



How International Students Adapt in China: The Role of Chinese Social Media in Intercultural Adaptation

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Abstract: Recently, the number of international students studying in China has increased significantly. Each international student studying in a foreign country feels a certain amount of culture shock while studying abroad. In order to simplify the process of acculturation and enable the student to get accustomed to a learning process, universities take a number of measures. In this regard, it is worth to note the influence of social media that international students use in order to pass through intercultural adaptation. Thus, this paper aims to identify the role of Chinese social media in the cross-cultural adaptation of students by utilizing the UTAUT model.

Keywords: SNS, China, International student, Acculturation

1. Introduction

China's name Zhong Guo 中国 literally meaning the "Middle Kingdom" is in many ways a representation of the current world affairs, which makes it inevitably the new gravitational center of academics. This is obviously aided by China's steady and massive economic prowess, with a GDP rising to 6.8 % in 2017¹ and its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) strategy that is attracting scholars from all over the world. Official statistics from the Chinese ministry of education shows a gradual rise in the number of international students studying in China. As Figure 1 illustrates, in 2016, the number of international students was estimated at about 442,773 from about 202 countries which was an 11.35 % increase from the previous year of 2015 which had a total of 397,635 international students. 49,022 students or 11.07% of total international students received Chinese government scholarships. 393,751 students or 88.93% of the total international students were self-sponsored².

This new policy of opening up to the world brings a set of new challenges to these foreign scholars and the host citizens from a cultural point of view. This first meeting between different cultures may lead to what cross-cultural or intercultural studies describe as "Cultural shock" (Pedersen Paul, 1995). These new interactions create a new phenomenon on how different cultures interact from a technological point of view. New information and technological communications have remarkably flattened the world (Friedman, 2005) where different cultures can interact and make their voices and opinions heard on the "Web 2.0" (O'Reilly, 2005). In this modern era of technological advancements, it is fundamental to mention the impact of social media as regards to human interaction. For a long time dominated by western social networking services (as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat), today the emergence of Chinese SNS such as WeChat, QQ, Weibo, YY at a global level, defying western SNS. This is probably in great part due to the massive Chinese internet population which is now estimated at about 721,434,547³ and also due to China's internet censorship dubbed the "Golden Shield" or the "Great Firewall" that has greatly blocked the emergence of these western SNS in favor of the local Chinese SNS or virtual joint ventures between western technological companies and Chinese SNS.

¹ (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-09/21/content_32275000.htm)

² Original Document:

http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/xw_fbh/moe_2069/xwfbh_2017n/xwfb_170301/170301_sjtj/201703/t20170301_297677.html

³ <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/china/>

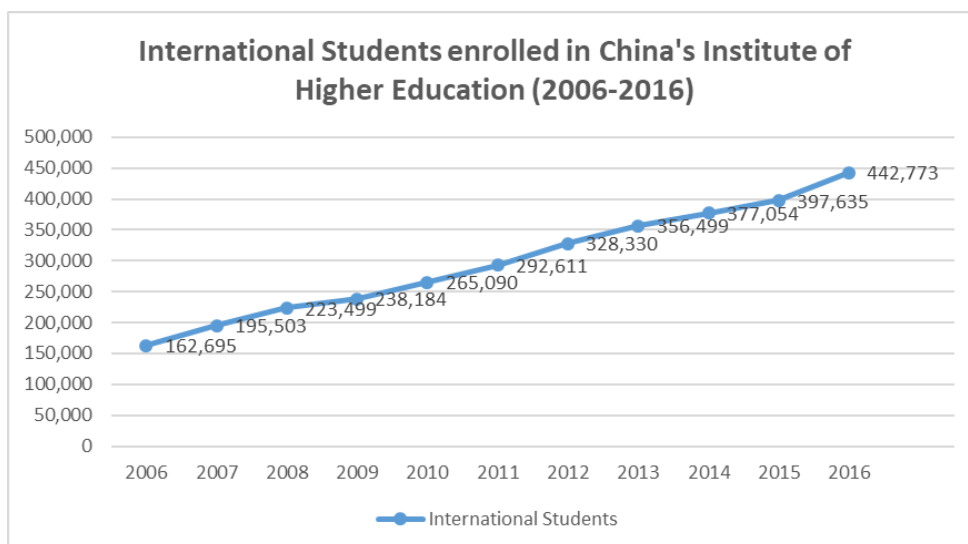


Figure 1: International Students enrolled in China (Source: Chinese ministry of education)

