THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INTERCULTURAL FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT. Studying in a foreign country provides an opportunity for students from diverse cultural backgrounds to develop an intercultural friendship between each other. In today's increasingly digitalized society, the use of social media cannot be detached from any communication context, including intercultural communication. Previous studies have examined the use of social media in various settings of intercultural communication. This study aims to examine the use of social media in intercultural friendship development among foreign students in Kocaeli University, Turkey. Applying qualitative method, six foreign students who represent four different cultural backgrounds were interviewed in this study. The interview tried to explore their subjective experiences of using social media to develop an intercultural friendship with other foreign students in their surroundings. The study reveals various similarities and differences of the pattern, evaluation, and impact of using social media in intercultural friendship development. The study concludes that the use of social media tends to enhance the intercultural friendship development.
Keywords: social media, intercultural friendship development, foreign students

Abstrak. *Belajar di luar negeri memberikan kesempatan bagi siswa dari latar belakang budaya yang beragam untuk mengembangkan persahabatan antar antara satu sama lain. Dalam masyarakat yang semakin digital sekarang ini, penggunaan media sosial tidak bisa terlepas dari konteks komunikasi, termasuk komunikasi antar budaya. Penelitian sebelumnya telah meneliti penggunaan media sosial di berbagai pengaturan komunikasi antarbudaya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji penggunaan media sosial dalam pembangunan persahabatan antar kalangan mahasiswa asing di Kocaeli University, Turki. Menerapkan metode kualitatif, enam mahasiswa asing yang mewakili empat latar belakang budaya yang berbeda diwawancarai dalam penelitian ini. Wawancara mencoba mengeksplorasi pengalaman subjektif mereka menggunakan media sosial untuk mengembangkan persahabatan antar dengan mahasiswa asing lainnya di lingkungan mereka. Penelitian ini mengungkapkan berbagai persamaan dan perbedaan dari pola, evaluasi, dan dampak dari menggunakan media sosial dalam pembangunan persahabatan antar. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa penggunaan media sosial cenderung untuk meningkatkan pengembangan persahabatan antar.*
Kata Kunci: *Media sosial, Persahabatan Antar BudayaMahasiswa Asing*

INTRODUCTION

The advanced development of digital communication technology has assembled people from different parts of the world into a big setting of so-called globalization. This setting urges an increased importance of the study of intercultural communication in relation to the new media, which epitomizes the digital communication technology. The emergence of new media is often considered and perceived as dramatically altering the way we communicate. It has brought human interaction and society to a highly interconnected and complex level, but at the same time challenges the very existence of intercultural communication in its traditional sense (Chen, 2012: 1). Accordingly, many communication researchers have been attracted to conduct various studies examining the impact of new media on intercultural communication in many different settings. Intercultural communication, compared to any other communication context, is essentially unique in its complexity as it encompasses any importance of different cultural symbolizations and their exchanges across different societies. Any study of the impact of new media on intercultural communication should extend our understanding and capability to escalate the quality of our intercultural communications amid the increasingly globalized and digitalized society.

The study of intercultural communication, in particular, have spanned over different types of setting. However, researchers have paid scant attention to the setting of intercultural friendships, despite their clear importance and frequency in the increasingly multicultural world (Sias, Drzewiecka, Meares, Bent, Konomi, Ortega, & White, 2008: 1). At the same time, the study of intercultural friendships in relation with the growing new media has still been less examined.

Considering that intercultural friendship has gained more importance since our society become increasingly globalized and multi-culture, as well as that new media has dramatically changed the way we communicate, this present study aims to examine the use of social media, which is a form of new media, in intercultural friendship development. The participants of this study consist of six foreign students in Kocaeli University of Turkey who represent four different cultural backgrounds: Asia, Arab, Africa, and Europe. Examining the development of intercultural friendship among foreign students in Turkey can be said as increasingly important due to the increased number of foreign students coming to and studying in Turkey. Examining the use of social media in intercultural friendship development among foreign students is particularly considered as crucial because students, who are mostly youth, are at the forefront of communication technologies that are transforming social interactions in ways yet to be fully understood (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). An initial observation found that most of the foreign students in Kocaeli University befriended each other on social media, especially *Facebook,* and *Instagram*, as soon as they came to Turkey. The study focuses on seeking subjective experiences and perceptions of the participants in using social media to develop an intercultural friendship. Therefore, a qualitative method is applied

in this study. The examination is limited only to the intercultural friendship development among foreign students, not between foreign students and Turkish students.

