lifestyles held by the people in the target language culture (Drewelow, 2013; Furstenberg & English, 2016; Klimanova & Hellmich, 2020; Oliver & Cook, 2015). These skills were strengthened by the learning cycle as ELLs were encouraged to adjust the process of their learning, seek solutions for problems, and reflect on their lived experience within the authentic learning environment (Wach, 2015). Integrating local residents' and informants' interviews in the project fostered another layer of opportunity for ELLs to verify and reconceptualize

their assumptions and explain their point of views and intercultural experiences (Furstenberg & English, 2016; Klimanova & Hellmich, 2020; Ozdemir, 2017). This finding also supports the previous studies that the representations of content on social media such as Instagram could be partial and sometimes misleading (Chua & Chang, 2016; Victoria, 2019). Creating concepts of "perfect lives" or "most exciting lifestyles" has become a cultural norm on platforms like Instagram; therefore, educators can facilitate and provide an arena for students who are new to the target language environment to explore and critically evaluate these sources so that they are able to confirm their inferences or seek more information to challenge misconceptions (Furstenberg & English, 2016; Oliver & Cook, 2015).

As ELLs progressed through the experiential learning cycle, the knowledge they acquired is a "transformation of the experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38) gained through autonomous learning (Lai, 2013; Lee, 2011). Different from directly transmitting the knowledge from the instructor to the students in the traditional classroom, this pedagogical integration fosters learners as active agents in their learning (Han, 2019; Mull, 2013) and emphasizes the concept of "here and now" which allows ELLs to engage in both the immediate simulated context (Instagram) and real-world situation (local visit). The findings showed ELLs went through an experimentation phase in which students were encouraged to use their prior background knowledge and expand new knowledge by testing the hypotheses they generated and discovering the fact of their assumptions. The results of the study further revealed that ELLs were able to conceptualize new ideas and modify the previous assumptions that were proven inaccurately (see Table 4) to demonstrate ways they grow and obtain new knowledge and understandings through exploration and reflections (Kolb, 1984).

Revised conceptual framework

In this study, ELLs' initial experiences aligned with the cycle of the experiential learning process (Kohonen et al., 2001): participants reflected on their immediate experience on Instagram to form assumptions about local communities. However, students were aware that the world they are experiencing online could be like "looking through the looking glass," and that their assumptions could be misleading or completely inaccurate. Therefore, their understanding of the local community can be strengthened by the stage of in-person exploration.

Based on the results of this study, the authors have modified this process to integrate the combination of digital and physical community exploration to create a conceptual model for Community Exploration within Virtual and Face-to-face Contexts that includes: (1) "assumptions" based on what ELLs researched online; (2) "reflection" based on what ELLs saw in person; (3) assumptions that were either "confirmed" or "modified"; (4) if assumptions were modified, ELLs formed "new conceptualizations" (see Figure 3 below).
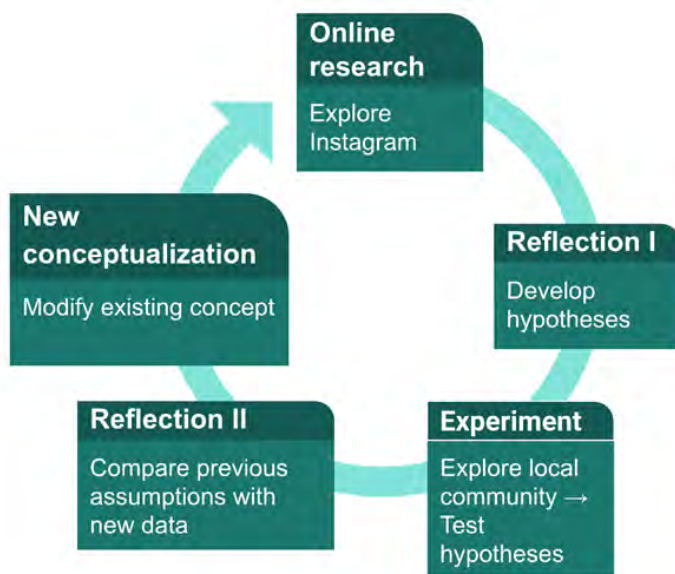
Figure 3. Model for community exploration within virtual and face-to-face contexts

This conceptual model contributes to the current literature by adding to the experiential learning framework the additional stages of experimentation, reflection, and new conceptualization that take place when learners use social media to form assumptions about a community and then use in-person exploration to test those hypotheses. This model illustrates the ways language learners progressed their knowledge and awareness through this study by conducting online research, critically evaluating the sources, reflecting and synthesizing information, and developing new conceptualizations that contain both virtual and face-to-face contexts.

