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Intercultural Education with Digital Media in Higher Education Cultural Difference, Identity, and Power

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Abstract

COVID-19 has had an indelible impact on the world, and the education sector has also changed to a certain extent, such as the widespread application of digital technology, the popularization of online courses in higher education, etc. Both students and teachers are getting used to digital technology as a method and tool in many curricula. In addition, the geographical restrictions and traffic barriers in different regions caused by the pandemic make people increasingly rely on social media and the Internet for cultural exchanges. By looking into the previous studies on intercultural education, the factor of digital media is overlooked in the field. On top of this, the research will focus on the digital changes in intercultural education in universities, and explores the relationships between digital media and intercultural education, with themes in cultural differences, identity, and power, by taking examples of the digital experience of college students, including the social media applications for entertainment and studying purposes. The study aims to explore the characteristics of intercultural education in digital times, and provide some reference for intercultural exchanges in higher education, such as the responsibilities that teachers and students should undertake in this regard.

Keywords

Intercultural education, digital media, higher education

1. Introduction

This paper will introduce the background of the current background of intercultural education, which is the alienations brought about by the pandemic and other problems, and the need for cultural exchanges in education. It follows the empirical studies in the field of intercultural education and reflects on the advantages and lack of consideration of media technology. Then the research questions will be raised and the methodology mentioned. After that, the three main threads are to be illustrated including cultural differences, identity, and power, to answer the questions. In the end, the conclusion of the paper will be drawn and advice in this reflection will be provided for the parties in intercultural education.

In recent years, the contemporary world has been witnessing constant chaos and conflicts, like pandemics, geopolitical confrontations, wars, social polarizations, racial discrimination, cultural misunderstandings, etc. People become both more suspicious and credulous and they become less willing to engage with anything that seems foreign or strange (Harold James, 2020). This is to say people are not only geographically less interactive due to the limits, but mentally reluctant to move and communicate or change their communication habits to the digital world. It is in this circumstance

where intercultural understanding and intercultural competence become more important than ever because they help address the root causes of some problems of today's societies like misunderstandings across cultural, socio-cultural, ethnic (Josef Huber, 2012). In a world experiencing rapid change, and where cultural, political, economic and social upheaval challenges traditional ways of life, education has a major role to play in promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence" (UNESCO, 2007:8).Industry reports showed that digital media use tremendously increased as people spent more time at home due to coronavirus lockdowns (Kemp, 2020). Covid-19 forced us into a regime of simultaneous, accelerated digital transformation as we abandoned our physical classrooms and went digital, underground. The impact was felt across every level of education, from preschool to professional development (Wolfe 2020). Thus, intercultural communication in digital education is the research focus, considering interculturality, higher education, and the digital age as a whole.

2. The Empirical Studies

The Council of Europe has a long-standing history of concern for bringing up intercultural education going back to the 1970s. The release of The UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education shows that intercultural education is one of the hot spots of future education development in the 21st century. Up to now, intercultural education research has expanded from the United States, Britain, China, and many other countries (Wang, 1999). For example, Carl A. Grant and Agostino Portera jointly prepared a collection of papers entitled Intercultural and Multicultural Education: Enhancing Global Interconnectedness (Carl & Agostino, 2010). Professor Jagdish Gundara has been at the forefront of intercultural education research in The Case for Intercultural Education in a Multicultural World (Gundara, 2014). For Chinese literature, Huang Zhicheng introduced foreign experience in intercultural education research and systematized China's intercultural education research such as "Intercultural Education: A New and Important Research Field" (Huang, 2013). Zhang Hongling developed the reference framework for intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education (Zhang, 2022), are all centered on intercultural competence and practical training. Thus, at home and abroad, the current research on intercultural education focuses on the education system, education equity, intercultural communication, and ability, and few studies take digital media factors into account. However, due to the unprecedented intensification of the universality of digital education, as educators and researchers, we should face technology and media squarely, and explore the theoretical and practical impact of digital media on intercultural education.

