

How the Features of Snapchat Affect Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students in the U.S.?

Ward (2001) pointed out that common challenges for international students in the U.S. include learning local culture, acquiring new skills, and eventually integrating into the host culture. This dynamic adjustment process in the cross-cultural context is defined as cross-cultural adaptation. According to Kim's (2001) Integrative Communication Theory, communication with local people is crucial for cross-cultural adaptation, and the research by Rui and Wang (2015) pointed that social network sites (SNSs), the common communication tool, play an important role in international students' adjustment process. Regarding the relationship between cross-cultural adaptation and SNSs, many studies have established the theoretical frameworks and used experiments to prove them and analyze typical SNSs. Most of them focus on Facebook, but Snapchat has been widely used by U.S. college students in recent years. Thus, international students cannot avoid contacting others by Snapchat. It needs a study to apply cross-cultural adaptation theory to analyze how the features of Snapchat affect the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. Because for cross-cultural adaptation, language proficiency is a crucial factor and interpersonal communication with local people is more effective (Kim, 2001), so this study will focus on the communication between international students of non-native English speakers and Americans.

There are various possible activities in Snapchat, and the usage pattern of Snapchat can be divided into two types: passive use (i.e., scrolling through others' posts) and active use (i.e., sending messages). For international students who study abroad in the U.S., passive uses tend to be beneficial to cross-cultural adaptation because they provide easy access to local cultural information, whereas active uses tend to be problematic because message exchange is rendered

difficult by the ephemeral nature of Snap.

To demonstrate the argument, at first, the theoretical framework proposed by Rui and Wang (2015) will be introduced to support the following analysis on Snapchat. The theoretical framework is limited to sojourners referring to the temporary visitors in a new culture. International students are applicable to the assumption. Next, the usage pattern of SNSs will be classified into two types: active use or passive use. Based on the theoretical framework, the benefits and problems of each usage pattern will be explored in the view of cross-cultural adaptation. Then the features of Snapchat will be clearly stated. In the end, all these features will be analyzed to prove the argument.

The Theoretical Framework

Rui and Wang (2015) proposed the theoretical framework to explain cross-cultural adaptation, which combines the conceptualization of cross-cultural adaptation by Ward (2001) and anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) within the context of cross-cultural adaptation by Gudykunst (2005).

Conceptualization of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Ward (2001) claimed that to define cross-cultural adaptation had to involve two main aspects: sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation. Based on the cultural-learning approach, the view claims that issues arise during the cross-cultural adaptation process when insufficient awareness of the host country (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). So, Ward (2001) introduced a new term called sociocultural adaptation to define a person's capability to learn, recognize and assimilate the host culture context. Besides that, Berry and Annis (1974) emphasized the problem of coping with acculturative stress in cross-cultural adaptation and claimed that acculturative stress could be reduced by social support. So, another perspective

about cross-cultural adaptation was stated by Ward (2001): psychological adaptation, which was related to mental health.

In addition, according to Ward (2001), individuals who can communicate effectively with local people have a higher chance to survive and handle stress, thus performing better in sociocultural and psychological adaptation.

Applying AUM to Ward's Conceptualization

AUM contains two main constructs: uncertainty and anxiety, most commonly considered in cross-cultural adaptation from the mental aspect (Gudybunst, 2005). In general, uncertainty refers to cognitive challenges of intercultural communication, and anxiety is more connected with affective issues (Rui & Wang, 2015). A low level of uncertainty means more confidence in understanding and predicting local people's behaviors; a low level of anxiety means less stress resulting from communicating with local people (Gudykunst, 2005). The first requires international students to learn and study the different cultural knowledge and acquire new skills be in accordance with the host cultural norms and practices. In this way, uncertainty will be lowered with a higher level of sociocultural adaptation. The second requires essential social support to communicate to international students to alleviate the acculturation stress and generate a sense of belonging. In this way, anxiety will be lowered with a higher level of psychological adaptation. Aligned with the conceptualization above, AUM clearly states how to promote cross-cultural adaptation for international students and suggests that effective communication with local people is crucial for cross-cultural adaptation.

The Usage Pattern of SNSs

Some researchers have described the effects of different SNSs usage patterns (Orben et al., 2018; Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). To better understand and compare each feature of Snapchat on

cross-cultural adaptation, two distinct types of uses can be identified: active use and passive use.

Active Use

Internet activities encouraging 'direct exchanges' among participants are described as 'active use,' likes comments, notifications, and other forms of interacting with people (Verduyn et al., 2017, p. 281). Since these practices encourage one-to-one contact, social connections may be more focused on a single person's use experience, making it easier to form and sustain connections (Orben et al., 2018).