A brief look at some previous studies on intercultural friendship may give a great contribution to this study. Li (2010) in her study of intercultural friendship development between Chinese and Americans found out that factors such as cultural differences, frequent contact, prior cultural experiences, needs, humor, and emphasizing similarities enhanced the intercultural friendship. A different study conducted by Sias, *et al.* (2008) examined intercultural friendship development, but on the basis of face-to-face interaction. Applying a qualitative method, the study revealed several developmental and communication factors that influenced intercultural friendship development among foreign students at a large Western university with the residents from the surrounding community. The developmental factors consisted of cultural similarities, cultural differences, prior intercultural experience, and targeted socializing. The communication factors consisted of language differences, humor, and play, as well as the creation of shared unique language. Chen (2006) in a different study examining intercultural friendship from the perspective of East Asian International students in the United States highlighted the crucial role of self-disclosure in the development of intercultural friendship as it evolves from superficial social relationship to intimate friendship.

Building a friendship with individuals from different cultures must always be a big challenge for every foreign student. Friendship requires not only an interest in the individual who is encountered but also a good communication and understanding among individuals involved in a friendship. Due to cultural differences, communication is not always easy and more efforts are necessarily required to achieve understanding. Various cultural groups have divergent meaning systems, making the exchanges of information more challenging and increasing the potential for misunderstanding, uncertainty, frustration, and conflict (Barnett & Lee, 2002). Intercultural friendship, however, is characterized by differences between individuals 'cultures that bring unique cultural knowledge and broaden their perspectives (Li, 2010: 11). Intercultural friendship is unique and complex in the sense that the individuals have to negotiate cultural differences as well as to perceive those differences as motivating rather than hindering them from the communication process.

Despite the lack of studies examining intercultural friendship development in relation to the new media, several studies below may give us a sufficient understanding about some relations between new media and intercultural communication in some different settings. Further, these previous studies may also become meaningful resources for the present study. Yum & Hara (2006) examined computer-mediated relationship development and compared it across culture. This study compared how participants from three different countries (The United States, Korea, and Japan) maintained self-disclosure to develop a relationship through computer-mediated communication (CMC). Applying a quantitative method, the results suggested some cross-cultural differences and similarities in the associations between self-disclosure and relationship qualities.

Despite the cross-cultural comparison, the study did not focus on the relationship between people from different cultures. A different study conducted by Croucher (2011) highlighted the impact of social networking sites on the cultural adaptation of immigrants. This study concluded that during cultural adaptation, the use of social networking sites affected immigrant's interactions with the dominant culture as well as immigrants' in-group communication. Another study conducted by Sawyer & Chen (2012), also examined the impact of new media on intercultural adaptation. Applying qualitative method to examine 10 international students in the northeastern region of the United States, this study showed that the participants tended to use social media to become more integrated to the host culture and to maintain connections to their home countries.

The use of social media to develop a relationship can be understood under the concept of computer-mediated communication (CMC). In its early development, CMC was argued by some researchers as lack of nonverbal cues and identity indicators such as class, gender, and ethnicity. Howard Reingold (1993, in Lengel, 2009: 544) particularly discussed the limitations of CMC in the intercultural context that relies heavily on nonverbal communication to express meaning, respect, and social hierarchy. Other researchers, on the other hand, saw such limitations as liberating. Instead of harming communication, the lack of cues and identity markers enhanced communication because it broke down barriers resulting from classism, racism, homophobia, and other social injustices (Lengel, 2009: 544). Susan Herring's conceptualization of 'social decontextualization' suggested that CMC neutralizes social status cues that might otherwise be transmitted by the form of the message (Lengel, 2009: 544). Herring also argued that CMC can equalize the social status of individuals because communication is emphasized on the content, rather than on the form of the message or the identity of the sender.

