



The Impact of Social Media on Intercultural Communication as Perceived by University Students of the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract

From the perspective of Omani university students, the study sought to shed light on how social media use affects cross-cultural interactions. The study sample used a descriptive methodology and included Nine Hundred and Forty-Eight (948) students from three Omani universities. The findings showed that, from the perspective of Omani university students, social media significantly influenced cross-cultural communication. Omani university students' contributions to cross-cultural interactions on social media were moderate in terms of communication and involvement but high in terms of cultural sensitivity, cultural adaptation, and tolerance for diversity. The findings also revealed several drawbacks to social media use in cross-cultural communication, chief among them being the potential for presenting an inaccurate picture of a society's culture and highlighting its flaws, which could skew it. Lastly, the findings showed that male students contributed more than female students to social media communication with foreign cultures. Compared to men, women displayed a greater degree of cultural awareness. Compared to graduate students, undergraduates were better at adjusting to new cultures.

Keywords: Social Media, Intercultural Communication, Cultural Psychology.

Introduction

A reciprocal relationship between two or more people using various means and methods, whether electronically through social media on the Internet or directly between people, is the foundation of the social phenomena known as communication. A new era of efficient communication between people has been made possible by social media on the Internet,

which has drawn millions of users and ingrained itself into people's and societies' everyday routines (Alsoudi et al., 2021). Without being limited by time or location, it has emerged as a powerful means of bringing together a wide range of individuals, customs, viewpoints, and locations around the globe (Sawyer & Chen, 2012).

Social media has revolutionized global communication by enabling rapid and simultaneous interactions among individuals worldwide. This technological advancement has significantly altered how people connect and engage with one another (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). As a powerful tool, social media impacts various aspects of life by facilitating the exchange of ideas and experiences while enhancing the ease and speed of communication among individuals from diverse societies and cultures. Consequently, a global community has emerged, allowing people from various parts of the world to interact and communicate effectively (Zaw, 2018). The influence of social media goes beyond the form and content of information; it also shapes how people perceive and understand each other in communication, particularly among diverse cultural or ethnic groups (Karimah & Gemiharto, 2017).

Recent global statistics reveal that there are 5.04 billion social media users worldwide, which accounts for 62.3% of the global population. On average, individuals spend 151 minutes per day using these platforms. The primary reason users engage with social media is to stay in touch with family and friends, cited by 47% of respondents. The second most common reason, at 36.2%, is to fill free time and have fun. Additionally, statistics show that one in five users share details about their lives on social media. Instagram is the most downloaded social media app, with 547 million downloads, followed by WhatsApp, with 424 million downloads. China ranks as the country with the highest social media usage, followed by India and the United

States. Europe has the highest usage at the continental level, while Africa has the lowest (Statista, 2024).

Social media plays a significant role in fostering intercultural connections between different societies and countries by providing access to social support and relevant information on an international scale. It serves as a primary source of communication and information for diverse groups of individuals (Pang, 2020). Engaging with various cultural groups on social media enhances recognition and promotes cultural exchange (McKelvy & Chatterjee, 2017).

Interculturality involves facilitating dialogue among diverse cultures and countering the tendency toward self-segregation (Ibanez & Saenz, 2006). It goes beyond merely accepting multiculturalism; it actively promotes interaction and dialogue between cultures (Ewijk, 2010). Additionally, it is essential to comprehend the everyday needs that arise between cultures, identify areas of dissonance, and engage in critical conversations (Kolapo, 2008).

Studies examining the impact of social media on cultural exchange have yielded diverse findings. Few studies (Chen, 2012; Gauntlett, 2011; Shuter, 2012; Pfister & Soliz, 2011) suggest that social media positively promotes cultural exchange. It enhances individuals' understanding of one another's cultures and contributes to the creation of a global culture by offering multimedia communication spaces enriched with images, videos, texts, and sounds. Additionally, it provides individuals with a platform to express themselves freely without restrictions.

In contrast, other studies (Bagdasaryan, 2011; Byam, 2010; Burgess, 2015; Curty & Zhang, 2012) argue that social media can create gaps between certain groups, even within the same culture, particularly between younger and older generations. It may also lead to superficial or shallow communication between cultures. While social media increases the amount of information

available, it often fails to foster a deeper awareness of global affairs. Furthermore, it can strengthen individuals' sense of belonging to their original cultures, which may generate resistance to cultural exchange and limit opportunities for cultural integration.

