

Article

Photograph sharing on social media and intercultural friendships in the US: A perspective from Taiwanese exchange students

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic interviews and observation with 18 Taiwanese sojourners in the United States (US), this study asked informants to retrospectively recount their photograph sharing experiences on social media with respect to intercultural relationships during their English learning sojourning. Friendships between Taiwanese people and those from other cultures may face linguistic and cultural barriers, and while the use of shared photos through social media can help overcome the tensions and challenges involved in the initial stage of communication, these multimedia communicative tools were phatic and supplementary to textual information. The findings showed that Taiwanese sojourners tended to share more selfies which featured food and places, whereas local American students tended to share pictures of their pets. It is likely that engagement in aesthetic labour to enhance the qualities of photographs by Taiwanese sojourners helped participants socialise with locals. Taiwanese informants rated themselves as better socially supported due to photograph sharing despite little enhancement in English learning.

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Introduction

As a faculty member working for language exchange programs at a Taiwanese college, I have been actively advising students on planning and applying to study mainly in the US. In over six years of teaching at various exchange programs, I have witnessed the changing media-scape as well as the technological transformation afforded by the use of smartphones. The increasingly heavy dependence on social media to communicate has reconfigured and reshaped my students' exchange programme experience in terms of how to interact with students with different language and cultural backgrounds. The growth of social media apps affords their users to take and share photographs to communicate their experiences despite the incapability of commanding a common language. The photographs shared among users across different countries on social media –with minimal texting involved – may help them develop, maintain and sustain intercultural friendships. Based on cross-sectional comparisons conducted by earlier studies, a common assumption is that most long-term well-adjusted settlers who live and work in a new environment need, and want, to be better adapted to the local language and cultural practices, so as to achieve some level of efficacy in their daily lives (Kim, Izumi & McKay-Semmler, 2009). While the short-term sojourners may not be expected to live in the hosting culture permanently, the command of the local language and a great acceptance of hosting cultural practices remain key for their adaptation in the hosting culture (Shiau, 2015). With the rise of visually rich platforms afforded by social media on smartphones, the advantages to sojourners of using visual tools on social media during

intercultural adaptation have attracted earlier academic attention (e.g. Trebbe, 2007; Ye, 2006). A number of studies conducted earlier before the rise of social media have shown that computer-mediated interpersonal communication activities help maintain ethnic ties (Lee et al., 2012; Sawyer & Chen, 2012). These studies, however, emphasized more on the texting aspect, overlooking the significance of visually-rich content exchanges afforded by recent technologies, which is the gap that this research attempts to address.

While there are advantages of using different communicative channels, texting on smartphone social media, in a way, is well-matched to the life circumstance of sojourners at a time when they are abroad and surrounded by a myriad of uncertain weak ties. As Kim et al. (2009) suggested, while talking verbally can advance relationships among those with strong social ties, such as nuclear family, text-based computer-mediated social media were used more to expand relationships in weak social ties, which is exactly the circumstance the exchange students face during their encounter with their first host country. The research focus is more broadly on how the perpetual connectivity afforded by smartphone technologies changes the pattern of usage, reconfiguring social relations among Taiwanese exchange students in the US, during different phases of their staying, people may use social media differently. For instance, in a case involving exchange experiences, Lebedko (2014) examined Chinese and Japanese students and found that they tended to use social media less frequently during the initial stage of experience as a way to alleviate the culture shock and/or devote more efforts to acculturate in the hosting culture. They, however, gradually began using social media sites as they recovered from the culture shock. In this study, Lebedko (2014) suggested that international exchange students began using their own social network (e.g. Renren for Chinese) more frequently to speak with their co-nationals who understand them effectively rather than learning and using Russian to acculturate with the Russian speakers in the hosting culture.

