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The Role of Social Media in Developing Intercultural Competence

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	This phenomenology study employs interviews into 10 undergraduated students of English education program at IAIN Parepare as participants. This research aims 1) to explore the experiences of the students regarding the usage of social media to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, and 2) to investigate how the use of social media contributes into development of students' intercultural competence. The findings display that utilizing social media plays an important role in exposing students to the numerous cultural practices and traditions, thereby improving their knowledge and recognition of various cultures. Students described learning about various cultural celebrations and customs through communication in social media. Furthermore, social media facilitates them adapt their communication effectively when interacting with people from different cultures, maintaining improved sensitivity and awareness into cultural variations. The students emphasized the significance of understanding cultural distinction and avoiding misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. However, this research still perceives few limitations including a small sample size and potential for self-reporting bias, indicating the necessity in validating and advancing upon these insights for further studies.

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INTRODUCTION

In brand new interconnected and globalized global, intercultural competence has gained extensive interest as a critical ability for individuals to navigate diverse cultural contexts effectively. Intercultural competence refers to the capacity to understand, communicate, and engage successfully with humans from exclusive cultural backgrounds (Akharraz, 2021). It includes having the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes important to engage in respectful and meaningful pass-cultural interactions. developing intercultural competence is specifically relevant for undergraduate college students, as they prepare to go into a globalized staff and have interaction with individuals from various cultural backgrounds (Avgousti, 2018).

With the appearance of virtual technologies, social media platforms have become prominent equipment for communication, information sharing, and constructing digital groups (Sekarsari & Wijayanto, 2024). In 2020, the common daily time spent by way of global customers on social media reached 2,24 hours, which became one of the highest intervals in comparison to nearly some other form of media (Tuten, 2023). these platforms provide precise opportunities for intercultural interactions, allowing people to connect with people from exclusive cultural backgrounds globally. As an end result, social media has the capability to play a great function in facilitating the improvement of intercultural competence among undergraduate students.

Winda Monika, in her research, had explored about the Role of Social Media on Intercultural

Communication Competences which primarily focuses on the motivations of individuals using different social media platforms for intercultural communication (Monika et al., 2020). However, it does not extensively explore the specific intercultural competence outcomes or skills that are developed through social media use. Thus, it is crucial to investigate the specific aspects of intercultural competence, such as cultural knowledge, intercultural sensitivity, or communication strategies, that can be fostered through social media interactions among undergraduate students.

Additionally, previous studies examine the influence of popular social media platforms on cross-cultural communication abilities, specifically investigating foreign students in Japan, including those enrolled at Kyoto University and Tsukuba University (Monika et al., 2020). Therefore, conducting research on how social media affects the enhancement of intercultural competence in undergraduate students at IAIN Parepare is important. This will provide insight into how social media can influence intercultural competency in a different cultural environment. The fresh research will address gaps in studies by exploring how social media enhances intercultural skills among students, providing a more detailed understanding of its influence on growth in a specific academic environment.

Moreover, investigating the challenges and opportunities associated with social media use in intercultural contexts is crucial for addressing potential pitfalls and maximizing the benefits of incorporating social media into educational practices (Weller, 2016). It is important to identify the factors that influence students' engagement with social media for intercultural interactions, their attitudes towards the integration of social media in intercultural learning, and the perceived impact of social media on their intercultural competence.

By exploring the role of social media in developing intercultural competence among students, we can contribute to the existing body of knowledge on intercultural communication and digital media in education (Álvarez Valencia & Fernández Benavides, 2019). This research will provide valuable insights into the experiences, perspectives, and practices of undergraduate students in utilizing social media platforms for intercultural interactions. The findings will inform educators and policymakers in designing effective educational interventions that leverage social media to enhance students' intercultural competence and prepare them for an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

The research questions are an essential element of the research because they lead and frame the process of the research. In accordance with the background, this research elaborates with the following research questions: 1) How are the experiences od the Students regarding the use of social media to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds?, 2) How does the use of social media by the students contribute to the development of their intercultural competence?

