The Role of Social Media in Intercultural Communication Competence: A Study of Chinese Students in Malaysia

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Abstract: With globalization, higher education and society constantly demand students and people to have intercultural communication competence (ICC). More and more Chinese students are choosing to come to Malaysia for higher education. In recent years, teenagers have accessed information through social media. To have deep research on how social media can help the acculturation process. The Integrative Communication Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation will be used as the theoretical guide for this study. The qualitative and quantitative research will be combined through a mixed-methods sequential interpretive design. Semi-structured interviews are conducted by selecting appropriate samples from the questionnaire through purposive sampling. The final data will be analyzed through Grounded theory as a theoretical guide. The main challenges encountered by Chinese students in Malaysia centered on cultural differences in the classroom, assignments, and cuisine. Students with high ICC thought social media would broaden their views and give them access to resources and information about different cultures as they acclimate. Students with low ICC believed that social media facilitated mutual understanding in acculturation. All of them were willing to use social media to make friends but still focused on making deeper connections with Chinese students.

Keywords: intercultural competency, cultural adaptation, cultural sensitivity, social media

1.   Introduction

The development of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is necessary for people living in multicultural societies and interacting frequently with people from different cultural backgrounds. ICC refers to exchanging information and ideas with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It involves understanding and respecting cultural differences, adapting to new cultural environments, and facilitating effective intercultural communication [1].

Higher education is gradually realizing the importance of fostering intercultural communication skills [2]. More and more Chinese students are coming to Malaysia to further their studies. According to EMGS, there are 9,146 applicants from China. Among the top 10 applicant countries for Fall 2022, many applicants are still compared to other countries [3].

In recent years, adolescents have been engaging with digital media in an increasingly large percentage of their lives. They spend a more significant amount of time on social media. Social media provides a platform that can sustain the basic developmental needs of adolescents (e.g.,

social connection, entertainment, and identity formation) [4]. Social media use suggests that people use it to fulfill their needs [5]. Compared to students from other countries, Chinese students could be more robust in their knowledge of ICC [6]. It is worth mentioning that this generation of Chinese students grew up in the Web 2.0 era with China's particular one-child policy and the rapid development of the Internet. Therefore, this generation of Chinese students has a unique cultural sensitivity.

The literature mentions that in today's ICC, research focuses mainly on mainstream Western countries [7]. Issues and challenges in adapting to the culture in Malaysia are centered on the invasive K-pop culture [8, 9]. Research on Chinese students' acculturation in Malaysia has mainly focused on language and communication barriers [10]. However, there still needs to be a knowledge gap about the role of social media influences on the issues and challenges of cultural adaptation for Chinese students in Malaysia.

To better address the research gaps. This paper proposes the following research objectives. 1) To understand the issues and challenges Chinese students face regarding acculturation in Malaysia. 2) To clarify whether social media helps Chinese students to enhance their problems and challenges in acculturation. 3) To better understand whether social media facilitates communication between Chinese and local Malaysian students.

2.   Methods

This paper helps to strengthen the theoretical foundation of the Integrated Communication Theory of Intercultural Adaptation proposed by Kim in 2017. In the cultural adaptation process, this study not only focuses on the challenges and problems encountered by individuals in the adaptation process. However, it also emphasizes the role of communication factors such as mass media in facilitating the process of acculturation. The theory explains the vital role that the personal and ethnic backgrounds of people coming to a new social environment and the conditions of the new environment play in facilitating or hindering the acculturation process. Most importantly, the theory states that individuals are the primary "facilitators" and bearers of "burdens." [11].

There is cultural uniqueness in different countries. Chinese students of this generation have a particular cultural sensitivity. Therefore, this study takes the Malaysian context to extend the theory further. Further, it explores the impact of social media on the acculturation process of Chinese students and their problems and challenges in the acculturation process in Malaysia. Thus, it will progress to contribute to more academic researchers and educational institutions.

This paper utilized a mixed-methods sequential interpretive design, combining qualitative and quantitative research in the quantitative phase of the study [12]. The researcher distributed the questionnaire through Google Sheets to respondents. These Google forms were limited to those who had a UKM email address. Then, purposive sampling selected suitable respondents from the questionnaire fillers (Table 1)

In the quantitative method, semi-structured interviews will guide this study. This method has the flexibility of increasing data to allow respondents to describe their experiences in the interview better [13]. In face-to-face interviews, Zoom was used to obtain more in-depth research data. To better achieve the research objectives, the research questions of this study examined the interview questions asked by Wu and Syarizan Dalib in their study to make a guide for this study [14, 15]. To better enable the interviewees to express the problems and challenges of acculturation in Malaysia and the role of social media in the acculturation process. The interviews will be conducted in Mandarin Chinese (a common language).