Alhuzami (2021) conducted a systematic literature review of previous studies focused on the impact of social media on cultural exchange. The review highlights the complexity of determining social media's role in cultural exchange. It can function as a catalyst for cultural exchange, a barrier to it, or simply reflect the existing level of cultural exchange within societies. More research is required to fully understand this impact. Therefore, this study examines how social media influences intercultural communication, specifically from the perspective of Omani university students. It aims to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do Omani university students use social media?
2. How does social media affect communication between diverse cultures from the perspective of Omani university students?
3. To what extent do Omani university students contribute to intercultural dialogue through social media?
4. What are the negative effects of using social media on intercultural communication as perceived by Omani university students?
5. Are there significant differences in the contributions of Omani university students to intercultural dialogue through social media based on gender and academic program?

Methodology

Participants

A total of Nine Hundred and Forty-Eight (948) university students participated in the study, drawn from three institutions in the Sultanate of Oman: Sultan Qaboos University (313, 33%),

Nizwa University (291, 30.7%), and A' Sharqiyah University (344, 36.3%). Of these participants, 612 were female (64.6%) and 336 were male (35.4%). The group comprised students from two academic levels: Bachelor's (637, 67.2%) and Postgraduate (311, 32.8%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 52 years, with an average age of 24.4 years and a standard deviation of 7.12. Participation was voluntary and facilitated by sharing a link to the study tools through email and social media.

Instruments

To meet the goals of the study, a comprehensive questionnaire was created to assess the effect of social media on intercultural communication, following a review of numerous prior studies and theoretical literature concerning intercultural dialogue and communication via social media, such as those by Gaitán-Aguilar (2022), Ni et al. (2020), Prakapienė and Prakapas (2016), and Wilson (2013). The questionnaire is divided into several sections:

The first part includes demographic information about the study participants, specifically their gender, university, and academic program.

Part Two contains seven questions regarding the social media usage habits of Omani university students. It focuses on the social media platforms they use most, the reasons for their usage, the amount of time spent daily (in hours), cultural aspects they have learned, the content they share most frequently, their most engaging content, and the additional cultures they have been exposed to.

Part Three comprises 11 statements regarding the impact of social media on intercultural interactions between various societies. Each statement was assessed using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree).

Part Four includes 19 statements that evaluate the level of involvement of Omani university students in intercultural

interactions through social media, categorized into four areas: participation and communication (11 statements), cultural sensitivity (4 statements), cultural adaptation (4 statements), and respect for differences. These statements also utilized a five-point Likert scale (Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree).

Part Five presents an open question regarding the disadvantages of social media in intercultural contexts. The scores for the third and fourth parts of the questionnaire were assigned as follows: (5) for strongly agree, (4) for agree, (3) for neutral, (2) for disagreement, and (1) for strongly disagreement. Therefore, the scoring for each item varies between (1-5). To evaluate the impact of social media on intercultural communication and the degree to which Omani university students engage in intercultural interactions through social media, the following scale was used: (1.00-1.80) very low, (1.81-2.60) low, (2.61-3.40) medium, (3.41-4.20) high, (4.21-5.00) very high.

The validity of the questionnaire was assessed by sharing it with a panel of experts in psychology and sociology. Some of the wording for specific items was adjusted based on the feedback provided by the reviewers. To establish internal validity, the corrected Pearson correlation coefficients were computed between the scores from the paragraphs and the overall questionnaire for the third and fourth sections, using 42 male and female students from the study community and those outside the final sample. The correlation coefficients ranged from 0.44 to 0.65, demonstrating that the items in the questionnaire possess strong validity. The reliability coefficient for internal consistency was computed using Cronbach's alpha for the third and fourth sections of the questionnaire, yielding values of (0.81 and 0.89) for the two sections, which are considered high-reliability coefficients.

Results

Question one: How extensively do university students in Oman utilize social media? Table 1 determines the frequencies and percentages of participants' answers regarding the questionnaire's level of usage (Part Two).

Table 1: To what degree do university students in Oman utilize social media?

Most used social media							
App	%	App	%	App	%	App	%
Tweeter	17	Instagram	70	WhatsApp	67	Facebook	2
Snapchat	47	TikTok	18	YouTube			29
Purposes of social media use							
Purpose	%	Purpose	%	Purpose	%	Purpose	%
Cultural	65	Scientific	39	Entertainment	83	Political	9
Sports	12	Commercial	29	Communication with relatives and friends			79
Daily usage (hours)							
Range	%	Range	%	Range	%	Range	%
1	2	1-2	11	3-4	40	5-6	31
6 & above	١٧						
Elements of the culture you learned							
Element	%	Element	%	Element	%	Element	%
Language	50	Dialects	47	Food	57	History	27
Values	35	Education	59	Fashion	49	Tourism	69
Marriage	19	Religious	24	Customs and Traditions	44	Arts	39
Traditions		Rituals					
Most shared content							
Content	%	Content	%	Content	%	Content	%
Videos	51	Photos	61	Texts	45	Emoticons	27
Most engaged content							
Content	%	Content	%	Content	%	Content	%
Videos	66	Photos	45	Texts	40	Emoticons	14
Most other cultures you learned							
Culture	%	Culture	%	Culture	%	Culture	%
Arab Asian	46	Arab African	15	European	27	American	17
Gulf	76	Asian non-Arab	19	African non-Arab	6		