Therefore, based on the literature and previous studies about intercultural education and communication, this research will aim to propose and proffer the following questions:

1) What makes the necessity of intercultural education?
2) How is identity impacted by digital media and intercultural communication?
3) What are the power dynamics in digital intercultural communication, including students, teachers, and media technology?

3. Methodology

The research design will take a multi-method qualitative way including discourse analysis and textual analysis. This study will investigate the general situation of intercultural education for college students in society, including the major sources out of school where they might encounter interculturality featuring popular social media such as Xuexitong, Bilibili, Douyin, Wechat, etc. Some of the media are mainly used inside the campus for studying like Xuexitong, while some are more relevant to entertainment like Douyin. On these online channels, there is a greater chance for them to experience intercultural discourses. Here they will be exposed to different cultures in numerous ways, such as through TV dramas, movies, games, cartoons, short videos, articles, etc. Specifically, the research objects include the language, discourse, and multimedia content of social media cultural communication, such audience's comment language, dialogues, online action (forwarding, likes, collection), etc. Discourse analysis and textual analysis will consider the context, language, and other factors to make sense of the implicit meaning of the media representations. This is especially important in the investigation of power dynamics between lines.

4. Implications

On the threshold of the post-pandemic era featuring slowbalisation and digitalization, it leaves us much space and of great importance to study how to communicate well interculturally online, and how to pursue better intercultural education in this digital world. This can be explored through the following threads including cultural differences, cultural identity, and power dynamics in intercultural education.

4.1 Cultural differences as the baseline for intercultural education

The first question facing intercultural education is how to understand the starting point and necessity of intercultural education. It's common to notice there are many quarrels, misunderstandings, and arguments over any type of topic, news, or opinion on social media. For example, the recent online interview of the famous feminist writer Ueno Qianhezi has stirred many discussions about feminism including many hate speeches and criticisms of the interviewers (@Quanxixi) for being irrespective and inconsiderate. This is one of the countless discourses about intercultural themes on social media that college students can encounter. It's important to understand the differences in ideas and behaviors caused by cultural differences. From the perspective of cultural relativism in anthropology, different cultures have their specific environment for development, so the understanding of culture must be based on the history and environment in which it originated. Thus, we should emphasize the historical factors of culture when it comes to intercultural communication. To take one post about this hot issue on Douyin from @Forever Joy (#Ueno Qianhezi # Three girls from Peking University # Keep talking), there are over 6000 likes and 4000 shares within two days after it was posted. There are comments below like "These three people are not asking questions as graduates of Peking University, but as three rural women", "I thought the conversation between them would be more about the workplace, growth, and freedom", etc. Most of the comments hold hostile and critical attitudes, and some in a more mild tone, and there are more discussions below each comment. First and foremost, it's worthwhile to ponder over the interview itself about why it has become such a hot topic online. Cultural differences can be one of the factors because the interviewer and the interviewee come from different cultures. Ueno Qianhezi is from Japan, a famous sociologist professor in the highest-level academy in Japan, and unmarried in her 70s. In comparison, QuanXixi and the other two interviewers are in their 30s with a fair educational background and have established their families with their own problems and worries. Thus, they have greatly different cultural backgrounds in terms of age, race, country, marital status, etc. That can be part of the reason that the interview itself is full of preconceptions and disagreements from both parties. Secondly, the negative comments from people come from their viewpoints generated from their cultural environment, which varies due to their own home cultures. Even though most users on Douyin come from China, they have variations in regions, ethnicities, values, attitudes, and concepts towards many matters, and that can be why it's easy to find opposing opinions online.

