



The Interplay between Social Media and Cultural Adjustment: Analysis of the Subjective Well-Being, Social Support, and Social Media Use of Asian International Students in the U.S.

Ming Xie¹  & Chin-Chung Chao² 

West Texas A&M University & University of Nebraska at Omaha

Abstract: This research focuses on social media use by Asian international students in the U.S. and its impacts on their subjective well-being, social support, and cultural adjustment. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 international students from six Asian countries who are studying in a Midwestern University in the U.S. The research finds that social media helps to compensate Asian international students for the loss of social support and offline social capital from their home countries. However, the function of social media, which provides bridging social capital and expands their social networks in the host country, is limited. This research extends the existing literature on social media's moderating effect on sociocultural and psychological adjustment.

Keywords: Asian international students, Social media, Cultural Adjustment, Social support, Subjective well-being

Article History:

Received: 24-05-2020
Accepted: 09-07-2021
Publication: 30-08-2022

Cite this article as:

Xie, M. & Chao, C. (2022). The Interplay between Social Media and Cultural Adjustment: Analysis of the Subjective Well-Being, Social Support, and Social Media Use of Asian International Students in the U.S.. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 22(2), 22-32. doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v22i2.37

©2022 by author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License.

Corresponding Author:

Ming Xie

Department of Political Science and Criminal Justice, West Texas A&M University, United States.
Email: mxie@wtamu.edu

1. Introduction

International students have been a growing population all over the world. In the U.S., the biannual report from the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), part of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), shows that there are 1.18 million international students studying at 8,774 schools in the United States as of May 2017. The report also notes that 77 percent of international students are from Asia. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), the top countries of origin of international students at American colleges and universities include China, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, among others.

The growing number of international students substantiates the need to understand the experiences, behaviors, and both the physical and mental well-being of these migratory populations. Common difficulties have been found among Asian international students regarding physical and mental well-being, cultural adjustments, such as a lack of social support, and the cultural distance between home culture and host culture (J. Lee & Ciftci, 2014; Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, Liao, & Wu, 2007). Also, scholars have discussed the important role of communication in enhancing social support and, therefore, to improve the cultural adjustment process (Du & Wei, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The proliferation of information technology and social media has offered convenient platforms and opportunities for international students to maintain connectedness and receive social support from their home culture, as well as interact with the host culture and seek new social support. However, the understanding is limited regarding how international students use social media to receive social support and to address their problems of well-being, both physically and mentally.

Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with international students from the six Asian countries of the IIE report, this study examines the potential effects of social media use among Asian international students on their social support seeking and subjective well-being. It aims to offer a deeper and more comprehensive understanding regarding how Asian international students perceive and experience the impacts of social media on cultural adjustment by capturing the subtleness of personal experiences.

The paper is composed of three main sections. The first section is the literature review of international students' subject well-being, social support, and their social media use. The second section explains the methodology, research design, and data collection process. The third part presents the research findings, discussion, and conclusion, as well as research limitations.

¹ Department of Political Science and Criminal Justice, West Texas A&M University, United States

² School of Communication, University of Nebraska at Omaha, United States

2. Literature Review

2.1. International students' subjective well-being in the cultural adjustment process

Subjective well-being includes “people’s emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction” (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). There has been a consensus that subjective well-being can be understood as an individual’s sense of psychological health and can be measured by the individual’s perceived life satisfaction (J. Chen, 2013).

International students are experiencing cultural transitions with inevitable sociocultural and psychological adaptation (Kuo, 2014; Ng, Wang, & Chan, 2017). In the existing literature on cultural adjustment, scholars have developed the cultural learning/shedding model, the U-curve theory of adjustment, stress, coping, and adaptation model (Berry, 2006; Black & Mendenhall, 1990). The cultural learning model suggests that cultural adjustment relies on migrants’ learning of culture-specific skills and allows them to negotiate their ways in a new cultural environment (Kuo, 2014). Black and Mendenhall’s (1990) U-curve theory of adjustment discusses four stages of cultural adjustment: honeymoon, cultural shock, adjustment, and mastery. The degree of adjustment is measured by migrants’ satisfaction with the new environment, attitude, contact with host nationals, or difficulties with aspects of the new environment. Berry’s (2006) stress, coping, and adaptation model suggests that the quality of a migrant’s cultural adjustment depends on his/her ability to effectively cope with stresses associated with cultural adjustment. Berry called for further research to expound on the relationships between the four cultural adjustment strategies, assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration, and the three major types of coping, problem-focused, emotional-focused, and avoidance coping.

