Journal of Studies in International Education
2015, Vol. 19(3) 203–224

DOI: 10.1177/1028315314536990
jsi.sagepub.com
SAGE

Surfing USA: How Internet Use Prior to and During Study Abroad Affects Chinese Students' Stress, Integration, and Cultural Learning While in the United States

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Abstract

Campuses across the United States continue to welcome a record number of Chinese students coming in pursuit of both academic and cultural goals. Yet, high levels of acculturative stress coupled with difficulties integrating into life abroad jeopardize accomplishing these goals. In this study, we examine Chinese students' Internet use both prior to and during study abroad, and its effects on stress, integration, and learning while abroad. In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 undergraduate and graduate students from China currently studying in the United States. Findings indicate that although online media and resources provide valuable information to Chinese students, they may also set the stage for entry into established, cohesive co-national peer groups, thereby discouraging integration.

Keywords

international education, social support, computer-mediated communication, cultural integration, cross-cultural engagement

Introduction

In 2009, China eclipsed India to become the largest sender nation for international students studying in the United States (Institute of International Education [IIE] Open

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Doors, 2001-2011). Fueled by government initiatives to promote cultural diplomacy and soft power, American universities' efforts to internationalize undergraduate curriculum and weather difficult economic times, and Chinese students seeking an edge in a competitive job market, Chinese students are becoming an increasingly influential cohort on campuses around the United States. Enrollment numbers have grown dramatically from less than 1,000 students in 1981 to nearly 100,000 in 2009 (Yan & Berliner, 2011) and currently stand at 197,294—with an increase of more than 35,000 in 2011 alone. Consistent with overall trends in international student enrollment, graduate students comprise a slightly larger percentage of overall student enrollment in degree granting programs at 52.47% (n = 103,505), compared with 47.53% (n = 93,789) undergraduates (IIE, 2012).

As ever-higher numbers of students originate from China, students are also more "net savvy" than previous generations. In the past 8 years, the number of Internet users in China has more than doubled to 618 million (Millward, 2014), with the average Internet consumer spending roughly 3 hr per day online. Chinese university students are even more likely to be online with an estimated 99% penetration rate and an average of 3.6 hr online per day. Individuals under the age of 35 account for 73% of Chinese Internet users and up to 80% of the 1 billion hr of Internet consumption in 2009 (Michael & Zhou, 2010). As student access to web technology is increasing, the Internet is shaping both students' expectations for life abroad and their experiences once they arrive.

Although research is only beginning to examine the ways in which the Internet is reshaping study-abroad experiences, empirical studies have demonstrated the general effectiveness of online technology in the transfer of advice, information, and even resources during times of stress (see, for example, Mikal, 2011; Mikal & Grace, 2012; Ye, 2006). Given the high levels of acculturative stress faced by Chinese students in the United States (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Yang & Clum, 1994), and difficulties integrating into life abroad (Yan & Berliner, 2011), the Internet may be particularly well-suited to help Chinese students. Yet, in touting cultural exposure and immersion as the venues to learning, the traditional model of study abroad suggests that the Internet potentially constitutes an escape and a distraction. Using qualitative interviews with 18 Chinese students studying abroad in the United States, we address both positive and negative aspects of Internet use, along with the implications of Chinese students' Internet-mediated seeking behaviors on their cultural integration and learning.

Theoretical Framework

While issues of stress and integration are common during study abroad, researchers find that these issues may be particularly salient for Chinese students in the United States (Yan & Berliner, 2009; Yang & Clum, 1994). Heightened academic and social stresses due to strong ties in the home country, limited exposure to American culture, lack of English language proficiency, and Confucius educational values that conflict with Western Socratic traditions (Campbell & Li, 2006) often lead to social isolation (Yan & Berliner, 2011) and the formation of insular communities of co-nationals (Yan

& Berliner, 2011). In most cases, peer cohorts become the primary social outlet resulting in isolated co-national groups where cultural learning and immersion are waylaid in favor of academic and social survival (Wang, 2006).

Earliest theories of acculturative stress suggested that a period of shock was a normal part of the initial adjustment to a new culture. The u-curve hypothesis put forth by Lysgaard (1955) and advanced and adapted by Oberg (1960), Adler (1975), and Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) suggested a normative pattern of adjustment marked by an initial decrease in well-being, and followed by a steady recovery as individuals began to immerse themselves in the host culture and to acquire culturally relevant knowledge. Several criticisms have been leveled against early normative models of intercultural adjustment stress. Along with theoretical limitations (Church, 1982), and empirical counterevidence (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), the models were attacked for treating acculturative stress as a natural by-product of international travel and cultural learning (McKinlay, Pattison, & Gross, 1996). This cavalier attitude toward acculturative stress risked trivializing the very real outcomes of heightened stress including depression, anxiety, isolation, decreased academic performance, and physical illness (Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Wei et al., 2007). As a result, criticisms of older adjustment models gave rise to a backlash of studies focused on predicting and even preventing acculturative stress during study abroad (see, for example, Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Other theories contend that there exists an optimal stress level that promotes peak performance: challenging participants without enabling complacency (Savicki, 2008). According to the model, cultural integration stress may benefit students by initiating a process of growth by which students develop cultural knowledge and appreciation. Based on the literature on posttraumatic growth, the model states that, "The process of posttraumatic growth is set in motion by the occurrence of a major life crisis that severely challenges and perhaps even shatters the individual's understanding of the world and his or her place in it" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). According to the model, the initial shock of adjusting to a new culture may constitute a life crisis sufficient to set in motion a process of posttraumatic growth, resulting in increased affective, behavioral, and cognitive development during study abroad. However, for the crisis to give rise to posttraumatic growth, students must have the support resources to regulate stress. Using a Challenge/Support hypothesis (Swickert & Hittner, 2009), the model suggests that optimal growth takes place when students are placed in situations that are challenging but that provide the support required to be successful.