Implications

Several pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study. Due to the nature of data on Instagram – primarily photos and positive content – instructors could focus on student learning objectives (SLO) regarding language learners modifying existing concepts or acquiring critical reflection skills: for instance, critical evaluation of social media content and the contrast between what students observe themselves and what they see on social media to adjust their assumptions about local cultures. In addition, one concern about culture learning is stereotyping, particularly when social media platforms like Instagram typically do not reflect all populations within a community. In this project, students were required to not only conduct research on Instagram but also other sources from different platforms like government websites, news articles, and reports. While students were making assumptions, they also needed to compare and contrast different information sources, evaluate their credibility, and synthesize them with peers. Through these collaborative processes, students were able to reflect on their initial findings, which could

further lead to noticing the gap between their assumptions and reality. They then used these materials to create interview questions for the native English speakers from the local community so they could verify their hypotheses. This process had the combined benefits of use popular social media platforms for new purposes and reaching outside their comfort zone to interact with new spaces and faces in the physical environment.

Conclusion

While the results of this study show how an experiential learning process can offer opportunities for language learners to explore the target language community through various lenses by critically analyzing social media content, experiencing the local community in person, and interacting with the residents of the neighborhood, there are several pedagogical implications and limitations that could be addressed in the future studies.

The limitations of this study include the small sample size and less diverse population of students. With only seven participants who came from the same home country and cohort of an exchange program, the study was not able to yield the richer data that could yield more linguistically and culturally diverse views. Another limitation is that participants had difficulty talking to local community members. Participants had only lived in the US for less than a month and were still adjusting to the academic culture in the target language community. To assist students in this project, more training and practice on how to find interviewees, design interview questions, and conduct interviews would be helpful in future iterations. Finally, with the limited time frame of this project, this study did not implement the final stage of experiential learning labeled "action" in which students apply the new knowledge or concept into the real world around them. This study helped learners complete the first few stages of the cycle to experience the multiple ways they can explore their new environment in hopes they will iteratively apply the process on their own in the future. This extension of "action" should be investigated in future studies. Future research should also conduct a follow-up study over time to investigate whether this project has any impact on how participants explore and interact within their community.

The current study exposes language learners, as explorers or investigators, to both social media and face-to-face environments. Participating in these contexts, language learners were able to reflect on their exploration and observation to engage in more in-depth conversation of the target language community, such as the concept of gentrification or the story behind the members of the community. The value of the experiential learning process is to allow learners to recognize diverse perceptions before making judgements of the target language culture or the members of local communities. This project-based study also provokes language learners to start the series of tasks with an open mind and encourages them to change their views on the target language culture based on the evidence they collect. The Community Exploration within Virtual and Face-to-face Contexts conceptual model offers a pedagogical

learning model for educators seeking to integrate experiential learning frameworks into multiple forms of practice. The results of this study reveal that social media can have a positive role in strengthening language learners' analytical skills and critical awareness of the foreign environment, conceptualizing their ideas through their observation, and confronting their hypotheses. These skills are invaluable in preparing learners for academic success, future careers, and community involvement.

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Appendix A

Online research worksheet

Research the neighborhood your group is assigned to online using Instagram, other social media, and other online sources. Answer the following guiding questions. This is an individual assignment, so each student is required to submit one's own worksheet.

1. **First source: Instagram**
   a. Describe some things you see and read about the neighborhood when you search for it on Instagram [Take screenshots and include it in your answers].
   b. Based on what you see, what are some **assumptions** you can make about this neighborhood?
2. **Second source:**

a. Platform or website: [Take screenshots or URL link and include it in your answers].
b. Describe what you learned or read about the neighborhood on this second source:

3. **Third source:**
   a. Platform or website: [Take screenshots or URL link and include it in your answers].
   b. Describe what you learned or read about the neighborhood on this second source:

4. **Synthesizing information:** Based on everything you saw or read online, list (at least) three things you believe to be true about the neighborhood.
   a. _____
   b. _____
   c. _____

5. **Did your online research lead to one consistent image/understanding of the neighborhood, or did you find conflicting information [give specific examples]?**