Passive Use

Passive use refers to monitoring others without direct engagement, including reviewing news feeds, clicking other people's posts, and viewing online discussion boards. Although passive use has a lower level of intimacy than active use, others claim that passive use can offer aids in the maintenance of more extensive social networks (Lewis & West, 2009). Users can reach a wider social network by passively consuming messages from others on the social feeds, empowering them to conquer social and time constraints from direct communications. Passive intake may also benefit one's psychological well-being by including informational and emotional support (Ballantine & Stephenson, 2011).

Active and Passive Use in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

As discussed above, based on the theoretical framework, effective communication is more effective for cross-cultural adaptation. So, active use, which facilitates 'directed exchanges' by SNSs, promotes the final results of adaptation. These activities can develop and maintain meaningful close ties, helping relieve the psychological burden and offer informative feedback and assistance to the international students. Ye (2006) stated that personal strong ties "involve

more self-disclosure and various forms of resource exchange" (p. 864). Active use provides emotional support to international students and leads to improved well-being, thus lowering anxiety to be better psychologically adapted.

As for passive use, these activities maybe not as effective as active use. However, this is not to say that passive use of SNSs is useless in the view of cross-cultural adaptation.

Individuals who observe others can gain a direct understanding of the host society and seek help if needed. Passive use allows international students to access critical knowledge and perspective about local people's values, beliefs, customs, and ideas in the U.S. They can have a basis for comparison about their actions, thus lowering uncertainty to be better socioculturally adapted. Also, passive use can ease the pressure from language barriers because the type of use generally does not involve direct message exchange, which lowers the requirement of language proficiency.

To put it another way, both active and passive use function in cross-cultural adaptation, but in different ways to offer international students help to better fit into the new culture faster, easier, and more comfortable.

Snapchat

Snapchat is a social networking platform that encourages participants to access and post photos, videos, and messages which are only allowed to be seen for a while, so after the period, others cannot access these postings anymore. The special timing function makes Snapchat unique from other SNSs, such as Facebook and Twitter. There are two distinct features of Snapchat: visuality and ephemerality. First, 'conversation' is claimed as "feels better when it's visual" by the Snapchat team. Snapchat is specialized for its 'camera first' function, which means that its users can exchange the forms of visualizations. Second, Snapchat is popular

among the young generation for its 'sharing a moment' function. The ephemeral nature of Snapchat endows the message a feeling of fading away, which may be interpreted as a 'moment.'

The Private Feature, 'Snaps'

Snapchat was primarily designed to share 'Snaps' (visual messages, i.e., images and short videos that visual effects can be added to) privately. To begin, users take a photo or record a timed video, and then some special visual effects can be applied. The sender has control of the time period that others can see on Snapchat (between one and ten seconds). A finished 'Snaps' can be sent to the selected friends from a list. Once viewed, 'Snaps' would disappear. Although it is possible that the receivers can take a screenshot of the content, a notification will be sent to the sender. For the sender, the only social remains or records of Snapchat content is the "seen" proof.

The Public Feature, 'Stories'

'Stories' is a relatively new feature added in the last few years, emphasizing the interpersonal aspects of the platform and aiming to construct the Snapchat community. Users can make their 'Snaps' visible to their friends or post them to 'Our Story,' where selected 'Stories' can be visible to all users by browsing SnapMap (a world map). These 'Stories' can be browsed multiple times within 24 hours. By tapping one specific location, users can learn events that happened there.

Discussion on Snapchat's Two Main Features

Benefits of the 'Stories' Feature

According to the definition of passive use above, scrolling through 'Stories' posted by friends or local people belongs to passive use. In particular, SnapMap employed with selected

geolocated 'Stories' can serve as a platform for international students to acquire local cultural knowledge. As mentioned before, by observations, international students can learn local social norms and values, making them more confident and comfortable to behave. Accordingly, they can lower their uncertainty level and achieve a higher level of sociocultural adaptation.

Especially as the platform gathering peers and young generations, SnapMap provides a unique opportunity for international students to gain insights into the young American community. Nowadays, some unwritten rules and beliefs solely shared among youth have been formed. According to Vaterlaus et al. (2016), this phenomenon is defined as 'youth culture.' Approaching 'youth culture' on SnapMap promotes acculturation into the youth community and helps formulate a sense of belongings.

In addition, the visuality of 'Stories' facilitates understanding for international students because of more cue involvement. 'Stories' emphasize the practice of 'context sharing,' consistent with the 'visual culture' developed and maintained by Snapchat, which means fewer language barriers for international students. According to Forbush and Foucault-Wells (2016), insufficient language skills hinder international students from making friends with peers, making them have a low level of self-esteem. So, language barriers would induce much anxiety from communicating with local people. It suggests that the visuality of 'Stories' would avoid depression and reduce the psychological stress (i.e., anxiety and the feeling of being marginalized), which facilitates the psychological adaptation of international students.