The Challenge/Support hypothesis has been demonstrated in literature on intercultural adjustment and intercultural learning. Berry (1997) conceptualizes intercultural adjustment as a function of group attitudes toward heritage culture maintenance, alongside a willingness and ability to adopt the basic values of the host society. Based on these two factors, groups may assimilate (abandon heritage culture, adopt host culture), integrate (maintain heritage culture *and* adopt the host culture), separate (maintain heritage culture, fail to adopt host culture), or become marginalized (abandon heritage culture *and* fail to adopt host culture). The model has been applied at both the group level and the individual level. Notably, Ward and Kennedy (1994) have used the model to explain differential adaptation in study-abroad participants, finding that

those who maintain their heritage culture (integrate, separate) exhibit higher well-being than those who abandon their heritage culture, whether attempting to assimilate completely or failing to assimilate, thereby becoming marginalized. Furthermore, the study finds advantages to learning (socio-cultural adjustment) stemming from the maintenance of home culture ties. The advantages of a social network comprised of both host- and co-nationals are echoed in the findings by Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2009) whose study shows that students made optimal progress in their cultural learning when their learning and social environments are comprised of members of the host and home cultures, and that those who spent the most time with host nationals ultimately became overwhelmed and scored lower on intercultural learning scales. The findings present evidence of the Challenge/Support hypothesis, and the authors state that bicultural peer networks provide optimal challenge and support by allowing students to actively engage with the host culture, but allowing students to reflect on and process their experiences, and to receive support from sympathetic peers.

Where most study-abroad programs provide administrative and academic support, programs generally rely on students' own efforts to create networks to provide much-needed peer support during their time abroad. According to Cohen and Wills (1985) social support can be divided into four forms: (a) Socio-emotional support refers to emotional support that enhances self-worth and feelings of togetherness, (b) informational support refers to the transfer of relevant advice and information to assist in coping with a stressor, (c) instrumental support consists of the transfer of goods or services, and (d) embedded support refers to the identity affirmation that comes from daily participation in a broader social network. While the benefits of social support have not been unequivocally proven, certain conditions have been shown to enhance the quality and effectiveness of social support: (a) Support must be appropriate (Cohen & Wills, 1985), (b) support must not be perceived as a burden to the provider (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessier, 2000), and (c) supporters must be able to empathize (Thoits, 1986). It is the final condition for effective support that creates an interesting problem: Study-abroad literature suggests that learning takes place primarily in cross-cultural interactions (Schumann, 1986), but co-nationals are more likely to be able to provide fitting, empathetic support to reduce stress.

It is precisely this trade-off between co-national versus host national peer networks that sits at the center of the debate over remaining connected through Internet use during study abroad. The traditional model of study abroad is characterized by "encountering another world, immersing oneself in the daily practices of other people, sometimes living and speaking in another language and learning how others view the world" (Dolby, 2004, p. 150). Yet researchers and administrators have long grappled with heightened stress and suboptimal integration among participants of traditional models of study abroad. As students are more dependent on online tools and connection, they can exhibit agency in their study-abroad experiences by capitalizing on the unique advantages of social support as mediated through the Internet. According to more recent studies, the Internet is not only an effective medium for the transfer of both socio-emotional and informational support (Leung, 2003; Wright, 2000), but there are unique advantages of Internet-mediated social support. Recent research has

demonstrated the effectiveness of Internet-mediated social support for communicating support over geographic distance and time zones (Dimmick et al., 2007), when seeking support for stigmatized conditions, or when coping with disease diagnosis (Malik & Coulson, 2008; Murero & Rice, 2006; Rice & Katz, 2001). Specific studies of Internet use during study abroad have found that the Internet can be an effective tool when coping with linguistic or cultural barriers to communication, can bolster confidence by providing students with a sense of community and security, and can be an invaluable resource for finding opportunities to interact with members of the host culture (Mikal, 2010; Mikal, 2011; Mikal & Grace, 2012). While studies have demonstrated that Asians (and Asian Americans) are less likely than Caucasian Americans to seek out mental health services during times of stress (Narikiyo & Kameoka, 1992), other research has shown that Asians are more likely to seek support through informal rather than formal channels (Kung, 2003). Asians may benefit from *implicit* support, or support derived from participation in a well-established community (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008)—such as those that can be found online.

In this article, we examine how Chinese students use the Internet to create and maintain networks of support to cope with the unique stresses they face while abroad in the United States. Where recent studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of online support in warding off stress (Cemalcilar, Falbo, & Stapleton, 2005; Ye, 2006), few studies have examined the role of the Internet use prior to study abroad in shaping their experiences and integration outcomes. Given that most Chinese students study abroad in pursuit of goals that are equally discipline-specific and cultural/linguistic in nature, we examine how students' support seeking behaviors may come to bear on their academic, cultural, and linguistic development.

