COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

Miscellaneous

Do social media platforms contribute to cultural integration? A case study on international students

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Submitted
April 13th, 2024
Approved
February 7th, 2025

© 2025
Communication & Society
ISSN 0214-0039
E ISSN 2386-7876
www.communication-society.com

2025 – Early Access
pp. 1-18

How to cite this article:
Bulut, S. (2025). Do social media platforms contribute to cultural integration? A case study on international students, *Communication & Society*, Early Access. https://doi.org/10.15581/003.38.2.002

Abstract

This article analyses whether social media platforms contribute positively to cultural integration and, if so, identifies the methods and features through which they achieve this. In the theoretical section of the Study, the Social Penetration Theory is explored to utilize its predictions. According to one of the core predictions of this Theory, individuals are initially reluctant to disclose personal information and keep relational closeness limited up to a certain threshold. However, as relationships deepen, the extent of self-disclosure increases. To analyze this prediction, I employed a case study approach within the research. I conducted in-depth and open-ended question interviews with international students in Turkey's higher education phase, asking about the effects of the social media platforms they have used during their social adaptation process since arriving in the country. Through the responses obtained, I performed a descriptive analysis. The findings reveal that social media participation and integration experiences among international students in Turkish higher education are similar and that social media platforms tend to have more negative than positive effects during the adaptation process. Significant challenges for integration include language learning, communication with peers, and dealing with discriminatory/hostile expressions. Conversely, the facilities their universities provide, official integration activities, and the advanced culture of solidarity in their physical and social environments offer significant benefits. Therefore, it is recommended that social media platforms develop inclusive, favorable policies for minority or ethnically/culturally diverse groups.

Keywords

Cultural integration, international students, MAXQDA, self-disclosure, social media, Social Penetration Theory.

1. Introduction

Social media can shape interpersonal communication between individuals and society, and individuals and the state, while also having the capacity to influence both targeted and unintended communication and orientations. In this context, social media is decisive in facilitating communication or integration for international students. It is feasible to regard social media as a backdrop of new news technologies because social media platforms allow individuals to be informed about fundamental issues that are important for people's social lives in many respects.

According to the results obtained from a study by Alencar (2017, p. 1588), social media sites are particularly relevant in enabling refugee participants to acquire language and cultural competencies and to develop social capital that is both bonding and bridging. Social media can provide immigrants with general information about human rights, citizenship, and local immigrant support services and assist them in overcoming feelings of isolation by presenting the cultural practices of their homelands and their new countries of arrival (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). These are some of the opportunities offered by social media platforms.

The impact of social media can vary across different age groups and on various topics. Zhao claims that social use of social media positively affects social integration and life satisfaction; entertainment use harms social integration and has no significant effect on life satisfaction (2023, p. 249). Therefore, to elucidate the impact of social media on social integration, it may be necessary to identify who uses these platforms and for what purpose. According to Yen and Dey (2019, p. 2), the role of social media is not monolithic due to its significant paradoxes. Because on social media platforms, there are fine lines between positive messages aimed at integration and polarizing statements, hate speech, and racism.

Social media facilitates rather than eliminates polarization, enabling consumers' encounters with chosen socio-cultural 'others.' (Cappellini et al., 2019, p. 22). Social media discussions have provided spaces where the 'lonely crowds' produced by the hyper-individualism of neoliberal society can come together, allowing the atoms of scattered social networks to reconfigure into a new political community an online crowd consisting of partisan supporters (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 750).

When considered from the opposite perspective, algorithmic filters' ability to gather crowds can also lay the groundwork for the equal rise of primary demands and ideas related to refugees and asylum seekers. Examples similar to these situations continue to be provided daily on social media platforms through hashtags, echo chambers, and filter bubbles with data flows, trends, and personalized content.

The above researches deliver insightful findings on how social media influences integration and interpersonal connections. Investigating the effects of social media, which vary based on the demographic attributes of user groups and context, is deemed crucial, particularly for students who migrate to other countries due to rising wars and internal disturbances. At this juncture, it becomes essential to understand the current state of how social media influences social integration, mainly through the experiences of international students. In this context, this study investigates to what extent international students living in Turkey utilize social media platforms during their integration process in Turkey, whether social media platforms represent an advantage or disadvantage for international students, and whether the perspectives of international students on their integration and adaptation process align with the approaches of Social Penetration Theory (SPT). Within the scope of the study, the term social media refers to Turkey's most frequently used social media platforms. According to many academic studies, the most widely used social media platforms in Turkey are Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X (Çetinkaya et al., 2014; Kuyucu, 2016; Savci et al., 2018; Dataportal, 2024). In this

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context, it is predicted that the social media platforms that are most effective in social integration processes within the scope of this research are the platforms mentioned here.

