

Role of Internet in Socio-cultural Adaptation Among International Students : A Study in Germany

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Abstract – The forces of globalization have initiated student mobility between continents. Research reviews indicate that Internet is the most popular medium among the young people. The impact of Internet on human communication and social life has been a focus of study in different parts of the world. For an International student, residing temporarily in another country for the purpose of study, successful socio-cultural adaptation makes academic and non-academic life in the host country comfortable. Communication being the core of effective inter- personal and social adaptation, this paper investigates the importance of Internet for an international student and explores how it helps in the socio cultural adaptation process in the host country. From helping to live in a new country to connecting with family and friends to integrating with the academic system, this study explored the need of the International student to use the Internet. The methodology used was a survey followed by focus group discussion with a sample of International students and an in depth interview with an official at the international office at Hochschule Bremen university of applied sciences, Germany. The findings of the research show that Internet, particularly is a very useful medium for International students and they are very dependent on it in the process of socio cultural adaptation.

Keywords – International Students, Internet Usage, Mobile Internet, Socio Cultural Adaptation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Student mobility in the International scenario has altered the global higher education scene in the recent years. The reason for this is the increasing number of students going beyond the borders of their own country for higher studies. United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK) and Australia have been attracting the International students largely when its history is traced [1]. These countries are popular as destinations mainly because they are English speaking countries. Additionally, a possibility of these countries being the favoured destination could be a result of the impressive marketing strategies of the universities in these countries that have been able to reach out to the potential students with ‘world class facilities’ in addition to offering substantial financial incentives.

Reference [2] observes that Germany, along with France are the middle power or also seen as secondary higher education destinations. They further add that Germany with quality institutions and being affordable, with institutions offering free or scholarship based education; is popularly introducing English as a medium of instruction to attract more International students.

Reference [3] reported that, “College students are heavy users of Internet compared to general population.” Being digital natives and having grown up with computers, “it is integrated into their daily communication habits and has

become a technology as ordinary as the telephone or television.”

An essential medium for college students to communicate with professors and classmates, to do research, it has become a functional tool which has affected the way they interact with others and with information. So, whether the students in higher education are in their home country or on international mobility, it is no longer fashionable to first seek out Internet connection, it is rather a necessity element.

Socio cultural adaptation in a host country is essential for a mobile international student to settle down. The point to which international students adjust will reduce their stress and help them adapt and settle down in the host country enabling them to academically and socially settle down.

This study will explore how International students belonging to different nationalities, who are studying various courses at Bachelors and Masters level for a short period of one semester or two at Hochschule Bremen City University of Applied Sciences, Germany, use the Internet for their socio cultural adaptation.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

International students are identified as a group as they share a common circumstance in the host country even though they are from different countries that may have different religions and political systems [4]. These characteristics include being transient and having to adapt, socially and culturally to their new temporary situations and such situations can cause more stress than their peers belonging to the category of domestic students [4]. Added to this is the sojourner’s stress for they have to learn and adapt to fit in a different culture in their temporary stay [5].

International students assist in promotion of international understanding as they add cultural diversity to the class room. ‘Without obviously making an effort, they help the local students or their classmates develop better understanding and better relations between the countries of their origin and the host’ Sandhu and Asrabadi, (1994), as cited in [5].

Acquiring the local social skills and learning local culture that facilitates ease of living in the host country is socio cultural adaptation. Age, gender, time in the country, language fluency are some of the main factors that affect socio cultural adaptation, to measure which scales have been developed by numerous researchers [5].

Reference [6] define the combination of behavioral competence and a strong influence of factors underpinning culture learning and social skills acquisition as socio cultural adaptation. Numerous scholars identified varied

factors that for the key to the study of socio cultural adaptation like gender, age, duration of stay in country, language fluency [7]-[9]. [10] developed the sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) to measure the socio cultural adaptation of individuals in different cultures.

