



Effects of distance from home to campus on undergraduate place attachment and university experience in China



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ABSTRACT

First-year students in transition from hometown to campus are generally confronted by intellectual and social challenges as well as disruption and the formation of the place attachments associated with relocation. Understanding the variables affecting student place attachment helps address the widespread concern about student transition. Interactions between place attachment to hometown and campus, and the effects of endogenous and exogenous variables on place attachments, were analysed using covariance analysis, based on questionnaire data gathered at a Chinese university. Campus identity acts as a predictor for the other three dimensions of place attachment to hometown and campus: hometown identity, hometown dependence and campus dependence. Place attachment to campus exerts a direct effect on place attachment to hometown, while the latter indirectly impacts on the former through mediators including academic self-efficacy and peer relationships. Gender, household registration record and duration of dormitory stay were also identified as statistically significant predictors of student place attachment.

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1. Introduction

Although the transition to university is traditionally perceived as a positive opportunity for personal development, all students face intellectual and social challenges (Chow & Healey, 2008; Fisher & Hood, 1987). While most students can successfully manage the process of transition, there is still a substantial minority (up to 20%) who do not adapt very well and who fail to fulfil the academic and social requirements of university life (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Underperformance resulting from not being able to make adjustments in learning and social contacts is an even more frequent outcome (Johnston, 1994). When geographical distance is involved, changes in the physical environment and the break with previous social networks make the transition more complicated. Students whose affective bonds with their hometowns are disrupted and whose sources of safety and identity are threatened have to develop associations with the new place, resulting in a more daunting transition (Brown & Perkins, 1992; McAndrew, 1998; Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010; Tognoli, 2003).

This human-place bond – termed ‘place attachment’ (Chow & Healey, 2008; Rijnks & Strijker, 2013) or as understood through related concepts such as ‘place identity’ (Chow & Healey, 2008), ‘sense of belonging’ (Cemalcilar, 2010) and ‘rootedness’ (McAndrew, 1998), along with their disruption – has been examined in a substantial number of articles (Fried, 1963; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983). However, the case of undergraduates making the transition from home to university has received much less attention, with some exceptions (e.g., Chow & Healey, 2008; Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010; Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2000). Among these exceptions, place attachment has been studied with reference to endogenous variables such as self-efficacy, psychological disorders and interpersonal relationships. For example, Fisher, Murray, and Frazer (1985) propose that about sixty to seventy percent of college first-year undergraduates report homesickness in the first few weeks and many still continue to suffer. In the context of a university campus, self-efficacy is also associated with persistence and achievement in learning (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). As interpersonal relationships play a key role in an individual's intellectual development and personal growth (Bowlby, 1969), they are also important for the formation of place attachment (Chow & Healey, 2008). Although Tinto (1987) suggested that successful

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adjustment to the transition requires managing both the academic and social aspects of the new environment, the relationships among one or more place attachments, academic activities, interpersonal interactions, emotional wellbeing and other variables remain unclear (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007).

University enrolment in China began to expand in 1999, when the *Education Revitalization Plan for the 21st Century* was approved by the State Council and forwarded to the Ministry of Education. In 1999 the number of students enrolled in universities reached 1.6 million. Since then, enrolment has been growing at a rate of approximately twelve percent annually. Although there is no overall data about the percentage of students who attend universities in places other than their hometowns, the proportion could be higher than ninety percent, according to surveys in universities under the national enrolment census (Liu, Guo, Fu, Cao, & Er, 2010). Therefore, the transition from home to university in China provides an ideal arena for research into place attachment, as well as into related predictors and mediating variables for the undergraduates' successful performance at university.

2. Place attachment in earlier research

2.1. Dimensions of place attachment and their relationships

Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) originally proposed a two-dimensional construct for place attachment: place dependence reflects the importance of a place in providing features that support specific goals (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981) and place identity refers to the symbolic importance of a place in giving meaning and purpose to life (Shamai, 1991). Kyle, Graefe, and Manning (2005) explored the dimensionality of place attachment in recreational settings with a first-order, three-factor correlated model in which social bonding was added as the third dimension: this model proved to be superior to others. Raymond, Brown, and Weber (2010) also incorporated natural bonding, family bonding and friend bonding into the place attachment framework construct and compared it to the traditional two-dimensional model. The traditional two-dimensional model proved to be a better fit for the data in that study, as also suggested by a variety of other samples (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004; Moore & Graefe, 1994).

