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Exploring Social Networking as an Aid to Acculturation

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Abstract

This paper uses a qualitative methodology, autoethnography, to explore how social networking can help international students acculturate to the United States. Our findings suggest three emergent themes. Social networking tools can aid acculturation through: 1) facilitating knowledge exchange, 2) alleviating apprehension, and 3) enabling socialization and building community.

Keywords: Social Networking, Acculturation, Qualitative Methodology

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Abstract

Social networking sites (SNS) have experienced tremendous growth over the last several years. Facebook is currently the world's largest SNS, with more than 500 million active registered users (Facebook 2010). While Facebook has a global reach, supporting over 70 translations, the focus of this research is how SNSs, like Facebook, can facilitate the acculturation of individuals to a new national culture. Acculturation has been defined as the changes or adaptations that occur as a result of interaction with culturally dissimilar groups, peoples, and/or social influences (Gibson, 2001). Initially, acculturation research concentrated on group-level processes, based on the understanding that culture and cultural change are group-level phenomena (Barger, 1982). However, subsequent research has examined it on an individual-level, suggesting that acculturation takes place as one acquires an increasing level of compatibility with his or her new cultural environment (Schwartz et al., 2010). From this perspective, acculturation research studies individuals living in countries other than where they were born (Berry, 2006).

In this research, we explore how an innovative technology, such as Facebook, can assist international students with acculturating to the United States. In doing so, we use autoethnography, a type of qualitative research utilized by relativistic and constructivist paradigms, in which participants share their experiences and thoughts through an autobiographical narrative (Ellis & Bocher, 2000). Thus, respondents use their own lenses of personal meaning to frame their experiences. The participants in this research were international students enrolled in their first semester of doctoral courses in the College of Business at a large Midwestern university in the United States. The students joined a Facebook group in which one of the professors posted a cultural tip of the week. The students discussed this tip, shared about their home culture, and asked questions. After the semester had concluded, the students wrote about their experiences.

The analysis of the international students' autobiographical narratives revealed several ways in which the Facebook group assisted in their acculturation process. First, it facilitated knowledge exchange so that they could better understand their new environment and alter their understanding or behaviors as necessary. Next, the Facebook interactions helped alleviate the international students' apprehension and enhanced their confidence. Third, it provided a vehicle for socialization and a sense of community. While this research is exploratory in nature, it does provide initial evidence that social networking sites can be used to aid acculturation.

Keywords: Social Networking, Acculturation, Qualitative Methodology

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