Method

To assess Chinese students' online networks of support, we conducted a series of qualitative interviews with 10 Chinese graduate students and 8 Chinese undergraduate students studying abroad at a major public university in California. Students were solicited using snowball sampling through the Chinese Student Association (CSA) and the Chinese Student and Scholar Association (CSSA) meetings. Interviews began with participants being asked to fill out a form that included demographic information, educational background, and previous travel experience. The remainder of the interview was semi-structured. The protocol consisted of three main topics: (a) The Internet, preparation, and expectations for life abroad; (b) transition, academics, and social integration; and (c) Internet-mediated social support, and stress reduction while abroad. Within the first topic, students discussed their goals for study abroad, specific Internet resources they used to prepare for study abroad, and the impressions they formed of the United States from their web browsing. Within the second topic, students discussed their transition abroad, along with any social or academic difficulties they faced in adjusting to U.S. culture and education. Finally, within the third topic, students discussed their Internet use while abroad, with particular attention to academic and social stressors they encountered in the United States. Each section was designed

to take 20 min, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. However, respondents were encouraged to share as much of their story as they liked, and thus interview times ranged from 60 to 90 min. All interviews were transcribed and coded using a bottom–up technique where themes and hypotheses emerged from the data.

Our interview subjects included nine women and nine men from the People's Republic of China. Seventeen students were enrolled in degree granting programs—5 students were pursuing doctoral degrees, 3 students were pursuing master's degrees, 10 students were pursuing bachelor's degrees, and 1 participant was a postdoctoral researcher. Seven students were studying in the physical sciences (including environmental science, electrical engineering, and computer science), and 7 students were studying social sciences (including global studies, economics, political science, and education). One student was studying East Asian languages and cultures, and 1 student was majoring in history (2 students did not report a major course of study). The average age was 19.44, with an age range of 18 to 28 years. Ten student respondents had been in the United States for less than 6 months. Four students had been in the United States between 1 and 2 years, and 6 students had been in the United States for more than 3 years or more (1 student did not respond to the question). Eight students reported study-abroad experience prior to moving to the United States, while 10 students reported no significant prior relocation experience.

Results

All respondents indicated that their decision to study abroad was motivated both by language and cultural development, as well as by academic pursuits and job security. For motivation, students listed improved English, cultural learning, and cultural integration alongside creativity encouraged at U.S. institutions, academic prestige, and job security promised by a U.S. degree. However, while many students indicated that their motivation to study abroad included cultural and linguistic goals, our results echoed findings of other researchers indicating that bicultural (Chinese–American) friendships among the students we interviewed were low. In fact, of the 18 students interviewed, no students reported that their closest friend was American. Only three students reported having at least one close friendship with an American student. Of the remaining 15 students, 12 reported interacting with American students in class, but rarely outside of classroom settings, and 3 students reported no American friendships at all. Yet, where previous studies of American students have found that the Internet can be a useful tool for creating connections within the target culture, our results indicate that Chinese students are unlikely to use the Internet to create additional opportunities to interact with their American peers and classmates. Rather than enrichment and integration, Chinese students' Internet use belies academic focus with limited cultural engagement. Students' Internet use can be categorized into three principal outcomes: (a) gains of logistical information about the United States, (b) reaffirmation of Chinese identity through the creation of insular co-national peer groups, and (c) the eventual abandonment of prior cultural integration goals.

Primacy of Informational Support

Data demonstrated that the perceived lack of support available through the U.S. university system created considerable stress for students. As a result, many Chinese students turned to resources available over the Internet both in preparation for study abroad and to cope with ambiguity during study abroad. Internet use patterns showed that Chinese students used the Internet (a) to obtain logistical information to promote successful independent living and (b) to tap into a network of informational support available through more experienced Chinese students currently residing in the United States. Reliance on obtaining information from co-national peer groups might initially form in secondary school at a key time for navigating and strategizing the university application process. Notably absent from Chinese students' support seeking behavior were cultural information and students reported only limited socio-emotional support seeking online. Results show that whereas this support decreased stress and increased feelings of community and cohesiveness among Chinese students, Internet use did little to help Chinese students form bridges with Americans during study abroad.

Prior to departure, few of the students we interviewed had any experience living alone. Of the 18 student respondents, 1 student migrated to the United States at 10 years old, 6 had finished high school degrees in China, 1 had attended a boarding high school in Singapore, and 10 had completed undergraduate degrees at Chinese universities. However, even the students who had completed their undergraduate degrees in China had little experience living fully independently, as would be expected during undergraduate studies in the United States. One student describes his experience as an undergraduate in China:

> When we were in China, we don't have to consider much. There are dining halls, so we go to the dining hall to eat. We live in dorms, so we don't need to buy our own furniture, or think about utility bills. We just pay our tuition and everything is taken care of. But when we come to the United States, we need to consider a lot of other things. (Ming, male, PhD, computer science)

Ming describes a difficult transition marked by a period of adjustment into the independence expected of graduate students in the United States:

> My first year here, I spent most of my time getting used to the lifestyle and how to schedule my time. In China everything is so convenient. There are services for you. You spend most of your time studying. When I came [to the United States] I needed to consider how to arrange my house, how to schedule my time, how to manage my money, things like that. It really took a lot of time for me to get used to. (Ming)

For many Chinese students, even those who had traveled abroad, the decision to study abroad was not only a decision to undertake a degree program in a new educational system, in a new language, but also a decision to assume responsibility for many day-to-day functions that would have been assumed by a university in China. While a valuable endeavor for students, for Ming, this focus on independent living in a new country caused stress by distracting him from academic responsibilities.

