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Projecting Social Media Identities: An Analysis of An International Graduate Student's Social Media Posts

Abstract:

In the context of global education, international students face complex identity construction processes influenced by political, economic, cultural, and personal factors (Marginson, 2011). Despite these challenges, there is a significant lack of studies focusing on how international graduate students navigate their identities, particularly on social media platforms. With their significant potential to facilitate cross-cultural engagement and community building for international students (Hjorth & Goggin, 2018) and to project the identities of individuals (Van Dijck, 2013), exploring international students' social media presence can reveal their self-perceptions, identity negotiations, and the role of digital platforms in their identity formation. These insights are crucial for understanding their needs as they adapt to a new context. To illustrate, this study explores the social media discourse of an international graduate student from Turkiye to understand what identities she projects on social media and what experiences those identities highlight regarding her academic and social life during her first year in a Southwestern U.S. state. Grounded in the post-structuralist identity theories (e.g., Gee, 2000; Norton, 2000), this research analyzes the Instagram and X posts of the student, covering the period from her arrival in the United States in August 2023 to March 2024. Using narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen et al., 2014) and small stories analysis (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008), the findings reveal that cultural, social, and adaptive identities became central in the data analyzed. Those identities emerged from the analysis reflect the participant's continuing connection to her homeland, creative socialization in her new environment, and strategic adaptation to her new academic and social context. By analyzing these identity projections, the study highlights the role of language and discourse in the complex identity negotiations of international students. It feeds into a closer look at cross-cultural communication in both online and offline spaces.