Impact of social media on Intercultural Communication Competence of Chinese People living in Sweden

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Abstract

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) describes the ability to interact with people from different cultures effectively and appropriately. In the impact of globalization and information technology development, social media facilitates intercultural communication and open a new space for intercultural interactions. As the impact of social media on ICC is not often explored, this study would shed light on this unexplored domain and focus on Chinese people who currently live in Sweden by asking the question:

*How does social media influence the ICC of Chinese people living in Sweden?*

This study adopts a mixed method: it uses a survey questionnaire followed by individual interviews, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data.

As a result, two factors stimulating ICC are identified. The role of social media on ICC when residence in the host country is confirmed, and two stages of ICC development associated with social media in the host country are explored. Last but not least, social media seems to influence the ICC of Chinese people living in Sweden in a positive way, however this positive impact is not independent of real social interaction with the host culture.
Sammanfattning

Interkulturell kommunikationskompetens (ICC) beskriver möjligheten att integgera med människor från olika kulturer på ett effektiv och lämplig sätt. Globalisering och utveckling av informationsteknologin har gjort att det underlättar sociala mediers interkulturell kommunikation och öppnar nya sätt för interkulturella interactioner. Eftersom konsekvenserna av sociala medier angående ICC undersöks sällan ska denna studie lyfta fram denna outforskade domän, focus ska ligga på personer med kinesikt härkomst som för närvarande bor i Sverige genom att ställa frågan:

*Hur påverkar sociala medier ICC för personer som bor i Sverige av med kinesikt härkomst?*

Denna studie anammar en blandad metod: den använder en enkätundersökning följt av individuella intervjuer, samlar både kvantitativ och kvalitativ data.

Som resultat identifieras två faktorer som stimulerar ICC. Sociala mediernas roll på ICC när bosättning i värdlandet bekräftas, och två steg i ICC-utvecklingen i samband med sociala medier i värdlandet utforskas. Sist men inte minst verkar sociala medier påverka den kinesiska befolkningens ICC på ett positivt sätt, men denna positiva påverkan är beroende av verklig social interaktion med värdkulturen.
Impact of Social Media on Intercultural Communication Competence of Chinese People Living in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
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Author Keywords
Social Media Use; Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Communication Competence; Chinese People Living in Sweden; Development of Intercultural Communication Competence; Impact of social media on Intercultural Communication Competence.

INTRODUCTION
Globalization makes human beings live in a world without borders. People emigrate from their home countries to other countries in terms of studies, romantic relationships, employments, investments and other multinational opportunities. The International Migration Report 2017-Highlights [1] reports that, China is the fourth largest country of origin and that there were 10 million Chinese migrants living and working overseas in 2017. Top immigration destination countries for Chinese migrants are the USA, Korea, Japan, Canada and Australia. The number of Chinese people living in Sweden is relatively small compared to other ethnic groups in Sweden, roughly 29,000 [2].

Through the impact of globalization and information technology development, social media facilitates cross-cultural communication and open new space for intercultural interactions. We witness the global popularity of Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and other social media sites. While Culture as a communication context dictates the use of media [3], it leads to that people come from one culture may have the shared platforms of social media, and China is the case in point. The widespread social media use of Wechat, Weibo, Zhihu among the Chinese reflects cultural preferences. In order to maintain the connections with their family and accomplish integration in Sweden, the majority of Chinese people carry out double-footed social media use pattern: the Chinese social media as well as the international social media.

Intercultural Communication Competence reflects the ability to interact with people from different cultures effectively and appropriately [4] [5]. The development of ICC can be assessed in a number of studies. Most ICC studies mainly focus on educational settings [6] [7] [8], international management contexts [9] [10] and
domestic intercultural relations [11]. Participants are international students of certain educational programs or employees who work in the multicultural working environment. Although ICC is frequently mentioned and studied in both academia and business world, the intersection between ICC and social media use is not often explored. As an environment for intercultural communication, social media would play a role on ICC, especially for those Chinese people living in Sweden who stay active between the Chinese social media and the international social media.

The purpose of this study is that to find out through the social media use of the Chinese living in Sweden, the interplay between social media use and their ICC, and finally define how social media influences their ICC.

**THEORY AND RELATED WORK**

This section is a brief account of ICC and dimensions, assessment of ICC, social media and impact of social media on ICC. There are various theoretical frameworks of ICC and related constructs in academia, and this study would explain the significant ones relate to the study per se.

