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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON STUDENTS CULTURAL AWARENESS AT UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL

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The article explores the impact of social media on the development of cultural awareness among upper secondary school students in the context of the modern information environment. The relevance of the study is determined by the growing role of social media as a primary source of information about other cultures in the context of globalization, digitalization and ongoing socio-political challenges. In modern conditions, upper secondary school students increasingly perceive cultural diversity through media representations rather than direct intercultural interaction. This tendency is particularly significant in Ukraine, where the information environment is shaped by external influences and requires a high level of critical media awareness.

The aim of the article is to investigate the impact of social media on the development of cultural awareness among upper secondary school students, to identify the peculiarities of their perception of intercultural content and to determine the potential of integrating media literacy into foreign language teaching.

The methodological framework of the research is based on Michael Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, with a particular focus on the component of critical cultural awareness. The empirical part of the study involved a survey conducted among 92 students of grades 10-11 from secondary schools in Zhytomyr and the Zhytomyr region.

The results of the study demonstrate a high level of students' engagement with social media and reveal significant exposure to English-language content, which creates favorable conditions for developing intercultural communicative competence in the EFL classroom. Social media are shown to contribute to upper secondary school students' awareness of cultural diversity, their openness to other cultures and motivation to learn foreign languages. At the same time, the level of critical evaluation of media content and fact-checking skills remains moderate, indicating the need for pedagogical support.

The study concludes that social media can serve as an effective tool for fostering cultural awareness when integrated into EFL teaching at upper secondary institutions. It highlights the importance of developing students' critical thinking, media literacy and ability to interpret cultural representations in an informed way.

Key words: *intercultural communicative competence, foreign language, medialiteracy, social networks, Byram's model, general secondary education institution.*

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ВПЛИВ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ МЕДІА НА КУЛЬТУРНУ ОБІЗНАНІСТЬ УЧНІВ СТАРШОЇ ПРОФІЛЬНОЇ ШКОЛИ

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У статті досліджено вплив соціальних медіа на формування культурної обізнаності учнів старшої школи в умовах сучасного інформаційного середовища. Актуальність проблеми зумовлена зростанням ролі соціальних мереж як основного джерела інформації про інші культури, а також необхідністю розвитку критичного мислення та медіаграмотності здобувачів освіти в умовах інформаційного тиску. Теоретичним підґрунтям дослідження слугувала модель міжкультурної комунікативної компетентності Майкла Байрама, зокрема її компонент критичної культурної обізнаності.

Метою статті стало визначення впливу соціальних медіа на рівень культурної обізнаності учнів старшої школи, а також з'ясування можливостей інтеграції медіаграмотності у процес навчання іноземної мови. У межах дослідження проведено анкетування серед 92 учнів 10-11 класів закладів загальної середньої освіти м. Житомира та Житомирської області. Результати засвідчили високий рівень залученості учнів старшої профільної школи до використання соціальних мереж, а також значну взаємодію з іношомовним, зокрема англошомовним, контентом. Встановлено, що соціальні медіа сприяють розширенню знань про інші культури, формуванню відкритості до міжкультурної взаємодії та мотивації до вивчення іноземних мов. Водночас виявлено середній рівень сформованості навичок критичного аналізу медіаконтенту та перевірки інформації. Автором виявлено позитивну тенденцію щодо відкритості учнів до інших культур та використання соціальних мереж як ресурсу для вивчення іноземної мови і культури.

Зроблено висновок про необхідність інтеграції медіаграмотності у процес навчання іноземної мови у старшій профільній школі з метою розвитку критичного мислення й культурної обізнаності учнів, а також їх здатності до інтерпретації культурних наративів й ефективної міжкультурної комунікації.

Ключові слова: міжкультурна комунікативна компетентність, іноземна мова, медіаграмотність, соціальні мережі, модель Байрама, заклад загальної середньої освіти.

Introduction of the issue. The instability of geopolitical and economic conditions worldwide has created new demands for modern citizens, particularly regarding their ability to interact effectively with representatives of different languages and cultures, navigate a multicultural information environment and develop their own viewpoints based on the critical interpretation of information. Under contemporary conditions, these processes are largely mediated by social media, which have become one of the leading channels for obtaining information, including knowledge about other cultures, social practices and values.

These transformations affect not only the spheres of politics, business, media and art, but also education, which is currently undergoing significant changes due to European integration processes and the necessity of our country to enter the European linguo-cultural space.