In the context of relationship development, Joseph Walter (in Griffin, 2012) through his *Social Information Processing Theory* suggested that social interaction and bonding established through CMC is not only possible but, given time, relationship development through CMC can equal face-to-face communication. Walther proposed four features of CMC that provide a rationale for his theory, they are verbal cues, extended time, *hyperpersonal* perspective, and the warranting value of information. As mentioned before, the focus of this study is to examine the use of social media in intercultural friendship development. To conduct the examination, three main research questions are raised as follows: How did the participants of this study use social media to develop an intercultural friendship? And How did the participants of this study perceive and evaluate the use of social media in intercultural friendship development? What are the impacts of social media use on face-to-face communication perceived by the participants of this study?

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study applies qualitative method. This method is useful to understand participants' experiences, allowing the interviewer to obtain in-depth responses to questions (McNamara, 2007). The qualitative method of conducting in-depth interview provides the study with

detailed information about participants' thoughts and perspectives on the use of social media in intercultural friendship development. The participants consist of six foreign students representing four different cultural backgrounds: Asia, Arab, Africa, and Europe, with the composition of three male students and three female students. One Indonesian male student and one Filipino female student represent Asian cultural background. One Bahraini female student represents Arabic cultural background. One Ugandan male student and one Sudanese female student represent African cultural background. Last but not least, one Russian male student represents European cultural background. The Indonesian male student and Ugandan male student came to Turkey in 2014, the rest came in 2015. The age of the participants ranged from 23 – 26 years old. All of the participants reported that their experiences in Turkey are not the first time of them encountering different cultures. They already had prior experiences with different cultures either in their home countries or in other countries they have visited before coming to Turkey. The participants are recruited randomly based on initial observations applying some criteria: 1.) active user of social media, 2.) frequently posting/ sharing information on social media, 3.) relatively frequent in tagging other foreign students in their posts on social media, as well as commenting other foreign students' posts.

Data collection is conducted through an in-depth interview. The interview questions are designed based on units of analysis derived from Walther's *Social Processing Information Theory*. The interview questions are designed as open questions to allow the participants explore their thoughts and perspectives based on

their subjective experiences. The interviews have been conducted in informal friendly situations allowing participants to give truthful and honest responses. The interview results are analyzed through constant comparison approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The interview transcripts are read, reread, and compared in order to identify the recurring themes that emerged from the participants' responses to the questions. These recurring themes are then examined to determine their connection to the three research questions. The findings from the analysis are presented below.

Before presenting the findings pertaining to how the participants of this study use social media in intercultural friendship development, below I present the findings of the participants' motivations and difficulties of communicating with other foreign students in initial encounters.

Despite the cultural background differences, all of the participants were generally motivated to know and befriend other foreign students in their surroundings. They all admitted that cultural background differences between foreign students were not a serious problem in developing friendship and communication. All of the female participants, who are from The Philippines, Bahrain, and Sudan, said that the cultural differences, indeed; motivated them to learn more about other foreign students' cultures and countries. They all thought that learning about other cultures was always interesting. The Sudanese participant in particular, who liked watching Korean drama, was excited because she could learn more about Korea and its culture directly from her Korean friends. She stated, *"I learned many things about South Korea from them more than from the television. I can see directly how*

they do their things".

The male participants from Indonesia and Uganda explained that they did not have any problem to communicate with other foreign students. Both of them admitted that they got used to meet different people. The Indonesian participant stated that he had a relatively high curiosity about many things, so it was never a problem for him to start a conversation with other foreign students. The Ugandan participant reported that he basically liked making friends and previously was friend with people from other countries for 6 – 7 years on social media. The Russian male participant gave a bit different statement. He stated that he did not have any problem to communicate with other male foreign students regardless their cultural backgrounds, but had a bit difficulties to communicate with female foreign students. He reported that back to his home country, he studied in a gender-based senior high school where male and female students were separated in different buildings. He thought that it still affected the way he communicated with female students.