Socio cultural adaptation may differ by gender. It suggests that women may have more difficulty adapting than men [11,8]. Life events and its association with age, or social clocks are age dependent and differ from culture to culture. These events could be getting a first job, graduating from university, getting married and having children [12]. 'Older students undergoing international student mobility may have more trouble adjusting than younger students' [13]. With regard to the time spent, the research results varied, some findings revealing that the longer time is appropriate for cultural adaptation while some others note that short duration is sufficient for the same.

Language ability and competence is also shown to be related to socio cultural adaptation [5]. Better understanding of the host country language is quite important in the German context. Most international students, join German language courses to equip themselves as a need for better adjustment. It has been observed that the language ability of international students is related to their overall adaptation and academic process [5].

Studies on expatriates show that they suffer from changes in food, language, living and working environment, manners and many other domains. The importance of 'the need for more family support in a different culture has always remained significant' [14]. An international student has more reasons to feel out of place as they confront being psychologically as well as financially responsible for themselves. [15] concluded in their study that overseas students showed symptoms of depression.

It is visible that the cultural adjustment demands for an international student can be substantial. Effective communication with professors and peers in academic settings and comfortable interactions with local people in social situations are crucial for successful adjustments for international students in a host country culture [16].

Only those elements of culture that are different from that of home country needs adaptation at the host country. If the difference is wide, then the challenges to adaptation are higher. For instance, it could be possible that for a student from France studying in Germany may not hold as many challenges for adaptation when compared to a student from Japan or India.

The arrival of Internet and cellphones in the last decade has made dramatic changes in the lives of people. In addition to changing the communication dynamics it has also affected the behavior and habits of young people. The adoption of this new technology by the young people has been smooth as they belong to the group that are the 'digital natives'.

[17] states that 97% of people in the age group of 18-29 years use Internet through their mobile device. A fact sheet on the UN website by the International

telecommunications Unit (ITU) and UN – Habitat about Youth and ICT [18] mentions the 'world being more interconnected than ever before by the growing mobile subscription globally'. The report refers to the ITU estimate of 2011 that young people under the age of 25 accounted for 45% of total internet users.

Mobile Internet is an evolution of the Internet itself. The spread of mobile Internet is faster due to the availability of cheaper smart phones and also due to the fact that service providers are making it cheap and fast to use. The mobile Internet comes with its own benefits, of not having to be wired or within the range of Wi-Fi. Wi-Fi is generally linked to a fixed connection that provides a limited mobility and it does not offer accessing the Internet everywhere. Full mobility through a smart phone makes Internet mobile. It is seen that while some people rely on their phone Internet to help navigate an unfamiliar city or find suggested restaurants in an unfamiliar area, users stay connected with people through various applications like Facebook, Twitter and others [19].

College students are heavy users of the Internet compared to the general population according to [3]. The process of socio cultural adaptation, in countries where there is a large inflow of international students is also waking up to research considerations in order to attract more international students and increase their popularity. This study adds to the knowledge in the area of socio cultural adaptation of international students in Germany.

III. METHODOLOGY

With an aim to understand the role and usage of Internet in the socio cultural adaptation process of an international student studying in Germany for a short period of time, the objectives of this research are :

- to understand the role of Internet in the socio cultural adaptation process in the host country for an international student and
- to explore the importance of Internet at a host country for an international student.

The data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire from a sample of international students studying at Hochschule Bremen University of Applied Sciences, Germany at the first stage. This was followed up with a focus group discussion to get in depth answers from a sample of the respondents of the first stage and also an interview with an experienced international office coordinator who handles student exchanges.

[6] offers flexible scale that measures the amount of behavioral and cognitive difficulties experienced by individuals adjusting in a new culture was the inspiration for the socio cultural adaptation domains in the questionnaire. The instrument was modified to suit the characteristics of the sojourning sample. In the current research, out of the 40 total domains, 19 were found to be generally relevant for a mixed group of respondents for the study. Freedom was taken to modify the five point Likert scale in the original scale to the use of Internet from a three point scale for each of the domains. The identified

domains were chosen after informal discussions with a few international students.