Table 1 indicates that the social media platform most frequently utilized by Omani university students is Instagram at 70%, with WhatsApp following at 67%, and Facebook being the least used at 2%. The primary reasons for engaging with social media are entertainment at 83% and staying in touch with family and friends at 79%. The least common reason for using social media was for political purposes, accounting for only 9%. The findings also showed that the typical usage rate of university students falls between (3-4) hours daily at 40%. The cultural aspects they discover via social media include tourists (69%), education (59%), and food (57%). The least frequent element is Marriage traditions at 19%. The material they engage with and disseminate the most is video and reels, comprising 66% for interaction and 51% for sharing. The cultures they most frequently learn about via social media are Gulf culture at 76%, and then Arab Asian culture at 46%. The culture they identified with the least was the non-Arab African culture, at 6%.

Question two: What impact does social media have on cross-cultural communication? The means, standard deviations, percentages, and levels of the participants' answers to the questionnaire's "How to Influence" items (Part Three) were calculated. Table 2 displays the findings about how social media influences cross-cultural communication from the viewpoint of Omani university students.

Table 2. Extent do Omani university students use social media

How does social media affect communication between different cultures?					
Items	Mean	SD	%	Level	
Promoting dialogue between different communities	4.25	0.65	85.0	Very high	
Promoting learning between different communities	4.15	0.64	83.0	High	
Expressing ideas across cultures	3.77	0.81	75.4	High	
Breaking language barriers between different cultures	4.08	0.67	81.6	High	
Empathizing with the issues of other	4.34	0.72	86.8	Very	

communities				high
Understanding cultures more deeply	4.02	0.72	80.4	High
Sense of global community	4.02	0.74	80.4	High
Highlighting marginalized cultures	3.56	0.90	71.2	High
Appreciating and respecting other cultures	3.79	0.85	75.8	High
Exchanging customs and traditions between communities	4.02	0.70	80.4	High
Exchanging experiences between different cultures	4.19	0.64	83.8	High
Total	4.02	0.65	80.4	High

Table 3 indicates that Omani university students think social media plays a big part in cross-cultural contact and exchange. According to the study's evaluation criteria, the average response to the paragraphs discussing the degree of social media's influence on cross-cultural interactions was (4.02) with a percentage of 80.4%, which is regarded as high. The table makes it evident that social media plays a major role in fostering cultural exchange by fostering discussion and experience sharing, improving learning and experience sharing across nations and cultures, and fostering empathy for the problems faced by other communities.

Question Three: How much do Omani university students use social media to promote intercultural understanding? The participants' means, standard deviations, percentages, and levels of answers to the questionnaire's items on the extent of use were calculated (Part Four). Table 3 displays the findings regarding the degree to which Omani university students contribute to cross-cultural communication through social media.

Table 3. Contribution of Omani university students to intercultural via social media

Domain	Items	Mean	SD	%	Level
Participation and communication	Interact with people from different cultures	3.23	1.13	64.6	Med
	Participating in discussions on global issues	2.88	1.24	57.6	Med
	Actively participate in communities that bring together people from different cultures	2.62	1.15	52.4	Med
	Contribute positively to discussions and exchange ideas from my cultural perspective	3.15	1.13	63.0	Med
	Sharing content that reflects my culture	3.25	1.28	65.0	Med
	Actively contribute to the dissemination of information about my culture	3.22	1.16	64.4	Med
	Participate in conversations in multiple languages	2.86	1.26	57.2	Med
	Read about global news and cultural events	4.01	0.98	80.2	High
	Participate in and comment on news stories that include diverse cultural perspectives	3.08	1.14	61.6	Med
	Actively seek to build relationships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds	3.18	1.20	63.6	Med
	Participate in ongoing conversations and collaborate with people from different parts of the world	2.90	1.23	58.0	Med
Total		3.13	1.19	62.6%	Med
Cultural sensitivity	I am sensitive to cultural differences when interacting with others	4.09	1.14	81.8	High
	I use language that is insensitive	3.72	1.10	74.4	High

	to diverse cultural perspectives				
	I am culturally sensitive when sharing content	3.68	1.12	73.6	High
	I avoid using images that may be culturally sensitive or offensive	4.14	1.03	82.8	High
	Total	3.91	1.09	78.2	High
Adaptation to cultures	I deal with cultural differences in a respectful and constructive manner	4.03	1.07	80.6	High
	I seek to understand different points of view and avoid confrontational or disrespectful language	4.03	1.02	80.6	High
	I adapt my style to include different cultural norms	3.42	1.09	68.4	High
	I consider how cultural differences affect the interpretation of my comments	3.50	1.09	70.0	High
	Total	3.74	1.05	74.8	High

