



Research Paper

The role of social media in the development of intercultural competences among future social workers

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ABSTRACT: In modern multicultural societies, intercultural competence is a basic requirement for effective social work. At the same time, social media is emerging as important platforms for communication, interaction, and cultural diversity. The study explores the role of social media in the development of intercultural competences among future social workers.

This study aims to explore how the use of social media contributes to students' intercultural awareness, their attitudes towards cultural diversity and self-assessment of their readiness for professional work in an intercultural environment. A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted among 51 students enrolled in the specialty "Social Activities" at the Technical University of Gabrovo, Bulgaria. The empirical data were collected within a single point in time through a standardized survey.

The results of the study show that social media plays a significant role in the formation of intercultural competences among future social workers. A statistically significant relationship has been established between the frequency of online interactions with different cultural communities and groups and the self-assessment of intercultural competences. The results obtained highlight the potential of social networks as a complementary tool for the development of social competences in social work training.

KEYWORDS: social media, intercultural competence, social work, higher education

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I. INTRODUCTION

In modern societies, increasing cultural diversity necessitates the need for professionals capable of interacting and working across cultural boundaries. In the field of social work, intercultural competences are recognized as a key professional value, enabling professionals to provide culturally sensitive and inclusive services to individuals and communities from different backgrounds [1], [2].

At the same time, social networks and digitalization have transformed the ways in which people communicate with each other, interact, learn and engage with cultural diversity. The results of several studies show that social media makes an important contribution to the development of multicultural tolerance [3], as well as to the overall social development of the individual [4].

The aim of this article is to explore how the use of social media contributes to students' intercultural awareness, their attitudes towards cultural diversity and their self-assessment of their readiness for professional work in an intercultural environment.

The object of research is social work students as future professionals, preparing for work in the conditions of cultural diversity and multicultural social environment.

The subject of research is the role of the use of social media and intercultural online interactions in the development of intercultural competencies among social work students, with a particular emphasis on their professional preparation for multicultural practice.

For the realization of the set goal, the following research tasks have been formulated:

1. To analyze the theoretical assumptions and research related to intercultural competences, social networks and the professional training of future social workers.
2. To study the patterns of use of social networks and forms of intercultural online interactions among students.

3. To assess the level of intercultural competences and attitudes towards cultural diversity of future social workers.
4. To investigate the relationship between the use of social networks and the development of students' intercultural competences.
5. To analyze and interpret the results of empirical research and to formulate conclusions and recommendations for the development of intercultural competences in social work education.

The main research question posed in the research is what is the role of social networks in the development of intercultural competences of future social workers?

The sub-questions sought in this study are:

1. How often do social work students use social networks to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds?
2. Is there a link between the intensity of social media use and the self-assessment of intercultural competences?
3. How do social work students assess the contribution of social networks to their professional preparation for work in a multicultural environment?
4. What positive and negative effects of social networks on intercultural communication do future social workers perceive?

For the purposes of the study, the following methods were used: descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages and averages), analysis of internal consistency through Cronbach's α reliability factor, Spearman correlation analysis to establish relationships between the studied variables. Statistical processing of the results was carried out using Microsoft Excel.

In the context of the modern development of societies, the study of the role of social media in the development of intercultural competences among future social workers is particularly important. Understanding how students perceive and use social networks for multicultural interaction can provide valuable insights into social work education and the preparation of culturally competent professionals.

II. LITERARY REVIEW

A review of literature sources about intercultural competences shows that most authors define intercultural competence as a multicomponent concept encompassing knowledge, skills and behavioral manifestations that allow an individual to interact effectively and adequately with representatives of different cultural groups [5], [6], [7]. As UNESCO (2013) points out, intercultural competences are a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow individuals to effectively interact and adapt to a social environment characterised by cultural diversity and different lifestyles [8, p. 5]. In this sense, through a metaphorical model of an "intercultural competence tree", UNESCO (2013) illustrates intercultural competence as a development process consisting of interrelated elements (Figure 1). The main parts of the tree are:

- the roots that symbolize values and attitudes such as respect for diversity, openness, tolerance, empathy;
- the trunk, which symbolizes knowledge and understanding of one's own cultural identity, social and cultural processes;
- branches and leaves, which represent the skills and behaviors that people use in an intercultural environment through effective communication, active listening, adaptability;
- the fruits that symbolize the results of intercultural competence, such as mutual understanding, social inclusion, social justice, etc.

In the context of research on future social workers, the tree shows that social networks can support the development of knowledge about other cultures (trunk), intercultural communication skills (branches and leaves), positive attitudes towards diversity (roots), which ultimately leads to higher intercultural competence and better preparation for working in a multicultural environment (fruits).

