



The Role of Social Media in the Acculturation Process of Chinese International Students

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Abstract. Studying abroad is still a growing popular trend in the 21st century. Comparatively speaking, the route and procedures offered by international students to prepare in China is a sophisticated industry. Nevertheless, as students are abroad, acculturation becomes the main issue they will encounter while exposed to an unfamiliar culture. In such a digital age, social media is critical in the situation of cultural adaptation. Language barriers, discrimination, and social isolation are possible challenges students could face during acculturation, which may further develop into acculturation stress and experience mental frustrations. Fortunately, social media is a way for students to deal with problems like homesickness and stress. Not only could it benefit students to understand the adopted culture better and, at the same time, maintain their existing interpersonal relationships, but it also promotes globalization and cross-culturally understanding. However, social media could bring other issues and reduce Chinese international students' chances to acculturate while conveying other psychological distress and difficulties. The paper aims to determine the extent to which social media is critical for Chinese international students in the process of acculturation. Present multiple aspects of how social media influences acculturation and evaluate both the positive and negative consequences of utilizing social media when studying abroad. The result of this article recommends that appropriate use of social media can facilitate the process of acculturation for Chinese students, albeit in an age of digital age where one cannot disassociate oneself from the internet. The excessive use of social media can lead to difficulties in cultural adjustment or adaptation as well as psychological difficulties.

Keywords: Social media · Acculturation · Chinese international students · Study abroad

1 Introduction

According to the 2021 Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) annual report U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) released on April 2, 2022, there was a decrease of 1.2% nonimmigrant international students in the U.S. compared to 2020, but there still remain 1,236,748 active students holding F-1 and M-1 [1]. Students who carry China citizenship reach 28.2% of the international student population and are expected to continue to grow as the Covid-19 pandemic situation is getting milder

and slowly recovering globally. The above data suggests that studying abroad is still a primary trend for students, not only in China. However, students studying abroad are exposed to a variety of challenges, including the high requirement of foreign language skills and cultural adaptation, potentially making them prone to acculturation stress. As international students are apart from their homeland, social media has become a major approach for them to contact either locally or overseas with high efficiency and expeditiousness.

1.1 Acculturation

In light of what Smith and Khawaja summarized, Berry and colleagues define acculturation as the combination process of psychological and cultural change owing to contact with diverse cultural groups and individuals [2]. Nevertheless, it is a bidirectional process to both their host culture and adopted culture; the four intensities to define the attitudes of migrants are integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Considering international students are unlike immigrants, which is inappropriate if they fully assimilate into the new culture, because eventually, they offer themselves to return to their homeland, and the period they last in a foreign country is relatively short. Therefore, lots of other pressures are exerted on them.

1.2 Acculturative Stress and Possible Stressors Encountered

If international students are facing maladaptive situations, it could result in possible acculturative stress refers to the social, psychological, and somatic difficulties that may supplement acculturation and could cause a higher onset of anxiety, depression, alienation, and other forms of mental or physical stress. Some possible stressors students could encounter are racial and regional discrimination, language barriers, unstable interpersonal relationships, educational adjustment difficulties, and sociocultural accommodation [3]. Providentially, most societies are aware of such issues and provided with social programs and support groups either behavioral intervention or receiving social support from root families to reduce homesickness [4]. However, it is worth noticing, as ÇÖMLEKÇİ pointed out, that previous scholars argued it is still a serious issue that although universities are attempting to emphasize cultural diversity and tolerance, situations like stereotypes, isolation, and barriers could still influence international students' mental health [5].

1.3 Social Media and Its Role in Coping with Acculturation

The advance and development of social tools and technology effectively eliminate the boundaries of time and regions. With the invention of social media, once unimaginable ways of communication are possible. According to Boyd (2019), social media is a group of applications that allow people and groups to come together, communicate, share, and occasionally work together or have fun [6]. Kantar Media provided analytical data and classified the Chinese's most used social media. It appears that WeChat has 1,098 million users and was the largest Omni-media (media type contains one-step multiple functions);

on top of that, social media under their taxonomy could also be divided into core social media (relationship-centric social media platform) and derivative social media (Content-oriented social media platform). Core social media involves newsfeed applications, either business or personal networking, also related to interest. Examples of that in China landscape are Weibo, Xiaohongshu corresponding to Facebook and Twitter. However, derivative social media is more dependent on personal taste and demand, including four different categories, multimedia entertainment (Iqiyi and YouTube), knowledge and information (Baidu and Google), e-commerce (Tmall and Amazon), and online gaming (Arena of Valor and PUBG) [7]. In comparison, overseas-owned media are more likely to be independent and inclined to have mono-functions. The most popular Omni-social media in the United States is Facebook and WeChat in China. However, WeChat can only access private personal accounts recognized as their “friend” and is limited to socializing with acquaintances only. Social media favor and choices would also affect the degree of acculturation. In the long term, these social media platforms build up the web between international students with their original culture (geographically apart) and the new culture they are trying to integrate into.