In the data analysis phase. In the quantitative phase of this paper. The questionnaire data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v.26.0. The correlation data with a p-value less than 0.05 were selected for comparative analysis. In the quantitative part of the

study, this paper used a Grounded theory approach to construct a theory by continuously comparing and analyzing data. The researcher will compare the descriptions of the experiences of different respondents and extract new concepts from them [16]. Gradually construct a theoretical framework to deeply explore the impact of social media on intercultural communicative competence. (FSSK: Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences. FEP: Faculty of Economics. GSB: Graduate School of Business. FTSM: Faculty of Information Science & Technology)

Table 1: Sample of the semi-structured interviews.

Name	Age	Gender	Faculties	Self-assessment of ICC
Xiang Liwei	21	Male	FSSK	High
Wang Bohan	21	Male	FSSK	High
Kong Linghao	22	Male	FSSK	High
Xu Bingxuan	22	Male	FSSK	Low
Ma Wugang	21	Male	FSSK	High
Liu Chengshuai	21	Male	FEP	Low
Song Rongxiu	22	Female	FSSK	High
Jin Yuan	21	Female	FSSK	Low
Lin Sijin	21	Female	FEP	Low

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Findings

The research collected data on UKM student email addresses via Google Forms and set it only to allow students with UKM email addresses to fill in to ensure data rigor. Collected data from 81 participants to analyze; the sample's age was mainly between 18-25 years old (Table 2) at the undergraduate level at UKM. Chinese students are mainly concentrated in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FSSK) and the Faculty of Economics and Management (FEP) (Table 3). However, female students are more predominant in the sample collection, accounting for 63% of the total sample (Table 4).

Table 2: Count of age.

18-20	21-25	26-30
38	41	2

Table 3: Count of faculty.

FSSK	FEP	GSB	FTSM	FST
47	30	2	1	1

Table 4: Count of gender.

Male	Female
40	41

The data showed that most Chinese students still face some cultural adaptation pressure during their studies in Malaysia. Their main problems and challenges were centered on academic pressure, diet, and different classroom culture. Among them, 63% of Chinese students believed that academic

pressure was the most troubling issue for them, 55.6% believed that diet was more troubling, followed by 45.7% who believed that different classroom cultures impacted them (Table 5).

Table 5: Issues and challenges during your study abroad in Malaysia.

Study-related stress and distress	51 (63%)
Differences in diet	45 (55.6%)
Differences in classroom culture	37 (45.7%)
Readiness for new environments	26 (32.1%)
Lack of friends	14 (17.3%)
Attitude towards the host country	13 (16%)
Psychological distress	12 (14.8%)

In the process of cultural adaptation, most Chinese international students choose to use social media to help them. Among them, 54.3% of Chinese international students said that social media bubbles and screening bias led to challenges in cultural adaptation. However, only 32.1% believed social media could help Chinese students adapt better during acculturation (Table 6).

Table 6: Challenges posed by social media during the acculturation phase.

information cocoon	44 （54.3%）
Culture clashes and misunderstandings	22 （27.2%）
Social media isolation and a sense of isolation	15 （18.5%）

Based on the distribution of self-rated Intercultural Communication Competence Level (ICC) scores (Table 7). The correlation shows that the frequency of using social media during cross-cultural adaptation is positively correlated with ICC ($p < 0.05$) (Table 8). The higher the ICC competency, the more frequent the use of social media in acculturation.

Table 7: Self-assessment of ICC.

Low ICC （0-4）	20
High ICC （6-10）	21

Table 8: SPSS correlation.

		Self-assessment of ICC
The Use of social media	*Perdonal correlation*	*.420***
IN intercultural	*Sig(2-tailed)*	*.000*
Processes	*N*	*81*

Students with strong ICC had contact with local students during their studies in Malaysia. Most of the students indicated that local students helped them to better adapt to the Malaysian environment in terms of cultural adaptation and introducing more friends. In addition, most of the students used social media as a tool to enhance cross-cultural adaptation. They believed social media helped them broaden their horizons, learn about other cultures, and meet people from different cultural backgrounds. Only three people with high intercultural competence did not make more friends through social media (Table 9). They argued that social media provided information and resources about the relevant new culture during the acculturation process and helped them to

build their social networks further. However, there were also challenges related to information cocooning.

