

# 12 #SLA: the impact of study abroad on negotiation of identity on social networking sites

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## Abstract

This chapter describes an inquiry into how Japanese university students who have participated in study-abroad negotiate their identity on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) when interacting informally in English with non-Japanese interlocutors. SNSs provide a unique opportunity for English language learners to practise their skills in an informal environment, and to maintain and develop social connections with non-Japanese partners. However, maintaining one's unique identity in these intercultural exchanges can prove difficult. The results of this research showed that a study abroad experience had an influence on students' usage of SNSs in English. This was evident in participants' selecting SNSs that were more commonly used in the country where they studied and adopting non-Japanese behaviours on these platforms. Participants expressed that a fear of flaunting their English ability acted as a barrier to usage, but the effects of this factor was reduced after their time abroad. Finally, participants found that cultural differences in the usage of SNSs caused some tensions, and forced them to evaluate their own cultural preferences and decide what behaviours to adopt from the target culture. While several studies have investigated SNSs for language learning (Ottoson, 2014; Waragai et al., 2014), few have explored identity negotiation in this context

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(Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Therefore, the following inquiry fills a critical gap in the research literature regarding this topic.

**Keywords:** identity negotiation, study abroad, social networking sites, Japan.

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## 1. Introduction

For language learners, study abroad offers a unique opportunity to not only develop competency in the target language, but to also be immersed in a foreign culture and to cultivate personal relationships with individuals from the host country. In the past, once a student returned to their own country, it took a concerted effort to maintain these relationships. However, with the advent of SNSs, such as Facebook and Instagram, it has become easier for returnees to continue to develop social connections created after cultural contact and continue to benefit from the informal language practice these relationships provide. Research into the impact of social media use on language learning prior to, during, and after study abroad has been explored in several studies (Ottozon, 2014; Waragai et al., 2014). Yet, few inquiries have focussed on how Japanese learners of English negotiate their identity on SNSs (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Due to the significance of identity negotiation in the process of language learning (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) and the potential of social media as an informal English-language learning platform, there is a need for further research on this topic.

The purpose of this research was to investigate how a study abroad experience affected students' usage of SNSs when communicating with non-Japanese interlocutors. In addition, the researchers investigated the perceptions of the participants towards SNSs for informal English-language learning, and the process by which they negotiated their identity on these platforms. The research questions were as follows:

- What were Japanese students' actual use of SNSs in English before, during, and after a study abroad experience?

- What were Japanese students' perceptions of the advantages, disadvantages, and barriers of SNSs for English language study following a study abroad experience?
- How did Japanese students negotiate their identities on SNSs when communicating with non-Japanese interlocutors before, during, and after a study abroad experience?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Setting and participants

The researchers collected data from university students in a Japanese public university. There were seven participants (five male and two female); they ranged from 19 to 26 in age. They voluntarily accepted the offer to participate in the study when they took part in a guidance session for a four-week study abroad programme conducted in Australia. The aims of the study abroad programme were for the participants to improve their English skills and to gain credits during the period spent abroad. This study abroad programme, which took place from the 17th of February to the 17th of March of 2018, was established and supported by a national university, which the participants belong to. Among the participants, five were undergraduates, and two were graduate students. A wide variety of majors were represented among the participants, including foreign languages, law, biology, economics, and dentistry. In order to protect students' identities, a pseudonym was assigned to each participant. [Table 1](#) provides demographic information collected from the participants.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Major
Noriko	female	19	foreign language
Suzu	female	20	foreign language
Masaki	male	19	law
Go	male	20	law

Yuta	male	23	biology
Kei	male	19	economics
Hiro	male	26	dentistry

## 2.2. Data collection

The researchers used a mixed-methods approach in order to triangulate the data collected. The quantitative data was gathered through a paper-based survey, and the qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews and email exchanges. The quantitative survey was administered to the participants after they returned from their study abroad experience. Qualitative data was gathered first in a pre-sojourn interview and then through a more extensive interview process post-sojourn. In addition, the researchers exchanged emails with the participants during the time they were studying abroad.

The researchers created a survey instrument based on previous models found in the literature (Toland, Mills, & Kohyama, 2016; Vasilopoulos, 2015). The quantitative instrument was developed in order to investigate the usage and perceptions of SNSs for informal English learning as well as various factors that contributed to identity negotiation on this platform. The survey consisted of five sections: (1) self-confidence and flaunting, (2) cultural contradictions and tensions, (3) perceived barriers to usage, (4) perceived advantages, and (5) actual usage. Scales associated with perceptions ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The usage scale also had five levels ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*).

