

How Can Social Media Be Helpful for Immigrants to Integrate Society in the US

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Abstract

With an increase in diversity in the society, the United States has been faced with the challenge of how to integrate its immigrants in the American communities. Different researches have shown that social media has a significant role in the integration of these immigrants. However, that which has been missing in such studies encompasses the conceptual frameworks for understanding the existing interplay between the utilization of social media and, on the other hand, integration. The results of this research point out that social media has a significant relevance in the participation of immigrants in acquiring language, cultural competencies and bridging social capital. Based on these results, therefore, an analysis of immigrant integration in American by using social media has been demonstrated in the paper.

Keywords: Diversity, social media, immigrants, integration, cultural competencies

Introduction

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As a result of increased immigration into several societies, encompassing the United States, populations have become both culturally, as well as, ethnically diverse. For instance, in America, the number of immigrants caught crossing the southern border reduced to a low of 11,127 in 2017 following President Trump's hard stance on immigration. However, this was short-lived as it was announced by the Department of Homeland Security on April fifth that Border Patrol Agents had caught thirty-seven thousand three hundred and ninety-three individuals who had tried crossing over in March. This is a representation of more than 200 percent increase on the previous year (Illegal immigration to America is rising again, 2018). Such statistics postulate that there is an enormous potential of the American society becoming increasingly diverse. The development creates problems for the American society based on the need to integrate various ethnic minorities in the country. Therefore, this research will discuss the significance that social media plays in integrating immigrants in the American society.

First, immigrant integration can be described as the process whereby newcomers in a particular country become part of the hosting community (Wachter and Fleischmann, 2018). The authors continue to mention that not every immigrant integrates into a similar rate as it is influenced by a host of different factors such as the intention of staying in the host nation. Mass media and in particular to social media has an important role in integrating minorities in the community. Reddy (2014) describes social media as a collection of online channels of communication that have a dedication toward society-based inputs, collaboration, improving interactions between different segments of the community and even in sharing of content. Through this, non-economic concerns such as cultural erosion, and threats to the national identity that have a huge dependence on the level of social integration by the immigrants can be effectively avoided (Laurentsyeva & Venturini, 2017).

Currently, social media has commenced playing a significant role in the lives of several individuals particularly the young. Smith and Anderson (2018) assert that Facebook and YouTube have dominated the landscape of major sites used by American Adults. Additionally, younger Americans particularly those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four have embraced other platforms such as snap chat, Twitter, and Instagram. A sizeable majority i.e. seventy-one percent of them visit the sites several times a day (Smith & Anderson, 2018). These are cumulative statistics and therefore represent every resident of America including the immigrants. Thus, increasing presence of social media and its unique traits do affect social relations and the American community as a whole.

Methodology

In this research, the qualitative method was utilized. It was in particular to carrying out interviews. The method was regarded as the most effective to provide answers to the research question i.e. how social media can be helpful for immigrants to integrate them in the American society. Its appropriateness was pegged on its ability to give detailed data on the experiences, as well as, the thoughts of the participants regarding the impacts of social media on their ability to sufficiently integrate. The in-depth interviews took place in California where caravans of the Central American immigrants do pitch tent. In fact, California has the greatest number of the immigrants with current statistics standing at 207,700 ("U.S. Immigrant Population by State and County", 2018). The study was conducted between May 1st and 31st of 2018.

As a result of the problems that are usually experienced when recruiting the respondents into a study, there was a need for including the participation of cultural insiders. These are individuals who have an exponential background of the immigrant crisis in America. The experts live in California and helped in the research through recruitments and enrollments into the study subject to their extensive social networks, as well as, extended associations.

In total, thirty immigrants were interviewed. They cut across broad cultural backgrounds ranging from Syrians, Mexicans, Afghans and those from Africa. A majority of these respondents had lived in California for approximately three years and could thus easily tell the impacts that social media had on their lives. Also, worth noting is that the immigrants were either processing their asylum status or, on the other hand, had already been admitted as American citizens. Each interview averagely took thirty minutes. The cultural insiders assisted in conducting the interviews and their role mainly came into play in cases where their participants did not have sufficient English command.

