

学校编码: 10384

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廈門大學

硕士学位论文

“契合中国!”：社交媒体使用与海外留学生跨文化适应
“FITTING-IN CHINA!”: SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND CROSS-CULTURAL
ADAPTATION OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS

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论文提交日期: 2017年4月

论文答辩时间: 2017年5月

学位授予日期: 2017年7月

答辩委员会主席: _____

评阅人: _____

2017年4月

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摘要

由于社交媒体在增进人们传播与互动中发挥着重要的作用，越来越多在中国的海外留学生使用社交媒体来适应新的文化和生活方式。本文以厦门大学海外留学生为例，探究本土化和国际化的移动社交平台应用是如何协助他们在中国的跨文化适应。

本研究采用两种方法：问卷调查与深度访谈法。通过调查发现本土化社交平台（如微信）与中国文化适应存在显著相关，主要体现在社交平台使用促使留学生有更多的朋友、更强的交往能力；而国际化社交平台（如 Facebook）的使用并没有对当地文化的适应起负作用，而是与母国的家人交流有密切关联。通过深度访谈，发现海外留学生会使用微信同时跟与当地人和其他的海外学生交流，从而维系两类社交圈：即当地社交圈和国际社交圈。同时维系这两种社交圈代表着海外留学生的健康社会文化适应和心理适应。这表明海外留学生有能力通过社交平台在中国建立并保持社会关系，逐渐克服困难，进而适应新的文化和生活。就社交平台选择而言，海外留学生倾向于使用本土化社交平台来适应中国文化，而使用国际化社交平台来与身在祖国的亲人保持联系。可见，无论是本土化或是国际化的社交平台在海外留学生的跨文化适应中都很重要，同时协助他们更好地与在中国和自己国家的亲朋好友保持联络。

关键词：跨文化适应、社交媒体、海外留学生

ABSTRACT

As social media play an important role in promoting people's communication and interaction, more and more overseas students in China use social media in order to adapt to a new culture and lifestyle. This paper examines local and international social media use and its influence on cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students in China at Xiamen University.

This study adopts two methods: a survey and in-depth interview. Based on the results of the survey, a significant correlation is found between local social platforms (such as WeChat) and adaptation to Chinese culture. Through local social media use, overseas students can strengthen their communication ability and make more friends. In contrast, the use of international social media platforms (such as Facebook) has no influence on cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students. However, a significant correlation is found between international social media and communication with family. Through in-depth interviewees, it is found that overseas students use WeChat with local people and with other overseas students that makes WeChat a platform with two circles of communication: local and international. The following two circles of communication represent healthy sociocultural and psychological adaptation of overseas students. The results of this research show how important local and international social media in cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students in China where overseas students strengthen and maintain relationship, overcome difficulties and adapt to new culture and lifestyle. Therefore, overseas students tend to use local social platforms to adapt to Chinese culture and international social platforms to keep in touch with home country. It was found that both local and international social platforms are very important in cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students as they help overseas students in China to be better interconnected with friends and family.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Social Media, Overseas Students

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The internationalization policy of the Chinese government to open-up its education system to the rest of a world has attracted a staggering number of students to China from all around the world for various types of studies. In 2014, the number of overseas students in China reached 377,054,611, studying in around 660 research institutes in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities¹. In 2015, 397,635 overseas students arrived in China to undertake various types of studies². China plans to recruit 500,000 international students by 2020, which will make China the largest stop for overseas students in Asia. Moreover, internationalization is one of the most important indicators of educational accomplishments in Chinese universities (Shiao-Yun Chiang, 2014). Generally, “the border-crossing student” experiences a different style of life, language and culture, which may lead to some stress. Therefore, the way to minimize such stress is adapting to the new culture. (Kim 2001).

Due to the progress of the mobile phones and various types of social platforms, social media have become the important element of communication. During cross-cultural adaptation, overseas students use Chinese local social platforms and international social media to explore more about China, build and maintain relationships, stay in touch with family and friends from home countries. A great deal of research have confirmed that cross-cultural adaptation is an important factor that impacts overseas students’ “general well-being and academic performance in the host culture” (Morrison et al. 2005; Zhou et al. 2008; Zhang and Goodson 2011). However, existing studies were focused on countries other than China. Little appears to have been written specifically on the influence of social media on the cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students studying in China. In addition, most of China’s researches about the role of social media in cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students seem to be exceedingly general. With the help of social media, overseas students can better and quickly adapt to Chinese lifestyle and culture. It is important, therefore, to realize how overseas students use local social media and international social media to adapt better in China. Through incorporating different types of local

¹ <http://www.csc.edu.cn/studyinchina/newsdetailen.aspx?cid=122&id=1399>

² <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2016/09/14/chinas-lure-for-international-students-surges/>

and international social platforms, the current study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students.