These technologies provide a "platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Web 2.0 technologies ushered-in the age of social media with its interactive features that connect people in multi-dimensional facets. These new forms of information and technological communications render obsolete, the outdated S-M-C-R communications model (Berlo, D. K.1960).

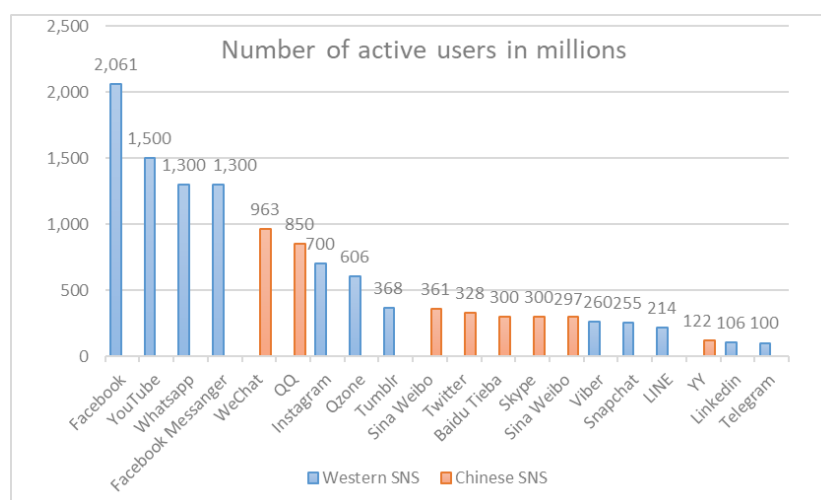


Figure 2: Global SNS as of September 2017 (Source: Statista)⁴

Studies show that migrants use different forms of media to facilitate or resist the acculturation process to a new culture (Kim, 1988; Kramer, 2003; Hwang & He, 1999; Raman & Harwood, 2008) and at the same time to stay in touch with their respective countries, families and friends (Durham, 2004; Lee, 2004). However, there are few research studies on how international students adapt to a host culture (Sawyer & Guo-Ming, 2012) or the impact of social media on the acculturation process (Wang, Huang, Huang, & Wang, 2009). The acculturation process is sometimes difficult for some students who undergo moments of depression, stress and loneliness (Chun & Choi, 2003; Croucher, 2008; Kramer, 2003). Hence the research question of our study is "How do Chinese social media help International students adapt to Chinese culture?"

⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

This study is significant in exploring how Chinese social media facilitates or hinders the acculturation process of international students in China and proposes new elements that will help to shape policy-making and educate new scholars to China. More specifically the objectives of this study are:

- To understand and analyze the acculturation process of international students in China
- To understand the scope of Social networking services in facilitating the acculturation process of international students in China
- To identify and propose new policies or models that can help to facilitate the acculturation process of international students to a host country with the use of Social networking services.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