Table 9: High ICC social media Meet and Greet Local Student.

Yes	18
No	3

Students with weak ICC believe that social media plays a role in facilitating cultural exchange and understanding in the cultural adaptation process (Table 10). Most of them needed clarification about the role of social media in improving acculturation and considered it a double-edged sword. However, they believed that social media helped in the acculturation process by providing information and resources related to the new culture, thus better helping Chinese international students overcome the acculturation challenges. Although the frequency of using social media in cross-cultural adaptation was low, they believed it provided an opportunity to help them learn about other cultures. However, most of them only met a few people through social media. The challenges that this group perceived to the role of social media in the process of acculturation centered on the information cocoon.

Table 10: Low ICC Social media's help in acculturation.

Building new social networks	6
Understanding new cultural information	6
Uncertainty exists	8
aggravated information disorder	0

3.2. Qualitative Research Findings

To gain a deeper understanding of the problems and challenges faced by Chinese students in the cultural adaptation process in Malaysia and whether social media played a role in this process, further interview methodology was adopted to draw more insightful conclusions.

The interviewees generally indicated that academic stress was a significant problem during cultural adaptation, as shown in Table 11. This stress mainly stems from the Malaysian education system emphasizing group work in completing assignments. Compared to the Chinese model of independent homework completion, this collaborative approach places higher demands on students in quantity and frequency. However, the interviewees reported that the volume of homework was large, and the collaboration among group members needed to be closer, making it challenging to complete the assignments.

In addition, cultural differences in the classroom were a common issue mentioned by the interviewees. In Malaysia, professors expect students to participate and interact in class actively. This is a significant difference from the traditional teaching style in China, where Chinese students are more passive recipients of the knowledge imparted by the teacher. Some interviewees mentioned that they may have experienced ridicule from students or teachers in their home country, leading them to behave more conservatively in Malaysian classrooms and be skeptical about active participation.

Another aspect related to food was the adaptation to Malaysian food under the influence of Indian culture. Malaysian food usually incorporates a lot of Indian spices, which is different from Chinese dietary habits, resulting in the respondents feeling uncomfortable with the food during the adaptation process.

Interviewees indicated that academic pressure mainly came from group work, and respondents indicated that compared to the independent completion of assignments in China. Many assignments in Malaysian education require group cooperation. The amount of homework is quite heavy, and group members often need to cooperate with the work. The cultural differences in the classroom are mainly centered on the significant differences in classroom interaction from China. Malaysian professors hope that students can be more active in the process of lectures, but most of the interviewees in the domestic education stage are mainly teachers to impart knowledge. Some interviewees mentioned that they are not substantially involved in the classroom. They may have experienced ridicule from students or teachers in China, so they are still concerned about participating in the classroom suddenly.

Regarding diet, Malaysian cuisine is deeply influenced by Indian culture, which adds many spices to the food. Respondents indicated that they felt uncomfortable with the food during the adaptation process. Moreover, the hand-held form of dining also came as a culture shock to respondents.

Table 11: Issues and challenges during the adaptation process.

Academic stress	Assignment form	Assignment Langue	increased workload	Participation of panelists
Classroom culture	Professors' Expectations for Student Engagement	Psychological pressure not to express feelings in the classroom	Enthusiasm of host country students attending classes	
Malaysian cuisine	Spices	hand-held form of dining		

3.2.1. High ICC

For people with high intercultural communication skills, social media is mainly used in China (e.g., WeChat, DOUYIN). However, they come to Malaysia and use local social media (e.g., IG, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook). These people take social media as a powerful tool to solve cultural adaptation and to improve their English proficiency level. They gain a deeper understanding of the culture by actively searching for local culture and news. As well as following the daily life and comments shared by people from different cultural backgrounds or the host country people on social media.

This paper found that social media helps broaden horizons and provide information and resources about new cultures during acculturation through the daily life shared by others on social media. They gained a deeper understanding of the host country. At the same time, by sharing big data on different social media platforms (IG et al.), they were able to make more friends from different cultures, including those in the host country.

