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An Investigation of the Physical and Digital Transitions of Saudi Students Coming to the UK

Anas Alsuhaibani
Andrew Cox
Frank Hopfgartner
Xin Zhao

The University of Sheffield,
Regent Court, 211 Portobello Street,
Sheffield S1 4DP

ahalsuhaibani1@sheffield.ac.uk

a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk

f.hopfgartner@sheffield.ac.uk

xin.zhao@sheffield.ac.uk

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Abstract

The transition from the home to the host country for international students has been always considered a sensitive period. Students face multiple social, cultural and academic challenges during this time. For Saudi students coming to the UK, the experience can be especially challenging, because they are moving from a conservative Muslim culture to a more open society. By considering their physical and digital transitions, the aim of this research is to understand how Saudi students in the UK perceive their use of social media during their transition. A mixed methods approach is to be used in this research. A preliminary analysis of the qualitative data, discussed in this paper, shows a strong relationship between how the students conceive transition and their use of social media. At times or for some students coming to the UK was conceived as a significant identity change, and they had to make choices about how to reconfigure their digital presence to represent and support this transition. Other students conceived of the transition purely pragmatically; they made the physical move but their social media usage remained a vehicle to stay in contact with family and friends.

The number of international students has grown from approximately 1.3 million in 1990 to about 5.5 million in 2017 [23]. This number is estimated to increase to eight million by 2025.

The UK is one of the top destinations for international students with approximately 460,000 in 2017/18 [24].

Saudi Arabia is one of the top seven sending countries, with more than 14,000 students in UK higher education in 2017/18 [25].

Author Keywords

Transition; International Students' Transition; Study Abroad; Saudi International Students; Social Media.

ACM Classification Keywords

Social media

Introduction

The transition to a new academic stage is a challenge for both international and domestic students. However, for international students, the process is more complicated. Students can experience multiple transitions: social, environmental and cultural, in addition to their academic transition [5,7,15]. International students at their transition are more likely to suffer from different psychological issues (e.g., anxiety, loneliness, depression or stress) [3,8,13,22]. Saudi students may encounter further challenges compared to other international students. Considering the students' movement from a conservative Muslim society to an open society and their involvement with a different academic system, more challenges may occur [4].

International students tend to spend more time on social media than domestic students [10], this is due to their increased need of social support and communication [9]. A recent study of the use of social media by Korean and Chinese students in the US found that they spend on average about 6.5 hours of their day online [17]. Sandel [20] found that international students spend on average approximately two hours per day communicating with friends and families.

Just like other people who experience transition in their lives, international students may find support on social media during their physical movement [12]. According to Sleeman, Lang and Lemon [21] social media can play a role in international students' transition by allowing them to maintain connections with their home families and friends. It can also help them to explore the new culture and create new ties with new people. On the other hand, social media may have negative social and academic impacts on international students. It can hinder the students' engagement with the new society [11] and distract them from their studies [1].

There is a lot of debate about the impact of social media on students. Little of this seems to have been tied to the specific context of international students' transition. Furthermore, more studies are required to see how students from different nationalities use social media in different ways. In a recent systematic review in the area of international students and social media conducted by Sleeman, Lang and Lemon [27], they reached the conclusion that future researchers are recommended to focus on students coming from 'less researched' countries. Therefore, by considering the students' physical and digital transition, the aim of this research is to investigate the digital spaces that Saudi students use in accordance with their transition to the UK. This aim will be achieved by applying a mixed methods approach (interviews then Twitter data analysis).

Methodology

A mixed method sequential exploratory design approach was adopted for this research. The project began with qualitative semi-structured interviews, and then Twitter data analysis will be undertaken. Given

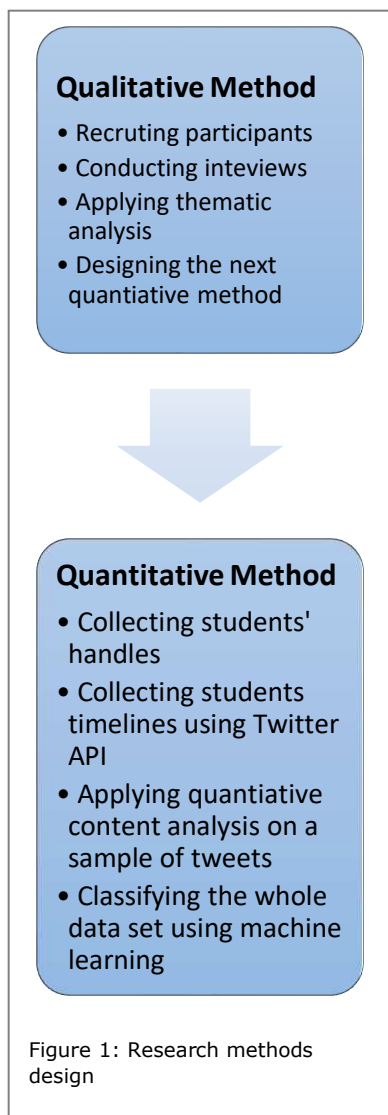


Figure 1: Research methods design

that during the transition there is both physical movement and change in digital presence, the project explores the way these two are interwoven. Thus rather than using purely digital methods, there is a strong element of exploring transition as a material experience through the interviews. Figure 1 is an outline of the research design. This paper will focus on the results of the first qualitative method.