Despite the motivation to learn about other foreign students' countries and cultures, all of the participants except the Sudanese participant admitted that they experienced some kinds of anxiety in some initial encounters with other foreign students, such as anxiety of saying inappropriate things, misunderstanding, as well as uncertainty about other foreign students' attitudes. The Indonesian participant explained that, although he had a high curiosity about many things, he tended to avoid conversations with foreign students from some certain countries due to his uncertainty about their attitudes. *"There are friends from some certain countries with whom I am a bit difficult to communicate. I have no idea if they are*

stubborn or know-it-all persons. I actually like talking with friends but myself also automatically select whom I can talk with", he explained. Quite similar to the Indonesian participant, the Ugandan participant reported that, while he felt freer when talking with foreign students from Asia and Europe, he worried that he might be offending when dealing with foreign students from more conservative countries like Arabic countries. All of these participants admitted that they preferred not to ask too many questions in initial encounters in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Different from other participants, the Sudanese participant explained that she did not experience any uncertainty or anxiety even in the initial encounters with other foreign students because she perceived that all of the foreign students were in the same situation of being in a foreign country and far away from their families. As she explained, *"I feel they are just like my family because they are in the same situation with me. So I don't find that it is too hard to deal with them. We are just like a family, I don't feel any border."*

All of the participants admitted that with time they got closer with other foreign students, some even became their close friends. However, they reported that they actually did not meet other foreign students every day. Communicating on social media became a complement to their face-to-face communication, especially when they could not see each other in physical encounters. Below are the findings of the study pertaining to the participants' use of social media in intercultural friendship development with other foreign students in Kocaeli University. The findings are divided into three classifications based on the connections between the research questions and the

recurring themes emerged from the participants' responses to the questions.

Patterns of the Social Media Use in Intercultural Friendship Development

The patterns intended in this classification consist of the participants' motivations to communicate with other foreign students on social media, social media platforms used frequently by the participants, and how the participants use the social media platforms to communicate with other foreign students.

Participants reported various motivations of why they communicated with other foreign students on social media. The first motivation is to facilitate communication when face-to-face interactions could not be made up due to various reasons. The participants from Bahrain, the Philippines, Sudan, and Uganda said that they communicated with other foreign students on social media because they were not always able to meet each other in face-to-face interactions. The Ugandan participant explained, *"For example, I have some friends who stay in different dormitories. When we first came here, we wanted to meet. But I did not know how to move from my dormitory, he also did not know how to move from his dormitory. So the only way to talk was on social media."* The Russian participant said that he did not have every foreign students' phone number, so it was easier for him to reach them on social media.

The second motivation is to find more information about other foreign students. This motivation was expressed by the Filipino participant as she explained, *"When I know them and they give me their social media accounts, I will definitely look at their social media profiles. We can trace information about them by looking at what they are doing on social media."*

The third motivation is to show friendly intentions to other foreign students. This motivation was expressed by the Indonesian and Russian participants. According to the Indonesian participant, he could show his friendly intentions to other foreign students on social media for example by giving likes to post or photos they shared on social media. He explained, *"I know some foreign students on social media whom I rarely meet in face-to-face interaction. But whenever they post something on social media, I always give likes. Because I worry if I don't like their posts, they might think I have issues with them."* The Russian participant had a different idea of showing friendly intentions on social media. According to him, he would have more chances to help other foreign students if they communicate on social media because every foreign student could be easily reached on social media.

Various responses also came out pertaining to the frequently used social media platforms and how each of those platforms was used by the participants. All of the participants generally used *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Whatsapp* more frequently than other social media platforms. They all agreed that *Facebook* is the platform where they could share general and useful information such as news and articles of any kind, as well as funny jokes. Besides that, on *Facebook* they also shared photos of their personal moments and experiences. Sometimes they also tagged other foreign students in their photos or posts they shared. Since *Instagram* allows its users only to share photos and short videos, the participants also used *Instagram* mostly to share their personal photos.