For international students, the cultural distance between their home culture and host culture creates different understandings of messages and concepts such as quality of life and standards of living, which can be barriers during the process of cultural adjustment and interactions with people from other cultures. Compared to domestic students, international students are at increased health risk and are less likely to seek help for mental health and related problems (Skromanis et al., 2018). Studies have revealed the problems of the subjective well-being of international students, such as culture shock, stress, depression, and loneliness (J. A. Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015; Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Wei et al., 2007). With the development of information technology, understanding social media’s effects offers a vital avenue to understanding international students’ cultural adjustment and coping strategies.

2.2. Social support and Social Capital of international students

Social support is defined as the “process of interaction in relationships which improves coping, esteem, belonging, and competence through actual or perceived exchanges of physical or psychosocial resources” (Gottlieb, 2000, p.208). As sources of social capital, social support and social network have been seen as a positive influence on people’s well-being (Croucher, 2011; Hanasono, Chen, & Wilson, 2014). For international students, a lack of social support is associated with their well-being and their adjustment to the new culture (J. Lee & Ciftci, 2014). Social support can alleviate the psychological effect of stress. It has been found useful to address the problems of subjective well-being (Du & Wei, 2015) and to help international students with cultural and school adaptation (Du & Wei, 2015; C. Lee, Sung, Zhou, & Lee, 2018).

Social capital is defined as “features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) identifies two types of social capital: bridging social capital, which is embedded in heterogeneous social networks, and bonding social capital, which is embedded in homogenous social networks. Social capital exists in networks of relationships (Glass & Gesing, 2018). For international students, the connection and social network with people from the same or similar cultural background provides common grounds, support, and trust, which is a type of bonding social capital (Rienties, Johan, & Jindal-Snape, 2015). The bridging social capital is built when students strategically develop multi-national and host-national relations. Both bonding and bridging social capital can benefit international students’ sense of belonging and subjective well-being by decreasing acculturative stress. However, international students face challenges in building bridging social capital because of the language and cultural barriers. Therefore, to address the existing problems regarding subjective well-being and to enhance the sociocultural adjustment of international students, it is imperative to explore the international students’ behaviors of making connections and seeking social support from both the home culture and the host culture.

2.3. Social media and cultural adjustment

Existing literature has explored both the benefits and challenges of information technology in the cultural adjustment process (Odağ & Hanke, 2018). The expansion of the Internet, mobile applications, and social media has dramatically altered the way in which people seek information, build social networks, make decisions, and connect to home and host culture (Gomes, 2015). Low-cost or free chat and social messaging apps have proven

themselves as being important to increase self-esteem and perceived social support and to reduce loneliness, depression, and acculturative stress (Sandel, 2014; C. Wang, 2012). However, scholars have also found that online communication is not sufficient for “a fully successful acculturation” without examining pre-existing boundaries and offline interactions across cultural boundaries (Odağ & Hanke, 2018).

For international students, scholars have analyzed their cultural adjustment from the aspects of learning experiences, social networking, and entertainment (Sun, Lin, Wu, Zhou, & Luo, 2018; Valencia & Benavides, 2019). The prevalence of social media makes them important tools for international students to maintain and develop social capital. Some studies confirmed that social media promoted users’ political and civic participation and enhanced international students’ life satisfaction (Pang, 2017; Zhan, Sun, Wang, & Zhang, 2016). In contrast, other scholars found that social media use may be correlated with negative consequences such as a feeling of loneliness and social isolation (J. Wang, Jackson, Gaskin, & Wang, 201). Also, some studies reported no relationship between social media use and subjective well-being (Guo, Li, & Ito, 2014). To address the inconsistent research results, Pang (2018) suggested that social capital should be a crucial mediator in the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being. Specifically, it is critical to understand whether and how social media maintain and expand international students’ networks and develops both bonding and bridging social capital. In light of the contradictory findings in the existing literature regarding social media's effect on user's perceived social support and social capital, more empirical evidence is needed to address the following research questions:

- (1) How do Asian international students describe their use of social media?
- (2) What’s the role of social media in the cultural adjustment process of Asian international students in the U.S.?
- (3) How does the use of social media influence the subjective well-being, perceived social support, and social capital of Asian international students in the U.S.?

3. Research Design

To address the research questions, this study applies a qualitative research method, including semi-structured in-depth interviews. Based on the IIE report, international students from China, India, South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Japan, respectively, are recruited from a Midwestern U.S. university. A recruitment letter was sent out to international students from the above six countries from the university’s international office. A total of 17 students responded and agreed to participate in this research. The research sample does not intend to generalize the findings to the entire Asian international student population in the U.S. However, it still seeks to capture the diversity of Asian international students regarding their major, educational level, and duration of stay in the U.S. To ensure the anonymity of students’ identities, letters and numbers are used as pseudonyms to represent the participants. Research participants’ information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Research participants