**Intercultural Communication Competence and Dimensions**

Intercultural Communication Competence (Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Competency or ICC) refers to the knowledge, motivation, and skills necessary to interact effectively and appropriately with people of different cultural backgrounds [4] [5]. Different scholars [4] [5] [6] [8] [12] [13][14] classified ICC in various ways. According to Fantini [8] [12], ICC is comprised of four dimensions (see Figure 1), which are intercultural knowledge, intercultural attitude, intercultural skills and intercultural awareness. The conceptions of respective dimension in this study reference other prestigious scholars' definitions as well.

**Intercultural Knowledge**: This dimension refers to an individual’s skills to gain knowledge about one’s own culture or another culture with which one interacts, and the skill to have relevant information which would help the individual to interact with people from the other culture personally [6]. Fantini [12] defines it as knowing the hosting culture.

**Intercultural Attitude**: Deardorff [13] describes this dimension as being open, interested in and curious about different cultures. Byram [6] also claims that intercultural attitude is a concept which is affected by curiosity, social class, gender and race.

**Intercultural Skills**: This dimension is termed as the ability to listen, observe, interpret, analyse, evaluate people from other cultures and finally relate oneself to other cultures [13]. According to Marin & Nakayama [15] as well as Odegers [16], skills of learning a second or third language, listening, information gathering and problem solving are be considered as the examples of intercultural skills. Fantini [12] argues that “intercultural behaviour” can be another name of this dimension and this dimension is affected by other dimensions.

**Intercultural Awareness**: Byram [6] explains this dimension as an individual’s ability to see the similarities and differences between one’s own culture and the other culture in a critical point of view. Intercultural awareness reflects one’s consciousness of enhancing attitudes, knowledge and skills when interact with other cultures.

![Intercultural Competency and dimensions](image)

**Assessment of Intercultural Communication Competence**

Assessment of ICC could identify the positive indicators to individual growth, and in return it fosters the ICC development in given context. Fantini [12] suggests that assessing ICC at the beginning, during, and end of programs provides important and useful information. Self-evaluation and peer evaluations could be taken into considerations.

There are several assessment tools to evaluate ICC, such as Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory [17], the Global Perspective Survey [18], Intercultural Competence Scale [8], Intercultural Development...
Inventory [14], Intercultural Sensitivity Scale [19] etc. Each assessment is based on the framework of intercultural communication scholars respectively and measures different dimensions, components, preferences and orientations to ICC. Most of the assessments are conducted online in the format of Likert scale report with the range of 10-159 questions.

Social Media

Social media is a general term that refers to several kinds of internet-based applications that allow users to create and exchange their own content, known as user generated content [20] [21]. Social media is an important part of our life as it promotes the interconnectedness and interdependence of our culturally diverse world [22]. The diffusion of social media across the world not only respect network effect also the culture preference. When talking about China, the government censorship should be taken into consideration as well. Major international social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, were blocked since 2009 in China, which means accessing to international social media requires certain software and knowledge from the users to bypass the restricted firewalls [23].

Impact of Social Media on Intercultural Communication Competence

Global Understanding Project [24] is an online collaboration between the University of Tlemcen from Algeria and East Carolina University from the USA, where students from both universities communicate through social media tools (videoconferencing, Instant Messaging, Emails and Facebook). These social media tools are identified as the enablers of developing ICC, especially building their intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes, which this work recognizes as their ICC dimensions. The work concludes that under the impact of social media, the students' ICC increases in the Global Understanding Project.

The intersection of ICC and social media use nowadays in the context of Chinese people living in Sweden is the basis for the following question:

How does social media influence the ICC of Chinese people living in Sweden?

METHOD

This study adopts a mixed method, using a designed online survey questionnaire followed by individual interviews, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. sixteen completed surveys are collected and six interviews are conducted.