Different from using *Facebook* and *Instagram*, most of the participants

used *Whatsapp* as an instant messaging platform to send more personal and important message with specific topics such as school-related or private messages, including personal photos. The Ugandan participant commented, *"Whatsapp is more specific. Facebook is more general but Whatsapp is pointing to specific things."* The Indonesian participant said that *Whatsapp* is a more private platform to communicate with closer friends because this platform requires the users to know other peoples' phone numbers. Different from five other participants, the Bahraini participant used *Whatsapp* just like she used facebook. *"I send them a message on Whatsapp from general to private information"*, she said. Generally, all of the female participants were more flexible in using *Whatsapp*. They used *Whatsapp* not only to send important messages but also to have small talks with other foreign students.

Evaluation of the Social Media Use in Intercultural Friendship Development

There are generally positive and negative evaluations perceived by the participants in using social media to develop an intercultural friendship with other foreign students. The participants expressed these evaluations in various ways. In addition, there are also some conditions that were perceived differently by the participants, but not in negative or positive manners.

The positive evaluations show some potential factors that are likely to increase the intercultural friendship development between the participants with other foreign students. Firstly, since social media enables people to share any kind of information, the participants perceived that through social media they could find more

information about other foreign students. They also thought that they might not know such information if they did not communicate with them on social media. The Ugandan participant reported, *"I got much information about their own countries, because when interacting face-to-face, people do not talk much about their countries and also about their friends back home. In face-to-face interaction, people choose to talk about what currently available."* The Bahraini participant gave a similar response with the addition that from what her foreign friends shared on social media, she could find similarities between them. She explained,

"Sometimes I know something about them only from social media and maybe I will never know in real life because we do not even talk about it. It makes me know more about them, for example their cultures. Sometimes I know that we like something in common. It is easier to find something in common on social media."

Secondly, since the participants shared and sent mostly written information or messages on social media, they perceived that they could perform more positive information or messages as they had more time to manage the information or messages they wanted to share. They also perceived that this advantage helped them to minimize misunderstanding especially when dealing with sensitive issues. One of the examples was expressed by the Filipino participant as she explained,

"I always think and rethink if I want to post something on facebook, comment, and also reply message. When it comes to public posts I choose to give normal comments. My comments are always the general idea that everybody can

have. We should be careful on social media. We should consider if our posts are important or have a bad effect or not."

Thirdly, since the information or messages that they shared on social media were well-managed, the participants reported that they gained more positive responses from other foreign students. Some examples of this evaluation were expressed by the Indonesian and Sudanese participants. The Indonesian participant said, *"They often respond what I shared on social media positively. They are very nice."* While the Sudanese participant reported that besides gaining positive responses, she also gave positive responses to her foreign friends, *"Yes when I post something, they give me positive comments, sometimes they like. I also love to use liking and loving features on facebook to respond their posts. I will like some posts, I will love some posts, it depends on the post."*

Fourthly, the participants perceived that social media helped them to talk about certain issues which were rather difficult to be conveyed in face-to-face communication. One of the examples was expressed by the Bahraini participant as she explained, *"Sometimes few things are really hard to be said when face-to-face. Like I do not have the courage to say it when face-to-face. So it is more comfortable to say it on social media."* The Russian participant was even generally more confident to communicate on social media, as he explained, *"In face-to-face I am shyer. On social media, I am not really shy because on social media I do not really feel people's emotion. But when face-to-face I see and feel people's emotion."*

Fifthly, the participants perceived that social media help them to get closer with other foreign students. The Filipino

participant said that conversation on social media served bonding since they could easily find each other and talked on social media. The Bahraini participant perceived similarly as she explained, *"There are some friends I became close to because we communicate on social media. They talk more and greet me very often on social media. They also sent me random things."*

Besides all of the above positive evaluations, there are also some conditions that were evaluated differently by the participants. Some participant evaluated certain conditions positively while the other participants evaluated negatively.

The first evaluation is related to the time issue of social media. The participants agreed that there are various kinds of time issue on social media such as the delayed time of message being sent and also the late reply from the people to whom the message was sent. The Bahraini, Indonesian, Ugandan, and Russian participants reported that they did not take the time issue as a serious problem.