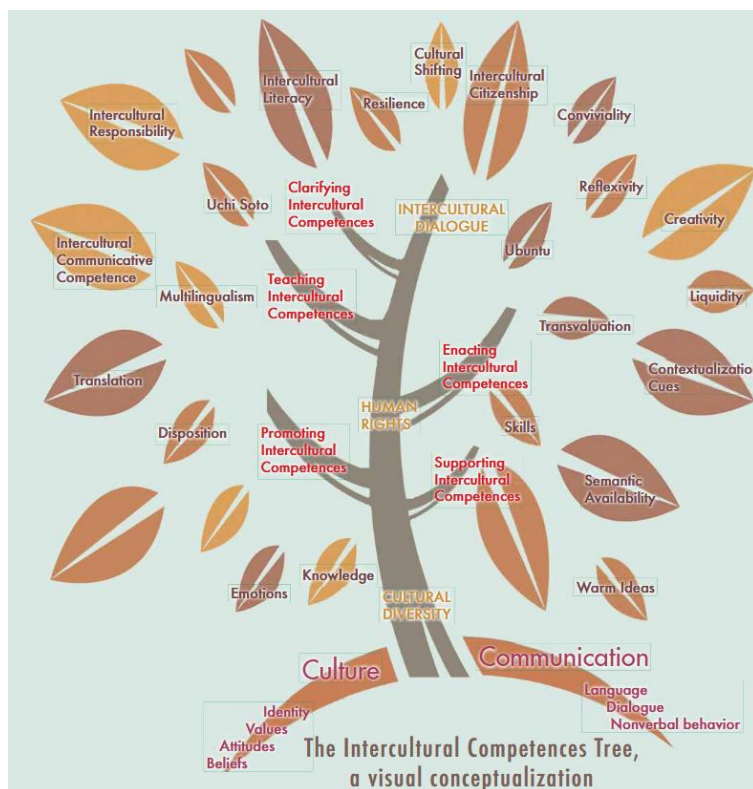


Figure 1: The Intercultural Competences Tree by UNESCO (2013, p. 23)

Modern research interprets intercultural competence through the prism of concepts such as intercultural communication, intercultural learning and intercultural literacy. According to Brandt (2024), these concepts are closely related and describe an individual's ability to interact effectively with representatives of different cultural communities in the face of increasing global interdependence [9, p. 5]. The author points out that intercultural understanding is not only associated with knowing cultural differences, but also involves developing knowledge, skills, attitudes that support constructive communication, critical reflection and collaboration in diverse social contexts. From this point of view, intercultural competence is seen as a key competence of the 21st century, significant for effective participation in the educational, professional and public spheres.

In the context of digitalization of contemporary society, social media is establishing itself as one of the most essential spaces for interaction between representatives of different cultural communities. Although intercultural competence is usually associated with direct communication and exchange of information, modern communication technologies significantly expand the possibilities of its manifestation. Regardless of the different definitions of social media, which have expanded over the years in the context of information technology, the concept is based on connectivity. This connectivity is realized through the various platforms, websites, profiles, and web-based applications that increase communication channels. In this context, the importance of social media in modern society is constantly increasing. According to data from the Digital 2025 Global Overview Report, the number of social media users worldwide reaches 5.24 billion people, which is two-thirds of the world's population [10]. Recent data show that the average daily internet user spends approximately 2 hours a day on social networks [11]. A further study found that young people and students are particularly active, for whom social networks are both a means of maintaining social contacts, intercultural communication, forming attitudes and values [12]. These trends suggest a growing scientific interest in the role of social networks as a factor in the development of intercultural competences in educational and professional aspects.

Social media creates new opportunities and perspectives for the development of intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes, transforming the way people communicate and creating social connections. These opportunities are of particular importance in the preparation of future social work professionals, for whom intercultural competence is a key prerequisite for effective professional practice in a multicultural environment. New research has established the significant role of intercultural competences in the field of social

work. A study by Stier (2026) concludes that intercultural competencies, considered by the author as process and substantive, are an essential prerequisite for successful and effective professional social work [13]. Also, Linka (2025) emphasizes that intercultural competence is not solely determined by the individual characteristics, personal qualities and professional training of social work professionals, but is also influenced by the institutional context in which the activity takes place [14, p. 121]. Supportive organisational policies and inter-institutional cooperation and interaction create conditions for the implementation of culturally sensitive practices. In this regard, the results of the study outline the need for targeted intercultural learning. On this basis, intercultural competence is established as an essential component of the professional training and practice of future social workers. The international standards of the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) and the International Association of School of Social Work (IASSW) emphasize the need for social work training to form abilities for effective social work in a multicultural environment and diversity [15]. Similarly, the National Association of Social Work's (NASW) Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice define cultural competence as a set of knowledge, skills, values, professional attitudes, and behaviors that ensure the provision of ethical, sensitive, and respectful effective social services to people from different cultural groups and communities [16]. The revised standards also introduce the concepts of "cultural humility", "intersectionality" and "language and communication" to emphasize their leading position in the understanding of multicultural relations. In this way, intercultural competences are perceived not only as a necessary quality, but also as a basic professional standard in modern social work.