Many later studies adopted the two-dimensional construct of place attachment and the correlation between the dimensions (Kyle, Graefe, et al., 2004; Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004; Raymond et al., 2010; Williams & Vaske, 2003), while some followed the construct but considered the dimensions to be uncorrelated components (Brown & Raymond, 2007; Hernández, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, & Hess, 2007; Kyle, Mowen, et al., 2004). In their study of lakeshore owners' attitudes towards their properties, Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) recommended a correlated uniqueness model of sense of place, in which items under the same dimension were correlated, while items under different dimensions were not. Moore and Graefe (1994) suggested that place identity could result from frequent visits and ascribed visit frequency to be a manifest variable of place dependence. This relationship was also found by Rijnks and Strijker (2013) in their study of regional identity. Harmon, Zinn, and Gleason (2006) observed similar phenomena in their study at Isle Royal National Park, but they found no connection between place dependence and visit frequency, indicating that place dependence is not a necessary predictor of place identity (Proshansky et al., 1983). Though a correlation between the two dimensions of place attachment is widely accepted, few studies have focused on the ability of one dimension to predict the other.

According to Proshansky et al. (1983), place attachment (or as they termed it, 'place identity') is developed through a process of distancing and evolves from an individual's environmental past. It

has been suggested that relocation, whether forced or voluntary, could lead to disruptive psychological experiences, especially for people with high place attachment to their hometowns (Fried, 1963; Fullilove, 1996) for whom this attachment to the place of origin could inhibit the formation of attachment to a new place. However, Bowlby (1969) pointed out the possibility that people could still become attached effectively to a new place, since their high attachment to their original home provides 'a safe haven' from which to explore the new setting. This was confirmed by Giuliani, Ferrara, and Barabotti (2003) in their findings about multiple place attachment to different places after relocation. Scopelliti and Tiberio (2010) found that both place attachment to hometown and place attachment to campus city exerted adverse effects on homesickness among undergraduates, but they perceived the two attachments as independent variables for predicting homesickness without considering the interactions between them. To date, research on the association of place attachment to past and present environments remains scarce.

2.2. Effects of demographic variables on place attachment and related endogenous variables

Among the demographic variables related to place attachment and its psychological consequences, residence length has received wide attention (Lewicka, 2011). For instance, Brown and Raymond (2007) used a three-way full-factorial model to examine the relationships between respondent variables and place attachment in Australia, and found weak but significant positive correlations between length of residence and place identity. These findings are consistent with those from a number of other studies (e.g. Goudy, 1982; Goudy, 1990). As mobility is closely related to the residence length variable, it also affects place attachment in various ways (Lewicka, 2011). Home ownership was also found to be a consistent predictor of place attachment in a number of studies (e.g. Bolan, 1997). Other variables such as social status or age sometimes showed positive and/or negative patterns of relationship with place attachment (Fried, 1984; Lalli, 1992; Lewicka, 2005), suggesting that the relationship may well be mediated or moderated by additional factors (Lewicka, 2011).

Gender could be an important variable in mediated or moderated relationships. Vorkinn and Riese (2001) argued that the correlation between gender and place attachment was quite weak while Scopelliti and Tiberio (2010) suggested using more sensitive variables than gender in further studies, since they unexpectedly identified no gender differences in place attachment to hometown. Although the effects of gender on place attachment have to be further clarified, its correlations with academic performance and psychological disturbances have been consistent. Researchers (e.g. Olani, 2009) found that female students have higher grade point averages (GPAs) than their male counterparts but lower academic self-efficacy (Liang, 2004; Shaher & Ayman, 2014). Fisher and Hood (1987) noted an overall rise in psychological disturbances among American students in transition to university, with females showing significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety.

Studies of university students have investigated the role of yet more variables (such as distance) and their characteristics. For instance, Chow and Healey (2008) pointed out that proximity to home provides opportunities for gradual adjustment and a sort of stability for first-year undergraduates (Brown & Perkins, 1992). Tognoli (2003) stressed the greater need to establish community relationships at the campus level for those students whose hometowns are further away, indicating the significant impact of distance on transition and adaptation.

Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) argued that academic self-efficacy, along with optimism, have indirect positive effects on

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