They did not mind if their messages were replied lately by their foreign friends. One example is reported by the Russian participant, *"They might be busy. On social media, they can just reply my messages anytime when they are not busy. It is not really a problem for me, maybe they have problems or they are busy."* However, the three of them would call their friends if they sent important messages but their friends did not immediately reply their messages. On the other hand, the Filipino and Sudanese participants admitted that they had a bit negative feeling when their messages were not immediately replied by their friends. The Filipino participant explained, *"For me, it is actually a barrier. Sometimes I thought maybe they do not want to talk to me."* The Sudanese participant thought

there might be a problem with the internet connection, as she explained, *"This is the problem with social media. When you have an internet connection, you can receive and reply message immediately. When we do not have an internet connection, we cannot use our social media."*

The second evaluation is related to the trustworthiness of other foreign students' posts on social media, particularly when it comes to inappropriate posts. The Bahraini, Filipino, and Russian participants reported that they did not take it seriously when they saw inappropriate posts from other foreign students. They thought that such posts were kind of personal choice. On the other hand, inappropriate posts from other foreign students might affect the perceptions of the Indonesian and Ugandan participants. The Ugandan participant, in particular, explained, *"Most of the time I believe what they shared on social media. Because they cannot post something that does not reflect themselves, although it is not 100% of that reflection."* Differently, the Russian participant commented, *"On social media, anyone can just wear a 'mask'. He or she might take stuff from anywhere and use it to show themselves on social media."*

In addition to the positive and negative evaluations, there are also some conditions of which the participants perceived in different manners. These conditions, however, are not evaluated as positive or negative. The differences are based on each participants' personal reasons.

The first condition is related to the use of *emojis* when communicating on social media with other foreign students. All of the female participants perceived that using *emojis* was necessary on social media communication because it showed their expressions and enlivened the conversations. The Bahraini participant, in particular, commented that *emojis* was the most important of communication on social media as she explained, *"Emojis are the most important part. For me, if there is no emojis, I won't use Whatsapp or other social media because there will be nothing. With emoji, I can see people's expression. If people do not use emojis it becomes so boring, like they have no expressions."* On the other hand, all of the male participants perceived that using emojis was not really important in social media communication due to several reasons. The Indonesian participant said that using *emojis* caused him took more time in typing the messages. The Ugandan participant reported that he only used a very few of *emojis* when communicating only with close friends. While the Russian participant perceived that he did not really use *emojis* because he basically did not really like expressing his emotions to other people.

The second condition is related to the number of mutual friends on social media. The condition intended in this context is whether or not the number of mutual friends shared on social media affected the participants to accept a friend request from other foreign students, as well as to send a friend request to other foreign students on social media. All of the participants agreed that when it came to accepting friend requests, they considered the number of mutual friends as a quite important factor. One example was explained by the Ugandan participant,

"If someone sends me a friend request, especially if I don't know him or her, then I will check if we have mutual friends. If we have, then how many they are. Then I will check do I know them. Because if he or she is stranger and I do not know any of our mutual friends, I

will not accept it."

Differently, when it came to sending friend requests, they did not really consider the importance of the number of mutual friends. One example was reported by the Sudanese participant, *"I do not consider if we have mutual friends or not, even if we study in different university, it does not matter for me. If I want to be their friend, I will send them a friend request."*

The third condition is related to sharing personal issues and solving problems. Except the Indonesian participant, all of them agreed that to solve problems and share personal issues, it was necessary for them to see directly their friends' facial expressions and emotions so that they could predict precisely if the problems were already solved or their personal issues were understood well. One example was explained by the Sudanese participant, *"I prefer to solve problems and share my personal issues through face-to-face because I can know their feeling. I can see their expression and I will know exactly the things of the problems. On social media, I cannot understand clearly. So for me it is better to solve problems and share personal issues through face-to-face."* Differently, the Indonesian participant commented that there was no difference between sharing personal issues on social media and in face-to-face communication, as long as he shared it with his close friends and through private social media like *Whatsapp*.

The fourth condition is communicative attitude or behavior in online groups of social media. All of the participants reported that they joined some online groups of foreign students. All of them admitted that they were generally passive when it came to communicating in online groups, although the groups were comprised of only international students. The Indonesian participants, however, reported that sometimes he could actively join the conversation if it was in English. When the conversation was in Turkish or another language of some students with similar nationality, for example, Arabic students, he said he could not follow the conversation and by that time he became passive. The same statement was also said by the Ugandan participant who could not follow the conversation in the group when the members started using language that he did not understand.