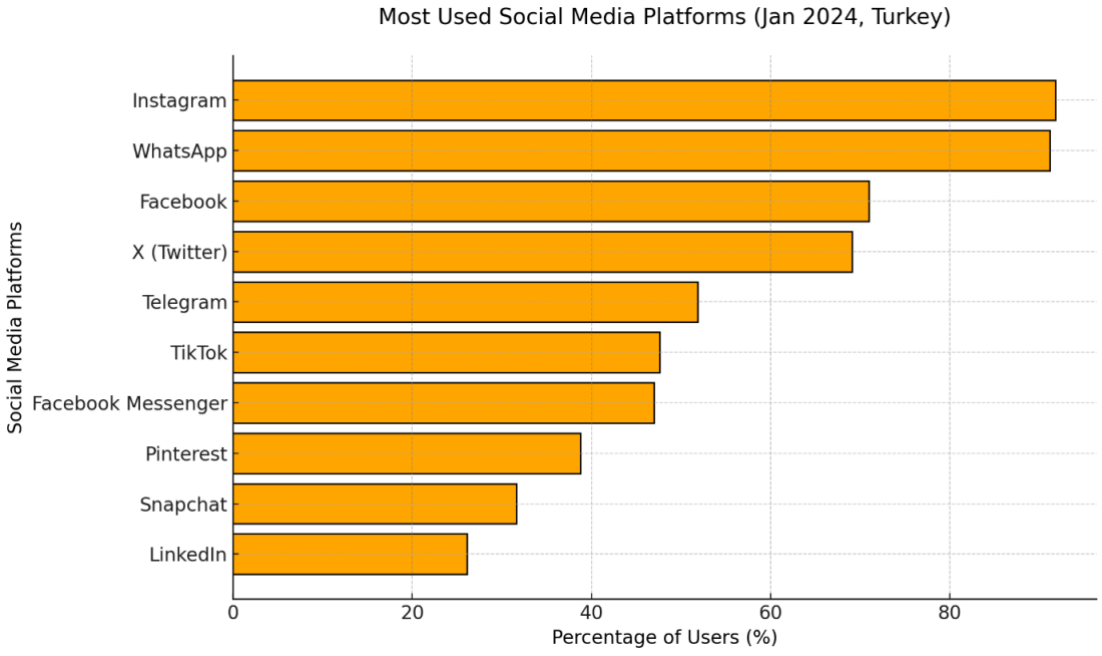
The present work has coded the data from in-depth and one-on-one interviews with international students using MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis program. The Study conducted a descriptive analysis to explore how the findings align with the SPT's predictions.

2. Social Media Use in Turkey

Social networking sites are the most popular method of sharing news in Turkey. When Turkish adults are asked about six different IT platforms they might use to share news with family or friends, social networking services emerge as the most popular, mentioned by 37.1%. Posting comments online or on someone else's blog was the second most frequently used means of sharing news (23.1%). However, substantial percentages also use online videos via services like YouTube (13.1%) and microblogging services like Twitter (12.3%) and video chat services (9.0%) to share news (US Agency for Global Media, 2024). Daily use of social media in Turkey is reported to be "3:01 hours" (1, 2). In addition, according to Google Play, the first list of the most popular free apps is social media applications. These social media applications (Messenger, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and X) have been downloaded approximately 4 billion times. This shows that the internet and social media are at least as demanding as basic needs (Savci et al., 2018, p. 248).

Turkey had 74.41 million internet users at the start of 2024 when internet penetration stood at 86.5 percent. Turkey was home to 57.50 million social media users in January 2024, 66.8 percent of the total population. Meanwhile, data published in the ad planning tools of top social media platforms indicates that there were 54.30 million users aged 18 and above using social media in Turkey at the start of 2024, equivalent to 86.8 percent of the total population aged 18 and above. More broadly, 77.3 percent of Turkey's internet user base (regardless of age) used at least one social media platform in January 2024 (Dataportal, 2024). Figure 1 shows which social media platforms are most frequently used in Turkey in 2024.

Figure 1. Most used social media platforms in Turkey in 2024.



Source: Adapted from https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-turkey (2024).

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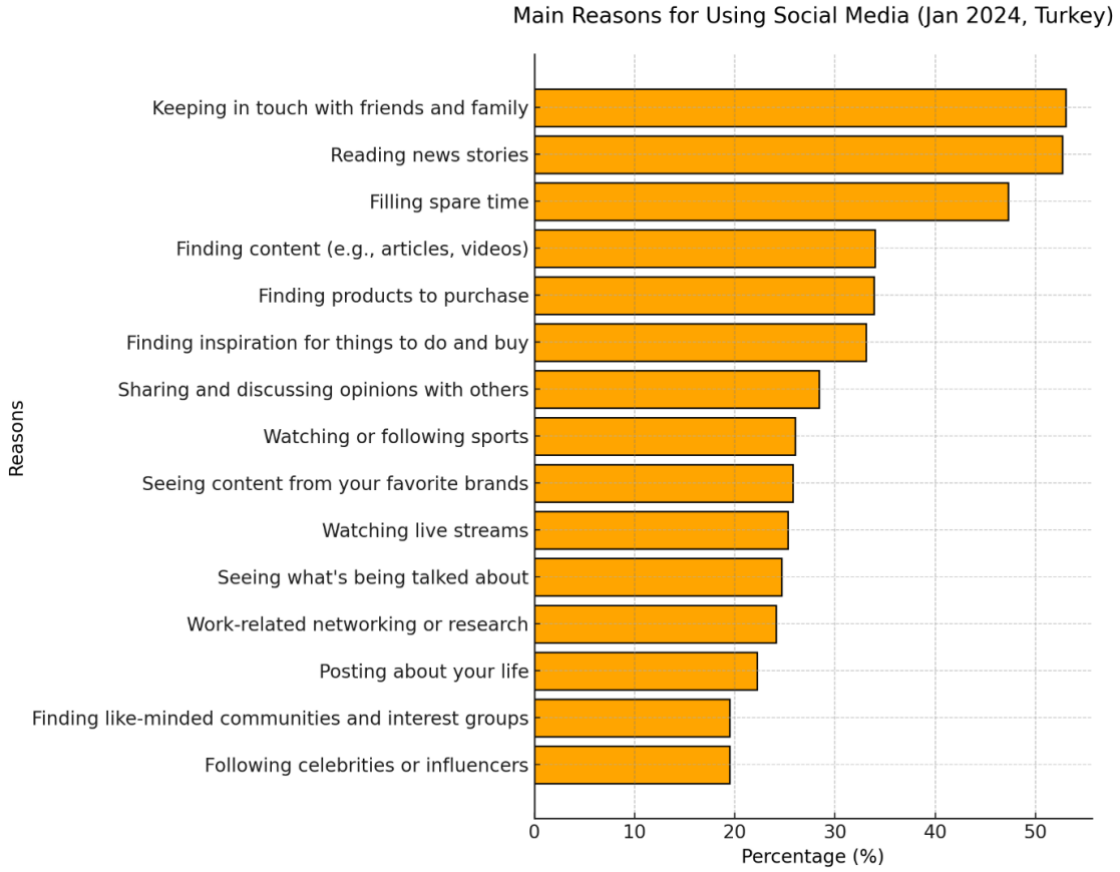
Upon examining Figure 1, it is evident that the most frequently used social media platforms in Turkey are Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and X.