Active international cooperation among Ukrainian learners, school teachers, university lecturers and researchers has become one of the top-priority areas of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. In particular, Paragraph 7 of Article 82 of the Law of Ukraine "On Education" states that the government promotes measures aimed at the development of international cooperation; the creation of appropriate legal, financial and economic conditions for cooperation; the attraction of resources from international organizations for the implementation of scientific, educational and other programs and projects; the promotion of international cooperation; and the provision of consultative support, among other initiatives [5].

Upper secondary school occupies a special place within the educational system, as it functions as a transitional stage between general secondary and higher education. According to the State

Standard of Upper Secondary Education, its purpose is *"the development of learners' personalities through the establishment of Ukrainian national and civic identity and the formation of competences necessary for their resilience, independence, responsibility, communication and interaction with other people, socialization, entrepreneurship, conscious choice of future life path, lifelong learning, professional activity and self-realization"* [2]. Among the key competences developed at this stage is the ability to communicate effectively in both native and foreign languages, which presupposes not only linguistic proficiency, but also intercultural awareness.

At the same time, contemporary teenagers increasingly form their perceptions of other cultures not through direct intercultural contact, but rather through the prism of media content presented on social networking platforms. Social media platforms have become the primary source of information for young people regarding cultural traditions, everyday life, behavioral norms and values of representatives of other countries. In this context, the issue of critically interpreting media representations of culture becomes especially relevant, since information disseminated through social media is often fragmented, stereotypical or manipulative in nature. This problem becomes particularly acute in the context of the full-scale war, when Ukrainian society exists under constant informational pressure and the media space has become a field of struggle for meanings, interpretations of events and political narratives. Under such circumstances, students' ability to critically evaluate foreign-language media content, recognize cultural differences and develop a balanced attitude toward other cultures constitutes not only an educational objective, but also an important factor of social resilience.

Therefore, there is an increasing need for the purposeful development of students' **cultural awareness**,

particularly through the integration of media literacy into the process of EFL teaching. In our view, foreign language classes possess considerable potential for creating a favorable environment for the analysis of authentic foreign-language media content, the interpretation of cultural phenomena represented in social media and the development of learners' critical thinking skills.

Current state of the issue. The issue of the media space influence on the formation of cultural perceptions among students of general secondary education institutions is highly relevant in contemporary pedagogical research, particularly within the contexts of digital education and intercultural communication. This problem has been addressed in the works of numerous Ukrainian and foreign scholars, including N. Hudyma, N. Mieliekiestseva, O. Kovalchuk [1], V. Melnychuk [4], T. Konovalenko, O. Sakhatska [3], H. Cho, J. Cannon, R. Lopez, W. Li [11], J. McDougall, M. Zezulkova, B. Van-Driel, D. Sternadel [12] and others.

In the study conducted by W.J. Potter, **media literacy** is viewed as *"a complex construct that combines a broad range of skills, including the ability to read, evaluate and analyze information, imagine alternative interpretations, deconstruct media messages, identify patterns, critically reflect on meanings, assess the credibility of information, determine communicators' intentions, formulate reasoned counterarguments, search for truth, resist manipulative influence, and create one's own media messages"* [13: 41]. Scholars I. Rozman and L. Kravchenko emphasize the significant role of media education in developing critical thinking among upper secondary school students and enhancing their ability to perceive, analyze and evaluate media content [6: 122].

At the same time, Ya. Sydorenko highlights the importance of developing media literacy among learners beginning from primary school through the integration of social media into

classroom activities, media content analysis and project-based tasks [8: 716]. According to I. Sakhnevych, mastering media competence represents the highest level of media culture, which presupposes an understanding of the sociocultural, economic and political contexts of media, as well as the ability to act as a bearer, creator and transmitter of values, standards and other elements of contemporary media culture [7: 142].

Furthermore, researchers emphasize that media literacy has the potential to contribute to the development of a broad spectrum of additional skills and competences. In addition to protecting individuals from the influence of unreliable information, it facilitates the formation of positive intercultural behavioral practices, supports the transformation of risky behavioral patterns into constructive ones, and enables the correction of inaccurate cultural beliefs or prejudices while preserving well-grounded perceptions.