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CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media and Chinese Context

2.1.1 Definition of Social Media

Social media plays an important role in our life because it allows people to communicate and receive the information that is quickly available on the Internet (Rebecca Sawyer, 2011). Moreover, due to social media, people can express their opinions to the public and take part in conversations through a “common virtual medium” (Rebecca Sawyer, 2011). Researchers use a large quantity of terms, concerning social media and social networking sites. In this study the terms social media, social networking sites and social platforms are used interchangeably.

Social media is the “social interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information, ideas, and pictures/videos in virtual communities and networks” (Ahlqvist, Toni; Bäck, A.; Halonen, M.; Heinonen, S 2008). Furthermore, social media have a dependance on mobile technologies, which design highly interactive platforms. Through these platforms people share, discuss, and modify “user-generated content” (Kietzmann, Jan; Kristopher Hermkens, 2011). According to A. M. Kaplan (2012) mobile social media refers to the “combination of mobile devices and social media”. The author points out that it is “a group of mobile applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”. Mobile social media which run on mobile devices differ from traditional social media as they have new elements such as “the current location of the user or the time delay between sending and receiving messages”. Social Web sites can be understood as websites that make possible for people to form online communities and share user-created contents (Kim et al, 2010). Therefore, the concept includes all activities by Internet users through extending or maintaining their social network (Richter et al, 2009). Social networking services are “online communities that concentrate on bringing together people with similar interests or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others” (Marcus & Krishnamurthi, 2009). Researchers give a wide range of definitions of social media and social networking sites which is explained by the

fact that social media quickly continue to evolve and its uses change. Heidy Cohen defines social media as the platforms that “enable the interactive web by engaging users to participate in, comment on and create content as means of communicating with their social graph, other users and the public”. According to Cohen, social media has the following main characteristics:

1. Broad range of content formats such as text, video, photographs, audio.
2. Interactions on platforms through social sharing, email and feeds.
3. One-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications.
4. Communication takes place in real time or asynchronously over time.
5. Can be used via a computer (laptops and netbooks), tablets (iPads, iTouch and others) and mobile phones³.

Cohen's definition focuses on the fact that social media is a “communication platform where users create their information as a mean of communication with public”. Cohen points out the factor of time during communication and the number of people who can participate in online communication. Besides, this definition highlights the importance of interactions by sharing content. Therefore, in this study we adopt this particular definition of social media. It is believed that this definition describes accurately the concept and provide a wide range of main features of social media.

2.1.2 Local and International Social Media

Overseas students in China tend to use two types of social media: local social media and international social media. The most popular local social platforms are WeChat and QQ. WeChat is the most popular used social platform in China which was developed by Tencent in China and first released in January 2011. It provides multimedia communication including text and voice messaging. (Weixin - 微信, 2011). According to Blog.percolate.com, 2014, WeChat has much more functions besides simple messaging which includes video/voice calling, sharing your moments

³ Heidi Cohen, <http://heidicohen.com/social-media-definition/>

with others, meeting new people, purchasing goods and other commodities, transferring money, real-time location service, and much more. According to statistical data, in August 2014, WeChat reached over 438 million users; 70 million outside of China (Tencent, 2014). WeChat is a mixture of Facebook and WhatsApp; it is a communication platform that according to Jiaqi Wu (2014) has unique functions such as 1) connecting to a group of friends which enables efficient connection with university friends, family members, and interest groups, and 2) chatting one-on-one, sending audio messages instead of text (Jiaqi Wu, 2014). In addition to this, WeChat has the function Moments, where users can share their photos, comment on photos of friends etc. This feature is similar to that of Facebook's and Instagram's. Overseas students after arriving to China have the opportunity to contact with Chinese friends, comment their photos and share their own interesting moments. Tencent QQ, or QQ, is an instant messaging platform which was developed by Chinese company Tencent Holdings Limited. QQ also offers a wide range of services, including online social games, music, shopping, microblogging, and group and voice chat. QQ and WeChat both are accessible by computer or by phone. The phone version is more used for practical reasons.

The most popular international social platforms consist of WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. WhatsApp is social platform created for mobile phones where users can send each other text and audio messages, pictures, videos. Besides, they also can share their location using integrated mapping features. WhatsApp Inc. was established in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum. According to statistical data, by October 2014, WhatsApp is the most popular messaging app counting more than 600 million users (Parmy Olsen, 2014). This type of social media helps users to interact with each other without considering the distance factor. Moreover, people can send their photos, location as well as sharing status, therefore ignoring the factor of distance. Another example of real time social platform is Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg is the founder of this social platform, which was created in 2004. The main purpose of Facebook was to bring people with different cultural backgrounds together and encourage interaction (Facebook, 2010). Nowadays, Facebook is a powerful social media, where people can easily connect with each other; in addition

to messaging and video calling Facebook has different entertainment activities and games. Facebook can be translated in 70 different languages, and around 70% of its users are outside the U.S. (Facebook, 2010). Therefore, Facebook is one of the most widely used social platforms outside of China. Lastly, Instagram is an online photo and video sharing platform that was founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. Instagram is usually used for taking pictures and videos. After posting a picture or video on Instagram, a user can share it in other social platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and others. (Frommer, 2010). Besides, before posting picture there is an option in Instagram where users can directly edit and apply various filters to their photos. The platform quickly gained popularity and reached over 100 million users in 2012 (DesMarais, 2013). This example of social media has shortened the ties of distance into knowing exactly what someone is doing through posting pictures and videos and without face-to-face communication with a person.