The theoretical analysis describes the close relationship between intercultural competences, the application of social media and the professional training of social work professionals. This necessitates the need for empirical research on the way in which students perceive the role of social media in the development of cross-cultural competences.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study of the relationship between intercultural competences, the application of social media and the professional training of social work specialists is the subject of discussion by several significant contemporary studies. Studies among students have shown that active use of social media and interaction in online communities creates opportunities for building friendships, developing cultural awareness, communication skills, and cultural sensitivity [17], [18], [19], which are essential for working in a culturally diverse environment.

Based on the literature analysis and the cited studies, a quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted within a time, the purpose of which was to outline the influence of social media on the development of intercultural competences of future social work professionals.

The subject of the study was 51 students studying in the field of social work at the Technical University of Gabrovo, with bachelor's and master's degrees. The study took place in June 2026.

Based on the reviewed scientific literature and the conceptual framework of the study, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1. Students who interact more frequently with people from different backgrounds through social media report higher levels of intercultural competence.

H2. Participation in international online communities is positively associated with students' intercultural awareness.

H3. Social media is perceived as a valuable resource for professional training of students in a multicultural social environment.

H4. Future social workers perceive both the positive and negative effects of social media on intercultural communication.

The information needed to test the hypotheses was collected through a standardised survey conducted through a specially designed questionnaire. The tool covers 21 items, structured in six thematic sections: (1) demographic characteristics of respondents; (2) use of social networks; (3) intercultural contacts in an online environment; (4) attitudes towards cultural diversity; (5) self-assessment of intercultural competences; and (6) perceived negative effects of social media use. Most questions are closed and measure the frequency of behavior. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the degree of agreement and self-assessment of intercultural competences, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Higher values reflect more positive attitudes towards cultural diversity and a higher level of perceived intercultural competences.

The reliability of the scales used in the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency factor. The analysis included 14 statements that measure the perceived impact of social media on students' intercultural competences. Before the coefficients were calculated, negatively formulated questions

were reverse-encoded. The resulting value for Cronbach's Alfa is $\alpha = 0,786$, which indicates good internal consistency. The result confirms that the indicators used measure a relatively homogeneous construction and can be used for subsequent statistical analyses.

The principle of voluntary and anonymous participation of all respondents in the implementation of the survey was observed.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current study involved 51 students studying in the educational and qualifications "Bachelor" (73%) and "Master" (27%). An analysis of the survey results in terms of gender shows that a predominant share of respondents are women (Table 1). This result is expected because social work has traditionally been characterized by a predominantly female representation both in education and in practice.

Table 1. Demographic profile of survey participants by gender

Variable	N	%
Women	44	0,86
Men	7	0,14

In terms of age, respondents over 30 years old prevail (82%). This result can be explained by various factors, including professional reorientation, the need to acquire additional qualifications and the pursuit of career development.

The survey data shows that the most used social network among participants is Facebook (94%), followed by Instagram (58%), Youtube (57%) and Tiktok (45%). Most respondents indicate that they spend an average of one to two hours a day on social networks. This result corresponds to the data on internet use by users in the last few years [11].

Although higher education provides opportunities to participate in international programmes and projects, including Erasmus+, only 24% of respondents participated in such initiatives. At the same time, a significant proportion of participants (85%) indicate that they are members or participate in international online groups and communities. More than half (61%) follow profiles or content related to other countries or cultures.

The results also show that 39% of participants interact online with people from different cultures, most often using social networks as a means of communication (94%). For comparison, 35% of respondents say that they often communicate in direct contact with people of different ethnicities, cultures or religions. According to 56% of respondents, such contacts have a positive impact on their attitude towards cultural diversity.

The results of the study show positive attitudes of students towards cultural diversity and relatively high self-esteem of their own intercultural competences. Table 2 shows that in terms of the role of social networks, the highest average is given to the statement that they support the knowledge of other cultures ($M = 3.90$). This result shows that respondents perceive social networks as a source of information and knowledge about cultural diversity. Relatively lower, but also positive, are the assessments reported on the impact of social networks on tolerance to differences ($M = 3.53$) and overcoming stereotypes ($M = 3.57$).