Çetinkaya et al. (2014, p. 50) investigated the use of social media in Turkey for social and political purposes. According to the study's findings, most participants (46.6%) spent 2–4 hours per day on social media, and 75.6% of these users accessed social media via smartphones. The proportion of participants who reported using social media for political and social purposes was 11.2%. Among these users, 78.9% shared political and social information through Facebook and X. Additionally, 67.7% of participants frequently used X specifically for political and social purposes.

According to Kuyucu (2016, p. 97), there is a significant relationship between social media usage and age. Members of Generation Y use social media more frequently than members of Generation X. Members of Generation X use Facebook and do not use many other social media tools, while members of Generation Y use Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube actively in addition to Facebook. Supporting this information, Figure 2 illustrates the primary reasons why individuals in Turkey used social media platforms in 2024.

Figure 2. Main reasons why people use social media in Turkey



Source: Adapted from https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-turkey (2024).

As observed in Figure 2, individuals primarily use social media platforms for key purposes such as socializing, reading news, spending leisure time, seeking information and content, and conducting searches for purchasing products.

Regarding education and integration processes in universities, the use of social media affects students' interactions with faculty members, peer interaction, and class participation

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(Bozanta & Mardikyan, 2017, p. 96). Buyukcorak and Dinc (2020, p. 23), in their study on the use of social media by young people in Turkey, stated that young people who use social media networks are influenced in a wide range of areas from, clothing choices to restaurants to eat at and how they should express their emotional feelings. On the other hand, Ozdemir (2021, p. 281) found that social media users in Turkey mostly use social media for reading news, entertainment, and information.

The increasing use and effectiveness of social media applications have led to the question of how international students use these applications in the process of integrating into Turkish communities through social media applications.

3. Social Penetration Theory (SPT)

SPT posits that communication shifts from superficial to deeper and more meaningful as a relationship develops. This Theory was formulated by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973 (Communication Theory, 2022). SPT is achieved primarily through self-disclosure, a process designed to reveal personal information. Opening up increases intimacy in relationships to a certain extent. SPT can occur in various contexts, including romantic relationships, friendships, social groups, and professional relationships (Communication Theory, 2022). Carpenter and Greene (2015, p. 1) have applied the Theory to computer-mediated communication contexts, including online dating and virtual teams. SPT is the 'onion theory' of personality because it describes how intimacy grows by penetrating the 'layers' of personality over time (Baack et al., 2000, p. 40).

Altman and Taylor's SPT highlights three functions related to relationship development (1973). Specifically, the Theory explains how relationships progress through stages of penetration, helps elucidate how people psychologically respond to interpersonal communication at each stage, and aids in predicting whether a relationship will advance based on communication at a given stage (Manning, 2009, p. 295).

Based on the system theory approach (Allensworth, 1996), SPT views relationships as mini systems formed, sustained, and altered through interactions. The process of self-disclosure progresses through four distinct phases (Altman & Taylor, 1973): orientation (initial interactions focusing on hobbies preferences), exploratory affective exchange (beginning to share more personal aspects of one's personality), full affective exchange (sharing of deeper intimate details), and stable exchange (complete openness achieved, marked by ongoing transparency).

> SPT regards the formation of relationships as a dynamic process in which relationships evolve from the most superficial and public stages to more intimate and personal levels. As relationships develop, they delve deeper into private and personal matters, penetrating the public persona to reach individuals' core personalities or self-perceptions. People allow others into their public selves by disclosing personal information, turning self-disclosure into a 'tool' for transitioning from one level of relationship to another (Panos, 2014, p. 188).

SPT plays a pivotal role in social psychology. It posits that individuals assess the rewards and costs associated with interpersonal interactions. Rewards may manifest as mutual disclosures and approval from others, whereas costs could come in the form of increased vulnerability and the 'risks' associated with others (Tang & Wang, 2012, p. 245). Individuals base their decision to disclose on the anticipated rewards of revealing that information. If an individual perceives that the costs of disclosing the information outweigh the benefits of doing so, then no information will be disclosed. As individuals' relationships with others develop, the tendency to share also increases (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The process of sharing and integration, along with the calculation of rewards and costs, only sometimes consists of conscious actions.

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SPT identifies four disclosure layers: surface, periphery, intermediate, and central, as outlined by Altman and Taylor (1973). Surface disclosures involve sharing superficial information that is easily observable or non-sensitive, like weather opinions or current classes, which can sometimes lead to deeper conversations. Peripheral disclosures are those comfortably shared in social settings without requiring intimacy, such as liking a sports team, and cover topics like geographic and family background or general preferences. Intermediate disclosures involve more selective sharing of personal opinions and preferences on topics like politics or movies, going beyond superficial likes or dislikes. Central disclosures reveal intimate and private information to close friends, partners, or family, often explaining the motivations behind one's beliefs or experiences. This tiered approach to sharing information illustrates how relationships progress from sharing low-risk information to more significant, intimate details (Pennington, 2015, pp. 5-6).