Outline of unresolved issues brought up in the article. The media sphere has had a significant influence on the formation of public consciousness in Ukraine over the past decades. Since the early 2000s, the media environment has been actively developing; however, it was primarily oriented toward the post-soviet audience. Nevertheless, the full-scale invasion became a catalyst for fundamental changes in media consumption and citizens' worldviews, as society realized the necessity of adopting a critical approach to information obtained from various media sources. Whereas television had remained the primary source of news before 2022, during the period from 2022 to 2025 the level of public trust in television channels significantly decreased, while priority shifted to Telegram channels, the YouTube platform, and the official pages of state institutions. Consequently, the development of citizens' ability to critically evaluate and interpret information, particularly from foreign-language media sources, has become especially relevant. Therefore, the

integration of media literacy into foreign language teaching is both appropriate and pedagogically justified, since working with authentic foreign-language sources contributes to the development of students' conscious understanding of Ukraine's role in the global world.

Within the framework of this study, it is considered appropriate to refer to **the Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)** proposed by the British linguist Michael Byram, which includes five components: *knowledge* (savoir), *attitudes and interaction skills* (savoir être), *skills of interpreting and relating* (savoir comprendre), *skills of discovery and interaction* (savoir apprendre/faire), and *critical cultural awareness* (savoir s'engager) [9].

The *knowledge* component encompasses understanding of stereotypes, social groups, traditions and cultural values of a particular nation. Although this component is relatively accessible within the process of foreign language teaching, its predominantly theoretical nature presents a certain challenge. The acquisition of factual information about another culture alone does not ensure a profound understanding of how this culture functions in real life and, consequently, does not fully contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence. In this regard, scholars emphasize the importance of using authentic materials (texts, videos, and media content), which enable students to immerse themselves in a real cultural context. Equally important is interaction with native speakers, particularly through cooperation with teachers and students from English-speaking countries or participation in international academic mobility programmes.

Another component involves the *skills of discovery and interaction* with society. Our practical experience demonstrates that providing students with opportunities to independently explore cultural phenomena contributes to a deeper understanding of their essence and significance. Such activities enable

learners to comprehend the reasons behind the existence of particular phenomena within a specific culture. Effective means of developing this component include correspondence with foreign peers, participation in guest lectures and the completion of research-oriented tasks.

Another important component is *the ability to interpret information and establish connections* with representatives of other cultures, which is closely related to mediation skills. These skills involve the ability to examine phenomena from different perspectives in order to avoid misunderstandings both at the level of verbal/non-verbal interaction and within intercultural dialogue. In the process of developing this component, it is essential to consider both macro-cultural and micro-cultural aspects: representatives of different social groups, even within the same country, may interpret the same cultural phenomena differently depending on their social status, personal experience or values. Therefore, the ability to analyse cultural information from multiple perspectives is of crucial importance.

The *attitude* component is regarded as the foundation of intercultural communicative competence. It presupposes openness to other cultures, readiness to acknowledge diversity of values and worldviews, as well as tolerance toward cultural differences, since the presence of prejudice significantly complicates intercultural interaction.

The final, yet equally important, component is *critical cultural awareness*, which involves understanding contemporary global processes and their influence on cultural development. Social, political and economic factors largely determine the functioning of cultural communities and shape their perception by others. Consequently, studying current global developments contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural diversity [10]. In our opinion, critical cultural awareness is one of the key components of ICC in the context of

the twenty-first century. In today's rapidly changing world, knowledge of traditions, stereotypes or established norms alone is insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of culture. Of particular importance is the ability to critically analyse information, facts and events that shape perceptions of other cultures. Given that the Internet, online platforms and social media constitute the primary sources of information for contemporary youth, cultural awareness is closely connected with the level of media literacy. Our experience of working with upper secondary school students demonstrates that the ability to analyse and critically evaluate media content is closely related to the formation of their perceptions of the language and culture they study, which can make this approach highly effective in foreign language classrooms.

Aim of the research. Therefore, the aim of the article is to investigate the impact of social media on the development of cultural awareness among upper secondary school students, to identify the specific features of learners' perception of foreign-language and intercultural content in the digital environment, as well as to determine the possibilities of integrating media literacy into foreign language teaching in the process of developing students' cultural awareness.

Results and discussion. In order to determine the influence of social media on the level of cultural awareness among senior secondary school students, a survey was conducted among 10th-11th grade students of general secondary education institutions in the city of Zhytomyr and the Zhytomyr region. The study involved 92 respondents aged between 15 and 18, including 62 eleventh-grade students and 30 tenth-grade students. It should be noted that the geographical limitations and relatively small sample size may affect the interpretation and generalizability of the research findings.