The survey is comprised of two parts: social media use, impact of social media on ICC development, while each part constructs in the fashion of making comparison of social media use and the impact between prior to Sweden and currently in Sweden. Here the social media is divided into the Chinese social media and the international social media, and the classifications are determined by where the social media tool is launched and where it gains the most popularity. The social media use is considered time spent, tools, frequency, engagement and the purpose of social media consumption. Twenty items in social media use part adopt both close-ended questions and open-ended questions. Close-ended questions refer to five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) and multiple response scales. Open-ended questions probe participants' social media preferences and their trust or concerns of social media. In order to understand retrospectively participants' social media use, all the social media tools mentioned in the survey were labelled with the year of launch. The design of survey also takes into consideration the unavailability of social media in the given year and the disinterest of the participants in social media. The second part, the impact of social media on ICC development, assesses the ICC development in the perspective of social media use. This part builds upon Fanitini’s four dimensions of ICC and derivates from his Intercultural Competence Scale (ICS) [11]. There are 53 items in his ICS, each item is the factor related to ICC dimensions and formed as five-point Likert scale. The second part borrows 16 factors (four factors of each dimension) from ICS and localizes in the fashion of social media and Sino-Swedish intercultural context. All the surveys are conducted digitally, and all data collected are archived digitally.

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The interviews help gain in-depth understanding of ICC development in each dimension and insights of
interplay of social media and ICC. The interviewees are required to give some explanations on certain items they responded in the previous survey. There are five questions addressed to the interviewees, and four of them regards their self-evaluation of development in intercultural knowledge, skills, attitude and awareness. The interviewees are asked to exemplify their experiences, feelings, interpretations and interactions. The last question focuses on interviewee’s self-interpretation of correlation between social media use and ICC development. The interviews are recorded with the consent of interviewees.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS
The results illustrate the data collected from the survey questionnaires to examine social media use, ICC development, and recur themes that in relation to interviews about the interplay of social media and ICC.

Social Media Use
Social media interest. The majority of participants confirm their interests on social media, while three of 16 participants show that they no longer have any interest on social media.

Time spent on social media. The average daily time spent on social media varies from less than one hour to more than five hours. The majority of participants only spend time on the Chinese social media or spent more time on the Chinese social media than international social media prior to Sweden. Time spent on the Chinese social media becomes the dominant pattern in current stage.

Social media tools. Prior to Sweden, the most popular Chinese social media tools are Wechat, Weibo and QQ, except two participants had no access to social media prior to Sweden due to unavailability of social media in late 1990s. In a word, there is no dominant social media tool in the participants’ lives prior to Sweden. However, in the current stage, all 16 participants confirm they use Wechat, and the second popular social media among participants is Zhihu, a Quora - like knowledge sharing platform; Himalaya Podcast ranks the third popular social media tool. It shows that the absolute predominated strength of Wechat weakens the diffusion of other social media tools. On the other hand, there are eight participants who state that they do not use the international social media tools prior to Sweden. Among other eight participants who use the international social media, the preferred social media are Skype and LinkedIn prior to Sweden. In the current stage although one participant claims that she has no access to the international social media, other participants display diversified application to Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and Instagram.

Frequency of social media use. According to figure 2, 11 participants report accessing to the Chinese social media several times per day prior to Sweden, and this trend remains currently. Except 8 participants’ no access to the international social media prior to Sweden, only one participant visits his international social media site several times daily, and three participants log into their international social media once daily. While now eight participants report use their international social media accounts several times per day. To conclude, the majority of participants use the Chinese social media more frequently than the international ones, both before and after their arrivals.

![Figure 2: Frequency of use of the Chinese social media and the international social media prior to Sweden and current stage.](image)

Social media engagement. It refers to their activities and interactions on social media, such as sharing, commenting, thumbing up and reposting on social media sites. The overview of social media engagement shown above (see figure 3) demonstrates participants are likely to be slightly more proactive on the Chinese social media than the international social media both prior to Sweden and currently. But it would be a divided topic if looked at individually. The engagement on the Chinese social media witness a downward trend, which means that compared to seven participants’ proactive engagement prior to Sweden, 10 participants adopt neutral engagements, namely mainly observation, few comments and sharing posts in the current stage. Nevertheless, the participants are increasingly involved in the international social media shifting from
extremely passive to neutral engagement. There are eight participants stating that they do not have any international social media accounts prior to Sweden, and nine participants express that they have neutral engagements in current stage.

