Live Ambience and Homestead Away From Home:
Social Media Use and Dependency by
Visiting Chinese Students in the United States

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This study investigates social media dependency relations among Chinese college students during their three-month study abroad sojourn in the United States. Data were collected using a multimethod approach of ethnography, field observation, and in-depth interviews. Inspired by the lens of media system dependency (MSD) theory, the analysis focuses on the diverse goals and motivations that drive student behavior in social media engagement, as well as various contextual factors leading students to adapt and transition to the U.S. social networking sites (SNS), and the subsequent outcomes. The findings indicate that task-driven and assignment-centered goals dominate social media use, and that multidimensional aspects of interaction pervade student engagement with different social networking applications. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed in light of the overall findings.

Keywords: social media, media system dependency, QQ, SNS dependency, WeChat, cross-cultural adaption

This study investigates social media dependency relations among 18 college juniors from China during their three-month study abroad sojourn in the United States. The design of the research was inspired by the lens of media system dependency (MSD) theory, which argues that individual dependency is contingent on the dynamic individual-media-society relations, and heightens under moments of elevated degrees of confusion and conflict. Because students on study abroad missions are uprooted from their home university and land in a brand-new social environment, they have to learn to survive and thrive in a surrounding that is conducive to feelings of ambiguity and disjuncture. This then provides an opportune

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moment to examine their social media dependency in the routines of everyday life. Data were collected using a multimethod approach incorporating ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interview, and our analysis focuses on the diverse goals and motivations that drive student behavior in social media engagement. We also examine contextual factors leading students to adapt and transition to the U.S.-based social networking sites (SNSs), and the subsequent outcomes against the backdrop of China's social media ecology where popular Western apps are blocked by the state-orchestrated Great Firewall.

Theoretical Perspectives

Sojourner Students and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

More students than ever are participating in study abroad programs at the global level, with varying lengths of duration, different academic foci, and innovative approaches (Forum on Education Abroad, 2017). As a result, the field of study abroad has become a fertile ground for academic inquiry into myriad themes and topics ranging from the interplay of personal traits and learning outcomes to the implications for institutional goal-setting and practices (Marijuan & Sanz, 2018). One focal area of interrogation is cross-cultural adaptation, defined by Young Yun Kim (2012) as "a cumulative-progressive trajectory of an individual's adaptive change over time" (p. 234). A similar concept is acculturation, which refers to "the dual process of cultural and psychological changes that take place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). While Berry's formulation places emphasis on the twin aspects of psychological and sociocultural adaptions, Kim's framework moves beyond these two components (or what Kim calls "psychological health" and "intercultural identity") to include a third dimension: "increased functional fitness in carrying out daily transactions" (Y. Y. Kim, 2012, p. 238; see also Y. Y. Kim, 2001, pp. 185–186). Kim's model, therefore, attaches specific importance to the behavior-shift, task-oriented aspect of being able to survive and thrive in the host environment.

The advent of social networking technologies has dramatically transformed the study abroad experience for today's college students, as has been noted prominently in current research on students' acculturation process (e.g., Sleeman, Lang, & Lemon, 2016). Extant research consistently points to the leading role of social media in fulfilling diverse information needs among international students, as revealed in the systematic review of current research literature by Hamid, Bukhari, Ravana, Norman, and Ijab (2016). In their study of social media use among U.S. students participating in a short-term study abroad trip, Hetz, Dawson, and Cullen (2015) found that social media were used purposefully by the students to maintain connectedness with family and friends at home, engage in group work, coordinate tasks, and plan weekend trips. Likewise, international students in the United States rely on SNSs to reduce uncertainty and cope with sociocultural stress (Rui & Wang, 2015). Communicating with family members and conationals on social media while studying in another country "can serve as a psychological bulwark" against feelings of ambivalence and estrangement in their host country while enabling the students to better equip themselves in interaction with locals, as revealed by Lim and Pham's (2016, p. 2184) research on Indonesian and Vietnamese students in Singapore.