Interviewee	Gender	Age group	Country of origin	Education	Major	Year in school	Duration of stay in the U.S.
CN1	Female	26-30	China	PhD	Public administration	5 th	4 years
CN2	Male	26-30	China	Master	Mathematics/ Data Science	1st	4 years
CN3	Male	21-25	China	Undergraduate	Management of information system	3rd	4 years
IN1	Female	26-30	India	Master	Communication	4th	6 years
IN2	Female	21-25	India	Master	Management of information system	1st	11 months
IN3	Male	21-25	India	Master	Management of information system	3rd	3 years
JP1	Female	26-30	Japan	Language program	Language program	1th	1.5 months
JP2	Female	26-30	Japan	Undergraduate	Theater	2nd	1 year
JP3	Male	21-25	Japan	Undergraduate	Business management	3rd	4 years
SK1	Female	26-30	South Korea	PhD	Public administration	2nd	1 year
SK2	Male	26-30	South Korea	Master	Athlete training	2nd	1 year
SK3	Male	26-30	South Korea	Undergraduate	Biology	4nd	6 years
TW1	Male	26-30	Taiwan	PhD	Public administration	3th	2 years

TW2	Female	21-25	Taiwan	Language program	Language program	1th	2 months
VN1	Male	21-25	Vietnam	Undergraduate	PR and Marketing	4th	5 years
VN2	Female	21-25	Vietnam	Undergraduate	Business administration	3th	2 years
VN3	Female	31-35	Vietnam	Undergraduate	Accounting and supplies chain	4th	5 years

Individual interviews began after IRB approval on October 9, 2018, and were conducted at the university's campus in November and December 2018. Each interview lasted for 25 to 50 minutes. The interview protocol included: (1) demographic information, (2) subjective well-being, (3) social support and subjective well-being, (4) the relationship between social supports, subjective well-being, and social media use. One of the researchers, an Asian student studying in the U.S., was aware of her potential biases and assumptions and was very careful about the interaction with the research participants during the interview process. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed word-for-word.

This research adopted the directed approach for data analysis, which means the analysis was based on the existing theoretical framework, Berry's stress, coping, and adaptation model, and the social capital framework. In the analysis process, the researchers also paid attention to the emerging themes from participants' responses (Berg & Lune, 2017). Data analysis was conducted by the software MAXQDA, with the process of data display to identify the themes and patterns from research participants' responses; data verification to map out the relationship between themes; and final data analysis (Berg & Lune, 2017). The two researchers had extensive conversations regarding the data collection and data analysis process. According to Silverman (2009), constant data comparison is an important way to ensure reliability for qualitative research. At the first step of the data analysis process, the two researchers read and coded the transcription separately. Then the two researchers discussed the codes, concepts, themes, and examples together and finalized the codes. The adequate conversations between the two researchers ensured a comprehensive and inclusive data analysis process.

According to Maxwell (2013), respondent validation "is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on" (p. 126). To avoid possible researcher bias and misinterpretation of the perspectives and perceptions that research participants have on their social media use and their subjective well-being, research participants were asked for feedback on preliminary findings. The researchers asked questions such as whether the findings matched their experiences and whether they wanted to change anything about the research findings. Not every participant's response covered all the themes. Their feedback included "it looks good to me" or "I don't see anything that needs to be changed." Two participants requested a few details regarding personal information to be removed. Their feedback helped the researchers to analyze the collected data thoroughly.

4. Findings

Overall, research participants were mostly satisfied with their experience in the U.S. As CN3 said, "I am satisfied with my life here. It is my decision to come here. I like the environment, the university. People are very friendly here." When asked why they were satisfied with their lives in the U.S., their explanations were mostly related to the process of acculturation and adjustment to a new environment. International students have been exposed to different cultural and social environments since they came to the U.S. Due to the significant life change, all the Asian international students have had various challenges regarding their living circumstances, such as adjustments to new weather phenomena, food, transportation, issues of finance, homesickness, as well as experiencing cultural, language, and academic barriers.

The acculturation process, especially the cultural and language barriers, makes international students' communication and study difficult and results in additional stress and anxiety. Because of their unfamiliarity of English, they need to spend much more time on academics compared to their American colleagues. Their inadequate language skills, especially accents and the use of slang, impede their academic performances and interpersonal relationships. Many of them mentioned that they were depressed and frustrated when they could not use English to express their feelings in detail or genuinely. As SK3 said,

When I just came here, my English was not good. It is okay for me to say short sentences. But it was hard for me to say a lot and to use long sentences. I felt so sad...At that time, I was always the last one to find teammates to do the group project. Because of my English, the other classmates didn't want to work with me.

As students, most of the participants said that their mental well-being was significantly influenced by academic pressures and stress. They come to the U.S. for the purpose of education. The gap between their

expectations and the educational environment is a big shock for them. Due to the cultural differences of the educational system, most of the Asian international students are challenged to speak their opinions and to be more assertive.

