

Finding Themselves between Home and Host Cultures

The Use of Facebook by International Students

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ABSTRACT

Advancements in technology have enabled society to become increasingly globalised, both with regard to physical migration, as well as through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enable the maintenance of transnational ties. In particular, transient migration in the area of higher education has seen an increasing number of students migrate overseas for the purpose of their studies. However, research has shown that these international students are often disconnected from their host culture and society, with local-international friendships proving to be uncommon (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016). Based on interviews with over 200 international students in Australia, Sawir et al. (2008) revealed that two-third of them had suffered or were suffering from loneliness, of which Sawir et al. identified three kinds -personal loneliness from loss of contact with families, social loneliness from the loss of networks, and cultural loneliness from the change in environment. This raises the question of how these students may be better supported, and the international student experience improved upon.

Social media has often been positioned as a tool through which users become connected and communities are formed. One of the most popular platforms of social media, Facebook, has become an established part of many lives in modern society. Media and culture have always been interconnected, however, the dominance of the Web in everyday lives means that the role that media plays in cross-cultural communication is more significant than ever and must be researched for a better understanding of this phenomenon. While current research has examined the issues relating to construction of online identities for communication within established social networks, new issues have emerged in relation to collapsed contexts and imagined audiences in today's globalised world, especially as multiple cultures are introduced onto the same platform as a result of migration or relocation. Insufficient research has been done into the influence of technology on transient migration and its potential to support cross-cultural communication. The question thus is how exactly social media may assist transient

migrants overcome issues of isolation and loneliness, and provide them with support during their time abroad.

This study looks to address the issue of student isolation within host societies by examining how social media may provide spaces for support, self-expression and cross-cultural communication. Through a visual internet ethnographic study, it examines the profile pages of international students on Facebook to better understand their positions in these home and host societies. This research study is supplemented by semi-structured interviews for a thorough examination of international students' use of social media.

As we examine how the Web has developed and changed over the last 30 years, it must be acknowledged that this change cannot be solely attributed to technological advancements, but is also influenced by the actual human users of the Web who participate in it. Web users utilise online tools to produce content of their own, tailoring their online experiences accordingly. While advancements in technology has created a more globalised society, the globalised users within this society have had their own impact on technology. This research looks to create a more in-depth understanding of the ways in which social networking platforms are used by transient migrants to navigate transnational cultural settings. It is aimed at enabling deeper understanding of the complex inter-linkages between cultures, to engender new insights of transnational identities. This is essential to address the global nature of today's society and the role of social media platforms in the spaces they create for transient migrants.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing-Social media • Human-centered computing-Ethnographic studies

KEYWORDS

Facebook, Social Media, Migration, International Students, Hybridity, Online Spaces

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1 State of the Art

In order to examine role of social media in facilitating the international student experience, this paper begins by examining the concepts of migration and integration through Berry's (1997) theory of acculturation and their critiques. Phinney (1996) describes acculturation as the extent to which individuals acclimate to host cultures, while maintaining their home culture identities. Berry draws on this to suggest a quadric-modal model that focuses on two dimensions of acculturation; maintenance of home cultural identity and acclimatisation to the host culture. Based on these two dimensions, Berry (1997) describes four modes of acculturations: (1) assimilation - where the individual interacts with the host culture and rejects their native cultural identity; (2) integration - where the individual interacts with the host culture and still maintains their native cultural identity; (3) separation - where an individual avoids participation with their host culture and focuses on maintaining their native cultural identity; and finally, (4) marginalization - where the individual does not interact with both their native culture and their host culture. Of the four, Berry (1997) views the ideal state of acculturation to be integration.

Indeed, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) within migration processes have often been seen to have positive impacts on acculturation. An example of Berry's integration can be read through Chen and Hanasono's study on the uses of Facebook and Renren by Chinese international students in America (2016). In this study, the Chinese international students utilised Facebook as an information tool to keep their selves updated with local news and with social happenings in their host society. Their continued use of Renren however, served more social purposes and was essential in allowing them to communicate with their friends and family back home. Indeed, research on ICTs have revealed them to be key tools in allowing migrants to maintain relationships despite issues of distance and space (Baldassar and Merla, 2014), as evidenced in Chen and Hanasono's study. The integration process can thus be seen to be supported by the use of ICTs.

However, the use of ICTs by international students to communicate with friends and family may also have negative impacts on their acculturation. Kim et al., (2009) researches the uses of communication technologies by international students in South Korea. Their findings revealed that the international students' preoccupation with maintaining their established relationships back in their home culture, meant that they lacked incentive to form new relationships within their host culture. Their social relations were limited to their friends and family back home, which impacted their social adjustment within their new host society, resulting in separation as described within Berry's (1997) model.