Method: Interpretative ethnographic approach

While the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of intercultural friendship can be easily validated in everyday life, few research studies have attempted to understand how these friendships evolve across the borders from different cultures with respect to photograph sharing on social media. The present study aimed to explore how the uses of photograph sharing are related to intercultural friendships among Taiwanese sojourners and people from other cultures in the US. Along the same line, this study intends to offer sojourners' personal accounts of their experiences with photograph sharing. Do they simply share photographs at their convenience? Has this practice helped people from different cultures to connect and bond substantially? With the popularity of social media use, the study tries to focus on how intercultural friendships evolve through the sharing of photograph on social media. Two common extreme thoughts can be synthesized as follows: on one side, the use of social media primarily offers a safe and peaceful haven where the sojourners can stay and hibernate within the co-ethnic community. On the opposite end of the continuum, the uses of social media are believed to potentially accelerate the growth of intercultural friendships. This study posits that there are contingencies for making aforementioned extreme cases happen. While the aforementioned extreme cases may not address the experiences shared by the Taiwanese students, this study formulate two questions to shed light on the academic inquiry: (1) How did Taiwanese sojourners use social media to make new friends from different cultures? (2) What roles do these social media play in creating, maintaining and sustaining these intercultural friendships?

Drawing on ethnographic interviews with 18 Taiwanese sojourners in the US, this study asked informants to retrospectively recount their photograph sharing experiences on social media with respect to intercultural relationships during their English learning sojourning. The study adopts an ethnographic research approach, including participant observation and informal interviews. Since most of the informants are connected with the researcher using various smartphone applications, such as LINE, Skype and/or Facebook, the researcher also participated, reviewed and discussed with these informants on social media regularly to understand the overall circumstances of their intercultural friendships on these social media sites. These sojourners sometimes complemented these interviews with visually-rich digital artefacts. Participant observation of the Taiwanese exchange students' smartphone interactions with their friends was conducted when these students are geographically accessible.

Findings: Photo sharing to recall shared memories

Over the first month upon arrival, three types of photographs started to be exchanged, namely: selfies, photos of places a person has visited or that are personally meaningful, and photos of food/meals. Since these graphic communicative resources require some self-disclosure from exchange students, Taiwanese students are also more likely to mention their significant others in posts to American friends, a means by which they showcase their social circles, or cliques, to which they belong. Photographs posted by sojourners often included their families and hometowns as a means of introducing their home culture and explaining their experiences of negotiating life transitions. In terms of photograph sharing, a notable discrepancy between Taiwanese sojourners and Americans is that the former often emphasize the meals/foods they have experienced at home or overseas, even including specific details such as ingredients and cost, while their American counterparts are more likely to disclose a high level of detail about their pets, including how they raise and interact with them. HK and Lima expressed this difference as follows:

“I think we “Taiwanese” (quotation gesture) simply inherently love taking pictures before eating anything – like the slice of pizza I had yesterday, which was too boring to for my American friends to see. But to me, the point is that it’s so boring; I want to ask people how a piece of pizza can be so plain. My American friends would probably say I am so easily entertained” (HK, author’s personal interview on 06/28/2015).

“One day we took part in a tour group, accompanying some Americans to see a theatre performance. Before going into the theatre, we first took individual selfies and then took group pictures. But everyone had at least one camera and wanted a group picture taken with her or his camera. We had to reshuffle the group almost five times, but one of the Americans left after we took the first group picture” (Lima, author’s personal interview on 07/24/2015).

The local-American’s perception of Asians as being extremely enthusiastic about taking and sharing photographs is reflected in two common ethnic comments reported by numerous informants that reference excessive taking of photographs as being “Chinese” or “Asian” illustrated by the following comments: “come on, you are so Chinese” as one informant was

told as they took a photograph of their food before eating it. “Oh, you are so Asian” as reported by another informant who was told this because they took many pictures during the field trip. On the other hand, Taiwanese sojourners sometimes found that their American counterparts talked excessively about their pets, mainly dogs and cats. D and Peter expressed being mystified at how best to deal with American friends who constantly uploaded photographs of their dogs and cats in a series of slightly different poses despite their indifference about how their pets look and behave. As D put it, initially he would look at a cat and say “wow it is cute” but after a hundred pictures he would be running out of words with which to comment. Enthusiasm for such sharing of pictures can be dampened if the sharing efforts remain one-sided.

“In the long run, I only keep my photographs of meals for future retrieval. I find them too trivial for most of my friends, except my mother may want to know” (Jessie, author’s personal interview on 07/28/2015).

“Well, you can’t trade your meal pictures with their doggie pictures. It simply doesn’t work that way” (LKK, author’s personal interview on 07/24/2015).