1.4 Objective

Chinese international students share a large proportion of the international student population and as this generation is born “digital native”, focusing on the role of social media is necessary for such a digital era. This research will evaluate the importance of social media when a particular cultural community is coping and struggling with acculturation. Specifically, this paper aims to identify the extent to which social media is critical for Chinese international students in the process of acculturation. To argue how social media positively contributes to Chinese international students adapting to a new culture, while also exploring how social media mitigates the acculturative stress of Chinese students studying abroad. On the contrary, the negative consequences social media could potentially impact on Chinese international students’ acculturation are closely examined, with a specific Chinese sociocultural phenomenon provided. Finally, the absence of psychological analysis and the realization of post-pandemic globalization prediction in the article are accentuated for future suggestions and notify the possible research directions on this topic.

2 Positive Impact of Social Media Involvement in Acculturation

In the practical situation of students studying in a foreign country, the usage of social media is basically divided into two subcomponents. The first is learning the new culture, and the second is maintaining the original culture. Subsequently, international students also have encouraged globalization by bringing different cultural traditions to other countries they live in for a short period. Contemplating the exceptional period of Covid-19, this online educational environment acquires higher involvement in social media, which ultimately promotes interdisciplinary study partnerships.

2.1 The Mechanism of Cultural Adaptation

Social media provided those international students a chance to better understand the host culture, particularly popular and subcultures. For learners studying abroad, social networks offer them a chance to potentially develop their interests and catch up with the trend; this creates a comfortable atmosphere for international students to find their peer circle as fast as possible because they can access local news and topics discussed among the teenagers. Binsahl et al. Suggest that social media provides international students with a “sense of connectivity with what is happening around them” [8]. This statement is further attested by the study Forbush and Foucault-Welles conducted in 2016. The research examined how diversified social media impacts Chinese international students’ social and academic adaptation. Specifically, researchers found out the use of SNSs had significantly improved the diversity and size of sojourner’s social networks both in the early stage when they first arrived. Regarding their research, students with more varied social networks were found to have a better social and academic adaptation to the new culture [9]. Overall speaking, social media is acknowledged and implicated as a positive existence while it was created to overcome the difficulties both in the preparation stage and later study experiences for international students. However, what has also been mentioned in this study is that their host nationals may assist international students with desirable contacts and lower the prevalence of potential sociocultural and educational stressors, which may further develop acculturative stress.

2.2 The Mechanism of Maintenance of Original Culture

In the circumstance of maintenance of sojourners’ host culture, Zhao suggests a significant reason for utilizing social media has been highlighted as staying in touch with family and friends back home, which offers the social and emotional support required to assist in acclimatizing to the new environment [10]. This concept is further developed as transnational connections refer to the invisible or the “cyber home-based support network” [10]. Social support has been classified by researchers into a number of different categories, including social embeddedness (i.e., social network resources), enacted or received support, and perceived support [11]. Research has also constantly indicated a positive connection between social support from friends and family on the overall social and psychological adjustment (emotions) in daily life. Imaginative works are achievable by new media circulation; thus, social media have created a new form of culture, locality, and a sense of belonging. Academics also argue that the locality that international students experience is no longer exceptional but rather a continuous change of location [12]. Thus, local or foreign media empower international students with a sense of simultaneity and connectivity since it brings a relatively close distance and allows them to contact their families for support once they need it.

Social media construct platforms for private or personal connectivity and the possible online support they can reach. Findings suggest that online ethnic groups and computer-mediated communication could reduce the level of acculturation stress. As there are fewer language barriers and the divergence of general values, international students find the group they belong to. A questionnaire conducted by Ye suggests that students who are satisfied with their interpersonal support networks perceive less hatred, discrimination,

and negative feelings [13]. However, gender and age could also affect the well-being of students, whether attending for online support is more critical in the case of facilitating adaptation to the new culture.

2.3 Globalization and Covid-19 Online Educational Context

Online learning systems today are a dominant field since they are accessible and well-pervade around the globe. The establishment of this community fundamentally breaks and surmounts the traditional assumptions and modes of in-class face-to-face education or the stuffy concept of an irremovable learning environment and reality. Scholars conducted a study using the Web 2.0 tool and followed with a series of questionnaires, focus group interviews and google analytics to perceive the interaction between online education support media and the possible benefits [14]. Studies suggest that online social network tools are inclusive, diversified global learning communities and curricula. It adjusts the teaching stylishness, and ambiance as the classes are more flexible and create low-tech (easy approaches) and low-cost with high accessibility of education [14]. Meanwhile, such an appreciated opportunity allows students to broaden their understanding of what different cultures value the most and create international collaboration and mindset, which further pushes the notion of globalization.