## 2.3. Analysis

The quantitative data was analysed through descriptive statistics, which involved frequencies and percentages. The qualitative data was analysed by thematic analysis. This process required the researchers to manually sort the data into categories they developed based on their reading of the pertinent literature. These categories corresponded to the sections of the quantitative survey: (1) self-confidence and flaunting, (2) cultural contradictions and

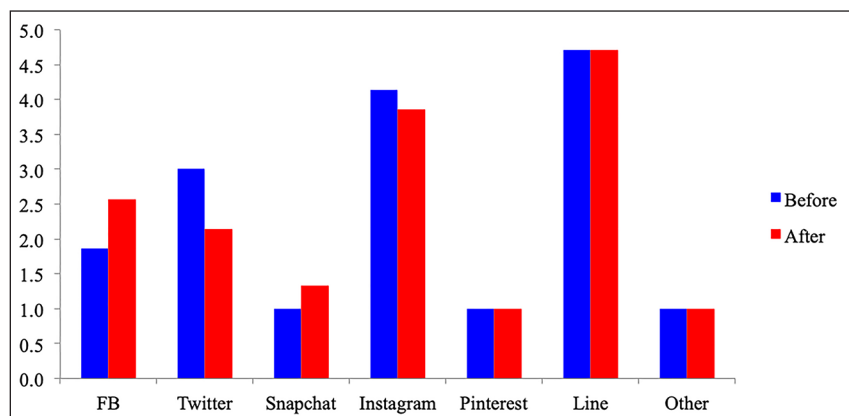
tensions, (3) perceived barriers to usage, (4) perceived advantages, and (5) actual use. Among all seven participants' narratives, a limited number of excerpts was selected to clearly illustrate the process of the participants' perceptions and negotiation of identity according to each dimension. Interview data is presented in the brackets at the end of quotation. For example, (i8october18yuta) indicates that the narrative is quoted from the interview with Yuta on 8th October 2018.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Research Question 1: actual usage

After returning from their study abroad experience, the participants were asked to gauge their frequency of usage of various SNSs pre- and post-sojourn. The following chart (Figure 1) indicates the mean score of the participants associated with each SNS. The first bar shows their perceived usage before studying abroad and the second bar demonstrates their usage after studying abroad.

Figure 1. Pre- and post-sojourn usage of SNSs



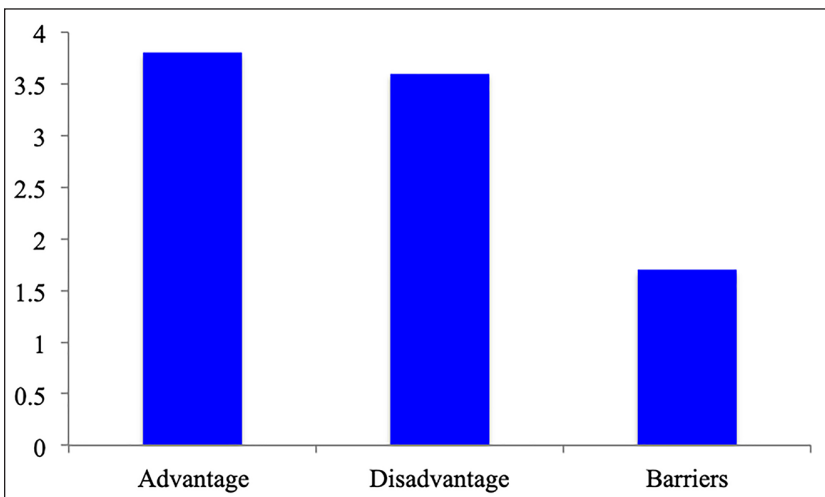
Note: Scale ranging from 1 never to 5 always.

The results seem to indicate that the experience of studying abroad influenced Japanese students' usage of SNSs. Snapchat and Facebook, two sites which are not as popular in Japan as they are in Australia (Sensis, 2017; Statista, 2018a, 2018b), showed an increase in usage. However, the usage of Twitter, which is a very popular SNS in Japan (Statista, 2018c), decreased among the participants. This may indicate that participants in the study were communicating more frequently with non-Japanese interlocutors and changed their SNS usage based on the preferences of their new communication partners.