From a sociological perspective, there are structure and action-based explanations of the relationship between culture and practitioners. In recent years, sociological theories have begun to integrate the structure and actions, believing that the actions of individuals within the same group or community are relatively dynamic. Giddens' (1984) structural theory tries to solve the problems that structure restricts the individual agent, the agent's activity relative to the structure, and the relationship between the actor's practice and the structure. He emphasizes the ability of individual actors to shape their environment through reflection and adaptation. These all show that individual actions are not only constrained by the external cultural system but also constantly generated and reconstructed in their practical reflection and social interaction. In the example post, the comments from the app users can be deemed as individual actions, which affect the media, and the attitudes and values people hold for this incident as well. Therefore, cultural differences are mutual recognition in interactions between social groups and individuals. The social order of a culturally diverse society is rebuilt by actors from different cultural backgrounds in the process of continuous interaction, and social solidarity is generated by the formation of common values in the process of social interaction. For instance, the social order in the discourse of this interview on Douyin is built through all kinds of comments, shares, and reproductions in different perspectives from the original video. Among the productions and reproductions, people with the same attitudes toward the interview incident might share social solidarity.

4.2 Identity in digital media and intercultural education

Identity or self-consciousness is another significant perspective to look at intercultural education in a digital era. It involves the identity of teachers and students, online identity in different digital media platforms, and the difference between internet and reality identities. James Marcia (2011) focused on the different stages of identity and put forward the theory of four identity states. Identity foreclosure refers to the lack of self-definition in different cultural environments, sometimes very clear, and sometimes very vague. Individuals in intercultural situations or social mobility often face this state, especially students with a multicultural background, they could be ambiguous about how to define themselves. Another important point is that students might have vague lines between online identity and identity in the reality. For example, students will think social media is interesting, but there is a certain gap. This kind of estrangement will lead to a certain sense of alienation among students and teachers, and the efficiency of communication will be reduced, but the screen will also give students a certain sense of security, after all, there will be no real supervision from teachers. Therefore, the inconsistency between college students' self-identity of reality and social media will lead to the

difference between the speech habits used in speaking, discussing, and communicating in general learning and real life.

Social identity theory refers to the process in which individuals classify themselves and others into different social groups. In this process, along with the typed cognition of themselves and others, individuals' self-esteem and sense of belonging are connected with it. When an individual regards himself as a member of a group and acts accordingly, that is, internalizes his identity as a member of the group, it indicates that the individual has the social identity of the group. Therefore, social identity is a part of the individual self-concept. How integrate learners' self-identity in the relationship of cultural diversity and maintaining positive self-identity and a high level of self-esteem is an important goal of intercultural education. For example, the formation of students' identity is based on their cognition of group status and inter-group relations in school and society and is constantly changing dynamically according to different situations. Xuexitong, one of the most popular studying social platforms in many universities and colleges in China, becomes the main online space where students and teachers communicate with each other, establish their relations and form their identities. In addition, the role of the media is indispensable, as a channel to understand the different cultures of the outside world and an arena where various online learning activities take place. For example, on Xuexitong students can acquire studying material and online courses, on Bilibili they can watch foreign productions, on Tiktok they communicate with different audiences in a variety. Learning can happen in all kinds of social media, and self-identity is established in engagements with other groups via all sources.

4.3 Power dynamics in the intercultural education of digital media

Revealing the power relationship in the intercultural education of digital media, the first thing is to note there are media, teachers, students, and schools consisting of different counterparts in the power dynamics. There are teachers' power changes in traditional classes to digital media, students' increasing power over an open resource, media power as an indispensable intermediary, ethnic prejudice upon students from marginalized cultures, and fewer media technology resources. Firstly, intercultural education should deal with the power relationship of the cultures' hierarchy such as the cultural disparities and prejudices among the ethnicities, cities, and regions. These might explain the cultural discriminations, misunderstandings, and hierarchical implications for the teachers and students. For example, in Guangdong Peizheng College, most students come from Guangdong. The students from the east part of Guangdong have more traditional concepts and religions compared to the students from the southern part, they speak less fluently in English due to the less developed education quality and economic conditions. Thus, people hold stereotypes and even prejudices towards cultures less advanced. These can be the hierarchical implications. As educators, what we should do is to realize the transformation of the pedagogy and curriculum to empower marginalized students (Zembylas & Iasonos, 2010). It's also worthwhile to investigate if teachers or students promote an education that challenges power relations and promotes social change.