For Chinese students in the United States, Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) found that early preparation for study abroad before arrival facilitated subsequent adaptation, and social support provided by host nationals via SNSs helped alleviate sociocultural stressors in acculturation. Specifically, use of media sources in the host country eases the adaption process, as evidenced in the study by Park, Song, and Lee (2014), which concludes that students who relied heavily on Facebook exhibited a higher level of psychological well-being, compared with counterparts who mostly depended on ethnic networking sites among Chinese and Korean students in the United States. Research by Yuan and Fussell (2017, p. 89) reveals that, compared with their Korean counterparts, Chinese students studying in the U.S. were more prone to "the effect of dual yet split networks and SNS choices" in that they had to rely on U.S. social media to maintain social relationships in the host country while using Chinese SNSs to keep connections with friends in China because their friends in China were not likely to be able to log onto U.S. SNSs without extra efforts (in bypassing state blockade).

Media System Dependency and Social Media Use

Media system dependency (MSD) theory was developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) to explain microlevel individual media use through analysis of structural dependency relations at the macrolevel as defined by the media and societal systems. Under this context, dependency is "a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent on the resources of another party" (p. 6). The basic premise of MSD is that individual media dependencies are determined by structural relations between the media system on the one hand and the economic system and political system on the other; it is "a relationship in which the capacity of individuals to attain their goals is contingent on the information resources of the media system" (Ball-Rokeach, 1985, p. 487). MSD conceives of a media system as an information system; from an ecological perspective, media power resides in their possession of rare information resources and the capacity to gather, process, and disseminate these messages (Ball-Rokeach, 1998).

At the microlevel, MSD argues that individual selection of media content and format is a rational and goal-oriented phenomenon. Six levels of individual dependency relations on the media system can be discerned as the product of three distinct goals— *understanding*, *orientation*, and *play*—and the dual goal targets of *individual* vs. *social* (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). While individual goals persist, their dependency on the media system is variable rather than stable: The dependency relationship heightens under circumstances of high degrees of change and conflict, or in the presence of ambiguity and threat, and the intensity and scope of the goals directly affect the nature and strength of dependency between individual users and the media system as manifested in selection of media and patterns of usage.

It should be noted that MSD was conceptualized in connection to the conventional media environment, and the Internet-led new media landscape has fundamentally challenged the original premises. The participatory nature of the Internet means that mass media no longer hold the prized power as unchallenged sources of information. In special relevance to social media, O'Sullivan and Carr (2018) call for a "transchannel communication" perspective because "the traditional assumptions underpinning interpersonal communication versus mass communication may no longer distinguish the complex, converged communicative processes occurring in social media's rich, multichannel environment"

(p. 1175). The mainstreaming of social media into everyday life has turned them into an integrated communication apparatus for user expression, engagement, interaction, and storytelling (Y. C. Kim & Jung, 2017), and these dependency relationships are particularly prevalent during moments of chaos, uncertainty, and ambiguity.

If the "digital natives" or the "Net generation" are marked by having grown up with digital technologies (Prensky, 2011), the current college-age youth may be appropriately called the "social media generation" in that SNS use has been a pervasive aspect of their everyday life since adolescence, reinforced by the perpetuation of the smartphone in their multimedia lifeworld. As Martin and Rizvi (2014) demonstrate, interaction on digital media creates a complexly syncretic, heterogeneous diasporic mediasphere enabling a feeling of ongoing copresence of "back home" and "out here" for Indian and Chinese students studying in Melbourne. Likewise, international students in Australia use social media to construct a hybrid, "home away from home" space where they "hang out" with students of their home countries, other international students, and local counterparts and maintain multiple identities in "moving and traveling" among various network groups (Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014, p. 9).

Existing research interrogating MSD relations in social media has been typically cast in the context of celebrity mourning (e.g., Michael Jackson, as in Lee, 2012), natural disasters such as the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 (Jung & Moro, 2014), or moments of active school shooter incidents (Mazer et al., 2015). There is, however, scarce scholarly effort in explicitly embracing the MSD perspectives to shed light on social media use by college students on short-term study abroad missions. This research argues that the broad lens of MSD, informed by the goal-setting of understanding, orientation, and play, can add valuable insight to the three dimensions of psychological health, sociocultural identity, and functional fitness within cross-cultural adaptation research in the context of migrant students. The goal-directed nature of social media use among sojourn students, as noted previously, has dominated findings in various research settings, such as in building psychological bulwark through familial and close ties (Lim & Pham, 2016), gaining support of conationals (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016), relieving stress (Park et al., 2014), and reducing uncertainty (Rui & Wang, 2015).