The purpose of using social media (see figure 4). The main purposes of using social media are maintaining relationships with family & friends, getting news and information, developing new social network. Except the international social media use prior to Sweden, maintaining relationships with family & friends is the primary purpose of using social media. This purpose is greater than the purpose of developing new social network. This result verifies Rosen et al.’s finding [25] that people from collectivistic cultures (e.g. the Chinese culture) utilize social network sites to maintain relationships with close relatives or friends instead of developing new relationships with others. The Chinese social media tools satisfy various demands of the participants no matter prior to Sweden or current stage. There are three distinct decreases in the purposes of developing the social network, sharing one’s own life, familiarizing others’ lives comparing prior to Sweden to current stage. Besides mobile payment, business demand illustrates the unique purposes that the participants use the Chinese social media. The purposes of using the international social media expands drastically comparing prior to Sweden to current stage. The majority of participants do not use the international social media or they use it to get news and information prior to Sweden. Now their international social media use reflects their additional needs of familiarizing others’ lives, learning knowledge and gaining sense of belongings.

Communication with Swedish people. Eight participants express that they do not have any communication with Swedish people through social media prior to Sweden. This data verified their no access to the international social media prior to Sweden. In the current stage, all participants communicate with the Swedish through social media. There is one participant who has no access to international media, but she managed to persuade all her Swedish contacts to install Wechat to keep in touch. One participant contrasts her communication with local Swedish now and then: “There is no social media back late 1990s. The only way I can get connect to the Swedish people is through Emails, long emails full of emotions and thoughts about life. However, nowadays we just send short text messages, as short as possible.”

Degree of dependence on social media. In general, participants represent higher dependency on the Chinese social media than the international ones. About the Chinese social media, 10 participants recognize that they somewhat depend on the Chinese social media, because it enhances their life quality and efficiency; three participants show neutral dependency on the Chinese social media, which means they can manage their lives very well with or without the social media; two participants express they extremely depend on the Chinese social media, and they could not manage their lives if no social media involved. About the international social media, nine participants convey they have neutral dependency; five participants show somewhat depend on the international social media; one participant extremely depends on the international social media.
The impact of social media on their wellbeing. This question tries to probe the interplay of social media and their wellbeing (see figure 5). Consensus reached by all participants is that no one think social media brings more negative impacts than positive impacts. Prior to Sweden, four participants think social media brings positive impacts on their wellbeing; six participants claim that there are neutral impacts of social media on their wellbeing, which means either positive or negative impacts offset one other; two participants are outliers because they cannot access to social media prior to Sweden; four participants think there is no correlation between social media and their wellbeing. In the current stage, five participants think social media has positive impacts; seven participants claim that there are neutral impacts; four participants insist there is no correlation between social media and their wellbeing. If take a closer look of each participant’s choice, it shows that 13 of 16 participants take the same stance prior to Sweden and current stage. In other words, they insist the social media’s impacts on their wellbeing remain unchanged no matter prior to Sweden or now. One participant articulates the change of stances on social media impact: “Prior to Sweden, social media opens the world to the curious me, and I am eager to learn and understand anything surrounding me. So it is the positive impacts then. Today, since I have been through so many things in my life, and I have learnt to keep critical eyes. There are positive and negative news going on every minute on social media. If you are an empathetic person, your emotions will be driven up and down by the information you take in. In one way you enjoy the efficiency of using social media, in other sense, you are bothered by it and you are glued to your phone. So, I would like to take it as neutral impacts on my wellbeing nowadays.”

ICC Development Through Social Media Use

To assess the participants’ ICC development, there are 16 survey questions in this part. Each factor contrasts participants’ stances (five-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree) between prior to Sweden and current stage. In addition, some quotes from interviewees would help gain better understanding of their stances.

Intercultural knowledge development through social media use. There are four factors constructing intercultural knowledge in this survey: 1. Through my social media use, I knew the essential norms and taboos of the Swedish culture; 2. Through my social media use, my understanding of the Chinese culture is deepen; 3. Through my social media use, I could cite important historical and socio-political factors that shape Chinese & Swedish culture; 4. Through my social media use, I could discuss and contrast various behavioural patterns in my own culture with those in Sweden. In all four factors, the majority of participants take a neutral stance (neither disagree nor agree) prior to Sweden, while the majority agree to the factors in the current stage. It means that prior to Sweden, social media’s role in intercultural knowledge is hard to define while in the current stage social media helps participants to achieve their intercultural knowledge in given aspects. So that they develop their intercultural knowledge by social media use through their stays in Sweden. However, there is one participant representing opposite thinking in No.1 factor, she chooses “agree” to prior to Sweden but turn to “neutral” in the current stage. She explains “Prior to Sweden, social media is where I can get the information about Sweden. I use Renren (Facebook equivalent) to communicate with the Chinese students in Sweden to familiarize with their lives in Sweden and Swedish universities. I gained the basic knowledge about Swedish people and culture. After I came here, I hung out with my classmates and was active on Facebook. Once I formed my social network and interacted with people offline, I am kind of independent of social media, because I have other sources of information to gain intercultural knowledge.”