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a phenomenology study (19). In investigating 'The Role of Social Media in Developing Intercultural Competence', the study begins by selectively identifying participants based on criteria encompassing their social media usage, intercultural experiences, and academic engagement. A meticulously crafted interview protocol, consisting of open-ended question, facilitates comprehensive discussions about their social media practices, experiences in intercultural interactions fostered by these platforms, perceived influences on their intercultural competency, and encountered challenges. Through one-on-one interviews with chosen participants, qualitative data was collected, allowing for a nuanced exploration of individual perceptions and experiences (20).

This research was conducted at the English Education Department in IAIN Parepare. IAIN Parepare is an Islamic higher education institution located in Parepare, a city in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The population for this study comprises undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language Education program at IAIN Parepare, chosen for their involvement in language learning and potential for cross-cultural interactions in academic and social contexts. From this population, a purposive sampling method will be employed to select a sample of 10 individuals with experience using social media for cross-cultural interactions (21).

The primary research instrument for this study was unstructured interview approach (22). Participants were engaged in open-ended discussions about their experiences with social media and how it influences their intercultural competence. These interviews explored various dimensions of intercultural understanding, including knowledge acquisition, skill development, cultural awareness, and sensitivity to cultural differences. In this research, the researcher employed an interactive model for data analysis, which was developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. The model encompasses several steps, including data collection reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (23).

In this research, the research paradigm employed is constructivism. This paradigm views reality as a construction or product of human beings themselves (24). The constructivist paradigm sees the reality of social life not as natural reality, but as formed through construction. Therefore, the focus of analysis in the constructivist paradigm is to discover how events or realities are constructed, and in what ways these constructions are formed (25).

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RESULTS

In this section, the focus was on exploring how social media platforms contribute to the intercultural experiences and competence development of undergraduate students at IAIN Parepare. Students Experiences in Using social media to Interact with Individuals from Different Cultural Backgrounds

Platforms Used for Interaction

Based on interviews with 10 students, it was found that the use of social media to interact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds is predominantly through platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Discord, and Twitter. Each platform offers different features that facilitate cultural exchange through visual content, direct conversations, and group discussions, enhancing students' understanding and engagement in intercultural interactions. Thus, the use of various platforms provides diverse avenues for students to engage in intercultural interactions through social media.

Benefit Found

Based on the interview data, many students expressed that using social media allows them to learn first-hand about various cultures worldwide. For example, participant I explained,

"Social media has been a valuable tool for me to explore and learn about diverse cultures. Through platforms like Instagram and YouTube, I've immersed myself in the traditions, cuisines, and lifestyles of people from around the world."

By observing and engaging with such content, students deepen their understanding of cultural norms, values, and practices that may differ from their own culture. This reflects how visual platforms like Instagram provide direct insights into global cultural diversity, enriching their cross-cultural learning experiences.

Students also reported that using social media enhances their communication skills, especially in cross-cultural contexts. One participant mentioned,

"Social media has greatly helped me develop intercultural communication skills. I've learned to speak more politely and respectfully when communicating with friends from various cultures on WhatsApp."

These responses underscore how social media serves as a platform for enhancing communication skills across cultural boundaries. Participants highlight learning to adjust their communication styles to be more respectful and effective in diverse contexts. They also note gaining awareness of cultural sensitivities, which is crucial for fostering successful intercultural communication.

Social media not only enhances communication skills but also promotes awareness and understanding of cultural diversity. As participant H reflected,

"It's helped me learn how to communicate better with people from different backgrounds. I've become more aware of cultural sensitivities."

This sentiment highlights the educational value of social media in fostering sensitivity towards cultural differences. Through interactions on platforms like Instagram and Twitter, individuals gain exposure to diverse viewpoints and cultural practices, expanding their understanding of global perspectives. Despite uncertainties expressed by some participants about translating online communication skills into face-to-face interactions, these experiences significantly enhance interpersonal communication skills and promote cultural sensitivity in global interactions.