### 3.2. Research Question 2: perceptions

Participants were queried regarding their perceptions of the advantages of using SNSs for informal English-language learning as well as the possible disadvantages and barriers to usage that were present when using SNSs for this purpose. Figure 2 displays the mean values associated with perceptions.

Figure 2. Mean value of perception constructs



Note: Scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

### 3.2.1. *Advantages*

Six out of seven participants perceived that SNSs provided a good opportunity to learn authentic conversational English. For instance, Go stated:

“I can really communicate, rather than just using expressions which I’ve learned through English textbooks” (i12april18go).

Noriko also demonstrated a positive impression toward SNSs, saying:

“The English expression in usual mail messages is different from that we learn in school, isn’t it? So, I want to know this type of English expression a little” (i25january18noriko).

The participants’ narratives seem to confirm the work of researchers who regard SNSs as potential platforms for language learners to acquire informal language or real-life experience in a target language (Ottozon, 2014; Waragai et al., 2014). Furthermore, five out of seven participants stated that acquiring knowledge of internet slang was connected to learning authentic conversational English and that usage of SNSs would provide an opportunity to learn and practise these linguistic forms.

### 3.2.2. *Disadvantages*

Five of the seven participants agreed or strongly agreed that SNSs could serve as a distraction that would interrupt their study time. There seems to be strong evidence for this worry because several studies have shown that an increase in SNS usage is correlated with a decrease in academic performance (see Lui, Kirschner, & Karpinski, 2017). One possible issue for students that are studying abroad is that the usage of SNSs in their native language can rob them of the opportunity to be immersed in the target culture and language. While this sentiment was not expressed by any of the participants in this study, it is a factor that must be considered for future research.

While learning informal English and netslang was seen by several students as an advantage to the use of SNSs for language learning, four of the seven participants expressed the opinion that they may learn ‘improper English’ through the platform. Kei, a 19-year-old economics undergraduate, expressed his belief that much of the English used by native speakers on SNSs was “mechakucha” (i18april18kei), a Japanese word meaning chaotic or improper.

### 3.2.3. *Barriers*

Survey responses showed that participants believed their low levels of English and worries about privacy to be significant barriers to their usage of SNSs in English. The survey item ‘When I read certain posts I get irritated’ also received a high mean score among participants. Prior to the study, the researchers hypothesised that privacy would be a major issue for Japanese users of SNSs due to a cultural propensity to avoid sharing personal information with members outside of one’s inner circle and the importance of saving face. A research conducted by Ishii (2017) showed that Japanese users of SNSs tend to avoid revealing personal information to friends online unless they also maintain a relationship in the real world.

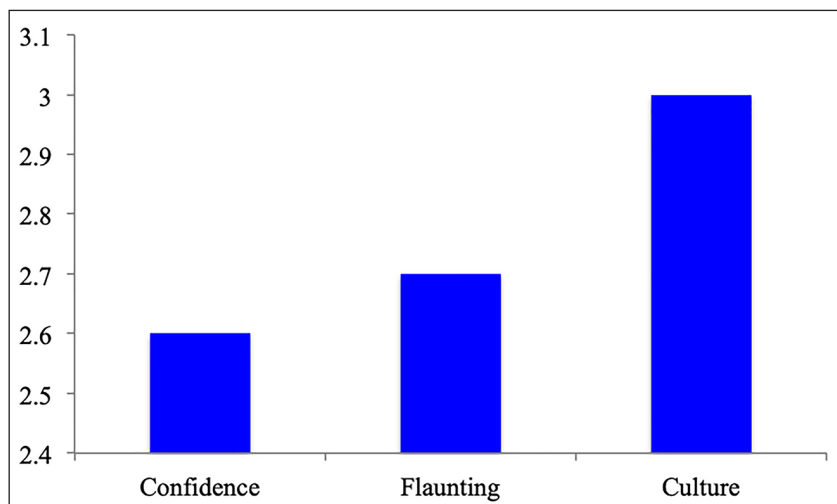
### 3.3. **Research Question 3: negotiation of identity**

Identity negotiation is the process by which we establish our positions in relationships and the way we represent aspects of our identity, such as gender, ethnicity, and social position (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Individuals are constantly reshaping and repositioning their identities through the usage of language. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) insisted that “[n]arratives play a particularly important role in our account of negotiation of identities” (p. 18). They insisted that people negotiate their identities through “an interplay between reflective positioning, i.e. self-representation, and interactive positioning” (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 20). For Japanese students who have participated in a study abroad experience, SNSs can serve as a platform for this reflection when communicating with non-Japanese partners. The question of how English Language Learners (ELLs) negotiate their identities in informal



settings is especially pertinent in the Japanese context where English is highly valued, yet, rarely used outside of classroom settings. Figure 3 displays the mean values of each construct associated with negotiation of identity.