4.1. Social Media and Social Networks

Scholars have studied the relationship between user preference and features of different social media platforms. Among international students, the usage preference of different platforms is closely related to the characteristics of available applications and the usage purposes (Wai, Ng, Chiu, Ho, & Lo, 2018). The most mentioned social media platforms among the research participants include Facebook, followed by WeChat, which is mostly used by research participants from China, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, iMessage, WhatsApp, LINE, and KakaoTalk, which are mainly used by research participants from South Korean.

Social media plays a vital role for the research participants by connecting them with their families and friends in their home countries. Hall and Sivakumaran (2014) find that international students studying abroad use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to stay in touch with family and friends back home and to make friends in their host country. This research has a similar finding. Asian international students use different social media platforms to communicate with friends from different countries. The usage preference is mainly impacted by the existing networks on those platforms. For example, when answering the question of why do they use different platforms, most interviewees said it was because their friends or family are using it. Also, they do not like the feature of Facebook that most of the information is public to everyone. Therefore, they prefer to use social media platforms such as WeChat and LINE because “I can have a more private conversation with some of my friends, which cannot be seen by others” (CN3). JP3 said,

When I was at a job interview, the interviewer asked me about a photo on my social media, which was a photo I was kissing a girl. I was so surprised that they found that picture, and I explained it to them. But after that, I am cautious to put any of my photos on social media.

Due to the distinct characteristics of social media platforms, international students are using them for different purposes. For example, Instagram is more used as a way to find people with the same hobbies and interests and generate group belongingness; WeChat and Kakaotalk are more used for communication with people in home countries, while YouTube is used for entertainment, especially to watch videos from home cultures.

4.2. Group belongingness and bonding social capital

Participants discuss the problems they have in the U.S. with finding social support through families and friends in their home country. As CN1 said, “Knowing people in China are caring about me makes me comfortable and brave to deal with life in the U.S.” They also ask for suggestions regarding their studies from their families back in their home countries, especially when they just started their study in the U.S. SK1 said, “I almost video chat with my parents in South Korea every day. I ask them for suggestions and let them know what I am doing here.” JP2 said, “When I am not happy, I will use LINE [social media application] to talk with my friends in Japan. They can understand me and make me feel better.” TW1 said,

When I had conflicts with my roommate, I asked my mom for suggestions. She helped me to list all the people I should talk to and ask for help. Like my program chair, I didn't know if I should talk about my personal issue with my chair. And my mom insisted that I should talk with my chair. And finally, the problem was solved because of the help from my chair. So my mom was right.

Besides seeking support from families and friends in their home countries, people from the same or similar cultures exist as significant social support for international students. Sometimes they are reluctant to tell their problems to their families. Therefore, friends from the same or similar cultures offer social support for international students. IN2 and IN3 mentioned they mostly interact with their Indian friends in the U.S. IN3 explained, “The only way for me to meet friends is through classes. And in my classes, almost 80% of students are from India. So it is easy to make Indian friends for me.” TW2 has been in the U.S. for just two months. At her program, she made friends with her Japanese classmates very soon. She said, “Because there are no Taiwanese or Chinese friends in my classroom. It is a little easier for me to make friends with my Japanese classmates.” They went shopping, eating, and worked out at the gym together and use LINE, which is the most popular social media platform among Japanese and Taiwanese, to plan events and communicate.

SK1 and JP2 are both interested in animals. They both use Instagram to find photos of animals and find people who also like animals. CN3 set up a group chat on iMessage. He said, “I named the group as ‘eating.’ Whenever I feel bored or lonely, I would go to ask my friends in this group to have lunch or dinner with me.” VN1 likes hiking and running; he found people who have the same interests through social media and went hiking with those people. Through this kind of interaction, their loneliness in the U.S. is relieved. TW2 said, “Last weekend, I just did a video call with my high school friends. They were having a BBQ party in Taiwan, I joined them by LINE, and it made me feel like I was close with them.”

For VN2, social media is not only a platform for her to share information and her achievement with friends and relatives in Vietnam but also a way for her to make her parents proud of her. She said,

Whenever I have some achievements, I will post them on my Facebook. The friends and families in Vietnam will see it and talk with my parents about how great I am. That's a way I prove myself to my parents, to let them be proud of me.

Facing the challenges of cultural differences, entertainment is another way for Asian international students to connect to their homeland through their choice of entertainment (Gomes, 2015). They watch films that were in the same culture or language, view TV shows from their home nation, and listen to music in their language. The international students continue appreciating this association with their favorite entertainment industries and actively maintain cultural links to the homeland in this way.

Social media is an entertainment tool for international students to relax and relieve their stress. CN2 said, "Social media makes my life colorful. Sometimes when I feel much stressed, I will go to YouTube to watch some videos like comedies. That makes me feel better." CN3 said, "I like video games. When I don't want to study, or when I feel lonely, I will ask my friends to play video games with me." SK3 said,

Social media makes my life more fun. Without social media, my life would be more stable and boring. There are both good things and bad things on social media which make my life up and down. But it also makes me feel I am alive.

