



Social Media Usage Behavior and Its Impact on Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students in China

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Abstract. With the continuous increase in the number of international students coming to China, the issue of cross-cultural adaptation is becoming increasingly prominent. Among the many factors that affect cross-cultural adaptation of international students, social media usage of students has been one of the research focuses by scholars both domestically and internationally. The paper analyzes the common social media usage behaviors of international students studying in China, and its impact on students in terms of the social-cultural, and psychological dimensions based on the dual-dimensional model of cross-cultural adaptation, followed by proposing to encourage international students to fully utilize social media to integrate their lives and studies into Chinese community quickly, and to improve their identification with Chinese culture.

Keywords: International Students in China, Social Media, Cross-cultural Adaptation.

1 Introduction

Over the past decades, China has gradually become one of the world's important destinations for studying abroad. The "One Belt One Road" Initiative has also attracted a large number of students to study in China. In 2019, the proportion of students from countries along the "One Belt One Road" accounted for 54.1%^[1] of the total number of international students. Yet due to differences in students' ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as language and culture, a major problem faced by international students entering the social community of China is cross-cultural adaptation. One factor that captures more attention from researchers in recent years is social media usage.

Studies have shown that the selection and use of social media play an important role in cross-cultural adaptation for international students. On the one hand, social media provide virtual "settlements" for international students studying in China by maintaining close relationships with their social graphs in home country. On the other hand, by constructing new digital public spaces in cross-cultural contexts, social media offer new choices and channels for them to adapt and integrate into the host country's society and culture^[2].

2 Social Media Usage Behavior of International Students in China

2.1 The Motives behind the use of social media

As to motivation, international students studying in China mainly use social media, especially local social Apps, to meet the following needs: information acquisition; interpersonal communication; entertainment; day-to-day consumption, self expression, etc.^[3] For example, WeChat is often used by international students to communicate and socialize with Chinese teachers, students, and friends, While Douyin, a sister social App of TikTok known as a popular short video platform, is not only used for fun but sometimes to shop and share their lives on campus. Although there are fewer behaviors related to consumption, social media still enable international students to observe what is happening in China and learn more about the local community.

2.2 Characteristics of Social Media Usage Behavior

The social media usage behavior of international students is firstly characterized by the choice of different types of social media. As they arrive in China, international students are facing choices of social media systems: first, social media in the host country represented by WeChat and Douyin, and second, social media from Western countries or home country represented by Facebook and Youtube. There are significant differences between the two social media systems in terms of language, sociocultural context, and values. This creates a complex social media environment for international students studying in China.

Researches show that Facebook, Instagram and other social platforms in English are still popular social Apps among international students in China, and WeChat, QQ, Douyin, etc. are also favored by them as local social media. Different social media choices have constructed distinct lifestyles and social networks for them, but their media choices also reflect certain trend of convergence. For example, WeChat and QQ are commonly used for daily communication with Chinese social graphs esp. on campus, while Douyin is used to understand Chinese society in a broader sense in China^[4]. Some international students even shoot and share short videos about their learning activities and daily lives in China through Douyin. However, overseas short video Apps are still the most common channels for international students to watch video programs^[5]. The impact of overseas social media such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook on international students in China shows a U-shaped curve^[6].

Secondly, the content consumed on social media. International students studying in China are fond of practical information closely related to their studies and daily life, as well as traditional Chinese culture, cuisine, customs and traditions based on their own interest. Such information, either in text, picture or video can help students quickly get to know the community where they are going to live in the coming months or years and alleviate pressure of being alone in a utterly different social environment.

In addition, as to the type of social media, international students in China are more reliant on non-official platforms, especially Douyin, and less use of the official social

media. However, some surveys present different conclusions: the simple narrative contents shared on most local non-official platforms, alongside with language barriers and too many advertisements, affect the viewing experience of international students, while official media, due to its focus on real daily life, advanced infrastructure, and ordinary family^[7], are more satisfying the needs of international students to formulate an in-depth and all-around picture of the society and culture of China, thus, are expecting to have more influence on the students.

2.3 Differences in Social Media Usage Behavior

There are slight differences in social media usage among international students due to factors such as gender, country of origin, length of stay in China, and motivation of cross-cultural adaptation. Taking WeChat as an example, research has shown that men's use of WeChat for information acquisition and sharing behavior is slightly higher than women's. From the perspective of the country of origin, there is no significant difference in the use of WeChat in terms of information acquisition, interpersonal communication, and other aspects. However, there are significant differences in the use of WeChat to meet the needs of daily services. Among them, international students from Africa use WeChat for consumption more than other international students^[8].

However, there are also studies indicating that some international students from Southeast Asia have already used WeChat before coming to China. In addition, the longer international students stay in China, the stronger their motivation to adapt to Chinese society and culture, and the more they are willing to use local social media in their daily lives^[9]. In general, international students studying in China meet their needs by distinguishing and using social media of different types and functions. By matching different social media with the expected social network, they build social connections in the host country and integrate into the host country's culture and life.

3 The Impact of Social Media Use on Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students in China

3.1 Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

Cross-cultural adaptation is the phenomenon in which two or more individuals or groups with different cultures come into contact with each other, resulting in a change in the original cultural patterns of one or both parties^[10]. Scholars in this field have proposed multiple theoretical research models from different perspectives. Berry proposed four approaches to acculturation for immigrants and the society of settlement, namely isolation, integration, assimilation, and marginalization of the individual^[11]. Kim claimed in the stress-adaptation-growth model that acculturation is a dynamic psychological movement^[12]. The two-dimension model proposed by Colleen Ward is widely recognized, which examines cross-cultural adaptation from the perspectives of social and cultural adaptation at the behavioral level and psychological adaptation at the emotional level. The former reflects whether one can effectively communicate with

others, cope with life and work in cross-cultural contexts, while the latter embodies psychological or emotional satisfaction and happiness in cross-cultural environments [13].