However, despite the many advantages of social media for these culturally competent individuals, they still face some challenges. These challenges center on the isolation and segregation aspects of social media. Some people may become so addicted to social networks that they cannot return to real life. The personal labels established on social media may also lead to feelings of isolation. In addition, the phenomenon of information cocooning in social media is also a problem, as social media is primarily used for entertainment and may only recommend relevant and valuable information with a deliberate search for big data.

Despite these challenges, these culturally competent communicators believe they can circumvent the adverse effects of social media through subjective efforts. They can rationalize their time to avoid overindulging in social networking while maintaining real-life communication and socialization. They can also actively select valuable information and search for it proactively to ensure access to diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives.

3.2.2. Low ICC

Among those who were lower in the self-assessment of intercultural communication competence, the use of social media remained the same, and they preferred to use Chinese social media to help solve intercultural communication problems. Their reluctance to use local social media is mainly due to their limited English language proficiency. They still need help to read English social media.

This led to concerns about other cultural considerations introduced in social media, which made them reluctant to communicate with students in the host country. They indicated they could meet people in the host country through social media. They will focus on the host country students who are physically attractive but need more communication. In addition, most of them were also reluctant to interact with students from the host country because of their personalities. They are also willing to communicate with host country students if the host country students take the initiative to socialize with them. However, in many cases, the host country students did not socialize with them, significantly reducing their willingness to socialize.

Nevertheless, they believe that social media has a role to play in the process of cultural adaptation. But uncertainty remains. Through social media, they can learn about the taboos of other cultures and some festivals in the host country (Despite the uncertainties). They believe that social media plays a role in promoting mutual cultural understanding.

Despite the advantages of social media, these less culturally adapted populations still need some help. They are more affected by the information cocoon and the isolation brought by social media, which may limit their motivation in the process of acculturation. Even this group of respondents indicated that their understanding of local issues through social media increased their culture shock about the local culture, which reduced their use of local social media in the acculturation process. To a certain extent, this reduced their further communication with locals in cross-cultural communication.

3.2.3. Summary

In summary, comparing people with different levels of ICC, it can be concluded that individuals with higher ICC are more inclined to use local social media platforms when traveling to a new country, and they are adept at using social media as a mediating tool to learn about the culture of a new country. This helps them to minimize problems and challenges in the process of acculturation. They could use social media platforms to make friends from different cultural backgrounds, gain insights into the cultural aspects of national communication, and obtain timely information on local news (Table 12).

In contrast, individuals with lower ICC preferred social media to learn about cultural taboos and domestic news. Both groups expressed challenges posed by social media in further interviews, mainly regarding information closure and feelings of social isolation. The difference is that high ICC individuals believe they can circumvent social media challenges in acculturation through subjective efforts. In contrast, low ICC individuals perceive these challenges as somewhat uncertain.

Overall, the above findings reveal different strategies and attitudes towards utilizing social media in acculturation among people with different levels of ICC. High-ICC individuals are more confident in utilizing social media as a bridge to facilitate cross-cultural communication and

understanding. In contrast, low-ICC individuals utilize social media more to obtain relevant cultural background information. This analysis emphasizes the importance of enhancing ICC in cross-cultural situations to better cope with the challenges posed by social media and to promote effective acculturation.

Table 12: Comparison of interview data.

	Social media	Social media use during acculturation	Challenges of social media in Intercultural Communication
Hight ICC	·In China: WeChat DOUYIN Weibo ·In Malaysia: IG Whatsapp TIKTOK Facebook	·Learn about the country's culture from the social media accounts of friends in the host country ·Learn more authentic English expressions ·Keep up with local news ·Meet more host country friends through big data	·information cocoon ·The isolation that comes with social media
Low ICC	In China: WeChat DOUYIN Weibo In Malaysia: WeChat DOUYIN Xiao hongshu	·Understanding what to look for in a culture ·Keep up with local news	·information cocoon ·The isolation that comes with social media ·Aggravating culture shock

4. Discussion

In the context of cross-cultural exchange, international students from China face similar adaptation challenges in Malaysia and the UK. In response to this context, the interviewees offered suggestions in their interviews aimed at helping these international students to better integrate into the local culture, living, and learning environments. Their insights are applicable to Malaysia and instructive in the UK context.

