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Social media use and adaptation among Chinese students beginning to study in the United States



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ABSTRACT

Chinese international students studying abroad in the United States undertake a life changing venture; one that produces numerous benefits for both the Chinese students and the American people, yet is also fraught with hardships and struggle. Prior literature shows that large and diverse social networks are ideal for increasing international students' adaptation. Using an online questionnaire administered to 120 Chinese international college students studying in the U.S., we explored the potential impact that the utilization of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) could have on the construction of such social networks, when used during study abroad preparation. We found that students who used SNSs more often during their study abroad preparations had larger, more diverse social networks abroad, compared with students who used SNSs less often or not at all. Students with more diverse social networks reported significantly higher levels of social and academic adaptation in the host culture. We suggest universities and advisors provide training for the use of SNSs to Chinese students during their study abroad preparations, in order to increase social and academic adaptation when abroad.

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1. Introduction

The number of international students studying in the U.S. has been consistently increasing since the [Institute of International Education \(2014\)](#) began keeping track in 1952. Enrollment in the 2013–2014 academic year hit a record high with 886,052 foreign students beginning their studies at universities and colleges nation-wide.

This influx of international students from all over the world has positive impacts on the U.S., culturally and economically. Each student brings with them a unique cultural heritage that diversifies the population, increasing awareness and appreciation of other cultures ([Bevis, 2002](#); [Harrison, 2002](#)). These students' differing perspectives provide them with a distinct set of skills and knowledge, which adds intellectual capital to the country and work force ([Smith & Khawaja, 2011](#)). International students also have a significant effect on the country's financial capital, having contributed over 27 billion dollars to the U.S. economy in 2014 alone. Nearly 80% of international students' college funding comes from outside the U.S. (mostly from family members or themselves) helping to grow the economy ([Institute of International Education, 2014](#)). Moreover, "in the last half of the twentieth century, America was the location of choice for the best and brightest scientific minds in the world" ([Zucker & Darby, 2007](#) p. 181), comprising 62% of the global population's star scientists and engineers, the majority of whom first arrived as international students ([Hawthorne, 2010](#)). International students provide a plethora of benefits for

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the host country; therefore, “. . .their academic success, health, and psychological wellbeing (PWB) are important issues for the students themselves, for university administration and for research communities” (Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, & Lynch, 2007, p. 200). Yet, despite the importance of maintaining and retaining international students, only a small minority intend to stay in the U.S. long term. Upon completing their study abroad programs or degrees, most international students feel torn between the U.S. and their home country, yet the majority report intentions to return home within a few years (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Hazen & Alberts, 2006).

China has been the number one origin country for international students studying in America for the past five years; currently representing 31% of all international students. Not only has China maintained this top position, but the total number of Chinese students in America has been increasing at an average rate of 25% per year (Institute of International Education, 2014). Adapting to life in America for these 270,000+ Chinese students, however, is no easy task, as the differences between America and China are numerous (Hazen & Alberts, 2006; Yan & Berliner, 2013). Among the many issues these students face, Church (1982) identified academic and social adaptation as two of the most prominent and important. Chinese students struggle academically in understanding how to perform well in American classrooms, as opposed to Chinese ones. Socially, they struggle in adapting to new cultural customs and norms (Yan & Berliner, 2013), and in forging meaningful relationships with US Americans (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). Moreover, Chinese students are often the least adjusted group among all international students, due to their high levels of stress, neuroticism, and perceived cultural distance (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007; Hazen & Alberts, 2006). American students' native understanding of social and academic norms in the U.S. may help alleviate some of these issues; creating a more supportive environment and ultimately reducing the attrition rates at universities (Westwood & Barker, 1990).

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) could serve as an avenue for generating social support networks for Chinese international students. The use of SNSs is now the most popular online activity in the world (ComScore, 2011). 73% of American adults use SNSs, such as Facebook and Twitter, and over 400 million Chinese adults use SNSs, such as Weibo and RenRen on a daily basis (China Internet Watch, 2012; PEW Research Center, 2013). SNSs have been found to have a positive impact on creating and maintaining social capital, as well as improving psychological wellbeing for American students, so it follows that they might also help international students (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Stefanone, Kwon, & Lackaff, 2011). These new social media platforms may offer a modern and exciting new way to help international students with adapting to their new life; an avenue that has been virtually unexplored in the field of Intercultural New Media Studies (Shuter, 2012). In this paper, we present the results of a study examining whether or not SNSs can be utilized to influence Chinese students' social networks and whether this, in turn, affects their adaptation when they are studying in the U.S.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. International students

While some literature touches upon the differences among international students, immigrants, and expatriates (Berry & Sam, 1997; Church, 1982), few studies have tested whether or not the differences among such groups are truly meaningful. Kim (2001) separates all individuals moving from one country to another into two categories: short-term and long-term. Long-term individuals are represented by immigrants and refugees who intend to stay in the host country on a more or less permanent basis. Short-term individuals, also known as sojourners, are represented by international students and foreign workers (expatriates) who intend, at least initially, on returning to their origin country.

This study seeks to examine individuals in the latter group, therefore, all of the prior literature we review is either all-encompassing or pertains specifically to sojourners. While we could delineate further to only include literature about international students, we take insights from a few articles about expatriates, as the differences between both types of sojourners are few enough and “all individuals crossing cultures face some common challenges as they pioneer lives of uprootedness and gradually establish working relationships with their new milieus” (Kim, 2001 p. 4).

2.2. Acculturation, stressors and adaptation

Acculturation was originally defined by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (p. 149). Researchers have developed a number of perspectives in the study of acculturation since then; one of the most noteworthy being the development of the bi-dimensional or bi-cultural model, which is used often in intercultural research today. Berry (2005) defines acculturation as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (p. 698). As these cultural groups interact, individuals will experience varying degrees of *acculturative stress*, which includes any physical, psychological or social degradations in an individual's health that is related to the acculturation process. Common acculturative stressors include anxiety, depression, identity confusion and feelings of being marginalized (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). In response to acculturative stress, individuals choose different acculturation strategies based on the two dimensions of acculturation: *cultural maintenance* (the extent to which one maintains his/her heritage culture and identity) and *contact and participation* (the degree to which one becomes involved in the host country's society and with other cultural groups). Those who pursue positive action in both dimensions by maintaining some of their own

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