Faced with independence, and relatively limited support available through U.S. universities, many Chinese students used the Internet to research the United States and U.S. universities while still in China. From selecting a university, to organizing daily life abroad, to information on taxes, students turned to online sources to help them gather information and make well-informed decisions. This information seeking often involved tapping into established networks of Chinese students studying abroad in the United States. For example, many Chinese students reported that attending a well-reputed university was important. As such, when deciding which university to attend, one student reported that she had not only searched several websites for university rankings but, where possible, also scoured student rosters for other Chinese students already enrolled and sent emails to solicit information.

Chinese students currently abroad in the United States served as a network of valuable informational support, providing key logistical information for students preparing to study abroad. Prior to departure, virtually all students reported connecting with other Chinese students already in the United States to obtain basic survival information on finances, transportation, or other logistical issues. Ling, a female master's student of environmental science reported that prior to coming to the United States, she used social networking sites such as Renren or university-specific Google Groups to find information, specifically:

> …what kinds of things I should bring here? And also before I came here I have to look for the house. So I post any issues or problems about whether I should live in the schools, in the apartment of schools, or live outside, and also [I looked up] the rents, or some safety issues. (Ying, female, MA, Environmental Science)

Jiang, a doctoral student of electrical engineering and computer science, offers some other examples of types of information students may seek from other Chinese students who are already abroad: "Most are technical questions: what is Twitter? What data plan is good? What most concern? What stress? That kind of thing" (Jiang, male, PhD, electrical engineering and computer science). By connecting with more experienced peers, students were able to plug into a network of information to help alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty of living alone and abroad for the first time. More importantly, by plugging into a network of experience, each student was not forced to research and relearn the same information as previous students. Rather, students could build off of each other's experiences as a collective. New students could draw on this collective wisdom for support and looked forward to contributing their experiences later.

Interestingly, when it came to information on how to behave, how to act, conceptualizations of social propriety, and other culturally relevant information, students did not report turning to this network of experience. In fact, few students reported having researched any cultural information prior to going abroad—or searching for cultural orientation programs designed to help students understand American culture and interaction styles. For example, when asked what kind of cultural information she sought online, Yun reported,

> I researched how Chinese students live in the US: how they commute from the apartment to the school, how they do grocery shopping, where to travel, where to buy a car. (Yun, female, PhD, education)

When gently pressed to consider other, more "cultural" elements of life abroad such as interaction styles, dress, conceptualizations of space, or American etiquette, Yun responded, "Actually, I didn't participate in any training program." Students who reported having learned about American culture prior to arriving in the United States generally reported having learned about U.S. culture in English class, or having gleaned an understanding of U.S. culture through popular media sites such as online newspapers, television, and movies—rather than through research or Chinese peer networks. According to one respondent,

> I read newspapers. We have a school program called English Corner that require a lot of readings, and I watched a lot of movies—American movies, and TV series. (Zheng, male, undergraduate, economics)

Despite many students reporting intercultural learning and communicative competence goals, in practice, American culture tended to be only marginally important with relation to academics because, in the words of one participant, "American culture is like pop music, pop culture. I guess I had already known a lot about that before I came [to the United States]" (Jiang).

This pattern of information seeking—and of tapping into a network of informational support provided by more experienced Chinese students—not only continued, but in some cases, also grew stronger once students were abroad. When asked about stressors encountered abroad, and about Internet resources used to cope with those stressors, students reported that they had experienced no stressful intercultural exchanges. Instead, students reported very specific logistical issues they had encountered in the United States. As such, the social support they sought was more likely to be informational—focused on a specific problem—rather than emotional in nature. For example, when asked about stressors in the United States, Ling recounts a complication with her travel visa that, if unresolved, could have prevented her reentry into the United States after a short trip to China. To receive support, Ling reports,

> Maybe I post my feelings and problems in the social network, and a lot of my friends will reply to me. Reply the information I posted and give me some suggestions or some examples they have encountered. But this sounds a lot more like what you call problem-focused. I have problem, here is a possible solution. (Ling)

Ling's response typifies a pattern observed among Chinese students, which is the primacy of problem-focused, informational support exchange among Chinese students, particularly in public forums such as Renren, Facebook, and Google Groups.

Yet while informational support seeking was most common among Chinese students, our student respondents also reported a limited exchange of emotional support

online. Generally, Chinese students shied away from public forums in favor of private programs enabling one-to-one connections with close friends or family members. While some students reported posting about frustrations or sad feelings on public forums, most Chinese students balked at the idea of either seeking or providing emotional support on public forums, even those with limited or select memberships such as social networking sites. When asked about exchanging emotional support online, Ming reported,

> Emotional problems or feeling frustrated or things like that, I think you need to seek a solution. Your emotional cannot help much—so you need to find a solution to really solve your problem.