Research Context and Questions

Participants in our study hail from the journalism and communication program in one top-tier national university in China, and they were all junior honors students aged between 20 and 21. The three-month stint, which lasted from early September to mid-December 2017, was designed to immerse the students in the host university as an experience learning journey. A total of 19 (14 female and 5 male) students stayed for the whole duration, taking part in mandatory programs in three categories: regular classroom instructional activities; scheduled events on the host campus and its vicinity; and visits to sites of historical, cultural, and tourist significance in the surrounding region. The host university is a land-grant public university in the southeastern United States. All students had to return to their home university at the end of the program to continue their degree program. As expected, all the participants had maintained an active profile on social media for both program-related and personal communications.

This group provides us an ideal opportunity to interrogate social media dependency among this demographic for the following reasons. First, the study abroad uproots students from their zone of usual comfort and lands them in a brand-new environment where they have to restore daily functions in their academic life and daily routines, thus creating a situation for the students in which "salient aspects of their environs are ambiguous" (Ball-Rokeach, 1985, p. 500) and there is "a relatively high degree of change and conflict" (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 7)—primary conditions to untangle media dependency relationship in MSD research. Second, unlike visitors caught in shorter and temporary stays (e.g., tourists), the period of three months is extended enough so that these students have to adapt to the new environment to survive and succeed. Third, the participants in this study display different inherent dynamics and motivations from regular international students. The latter, by intentionally planning for longer stays or even aiming for eventual emigration, may aggressively seek acculturation by switching to social networks and communication customs in the hosting country (Lim & Pham, 2016; Park et al., 2014). By contrast, this particular cohort understands that they will return to their home country/university at the end of the program, and may be incentivized to keep their habitual use of social media to the extent possible so that there is no significant disruption to their communicative circuit upon returning to their home country. Meanwhile, totally depending on established relations may not be a viable option thanks to the changed environs in a new country.

Our research questions are posited along the general goal-setting trajectories of understanding, orientation, and play in the migrant students' daily encounter with social media. Instead of ascertaining a complete typology of dependency relations, our focus is on the *primacy* of social media dependency on key tasks and activities. In other words, we are mostly interested in identifying the dominant motivational factors in driving students to accomplish what they perceive to be the most critical roles and functionalities in their daily routines. As Carillo, Scornavacca, and Za (2017) found out, prior individual dependency relations on information technology are predictive of continuance intentions. Our first question is related to the students' continued use of social media where they already established prior presence:

RQ1:   *How will the students rejuvenate media dependency relations with different social media venues that they were already using prior to their study abroad sojourn in fulfilling social, academic, and personal needs?*

Chinese students sojourning in the United States face significant macrolevel variations while migrating between the Chinese and the U.S. social media systems because the Great Firewall blocks most major U.S. social networking sites from China. It is then of interest to investigate how migration to U.S. social media may occur among the visiting Chinese students, and for what motivations.

RQ2:   *What are the primary motivating factors in driving the students' decision to build media dependency relations with U.S. social media platforms?*

RQ3:   *Once they establish media dependency on the U.S. social media, do the students intend to continue this relationship once they return to China, and why?*

MSD advocates an ecological or system perspective in untangling complicated dependency relations (Ball-Rokeach, 1985 & 1989). As a matter of fact, it expands into communication infrastructure theory (CIT) in adapting to the changing media environment where a multiplicity of (conventional and new) media platforms coexist and cooperate (Y. C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). It is useful then to examine the role of conventional and digital media alongside social media in defining overall individual media relations among the migrant students, as stated in the following question:

RQ4:   *How do the students develop dependency relations with conventional and digital (nonsocial) media?*

Methods

Plans were made early on to conduct the study using a combined approach of participant observation as guided by appropriate principles mapped out in Spradley (2016) and in-depth interviews. The senior researcher of the research team fulfilled the dual role to "engage in activities . . . and to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation" (Spradley 2016, p. 54) by directing the program and leading the students through organized events. The junior researchers conducted semistructured in-depth interviews with the participants aligned with our academic goal "in understanding the lived experience [of the students] . . . and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9).

The ethnographic observation portion lasted throughout the duration of the program, whereas the interviews were completed within the last two weeks of the study abroad trip (in late November and early December), thus allowing students the maximal exposure to their encounter with social media. The length of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to nearly two hours, averaging about one hour overall. The interviews were recorded, upon participant agreement, and were transcribed for further analysis. Guided by the insight as offered in Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2011), field notes, onsite observations, and interview data were synthesized for corroborating evidence in detecting salient patterns and coherent narrative lines, and in extracting prevailing thematic threads and recurring clusters of meaning. One female student declined to participate in the interview due to personal reasons. Our subsequent analysis is therefore built on data comprising contributions from 13 female and 5 male students.