With a mean of 3.13 and a percentage of 62.6%, Table 3 demonstrates that Omani university students' involvement and communication contributions were mediocre. Building relationships with people from different cultures, sharing content, and publishing information that reflects the Sultanate of Oman's culture came in at a median level while reading international and cultural news at a high level were the highest areas of participation and communication. Communities, discussions, and conversations involving people from diverse cultural backgrounds had the lowest levels of engagement and communication. With a mean score of 3.91 and a percentage of 78.2%, the results showed that Omani university students pay close attention to cultural sensitivity when interacting with others

or posting on social media. With an arithmetic mean of 3.74 and a percentage of 74.8%, the table concludes that Omani university students can respect and adjust to diverse cultures.

Question Four: From the standpoint of Omani university students, what are the drawbacks of social media use for cross-cultural communication? The most common negatives in the study sample's answers were determined by classifying the participants' answers to the open-ended question on the drawbacks of using social media in cross-cultural interactions. Table 4 shows the most prominent negatives, their frequency of occurrence in the sample's responses, and their percentages.

Table 4. The most prominent negatives of social media in intercultural

Prominent negatives	Freq.	%
Showing a false stereotype about the culture of societies	209	22.0
Distorting the image of the culture of societies	336	35.4
Creating a gap in the culture of a country	124	13.1
Showing a different image of the reality of cultures and societies	235	24.8
Showing the negative behaviors of other societies	309	32.6
Forming a superficial understanding of the cultures of societies	149	15.7
Lack of contribution from relevant official institutions, which may give an unrealistic image of the culture of society	111	11.7

Despite the benefits previously highlighted in the findings of the second question, Table 5 presents a list of the most significant drawbacks of social media in terms of cross-cultural contact and trade. According to Omani university students, social media can occasionally disseminate electronic content that does not accurately represent a society's true culture. Additionally, it draws attention to harmful behaviors that are a part of every

civilization, yet doing so can occasionally result in the formation of cultural stereotypes that are not true. According to Omani university students, the lack of official institutions, such as the Ministries of Culture and Heritage, and the dependence on individuals, primarily social media celebrities, for cultural exchange, may result in an inaccurate portrayal of any nation's culture. Additionally, it occasionally provides a cursory rather than a thorough understanding of a nation's or society's culture.

Question Five: Do sex and academic programs significantly affect how Omani university students contribute to cross-cultural communication on social media? Using an independent sample t-test, participants' responses to their social media contributions to intercultural communication were compared by sex and academic program. The results of this question are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Independent sample t-test results

Domain	Variable	Category	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig	E.S (d)
Participation and communication	Sex	Male	3.29	0.69	4,16	946	0,001	0,34
		Female	3,03	0.79				
	Program	Bachelor's	3.10	0.77	1.14	946	0.191	0,09
		postgraduate	3.16	0,76				
Cultural sensitivity	Sex	Male	3.77	0,72	3.54	946	0.001	0,29
		Female	3.99	0,79				
	Program	Bachelor's	3.95	0,76	1.42	946	0,83	0,11
		postgraduate	3.86	0,78				
Adaptation to cultures	Sex	Male	3.72	0.66	0.53	946	0,304	0,04
		Female	3.75	0.82				
	Program	Bachelor's	3.83	0.74	3.20	946	0.001	0,25
		postgraduate	3.64	0.78				

According to Table 5, there are no statistically significant differences between undergraduate and graduate students in the domains of participation ($t = 1.14$, $df = 946$, $sig = 0.191$) and cultural sensitivity ($t = 0.53$, $df = 946$, $sig = 0.304$), nor are there any differences between males and females in the domain of cultural adaptation ($t = 0.53$, $df = 946$, $sig = 0.304$). The domains of cultural sensitivity ($t = 3.54$, $df = 946$, $sig = 0.001$) and

participation ($t = 4.16$, $df = 946$, $sig = 0.001$) showed statistically significant differences favoring female students and male students, respectively. Lastly, the program found statistically significant differences in Favor of undergraduate students in the cultural adaptation domain ($t = 3.20$, $df = 946$, $sig = 0.001$).