Regardless of the positive or negative evaluations, as well as differences in perceiving some conditions, all of the participants agreed that by communicating with other foreign students on social media, they gained more information about those other foreign students. It helped them in predicting other foreign students' characters, attitudes, and behaviors. One example is said by the Indonesian participant, *"Social media is very useful for me. I think I know more about my friends from social media, so I got to know what kind of person they are."*

All of the participants also had similar expectations of future interactions. By communicating on social media, they hoped that they would be able to maintain their friendship with other foreign students even after graduated from the university and they have to go back to their home countries.

Impacts of the Social Media Use on Face-to-face Communication in Intercultural Friendship Development

The analysis reveals two different impacts of the social media use on face-to-face communication perceived by the participants. The first impact is generally

positive and enhances the intercultural friendship development. On the other hand, the second impact is perceived differently by the participants. However, it does not impact the intercultural friendship development in any negative way.

The first impact is that the use of social media provides topics for face-to-face communication. It generally enhanced the intercultural friendship development in a positive way. The participants reported that their face-to-face conversations with other foreign students were quite often inspired by information they found on social media. The Sudanese participant gave an example of her experience,

"When I saw something on facebook and I tagged my friends, later we would talk about it when we met face-to-face. Sometimes when they found something they told me that they would tag me. Sometimes we found a photograph on facebook when we were talking together and we would talk about it. If we did not check facebook, we would not find any photograph that we could talk about."

Meanwhile, the Indonesian participant perceived that he gained appreciations of the photos he shared on social media when he met his foreign friends in face-to-face interaction. Those appreciations were not only from his closer friends but also from other foreign students who were not really close to him in face-to-face interaction. He explained,

"On social media, both my close friends and those who are not really close to me always like my photos that I shared. When we met face-to-face, both of them always said that my photos on Instagram were always nice. So it is like, social media makes me talk with friends, even with whom I am not really close to."

The second impact is that the use of social media generates participants' perceptions of other foreign students' personalities performed on social media and in face-to-face interactions. The Bahraini, Indonesian, Ugandan, and Russian participants perceived that other foreign students performed similar personalities both on social media and in face-to-face interactions. The Ugandan participant, for example, thought that communication on social media and in face-to-face complemented each other so that he got a clearer understanding of their foreign friends. In this way, what they saw on social media validated what they saw in face-to-face interactions. On the other hand, the Filipino and Sudanese participants perceived that some of the foreign students performed different personalities on social media and in face-to-face interactions. Although it actually invalidated what they saw on social media, it did not affect their perceptions of other foreign students in a negative way. Instead, the Sudanese participant sometimes became more curious to know more about their foreign friends in face-to-face interactions. She explained,

"Some of them show something different on social media and in face-to-face interactions. For me, it is not that they are bad, but maybe they are shy to show those things in face-to-face interactions. For example, I have a close friend from Yemen. When face-to-face, she is very quiet. But on social media, she writes amazing posts. Every time when she posts something on social media, I always want to read it. My other friend from Russia, she is also very quiet when face-to-face, but on social media, she likes to post handicraft that she made.

One day I asked her to teach me doing it."

CONCLUSION

The findings indicates various factors and impacts of social media use in developing an intercultural friendship. Several similarities and differences of the participants' evaluations of the social media use in developing intercultural friendship were also found in this study. In this chapter, the findings are discussed within the scope of Walther's *Social Information Processing Theory*. As has been explained before, there are four key features of this theory: verbal cues, extended time, *hyperpersonal* perspective, and the warranting value of information. The discussion attempts to find if the findings either confirm or contradict those four key features.