Figure 3. Mean values of negotiation of identity constructs



Note: Scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

### 3.3.1. *Self-confidence and flaunting*

In this study, self-confidence refers to a confidence in one's English skills or abilities in general. As SNSs provide a platform of self-representation, SNS usage in English is connected with how ELLs represent themselves as users of the language in public rather than mere students of English in private. Leis's (2014) research also indicated that students who display high levels of self-confidence in their English skills tend to use SNSs as a tool for English learning. Thus, self-confidence was chosen as a significant dimension of SNS usage in English in this study. Moreover, flaunting is connected with self-confidence. Yet, Vasilopoulos (2015) showed that fear of flaunting prevented his bilingual Korean interviewees from the usage of SNSs in English, even if they were fully

confident in their English skills. Therefore, self-confidence and fear of flaunting seem to have an inverse relationship with SNS usage in English among learners of the language from cultures where flaunting is seen as a negative trait.

One participant who exemplified the dimensions of self-confidence and flaunting was Suzu. Suzu, a 20-year-old majoring in foreign language, was highly sensitive to flaunting in her pre-sojourn period. Because she attended an English conversation school for several years when she was a child, she had the feeling of being superior to other English learners. When asked about English classes in her junior high school, she said: “I was good at English” (i31january18suzu).

While she was confident with her English abilities, she was afraid of being seen as showing off her ability on SNSs. Furthermore, she strongly criticised Japanese people who, despite possessing low-level English skills, post something in English on SNSs.

“It is not for improving (their English skills), but rather, like, they want to show off that they can post something in English” (i31january18suzu).

“When they (Japanese people) post something in English, they must feel it is cool (to post in English). This is almost, I am just mocking them” (i31january18suzu).

She also negatively commented on the effect of the usage of SNSs on the improvement of English skills saying:

“It can be to practise, but people post in English even if there are mistakes” (i31january18suzu).

As she had no relationship with anyone who used English via SNSs, she continued by saying:

“If they have only Japanese followers, I am wondering why they post in English” (i31january18suzu).

Finally, she asserted:

“I think almost everyone posted their experiences in their target language while they study abroad, but I have decided I will not do it if I study abroad” (i31january18suzu).

However, her perceptions and attitudes toward SNSs slightly changed after her sojourn. While studying abroad, for the first time, she made some English-speaking friends. It was the first time for her to make friends with whom she communicated only in English. Although, in her pre-sojourn period, she asserted that she would not post something in English, after returning to Japan, she changed the declaration.

“Like, international friends started to follow my Instagram, so I’m thinking of using both, a little bit. I think it may be good to post something in both Japanese and English” (i4april18suzu).

In addition, she demonstrated that her perception towards SNSs also changed slightly when she was asked about the effect of SNS usage in English on improvement of learners’ English skills.

“Well, it’s good if we post something after checking properly by ourselves” (i4april18suzu8).

In her pre-sojourn period, she thought someone must check her English grammar for her ability to improve when using SNSs. However, she came to realise that posting in English can be effective for English learning if the grammar is checked by the poster even if they do not possess a high-level of English skill.

### 3.3.2. *Cultural tensions and contradictions*

Cultural contradictions and tensions refer to issues arising due from cultural differences between Japanese society and the English-speaking society on SNSs.

Hiro was a frequent passive user of SNSs prior to study abroad. He believed that SNSs could be a beneficial platform to learn English, stating: “I think I can learn, like, English slang” (i29january18hiro). However, after returning from study abroad he noted an important cultural difference in usage. He said:

“My friends (in Australia) often post their faces on their SNSs” (i5april18hiro).

He posited that this behaviour represented a form of narcissism among non-Japanese people and a lack of shame. He further commented:

“Men (Australian men) who are not good-looking guys post close ups of their faces. Even if they have a bushy beard at the time, they post their faces without hesitation” (i5april18hiro).