Typically associated with masculine coping responses in western cultures (Greene & Debacker, 2004), undergraduate Lisa, a female student, echoed a similar reluctance to seek or provide emotional support in public venues. For Lisa,

> I have this feeling that if you can post something online, it's not that bad. I mean if something major happened, you don't have the time or the emotion to post it online. (Lisa, female, undergraduate, global studies).

This reluctance to use Facebook for emotional support transactions and the departure it represents from findings on American students' Facebook use patterns (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008) is consistent with research demonstrating cultural differences in support seeking behaviors and conceptualizations of propriety. As noted above, research on cultural differences in support seeking behaviors among Americans and Asians has demonstrated that Asians may be less likely to call on networks of support during times of stress and may be more likely to benefit from *implicit* support availability.

Create and Maintain Insular Co-National Peer Networks

Accessing a knowledgeable network of informational support provided students with an initial introduction to well-established co-national peer networks that would become the primary social outlet for most respondents. While previous researchers have commented on insular groups of co-nationals and poor integration among Chinese students studying in the United States (Yan & Berliner, 2009), our results indicate that use of multimedia may actually allow students to begin to form relationships with these groups before they even arrive in the United States. This early entry into insular co-national peer groups may set the stage for very limited integration among Chinese students. However, the peer networks have the advantage of (a) allowing students to access empathetic, fitting emotional and informational support as recommended by Thoits (1986) in a culturally appropriate manner; (b) leveraging collective wisdom available through more experienced Chinese students to ensure personal survival; and (c) maintaining important obligations to friends and family in the home culture.

The Internet allowed students to begin forming relationships with co-nationals prior to studying abroad. According to respondents, the convention for meeting new people in Chinese culture is to be introduced by a third party. However, the Internet served as a social lubricant, allowing individuals to circumvent convention by making contact with group members who were already studying abroad (Wellman, Hasse, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). According to Ling, who reported looking through rosters for other Chinese students, she also used the Internet to look up the two Chinese students who would be her roommates in the United States:

> I used the Internet to contact the roommates I would have here for the first year because they are also Chinese girls. So we exchanged phone numbers. I also contacted one girl who came here with me on the same flight. (Ling, female, MA, environmental science)

Furthermore, by tapping into the established network of informational support available through the Internet, students laid the foundation to begin forming face-to-face networks of support with co-nationals once they arrived abroad. For example, students reported using Google Groups to gather relevant information for their sojourn; however, through these networks, students often managed to recruit material support, such as rides from the airport to their apartment once they arrived in the United States.

Through networks of informational support, students were also plugged into other networks of material support from trustworthy sources: fellow Chinese students in the United States. According to Ming,

> If you want to rent a room I can provide some information, or if you want to buy a car, there may be some people who want to sell their car. When you communicate with Chinese people it will be much easier and there are not so many Chinese people here, and we can basically trust each other. There are resources like textbooks. So some people will graduate soon, and they want to sell their stuff. There are a lot of researches people share together. (Ming, male, PhD, computer science)

More importantly, this Internet contact creates opportunities to be plugged into a well-developed network of material, informational, or even emotional support by linking students to each other, or to larger groups such as the CSA or CSSA.

While most students shied away from seeking, or providing emotional support on public forums, students reported that the Internet was useful in obtaining socio-emotional support in a culturally appropriate manner. In some instances, this involved the transfer of advice or venting. According to Lisa, the undergraduate who shunned Facebook and reported very limited emotional support interactions through public forums,

> I vent to my friends using chat. I feel more safe and secure talking to like one or two friends about my problem, because I know that if you post online the people don't care, they don't know exactly what happened to you and they just say things to make you feel better. If you talk to one or two friends, they understand your life and they really care about what's going on so they can comfort you or find ways to help.

This discreet and personal support exchange is more in keeping with cultural notions of propriety. According to Lisa, "Chinese people are more closed. They like to interact with people they feel more comfortable with." Chinese students are less inclined to share worries in public forums, and having Chinese friends on- and offline enables students to access support in a manner that is respectful to cultural support seeking norms.

While some students demonstrated more stoicism with regard to personal problems and emotional support, instances where students did report using or providing emotional support were limited to programs that enabled private exchanges. In other instances, emotional support could be garnered from the simple presence of friends and family members online—with no actual transference of support or advice. Students reported feeling comforted when friends and family members would log onto instant messenger programs—that the perception of available support was enough to buffer stress. Previous research from social psychology has demonstrated that social support need not necessarily involve the transfer of advice or information; that the simple perception of available support can be sufficient to ward off the deleterious effects of stress (Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007). For Chinese student respondents, seeing the avatar of a friend or family member provided the perception of available support—and that perceived or implicit support was enough to increase well-being.

Results from previous studies have also demonstrated that students may experience stress due to a separation from their home culture (Sovic & Blythman, 2008). The Internet may alleviate some of the stress and anxiety of separation from peer networks in their home country by allowing students to continue to maintain supportive relationships in the home culture—but also by allowing students to continue to fulfill their social obligations toward friends and family back in China. According to Yun, if she found herself feeling down or depressed, "I could call my family. They are really my rock. I would call my mom" (Yun, female, PhD, education). Yun reported weekly calls with her mother and her older brother, and that those calls were helpful in buffering stress.