The advanced development of social media enables the users to share not only text-based messages but also pictures, videos, and *emojis*. Walther believed that CMC users can adapt to restricted text-based verbal message and use it effectively to develop a close relationship through self-disclosure and verbal warmness (Griffin, 2012). The enhanced features of social media seem to increase the effectiveness of relationship development among CMC users. In this study, the findings revealed how the participants used social media and perceived several advantages for intercultural friendship development. The enhanced features of social media enable the participant to disclose themselves through sharing information, personal experiences, and even personal issues. At the same time, they also gained responses of their self-disclosure and could give

responses to other foreign students' self-disclosures. Just like in face-to-face communication, self-disclosure plays an important role in the continuity of social media communication. The specific advantage of self-disclosure on social media is, the users can freely disclose themselves through sharing any kind of information from general to personal level. The participants of this study were benefited as they gained much information about their foreign friends from social media. It helped them to determine the personalities of their foreign friends. At the same time, they also gained and gave mostly positive responses when communicating on social media. Self-disclosure, in combination with positive responses that show warmness, can be considered as fostering the intercultural friendship development. At this point, the findings of the study seem to enrich Walther's notion of the effectiveness of verbal cues in the development of relationship among CMC users.

The needs of easy communication, gaining more information about friends, and showing friendly intentions to other foreign students were found as the participants' motivations of communicating on social media. The participants perceived that social media facilitated them to acquire those needs. They found social media as helpful platforms for communication and interaction because they did not always have time and chances to meet in face-to-face interactions. On social media, they could communicate anytime and anywhere without necessarily seeing each other. The findings confirmed Walther's notion of extended time in CMC. He argued that extended time is a crucial variable in CMC. Over an extended period, the issue is not the amount of social information that can be conveyed online; rather, it's the rate at

which that information mounts up. The limited time for face-to-face interaction hindered them from having frequent communication with other foreign students. But with the help of social media, the participants had more time and chances to communicate with other foreign students and also to show friendly intentions to them. Furthermore, by constantly accessing their social media, they were also constantly exposed by what other foreign students shared. This was how they gained more information about other foreign students.

The third feature of Walther's *Social Information Processing theory* is *hyperpersonal* perspective. Walther used the term *'hyperpersonal'* to claim that CMC relationships are often more intimate than those developed when partners are physically together. *Hyperpersonal* perspective is developed because CMC users have the ability to perform selective self-presentation since they may plan, contemplate, and edit what they want to share on social media, more mindfully and deliberatively than they can in more spontaneous and simultaneous talk. Besides that, CMC users also tend to give positive rather than negative feedback when communicating on social media. The findings of this study strongly confirmed this notion. As has been explained before, the participants tended to be more careful in sharing information and giving comments to other foreign students' posts on social media. The findings indicated that communication on social media, compared to face-to-face communication, facilitated the participants to perform more positive information and feedback, which could lead to the positive development of intercultural friendship.

The warranting value of information conceptualized by Walther in his theory refers to reasons to believe that information is accurate typically because the target of the information cannot manipulate it. It can be also considered as the perceived validity of the information presented online with respect to illuminating someone's offline characteristics. The findings of this study did not fully confirm this notion. Some participants could easily believe what other foreign students' showed about themselves on social media. Some other participants did not even really care if what other foreign students' showed on social media was truth or lie. On the other hand, some participants considered that face-to-face interaction was also important for them to determine the truth of what other foreign students' showed on social media, for example, their personalities.

Despite the fact that cultural background differences encouraged the participants to communicate with other foreign students in order to know more about their cultures, the analysis indicated that when it came to communication on social media, personal similarities became a priority and a determining factor of the continuity of the communication on social media. The participants emphasized that they would prefer to talk more with foreign students who shared similar interests with them.

Based on the findings and the discussion, despite some negative evaluations perceived by some of the participants, this study concludes that the use of social media generally tends to enhance the development of intercultural friendship development. However, this study does not intend to generalize if social media always enhances intercultural friendship development. Further research is necessary to find if there is any decreasing effect of the social media use in

intercultural friendship development.

Finally, the limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, only six foreign students were interviewed in this study. Interviewing a larger number of students with more diverse cultural backgrounds would be beneficial in generating a greater understanding of intercultural friendship development. Second, although this study found differences and similarities of participants' evaluations in using social media, this study did not explore any further why these differences and similarities emerged. Future research may explore this issue to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the social media use in intercultural friendship development.

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