SPT suggests that communication and self-disclosure are pivotal for strangers to become friends, marking a crucial step in advancing relationships. However, transitioning from one relationship stage to another often takes considerable time due to the inherent risks of self-disclosure, such as potential relationship regression or dissolution (Perbawaningsih, 2016, p. 44). SPT describes how relationships deepen in intimacy, moving from surface-level interactions to more profound, intimate communication. This concept of intimacy is not limited to physical closeness but includes intellectual and emotional connections, emphasizing the importance of sharing personal information and activities. Altman and Taylor (1973) posit that SPT highlights the importance of self-disclosure's breadth and depth in forming and sustaining relationships. Breadth refers to the range of topics of one's personality shared with others, while depth relates to the intimacy level of the disclosed information within those topics.

According to others (Kays et al., 2016), social media can transform the typical nature of self-disclosure and, in specific scenarios, may facilitate a faster occurrence of more intimate emotional revelations. SPT, predominantly a voluntary and planned disclosure form, can encompass processes observable on social media platforms. Therefore, international students disclosing themselves, making declarations, or participating in opinion discussions on social media platforms can also be considered part of the social penetration and integration process. SPT suggests a sharing model that allows the disclosure of increasingly private information.

3.1. Social media and self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is a two-way interaction involving a discloser and a recipient, spanning cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. The relationship dynamics influence the timing, nature, and manner of disclosure, whether in a single instance or progressively over time (Sprecher et al., 2018, pp. 164-165). Tang and Wang (2012, p. 245) claim that self-disclosure, the intentional sharing of personal insights and experiences, is essential for interpersonal bonds. With digital progress, it extends to sharing information online and offline, anonymously or not, showcasing the evolution of communication. Self-disclosure plays a crucial role in elevating relationships to higher levels of intimacy. This practice is beneficial not just for cultivating relationships in the physical world but is also deemed crucial in online environments, particularly in activities related to giving and receiving advice (Lei et al., 2023, p. 435).

Self-disclosure has pros and cons. It promotes mutual openness and trust, which are crucial for relationships. Nevertheless, over-sharing early might be considered insecurity, risking rejection for seeming unlikable or inappropriate (Steinberg, 2007). Individuals have protective layers concealing their core selves, serving as barriers to self-disclosure that are not shed simultaneously. Through gradually revealing and removing these layers, deeper, more

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intimate aspects are disclosed. This process, termed social penetration, gradually deepens the intensity and intimacy of self-disclosure (Tang & Wang, 2012).

According to Luo and Hancock (2020, p. 112), self-disclosure on social media, aimed at expressing emotions and thoughts to alleviate pent-up feelings, aligns with traditional research suggesting individuals experiencing psychological distress engage in self-expression as a stress-relief method. Supporting this, Zhang found that increased stress levels led to more self-disclosure online. A potential explanation is that individuals with lower self-esteem view social media as a safer platform for self-expression and a means to gain social compensation, like enhanced attention and support from others. Social media's anonymity enables authentic self-disclosure, while its control allows for curated self-presentation and the portrayal of an idealized self, surpassing face-to-face communication's limitations (Schlosser, 2020).

However, Perbawaningsih (2016, p. 44) claims that in social media relationships, barriers like semantic misunderstandings due to the limits of language in conveying true thoughts and feelings are significant, while other hindrances, like physical, psychological, and physiological ones are less impactful. This situation may facilitate the quicker formation of relationships, yet these relationships often need more quality and durability than those established through face-to-face interactions. According to Walsh and colleagues (2020), studies on online privacy management indicate that individuals are more inclined to share personal information on social media when they see the benefits of disclosure as high and the risks as low. Specifically, when users are less worried about others' reactions or misuse of their shared data, they tend to fill their profiles with more personal details and apply fewer privacy controls to their posts.

4. Objective and research questions

This Study investigates how international higher education students in Turkey utilize social media platforms during their social integration processes and whether these platforms facilitate their integration into society. The theoretical foundation for this research is rooted in SPT. According to this Theory, individuals engage in a risk and cost calculation when disclosing themselves to others; if the benefits outweigh the risks, they can share their intimate thoughts with other individuals. Another premise of the Theory posits that as individuals' communication processes with others evolve and their relationships deepen, the frequency and depth of sharing and disclosures will increase accordingly. This theoretical viewpoint guided the conduct of face-to-face and comprehensive interviews with students enrolled in higher education institutions in Turkey. Open-ended questions grounded in SPT's theoretical approaches were presented to the participants, and their responses were gathered as foundational research data. The Study aims to assess the role of social media within the context of integration processes.

The primary aim of this study is to determine whether the use of any social media platform by non-Turkish students (from various national backgrounds) studying at higher education institutions in Turkey facilitates their integration into Turkish universities and society from the time of their arrival in Turkey to the period during which the study was conducted. Additionally, the study seeks to examine whether their integration processes align with the core propositions of Social Penetration Theory. In this context, the study seeks to clarify which social media platforms international students in Turkey utilize, whether these platforms have any impact on their integration into Turkish society, and whether they establish a direct connection between social media platforms and their social integration processes. These three areas have been identified as sub-objectives under the primary aim. The following research questions were developed based on the study's main aim and sub-objectives.

RQ1: How is the integration of international students pursuing their education in Turkey into Turkish culture and system described?

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RQ2: What are the primary challenges in this integration process, and how has social media influenced the related integration process?
RQ2: How can the relationship between SPT's approaches to interpersonal communication and interaction processes and the evaluations of international students on the integration process?