Nowadays, social platforms has become an essential part of our lives; everyday people across the world use social media to communicate and interact with others without being face-to-face. Therefore, people can stay in touch and be connected regardless of the factor of distance.

2.2 Cross-cultural adaptation and Social Media

2.2.1 Previous research on overseas students' adaptation

A few recent studies about overseas students' adaptation were found in the Chinese research literature. (Chen, 2003; Lei & Gan, 2004; Yang, 2009). Chen (2003) analyzed answers of overseas students about their cross-cultural adaptation in Beijing, China. The author used different dimensions and received 88 responses. The respondents stated that certain Chinese attitudes are unusual in comparison with their country and this had a negative impact on their adaptation to Chinese society. Lei and Gan (2004) examined 96 overseas students from 47 various countries who were studying in Beijing, China. The respondents confirmed the problems in adjusting to the Chinese lifestyle, shopping, accommodation, food and others. Yang (2009) concentrated on the everyday life problems up to 200 overseas students in six universities in China. The author's results revealed that overseas students had

problems in making Chinese friends. Most of the previous studies adopted only quantitative research methods. In addition, those studies did not take into consideration the role of social media use in cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students. Besides, previous studies did not divide social media into two large groups for better understanding the impact of social media on overseas students' adaptation. From this point of view, exploratory quantitative and qualitative study would provide some insights into the characteristics and features of the field. The purpose of the present study is to examine local and international social media use and the cross-cultural adaptation of overseas students in China in order to get a better understanding of this process. This study will analyze the frequency usage of social local and international media platforms, the impact of these social media on overseas students' adjustment to Chinese culture. It will also look how overseas students perceive their adaptation to China itself from sociocultural and psychological side.

2.2.2 The definition of cross- cultural adaptation

When overseas students go abroad, they have to “adopt different social and cultural patterns in both psychological and sociological aspects” (Ye, 2005). This adjustment process make overseas students to experience more stress than local students which can be explained by the fact that to be successful, they have to learn quickly to adjust to a different culture. Cross-cultural adaptation has been studied for decades (Kim, 2001). Cross-cultural studies concentrate on the interactions between people from different countries with different cultural backgrounds. “The multicultural world is enhanced by the experiences of sojourners, immigrants, and others who successfully make the transition from one culture to another” (Kim, 2001). Kim and colleagues (e.g., Kim, 1977, 2001, 2006; Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2008, 2009; Kim, Lujan, & Dixon, 1998) in their cross-cultural adaptation theory explain the process of adaptation experienced by the “border-crossing sojourner or student”, and recommend ways to decrease the degree of psychological stress and increase the person's “functional fitness” and “psychological well-being” (Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2009). The theory states that adapting individual experiences a “stress-adaptation-growth” dynamic that develops over time, pushing the sojourner to increasing levels of adaptation. Besides, the theory also claims that some

communicative practices may quicken adaptation, for example, communication with host nationals and communication with co-nationals over the long-term (Kim, 2001). Kramer points out a drawback of Kim's theory which is seeing the host culture as a fixed end, unaffected by the presence of the adapting individual (Kramer, 2000; Sandel & Liang, 2010). For the purpose of this paper, the terms adjustment and adaptation is used interchangeably. According to Castro, adaptation refers to “the process of adjustment to the existing conditions in the environment” (Castro, 2003). Therefore, the key to successful adjustment is perceiving and understanding the new environment as well as the emotional well-being of sojourners during the adjustment process. (Ying & Liese, 1991). As a result, researchers claim that both sociocultural and psychological aspects of cross-cultural adaptation need to be examined in studies. (Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999; Ying & Liese, 1990, 1991). Ward and colleagues indicated that cross-cultural adaptation includes two categories: psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment. (e.g., Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1999; Ward, 1996, 1999). Sociocultural adaptation refers to the extent to which an individual can fit in different aspects of a new culture (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Sociocultural adaptation is more influenced by factors supporting culture learning and social skills such as making friends, knowledge of the local language, participating in social activities and others (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1994; Ward & Searle, 1991). Several authors have described different categories of sociocultural adaptation, precisely Black and Stephens (1989), who have analyzed cross-cultural adjustment in the field of management, indicate the following three domains: 1) General adjustment (managing daily life) 2) Interaction adjustment (relating effectively to host nationals) 3) Work adjustment (accomplishment of work-related objectives). In this paper general and interactional adjustment of overseas students in China is thoroughly explored. Interactional adjustment includes not only communication with Chinese people, but also with other overseas students from different countries. Furthermore, it includes social interaction through local and international social media with both overseas and Chinese students.

Psychological adaptation concerns psychological and emotional well-being. It is associated with the stress that person experiences during adaptation process and the

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