Intercultural attitude development through social media use. No.5-8 factors, in respect of intercultural attitude, are described as below: 5. Through my social media use, I learn Swedish language and the culture; 6. Through my social media use, I try to communicate in Swedish and behave in appropriate ways; 7. Through my social media use, I show interest in new cultural aspects; 8. Through my social media use, I try to understand differences in the behaviours, values, attitudes and styles. In all four factors, the majority of

Figure 5: The impact of social media on wellbeing prior to Sweden and current stage.
participants take a neutral stance (neither disagree nor agree) prior to Sweden, while the majority agree to the factors in the current stage. For example, one participant illustrates why she picked “neutral” prior to Sweden but chooses “strongly agree” in the current stage about Factor 8: “before I came to Sweden, the only social media I use is QQ. I seldom have chance to interact with people from other cultures. Hence it is really hard to say social media’s role to understand different behaviours and value. Currently, I can observe and contrast the Chinese behaviours, values with other cultures on social media. For instance, the Chinese people would like to ‘daily check-in’ their learning process (e.g. learning English through an app) on the social media. By doing so, they may harvest the sense of fulfillment from their network’s ‘thumb-ups’. It is hardly to find this when I interact with my foreigners. People from other cultures would check in on one activity but not involved in checking in for the learning process.”

Intercultural skills development through social media use. Four factors are stated as below: 9. Through my social media use, I demonstrated flexibility when interacting with persons from Sweden; 10. Through my social media use, I used strategies for learning the Swedish language and culture; 11. Through my social media use, I used culture-specific information to improve my style and personal interaction; 12. Through my social media use, I helped to resolve cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings when they arose. Factor 9 and 11, the majority of participants choose “neutral” stance prior to Sweden then turn to “agree” in the current stage. These results demonstrate that they realize their intercultural skills development during their stays in Sweden. However, the interesting findings lie on Factor 10 and 12 (see figure 6). There are nine participants taking “neutral” stance prior to Sweden and seven participants stay with this stance in the current stage. One participant explains why he stays in the neutral stance: “prior to Sweden, I haven’t decided whether to learn Swedish. But I do ask or search around on social media to familiar with the Swedish culture. In this circumstance, I could neither agree nor disagree to this statement. In the current stage, I have learnt the Swedish language and culture more in face to face interaction with people here than on social media, but I could not rule out the social media because you can see people’s post in Swedish now and then. In this sense, I keep my neutral stance.” The answers to Factor 12 reflect their approaches to culture differences and misunderstanding. Ten participants select neutral stance prior to Sweden and seven participants continue to take this stance. One participant articulates the reason: “When I encounter cultural conflicts or misunderstanding, I don’t comment or discuss on the social media, instead I just browse and take in the information. I think people are mature enough to make their judgements, and most of which are deeply rooted. As an individual, I don’t think I am powerful enough to change stereotypes, prejudices about culture on social media. In a word, I take the neutral stance no matter prior to Sweden or nowadays.” Another participant explains why she changes her attitude from “disagree” to “neutral”: “I have no chance to encounter cultural conflicts or misunderstandings prior to Sweden, even I encountered I might not have the sensitivity to identify it. Now I would take the neutral stance rather than in favour anyone when I face conflicts online. It is pointless to discuss some issues with someone who holds the different opinion on the social media, as a result there is no win or loss. People will get lost during the online debate and leave the topic unsolved. If I do want to talk something with my friends, I would like to meet them face-to-face and let the brain juice flow.”

Intercultural awareness development through social media use. Factor 13-16 construct statements about intercultural awareness: 13. Through my social media use, I aware of differences and similarities across the Chinese and Swedish culture; 14. Through my social media use, I aware of Swedish people’s reactions to me that reflected their cultural values; 15. Through my social media use, I aware of diversity in the Swedish culture (such as differences in race, gender age ); 16. Through my social media use, I aware of my own level of intercultural development. The majority of participants take neutral stance prior to Sweden then agree to the statement in the current stage in all four factors. This shows they achieve their developments in intercultural awareness. In Factor 16, there are nine
participants keeping neutral prior to Sweden while nine participants turn to agree in the current stage (see figure 7). One participant gives explanation to the reason changing from “neutral” to “agree” regarding Factor 16: “I agree with that social media facilitates my ICC development. Prior to Sweden, I have limited use of social media, it is difficult to define the role of social media on my ICC. Once you set foot in Sweden, you can access to all sorts of social media apps, your active learning journey starts. No one would think about their ICC when they interact with people from different culture, but when you immerse in another cultures, you were influenced gradually and unconsciously. Of course, your ability to interact with people from other culture enhanced when you would like to open to other cultures.”