In fact, virtually all students reported at least weekly, sometimes daily, contact with friends and family back in China. Interactions could be supportive, to obtain advice, to maintain relationships, or to attend to social obligations. Even Lisa, who had migrated to the United States at 10 years, and whose parents were living in the United States, reported weekly calls to her grandparents in China. Zheng said that families were to be consulted on major decisions:

> If I talked to my family, sometimes it's serious—like if I decide to get a job, in terms of planning. After graduation, I want to go to Florida. My family and I would talk a lot about that. (Zheng, male, undergraduate, economics)

Yet, while many students reported support and improved well-being from these conversations, others felt that they needed to hide challenges from friends and family for fear of worrying or disappointing family members. For example, when Zheng was experiencing problems with his first host family, he reports that he could not discuss

the issue with his family back in China for fear of worrying his mother. While less "supportive" in the conventional sense, these interactions represent roles and responsibilities that students have toward their families. Failure to meet these obligations may result in heightened stress and anxiety, or the feeling of being far removed from their culture—similar to findings for Americans studying abroad (Mikal & Grace, 2012).

Eventual Abandonment of Prior Cultural Integration Goals

By allowing students to both access old networks of support, and simultaneously providing access to new co-national networks of support, the Internet permits students to create support networks with co-nationals in the United States and China. This increase in available support from the home culture is accompanied by the eventual abandonment of cultural and language development goals. As shown above, prior to coming abroad, students seek out informational support from Chinese co-nationals and become plugged into an already well-established network of Chinese students. It is from among this network that students begin to build their first friendships in the United States. According to students, institutional, linguistic, and cultural challenges in forging relationships with American students, coupled with the shared culture and experiences among Chinese students, laid the foundation for deeper relationships to emerge among Chinese co-nationals.

At the start of their sojourn, nearly all students reported that language and cultural development were paramount to their decision to study abroad. Students were attracted to the U.S. educational system because of the perceived freedom of expression in American academics, the global marketability of English fluency, and the professional networks accessible through the American education system. And all students cited language and cultural learning as part of their justification for study abroad. According to Ming,

> There is a cultural difference. Americans are free. They have their freedom and they have the right to think outside the box, so people tend to be more creative. They don't have many restrictions to do the things they want to do, and to think what they want to think. Chinese people are constrained by their education, so I think the people around me [in China] are not that creative, so that's why I want to learn in the United States. (Ming)

Ming wanted to learn to think creatively within his academic discipline, while Zheng wanted to establish strong professional networks. Both prioritized learning English and development of intercultural communicative competencies as the means of achieving these cultural development goals. Yet, of our 18 interview subjects, all 18 reported that the majority of their peer networks consisted of co-nationals and that their closest friend was also Chinese. More than half reported that 100% of their friendship networks were Chinese.

Despite intentions to learn about America and American culture, many Chinese students reported challenges in connecting with, and relating to, American students.

For some students, the challenges centered around programmatic features such as living situations, jobs, or the prominence of Chinese co-nationals in specific majors or labs. One student discussed her frustration with the limitations imposed by her living situation:

> It is a mistake to put all the undergraduate Chinese students together. This kind of living arrangement isolates us from other students. I have no chance to approach American students and find that most of the time I stay with other Chinese students. I don't have many chances to communicate with American students because the majority groups who live around me are Chinese students. It is not what I expected. (Huqiang, male, undergraduate, financial mathematics)

Some students jokingly referred to such living situations as "Chinatowns" where Chinese culture and language dominate interactions. Students who were involved in PhD programs also suggested that students were either too loosely connected to form meaningful relationships, or that Chinese enrollment was too high. After reporting that her peer networks were composed of mainly co-nationals, one student suggested that program features play a major role:

> Chinese students have similar backgrounds. But my department doesn't have a lab or a room for graduate students, so we don't meet very often with each other, or talk about our courses or our research projects. I was a bit disappointed about this at the beginning. (Jiangyan)

Similarly, Jian reported that this program was made up of "80% Chinese students," limiting opportunities to interact across cultures as well.

Beyond programmatic features that limited contact with Americans, linguistic barriers and cultural differences also prevented Chinese students from forming meaningful cross-cultural friendships with Americans. Chinese student respondents reported that while Americans seemed friendly and pleasant, making friends with Americans was difficult either due to limited English proficiency or due to an inability to relate to American students. Xuan reports,

> I still have trouble making friends with American students because of the culture and language. Most topics they are interested in—besides academics—I just cannot participate in. I have some friends from Taiwan and we can chat about the programs and difficulties because we have some common issues as international students. (Xuan, female, PhD, political science)

Xuan goes on to say that she is concerned that American students cannot empathize with the experiences of Chinese international students and will therefore not be interested in the difficulties she faces. When asked what American students might like to talk about, Xuan responds,

> American students like extracurricular activities and outside sports very much. My coworkers like to go hiking, mountain climbing or marathons. But I am not that kind of

> outdoor-sports person. My friends are from Taiwan. We just have a cup of tea and watch videos online, watch some favorite movies or just chat.

Beyond living situations, lab composition, and high Chinese enrollment at universities, Chinese students also face barriers to communication in face-to-face settings with American students. Not only must Chinese students surmount insecurity related to their linguistic proficiency but also cultural differences around topics of interest that make relating to American students difficult.