5. Method

In this study, students who came to Turkey from other countries and registered for higher education were selected as the sample group. Accordingly, the Study is based on purposive sampling criteria. For inclusion in the sample, it was established that the relevant students must be able to speak Turkish, be university students, and use at least one social media platform as the criteria for purposive sampling. After obtaining ethical approval from Cukurova University, it was contacted international students from higher education institutions between January 1 and January 30, 2023. Participants were reached through student groups, social media platforms, and communication channels and groups (without joining these groups). After obtaining their consent and conveying the consent form, they were invited students to participate in the interviews. These students were not required to be enrolled in a specific department or field of Study. In the study, in-depth interviews with 17 students were conducted, involving open-ended questions.

Table 1. Participants' countries and social media preference information

Nr	Gender	Country	Social Media Preference
P1	M	Syria	Facebook, X
P2	M	Turkmenistan	Facebook, X, Instagram
P3	F	Algeria	Facebook
P4	F	Libya	Facebook, Instagram, X, Whatsapp, Telegram
P5	F	Syria	Instagram, X
P6	F	Palestine	Instagram, Messenger
P7	M	Syria	Facebook, X
P8	M	Egypt	Facebook, X, Youtube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Telegram
P9	F	Egypt	Whatsapp
P10	M	Liberia	WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat
P11	F	Tunisia	Instagram – WhatsApp
P12	F	Syria	WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Messenger
P13	M	Algeria	WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook
P14	F	Palestine	Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram
P15	M	Serbia	Instagram, Telegram, Snapchat, X, Discord
P16	F	Syria	X, Instgram, Tiktok
P17	M	Egypt	Facebook, Instagram

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 1 shows the social media platforms used by the participants in their countries and Turkey. According to Table 1, five participants came from Syria, three from Egypt, two from Algeria, and two from Palestine. There is also one participant each from Turkmenistan, Libya, Liberia, Tunisia, and Serbia. The most frequently used social media platforms are Facebook, X, Instagram and WhatsApp.

After the interviews, I recorded their responses in separate Word documents, each containing the evaluations of one student, and arranged them for coding. Instead of using a predetermined codebook, I subjected these documents to text analysis through MAXQDA 2020, coding them within the framework of themes that emerged during the text analysis. Themes

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shaped within the framework of coding and text analysis, respectively, *Social Media and Self-Disclosure*, *Personality in Cultural Integration*, *Approaches in Online and Offline Environments*, *General Cultural Integration*, *Social Media and Cultural Integration*, *Being an International Student*, *The Impact of Social Media on Socialization*, and *Reasons for Following on Social Media*.

Before the interviews were conducted, the *Cukurova University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee in Social Sciences and Humanities* approved our interviews on December 1st, 2022. Respondents gave written consent for review and signature before starting interviews.

The research reached participants, with eight male students and nine female students. The youngest participant is 20 years old, while the oldest is 32. Four participants are graduate students, and 13 are undergraduates in their third or fourth year. Seven participants are enrolled in humanities programs, while ten are in other fields. Efforts were made to ensure a balanced diversity in the departments where education is received. The most frequently used social media platforms among the participants are Facebook (10 participants) and Instagram (12 participants).

For the analysis of the data, I utilized a descriptive analysis approach. To ascertain the correlation between the assessments of students and Social Penetration Theory (SPT), I deemed it necessary to conduct a text analysis within a qualitative framework. I employed a descriptive and exploratory analysis method to examine individuals' use of social media in Turkey, the perceptual approaches of the Turkish society toward students who are in the country but not citizens, and how these approaches affect the integration of international students into the society. I implemented an analytical style that references the fundamental approaches of SPT concerning the student's thoughts on the subject. Consequently, an analysis method prevalent in the field of communication was applied within the analysis process, which was determined through interview data collection techniques and MAXQDA coding. In summary, the research was conducted using a qualitative research design and descriptive analysis, framing the exploration based on individuals' experiences and subjective thoughts regarding integration.

6. Results and discussion

6.1. *Social Media and Self-Disclosure*

Within the scope of this theme, responses were sought to whether participants openly expressed their personal opinions on facts and events through their social media accounts. Most participants have reported sharing their personal views or perspectives via social media. Some participants explained that societal values drive their reason for sharing. For example, P2 (2023) stated, "Yes, because staying silent on certain issues does not make sense, especially from a values perspective." P3 (2023, personal communication) has highlighted the concept of freedom:

> Individuals of varying intellectual, scientific, and educational backgrounds can be found on social media. This diversity sometimes makes it challenging to articulate my opinions and thoughts. Nonetheless, every educated person has to contribute to positive change. The role of the intellectual is to endeavor to amend the behaviors of others by leveraging all available tools, such as social media. Those who shirk this responsibility under the guise that it is not theirs to bear fail to enrich their education, position, and culture.

People generally perceive expressing their opinions as a necessity. However, P6 articulates their perspective on this matter: "Not everything, because we all know that we do not possess absolute freedom to do so. Our accounts are monitored, and we do not believe that everyone would understand what we mean." On the other hand, some emphasize that social media is not an appropriate venue for expressing thoughts. For instance, P12 (2023, personal communication)

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mentions using social media only as an archive in recent times. P14 (2023, personal communication) stated that they never share personal information due to malicious individuals and software. Meanwhile, P15 (2023, personal communication) has observed that social media represents both an advantage and a disadvantage in this context.

Numerous factors influence the inclination or sentiment towards sharing personal thoughts on social media. Just as some feel free in this context and others perceive the opposite, some participants declare that engaging in individual and cultural discussions is a responsibility. Considering the predictions of SPT, P3's statements align with them. P3 expresses that the presence of individuals with different characteristics on social media acts as a barrier to sharing their thoughts, indicating that a calculation of cost is involved.