During the Covid-19 pandemic educational context, some international students could not travel to campus due to a lack of flight opportunities eliminated by the airline and the country's regulations or lockdown. Hence, online classrooms have started to play an essential role in providing a synergistic environment; the social presence of online learning establishes the situation for inquiry, and high-quality interactions develop collaboration skills that challenge students and expand their learning [14]. Online social networks also offer international students one-on-one lessons or after-class curricula to ensure they are following the schedule of their teachers. This suggests that more studies should be conducted in the presence of a global pandemic and the possible impact of social media platforms on teenage international students.

3 Negative Impact of Social Media Involvement in Acculturation

3.1 Brain Drain Phenomenon

In particular, the observable case of social media platforms creating a brain drain phenomenon can negatively impact both international students and other individuals online bidirectionally. Namely, in social applications like Xiaohongshu or Douyin in China, it has become a trend that only rich or high-status families could havener their children to study abroad. Certain teenagers, especially those with common compulsory education in China, are jealous and envious because some Chinese international students purposefully share posts or video records to create anxiety. As young adults, their values are still formed and rethought; it is complicated for them to distinguish what is beneficial and possibly harmful, leading them blindly to follow the trance. Specifically, Xiaohongshu, a social media platform popular with the younger generation, the hashtag (#) of international students had 192.3M views on July 09, 2022. The contents are influencers sharing

either export product reviews, vogue dressing styles of western countries, popular cultures, or commercialization to pretend they are overseas, with single esthetic content to show off their lives. This created a negative public environment for students and users, which obviously made people socially compare themselves and anxious about being unique and not as sparkled as the online celebrities they discovered. Some international students tend to think in a way that they are significantly more advanced and sophisticated than others. However, this could also bring issues like cyberbullying and social isolation, and over-relying on social platforms made them unable to cherish their personal life fully. The overconfidence social media creates undesirably affects the psychological health of both possible supportive communities and themselves. Furthermore, media message injection is one of the main concerns that could be on display when students actively seek integration and self-fulfilling based on the desire to become an “influencer” on a negative side.

3.2 Salience Identity

Most Chinese international students grew up in China, a collective society. Guo and colleagues proposed that although China and Japan shared almost exact cultural dimensions, every time an individual integrates or accommodates a new culture, psychological changes and social processes in acculturation are still accompanied.

Collectivistic cultures appear to have different social and communication styles compared to individualistic countries. China is a collectivist society; people utilize social media to maintain existing relationships [15] and achieve a state of psychological comfort through an emotional support group by having private group chats involving students from the same region or who share the same nationality. Since they have the same mother tongue, it is easier for them to communicate than with their foreign classmates; articles recommend that “The increase in the number of students studying abroad shows a certain “bunching” phenomenon in time and space” [16]. Social media fosters connection among Chinese students and stimulates their “Chinese” identity. Students are welcome to find their in-group other Chinese when this identity becomes salient. Although students are more comfortable abroad as they are less homesick, to a small extent, social media subsequently brought distance for students who are actually willing to integrate as part of a new culture. In such circumstances, the acculturation process is no longer the same as the traditional physical culture adaptation. This limitation made students slower in acculturation as they found other Chinese peers, making it harder for them to meet new friends locally and emphasizing the problematic side of cultural integration due to social media encouragement of salient social identity.

3.3 Psychological Distress and Anxiety

Overreliance and excessive use of social media could create inevitable negative consequences, stressors like compulsive social media usage; negative feedback or comments; cyber-bullying; over-awareness of peer stressful life events; periodical social media updates; interpersonal comparison could promote social media fatigue, which refers to emotional decline, exhaustion and loss of interest which could later trigger the mental distress like anxiety and depression [17, 18]. Teenagers who spent more time on

social media during the day and at night, as well as those who invested more in their emotions, experienced issues with their sleeping quality, lower self-esteem, and going through depression or anxiety. Nighttime social media use and emotional investment predicted lower sleep quality [19]. Specifically, text messages and social media alerts cause poorer sleep quality and duration. However, it is critical to note that regular use of social media is not hazardous to the mental well-being of students; addiction to social media undoubtedly elevates the level of psychological distress.

4 Conclusion

This paper analyzes the value of social media in a situation where Chinese international students are undergoing acculturation difficulties. Although there are general limitations of social media and, in particular, negative effects due to their host culture characteristics, in special Covid-19 circumstances, social media plays a critical role in online education. Overall, social media is essential for international students in acculturation and mitigating acculturative stress. However, researchers also need to realize that social media may bring problems such as further psychological discomfort or stress. The unhealthy environment it creates may affect how international students perceive themselves in their original cultural background. Also, because social media allows people to easily connect with others, even strangers, their social identity or cultural background is exposed online, offering them a chance to find their “in-group” instead of positively accepting multiple societies or cultural diversity. In future studies, it is important to figure out how exactly social media is conveying messages and whether the goal is to promote globalization or traditional acculturation built upon real connections or a sense of acquaint various cultures on a smattering level.

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