Figure 7: Intercultural awareness development in the respect of Factor 16.

The impact of Social Media on Intercultural Communication Competence

This is a self-assessment of impact of social media on each participant’s ICC in the survey. To get in-depth insights, the same question is addressed to the interviewees in the interview session. Assessment (see figure 8) about prior to Sweden, five participants hold the view that there is no correlation between social media and their ICC; Four of them insist the social media brings positive impact to their ICC; five participants claim that there are neutral impacts of social media on their ICC, which means either positive or negative impacts offset one other. Nevertheless, results change dramatically in the current stage. Nine participants confirm the social media plays a positive role in their ICC; six participants claim that there are neutral impacts of social media on their ICC; one thinks no correlation between social media and their ICC. One participant chooses both positive explaining in this way: “no matter prior to Sweden or current stage, social media contributes to my ICC in a positive way. In one way it consolidates my sense of belonging to my Chinese identity, which enables my awareness of the cultural differences between China and Sweden. I respect the differences and values we hold. On the other hands, social media provides me information and opportunities to experience, adapt and integrate in the Swedish society. Although you might feel that you are overloaded with both positive and negative information, that’s how the world build up as well as the culture. If you keep an open mind, make use of the good part of the culture which can benefit your integration in the host country. On the other hand, bear in mind the part of culture you could not accept so far, and look for your own interpretation through your daily encounters. At last, either accept or adapt.” One participant changes her view from “no correlation” to “neutral” because in her opinion, “ICC is dependent of immersion in another culture, like you work, study and live in another culture or interact people from another cultures. Prior to Sweden, people mainly interact with their own culture, there is no immersion in other cultures, hence there is no direct relation between social media and ICC. In the current stage while you live in another country, social media could be biased on certain culture. It is up to you to judge what is true or false. As a result, it could not be generalised in a positive or negative role.”

Figure 8: The impact of social media on ICC prior to Sweden and current stage.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to find out the interplay between social media use and ICC through the social media use of Chinese people living in Sweden, and finally define how social media contributes to the
Chinese People’s ICC. To explore “How does social media influence the ICC of Chinese people living in Sweden?”, this study collects both quantitative and qualitative data through survey questionnaires and interviews.

Social Media Use

The results show that the majority of the Chinese in Sweden use both the Chinese and the international social media. They slightly or largely dedicate to the Chinese social media than international media regarding time spent, frequency, engagement and dependency both before and after their arrivals, although they are increasingly involved on the international social media by contrasting prior to Sweden with current stage. These findings could demonstrate the Chinese social media use strengthen their links to China and keep them updated on current events, which is quite essential to their overseas lives. While the international social media use exemplifies how they build relationships upon arrival and how they strengthen them afterwards. According to Sawyer and Chen [22], as time moves on, their social media use was switched to interact with host nationals to have better integration. However, this process of integration would take decades even lifetime to accomplish, or perhaps there is no ending point for the integration. At least in the current stage, the majority of participants still commit more on the Chinese social media than the international social media. Besides, their lengths of stay in Sweden, ages, education level, Swedish language proficiency, profession, even their trust on social media also affect their social media use.

ICC Development Through Social Media prior to the Host Country

Developing ICC through social media could start from the home country depending on the social media popularity and motivation of the social media users. An interesting finding from this study is that 2009 would be dividing line differentiate the patterns of their ICC development. It is also the year the major international social media sites were blocked in China ever since.

There are seven participants who arrived in Sweden before or in 2009, and all of them had no access to international social media before their arrival. Talking about the impact of social media on their ICC prior to Sweden, none of them define it as the positive effect. It may partly lie in that the low popularity of social media lead to very limited social media use in one's daily life, so that it might just play little role in their wellbeing let alone ICC. Because none of them had experienced communication with local Swedish people through social media, either they have no knowledge of the host country or their source of information about Sweden is what other Chinese people share on the Chinese social media. In this sense, only they are curious and open-minded enough, they would search on the social media to obtain information about the host country. Although some of the opinion on social media could be biased, these social media interactions would prepare themselves to face the cultural differences mentally.