VN2 is interested in fashion information such as makeup, nails, hairstyle, and clothing. She enjoys posting this kind of information on her social media. She noted,

I used to be very popular on Facebook when I was in Vietnam. I had a lot of followers because I always posted information about the latest fashion on it. Right now, I don't do it so much because I am too busy. But sharing my own makeup or other things, I am interested in making me feel positive and happy.

Social media offers ways for international students to overcome geographic distances and other barriers—to build their social networks and navigate cultures and cultural products. Through communication and interaction with people who have the same interest, international students use social media to generate or enhance their group belongingness and connectedness.

4.3. Social media and bridging social capital

For international students, it is also crucial for them to get social support from the U.S. When they are far away from home, they have to challenge themselves to adjust to the new culture and to seek social support. They take positive actions to make more American and international friends, to join different organizations, to force themselves to speak English, and to learn about American cultures. JP3 has been in the U.S. for six years. He said, "In my first year here, I didn't even know how to say no. I couldn't understand what my professors were saying, what my classmates were saying. I had to go to ask them to speak very, very slowly." But now, he is the treasurer of a fraternity organization. VN3 has been actively involved in many organizations both inside and outside of the university. She said, "Being involved in those organizations is a way for me to relieve my stress when I don't want to study or feel lonely."

Some of the participants mentioned the service of counseling and international advising offered by the university. Most of them know that there are counseling services available on campus but never or seldom use them. As JP3 said, "I went there [counseling] once. But I don't like it. They are nice. But I just don't like it. I feel more comfortable talking with my friends about my problems."

International students exist as a particularly vulnerable group which have to navigate different cultural tensions and influences from both home and host cultures. This research finds that international students are sharing and seeking information such as news, sports, food, local events, and information for professional development. They get information regarding the latest news from their home countries. JP2 said, "I would like to get information about the earthquake [that] happened in Japan." IN2 and IN3 stated that Facebook is the top way for them to get information and the latest news about India. IN3 said, "Although not all the information on Facebook is trustworthy, it is the most important way for me to learn about things happening in India. Probably I will search other sources if I find the news is interesting."

Also, social media helps international students to find useful solutions by interacting with people in the same situation. CN1 said,

Yesterday I just had a video chat with a friend who I have not seen for two years. We talked about the teaching issues in America, and she gave me a lot of useful suggestions. It is helpful for me to learn that other people have the same problems as me. It is not just me. That makes me feel a little better.

SK2 is planning to apply for a Ph.D. program in the U.S.; he is using Twitter to get information regarding his study and career development. SK3 mentioned that several years ago, because of the posts of his study, a person who was interested in applying for the same program contacted SK3 through Facebook. He gave a lot of information to that person, who was finally admitted by the program successfully. He said, "That experience makes me think, if I am looking for a job or something, I can use social media to contact the people in that company directly. So that I can have some personal connections. That might be helpful." Accordingly, VN3 also mentioned that several years ago, when she was applying for a job, the hiring manager added her on Facebook and used her Facebook profile to learn about her.

4.4. Challenges and negative effects of social media

While social media may be applauded for its mobility and the positive value and effects it can have on international students, it can easily become a distracting factor. Therefore, how students balance their academic, social, and entertainment needs through social media has been mentioned as a challenge for international students. The research participants mentioned the negative impact of social media, such as distraction from their studies and work, not to mention information overload. CN1 and VN1 talked about how social media use makes them unable to focus on their academics. Also, CN2 said, "I have thought about it many times to delete all the social media on my cell phone so that I can focus on my study." JP2 said, "There has been too much information on social media, and sometimes I cannot find the information that I am really interested in. Whenever I open Facebook, I need to spend a lot of time to browse all the information." IN3 has taken action to reduce social media use. He said, "I used to use Facebook a lot two years ago. But it was too distracting, and I don't have enough time to use it. So right now, I use it very less. I just posted two or three posts on it recently." Also, the issue of information privacy and security on social media has been one of their main concerns. CN2, CN3, JP2, and TW2 all mentioned that they are concerned about their information safety on Facebook because of the news of information leaks and privacy violations.

5. Discussions

The present study aims to investigate how social media use influences the subjective well-being and perceived social support of Asian international students. Consistent with previous literature, social support from both home and host country was critical for the transition and acculturation of international students in the U.S. The interviews demonstrate that international students primarily seek relationships with others from the same or similar cultures. International students echoed concerns in regard to the host country's ability to understand their unique situations. Therefore, research findings show that although there have been some services from the host culture available to help the cultural adjustment of international students, the subtleness and uniqueness of each student's need is hard to capture. Specifically, there are different cultural values between Western cultures as found in the U.S. and Eastern cultures as represented in the international student population of this study. The interviews demonstrate these cultural differences in intangible ways, including conflicting social expectations in terms of communication breakdowns with others in the host country.