In the interviews, the interviewees said that from their aspects, 1) Before coming to Malaysia, they can first understand the local culture and customs through social media. Malaysia is a religious country. In daily communication, many things need to pay attention to the place. However, social media has the problem of an information cocoon. Those planning to study in Malaysia can search for the following information on social media. Help them understand the country's communication taboos to help Chinese students do the pre-departure preparations better. 2) Chinese students can take the initiative to proactively communicate through social media to help alleviate the culture shock brought about by the cultural adaptation process to the pressure and distress. 3) Improve self-confidence. Moreover, English is only a communication tool.

The respondents believe that more can be done: 1) Considering that some professors do not have a good level of English proficiency, some courses can be offered to co-teach with local students. 2) setting up mutual help buddies for exchange students to embrace the host country and implementing this to full-time Chinese students or more international students. 3) Helping Chinese students solve their shyness prevents them from interacting further with local students. 4) Providing mandatory ice-breaking activities for Chinese students to join. Help Chinese students to solve the problem of being shy and unable to communicate with local students. 5) Provide mandatory ice-breaking

activities so that Chinese students are forced to join. 6) The University can open a social media account to help Chinese students and international students from other countries with the complicated visa process to have a more explicit version of the visa process and the venue. 7) Enhancing the publicity of University counseling rooms. 8) The country's culture can be publicized by choosing some internet stars. The star effect helps international students better understand the country's culture through social media.

However, the UK has the same education system as Malaysia. Chinese students in the UK, the researchers suggested that students could be helped to establish social networks to solve their difficulties in living and studying in the UK upon arrival. Secondly, Chinese students should be encouraged to initiate conversations in academic exchanges and social activities. The next option could be to hire cultural ambassadors to increase social interaction between students in these groups. Organize activities or events to celebrate important festivals in their home culture, such as Chinese New Year. Since there is also a positive link between students' perceived value and their loyalty to the university, this can also motivate Chinese students to share their experiences [17].

In summary, cross-cultural adaptation is always an important issue for international students to face, both in Malaysia and the UK. The suggestions from the interviewees provide us with valuable ideas, from self-awareness and social media activation to support measures at the school level, which provide valuable insights to facilitate the integration and communication of international students. Working together can create a more inclusive and supportive international learning environment and a richer and more meaningful study experience for international students.

5.   Conclusion

In the current context of globalization, social media has become the main channel for people to obtain information, facilitating the spread of the country's culture. It has also led to more people knowing about Malaysia, attracting more Chinese students who travel to the country for higher education. However, the clash of different cultures can lead to stress and problems in cultural adaptation. In the case of Chinese students, many of them lack knowledge of ICC. Most Chinese students need help with food, classroom culture, and homework pressure during acculturation. However, those Chinese students with higher ICC will enhance their adaptation through social media. They would observe the lives of local students shared on social media to learn about local news and other national cultures. These students reported using local social media platforms (Instagram, WhatsApp) more frequently after coming to Malaysia. Despite social media problems such as feelings of isolation and information cocooning, those with high ICC proactively avoid related challenges.

In contrast, Chinese students with lower ICC are more likely to use Chinese social media. Their use of Malaysian social media was mainly limited to communicating with professors or following information about local students without actively participating in social interactions. They perceived some uncertainty in the help of social media in the process of cultural adaptation, and although it could help them understand the do's and don'ts of the local culture to a certain extent, on the other hand, the access to such information deepened their reluctance to socialize with local students. In addition, they are more introverted and prefer local students to take the initiative to contact them. Therefore, before choosing to study in Malaysia, Chinese students can make sufficient preparations, learn about the local culture in advance, and enhance their self-confidence. Schools can help Chinese students adapt to the local culture by cooperating with local students in co-teaching, establishing friendly and supportive relationships, promoting mental health in universities, and setting up official social media platforms. These efforts can help Chinese students to better integrate into the local society and improve their cultural adaptability.

This paper focuses on the knowledge gap of intercultural communicative competence among Chinese students at UKM at the undergraduate level. The scope of the study is small; the study is limited by the fact that Chinese students at UKM are concentrated in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Economics, which leads to a particular bias in the research sample. Most Chinese students still have some psychological concerns about participating in the study. So that future research can expand the data—a comprehensive study for Chinese students through more comprehensive colleges and universities (UM UPM USM). A longitudinal study can also be done on Chinese students studying in Malaysia. To observe the problems Chinese students, face in Malaysia regarding cultural adaptation and the solutions through stages.

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