The primary focus of the interviews was on the patterns associated with internet utilization and social media applications. Another focus was directed towards knowing the motives behind the use of social media, the expectations, as well as, the perceptions of users, and the important role that social media undertakes in the promotion of immigrant integration in America. Various open-ended questions were raised concerning the immigrants' vision of being integrated into America. For instance, the participants were asked to shade light on the significance they peg on different aspects of their lives in the US. Such encompassed language, education, and even cultural adoption. There were also questions on what their thoughts were on the necessities required so that they may feel integrated into the United States going by the discussions that are taking place both in mass media such as television and radio and in other social media networks. Tape recorders were significant during the entire period of the interview process as they were used in recording every discussion.

Literature Review

Integration is increasingly becoming significant and chances are that it will continue doing so in the decades to come. Alba & Foner (2014) further note that its continued significance will be as a result of the problems often experienced with the changes in demographics that are occurring on every side of the Atlantic. In fact, there is a great potential that every rich country will undergo a situation referred to as "transition to diversity." (Alba & Foner, 2014). Such a transition necessitates that an efficient integration process takes place from all spheres including the social media. However, it should be noted that there have been great difficulties even in America when it comes to welcoming immigrants into the society. For instance, there have been Western-European tensions and in particular to Christian and Muslim immigrants which has also spilled to social media platforms. This consequently leaves several questions unanswered regarding the cultural integration of individuals (Karim & Al-Rawi, 2018).

Social media has a great potential in the integration of immigrants in the US because of the widespread presence of generation Y in social media. In fact, Bolton et al., (2013) assert that this is a generation exerting a unique fascination both in their academics and, on the other hand, as managers. They are thus referred to as digital natives and are the preceding generation to have lived a significant portion of their life in a digital environment. Since technology immeasurably affect their lives and work, incorporating social media in integrating immigrants should not be a difficult task. For instance, in social media platforms, Bolton et al., (2013) mention that youngsters in this generation actively contribute, share, search and consume content. By, therefore, sharing positive aspects regarding immigrants, it is very possible integrating them in the American societies. The usage of these platforms is also a harbinger of the manner in which people behave towards not just the immigrants but other aspects of the society and in particular to the future (Bolton et al., 2013).

Striking a balance between unity and diversity has consistently become a problem for multi-cultural countries. The main challenge that faces nations globally is the manner in which they can legitimize, as well as, recognize the variations while

also constructing overarching national identity (Banks, 2014). Such an identity should be one that takes into consideration the voices and experiences of diverse groups that immigration often brings. Immigration usually results in several ethnic, language and even religious groups consequently culminating in weak identifications because of their marginalization (Lecheler, Bos & Vliegthart, 2015). However, Banks (2014) writes that social media platforms can be used to revamp their hopes, dreams and even possibilities. Such information on integration spread quickly in social media as a result of the wider reach and the number of participants in these platforms. It is also possible communicating on the general welfare of the immigrants so that the American societies can become fully informed.

Findings

The findings from the study postulated that every participant in the research has a bigger social media preference in comparison to other internet applications. Further, the difference in age, as well as, gender did not determine the number of times in addition to the forms of social media to be used during the process of integration. The most common social media sites that were of interest to the respondents encompassed Facebook, which was the leading in terms of preference. Others were YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Google. The respondents also noted that they spent an average of seven hours per day on these platforms.

The fact the immigrants are capable of logging into their social media accounts through their cellphones has also worked towards increasing the duration that they stay online. The respondents noted that social media can be used in pushing for the right agenda regarding immigration while at times it can be used as an oppression tool mainly through the hostility shown to them. The oppression is mainly through the negative comments and updates that are at times associated with them.