Challenges Faced

Navigating language barriers is a common challenge in cross-cultural interactions on social media. As participant E expressed,

"Language can be tricky sometimes, but I use translation tools and ask for clarification when needed."

Another participant shared,

"Language barriers have been tough. I try to use translation tools, but sometimes get lost, and it's hard to deliver my thoughts accurately."

These sentiments highlight the complexities of relying on translation tools to bridge linguistic gaps. Despite these obstacles, efforts to improve communication strategies help build stronger intercultural connections.

Cultural misunderstandings often arise during online interactions as well. As participant H reflected,

"One of the biggest challenges I've faced is cultural misunderstandings. For example, during a discussion about gender roles with friends from Malaysia, there were moments of miscommunication due to differences in cultural perspectives. To overcome this, I approached the conversation with humility, asked clarifying questions, and tried to understand their cultural context better."

These experiences highlight the need for patience, empathy, and open dialogue to bridge cultural gaps and foster mutual respect.

Social media also portrays stereotypical views of cultures, leading to limited and sometimes inaccurate representations. As participant A pointed out,

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"One of the biggest challenges I've faced when interacting with individuals from different cultures via social media is the limited cultural representation. Social media often portrays a stereotypical view of cultures."

This can hinder meaningful connections and perpetuate stereotypes. Promoting diverse and authentic cultural representations can help users engage in more genuine and respectful interactions, fostering a more culturally sensitive digital environment. The Contribution of Social Media Use to the Development of Students' Intercultural Competence.

Knowledge Development

The use of social media significantly contributes to students' intercultural competence by exposing them to diverse cultures through platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Participant H noted,

"I feel my knowledge about other cultures has grown through social media interactions. For example, I learned about Eid Fitri celebrations from my friend's Instagram posts, which deepened my understanding and appreciation of their culture."

These interactions provide both factual information and personal insights, enriching students' understanding of cultural nuances and fostering a more empathetic worldview.

Social media also enhances students' communication skills, as Participant C highlighted, "I've learned to adjust my communication style to connect authentically with people from diverse backgrounds." This adaptability in communication helps students navigate cultural differences sensitively, fostering meaningful intercultural exchanges.

Skill Improvement

Participants recognize social media's role in improving their communication skills across cultures. Participant A mentioned,

"I now adjust my communication style when interacting with friends from different cultures, being mindful of humor and idioms that may not translate well."

This awareness and adaptation reflect students' growing ability to communicate effectively and respectfully across cultural boundaries. Moreover, social media exposes students to diverse perspectives and communication styles, enhancing their understanding of cultural norms and values. Participant G emphasized, "It's improved my ability to communicate respectfully with people from diverse backgrounds." This development underscores how social media cultivates empathy and inclusivity in students' interactions, contributing to a more interconnected global community.

Increased Awareness & Sensitivity

Social media platforms significantly enhance students' intercultural competence by increasing their awareness and sensitivity to cultural diversity. Engaging with diverse perspectives on platforms like Instagram and TikTok helps students develop a deeper understanding of cultural nuances. Participant B noted, "It's taught me to communicate respectfully and sensitively across cultures, enhancing my communication abilities." This active engagement with diverse viewpoints promotes cultural sensitivity and respectful communication practices.

Participant E added

"Social media has helped me learn to communicate better with people from different backgrounds, increasing my awareness of cultural sensitivities."

This acknowledgment highlights how social media exposure broadens students' cultural awareness, fostering inclusive and respectful interactions. Overall, social media serves as a powerful tool for promoting increased awareness and sensitivity among students towards diverse cultural perspectives. By facilitating cross-cultural communication and deepening cultural understanding, social media prepares students to thrive in a globally interconnected world.

DISCUSSION
How social media Helps Each Competence

Social media has become an indispensable tool in fostering intercultural competence among students. It aids in the development of intercultural awareness, sensitivity, communication, and adaptation by providing platforms for real-time, interactive, and immersive cultural exchanges.