Observation of Hiro’s Instagram account (with the participant’s permission) showed that the vast majority of photos he posted were of food and nature, rather than people, compared to the other interviewees. This might indicate the Japanese people who are conscious about Japanese cultural norms tend to hesitate in sharing private information with outsiders.

Hiro’s opinion was corroborated by another participant, Noriko. She commented:

“I think many people (in Australia) are using SNSs to express themselves. For instance, my Australian friend posts her work on her SNSs” (i12april18noriko).

“But, Japanese people post something, like, when they go to a cafe” (i12april18noriko).

It seems by “express themselves”, Noriko means sharing private information. Although she recognised the varying usages of SNSs in English-speaking cultures, she has continued to mostly adhere to Japanese social norms on SNSs, even after her sojourn. This is evident from the content she posts, which

tends to focus on subjects like what she ate or a place she visited and does not usually include pictures of people or sharing aspects of her life that she considers private.

The aforementioned observation and the narratives indicate that participants have not changed their attitudes toward SNSs although they were conscious about the cultural differences after their sojourn. This can be because the majority of their followers are still Japanese and they do not feel the necessity to change their ways of using SNSs. In this sense, the result shows that their identities as Japanese on SNSs have remained the same even after their sojourn.

Usage of internet slang was also perceived as a cultural contradiction and tension by some participants despite also citing it as a form of the language they wanted to learn by using SNSs in English. For example, Masaki strongly agreed with the survey question: I have experienced difficulties when using SNSs in English due to cultural misunderstandings. Showing his Australian English-speaking friend's post where internet slang is frequently used, he said:

“On SNSs, internet slang or internet language is used a lot. So, I had a difficulty in understanding them. Yes, I strongly agree with it (the questionnaire)” (i27march18masaki).

At the same time, he stated:

“It is a kind of English learning for me to get to know Internet slang” (i27march18masaki).

Although he was confronted with the difficulty of understanding internet slang, he still was motivated to learn it. Five out of the seven interviewees, Kei, Noriko, Go, Hiro, and Masaki, held positive attitudes towards English Internet slang, mentioning that it is part of the English language. Yuta did not comment about it negatively or positively, and only Suzu, who aimed to acquire ‘perfect’ English, showed her negative feelings towards Internet slang. This example shows the possibility that Internet slang in English functioned as an indicator for some

participants to show themselves as fluent English users who have command of non-standard forms of the language.

Given the results above, it is interpreted that some interviewees constrained their Japanese identity through avoiding sharing their private information on SNSs. Some tried to construct their identity as fluent English speakers by learning Internet slang on SNSs.

#### **4. Conclusions**

SNSs are valuable tools for ELLs to practise their skills in an informal environment and to maintain and develop social connections with non-Japanese partners following a study abroad experience. The data revealed that participants changed their usage of SNSs over the course of their study abroad experience. Some notable changes included adoption of platforms not commonly used in Japan and adaptation to behaviours and norms of SNS usage in the target culture. Fear of flaunting one's English ability reduced usage of SNSs with one participant, but the effect of these barriers was reduced following study abroad. Finally, students participating in the study found that differences in cultural norms caused some tension in their interactions on SNS and forced them to negotiate their identity as they navigated these unfamiliar behaviours.

While every effort was made to strengthen the methodology used to collect data for this research, some limitations exist that must be considered. First, the data were collected from a small sample of students at one selective university. A larger, more diverse group of students would help to extrapolate the results to a larger population in Japan. In addition, a larger sample would allow for further quantitative analysis of the data collected. Second, the responses of the participants were self-reported. In order to address this issue in future studies, it will be important to triangulate the self-reported data by observing interactions on the platform. More accurate data regarding usage of SNSs might be gathered by having participants maintain a usage log.

Despite the limitations mentioned, the current study paints an interesting picture of several aspects important to the negotiation of identity in SNSs for ELLs in general, and Japan in particular. It is the hope of the researchers that this chapter will serve as a springboard for further research on the topic and help educators and administrators to better prepare study abroad participants to make the best use of SNSs before, during, and after their sojourn.

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**Professional development in CALL: a selection of papers**

**Edited by Christina Nicole Giannikas, Elis Kakoulli Constantinou, and Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous**

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