The formulated questionnaire to understand the role of Internet in the socio cultural adaptation process of international students at Hochschule Bremen University of applied sciences, Germany was administered to a sample of international students enrolled in September -October 2015 for either a semester or for a year of study in the host university.

Procedure and Participants

This study used a mixed method exploratory approach to address the research objectives. Quantitative data was collected using a questionnaire and qualitative data was acquired from group discussions with international students and also by an in depth interview with an international office coordinator who handles student exchanges.

Subjects were limited to the international students enrolled in a particular batch of German language course (belonging to both undergraduate and post graduate studies) at Hochschule Bremen University of Applied Sciences. Hochschule Bremen attracts numerous international students through exchange programs like DAAD, Erasmus Plus, Erasmus Mundus, ISAP and others. The research objectives were introduced to the subjects and they were given the questionnaire. The researcher was available to clarify the understanding and meaning of the questions. The respondents took about 12-14 minutes each to complete the questionnaire. Following this, focus group discussion was held with some of the respondents with a goal of gathering information about the role of Internet in their lives as an international student. Its importance and significance in their day to day lives were probed.

An in-depth interview was conducted with an international office coordinator to see the influence of Internet on the incoming students and also to understand how the university has over the years changed the process of application and correspondence to electronic and Internet based.

IV. FINDINGS

The sample for this study belong to a German language class, enrolled in the A1 level and hence it implies that they are building their communication competence by learning the host country language. The intention to learn the host language through this enrollment states that they are developing their skill to facilitate interpersonal relations with the locals in an effort to ease cultural learning and socio cultural adaptation. 'Language ability is at the heart of socio-cultural adaptation and enables wider communication competence [20].

Sample profile :

The total number of respondents were 32. In the sample size of N= 32, 62% of respondents were female and 38% were male. The mean age of the respondents was 22.37 years.

The respondents belonged to different nationalities as follows : respondents from Brazil comprised of 18.75%, the ones from India were 18.75%, from Japan the respondents were 12.75%, from Turkey they were 12.75%,

from China were 12.75%. Additionally 6.25% were from France, 6.25% were from United Kingdom and 6.25% were from Thailand. This reflects a varied cross section reflecting the different continents comprising of varied socio cultural background of the respondents.

Of the total respondents, 25% were planning to live and study in the host city for about half a year and the remaining 75% were there for a period of one academic year. International students generally study a semester or two in a different country and then go back to their home university to complete their degree.

The international students either get nominated by their home university or themselves choose their host university. The process of getting accepted by the host university and coordinating with the international office of the host university to complete their academic, accommodation and travel usually starts four to six months prior. This survey was conducted during the third/fourth month of their stay at the host country and most of them had settled down to a routine life. Most of the international students are provided stipend or scholarship for their study period. Some of them take up part time jobs during their free time.

It was seen than all the respondents used smart phones with mobile Internet. It can be noticed that irrespective of the country they belonged to, the respondents, probably because of their age and student status were similar in the trend of using a smart phone with internet. With the internet facility always available to them on their finger tips they could get connected to internet and be online at any time.

The respondents held that the mobile internet was used for varying purposes like being in touch with people to finding their ways in a new city to many times getting instant information about transport or other things where as they preferred to connect to internet via their laptop or tablet in the campus or at home for in-depth work on assignments or reading etc. these responses were emphasized during the panel discussion held later. It can be seen that mobile internet is more easily and frequently used by the international students.

Socio-cultural Adaptation:

As mentioned earlier in the review of literature, socio cultural adaptation of an individual comprises of adaptation at various levels. To evaluate the scale to understand the findings comprehensively, the domains were grouped under 'Interpersonal communication', 'academic work/performance', 'personal interest and settling down', 'adapting to weather conditions', and 'gaining language proficiency'. These groups together encompass all the questions raised in the questionnaire and enables a comprehensive presentation of data.