The primary objective of the study and its research questions centered on whether social media has a direct impact on integration. As indicated in this section, social media platforms do not have a direct or facilitating effect on social integration processes. Instead, these platforms are often perceived as spaces where surveillance and privacy loss occur, negatively influencing socialization processes. This perception leads users to adopt a cautious and distant approach toward social media platforms during their social integration journeys.

6.2. *Personality in cultural integration*

Within this theme, there has been an effort to evaluate how personal characteristics affect the cultural adaptation of international students to the society in which they live. Participants have generally indicated that personality plays a significant positive role in social adaptation. For instance, P2 (2023, personal communication) noted that the shared cultures of their home country and Turkey, part of Middle Eastern culture, facilitate the integration process. This notion aligns with the SPT's assertion that familiarity with the person one communicates with leads to greater self-disclosure (Carpenter & Greene, 2015). This prediction of the Theory emerges in P2's explanation through the expressions 'familiarity' and 'having similar cultures.' The assertion that the essential foundation for individuals to convey their feelings and thoughts to others lies in getting to know the counterpart with whom they are developing a dialogue finds resonance in cultural similarities among participants. For instance, P3 (2023, personal communication) expressed great admiration for Turkish traditions but mentioned that friendly relations with the surrounding society did not progress positively, leading to psychological and social disconnection. This adverse progression reflects the SPT's prediction that 'as relationships develop, the nature of communication becomes more distinct.' In an environment lacking friendly communication, the possibilities for idea exchange and adaptation become more challenging.

P4 expressed that they gained confidence as they became more acquainted with society and became aware of their rights and responsibilities. Accordingly, disinformation and hate speech circulating at the national level about refugees and asylum seekers are among the most impactful negative situations for many international students, including P4. According to P4, expressions of hate speech and racism are factors that complicate social integration and alienate the individual from societal phenomena. Another participant, P5, also responded to alignment with the core predictions of the SPT.

> I accept people once I get to know them well. Their religion, race, or color does not matter to me as long as they are human. Unfortunately, what is difficult for me is that I often feel shy during the getting-to-know phase, and I am afraid of being excluded.

Considering the objectives and research questions of the study, it is possible to make the following interpretation: SPT posits that individuals make reward and cost calculations in their

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relationships (Tang & Wang, 2012). P5 describes the primary reward as thoroughly getting to know the people they communicate with and engaging in dialogue after making no distinctions among humans. This approach enhances communication and harmony between individuals and societies. On the other hand, being shy in communication and fearing exclusion can also be considered primary costs, especially for international.

Participants stated that as they learn the language of their society, become familiar with its culture, and socialize, their personalities play a more effective role in communication processes. Here, the focus is also on self-confidence, entrepreneurship, and openness. The text highlights that voluntarily participating in social and cultural activities and exchanging ideas contribute to outcomes. Generally, participants have mentioned that their cultures and Turkish cultures are similar, facilitating personal adaptation and cultural integration processes.

6.3. *Approaches in online and offline environments*

This theme discusses participants' views on the host society's behavior and approaches towards international students. Also, the theme is detailed to evaluate individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and discourse toward online and offline international university students. Nearly all participants expressed that people develop different perspectives toward international students online and offline. Students generally reported encountering racist language on social media platforms, but in university settings and their physical surroundings, people were more understanding, calm, and engaged in friendly relations. Participants indicated that the negative language and approaches on social media platforms are mainly due to the nature of language and attitude prevalent on social media. For example, P2 (2023, personal communication) explains their thoughts on this issue by associating it with misinformation:

> Although the media significantly impacts society, the societal perspective towards international students is positive. However, misinformation leads to communication gaps and prejudices.

Here, as in many adverse situations, the emphasis is placed on the significant problem posed by incorrect and targeted information. It points to the very different nature of social media compared to physical environments. For instance, while analyzing the way sources and promoters of fake news operate over the web through multiple online platforms, Zannettou and colleagues (Aïmeur et al., 2023, p. 14) discovered that false information is more likely to spread across platforms (18% appearing on multiple platforms) compared to accurate information (11%). Thus, misinformation and news targeting international students have a similar effect to other misinformation. The participants' evaluations of social media platforms reflect this situation. Participants have thus expressed that, rather than social media, universities effectively enable international students' cultural integration into their society. Because university students express that other international students do not find the same opportunities for socialization as they do. Participants have emphasized that Turkish society generally consists of understanding, helpful, and friendly individuals. However, they have also pointed out that unfriendly accounts on social media platforms conducting fake news campaigns against international students reflect offline relationships, particularly fueling racism against Syrians and Afghans with numerous false reports. Participants note that most opinions on social media platforms often contradict reality over time, originating from individuals' subjective ideas but still convincing societies. Indeed, we are going through times where empathy and understanding are diminishing, even on sensitive topics on social media platforms. According to Alloway and colleagues (2014, p. 151), frequent social media use exposes individuals to intense emotions and adverse events, reducing sensitivity to emotional experiences and affecting real-life

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interactions. Konrath and colleagues (2010) found a significant drop in empathy among college students from 1979 to 2009, especially in the last decade, aligning with increased social media usage. They attributed this decline in empathy to a rise in individualism and self-centered attitudes, encapsulated in the term 'Generation Me.' Another participant, P16 (2023, personal communication), emphasizes the normalizing effects of the media: "The language of the media fails to convey the suffering immigrants endure to the local citizens adequately. It oversimplifies the news and normalizes the situation, reinforcing racism without creating any impact on the viewer."