Nine participants came to Sweden after 2009 and eight of them can access to the international social media prior to Sweden. The social media are increasingly interconnected with people’s life and become more popular in their daily patterns and routines [22]. The more popularity of the international social media, the more attractive to the Chinese social media users. However, due to the internet censorship of the Chinese government, it required special knowledge and tool for the motivated Chinese social media users to surf outside world [23]. They have the chance to communicate with local people, and prepare their overseas life such as housing, jobs even romantic relationships. Through these intercultural social interactions online, four participants claim social media plays a positive impact on their ICC prior to Sweden.

![Figure 9: Interplay of social media popularity and motivation facilitates ICC development prior to the host country.](image_url)

To sum up, whether ICC development would be achieved depending on the social media popularity and motivation in the home country. If there are neither popularity nor motivation exist, there is hardly ICC improvement; If the social media popularity remains low, the motivation can trigger the ICC development; if the social media users are driven by both social media...
popularity and motivation, it is common to witness the ICC development. Figure 9 shows that two patterns of interplay of social media popularity and motivation influence the ICC development prior to the host country, taking 2009 as a divided year for example. The overlap of social media popularity and motivation could be the origin of ICC, and it will lead to the ICC development.

ICC Development Through Social Media in the Host Country

ICC development will be reinforced through social media when interact with people from other cultures in the host country. ICC is dependent of the contexts of real social interaction and social media use, and it lies on real-life social interaction largely than social media use in the host country.

There are two phases of Chinese people using social media to gain ICC after their arrivals. The first stage is at the beginning of their arrivals, and social media is one of most the important sources of information for them to engage with offline communities. For instance, Facebook event pages showcase all kinds of offline events and activities. In this stage, the Chinese people intentionally use social media to form their network or relationships, which they might have the opportunities to interact with people from other culture offline. Through the purposeful social media use, they would achieve their ICC development. In this sense, their ICC knit tightly with social media use in the first stage. The second stage represents longer immersion and integration in the host country. In this stage, social media is a platform which social media users to regroup, maintain, and strengthen these relationships and become more integrated in the host culture [22]. Most of the participants use observation as their interaction on the international social media. They are less proactive than they behave in the first stage.

The impact of Social Media on Intercultural Communication Competence

In general, this study shows that social media influences the ICC in a positive way in the immersion in the host culture. How the participants perceive impact of social media on ICC demonstrates their understanding ICC perse. Prior to Sweden, the majority of them have no knowledge about ICC and they could not associate with other cultures. So that they cannot define the impact or they think there is no association between ICC and social media. In the current stage, most of them acknowledge the conception of ICC and detect the impact of social media on their ICC either positive or neutral. From the contrast before and after, we witness the development of ICC and social media’s positive impact on ICC, however which could not independent of real immersion in the host culture.

As other studies, this study has limitations as well. First, only 16 participants were surveyed, and six participants were interviewed. Surveying and interviewing a larger number of Chinese would be beneficial in creating a greater understanding of social media use and ICC. In addition, the factors in the survey were selected from another scholar’s ICC assessment tool. If choose another factor, it might affect the result slightly. Thirdly, the age range of the participants could be expanded. For further research, Chinese people reside in other countries should be surveyed and interviewed in order to gain a broader perspective of the interplay of social media and ICC.

CONCLUSION

The intent of this study is to explore the interplay between social media use of Chinese people living in Sweden and their ICC, and finally define how social media influence their ICC. To achieve above intent, this study examines their social media use prior to Sweden and the current stage, assess their ICC development in the two stages. Three findings can be made based on the delineation of this study to answer the research question: How does social media influence the ICC of Chinese people living in Sweden?

First, developing ICC through social media use in the home country could be possible if social media popularity and motivation of social media users co-exist. The overlap of the popularity and motivation provides the condition for ICC development. Second, ICC would be reinforced in the context of real-life social interaction and social media use. Two phases are identified to depict how social interaction and social media use at play. Last finding of this study is that social media influences ICC in a positive way, which is more obvious in the current stage than prior to the host country, whereas this positive impact would not independent of real social interaction with the host culture.

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