To explicate 'Interpersonal communication' that encompasses questions like 'making friends' and 'communicating with friends and family back home and overseas', the findings reveal that:-

- 31.25% of the respondents felt that Internet was not required for interpersonal communication intending to make friends and only other sources are used to 'make friends'. While 56.25% feel that Internet use is felt

sometimes and 12.5% of the respondents said that they are dependent on the Internet for making friends.

- for communicating with family and friends back home and overseas 62.5% of the respondents felt the need to depend on Internet and 25% of them sometimes use the Internet for it. 12.5% of the respondents do not need Internet services and have other means of doing it.

It is seen here that Internet plays a significant role in interpersonal communication when it is used for connecting with people back home (friends and family). The reason for this could be the low cost/no cost involved in using Internet for calling/chatting when compared to higher international call rates of telephone. Also the distances seem to disappear because of the immediacy factor while chatting.

Academic work/ performance was evaluated comprising the answers derived from the domains of 'following rules and regulations', 'coping with academic work' and 'dealing with people of authority' in the questionnaire. The findings revealed that :

- To cope with academic work, 43.75% are dependent on the Internet while an additional 43.75% sometimes use the Internet for it. 12.5% of the respondents say that they do not need the Internet for this.
- To follow the rules and regulations in the host country and at the university, 12.5% depend entirely on the Internet, 68.75% of the respondents sometimes depend on the Internet and 18.75% of them do not use the Internet.
- To deal with people of authority, 12.5% for the respondents depend on the Internet, while 50% sometimes depend on the Internet. 37.5% feel there is no need of Internet and have other means of dealing with it.

The observation from these indicate that internet usage for academic work seem to be highly connected. The reason for it could be the trend of internet usage for online submission, online evaluation and online sharing of reading materials by the academicians. Hence role of internet becomes more or less essential for a student, especially in the international context.

Additionally, to understand the social requirement of pursuing the individuals 'personal interest and settling down', the questions about 'using transport system', 'getting used to the pace of life', 'going shopping', 'going to social events/gatherings', 'finding food/restaurants I enjoy', 'adapting to local accommodation', 'dealing with unsatisfactory service', 'finding my way around', 'adapting to local etiquette', 'findings news and general information' were considered. These domains relate to the personal interest of the individual student in making an effort in the process of socio cultural adaptation. The findings reveal that:

- For using the local transport system, 75% of the respondents feel that they use the Internet sometimes and 18.75% of the respondents are dependent on the Internet for this. The remaining 6.25% of the respondents feel that Internet is not required.

- For getting used to the pace of life in the host country, 68.75% of the respondents sometimes use the Internet and 31.25 % of the respondents do not use the Internet.
- About going shopping in the host country, 12.5% of the respondent are completely dependent on the Internet, while 62.5% sometimes use the Internet and 25% respondents feel that they do not require Internet to accomplish this task.
- Regarding going to social events and gatherings, 18.75% of the respondents depend on the Internet, 68.75% sometimes depend on the Internet and 12.5% of them do not need the Internet as they get the information from other sources.
- When it comes to finding food/restaurants that they like 25% of the respondents depend entirely on the Internet and the remaining 75% of them sometimes rely on the Internet as shown in Figure 4 below.
- When questioned about adapting to local accommodation, 31.25% of them were entirely dependent on the Internet, 56.25% said that they used the Internet sometimes for this and 12.5% said that they never used the Internet for this activity.
- About dealing with unsatisfactory services in the host city, 25% said that they depended on the Internet for sorting the issues, 56.25% of the respondents said that they used the Internet sometimes and the remaining 18.75% said that they did not need the Internet for this activity.
- 37.5% of the international students depend on the Internet for finding their way around while another 43.75% say that they use the Internet sometimes. 18.75% say that they never use the Internet for this.
- To adapt to the local etiquette, none of the respondents feel a need to depend on the Internet. While 68.75 % use it sometimes, 31.25% of the respondents feel they have other sources of information.
- For news and general information needs, 56.25% of the respondents depend on the Internet and the remaining 43.75% sometimes use the Internet. There are no respondents who feel Internet is not required for this.

