



'Close to Home, Even Though Far Away': social media in International Student Adaptation

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Abstract

This mixed-method study investigates the role of social media in the intercultural adaptation process of international students in Saudi Arabia. With over 200,000 international students enrolled in Saudi universities, understanding their adaptation experiences is crucial, particularly given Saudi Arabia's strict Islamic rules, Arabic language requirements, and unique cultural context. The study employed quantitative and qualitative approaches with 179 students participating in an online questionnaire and five students volunteering for follow-up interviews. The findings reveal that social media significantly impacts three key aspects of intercultural adaptation: strengthening, maintaining, and building relationships and connections; overcoming adjustment challenges; and enhancing participants' sense of belonging to both host and home cultures. No significant differences were found based on age or gender variables. This research contributes to the limited literature on international students in Arabic-speaking contexts and is one of the first attempts to explore social media's role in intercultural adaptation within Saudi Arabia specifically. The findings suggest that social media serves as a vital tool for international students, enabling them to maintain home culture connections while simultaneously integrating into the host culture. Pedagogical implications recommend encouraging pre-arrival social media interactions and introducing students to commonly used platforms as part of preparation programs.

Keywords: cross-cultural adjustment; intercultural adaptation; international students; social media; social networking sites