The study found out that the high number of hours immigrants spend on social media is partly because of the enormous idle time they harbor. It is mainly because they lack a meaningful economic activity such as employment. According to the respondents, their lives in most cases is hard, as well as, monotonous. There exists few or even no particular leisure activities for them. This aspect assists in explaining the increased need and usage for social media as a way of coping up with anxiety and passing time.

However, before coming into the United States, the participants reported that they initially used less social media while in their home countries. It was mainly because of the busy work schedules that they exhibited. They could thus, as a result, only use the platforms for an hour a day which is a great contrast to the present seven hours that they do. Some such as immigrants from Afghanistan mentioned that their use of social media was limited owing to the strict legislation in their country. In the discussions, the respondents also mentioned the shortfalls of increased social networking. In fact, some of them perceived it as problematic that several individuals would spend significant periods on social media. This was despite their recognition of the importance of social media in their lives in America. They also doubted the content credibility in these sites. They asserted that they did not know whether the information on the online platforms is factual or not, or whether they are dependable.

Cultural learning, as well as, language also enormously featured in the data that was collected. The respondents placed a considerable emphasis on the significance of first having to learn English for purposes of communicating with the locals and other immigrants. This is because English is the most widely spoken language in America. They also mentioned that it was necessary for full integration since culture and language learning would make it easier accessing the labor market, acquiring education and gaining citizenship. Worth noting also is a section of the respondents who retorted that integration is basically a 2-way process. This was based on their need to maintain their cultural backgrounds while also being assimilated in America.

The findings point out that social media platforms are used by immigrant societies to find information regarding their rights and citizenships. In fact, a majority of the respondents reported that they have in the past utilized Facebook in sourcing for information regarding immigration processes, regulations, tax issues and legal services. They postulated that they resort to social media since at times locating information from government websites can be a very difficult and time-consuming. However, for social media, the information is readily available.

Discussion

Pineau & Waters (2016) write that 2015 became the fiftieth anniversary since the Immigration Act came into law in 1965. It is the passage of this act that culminated in significant immigration into the US. The Act was responsible for abolishing the otherwise restrictive quota that mostly prevailed in the 1920s. It consequently opened America for legal immigration while also assisting in setting the stage for a rise in immigration from different places encompassing Asia, Africa, and even the Caribbean. Also, the Act placed a limitation on the number of immigrants that were coming from the Western hemisphere. However, this only succeeded in souring the number of undocumented immigrants. Currently, a total of forty-one million immigrants live in America representing 13.1% of the total population. Children born out of the immigrant groups are 37.1 million representing 12% of the population (Pineau & Waters, 2016). Therefore, the question of whether these immigrants have been successfully integrated into the American society is one which is both crucial and pressing.

The research has depicted that social media is especially significant for immigrants for purposes of improving their social connections. Most of the respondents agreed to have a connection with Facebook groups whose aims are mainly to improve the inter-cultural contact between them and the native communities. The social media sites also play a great role in the immigrants' acquisition of English and other cultural competencies. All these aspects work toward integrating the American society because of the availability of diverse groups.

Social media has also assisted the immigrants to integrate by enabling them to keep in touch with their families and allies in their home countries (Alencar, 2017). This aspect is significant for their social, as well as, emotional support. Basically, using social media can assist in tackling the challenges of integration. Also, integration through social media has the potential of making the immigrants consider their new countries as safe havens. For instance, social media leads to the passage of information regarding rights and freedoms, mainstreaming and even issues of identity which also work toward the formation of an integrated society (Eretin, 2017).

Herdagdelen, State, Adamic & Mason (2016) mention that socio-cultural dimensions or how best a person manages his or her day to day life in a completely new culture is usually predicted by the knowledge of the host's culture, the degree of contact between the natives and the immigrants and attitudes of various groups within a society. Additionally, McAuliffe & Weeks (2015) assert that the establishment of a vivid picture on the manner in which the discussions on immigration are presented on social media will help in better understanding the behavioral, as well as, attitudinal trends as per the rising global immigration.