5.1. Social Media Use by Asian International Students

In the context of the research question (1), the interviews indicate some similarities and differences across participants from different countries that warrant further discussion. Although it is difficult to interpret these findings based on qualitative narratives, some previous literature might be able to illuminate the current discussions. For example, on the one hand, research has found a general similarity of cultural adjustment with fewer variations among Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines; on the other hand, scholars have pointed out "a homogenized view of Asian Americans" which fails to identify the uniqueness of specific Asian cultures (Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, & Hong, 2001).

Regarding social media use, the use of WeChat by Chinese students, LINE by Japanese and Taiwanese, and KakaoTalk by Korean students demonstrate the role of social media in maintaining their ethnic identity and strengthening their in-group communication. Previous research suggests that the use of ethnic, social media is negatively related to the acculturation process and positively related to acculturation stress (Park, Song, & Lee, 2014). However, the current research findings suggest that communicating with friends and family from the same culture through ethnic and social media provides immediate emotional and social support and mitigates acculturation stress. Based on the above discussions, it is imperative to further investigate the subjective experiences of international students from different countries during their cultural adjustment process and how they operate multiple roles and interact within various cultural contexts.

5.2. Social Media and Mediated Communication

Regarding research question (2), the current research finds that social media has been a communicative tool for people to share, exchange, and create information. Based on the narratives of research participants, it is reasonable to argue that mediated communication through social media by international students plays a crucial role in maintaining their support network and bonding social capital with their home countries. The social support seeking from home culture or similar culture demonstrates the cultural distance between the home and host culture as well

as the importance of intercultural sensitivity in the process of acculturation. In contrast, the effort to enhance social network in the host country by international students are more visible among offline activities such as joining student groups and community organizations. The present study was unable to identify enough evidence regarding international students' cultivated social networks in the host country through social media.

5.3. Social Media and Cultural Adjustment

In the context of the research question (3), the use of social media strengthens their emotional and social well-being by enhancing bonding social capital and the existing social networks. As a coping strategy in cultural adjustment, social media provides an opportunity for international students to mitigate material barriers to host country adjustment when social support systems are inaccessible. In the absence of a sympathetic interlocutor from the host country or their families' help, international students use social media as a resource that connects them with services, forums of discussion, and information exchanges to solve material problems. Because they are far away from their families and familiar environments, social media allows them to navigate cultures, get information, and seek social support across the boundary of space and time. The research findings suggest that social media is playing a pivotal role for Asian international students to foster a sense of community belongingness, as well as to better adjust to the new culture and environment. In support of previous research which found that social media helps international students to maintain cultural connections with their home country, this study also found that social media can positively impact their information seeking, group belongingness, and academic performance.

It needs to be noted that there are some concerns regarding the negative impacts of social media on Asian international students. They mentioned the concerns for information safety and privacy as well as information overload, which focuses on non-credible and irrelevant information. Irrespective of these security and safety concerns, the interview participants overwhelmingly agreed that the social and instrumental benefits of social media use outweigh the potential adversities or risks of using these platforms.

6. Limitations

The research sample of Asian international students is recruited from one regional university, which cannot represent the international population in the whole area of the U.S. and might lead to research findings that cannot be generalized. There is a need to examine how international students from Asian cultures navigate the available social support and the communication channels and tools from the perspective of intercultural communication. Also, from the perspective of intercultural communication, more research is necessary to explore the resource of social support. For example, how information technology can be used by the university, the community, and society to offer culturally sensitive social support for international students. Further study will be helpful by focusing on a longitudinal study of the role of social media use for their social and cultural adjustment to seek more empirical evidence for researchers to develop the theories of intercultural communication, cultural adaptation, and social media research.

7. Implications and Conclusion

This research provides detailed descriptions and in-depth information regarding how and why Asian international students perceive and experience intercultural communication and adjustment through social media use. It extends the previous literature regarding the role of social media in the process of intercultural communications and the relationship between social media and social capital. In addition, there are several implications of the current research findings. First, a comprehensive description is useful for educational professionals such as school counselors, faculty, and administrators to better understand international students' perceptions and experiences of cultural adjustment and, therefore, provide culturally sensitive services and social support effectively. Although the personal stories of each student might not be generalizable to a broader population, the various issues that emerge from the research findings can enrich cultural humility and mutual understanding of people from different cultures. Second, media coverage has reported the decline of new international students enrolled in American universities since 2017. Although the decline might be a result of mixed socio-cultural environment changes, social media might play an important role for international student recruitment by providing needed information. This study provides a nuanced picture regarding what kind of information international students are seeking through social media. Third, the diversity and usage disparities of social media platforms among Asian international students, especially the indigenous platforms from their home countries, present a need to understand which communication channel has a stronger association with their both online and offline social capital, the students' intercultural sensitivity, and subjective well-being.