Findings

The following thematic threads are presented in terms of their prevalence and pervasiveness across the overall parameters of data. Our analysis primarily focuses on media dependency relations rather than specific platforms and sites in relation to the prior research questions. However, interplatform and cross-cultural comparisons are offered, wherever appropriate, in explicating specific dependency dynamics. To give prominence to narrative coherence, the results are presented in accordance with thematic threads rather than question-by-question breakdowns.

Task-Oriented and Assignment-Driven Engagement

In RQ1 and RQ2, we queried the utility of existing and new media dependency relations about students' social media use throughout the duration of their study abroad experience. Of clear note is that students' adaptation and development of social media dependency evolved on distinct trajectories of functional fitness. The most trodden area that the students delved into while discussing social media use was in relation to their routine academic activities and responsibilities, followed closely by errands in everyday life such as grocery shopping and excursion planning. In this regard, one most-often used approach is social networking groups (e.g., WeChat groups, QQ groups). The easy-to-use affordance in the available features of WeChat and QQ in forming groups makes it the preferred choice in communicating within designated groups. The number of regularly used social media groups ranges from over a dozen to more than 60 among these students. Because they are all affiliated with one class, this close-knit environment necessitates frequent in-group communication. They therefore share a few social media groups, including a respective WeChat and QQ group exclusively confined to the students, as well as a WeChat group including faculty advisors and students, with each group serving different functionalities. The QQ group is mainly used to share announcements, while the student-only WeChat group mostly facilitates discussions among group members. The faculty-student mixed group is often used for top-down notifications initiated by faculty leaders for related arrangements and scheduled events as well as student-faculty communication on issues of common concern. These virtual groups, the interviewees revealed, are important channels of communication about respective academic, social, and other developments concerning the collectivity.

In discussing the difference between QQ groups and WeChat groups, one student summarized it this way:

> I prefer the QQ group over WeChat for group announcements, because it is easier to use, and the latest updates will automatically pop to the top once I start QQ on my smartphone. It is hard to skip important announcements this way, and serves the purpose of group communication very neatly. (Student Z)

The majority of the students were already on QQ while at high school, but almost all of them started their WeChat persona after starting college. One specific advantage cited by multiple individuals of QQ group over WeChat group is the former's ability for easy archiving and curating. Two specific features on WeChat that were the targets of complaint are that WeChat limits the size of documents to be transmitted, and that expired documents and images can no longer be downloaded.

WeChat, however, far exceeds QQ and other platforms in terms of frequency of use among all students. This is because WeChat has now evolved into an all-in-one package—or polymedia—for communicating with diverse users and contexts. Irrespective of the number of participants and the scope of the undertaking, the students are in the habit of creating a WeChat group under circumstances where collaboration is needed, whether this involves a class project that lasts a week or an assignment that lasts the whole semester.

The students' intensive experience and their expertise on social media engender new opportunities and open up new possibilities for their academic assignments. As part of the requirement, students were asked to complete an assortment of reporting tasks for online and conventional media at their home institution. Once receiving the assignments, the students' first point of contact was most likely social media, for obtaining relevant information, planning action, and connecting with potential interviewees. Most students had already garnered significant experience in reaching out to targeted interview candidates on WeChat and Sina Weibo before their arrival in the United States, and that skillset spills over very naturally onto social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. One great affordance is that social media crosscut geographic or national boundaries, and some students were able to obtain interviews with targeted individuals in China for related perspectives and input while working on reports in the United States. This quote from a student while doing an in-depth report on the #MeToo movement summarizes the well-practiced strategies aptly:

> When I was working on my story on the #MeToo movement, I often started with a keyword search, and then identified possible candidates to write about and possibly interview. I gathered a lot of details for my story this way. If I was interested in talking to a particular individual, I would send a private request inquiring whether they would agree to an interview. (Student M)

Most students registered accounts with Facebook and Twitter driven by the need to gather information and reach out to people in the host country. They indicated that social media in the United States allow them to collect various valuable materials for their reporting tasks, as well as to initiate contact with persons of interest for interview. Trending topics on social media also allowed them to gauge public interest and hotspot issues in the host country. This narrative pertains to a student's novel experience on Facebook:

> Facebook gives me access to a vast base of interviewees. I like the "People You May Know" feature on Facebook, because it connects me to more people that I may want to interview. I am working on a feature story about horse trainers, and I am able to get in touch with a number of interview candidates this way. (Student C)

Many students noticed a cultural difference in pedagogical approaches between China and United States. In China, most faculty instructors use WeChat groups to communicate with students on course-related content, and students are often asked to turn in their assignments via WeChat as well. In the United States, none of the instructors conducts such activities via social media, but they all resort to file-sharing applications such as Google Drive, Blackboard, GroupMe, or even Instagram for course delivery. The students were surprised that none of the classes use Facebook, compared with the widespread use of WeChat in the college classroom in China.

> One thing I particularly like here is that our professors use email to communicate with us, and send their comments on my homework to my individual email account. While using WeChat, everything is sent to a shared space, and once something is deleted, it is gone forever. I don't understand why every class is using WeChat in China; maybe it is

because WeChat looks rather unfeeling? I personally prefer the approach here using email for class-related business. (Student J)

We don't communicate via email with the instructors in China. I think this probably has to do with the fact that students don't have a school-assigned email account. Here, every university manages its own email system that is available to all; professors and students start their day checking emails. It is very convenient and easy to stay up to date. (Student S)

This sentiment is echoed by the majority of students, who are in favor of a clear distinction between the "individual/private" domain on social media and the "school/business" sphere of email so that instructors maintain a distance from students' personal space on social media while conducting classroom business. This is a sharp contrast to the widespread practice in China where the boundary blurs between formal class engagement and personal social media space.

Self-Presentation

One common thread across diverse social media users, irrespective of national affiliation, is the cultivation of a virtual homestead to carefully craft and present one's public persona. Our observations are in line with Hogan's (2010) thesis of an exhibitional approach in which artefacts on display "are subject to selective contributions and the role of a third party" (p. 384). The algorism-based curating role of the third party in "filtering, ordering, and searching," as revealed in the interviews, is an important consideration by the students in choosing both the appropriate venue and its fitful content.

When there is a happy moment, I want to write it down. I want to be cutesy at times. Although I use WeChat more on a daily basis, I switch to QQ Zone to blog when I want to go into details in disclosing what's up in my life. I like to talk about the uplifting, the positive, but I also share moments that perplex and confuse me. The longer post on QQ lets me delve into what goes deep in my thought. It is hard to break any depth on WeChat, because you have to rely more on pictures, and less text. Moreover, too many of my teachers are also on my WeChat contact list, and I don't necessarily want them to see these posts. This is much easier to achieve on QQ. (Student S)

One specific term used by the prior student, "矫情," found repetitions among a few other interviewees while talking about moments they were looking to post. The Chinese word mixes aspects of being emotional, affectionate, but with a touching degree of ostentatiousness—the coveted moments for revelations by many.

In contrast to this approach of lengthy details, the following represents the cut-to-the-bone strategy of more frequent but terse narratives chronicling routine events.

I like to share my daily moments on WeChat, and I keep the posts as a memory that I can go back to in recording what has happened in my life. I write down all important

> events, short narratives with a lot of pictures. If I am too tired at the end of the day, and skip posting on an event, I tend to forget a few days later that it ever happened. (Student J)

On WeChat, one's posts are viewable to all circles of friends by default, or selective group of friends by personal design, but not to people outside one's friends list. One feature on WeChat, which resembles Facebook's public figure page, is the public account option, information published on which is available to the general public. The public account creates a different persona catering to niche needs to express oneself.

> I use my WeChat public account as a virtual diary book. From time to time, I contribute lengthy entries divulging my inner feelings on something, often accompanied with photos. I have lots to share my feelings on while now traveling abroad. (Student X)

> I have a passion for writing. So I use my WeChat public account to vent it out whenever I feel like to. (Student W)

Weibo, the Twitter-like microblogging site, can be registered using a pseudo identity, while WeChat most typically makes one's true identity known to followers. The former is open to the public by default, and is therefore attractive to some students, as imparted in the following quote.