As earlier noted, a few research articles were focused on the impact of SNS in facilitating intercultural adaptation of international students to a host country (Sawyer & Guo-Ming, 2012). Even less research has been carried out on the impact of Chinese SNS in the acculturation process of international students in China. This paper goes beyond the Intercultural adaptation model (IAM) that focused on the process of communicative adjustment during initial Intercultural interactions (D. A. Cai & J. I. Rodriguez 1997) without taking into account the role of SNS which is the focus of this paper. The difference or similarity of culture between the international students and the host country could be a mitigating factor in intercultural adaptation. Comparing or contrasting different cultures, values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations in an empirical manner is not always an easy matter (Hofstede, 2001) due to the subjectivity or relativity of the concept of "culture" (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006). Hofstede in his evolving works introduced the notion of values and beliefs held by members of certain cultures influence the behaviors of individuals and hence justifies their actions (Hofstede, 1980). He proposed six dimensions using factor analysis to better compare different cultures; (1) Power distance index (PDI) which looks at "the extent to which less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally"; (2) Individualism vs. collectivism (IDV) which explores the "degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups"; (3) Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) looks at "a society's tolerance for ambiguity"; (4) Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS) explores masculinity as "a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success." While projecting femininity as "a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life." ; (5) Long term orientation vs. short-term orientation (LTO) explores the difference between countries that value steadfastness, problem-solving attitudes with long term planning are deemed to have a high degree in this index while countries that value past connections or traditions as means of solving current or future challenges are deemed to be on the lower index of short term orientation; (6) Indulgence vs. restraint (IND) is the most recent dimension that was added by Hofstede. This dimension explores the concept of happiness by defining indulgence as "a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun." While restraint is defined as "a society that controls gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms." (Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J., and Minkov, M., 2010). These dimensions do not explain factors that push people to adopt SNS or any other technology for that matter.

This paper explores the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) that best analyzes the motivation behind international students using SNS. The earlier TAMs (Davis, 1989), Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), Motivational Model (MM), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), a combined theory of Planned Behavior/Technology Acceptance Model, Model of Personal Computer use, Diffusion of Innovations Theory (DOI), and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) tended to be conflicting and not coherent. Venkatesh et al. proposed a Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) which explains the adoption of information systems and behavioral intentions based on four main constructs; 1) performance expectancy, 2) effort expectancy, 3) social influence, 4) facilitating conditions. The first three constructs are connected to usage intention and behavior determinants. While the fourth construct of facilitating conditions is directly linked to user behavior determinant. These four constructs rely on the elements of gender, age, experience, and voluntariness of use in relation to usage intention and behavior. (Venkatesh et al., 2003). This model is more coherent and outperforms the other TAMs.

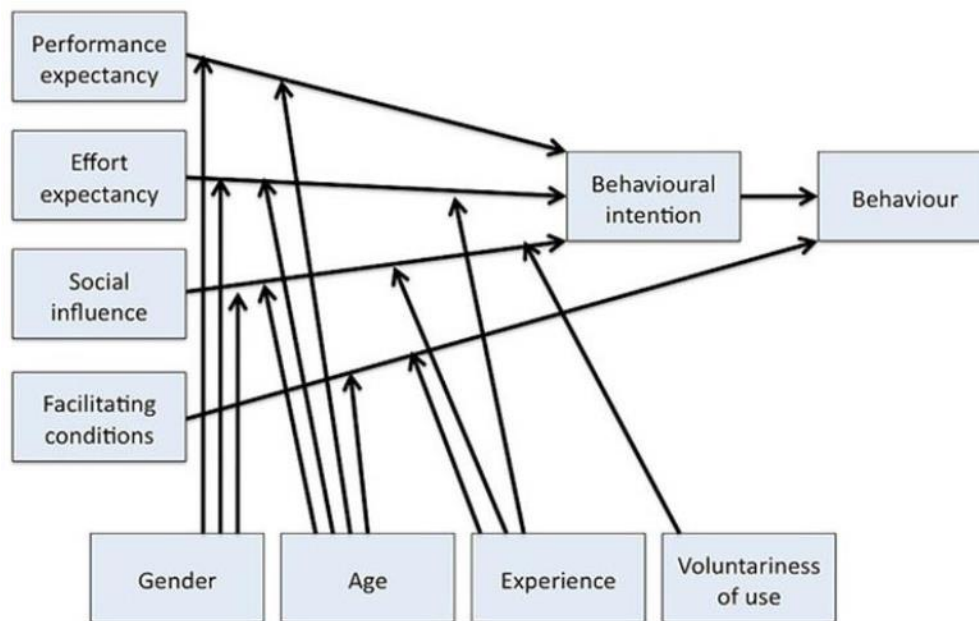


Figure 3: UTAUT model, Venkatesh et al 2003

From the UTAUT model, it is known that International student's acceptance of Chinese SNS depends on the performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions with these constructs. Hereby, the research objective leads to the following research questions:

- How is the performance expectancy related to the adoption of Chinese SNS to International Students?
- How is the effort expectancy related to the adoption of Chinese SNS to International Students?
- How is the social influence related to the adoption of Chinese SNS to International Students?
- How are the facilitating conditions related to the adoption of Chinese SNS to International Students?

The abovementioned constructs of the UTAUT model outlined in the research questions lead to the following hypothesis:

1. Performance expectancy (PE) can be defined as the extent to which International students believe that using Chinese SNS will ease their acculturation process.

H1: PE is positively related with the intention to adopt Chinese SNS to facilitate the acculturation process.

Performance expectancy is regarded as a critical dimension of the UTAUT model. This dimension describes the extent of acceptance of given technology. In the case of the research article, it has been proposed that performance expectancy is positively related with the intention to adopt Chinese SNS to simplify the acculturation process of international students residing and studying China. The review of the literature shows the support for the given hypothesis. Particularly, international students residing in a foreign country rely on social networking sites to stay connected with their family members. This in turn positively contributes towards their acculturation process in a foreign country.

2. Effort expectancy (EE) can be defined as the level of ease related to the use of Chinese SNS.

H2: EE is positively related with an intention to adopt Chinese SNS to facilitate the acculturation process.

Effort expectancy is regarded as another important element of the UTAUT model which facilitates the acculturation process (Venkatesh, 2003). In other words, this element of the model describes how it is easy for foreign students residing in China to use Chinese social networks. The review of several studies has shown that social networks that are developed for Chinese markets are based on the popular platforms such as Android and IOS which is common in many countries. Thus, it can be stated that SNS developed in China is closely similar to SNS in other parts of the world. Therefore, it can be proposed that EE is positively related with the intention to adopt Chinese SNS to facilitate the acculturation process.

3. Social influence (SI) can be defined as the extent to which International students perceive that it is important for others to believe that they should use Chinese SNS. This variable sometimes called "peer pressure" is important when a new technology hits the market (Hayes, 2009). The "cool factor" is usually strong in the beginnings and tends to cool-off or diminish as time goes on.

H3: SI is positively related with an intention to adopt Chinese SNS to facilitate the acculturation process.

Peer pressure is considered as an important factor which is used in many areas of study. Particularly, social influence dimension of the UTAUT model states that to what extent international students studying China will believe that it is essential to use the Chinese SNS in order to stay connected with their parents and friends in their home country. In this regard, it can be said that some of the popular platforms, social networks and websites do not function properly in China given the government restrictions and prohibitions (Tabachnik, 2001). Thus, it implies that there is no other way for international students to use Chinese SNS rather than other SNS.

4. Facilitating conditions (FC) can be defined as the organizational support, including constructs of perceived behavioral control, facilitating conditions, and compatibility with other technological platforms. This construct is important in the Chinese context due to the internet censorship "Golden Shield" that hinders the effective use of some prominent Western SNS. Access to these sites is only possible by using Virtual Private Networks (VPN) or proxies. This variable is key to understanding the acculturation process of International Students in China.

H4: FC is positively related with an intention to adopt Chinese SNS to facilitate the acculturation process.

This dimension of the UTAUT model describes facilitating conditions which include the perceived behavioral control, conditions related to facilitating and compatibility of the technology with other different platforms. It can be mentioned that Chinese SNS is well promoted in China and the government of China provides all support in order to increase the market coverage of Chinese SNS. Moreover, several devices are also compatible and support the applications of Chinese SNS (Phua, 2011).