Despite some perceived differences, photograph sharing can help the informants in intercultural understanding, particularly within the first three months. Many Taiwanese sojourners – or more broadly East Asians (in this study Chinese, Japanese and Korean sojourners in particular) – were quite skilled at editing (or photo-shopping) pictures and willing to offer others their help in improving the aesthetics of their photographs that represent the quality of their shared memories. Voluntarily helping others through deploying editing skills in this way is rewarding because both parties can tangibly feel the enhancements realized. For instance, Lima posted pictures that were more “authentically flattering” for all parties involved, and her American friend was instantly impressed by how her free aesthetic labour enhanced their own appearance and common existence. Such digital enhancement requires sophisticated skills, which Lima gained through her previous internship at a start-up company where her work involved “correcting” every incoming picture. Lima said that her objective was to make everyone look “authentically” thinner and beautiful, which she defined as sophistication in editing to a point where most people perceive the final image to be naturally – thus “authentically” enhanced – rather than to be unskilfully photo-shopped. In order to achieve this objective, it required her to adjust many dimensions of the pictures, including lighting and colour. Engagement in such aesthetic labour by Taiwanese sojourners can realize a long-term pay off because these pictures become testimonies of co-existence and shared memories, solidifying their friendships. Besides, if the pictures are sufficiently flattering, they can more easily be circulated through social networks.

The findings suggest that photograph sharing on social media is likely to significantly enhance intercultural friendships during the first few weeks, or the so-called “honeymoon phase”. The pictures shared are often a legacy of common everyday activities but can easily be lost if additional effort is not invested in their preservation and sharing. However, graphic postings shared on social media are mostly just merely complementary to textual information in the long run unless tailor-made for a specific interlocutor.

Conclusion and discussion

Photograph sharing can provide a wonderful recipe for intercultural friendships to grow among these participants. The study has some tentative conclusions that need to be further investigated. The posting of photographs is often reciprocal; namely, sojourners typically post photographs in response to an inquiry or request. While both Taiwanese and American students occasionally posted selfies, Taiwanese sojourners used selfies more often, often to situate themselves in a place that was important for them to indicate that “we are here”. In contrast, Americans were perceived as relatively subdued in posting selfies, and typically refrained from disclosing too much personal information in accompanying discussions, according to the informants.

This study is challenged by the fact that the informants conceptualize the notion of friendship quite differently from one another. In the age of social-networking, there are novel configurations of user practices and technological capabilities that are altering how we understand and trust intercultural friendship. This research embedded these transformations in an interpersonal, intercultural and technological context, avoiding a naive privileging of technology as the main force driving society, but also avoiding the social media-centric reduction of intercultural relations that are situated within this context (Shiau, 2015). Given the accessibility of various social media, they perceived themselves to be better socially supported.

This study’s findings are in line with the research carried out by Cemalcilar, Falbo, and Stapleton (2005) on social media in the early stages of cross-cultural transition and yields a similar result: interpersonal involvement in real life with members of the host society can effectively facilitate adaptation to that society. The use of photographs can potentially, but not always, help Taiwanese sojourners cope with cultural barriers in forming intercultural friendships. Such use of technology affords sojourners flexibility and various means to simultaneously communicate with both members of the host society and individuals of their own ethnicity. However, in this study the informants suggested that true friendships with Americans remained “remote”. Informants typically felt the need to maintain more than 500 contacts, and felt a stronger sense of both obligation and reward in their established relationships with old friends and parents back home; sojourners from different countries were also important to informants because their lives were following similar trajectories. Intercultural friendships between Taiwanese sojourners and Americans ultimately depend on how to text in a form of English shared by the local youth – a skill more related to proficiency in vernacular English than standardized formal English.

Despite the importance of knowledge and command of textism, new technologies offer new tools that help alleviate stress and retrieve the shared existence among users who cannot text and communicate well. Given this, this study concludes that intercultural friendships could only be better maintained and sustained with the sojourner’s mastering of textism in vernacular English, and interlocutors can experience greater social bonding as more textual information is created. However, social media unexpectedly nurtures intercultural friendships between sojourners from different East Asian countries more effectively than friendships between Taiwanese sojourners and Americans. They may experience bonding in a similar outlook of using and sharing photographs (e.g. Taiwanese and South Koreans in the US).

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