P3 (2023, personal communication) shared that their friends in Turkey were constructive in the adaptation process and that they learned a lot from them. Therefore, akin to the SPT, deepening and increasing social relationships aid in integrating international students in the host country and make it easier for individuals to disclose themselves (Panos, 2014). P3 also conveyed the following thoughts: "University dormitories significantly integrate international students into Turkish society with their diverse and ongoing cultural and sports activities. As for social media, we only find racism there." P3 emphasizes that the practices on social media platforms can be described as 'racism' while discussing how universities and social activities contribute to the social integration process. Like other participants, P3 has highlighted that social media is far from serving a function that enhances social harmony. The participant's observation highlights not only that the media normalizes pain and suffering but also stokes racism.

For international students, activities on social media platforms tend to highlight disadvantaged situations more prominently. Social media platforms often circulate racist, discriminatory, and hate-filled discourse, especially targeting migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. These elements pose significant challenges for participants attempting to use social media platforms as tools for socialization and integration. Participants reported feeling more comfortable forming friendships, expressing themselves, and experiencing less marginalization in physical environments.

6.4. *Social media and cultural integration*

In addition to discussing the broader topic of cultural integration, the Study also specifically sought participants' views on the impact of social media platforms on cultural integration. Participants voiced significant critiques of social media. For example, P1 (2023, personal communication) stated that social media platforms fail to stop publishing activities contrary to human rights and the principle of equality, such as bullying, racism, and hate speech. Mainly because baseless claims, hate speech, and racism-centered discourses can quickly spread on social media platforms, they can negatively impact individuals' socialization needs and desires. In this context, while social media may not always reflect society's agenda, it can become a suitable platform for desires and demands. On the other hand, participants noted that social media contributes to interacting with individuals who share similar opinions.

> Social media not only influences the integration of societies but also impacts the user base in forming ideas about the lifestyle they wish to lead. Social media influences everyone to aspire to adopt the lifestyle prevalent in the USA, consuming every new product, and altering their behaviors (P2, 2023, personal communication).

Therefore, there is no inherent issue with social media's ability to create perceptions that lead to changes in thoughts and attitudes among its target audience. Online platforms commonly produce such effects. However, suppose the predominant ideas on social media platforms support xenophobia and racism-centered discourses instead of promoting social

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harmony within society. In that case, the impact can be harmful and grow increasingly adverse. P2 has stated that social media platforms construct lifestyles within standard and specific patterns. Even when considered to foster social harmony, these platforms maintain this harmony within specific dominant values and lifestyles.

According to participants, knowing what behaviors and ideas a culture considers right and wrong within its societal context before firsthand experience would be beneficial. This function also shows that social media effectively disseminates encyclopedic knowledge. That is, social media efficiently manages to show specific information peculiar to a culture, group, or community. For instance, respect, family and kinship relations, and special rituals during festivals and occasions are frequently encountered on social media platforms (P8, 2023, personal communication). According to P14 (2023, personal communication), social media has contributed to faster language learning and better social integration. P15's (2023, personal communication) statements align with the SPT's prediction of 'opening up and disclosing oneself as one gets to know others.'

> When we first arrived in this country, we encountered difficulties reaching agreements and exchanging information with others. Gradually, we started to resolve these problems by becoming more integrated into the community. The problems or challenges we experienced turned into conveniences for us. The social media platforms we used made a significant contribution. For international students coming to this country, social media platforms have benefited from getting to know the country and have presented it favorably. Thus, they have contributed to removing barriers to initiate new international relations.

P15 anticipates that social media has quite significant functions. From getting to know the country to improving international relations, P15 has pointed out that social media platforms serve various positive functions. In other words, despite the prevalent view of social media platforms as centers of disinformation and racist discourse, some participants also highlight their positive functions.

The findings, which can be evaluated within the scope of the study's objectives and research questions, are clarified under various themes. The preceding sections established that social media affects the integration process adversely. However, this theme provides further insight into the nature of these adverse effects. One of the primary negative impacts of social media platforms is the lack of adequate moderation to prevent fraudsters and deceptive individuals. With their unregulated and uncontrolled nature, these platforms allow false and discriminatory discourses to circulate freely, often driven by the pursuit of engagement. Participants expressed clear dissatisfaction with this issue. Another observation is the disconnect between the public's expressed desires and opinions shared on these platforms and the limited reflection of these sentiments in broader public discourse. The rapid spread of fake news and deliberate misinformation fosters prejudice and misunderstandings. For participants, this structure of social media platforms is perceived as hindering rather than facilitating social integration.

6.5. *Being an international student*

This theme assesses the fundamental difficulties and potential advantages of being an international student in a country. Under this topic, participants primarily discussed the problems they faced due to being international students. Most participants emphasized that not knowing the country's legal system and, most importantly, its language posed significant challenges. Being away from family was mentioned as another significant difficulty. P4 (2023, personal communication) shared their thoughts on this matter by stating, "One of the most significant challenges I faced in my first year of university life in Turkey as an international

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student was the difficulty of communicating with friends due to language, racism, and adapting to a new environment and cultural differences," thus highlighting incidents and actions of racism. P4 also referred to their initial days in the country, mentioning they did not engage in discussions due to a lack of knowledge about their legal rights. However, they began participating as they became aware of their rights and informed those around them about false news concerning international students.

Within the scope of the research questions, this theme highlights key responses related to the challenges social media platforms pose in social integration processes. Participants noted that the exclusionary and alienating discourses emerging from interactions within Turkish communities on social media platforms have made integration processes more difficult. Due to these discourses, participants reported occasionally experiencing a sense of disconnection or lack of belonging. Additionally, participants indicated that their limited proficiency in Turkish created difficulties in adequately expressing themselves. Despite these challenges, some participants acknowledged certain advantages of living in Turkey. These include exploring a new culture, learning a new language, and meeting people from a different country. Career opportunities, increased responsibilities, and enhanced self-confidence were also highlighted as significant benefits. P14 articulated their thoughts on this: “Benefiting from a high-quality education enables us to climb the ladder of success in life and our professions more easily when we return to our home country.” Thus, participants also evaluated the importance of receiving a quality education in Turkey regarding the professional gains they would achieve upon returning to their home countries.