Also, Snapchat allows users to add new friends through the 'Stories' function. So, international students can enlarge their social circles easier by scrolling through posts, benefiting from that passive use involves less social and time constraints. However, some experts argued that passive use of SNSs only promotes weak and low-commitment ties,

undermining effective well-being (Lewis & West, 2009). These arguments have some validity if the crucial variable of physical proximity is not considered. In the context of physical proximity, relationships are most likely to be progressed and developed because of the higher possibility of social communications (Rui & Wang, 2015). It suggests that the new and weak friendship initiated by StoryMap tends to be developed further offline. In fact, Yang et al. (2014) have proposed a sequence to describe online relationship development for young adults, in which SNSs serve as the way to initiate social relationships. Besides, Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) support the speculation with empirical evidence showing that individuals with a high frequency of SNSs use are also active in connecting with these online friends offline. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that weak ties have many unique benefits that strong ties lack, including movement among different groups and highly open to outside information (Granovetter, 1983). Therefore, social relationships can be established by 'Stories,' and SnapMap exerts some effects on cross-cultural adaptation, which stronger ties cannot replace.

Potential Problems of the 'Snaps' Feature

Chatting by 'Snaps' involves direct communication, so it belongs to the active use of SNSs. As we have analyzed above, active use exerts a great positive influence on cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, it should also be true to chatting by 'Snaps.' However, the unique ephemeral nature distinguishes Snapchat from other SNSs (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) with a recordable nature. Actually, the key ephemeral characteristic hinders cross-cultural adaptation for international students.

Besides ephemeral SNSs, some forms of communication also have an ephemeral characteristic: the most prominent one is face-to-face interaction, so 'Snaps' share some properties with it (Bayer et al., 2016). For example, 'Snaps' also have no possibility of re-

experiencing, which challenges the supposed benefits of information documentation. The inability to store knowledge of 'Snaps' requires full attention to respond to the sender because of less reaction time promptly. It renders the social compensation hypothesis invalid, which presumes that online communication affords people the effect of 'shelter' to have more time to construct ideas (McKenna et al., 2002). On the SNSs with recordable nature, international students would have more time to draft and revise their messages. But this cannot be achieved by 'Snaps.' It suggests that 'Snaps' demand higher English proficiency for international students in the U.S. to understand its meaning quickly. Naturally, this would put more pressure on international students and negatively affect psychological adaptation, especially those who are not confident with their language.

In addition, the ephemeral characteristic of 'Snaps' makes it sensed as less supportive. According to the quantitative research by Bayer et al. (2015) with a sample of 154 undergraduates in the U.S., interactions by 'Snaps' were less supportive than other communication channels, including face-to-face interactions, calling, texting, email, Facebook, and Twitter. This result is consistent with the loss of the 'shelter' effect. To communicate emotions, international students need more time to construct and edit the message. In the counterpart, support providers also need time to truly understand the international students who need help and accordingly construct more supportive and helpful feedback before conceiving the message. However, these requirements are most unlikely to meet because of the ephemerality of 'Snaps.' The in-depth interviews about Snapchat from the research by Vaterlaus et al.(2016) support the view: participants are more likely to consider 'Snaps' as the fun tool instead of a great source of information.

Also, it should be noted that the ephemeral characteristic brings a kind of anonymity.

Because 'Snaps' would be automatically deleted after the set time, the sender could be non-accountable for the content of the message. In fact, Snapchat provides revenue for deviant behavior, including cyberbullying, discrimination, and 'sexting' (i.e., sexually explicit messages), damaging international students' psychological well-being.

Conclusion

For international students studying abroad in the U.S., cross-cultural adaptation is a common challenge to confront. SNSs may promote or impede the adjustment process, and Snapchat is a typical example. The 'Stories' feature with SnapMap provides opportunities to pick up the cultural awareness, integrate into the youth community, and enlarge the social network. The viscosity of 'Stories' also makes the messages easier to understand for international students. All these merits contribute to sociocultural and psychological adaptation, thus achieving a high level of cross-cultural adaptation. However, the ephemerality of 'Stories' is problematic to cross-cultural adaptation. The ephemeral nature requires full attention and higher English proficiency and makes Snapchat less supportive. At the same time, the ephemerality induces anonymity, intriguing deviant behavior. All these outcomes are detrimental to psychological adaptation, lowering the level of cross-cultural adaptation.

Regarding the limitations of the study, there is still a lot of work for future research. First, the study is a theoretical analysis, so it needs the experiment to verify. Also, the study only considered one SNSs – Snapchat. More SNSs should be involved next to compare and explore how one characteristic affects international students' cross-cultural adaptation. In this way, the result owns generality and universality to other SNSs. Besides, the characteristics of international students may affect the adjustment process via SNSs. It suggests that the field is left to research.

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