Table 2. Attitudes towards cultural diversity and the role of social media

Statement	Average
Social media helps me learn more about other cultures	3,90
Social media improves my ability to connect with people from other cultures	3,63
Social networks help me overcome stereotypes of other cultures	3,57
Through social networks, I become more tolerant of differences	3,53

Regarding the self-assessment of students' intercultural competences (Table 2), the ability to work effectively with people from different cultures ($M = 3.96$), followed by the desire to avoid stereotypes ($M = 3.90$) and the ability to adapt to the cultural specificities of the interlocutor ($M = 3.88$) was the highest scored.

The lowest average values were reported on the indicator for recognizing the impact of cultural differences on communication between people ($M = 3.59$) and professional training for work in a multicultural environment ($M = 3.58$).

Table 3. Self-assessment of cultural competences

Competencies	Average
I can work with people from different cultures	3,96
I strive to avoid stereotypes when working with people from different cultural backgrounds	3,90
I know how to adapt my behavior according to the cultural characteristics of the interlocutor	3,88
I am interested in international and intercultural topics	3,76
I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures	3,75
I recognize the impact of cultural differences on communication between people	3,59
Social networks support my professional preparation for work in a multicultural environment	3,58

Nevertheless, the averages go beyond the neutral value of the scale, which indicates a positive assessment of both one's own intercultural competences and the possibility and potential of social networks to support the professional development of students.

To test hypothesis H1, a Spearman correlation analysis was carried out between the frequency of online communication with people from different cultures and the overall level of self-assessment of intercultural competences. The results show a statistically significant positive relationship between the two variables ($p = 0.446$; $p = 0.001$). The obtained values show a moderate correlation, which means that students who interact online more often with people from different cultures value their own intercultural competences higher. These results make it possible to confirm hypothesis H1.

Hypothesis H2 testing was carried out by comparing students participating in international online communities and groups and those without similar experience. Table 4 shows that students who participate in international online communities have a higher level of intercultural competences and awareness ($M = 3.96$) compared to those who do not participate in similar communities ($M = 3.74$). Despite the observed trend, statistical analysis did not establish a significant difference between the two groups in the accepted level of significance ($p = 0.060$). Therefore, hypothesis H2 cannot be fully confirmed, although the results point to a positive link between participation in international communities and groups and the development of intercultural competences.

The results show that the statement "Social networks support my professional preparation for work in a multicultural environment" received the lowest average among the self-assessment indicators of intercultural competences ($M = 3.58$). However, the value reflects a positive assessment of the role of social networks in the preparation of future social workers. Therefore, it can be assumed that students perceive social networks as a useful resource for their preparation for work in a multicultural environment, which allows them to confirm the H3 hypothesis.

Analysis of the results shows that students recognize both the positive and negative aspects of social media. Among the most frequently cited positive effects are the opportunity to learn more about other cultures (78%) and improved communication with people from different cultures (65%). In addition, respondents also report negative aspects related to the spread of disinformation (55%) and the formation or reinforcement of stereotypes (43%). The results obtained show that students are aware of both the benefits and risks of using social networks in an international context. This assumes that hypothesis H4 is confirmed.

The results obtained show that social media is perceived by students as a useful tool and resource for preparing for work in a multicultural environment. This result can be interpreted by the fact that the professional training of social workers requires not only intercultural contacts and interactions, but also systematic training and development of professional skills to work in a multicultural environment. Previous studies have shown that by integrating multicultural education into social work training with the help of various innovative approaches and resources, future social workers can develop their intercultural competences necessary to work in a

multicultural environment [20], [21]. In this sense, social media can be seen not as a main, but as a complementary tool for the formation of intercultural competence.

V. CONCLUSION

The theoretical aspect of the research has made it possible to identify the importance of the formation of intercultural competences in the preparation of future social work professionals. The results of the empirical research show that social media plays a significant role in the development of intercultural competences of students studying to become social workers. The development of intercultural competences in the educational environment using a complex of resources is a very convincing tool for achieving intercultural understanding, appreciation, and sensitivity. The results of the study show a positive relationship between the frequency of intercultural online contacts and the self-assessment of students' intercultural competences, which highlights the role of the digital environment as a space for intercultural interaction. Students appreciate social networks as a useful resource forgetting to know different cultures, developing effective intercultural communication, cultural awareness and for professional preparation for working in the conditions of cultural diversity. It should be noted that the results of the study have been interpreted in view of some limitations. The survey was conducted among a relatively limited number of respondents from one specialty and is based on a self-assessment of the respondents, which limits the possibilities for generalizing the results. Future studies could provide larger and deeper insights into the role and influence of social media in the formation of intercultural competences. The results obtained support the need for a more targeted integration of digital and intercultural competences in the training of future social work professionals.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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