The analysis of the survey results demonstrated a high level of student engagement in the use of social media. In

particular, 56.2% of respondents reported spending more than four hours per day on social networking platforms, while 31.5% indicated using them for 3-4 hours daily. Additionally, 7.6% of participants spent 1-2 hours per day on social media, whereas 4.4% reported spending between five and eight hours daily. Among the social media platforms, Telegram (96.7%) and TikTok (88%) were identified as the most popular, confirming the dominance of visually oriented content within teenagers' information environments. The obtained data indicates that social media constitutes an essential element of students' everyday lives, which further emphasizes the importance of developing skills of critical perception and interpretation of information consumed online, particularly in the context of intercultural interaction.

An important aspect of the study involves identifying the languages in which students consume content on social media. The results revealed that 37% of respondents primarily consume content in Ukrainian, 13% mainly in English, while 42.4% reported using both languages approximately equally. These findings indicate a considerable level of interaction with English-language content among students, which creates favourable conditions for the use of social media as a tool for fostering cultural awareness in foreign language education.

The second part of the survey involved the use of a Likert scale (from 1 – "strongly disagree" to 5 – "strongly agree") in order to assess students' level of cultural awareness and their attitudes toward intercultural content (see Table 1).

Table 1

Results of the Statements Evaluation (Likert Scale, %)

№	Statement	Number of points (%)					Dominant Level
		1	2	3	4	5	
1.	<i>I am aware that content on social media may influence my attitude toward other cultures.</i>	7,6	13	31,5	30,4	17,4	Moderate
2.	<i>I notice that my cultural experience (communication with representatives of other cultures, studying traditions, stereotypes, etc.) influences my perception of information on social media.</i>	10,9	18,5	34,8	29,3	6,5	Moderate
3.	<i>I try to understand the cultural context of posts and videos before drawing conclusions.</i>	4,3	5,4	25	32,6	32,6	Sufficient / High
4.	<i>Social media help me learn about traditions and customs of other countries.</i>	0	3,3	15,2	33,7	47,8	High
5.	<i>I follow pages of organizations or bloggers from other countries.</i>	12	7,6	13	13	54,3	High
6.	<i>I am interested in how people from different cultures represent their everyday life online.</i>	7,6	13	26,1	25	28,3	High
7.	<i>I understand that the same event/news may be interpreted differently by representatives of different cultures.</i>	2,2	4,3	19,6	30,4	43,5	High
8.	<i>Social media help me better</i>	3,3	3,3	20,7	31,5	41,3	High

	<i>understand authentic English and cultural features of communication.</i>						
9.	<i>I pay attention to cultural differences in people's styles of online communication.</i>	4,3	8,7	30,4	27,2	29,3	Moderate
10.	<i>I understand that not all information about cultures on social media is reliable.</i>	2,2	4,3	7,6	27,2	58,7	High
11.	<i>I notice stereotypes or generalizations about cultures on social media.</i>	2,2	6,5	25	33,7	32,6	Sufficient
12.	<i>I always try to verify information/news using several sources.</i>	7,6	10,9	23,9	31,5	26,1	Sufficient
13.	<i>Social media makes me more open to other cultures.</i>	8,7	13	28,3	37	13	Sufficient
14.	<i>I respect the opinions of representatives of other cultures even if I disagree with them.</i>	3,3	10,9	29,3	37	19,6	Sufficient
15.	<i>Social media encourages me to learn foreign languages and cultures.</i>	5,4	9,8	29,3	21,7	33,7	High

The results indicate that students' awareness of the social media influence on the formation of attitudes toward other cultures remains predominantly at a moderate level: 31.5% of respondents rated this influence at 3 points. A similar tendency was observed regarding awareness of the impact of their own cultural experience, with 34.8% of respondents assigning a score of 3 points. At the same time, a positive tendency toward critical reflection on media content was identified. Most students rated at 4–5 points the statement concerning their willingness to understand the cultural context of posts before forming conclusions. Similarly, 47.8% of respondents highly evaluated the role of social media in learning about the traditions and customs of other countries. Regarding intercultural interaction, 54.3% of students reported following pages of organizations and bloggers from other countries. In addition, a moderate level of interest in representations of everyday life in other cultures was observed, with responses distributed across 3, 4 and 5 points (26.1%, 25% and 28.3% respectively).