7. Conclusion

This Study analyzed the experiences of international higher education students studying in Turkey regarding their socialization and cultural adaptation processes in light of the predictions of the SPT. According to the Theory, communication and relationships between individuals become more meaningful as they get to know each other better and deepen their relationships, gradually disclosing information specific to themselves and their personalities. The Theory also suggests that relationships naturally deepen and improve in an established environment of mutual trust. Moreover, individuals, sometimes consciously and unconsciously, perform reward and cost calculations on their relationships. The rewards individuals can gain from a relationship or interaction and the costs it may incur determine how much they disclose themselves to others. In beneficial relationships, individuals experience an increased sense of sharing and togetherness, while in those perceived as having a negative impact, the relationship remains superficial without delving into personality traits.

Based on the evaluations above, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with university students living in Turkey, aligning with the Theory’s predictions, and asked open-ended questions. The analyses did not yield general findings that fully aligned with or contradicted the Theory’s predictions. While some students stated that social media has positive effects on cultural integration and socialization, a significant number also view these platforms as venues for the spread of racism and hate-centered discourses. Most participants reported experiencing more negative effects than positive ones from social media platforms in their socialization and societal adaptation processes in Turkey.

The findings obtained in this study reveal significant outcomes within the scope of the research questions. Regarding RQ1, the results indicate that international students initially hesitated upon arriving in Turkey. However, their integration into Turkish society accelerated as they began socializing within university environments. Participants reported progress in learning Turkish, gaining awareness of certain social and legal rights, and expanding their

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knowledge of Turkish history and culture. Many participants highlighted that their integration into Turkish society was relatively more straightforward due to the cultural similarities they observed between Turkey and their home countries. Concerning RQ2, the findings suggest that participants' most significant challenge during their integration process was their initial need for more proficiency in Turkish. Participants emphasized that knowing and being able to communicate in the host country's language was a primary factor in overcoming many difficulties. Most participants perceived the role of social media in the integration process as negative. Some participants stated that social media platforms failed to effectively prevent hate speech, racism, and misinformation, thereby allowing prejudice and disinformation to spread quickly. The unregulated and uncontrolled nature of social media had a predominantly negative impact on participants' social integration and often led to feelings of discomfort and distress. Concerning RQ3, the findings suggest that the participants' experiences largely align with Social Penetration Theory's (SPT) core premises. Consistent with SPT's predictions, participants initially displayed reserved and introverted behavior in the foreign community where they found themselves. However, as they spent time with university peers and got to know them better, they reported feeling more at ease. Participants further indicated that the initially prevalent racist and hate-filled rhetoric and perspectives within some social groups diminished as the integration process deepened. They emphasized that physical and social settings provided more rational and integration-facilitating environments than social media platforms.

Considering the main objectives of the research, the participants use the most well-known and widely used social media platforms, that these platforms do not affect social integration processes as positively as anticipated, but that socializing relationships in physical environments facilitate social integration.

Finally, it is worth noting some research results related to social media or social integration of media. In a study on the relationship between minorities and social media in Germany, the authors (Mittelstädt & Odag, 2015, p. 29) noted that social media offers different options for inclusion in a (virtual) community, as it enables social interaction on a transnational level. The current research differed in that the general view of respondents was that social media networks do not contribute positively to integration. Another study conducted in the Netherlands (Alencar, 2018, p. 1588) investigated refugee integration, social media use, and purposes with 18 refugees from Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan. The findings suggest that social media networking sites are particularly relevant for refugee participants in acquiring language and cultural competencies and building bonding and bridging social capital. In current research, participants' statements of positive correlation between language learning and social media influence are similar to the findings of this study. In another study conducted in Sweden, Mitra and Evansluong (2019, p. 474) examine digital narratives of migrant journeys, focusing on their relationship with migrants' acculturation and integration into host societies. Their data show that migrants living in large cities in Sweden use social media effectively among themselves and that migrants' social media-based interactions do not promote integration. In this respect, the research parallels the findings of this study.

Choudhary, Nayak, Kumari, and Choudhury (2019, p. 481), based on interviews with Indian individuals, suggest that there is a link between integrated acculturation strategy and information diffusion on social media, which influences acculturation to sustainable food consumption behavior among social media users. Although the research focuses on food, it draws attention to the contributions of social media. In their article, Kizgin et al. (2019, p. 503) investigated the socio-political interactions of acculturation and ethnic communities. According to the authors, in multi-ethnic settings, the participation and engagement of ethnic

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minorities in mainstream political activities are influenced by their socialization on online networking sites and their level of acculturation. At the same time, their level of acculturation, which refers to their desire to adhere to their ancestral culture, negatively modifies this relationship. Considering the present study's findings, the conclusion that social media acculturation is not at an advanced level differs from the above research conducted in the Netherlands. Li et al. (2019, p. 513) investigate the facilitating role of social media in the acculturation of tourists in their article with Chinese people. The authors explain the impact of social media on acculturation with the term virtual acculturation and attribute a contingent function to social media. The current research differs from the above research in that it reveals the detrimental rather than positive effect of social media on the process of cultural integration. These studies and similar ones continue to investigate the relationship between social media and acculturation, cultural integration, and socialization. It is impossible to talk about the existence of absolute findings regarding the effect of social media platforms on cultural integration.

This article was originally written in Turkish. The author used ChatGPT4 and Grammarly AI software to check English grammar rules and sentence structures in translating the text into English.

AI usage statement

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