Not all difficulties interacting with American students originated in Chinese students' feelings of insecurity. Many Chinese students reported finding certain aspects of American culture to be unsavory and expressed reluctance to interact with Americans if interactions included crowds, loud music, and/or alcohol. For Ling,

> Chinese students usually get together to have fun, but usually we depend on little games or Karaoke. I mean we have to rely on something else. But for American parties, from my point of view, they don't have games or something, but more beer and alcohol. I don't drink much so it's not my style. (Ling, female, MA, environmental science)

Other students found the ambience at American parties made it difficult to interact and make friends. According to Huang,

> I remember I went to a party—very noisy music, the DJ said bad words. Students there felt it was very enjoyable, but I don't understand what they were singing and shouting. I don't feel it's interesting so I left. It's hard for me to join in with American parties, so I don't attend American parties anymore. (Huang, male, undergraduate, mathematics)

For many of the successful Chinese students studying at American universities, alcohol consumption is poorly viewed or even expressly forbidden. The prominence of alcohol at U.S. parties made the environment unpleasant for some Chinese students and made it difficult for them to make friends. As a result, many Chinese students opt not to attend parties.

Even beyond the unsavory aspects of American nightlife culture, many students felt that it was not possible to form close relationships between Americans and Chinese—and therefore opted not to make an effort. For these students, differences in culture, interactional style, or situation made meaningful exchanges difficult. Again, according to Ming,

> Computer Science will sometimes hold coffee hour or barbecues. If I came here and there were other Chinese students, we can talk in a good way. But when I talk with Americans, sometimes I find it hard to find the topics, and then I find it's hard to talk something, and then it's frequently we'll talk about academics and research and after that I don't have much to say. (Ming)

Chinese students often commented that it was hard to get to know American students, and that those difficulties arose from cultural difference, language deficiency, and

differing interest. However, where Mikal (2011) and Mikal and Grace (2012) find that students may use the Internet to help overcome cultural and linguistic barriers, Chinese students in this study exhibited no such inclination in their Internet use—preferring to cement relationships with Chinese co-nationals, and maintain contact with the home culture, over finding opportunities for interaction with the host culture.

The strong Chinese community, coupled with difficulties connecting with Americans, resulted in many Chinese students abandoning their cultural and language goals in favor of a focus on more purely academic endeavors. According to students, the American degree is the primary purpose of the journey and is more likely to provide future job security in China and abroad. According to Ming, when he was in Beijing, before studying abroad, he had envisioned a more multicultural peer network comprised of more American friends. When asked how he felt about not having cultivated a more bicultural peer network, Ming reported,

> Actually, I have struggle about this, but then you just get used to it and you feel not that bad, actually. Because you can separate your life into study and social. You have some friends and they can satisfy your social demand, so you get satisfied and you don't really need to seek much American friends. It's also hard to find a very close relationship with people you do not share the same cultural background with.

In fact, this separation of academic goals from cultural and language learning goals was a common occurrence among the students we interviewed. Before they came to the United States, nearly all Chinese students expressed a desire to experience American culture and to develop friendships with Americans to increase their cultural knowledge. However, due to academic stresses, financial burdens, cultural differences, and discomfort in social situations, they retreat to their comfort zone, live with Chinese peers, listen and watch Chinese music, and watch Chinese video on the Internet. As time goes on, they find their social network limited to co-nationals.

The preconditions for effective support, outlined above, are that support be empathetic (Thoits, 1986), that the support fit the stressor (Cohen & Wills, 1985), and that the support not be perceived as burdensome to the provider (Bolger et al., 2000). According to Chinese students, Americans simply cannot provide empathetic support. Furthermore, research on cultural differences in support seeking behavior suggests that Asian cultures may view social support as burdensome to the support provider and American's willingness to share openly as shameless. As a result, they may be reluctant to burden others with personal problems. *The People's Daily* (overseas edition, 7/23/2010) suggests that the appeal of close-knit Chinese communities may be a sense of security and a "low-cost communication" that circumvents many of the difficulties faced in intercultural communication. The Internet also provides students with easy and low-cost communication by bridging geographic distance (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and helping them reconnect with their home cultures (Mikal, 2010; Mikal & Grace, 2012). As such, access to low-cost communication now extends to news, films, and home networks of support—thereby discouraging integration and laying the foundation for an observed abandoning of cultural integration goals.

Discussion

The goal of this project was to examine how Chinese students use the Internet to prepare for study abroad in the United States, and how that Internet use came to bear on stress, learning, and integration while in the United States. Our results indicate that Chinese students use the Internet to leverage collective knowledge to ensure personal survival and to tap into a well-established network of informational support from Chinese students and scholars. This, in return, connects them to valuable networks of emotional and material support. However, as students spend more time in the United States, they establish insular networks of co-nationals and rely on the Internet for valuable information and social connectedness. This coincides with a progressive abandonment of integration and cultural learning in favor of more participation in Chinese communities and a focus on academic goals and degree completion. Our findings have important theoretical implications for cross-cultural adjustment and Internet-mediated social support, as well as practical implications that can help practitioners encourage Chinese students to maintain their cultural learning goals throughout their time abroad.