The population of Asian international students in the U.S. presents a tremendous challenge for the educational system. However, it also offers the opportunity for a deep and mutual understanding of cultural expectations and behaviors. Asian international students come to the U.S. to pursue education and career development and to enrich their lives. They might experience various adjustment problems and may need diverse

social support. Being away from home, their acculturation process is mixed by feelings of anxiety, stress, isolation, and loneliness. However, they also have a strong motivation to be acculturated to the American culture. They are making an active effort to improve their language proficiency and intercultural competence to better integrate themselves into the host culture and society. The research finds that social media is playing an essential role in the process of acculturation, both personally and professionally, for Asian international students. Understanding the individual and cultural differences of their social support demands and social media use will enrich the research and practice of intercultural communication. It also helps to improve the lives and academic performance of international students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

References

- Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2017). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (9th ed.). Pearson.
- Berry, J. W. (2006). Stress perspectives on acculturation. In D. L. Sam & J. W. Berry (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology* (pp. 43-57). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489891.007>
- Black, J. S., & Mendenhall, M. (1990). Cross-cultural training effectiveness: A review and a theoretical framework for future research. *The Academy of Management Review*, 15(1), 113-136. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258109>
- Chen, J. (2013). Perceived discrimination and subjective well-being among rural-to-urban migrants in China. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 40(1), 131-156. <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3718>
- Chen, J. A., Liu, L., Zhao, X., & Yeung, A. S. (2015). Chinese international students: An emerging mental health crisis. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 54(11), 879-880. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2015.06.022>
- Croucher, S. M. (2011). Social networking and cultural adaptation: A theoretical model. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 4(4), 259-264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2011.598046>
- Dao, T. K., Lee, D., & Chang, H. L. (2007). Acculturation level, perceived English fluency, perceived social support level, and depression among Taiwanese international students. *College Student Journal*, 41(2), 287-295.
- Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), 276-302. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0901_3
- Du, Y., & Wei, M. (2015). Acculturation, enculturation, social connectedness, and subjective well-being among Chinese international students. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 43(2), 299-325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000014565712>
- Glass, C., & Gesing, P. (2018). The development of social capital through international students' involvement in campus organizations. *Journal of International Students*, 8(3), 1274-1292. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i3.52>
- Gomes, C. (2015). Negotiating everyday life in Australia: Unpacking the parallel society inhabited by Asian international students through their social networks and entertainment media use. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(4), 515-536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.992316>
- Gottlieb, B. H. (2000). Selecting and planning support interventions. In B. H. Gottlieb (Ed.), *Social support measurement and intervention: A guide for health and social scientists* (pp. 195-220). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780195126709.003.0006>
- Guo, Y., Li, Y., & Ito, N. (2014). Exploring the predicted effect of social networking site use on perceived social capital and psychological well-being of Chinese international students in Japan. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2012.0537>
- Hall, H. K., & Sivakumaran, T. (2014). Social media use among international students. *International Student Experience Journal*, 2(1), 1-6.
- Hanasono, L. K., Chen, L., & Wilson, S. R. (2014). Identifying communities in need: Examining the impact of acculturation on perceived discrimination, social support, and coping amongst racial minority members in the United States. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 7(3), 216-237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2014.929201>
- Kim, B., Yang, P., Atkinson, D., Wolfe, M., & Hong, S. (2001). Cultural value similarities and differences among Asian American ethnic groups. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 7(4), 343-361. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.7.4.343>
- Kuo, B. C. H. (2014). Coping, acculturation, and psychological adaptation among migrants: A theoretical and empirical review and synthesis of the literature. *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, 2(1), 16-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21642850.2013.843459>
- Lee, C., Sung, Y.-T., Zhou, Y., & Lee, S. (2018). The relationships between the seriousness of leisure activities, social support and school adaptation among Asian international students in the U.S. *Leisure Studies*, 37(2), 197-210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2017.1339289>
- Lee, J., & Ciftci, A. (2014). Asian international students' socio-cultural adaptation: Influence of multicultural personality, assertiveness, academic self-efficacy, and social support. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 38, 97-105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.08.009>

- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Sage.
- Ng, T. K., Wang, K. W. C., & Chan, W. (2017). Acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation: The moderating role of social support. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 59, 19-30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2017.04.012>
- Odağ, Ö., & Hanke, K. (2018). Revisiting culture: A review of a neglected dimension in media psychology. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, 31(4), 171-184. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000244>
- Pang, H. (2017). Is smartphone creating a better life? Exploring the relationships of the smartphone practices, social capital and psychological well-being among college students. *International Journal of Advanced Media and Communication*, 7(3), 205. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJAMC.2017.089346>
- Pang, H. (2018). Exploring the beneficial effects of social networking site use on Chinese students' perceptions of social capital and psychological well-being in Germany. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 67, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2018.08.002>
- Park, N., Song, H., & Lee, K. (2014). Social networking sites and other media use, acculturation stress, and psychological well-being among East Asian college students in the United States. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 36, 138-146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.03.037>
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster. <https://doi.org/10.1145/358916.361990>
- Rienties, B., Johan, N., & Jindal-Snape, D. (2015). A dynamic analysis of social capital-building of international and UK students. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(8), 1212-1235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2014.886941>
- Sandel, T. L. (2014). "Oh, I'm here!": Social media's impact on the cross-cultural adaptation of students studying abroad. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 43(1), 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2013.865662>
- Silverman, D. (2009). *Doing qualitative research*. Sage.
- Skromanis, S., Cooling, N., Rodgers, B., Purton, T., Fan, F., Bridgman, H., Harris, K., Presser, J., & Mond, J. (2018). Health and well-being of international university students, and comparison with domestic students, in Tasmania, Australia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(6), 1147. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15061147>
- Sun, Z., Lin, C.-H., Wu, M., Zhou, J., & Luo, L. (2018). A tale of two communication tools: Discussion-forum and mobile instant-messaging apps in collaborative learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 49(2), 248-261. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12571>
- Valencia, J. A. Á., & Benavides, A. F. (2019). Using social networking sites for language learning to develop intercultural competence in language education programs. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 12(1), 23-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2018.1503318>
- Wai, I., Ng, S., Chiu, D., Ho, K., & Lo, P. (2018). Exploring undergraduate students' usage pattern of mobile apps for education. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 50(1), 34-47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000616662699>
- Wang, C. (2012). Using Facebook for cross-cultural collaboration: The experience of students from Taiwan. *Educational Media International*, 49(1), 63-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523987.2012.662625>
- Wang, J.-L., Jackson, L. A., Gaskin, J., & Wang, H.-Z. (2014). The effects of Social Networking Site (SNS) use on college students' friendship and well-being. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 37, 229-236. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.04.051>
- Wei, M., Heppner, P. P., Mallen, M. J., Ku, T.-Y., Liao, K. Y.-H., & Wu, T.-F. (2007). Acculturative stress, perfectionism, years in the United States, and depression among Chinese international students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 54(4), 385-394. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.54.4.385>
- Zhan, L., Sun, Y., Wang, N., & Zhang, X. (2016). Understanding the influence of social media on people's life satisfaction through two competing explanatory mechanisms. *Aslib Journal of Information Management*, 68(3), 347-361. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AJIM-12-2015-0195>
- Zhang, J., & Goodson, P. (2011). Acculturation and psychosocial adjustment of Chinese international students: Examining mediation and moderation effects. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(5), 614-627. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.11.004>

About the authors

Ming Xie is an Assistant Professor at West Texas A&M University. Ming earned her PhD in Public Administration from the University of Nebraska at Omaha in the U.S. and another PhD in Cultural Anthropology from the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, China. She is particularly interested in nonprofit organization management and communication, social media, emergency management, and intercultural communication.

Chin-Chung Chao is a professor of communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Her primary research interests span conflict management, leadership, intercultural communication, organizational communication, and media communication. She served as the President of the Association for Chinese Communication Studies (ACCS) in 2011–12 and the Chair of the Asian/Pacific American Communication Studies Division (APACS) in 2012–13, and as a guest editor of *Chinese Media Research* and *Negotiation and Conflict Management*. In addition, she has served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, and *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*. Her research has won multiple awards.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

I. Demographics:

1. Which age group are you belong to, 18-20, 21-25, 26-30, 31-40, 41-50, 50+?
2. What is your country of origin?
3. How long have you been in the U.S.?
4. What's your current educational level?
 - 4a. Which year are you in your studying program?
 - 4b. major

II. Subjective well-being

5. Thinking about your own life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life in the U.S. as a whole?
 - 5a. What kind of problems have you had with your standard of living and your personal health in the U.S.?
 - 5b. What kind of problems have you had with your personal safety in the U.S.?
6. When you have these problems, how do you cope with them?

III. Social support

7. How satisfied are you with your interpersonal relationships in the U.S.?
8. What kind of social support have you had to help you deal with the problems?
9. Do you think you have enough social support to help you deal with any problems?
10. What kind of social support do you think is most important for you?

IV. Social media use, social support,

11. What's your most frequently used social media? Why?
12. What kind of features of this social media are the most important for you? Why?
13. Does your connection with family and friends in your home country help you adjust to life in the U.S.?
14. What's the influence of social media use on your social support and well-being in the U.S.?