> I feel Weibo is more liberating, because I don't have to worry about how others may think about my posts. (Student M)

While social networking works in bridging and bonding with one's friends, this virtual proximity and intimacy may produce constraints on what one wants to say in the shared space. Toward this end, alternative social media venues fulfill the particular need to disclose to a different audience base. Under these circumstances, being at a distance from the perceived audience gives one the freedom to vent.

> I used to post my unhappy moments on Weibo. But it caused misunderstanding among followers who are also WeChat friends, because some thought I was talking about them. To avoid such embarrassment, I now stay away from posting anything that may lead to confusion among friends. (Student T)

> My Weibo account is unknown to most of my friends, and is registered under a cell phone number that none of them knows. For some content, if I published it on WeChat, some of my friends might think that is too trivial and totally nonsignificant. So I post on Weibo the content that I myself like seeing. (Student B)

Instagram, which is unpopular in China, becomes a point of attraction for some students after they have joined.

> I have virtually no followers from China on Instagram. Therefore, I use it as a place to post content that I otherwise would not publish on WeChat. I post about my life in the United States on Instagram. If I did the same content on WeChat, some people would probably think—"What is the big fuss about that? You are just showing off to us." I have no such worries on Instagram. Being at a distance is good while doing this. (Student Q)

> I feel worry-free on Instagram. Besides putting a lot of photos, I go there to practice my English, because I like the casual, informal style of writing I see from other users. I try to imitate the ones I like in their writing styles. If I did this on WeChat, it would feel very weird, because most others post in Chinese. (Student W)

Many students feel the pressure to stay upbeat and positive in social media, as testified by these narratives.

> Some people make it a habit to whine about things. They complain about this and that, usually making a big deal about nothing. This can make me feel dispirited, and destroys my mood for the day. (Student T)

> I make an effort to stay on the positive. After all, social media is the place that helps people loosen themselves. If there is something I am unhappy about, I just keep it to myself. (Student L)

Ritual and Routine Engagement

Social media play a central role in promoting interpersonal communication interconnecting a mixed network of both strong and weak ties. It has become a daily routine for the students to check friends' updates, stay in touch, enhance existing relationships, or simply say hello. Because the students are staying far away from home in an unfamiliar land, social media function as the primary means of letting their parents and loved ones in China know that they are doing well. Most students indicated that this is a routine they have to fulfill on a regular, sometimes daily, basis. The following quote speaks well for most of the students:

> Above everything else, it is to stay in contact with my family. For someone like me who loves chatting with my parents, it would be unimaginable to lose WeChat. Without the opportunity to video and audio chat with my parents on a frequent basis, I would feel lost and empty. (Student Z)

Similarly, social media communication bridges over diverse bases of friends, as seen in this quote:

> Social media are valuable venues for my friends to know what my life is like in another country, and vice versa for me to understand what is happening in their life back home. After I came to the United States, I have become even more reliant on social media. Now that I am far away from my college friends in China, I have more of an urge to

>know what is happening with them. . . . Once in a while, a comment, a like or a smiling
>emoji is a reminder that we are still in touch. (Student J)

The ritual of connectedness also applies to staying informed through readily accessible news updates in the host country and their home country, at both the national and local level. Various social media apps and features have made that as easy as just flipping one's smartphone on.

Playfulness and Entertainment

Students spend quite a portion of their spare time on getting entertainment content via social media, including watching TV programs and movies. Other topics that are mentioned as the most followed by the students are celebrities, pets, hobbies, cartoons, music, sports, cosmetics, and shopping.

>I read from WeChat public accounts every day, on a variety of topics. I follow a couple
>of hundred accounts on WeChat. Reading the posts makes me feel close to China.
>(Student W)

>Weibo is my main channel of entertainment, and I spend a lot of time on it. Breaking
>news, celebrities, rumors, tidbits about anything. (Student D)

>I am a Twitter person, following a lot of content there. Japanese and Korean musicals
>and celebrities. I use Twitter to follow non-China musical plays. (Student Q)

Of particular note is the role of YouTube, which is blocked out in China. Many students find this to be an instant locale for entertainment.