Another positive finding is the high level of understanding that the same information may be interpreted differently by representatives of different cultures: 43.5% of students rated this statement at 5 points. Furthermore, 41.3% of respondents indicated that learning English through social media contributes to a better understanding of cultural features of communication.

At the same time, the skills related to analysing cultural differences in styles of online communication appeared to be less developed: approximately 30% of students evaluated their awareness at 3 points, although higher scores of 4–5 points were also present. Nevertheless, 58.7% of respondents demonstrated a high level of critical cultural awareness by strongly agreeing (5 points) with the statement that not all information about cultures presented on social media is reliable. In our opinion, this tendency may be explained by the increased attention devoted by the state to the development of media literacy in both education and other social spheres. Similarly, the majority of students demonstrated awareness of the existence

of stereotypes in media content, with responses ranging from 3 to 5 points (25%, 33.7%, and 32.6% respectively).

However, the level of fact-checking skills appeared to be somewhat insufficiently developed: the largest proportion of respondents (31.5%) assessed this ability at 4 points, which indicates the need for further development of analytical thinking skills. A positive tendency toward openness to other cultures was identified: the majority of respondents rated the influence of social media on their openness at 4 points, while 37% stated that they treat representatives of other cultures with respect (also at 4 points).

An important aspect of the study involved identifying the motivational potential of social media in the process of learning foreign languages and cultures. The survey results demonstrated an overall positive tendency in respondents' answers: in particular, 33.7% of students completely agreed with the statement (5 points), which provides grounds for considering social media an effective motivational tool in the process of learning foreign languages and cultures. This can be explained by access to authentic content, opportunities to observe real language environments, and possibilities for interaction with representatives of other cultures.

The final stage of the survey included an open-ended question in which students were asked to provide examples of posts, videos or social media pages that had contributed to a better understanding of another culture. The responses were diverse in nature and reflected a wide range of respondents' interests:

- *"I often come across videos on TikTok and Instagram where people talk about their experience of living or staying in other countries".*

- *"The let's-play blogger CaseOh helped me better understand contemporary youth gaming culture. Through his videos, I saw how young people in the USA communicate, what values and humour are important for*

gamers, and how their online community is formed. In addition, by listening to him speaking English, I simultaneously improved my comprehension and learned new expressions and authentic language.

- *"A Ukrainian girl was showing Ukrainian memes to an American, and it was interesting to observe his reaction and whether the same things were funny for them as for us".*

- *"Recently, TikTok has frequently featured videos about certain habits of tourists and the reactions of local residents of a particular country or city, explaining why people reacted in a certain way".*

- *"YouTube channels where people from different countries show their everyday lives help me better understand another culture. For example, videos about life in Japan: how students study there, the rules of behaviour in society and people's attitudes toward work and traditions".*

- *"Posts of different bloggers whom I usually watch help me better understand other cultures. They travel around the world, visit different countries, and talk about them in their videos. Videos and posts created by foreign people of their own countries are also interesting because they show beautiful and unique places, describe traditions and simply introduce their culture. Even ordinary vlogs where people show their daily routine help me better understand their way of life. In my opinion, this is very interesting and makes us closer to one another, even at a distance".*

Conclusions and research perspectives. Thus, the results of the conducted research confirm that social media play a significant role in the development of cultural awareness among upper secondary school students, functioning both as a source of authentic intercultural content and as an environment for the development of foreign language communication. The study has demonstrated that students actively engage with social media, particularly with English-language content, which creates favourable conditions for the formation of

intercultural communicative competence. At the same time, the level of students' awareness of the influence of media on the formation of cultural perceptions, as well as the development of their analytical thinking skills, remains predominantly moderate, which highlights the need for further enhancement.

The obtained findings indicate the appropriateness of the purposeful integration of media literacy into the process of foreign language teaching, particularly using authentic media content, the analysis of social media platforms and the involvement of

students in the critical interpretation of information. Special attention should be devoted to the development of fact-checking skills, the interpretation of cultural phenomena and the understanding of the multidimensional nature of media representations. Prospects for further research involve the development of methodological recommendations for the use of social media as a tool for fostering critical cultural awareness among students, as well as the experimental verification of their effectiveness within the process of EFL teaching in general secondary education institutions.

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