The results confirm the findings that there are various functional advantages of seeking social support online. In the case of Chinese students, the Internet was an effective tool in helping to bridge the large geographic distances and in helping students to find fitting and empathetic networks of support. This research also underscores the potential of the Internet to enable the rapid establishment of new face-to-face networks of support when previous networks have been disrupted. Research from the field of Internet-mediated social support has begun to acknowledge the fluidity of on and offline networks of support (Haythornthwaite, 2005; Katz & Rice, 2002; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Where it was once assumed that social support networks online existed independently of networks maintained offline, more contemporary research acknowledges that relationships can be formed in both virtual and real space (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). This study takes that research one step further, echoing findings from Mikal, et al (2013) that in instances where face-to-face networks have been disrupted due to physical relocation, the Internet can be an effective tool in helping an individual to rapidly reestablish face-to-face support. In this study, we observe students using the Internet to make connections, gather information, and join groups—all before arriving in the host culture. As such, students hardly miss a beat in creating their social support networks abroad.

However, while the Internet appears to foster academic success through stress reduction, the way in which students choose to use the Internet may make it easier to abandon cultural learning goals. Nevertheless, complete cultural integration may never have been a truly realistic goal during study abroad (Twombly et al., 2012) nor even the most optimal strategy to promote cultural learning (Vande Berg et al. 2009; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Furthermore, cultural learning can only be considered a necessary outcome of study abroad if it is the primary reason that students are going abroad—which may not always be the case. Chinese students carry a heavy burden—mastering a foreign language in a foreign culture, alongside American students in degree-granting programs. Some students are living alone for the first time. Students

may feel that academic achievement is not possible when simultaneously managing difficult cross-cultural relationships with host nationals. In such cases, students may have to prioritize academics and refine their cultural learning goals in function with what is possible to manage. Multiple academic and social demands during study abroad may make it very difficult for students to integrate into American culture.

Study-abroad administrators may consider some changes to the traditional model to support increased integration among Chinese students. For example, informational support was of central importance to many Chinese students, but students felt the need to obtain that information from other Chinese students in the United States. Administrators could reduce uncertainty by providing students with more logistical information prior to departure, or by pairing students with an American volunteer to answer logistical questions. By decreasing reliance on Google Groups and social networking sites for informational support, students may have more of a chance to seek out information and form relationships with American students. It is also noteworthy that many students feel the need to acquire informational support to cope with living alone for the first time. Administrators may consider screening for students with limited experience living independently, to provide additional support. For example, universities may consider adapting the Fulbright model where co-nationals live together in one city when they first arrive in a country for intensive language training and are then placed in different cities following an orientation period. Rather than having students live in a separate city, universities could offer students with limited experience living independently a separate orientation program focused on independent living skills such as grocery shopping, managing limited financial resources, paying monthly bills, and setting up a bank account. Students could live together for the 2 weeks before courses begin, whereupon they would be relocated to other living arrangements to avoid the creation of Chinese-dominant dorm floors or apartments.

Administrators may also consider encouraging integration in two ways. First, as our results indicate that students are using the Internet to obtain information on the United States prior to departure, administrators may consider orientation programs that include an online, pre-departure orientation module in which students browse local web sites to find community events, extramural clubs, art exhibitions, volunteer opportunities or civic activism opportunities, or to connect with a local American student to ask questions. Administrators could provide structure by providing tasks that not only direct Chinese students to local events but also require them to pursue information in English. This may supplement the information the students receive from administrators and Chinese peers, helping students achieve the optimal balance of co- and host-national peer relationships. Second, given results that indicate a progressive abandonment of cultural integration goals over time, administrators may consider bolstering support for students throughout their stay in the United States. Encouraging integration may not necessarily require continuously new and innovative opportunities to integrate but a reminder to students that integration opportunities exist and that cultural immersion can foster academic and future career success, by promoting language and intercultural competency.

Limitations

This study is qualitative in nature. As such, the results shared herein are meant to generate testable hypotheses. These are not conclusive assertions but rather, patterns gleaned from our interviews with Chinese students. The results are likely to have been biased by the fact that we solicited interview respondents from among CSA and CSSA. As such, our sample may exhibit lower rates of cultural integration based on the fact that they have chosen to participate in organizations specifically for Chinese students. The results may also have been biased because 12 of the interviews were conducted in English with a Chinese interpreter and American present. As such, Chinese students may have felt less comfortable expressing dissatisfaction with U.S. culture—or may have found it more difficult to express their feelings and concerns openly during the interview. However, the second author conducted an additional 6 interviews in Mandarin, and results in the final 6 interviews echoed findings from the first 12.

Concluding Remarks and Directions for Future Research

The expansion and widespread adoption of new technologies provides unique challenges to study-abroad students and administrators. As a result, study-abroad administrators face the challenge of helping students use the Internet in pursuit of academic and integration objectives. The objective of our study was to profile students' current Internet use. Using qualitative data, we suggest three hypotheses that now require testing using quantitative data. Our data suggest that Chinese students most often seek informational support, that Chinese students leverage community knowledge for personal survival, and that there is an eventual abandonment of cultural integration goals. Better understanding the costs and benefits of Internet use among international student population will help administrators provide support that is relevant to a population of students that is likely to be increasingly plugged into networks the world over.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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