Discussion

The study's purpose was to ascertain how social media affects intercultural communication from the viewpoint of Omani college students. According to the findings, Instagram is the most widely used social media app, followed by WhatsApp, while Facebook is the least used. This might be a result of Instagram's abundance of video content, which is a popular way for young people to interact.

When it comes to sharing documents about the university education process, WhatsApp is a perfect way for students to communicate with one another. These findings aligned with data published by the website (Statista, 2024), which showed that Instagram and WhatsApp are the two most widely used social media platforms.

In terms of usage, communication with friends and family was the most popular goal, followed by entertainment. Due to their distance from their families and the necessity of communicating with them, university students typically concentrate on these two goals. The academic pressures that university students may encounter as a result of their studies may also lead them to seek out these forms of entertainment. These findings are in line with international data showing that communication with friends and family and entertainment are the two main motivations for using social media (Statista, 2024). The Gulf and Arab Asian cultures were the most familiar to Omani university students. This might be because the Sultanate of Oman study community and other Gulf and Arab Asian nations are close by in terms of geography, language, and

culture. The rate of familiarity with other cultures, as represented by European, American, and non-Arab African cultures, has decreased due to linguistic and cultural barriers.

The findings also showed that Omani university students think social media has a great influence on fostering understanding of other societies' problems and encouraging communication, experience sharing, and cross-cultural learning. This could be explained by the fact that social media offers more realistic content for other societies and is less censored than official media, which uses social media to develop a greater understanding of societal issues.

There is also a lot of room for discussion and involvement with these media. They might be less regulated and watched than other media, allowing people more freedom to share and express their opinions. Additionally, social media is a quick and efficient way for people from different societies to share experiences and skills. This finding is in line with the findings of numerous earlier studies that demonstrated the beneficial role of social media in cross-cultural communication, including Chen (2012), Gauntlett (2011), and Shuter (2012). About Omani university students' use of social media to promote cultural communication. Building relationships with people from different cultures, sharing content, and publishing information that reflects the Sultanate of Oman's culture came in at an average level while reading international and cultural news at a high level were the highest areas of participation and communication. Participation and communication in communities, conversations, and discussions involving people from various cultural backgrounds were the final areas. This could be explained by the study community's shared interests with social media users, the majority of whom are young. Language barriers that might make it difficult to communicate with people who do not speak Arabic as their first language could be the reason for the low level of

participation in discussions and conversations from various communities.

When interacting or posting on social media, Omani university students also demonstrated a high degree of cultural sensitivity, demonstrating their ability to adjust to and respect cultural differences. This could be explained by the characteristics of the study community, which is made up of college students who are cognizant of cultural differences and have the practical communication skills and abilities necessary to comprehend, value, and adjust to them. This finding is in line with earlier research (Burgess, 2015; Curty & Zhang, 2012), which showed that social media has caused gaps between members of the same culture, particularly between young people and the elderly. Furthermore, it permits shallow, surface-level cross-cultural communication.

Finally, the findings showed that men are more likely to engage in cross-cultural social media activity. This might be a result of their increased propensity to use these websites and their ability to use them to promote their nation's culture. Additionally, compared to women, they have more room to publish and share on social media. However, women were also more sensitive to cultural differences. When communicating, women typically keep the peace in the group and show concern for others. When communicating, men are typically more concerned with projecting an air of superiority, which they may demonstrate by acting without regard to other people's opinions (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022).

Additionally, according to Toussaint and Webb (2005), women are more empathetic and respectful of other people's feelings than men. Their awareness of cultural sensitivity when interacting on social media is indicative of this. Students pursuing bachelor's degrees also demonstrated an impressive capacity for cultural adaptation. Since they are younger than

graduate students and come from a generation that grew up with social media, they are better equipped to use these platforms and interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Statistics show that roughly 36% of social media users are between the ages of 18 and 29, in addition to the age similarity between undergraduate students and users from other cultures (Sproutsocial, 2024). Studies suggest that younger individuals can adapt to online communication tools and deal with other cultures (Anderson & Perrin, 2017; Quan-Haase et al., 2018; Hage).

Recommendations

Based on its findings, the study suggests emphasizing the value of social media use for academic purposes among Omani university students, as their percentage was low when compared to other uses. Additionally, it exhorts them to use social media platforms to promote the Sultanate of Oman culture further. It also highlights how the appropriate government agencies help disseminate society's culture via social media platforms rather than depending solely on individuals. The study also recommends carrying out comparable research on other societal groups and nations. Using social media platforms, it is feasible to investigate the variations in the level of intercultural contribution based on several demographic factors.

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