Intercultural Awareness

Social media significantly enhances students' intercultural awareness by exposing them to diverse cultural practices, traditions, and worldviews. Through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, students can follow accounts and join groups dedicated to different cultures. These platforms offer a constant stream of content, such as posts, stories, and videos, that showcase cultural festivals, everyday practices, and

significant events. For instance, a student might learn about Eid al Fitr Celebration through videos shared by Muslims friends, gaining insights into the rituals, food, and significance of the festival. When facing this situation students should speak according to the context and respond appropriately (26).This constant exposure helps students build a broad understanding of various cultures, going beyond textbook knowledge to experience living, breathing cultural expressions. As one student noted, "I feel my knowledge about other cultures has grown through social media interactions." This awareness extends to understanding global issues, social movements, and historical contexts that shape different cultures, making students more informed global citizens.

Intercultural Sensitivity

The interactive nature of social media enhances intercultural sensitivity by allowing students to engage directly with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Platforms like WhatsApp and Discord enable real-time conversations where students can ask questions, share experiences, and receive immediate feedback. This direct interaction helps students recognize and respect cultural differences in communication styles, values, and social norms. For example, students might learn that certain gestures or phrases are considered impolite in other cultures, prompting them to adjust their behavior accordingly. One participant shared, "I've become more cautious about using humor or idioms that may not be understood by friends from different backgrounds." Through these interactions, students develop empathy and a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity, fostering a more respectful and inclusive attitude. This sensitivity is crucial for building trust and rapport in intercultural relationships, both online and offline.

Intercultural Communication:

Social media platforms provide a fertile ground for honing intercultural communication skills. Students learn to navigate language barriers, interpret non-verbal cues, and adapt their communication styles to be more effective across cultures. For example, participating in international discussion forums on Reddit or joining multicultural Facebook groups requires students to convey their thoughts clearly and sensitively. A student reflected,

"I've become adept at training my communication style to connect authentically with people from diverse backgrounds. It's about understanding differences and bridging cultural gaps."

Additionally, social media's diverse communication tools—such as text, audio, video, and emojis—allow students to experiment with different modes of expression, enhancing their ability to communicate in varied cultural contexts. The instant feedback loop on these platforms enables continuous learning and refinement of communication strategies, making students more adept at handling cross-cultural interactions.

Intercultural Adaptation

Social media also plays a crucial role in developing students' intercultural adaptation skills. By regularly engaging with diverse cultural content and interacting with people from different backgrounds, students learn to adjust their behaviors and attitudes to fit different cultural contexts (4). For instance, following international influencers or joining global interest groups on platforms like Twitter or Instagram exposes students to a wide range of cultural norms and expectations. This exposure helps them become more flexible and adaptable in their thinking and behavior. One student highlighted,

"It's helped me learn how to communicate better with people from different backgrounds. I've become more aware of cultural sensitivities."

Furthermore, social media often brings to light cultural nuances that might not be immediately apparent in face-to-face interactions. This deeper understanding enables students to navigate complex social situations with greater ease and confidence. They learn to anticipate and respect cultural differences, making them more effective in multicultural settings, whether in academic, professional, or social environments.

In summary, social media is a powerful tool for enhancing intercultural competence among students. It provides continuous and interactive learning opportunities that promote intercultural awareness, sensitivity, communication, and adaptation. By engaging with diverse perspectives and cultures through social media, students develop the skills and attitudes necessary to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world. These competencies are essential for fostering global understanding, cooperation, and harmony in the 21st century.

Limitations of the Study

Every research study has its limitations, and this study is no exception. Understanding these limitations is essential for accurately interpreting the findings and recognizing the scope and applicability of the conclusions drawn.

Sample Size and Scope

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of participants. The study focused on a specific group of students from IAIN Parepare, which may not fully represent the broader population of students or other educational contexts. While the insights gained are valuable and offer a glimpse into the role of social media in developing intercultural competence, a larger and more diverse sample could have provided a broader range of perspectives and experiences. This could include students from different universities, regions, and educational backgrounds, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how social media influences intercultural competence across various contexts. Additionally, including participants from different age groups and with varying levels of social media engagement could yield more nuanced insights.

