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## Exploring the beneficial effects of social networking site use on Chinese students' perceptions of social capital and psychological well-being in Germany



Hua Pang

*Institute of Media and Communication, Dresden University of Technology, Dresden, Saxony, Germany*

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this exploratory research is to investigate whether and how different types of social networking site (SNS) interactions are related to Chinese international students' various dimensions of social capital and perceived psychological well-being. Based on a sample of 206 Chinese international students in Germany, findings indicate that after controlling for demographic characteristics, social use of SNS is positively associated with improvements in users' well-being while entertainment use is not. Additionally, using SNS for entertainment proposes a significant predictor of users' bridging social capital. However, bridging social capital on SNS is not related to the perceived psychological well-being. Furthermore, the study demonstrates a positive indirect effect mechanism by which social use of SNS would influence and psychological well-being through bonding and maintained social capital. Therefore, these empirical results offer significant implications for a more nuanced understanding of the crucial role of social media in sojourners' social connectedness as well as quality of life in an intercultural context.

### Introduction

The vast penetration of online social networking sites has fundamentally transformed both the nature and extent of individuals' interpersonal communication behaviors in the digital era (Wang, Jackson, & Zhang, 2011). Social networking sites (SNSs) are internet-based online applications where users enable establish personal information profiles, articulate their social connections, and tighten relationships with other members through sharing, liking, and commenting on a variety of distinct content (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014; Pang, 2018a). Moreover, the rapid emergence of SNSs offers an excellent avenue for users to conveniently participating in various entertainment activities such as downloading music, playing online games, viewing videos, and reading the latest sport news (Dhir & Tsai, 2017). Given that colleges students are predominant social media users (Chen, Sin, Theng, & Lee, 2015), hence, it is academically significant to investigate how they utilize social media and its potential effect on their personal social networks and psychological states.

Yet surprisingly few empirical studies have symmetrically unpacked the underlying mechanism behind the association between SNS use and the social and psychological consequences among minority youths, especially sojourners in a foreign society. According to the latest survey, Germany has now become the third most attractive destination country among overseas students behind the USA and UK in all over the world (Li, 2017). Moreover, as illustrated by a study conducted by German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Chinese overseas students currently constitute the largest proportion (12.8%) of all international students enrolled in German universities (DAAD, 2017). Since these Chinese overseas students from cultural or linguistic minorities, they will encounter a

*E-mail address:* [cassieph@163.com](mailto:cassieph@163.com).

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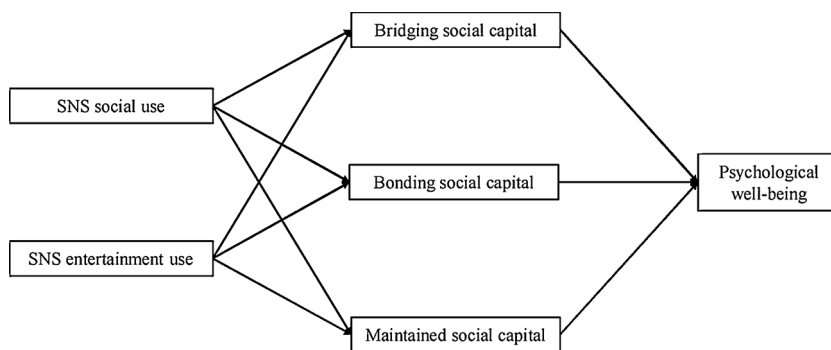


Fig. 1. The proposed research model for SNS use, social capital, and psychological well-being.

series of unavoidable issues such as language barriers, culture shock, social network maintenance, and psychological well-being development (Guo, Li, & Ito, 2014; Li, 2017; Sit, Mak, & Neill, 2017; Yuan & Fussell, 2017). Socially, these newcomers attempt to quickly adapt to the new cultural surrounding and create valuable connections with the local people in Germany (Lee & Sukoco, 2010). In such cross-cultural situations, domestic social media would serve as a useful tool for these students studying outside their home country to obtain social support networks and improve their psychological state (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). In fact, SNSs have been discovered to help international students to adjust to the new life by providing them with a number of benefits, mainly consisting of relationship establishment and social interaction (Cao, Meng, & Shang, 2018). For example, Yuan and Fussell distinguished between Chinese international students' adoption of a local social media site and a Western social media site, and further pointed out that utilizing the home-country social media platform permits them to sustain social networks with friends who share the same mother tongue, have prior interaction experience with one another, and are identified as meaningful relationships to maintain (Yuan & Fussell, 2017). As the number of Chinese international students attending tertiary institutions in Germany continues to rise (Li, 2017), it is needed to understand their social and psychological adaptations to this foreign country (Fig. 1).

Furthermore, previous literature regarding the possible impacts of interacting with SNSs has yielded inconsistent results. Some investigations confirmed that the utilization of SNSs is good for individuals' online sociability (Chen, 2013), allows members to maintain and develop social capital in computer-mediated environments (Li & Chen, 2014; Pang, 2017), promotes political and civic participation, as well as enhances ratings of satisfaction with college life (Lönnqvist & Itkonen, 2014; Pang, 2018b; Zhan, Sun, Wang, & Zhang, 2016). However, other empirical evidence documented that using SNS may be correlated with several negative psychosocial consequences including increased feelings of loneliness, depression, and stress (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015; Sidani et al., 2016). Even still other research reported no relationship between these variables (Petersen & Johnston, 2015). These mixed findings may be attributed to two possibilities: First, many previous studies have primarily concentrated on the time spent on SNS or the frequency of using it as the predictor of social capital and well-being. Such measurement has certain limitation due to it is uninformative about the distinct type of SNS use, which in turn lead to the inconsistencies in the results (Wang, Jackson, Gaskin, & Wang, 2014). The recent studies have verified that the association between SNS use and its social and psychological outcomes may depend on the different functions of SNS use (Guo et al., 2014). Second, SNS may influence users' social and psychological well-being through these crucial mediators such as bonding or bridging social capital rather than exert a direct impact on well-being (Yoo & Jeong, 2017).

Building on theoretical and empirical literature, the primary purpose of the current study is to more carefully explore how differential uses of SNSs are related to Chinese international college students' perceived social capital and well-being states in Germany. Considering that past research has indicated that the general social use has been divided into at least two broad categories based on the main function it serves for the user: the social use (e.g. wall postings, and sharing comments) and the entertainment use (e.g., playing online games, and enjoying music) (Wang et al., 2014). Thus, more specifically, this study strives to uncover whether and how social use and on entertainment use of SNS would lead to these overseas students' social capital and psychological well-being. Moreover, the possible mediating roles of social capital on the relationship between SNS interaction and social and psychological outcomes will be assessed by analyzing the conceptual model. As such, this present study extends the line of studies on the relationship between social media behavior and social capital (Chang & Hsu, 2016; Johnston, Tanner, Lalla, & Kawalski, 2013; Lönnqvist & Itkonen, 2014) and offers unique insights into how the newly emerging media technology may actually enhance people's quality of life through enhancing social capital in a cross-culture setting (Chan, 2015).

## Research framework

### *Social media use and psychological well-being*

As a key indicator of personal life quality, psychological well-being generally refers to individuals' overall evaluation and assessment about the meaningfulness of their lives (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009). According to Ryff, the concept consists of six predominant emotional and cognitive components: purposeful life, positive relations with others, personal development, self-acceptance, autonomy, as well as dominance over the environment (Ryff, 1989). With the increasingly pervasive use of SNSs among the younger generation, the potential implications of social media usage for well-being have received considerable scholarly attention. Although

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