Thus, it is apparent that these aspects are usually captured by creating significantly new friendships in the social media platforms. The friendships are usually between individuals drawn from varied cultural backgrounds and mostly undertaken in Facebook and Instagram. This works toward integrating the immigrant communities by operationalizing the cultural distance that initially existed between them. It should be known that several friendships on Facebook have commenced without either party knowing each other. They take place across varied ages and races which otherwise boosts the integration process.

Social media is also helpful for immigrants as it assists them in getting information concerning the activities of civil societies and other local entities working toward the achievement of cohesion in America. The connections usually established by the immigrants in the social media platforms culminate in offline social interactions. Through this, therefore, the immigrants will acquire reliable and sufficient information regarding issues such as the American labor market, as well as, the system of education. Visibly, social media acts as a means of orientation that substantially guides the immigrants in coming up with strategic and meaningful choices. For instance, the choice of undertaking education in America will boost the integration of the immigrants and the natives because learners interact in schools. These learners are drawn from very different backgrounds and are ethnically diverse. Since not every information in social media can be trusted, offline connections assist in proving their credibility.

Media consumption is also vital in the conceptualization of integration of immigration in their new places. This can be better understood by transnationalism. Transnationals are basically individuals connected with work, family, acquaintances and other important social networks across national borders. Through social media, it is also possible forming ethnic networks which can easily culminate in integration. It is because it is through these ethnic networks that opportunities, as well as, ethnic and political contacts which are otherwise significant for migrant populations are formed (Kindle, Ratcheva & Piechowska, 2015).

As a result, immigrant integration in America postulates a situation of parallel relations encompassing standards and identity narratives. These are responsible for shaping the life strategies, future dreams, as well as, the sense of belonging for the immigrants which are all significant factors in case of integration (Vihalemm, 2016). Social media can thus be helpful by assisting the transnationals to keep up with the news from their countries of origin while also taking part in social media campaigns. Social media, therefore, has a significant role in the achievements of an individual. It is because the strategies and visions that they undertake whose information is also found online are necessary for the achievement of their success.

Vihalemm (2016) continues to mention that social media assists in the integration of immigration through the creation of weak networks. A weak network is simply the communication that is taking place between individuals that are not close family or friends. The communication is not regular but usually rekindled after an extended period. The weak networks established in their new homes are promoters of integration. It is because the communication takes place with a broad array of people drawn from different cultures thus leading to a harmonious stay with others. Social media is also significant in boosting the integration of the immigrants by enabling constant mediations of the customs, lifestyles, opportunities and even the cultures of the host communities. Such aspects will culminate in the integration of these communities because of their interest in being assimilated in the host societies. For instance, by learning the local language and the cultures around, integration takes place since it is now easier interacting with the locals.

Digital technology possesses the ability to transform immigrant settlements in different areas of socio-economic, political, as well as, cultural integration. Consequently, new technologies such as social media will help in the integration process by providing the immigrants with general information regarding their rights, support services, citizenship while also assisting them not to feel isolated (Alencar, 2017). Social media also has the capacity of propagating the human-interest frame necessary for integration. Dekker & Scholten (2017) assert that this frame is usually propagated by lawyers, politicians and non-governmental entities.

These aspects culminate in integration by pushing for policy attention and desired change necessary for enhancing immigrant livelihoods. Therefore, from the discussion, social media's role in the integration process especial in a new nation is important to several immigrants. This is because it enables them to exploit, as well as, maintain crucial links to their original nations while also assisting them in establishing new connections in their current place of residence. It happens as they work towards resisting and subverting the ways of positioning themselves in these host nations (TLANG, 2018).

Conclusion

- [1] The paper has discussed how social media can be of assistance particularly for immigrants in being integrated into the American society. To achieve this, the paper has presented the findings of a study carried out on the immigrant population based in California. Its main finding is that social media has an integral role in integrating immigrants with the host populations because it boosts their interactions and sharing of vital data regarding several aspects such as their rights and freedoms and also the activities of various non-governmental organizations. Social media also permits interaction at a broadly trans-national level which ultimately culminates in the much-needed integration in the American society.

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