The observation from the above findings reveals the significant role of Internet to perform day to day activities for most of the respondents. The contrasting finding of the respondents using Internet for general information needs and not using Internet for adapting to the local etiquette reflect the preference of the generation.

To understand the respondent's Internet usage behavior to cope with the weather condition in the host country, the question 'dealing with climate' was evaluated.. The findings reveal that 37.5% of the respondents depend on their Internet for dealing with the climate and additionally 50% say that they sometimes use the Internet for it. 12.5% of the respondents say they don't need the Internet for this.

With the vibrant changes in the weather and helping residents to deal with extreme cold conditions and unprecedented rain, weather apps with specific city information are frequently used in Germany. It prepares the user to carry an umbrella or heavy winter jacket appropriately while stepping out of home. About 87.5 % of the respondents using Internet for dealing with climate reflects this necessity.

As Germany is not a native English speaking country, people coming from different home countries need to learn the language to some extent. Learning the local language is seen as one of the foremost attempt at the socio cultural adaptation process. to understand this , questions related to ‘making myself understood’ and ‘understanding local language’ were considered for evaluation. The findings reveal:

- In the domain of making themselves understood, 25% of the respondents depend on the Internet, 50% of them sometimes use the Internet and 25% feel that they don’t need the Internet for it..
- 25% of the respondents use Internet for understanding the local language and the remaining 75% use the Internet sometimes for the same purpose. There are no international students who do not need to use the Internet for this purpose.

This findings again endorse the use of internet through the use of translation and language applications, that helps the user communicate easily, be it to buy something or to ask for directions.

When asked If there was a need felt to learn about their own culture and cooking while as an international student in a host country, 18.75% of the respondents said they are depend on the Internet for it, 43.75% sometimes use the Internet. 37.5% feel there is no need to use the Internet for such a purpose.

100% of the respondents feel that Internet has made their life easy as an International student and all of them would miss it extremely if it vanished when they woke up the next day.

Most of the findings validate the need and use of Internet makes it easy to adapt to a new socio cultural setting in a new country. While the way internet is used by the international students belonging to a young age group for their socio cultural adaptation seems uniform, there seems to be no significant difference between the male and female members, or their place of origin in the entire sample.

Focus Group Discussion Summary

A focus group discussion was conducted post the data collection through the questionnaire. Nine students who were part of the sample participated in the discussion. The nationalities they represented were : three participants from India, two from Turkey, one from France, one from Japan and two from Brazil. The discussion was held in the classroom after the language class at the university. The expectation from the discussion was to understand how they rate Internet in their priority as an international student and what role does it play in the adaptation process. It was expected to reveal more than what the

questionnaire explored. The summary of the discussion were :

The respondents were connected to the Internet all the time on their mobile phones, through mobile data or through wi-fi connections.

About Internet’s role in interpersonal communication, most of the respondents agreed on the response that “Internet helps plan real meetings for studies or for recreation”. Also as one of the respondents concluded that it “greatly helps keep in touch with family and friends overseas”.

With regard to ‘academic work/performance’ there was consensus about “availability of study material online and assignment submissions via email” and it was inevitable to use Internet.

About using Internet for personal interest and for settling down in a new country, the discussion about its role was varied. A student pointed out that “if we are always using Internet and being connected online with people back home then we may not actually be settling down” for which the responses indicated different viewpoints. The discussion took a turn when a participant said that “ I use it to search for directions to go to a place of interest.”, The group responded that Internet facilitates settling down “as a medium only and not as an end.”

Using the Internet to adapt to weather conditions, the group was unanimous is their reflections. From deciding how to dress up for the weather to planning an outing, they had to first check the weather on the Internet. This adds to the response in the quantitative data about the role of internet being quite important for adapting to climate in the host country.

As the focus group discussion members belonged to a class attending German language course, they felt that they were already in the socio cultural adaptation process as they were all learning the local language. They all felt it was essential to learn some spoken language to live in that country. Additionally, “sometimes in the super market while buying something I use the translator as everything is written in German” was a point worth noting. The importance of learning the local language in socio cultural adaptation reflected here.