Secondly, about online classes, there are issues like digital inequalities caused by internet access and skills, Internet service and connections, and less tech-savvy people who are more at risk of becoming disconnected from their social environment than others, since social distancing guidelines make it more difficult to receive digital support (Nguyen, 2020). The role of digital media and technology could even surpass the status of teachers. Remote learning might induce anarchy, due to the decreasing participation of the teachers and the higher discursive power of media (Ruth, 2021). According to Chamberlin, intercultural education consists of general (and certainly flexible and overlapping) domains of knowing, relating, encoding/decoding, and transforming (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2013). In this framework, we can understand that intercultural knowledge might be affected by technology and media, especially when we are getting into the filter bubble of social media with similar ideas presented on mobiles. Relating can be applied because the students and teachers are constructing new identities through online practices, with their words, ideas, and other intercultural interactions. The internet language for communicating between people of different cultural backgrounds provides us with the ability to encode and decode. And the transforming interpretation can refer to the new understandings of people towards a new culture via digital media, which can vary from the original cultural notions.

Lastly, Symbolic Power can be a new approach to understanding the notion of power. Power is not something owned by some and not by others. Instead, symbolic power is an order of life, diffused and exercised by all. It is a way of structuring reality, classifying, controlling, and disciplining knowledge (Kramsch, 2016, p. 524). This notion provides a new way of understanding how power is embedded if it's exercised by all stakeholders within the online classes in intercultural education. For example, the role played by media in the intercultural education process can be interpreted by symbolic power. Teachers, students, and social media all have their symbolic power in the process of cross-cultural education. The symbolic power of the media is very invisible. We tend to ignore that the media, as a channel and platform, has certain management and authority capabilities. For example, the platform specifies the font, number of words, content type, and framework of text communication. These are the frames designed by the media in advance. As users

of the media, teachers and students can only arrange and combine selectively in this frame to form the display and exchange of content. Couldry (2012) suggests the nature of media's symbolic power leads to the division between those with representational power and those without access. Symbolic power helps define the world through its social forms with certain dimensions and categorical features, and media contributes to the evaluation of what counts as social knowledge in media-rich societies (Couldry, 2011; 85). In this sense, social media, and online class software can form a way of ordering, by giving more voice to the students with higher technical skills and facilities, and maybe less representational power to the teachers and students with a lower level of digital capabilities. Thus, symbolic power can be regarded as a keyword to reveal the power dynamics among the multiple parties in digital intercultural classes.

5. Conclusion

To answer the research questions, this paper has put forward three themes in studying intercultural education on digital media, which are cultural differences, identity, and power. Firstly, cultural difference is the starting point to understanding intercultural education, in the sense that many misunderstandings come from cultural differences, and college students share different values, notions, and attitudes. These make the necessity of intercultural education. In intercultural communication, cultures and practitioners are having influence each other in a dynamic process. Secondly, students form their self-identity through interactions with others online and offline, which can be diversified, multi-dimensional, and ambiguous. Lastly, power dynamics involve preconceptions about the student's cultural background. Digital inequality is a prominent problem facing many colleges since some students come from less technologically advanced regions. Knowledge transmission on digital media in intercultural exchanges might be altered by technology, while social media can also become a tool to help voice minority students. Symbolic power implies the implicity of power and serves well to help us understand how power is embedded in intercultural education.

Upon the research, university teachers and students should actively study various digital technology applications to keep up with the times. Teachers should deeply understand students' cultural differences, respect their different cultural backgrounds, help them build self-esteem, improve their sense of belonging, enhance self-identity, and help students who are not sensitive to digital technology. Students should also speed up their pace, actively use digital media, and participate in intercultural exchanges both on and off campus. To understand their cultural background and cultural differences from others, and to establish self-identity, we should pay attention to both the collective and the pursuit of independence. The use of social media should be moderate to enhance cultural exchanges.

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