While Berry's model may be utilised to describe some of the processes that are taking place, there are limitations to its framework. Particularly, Berry's model has been critiqued for the narrowness of its approach to the migration process. Ngo (2008) argues that basing an acculturation model on two dimensions overlooks the impact that other factors may have on the

acculturation process, while Rudmin (2003) critiques the model's "one size fits all" approach, which categorises all migrants equally. Weinreich (2009) argues that the model reduces the complex nuanced acculturation process into a simplified choice of acceptance or rejection of host cultural identities. While acculturation may have once served as an ideal framework through which to examine migration, the nature of globalisation today alongside the rise of social media, demands a shift in the ways in which we think about migration.

An alternative perspective is offered by Gomes (2014, 2015), whose work examines the use of social media by international students in Australia. Gomes, Berry, Algouzal and Chang's work (2014) reveals that international students form social identities tied to their host nation while studying abroad, linking back to the findings of Sawir (2008) and Kashima and Loh (2006). These social identities focus on the students' position as international students, and allow for the formation of "a parallel society made up of fellow international students that has no clear connections to (multicultural) Australian society or culture" (Gomes et al., 2015, p.517), maintained through social media and face-to-face contact. The formation of these social networks mimics the 'bubble' hypothesis in studies of expatriate communities, where expats tend to live in a 'bubble' separated off from the host society (Fechter, 2007).

To examine this phenomenon through the Berry's framework, this international student parallel society could be described as marginalisation in Berry's model. However, as argued by Del Pilar and Udasco (2004), home and host societies have a dominant influence on identity formation, making it impossible for migrants to construct identities that are completely independent of either culture. The students still associate with their home cultural networks, demonstrating the insufficiency of the marginalisation category to describing the positions held by these international students. In fact, none of the categories in Berry's model are quite able to convey the hybridity of the positions occupied by these students.

Gomes' research (2015) is essential in applying the notion of the hybridity to a theory of identities. The home and the host cultures are viewed as being intrinsically intertwined, meaning that these international students hold complex diverse identities that are not linked singularly to either their home or host cultures, but rather, draw from both (Gomes, 2014). In doing so, Gomes' work highlights the insufficiency of Berry's model as a whole, but particularly with regard to approaching research on the use of social media by international students solely from an integration perspective. Through the international student identity-based networks that these students occupy, it can be seen that integration is often not the end goal of most international students (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009). A more ideal approach would be to perform in-depth investigations of the hybrid positions that international students occupy in their home and host societies, and to utilise these understandings to contextualise the students' uses of social media as hybrid spaces tailored to their own needs.

2 Proposed Approach

Studies into the use of social media by international students have been limited in their scope, primarily due to their focus on the use of social media as a communicative platform. However, this limits understandings of the ability and potential of the Web to provide multiple spaces for information, social interaction, cross-cultural communication and identity production, especially to migrants who lack these spaces in offline environments. There is a need for more in-depth understandings of how international students may utilise social media to assist them in navigating the cultural differences that exist between their home countries and their countries of study. This research project aims to fill this gap by examining the Facebook platform as a Third Space – a platform that exists between home and host culture. This research draws on Bhabha's conceptualisation of the Third Space (1994) as an in-between hybrid position. As culture is only constructed in relation to the "Other", the third space serves as "an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no 'primordial unity or fixity'" (Bhabha, 1994, p.37). This allows for the alternative ways of seeing to emerge, in contrast to dominant viewpoints.

Gomes, 2014, 2015) and Bhabha's work (1994) supports a shift away from thinking of migrant positions in terms of the limited dimensions of Berry's model, to address migration from a hybridised perspective instead. There needs to be a change in understanding migrant identities beyond wholesale acceptance or rejection of entire cultures, to focus instead on how migrant users navigate the complexities of various cultures in their own ways. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's work on individualization in today's society (2002) is particularly relevant in highlighting how "[t]hose who live in this post-national, global society are constantly engaged in discarding old classifications and formulating new ones. The hybrid identities and cultures that ensue are precisely the individuality which then determines social integration. In this way, identity emerges through intersection and combination and thus through conflict with other identities" (p.26). Online identities are thus subject to the agency of the individual and their choices of cultural content as relevant to their identities. This is particularly essential to understanding the uses of social media by international students as their identities and their perceived positions in the society shape these uses. Approaching Facebook as a Third Space looks to take into account the agency of migrants in online environments, as they tailor online spaces according to their own usage.