3. Discussion

Many international students studying and living in China has strongly been affected by acculturation process (Phua, 2011). Being disconnected from old means of the social network and limited access to new means of the social network in the host country especially result in a challenge and it is widely observed by many international students who are currently residing in China. However, a wide range of social networking sites offered by Chinese people provided a chance for these students to stay connected with their families and friends.

The review of the literature shows that the acculturation process itself can be quite depressive and it is associated with the loneliness of students (Tabachnik, 2011). Additionally, many immigrants have utilized a number of technologies in order to enhance their communication process and to show resistance to acculturation process. The findings of the research show that the students who are affected acculturation process often seek help from social networking sites. In other words, it has been proved that reliance and usage of the internet can simplify the process of acculturation by providing assistance for international students while adapting to a foreign country. Particularly, this can be seen in terms of the access through which they can improve their language skills and look for some important information (Durham, 2004). Since China has its own social network sites instead of world widely popular SNS, the usage and adoption to Chinese SNS will make it much easier for international students to simplify their acculturation process. With the recent developments in the field of information communication technologies, most of the international students can stay connected to their home countries. For instance, using SNS students can stay connected with their parents and friends not only in their home country but to make and stay connected with friends that they make in a host country. Particularly, using SNS international students in China can post their writings and photos about their new life, place, and studies and inform their friends from home country. Moreover, social networking sites help international students to collect information about the new place, school, class schedules, and new environment through participation in different groups and forums.

The usage of SNS can be explained by their degree of acculturation process, however, there are other factors that should be taken into consideration such as the personality of the individual, their age, background and other experience which are more likely to impact on acculturation process. The review of the literature shows that the certain degree of stress that is experienced can be explained by the individual's age, gender, background and previous experience (Phua, 2011).

Precisely, the personality traits, their previous achievement records, and cultural background are important factors that impact on acculturation process.

One of the propositions of this paper is that effort expectancy is related to the intention to adopt Chinese SNS facilitates the acculturation process (Venkatesh, 2003). In other words, effort expectation implies the level of easiness that is related to the usage of Chinese SNS. Majority of the Chinese SNS also functions similarly to the number of popular SNS with minor modifications and differences. Generally, it can be stated that SNS in China is easy to use and takes time from the individuals to adapt to them.

Another important hypothesis of the study is the relationship between social influence and Chinese SNS in terms of simplifying and facilitating the acculturation process. In a social influence perspective, it is important to consider the impact of peer pressure (Venkatesh, 2003). As international students see and observe their Chinese friends using Chinese SNS for a different number of purpose, they will also be influenced to use Chinese SNS. Therefore, it can be considered that social influence has a positive influence on the usage of Chinese SNS by international students while facilitating their acculturation process. Facilitating a condition is considered as one of the dimensions mentioned in this model (Venkatesh, 2003). Particularly, it is believed that facilitating conditions is positively related with the intention to adopt Chinese SNS to facilitate the acculturation process. Most of the Chinese SNS can work on different platforms. However, it is also important to consider the censorship issues which are prohibited by Chinese officials. In this regard, students have an opportunity to access certain websites based on the virtual private networks or proxies. VPN is not only useful in terms of visiting websites where there is limited access to the website. Moreover, international students in China can access different websites which they used to visit using VPN from China. Therefore, it is believed that facilitating conditions is positively related to the intention to adopt Chinese SNS in facilitating the acculturation process.

4. Conclusion

Recently, the number of international students studying in China has increased dramatically. There are several reasons for increasing flow of students and some of these reasons can be attributed to increasing quality of education, teaching standards, and programs offered both in English and Chinese languages. Moreover, a variety of scholarship opportunities has contributed to the increasing number of international students in China. This study has explored how Chinese social media facilitate the acculturation process of international students in China and has proposed new elements that help to shape policy-making and educate new scholars in China. Precisely, this study aimed to understand the acculturation process of international students in China based on the UTAUT model. Moreover, this paper has considered the scope of SNS that facilitate the acculturation process of international students in China.

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