3.2 The Impact on Social-cultural Adaptation

After entering China, international students first need to solve their living and learning problems, such as accommodation, food, internet usage, and how to communicate and connect with Chinese teachers and students. Local social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ have become inevitable choices, providing them with instrumental channels to participate in regular teaching and club activities and establish a basic social network in China. In addition, another commonly used local social media Douyin, is serving as an information channel to observe China's real and diverse social scenes. Different from WeChat, the use of Douyin can also meet the entertainment needs of international students.

Researchers have agreed that there is a positive correlation between local social media use in host countries and cross-cultural adaptation among international students. For example, in the process of daily communication and learning, the use of WeChat can better help international students to improve their language skills [14], and Douyin can also meet their information needs to a certain extent, helping to get a more realistic picture of China and reduce cultural conflicts. The more frequent the use of social media by international students, the more beneficial it is for them to understand rules of university, as well as the social norms of Chinese society. In addition, in continuous daily interactions, the original instrumental connections are likely to be transformed into emotional support. International students establish a strong diffusion network through social media such as WeChat in the host country, providing them with more possibilities to accumulate social capital and support.

However, the use of local social media in host countries also has certain limitations in promoting cross-cultural adaptation among international students, and there is no consensus on the impact of local social media usage. This indicates that the mechanism of social media usage on cross-cultural adaptation is relatively complex. For example, the language barrier and cultural differences between local social media in Chinese and non-local media in English used at the same time may cause international students to fear and resist the use of local social media and Chinese culture. Even after living in China for a period of time, it is often found that the friends of international students on local social media in the host country is still confined to the teachers and students of the university and lack contact with the local community, reflecting the inertia or fear of integrating into foreign cultures. In addition, in terms of social media content consumption, the selective preferences and lack of interaction among international students studying in China also hinder their expansion of social networks and social integration, as well as unbiased understanding of Chinese society.

3.3 The Impact on Psychological Adaptation

International students coming to China may often experience anxiety and fear due to language barriers, differences in social customs and living habits, as well as academic pressure. It has been found that the use of local social media can help international students expand their interpersonal contacts, obtain more emotional and social support, and alleviate loneliness in foreign countries. Take Wechat as an example. Wechat, as a popular local social app in China, is often used to establish social network and effective communication with people. The use of Wechat by international students allows them to integrate into campus life more quickly, gaining a sense of group belonging, and gradually increasing their knowledge and identification with Chinese culture. While Douyin also provides an online space for international students to relax and reduce psychological pressure while observing what is happening in China from a foreigner's perspective. Yet, some argue that local social media in host countries offer less emotional support in addressing feelings of loneliness and homesickness. This is due to the limited number of friends international students have on social media, as well as language barriers that prevent them from integrating into the local social community outside of campus.

However, there are completely opposite views regarding the influence that the usage of non-local social media, is exerting on cross-cultural adaptation. Some scholars believe that the use of non-local social media is not always a hindrance, especially when international students have just entered China. Non-local social media can help students maintain contact with their family and friends in their home country, providing emotional support when needed, and alleviating anxiety and loneliness. While other scholars argue that the use of non-local media may strengthen the cultural identity of international students as an outsider of Chinese society. Once overly dependent, it can lead to negative or even resistant emotions towards the host country's culture and social community, creating new barriers to interpersonal communication such as "isolation", which hinder the psychological adaptation of international students^[15].

4 Utilizing social media to promote cross-cultural adaptation among international students

4.1 Using social media to join local communities and improve social adaptability

Firstly, in the early stage of coming to China, it is necessary to run learning workshops on social media participated by both international students and Chinese students, so that the new comers can build their knowledge about the landscape of local social media, in particular these social Apps closely relevant to their upcoming study and campus life. Students are learning how to use local social Apps such as WeChat, QQ to join various online learning communities, make friends, and even shop and hold online meetings, etc. All these communications and activities can quickly enable international students to adapt themselves to the lives in a country far away from their homeland. Secondly, the official social media account shall be established to regularly push interesting and

practical information or short videos in Chinese to help international students to learn more about the university and the city where they live, and also to improve their language and communication skills.

4.2 Utilizing social media to enhance interaction and gain more social and emotional support

On the one hand, social media shall be used to organize regular online and offline activities and enhance interactions between Chinese and international students. While introducing traditional Chinese culture and cuisine, it can also be used to encourage international students to share and showcase their home country's unique culture, improving their understanding and inclusiveness of respective cultures. In the process of communication, by increasing the number of social media groups and friends, especially Chinese friends, international students can receive more social and emotional support. On the other hand, short video competitions themed on Chinese culture or campus life can also be arranged for international students to promote their in-depth understanding and identification with Chinese culture, as well as their sense of belonging to the universities.

5 Conclusions

The continuous increase in the number of international students coming to China has highlighted the issue of cross-cultural adaptation at universities. Researches have shown that the use of social media plays an important role in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. Although there are some differences in the use of social media among international students in terms of media type and content preferences, the use of social media, especially the use of local social Apps, can help international students enhance their ability to adapt to a different culture and obtain more emotional and psychological satisfaction. Therefore, international students should be encouraged to get familiar with and use more Chinese social media in their learning activities and daily lives. At the same time, the teachers and international student management departments at university can also use social media to organize more activities, helping students gradually integrate into campus life, and promote a comprehensive knowledge and emotional identification with Chinese culture.

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