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Social Media: The Tool Immigrants Use to Communicate with The World

Immigrants leave their home countries in search of safety, better opportunities and an improved quality of life. The reasons behind their decision to leave a life they've always known varies based on their unique circumstances. Personally, my family relocated because of the increasing rate of violence and economic insecurity in Nigeria and in search of better educational opportunities. Moving here was equivalent to starting life over again for my family. We were in a new environment, my parents had new jobs, and my sister and I went to a new school.

Acclimatizing was hard for us. We had to learn and unlearn a few things, for example, learning how to speak English in an American accent. This was a task that everyone in my family struggled with, especially my parents. As a matter of fact, we still don't have American accents. Our accent could be considered the offspring of the American and Nigerian accent. Through this journey, social media has been a big contributor to our somewhat successful adaptation. Social media, TikTok in particular, helps immigrants learn more about American culture, stay in touch with their culture back home as well as communicate their shared struggles with other immigrants.

Social media plays a crucial role in the integration of immigrants in the United States. Bora Erdem, a faculty member in Marmara University, notes that "social media has commenced playing a significant role in the lives of several individuals particularly [sic] the young" (74). A lot of people share their opinions and experiences on the internet. This information helps

immigrants learn about their new environment: the lingo and culture, as well as build connections with people within the society. The development of online communities serves as a support network for immigrants by connecting them with people who have similar backgrounds. Personally, I have created a small community of African immigrants who have gone through or are going through similar situations on Tiktok. I achieved this by posting content relating to the things I face every day as an African attempting to fit into American society and engaging with people who interact with my posts. It's comforting to find people with similar experiences since it not only reduces feelings of loneliness but also creates opportunities to get advice on overcoming shared challenges. For example, there's a lot of distress associated with being away from home or in an unfamiliar environment. Immigrants are often victims of homesickness. I remember when I first moved to America, my family had gotten their fair share of American food and we began to crave our cultural food. My mum spoke with a friend and she told us where we could find the ingredients for some of the dishes we craved. Because my mum's friend had been in a similar situation in the past, she was capable of advising us on how to overcome our homesickness.

In a study conducted by Cleveland et al., the process of adjusting to life in North America and how immigrants handle culture shock is discussed. Immigrants must navigate the task of balancing their integration into American society with preserving their native culture. This can be handled in two ways, on one hand they could decide to cling to their original culture while trying to fit in with American culture and on the other hand they could let go of their original culture and fully embrace American culture (Cleveland et al. 2). In the former, individuals make deliberate efforts, using social media, to keep in touch with their home culture in order to maintain relationships. In the latter, social media helps individuals to communicate with others

within their new community as well as provide insights into local trends. I have seen the manifestation of both situations. African immigrant children tend to disregard their culture in an attempt to fit in. The most common reason for this is bullying. The Education system in America teaches American children that Africa is poor and uncivilized. This false image manifests in the minds of little children and they end up treating other children from Africa and other third world countries with disrespect. In return, African children don't want to be associated with Africa. In this case social media as well as social interactions would be the child's source of information on how to camouflage as a native. They would learn how to speak, dress and act in different situations. This doesn't last forever though because once they get to college, immigrant children, just like everyone else, are attempting to find themselves. They get exposed to international students from their home country and naturally gravitate towards them. This would rekindle the love they had for their culture and they end up being some of the biggest ambassadors of their culture. Social media contributes largely to the transition because it provides information on the way of life of the people in their home country and just like they did when they were trying to fit in in America, they will use social media to learn the slang and culture of the place they once called home.

Distance makes it easy for immigrants to forget where they are from and/or lose contact with people they were once close to. But, due to social media, immigrants can stay in touch with friends and family in their home country. It also allows us to “[learn] aspects of [our] heritage culture from afar via indirect or intermittent exposure, or both”(Ferguson et.al 166). This is why social media has a strong influence on identity and personality development. Immigrants can pick up lingo and mannerisms from watching their favorite influencer from their homeland. While some people may argue that if you've only experienced your culture from your phone then

you haven't fully experienced your culture. This can be traced to immigrant children feeling like they don't belong anywhere. In a TikTok video, Madiya, a content creator, expresses that when she's in America she is told she isn't American enough and when she is in Africa she is bullied and told she isn't African enough (Madiya, 0:12). This is a common thing for people who live outside of their country of origin to hear. They sometimes feel as though they aren't good enough because they aren't fully immersed in either one of their cultures. This feeling is the result of hearing things like "you aren't African enough to understand" or "you don't get it, you weren't born here" from family and friends. This prompts the need to switch between cultural behaviors in different social settings, thus creating the issue of identity crisis. I personally think that being an immigrant has its pros and cons, just like everything else. One of the many advantages is having access to an extremely rich culture with the benefits of living in the western world: good education, better healthcare and better opportunities.

The absence of social media would impact immigrants' ability to stay connected to their roots, learn about their new environment and build new relationships within their new immigrant community. The absence of Instagram, Whatsapp, Twitter and Tiktok (my personal favorite) would make it difficult for immigrants to maintain relationships with their friends and relatives back home. It would put a strain on their relationships because being unable to keep up with each other's lives or offer emotional support may cause both parties to become strangers. I know for a fact that social media is one of the things that help me maintain my relationships with my friends back home. Additionally, the absence of social media would make it harder for people to learn about their new environment. Personally, I used platforms like Instagram and TikTok to learn things about America that I couldn't ask questions about because I had no idea they existed. I remember searching up the meaning of a word I heard for the first time on TikTok, and within

the next week someone used it at school and I was capable of understanding what they said. It would also make it harder for immigrants to bond with one another in their new environment. Virtual communities provide spaces for immigrants to feel a sense of belonging as well as exchange advice with one another. The absence of such digital ties might make it more difficult for them to establish a support system, get useful local knowledge and deal with the challenges associated with adjusting to a new culture. For immigrants, social media plays a pivotal role in helping them maintain connections with their home country and building meaningful relationships in their new home.

Works Cited

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