Twelve Saudi students who are using social media and pursuing or planning to pursue their higher education in the UK were recruited for the interviews. The reason for including students who are planning to study in the UK is that this study focuses on all the stages of the transition. According to Menzies and Baron [16], the experience of transition starts before arriving in the host country. Other participants in the study were already in the UK. All had been there for less than a year, as McLachlan and Justice and Prescott and Hellsten [15,18] have argued, the student's transition period usually lasts up to 12 months after their arrival in the host country. Participants were recruited from different locations in the UK and to represent different levels of study, different ages, genders and family status. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, via phone or Skype, depending on the participants' preference and lasted between 42 and 102 minutes.

Preliminary results

Physical and digital transition

This study has shown that the physical transition for some students has an impact on their digital behavior and identity. Students who are keen to engage with the UK society and culture and to detach themselves from the Saudi society usually make a digital transition in their content on social media.

Those students usually make limited access to the online Saudi content because they want to weaken their ties with their Saudi life. They believe that this can have positive impacts on their engagement with the new society and developing their English language:

'I see my life in the UK as a good opportunity for me to engage with the UK community. In addition to the academic goals that I have, I am also planning to achieve some personal goals by learning about other cultures and engaging with new people [...]. Once I arrived to the UK, I created a new WhatsApp account but I gave this number only to a few people in Saudi Arabia [...]. I still contact my family and Saudi friends on social media but very rarely' [F5].

'In the UK, I also started to use a platform called Meetup and I have a positive experience with it. It allowed me to meet new people who have common interests; we meet and talk and that helped me to improve my English.' [M2].

These views are also supported by other studies [14,19] which claim that social media is a helpful tool for sojourners to learn about the culture and language of the host country. The findings showed that students who are personally motivated to study in the UK usually attempt transition themselves digitally. This usually happens through them contacting their new friends in the host country on WhatsApp and joining new groups, following new people from the host country on Twitter, watching host country bloggers on YouTube and adding host country celebrities on Snapchat. Students may also start to use new platforms that are commonly used by host country people. However, the time during the

transition is a key factor in regards to the relationship between the physical and digital transition. From the interviews, it was noticed that some students start their sojourn with a high level of enthusiasm about the new culture and place, which leads them to a strong digital transition. However, these students' enthusiasm often decreases after a while, leading to a return to previous patterns of digital activity.

Physical transition only

Other students perceive their transition to the UK as a temporary time and they are not keen to engage with the new society. This can be attributed to the difference in culture, religious and social life [2]. Furthermore, it might be related to the fact that unlike other international student groups, the majority of Saudi students are sponsored by employers in Saudi Arabia with an obligation to return immediately following the end of their studies. The results show that these students make little attempt to use social media as a tool to help with their social engagement with the new society. Rather they used the tools to keep them connected with their family and friends back home. Families in Saudi Arabia are very connected and children even if they are adults usually spend a lot of time with their parents [2,6]. Therefore, some students argue that this is an advantage of social media because they do not want to be disconnected from their home country:

'We are a very connected family and especially for my parents I do not want them to feel that I am far away from them, so, I am always in contact with them on social media.' [M4]

'I feel that social media is making a link for me with my country and family. Social media is the only way that keeps me updated with them.' [M5]

It is important to acknowledge that the digital transition is a complex aspect to be explored further. For example, one student reported that there had been no changes in his use of social media after the move. However, later in the interview the same student said that he changed his profile information on Twitter and sometimes he tweets in English after living in the UK. Students' accounts of their behavior need to be compared to actual behavior patterns. This is part of what the second phase of the project will undertake.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the digital spaces that Saudi students use during their transition to the UK. Depending on the students' conception of the move, social media can support their transition by building bridges with the new society or simply be used to maintain connections with the home country. How it is used may change within the trajectory of one individual as a result of shifting experiences.

For future research and to explore the nature of the digital transition, a quantitative method will be used. This method involves retrieving Saudi students' timelines on Twitter and applying quantitative analysis on it. This method will help the researchers to observe the changes in content and other patterns (e.g. profile information, number of followers/followings and language of tweet) during the students' transition.

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