To examine Facebook as a hybridised Third Space, it is necessary to examine both user activity and content produced on the site. As such, beyond asking questions about the use of social media by international students, this study employs a visual Internet ethnographic approach to perform a detailed analysis of the content produced through the participants' Facebook profiles. This approach is aimed toward examining how experiences are reproduced within online identities, as well as to incite understandings of cultural interactions and communities of practices online. This ethnographic study is supplemented with semi-structured interviews into user activity on Facebook

to contextualise their experiences and allow for insights into how the students are able to tailor their social media experiences.

3 Methodology

The participants gave access to their Facebook profile pages by accepting the researcher as a "Friend" and data from their profile pages were analysed in a visual Internet ethnographic study. The practice of visual Internet ethnography examines "a whole new raft of cultural practices mediated by visual and Internet technologies, through which the meaning and the significance of visual documents are very often redefined" (Ardévol, 2012, p.6). Facebook has fixed tools for user communication and set layouts for users' profile pages; which allow for a study on the construction of online identities through utilising the tools made available. However, despite Facebook's predetermined layout, the practices which individuals engaged in to create their identities on the site are unique to each participant as individuals; the visual set-up being intrinsically tied to their constructed digital identities. Thus images are as important and meaningful as written text in supporting detailed ethnographic work (Pink, 2013), an observation that emphasises the choice of visual ethnography as an effective research methodology. This methodology enables the visual and critical examination of the participants' profiles with regard to the presented text and images working together, from the position of an observer.

This visual Internet ethnographic study was further supported by face-to-face semi-structured interviews, where the students were asked questions about their experiences abroad, and the role played by social media in these experiences. During these interviews, the participants were encouraged to access their social media pages to reinforce any points that they made. These interviews were necessary to engage with the users in a more in-depth manner beyond what a study of their user practices may have afforded, to allow for further insights into understanding the use of social media by international students.

4 Results

While data collection and analysis are currently still ongoing, this research project has examined 29 international students in Finland and 21 international students in Australia to date. The data collected so far reflects the importance of social media to international students during their time abroad. The initial findings reflect some of the key ways in which social media are utilised by these international students as highlighted within the semi-structured interviews conducted:

To connect with friends: "I think [Facebook] is the main way I communicate with [people back home]" (Victor/France/UG).

For community engagement: "I think it's an important way to socialize with the people here or some exchange students and you know, I know some many Finnish bloggers so I know more about some jokes or stories about Finland and I can attend some activities if I wish to, I can see if there are some activities in Tampere or somewhere I can attend to. So yeah, I think it's necessary for me to browse Facebook." (Sally/China/UG).

To meet new people: “One way that I meet new people is to go to a lot of events, for example, Tribe Tampere, they organise many activities and I go there and have random chats with people and then I meet them again randomly on the street or on the bus, gradually getting to know them but getting to know them doesn’t mean that we can be friends. But Facebook is a very important channel that brings you information about these events.” (Thi/Vietnam/PG).

As a source of information: “If I want to find a group or a service, [Facebook] is a place that I first come to search for. Then... All sorts of other things. Second hand stuff and people moving services, and that sort of things. So it’s been really helpful” (Catherine/Vietnam/PG).

To engage with host cultures: “I can join the events which are Finnish. Like I just went to Fazer chocolate factory, it’s an event on the Facebook, and while I go there, I just know the thing, the some more details about Fazer chocolate factory and I can just join these events like jogging in the forest and yeah, it make me more closer to the Finnish culture I think.” (Camilla/China/UG).

Their various use of Facebook shows the importance of social media as a support tool for migrants. The limited resources offered to them directs these international students to seek out their own sources of information and support; Facebook being well-positioned to fulfil this role. Facebook offers them spaces of their own, which can be utilised for a multitude of functions, dependent on their respective needs.

However, what was also evident in the data collected was the importance of Facebook as a space to navigate cultural identities. Analysis of the profile pages constructed by international students on Facebook demonstrated how they drew on elements of different cultures to curate hybridised identities within their profile pages. The different functions available to users on its platform are set up to enable international students to construct and curate identities for themselves within this third space, addressing their diverse and multicultural audience. These functions become welded as tools through which users were able to create and express identities for their selves, drawing from elements of both their home and host cultures to address their multicultural audiences, creating their own meanings and identities in the process. Their use of Facebook reflects the hybridised positions that international students occupy in their host societies and offers hybridity as an alternative to study migrant experiences.

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