Taking the discussion further, about how they felt about Internet, one participant said “having Internet on my phone gives me confidence”. The confidence when asked to explain, was loosely translated through the following responses :

- When the news about studying at a university in Germany was confirmed, housing was the first concern. “I knew that with the help of Internet, it would be easy to sort out everything in the new place”.
- “Internet advantage and presence felt even before arrival, through the links sent for accommodation by the university international office and also the online application process and interacting with the buddy’s who were assigned to us”
- “Internet connectivity was very important while selecting the accommodation”

- “ Even during my travel to come here, at the transit airports, I was busy searching for wi-fi connections”
- “On arrival, getting a sim card and understanding the Internet package and wi-fi connection at home and at university were really important in the initial few days”
- “The speed of Internet is appreciated, I can get anything I want from anywhere, be it while on a tram or at the university.”
- “Personally use it for keeping updated about news, keep track of ongoing TV series and movies, other information and keeping constant contact with family and friends locally and also back home”

Hence the ‘confidence’ as expressed earlier came from being connected to the internet for interpersonal communication and for seeking information on their finger tips, especially when located in a different country. This confidence can be seen as leading to smooth socio cultural adaptation.

When questioned how they imagined an international student lived and studied in earlier days when there was no internet, some of the participants said that it was difficult to imagine that. Some others said that “those days were different, maybe they used the different media like television and movies to keep themselves engaged and wrote letters and made phone calls to family and friends rarely. But today we have the technology to and we are making use of it.”

The association of use of internet in the socio cultural adaptation hence was significant. They felt that they could not imagine a life without internet, especially in a distant country. Internet seems to be playing an important role in almost everything they do in daily life.

An in-depth interview was also conducted with an International office coordinator about how the Internet has changed the interactions with incoming international students. With over 15 years experience at the International office that now handles about 100-120 international students every semester, she has seen an increase in the inflow of international students. Her opinion about the recent shift to online application process makes it simpler for the incoming international student with fewer documents to be uploaded. It also aids in deciding the rent, location and other issues connected with accommodation. Internet use now being essential for academics, that includes getting course materials, conducting research for assignments and submission of assignments and to even communicating with academicians and other fellow students and friends were reiterated. Everyday requirements like city map, bus/tram timings and routes, ticket booking and translator/dictionary are very useful for an international student were recapped. The conclusion of the interview endorses the earlier findings.

V. CONCLUSION

The overall observation is that for the International students, Internet seems to be very essential for academics and for living in a host country. Internet on the mobile phone was used more frequently. The use of Internet for communicating with the officials at host country before arrival being significant, all academic material seems to be online making the Internet an essential tool for students. The role of Internet aiding in the socio cultural adaptation of an international student in the host country is very significant.

It is clearly visible that Internet is extremely important and has made life easy for an international student and they would miss it extremely if it vanished suddenly. They depend on the Internet majorly for communicating with friends, coping with academics and to keep track of news and other essential information.

Additionally, the focus group discussion and the in depth interview with an official reiterated the same uses of Internet. It can be concluded that in earlier times, the process of socio cultural adaptation might have been time consuming. With Internet affordable and available now the process of socio cultural adaptation for an international student at a host country for a short stay period of about a year, is faster, smoother and easier. Internet plays a major role in the socio cultural adaptation and has made life easy for the international students and they would miss it extremely if it suddenly vanished.

Limitations and scope for further research :

Since the study was conducted over a very short period of time with limited resources, the sample size was limited. A larger sample size might have revealed a stronger results. Additionally, the study could have checked for country wise or region wise similarities or differences which could have resulted in patterns of internet usage and behavior. Some respondents asked for clarifications in the questionnaire while answering the questions. Due to the limitation of time and resources, a pre test was not conducted, which could have solved the problem with the queries.

The role of other mass media was not considered, either through separate questions or by asking if they accessed the other media through Internet. Though it was briefly touched upon in the focus group discussion, it needs detailed understanding as it plays a major role in socio cultural adaptation process.

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