Generalizability

The findings of this study are based on the specific experiences of students from a particular educational institution, IAIN Parepare. As a result, caution should be exercised when generalizing these findings to other student populations or cultural contexts. The unique cultural, social, and educational environment of IAIN Parepare may influence the ways in which social media impacts students' intercultural competence. Therefore, while the study provides valuable insights into this specific context, its conclusions may not be directly applicable to students in different regions, countries, or educational systems. Further research in diverse settings would be necessary to determine the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other populations.

Self-Reporting Bias

The data collected for this study relied heavily on self-reported experiences and perceptions of the participants. This introduces the potential for bias or inaccuracies in how participants recalled and reported their experiences with social media and intercultural interactions. Participants might have consciously or unconsciously emphasized positive aspects of their experiences or downplayed negative ones. Additionally, social desirability bias could influence participants to provide responses they believe are more acceptable or favorable. To mitigate this limitation, future studies could incorporate objective measures, such as analysis of social media content or interactions, alongside self-reported data to provide a more balanced and accurate representation of participants' experiences.

Temporal Factors

The study's findings are also influenced by the current state of social media platforms and cultural dynamics at the time of data collection. Social media is a rapidly evolving landscape, with platforms continually updating features, policies, and user interfaces. Changes in technology, popular platforms, or societal norms over time could impact the relevance and applicability of the study's conclusions in the future. For instance, the emergence of new social media platforms or shifts in user behavior could alter how students engage with different cultures online. Longitudinal studies that track changes over time would be valuable in understanding how the relationship between social media use and intercultural competence development evolves.

Language and Cultural Barriers

Despite efforts to mitigate language and cultural barriers during data collection, nuances in language and cultural interpretations may still have influenced the results. Participants might have interpreted questions differently based on their cultural backgrounds or language proficiency, leading to variations in responses that could affect the overall findings. Additionally, the researcher's own cultural and linguistic background may have influenced data interpretation. To address this limitation, future research could involve bilingual or multilingual researchers and employ culturally sensitive methodologies to ensure that data collection and analysis accurately reflect participants' intended meanings and experiences.

CONCLUSION

In this section, author present brief conclusions from the results of research with suggestions for advanced researchers or general readers. A conclusion may review the main points of the paper, do not replicate the abstract as the conclusion.

Not only do author write down the major flaws and limitations of the study, which can reduce the validity of the writing, thus raising questions from the readers (whether, or in what way), the limits in his studies may have affected the results and conclusions. Limitations require critical judgment and interpretation of their impact. The author should provide the answer to the question: is this a problem with error, method, validity, and or otherwise?

This study aimed to explore the role of social media in developing the intercultural competence of undergraduate students at IAIN Parepare, with a focus on their experiences and the impact on their

knowledge, skills, awareness, and sensitivity towards cultural differences. The findings reveal that social media significantly contributes to the enhancement of students' intercultural competence in various ways.

Firstly, social media facilitates knowledge development by exposing students to diverse cultural practices and traditions. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok offer opportunities for students to learn about different cultures through direct engagement with cultural content shared by users worldwide. As one participant noted, "I learned about Eid Fitri Day from my friend's Instagram stories, which deepened my understanding and appreciation of their culture."

Secondly, the study highlights the role of social media in improving students' communication skills across cultures. Through regular interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds, students learn to adapt their communication styles to ensure clarity and sensitivity. A participant shared, "I've become more cautious about using humor or idioms that may not be understood by friends from different backgrounds,"

Furthermore, social media increases students' awareness and sensitivity towards cultural differences. Engaging with diverse perspectives on social media platforms helps students develop a deeper understanding of cultural nuances and fosters respectful and inclusive interactions. Another participant emphasized, "It's helped me learn how to communicate better with people from different backgrounds. I've become more aware of cultural sensitivities."

However, the study also acknowledges several limitations, including the small sample size, limited generalizability, potential self-reporting bias, temporal factors, and language and cultural barriers. These limitations highlight the need for further research to validate and expand upon the findings.

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