>I started to use YouTube after I arrived here. I now watch videos on YouTube whenever
>I have time. Every day after dinner, I search for interesting videos to watch. The same
>thing before I go to bed. (Student T)

Pressure and Anxiety: Always On

The ubiquity of smartphone-powered communication creates a new mode of sociality—the tethered self (Turkle, 2008). While this brings always-on connectivity to the students, its fallout has been unmistakably felt as well. Many of the students lament the added burden of being expected to be available on call via social media, mostly in school-assigned tasks and collaborative performances. When they are wanted for something, an immediate response is often expected. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is a 12-hour difference between their host region and home institution, meaning that they have to work multiple shifts when collaborating with partners in China on time-sensitive projects.

>I miss the days in high school, when very few had access to cell phones. All assignments
>were written on the blackboard at school. Once I went back home, no more additional

work. Now even when I return to my hotel at night, I keep receiving WeChat notifications, directing me to do this and that all the time. (Student L)

WeChat has now turned the old 8-hour work day into a 24-hour shift. Right before I am about to go to bed, a notification comes to tell me to do something. Even if I try to ignore that, it hangs on my mind all night, disrupting a good sleep. (Student Z)

As journalism students, they are required to contribute to their school media. It is typical for the editors to distribute assignments to WeChat groups, and individual students who are called on are expected to respond without delay. If they don't hear an immediate reply, they often tell students who are close by or who may know where the targeted students are to relay the notification, be it via a phone call or waking up the sought-after students from bed. Quite a few students complained of similar experiences of fellow members knocking on their door at the request of their editors or faculty advisors.

The school newspaper keeps looking for me all the time through WeChat. I wish I could just delete their account! If I don't respond right away, someone will @me [single me out] at the group. They will keep doing that until I reply. Super annoying. (Student C)

Adaptation to U.S. Social Media

With regard to the question (RQ2) on whether they had switched to using U.S.-based social media platforms since their arrival, all students had established some type of social media presence by creating accounts on some of the most popular sites in the United States, albeit to varying degrees. The most popular choices among the students in terms of platform are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. However, with regard to frequency of use, there were numerous individual cases of excessive dependency on Instagram and YouTube, trailed by Facebook. Use of Twitter does not seem to suggest a pattern going beyond moderate adoption. As to functionality, Facebook was mostly used to connect with local individuals for networking and organizations in completion of assigned tasks. Twitter is primarily used to seek information, especially news-related updates, while YouTube is solely a medium of entertainment and recreation. Instagram was the favorite of a few students for its ease of use and ability to curate large sets of pictorial data, although some expressed great interest in viewing photos from others.

When asked about their experience (if any) with using the U.S. networking sites before arriving in the host country, almost all students indicated they had used at least one of the applications before (mostly Facebook and Twitter). But very few of them reached any regularity, and the use was sporadically occasioned by the need for information otherwise not fulfilled by the Chinese social media. Even after they arrived in the United States, many of the students admitted that their use was dictated by their situational needs. The major consideration cited by students was that they were one close group doing most things together, and the fact that they had to return to China at the end of the program eclipsed the urge to network with local students. Many acknowledged that their approach would be quite different if they were to stay here longer on their own.

As for their intention on continuation (RQ3), about one-third (n = 6) said they would keep using these U.S.-based sites after returning to China. Specifically, one student remarked:

> I made some friends in California previously during a three-week study there. I did not really have much time to network with them then. I got connected to them via Facebook and Twitter this time. It feels so cool using these sites without the need for wall-hopping [i.e., a term for circumventing the Great Firewall in China]. I will definitely stay on these sites, and the first thing I want to do after going back is to find a better VPN, even if it means I have to pay for it. (Student Z)

Indeed, the Great Firewall was cited by many as the main reason for resorting to the previous pattern of sporadic use after returning to China: It is a nuisance to have to bypass the Firewall every time they log on. There is also the added disincentive that most students have very few friends on these sites.

Individual Dependency on Nonsocial Media

The students indicated varying levels of dependency relations with nonsocial media channels of communication (RQ4). Notably, this dependency merely complements, but does not reach the level of intensity with, that of social media. Students' radio use is incidental at best, with a few reporting doing so (e.g., while riding in a private car) while in China, and this pattern led to their total avoidance of radio during their sojourn in the United States. Departing from their habit of minimal use of television in China (no availability in university dorms), most students said they regularly watched TV in the three months of their study abroad, mainly limited to local news. This is mostly driven by two factors: Free cable TV was available in the hotel room where they stayed, and some class assignments required the watching of certain programs. Television has little role to play in their entertainment needs, because they are habituated watching their favorite TV shows online via multiple Web services.

Over half of the students visited online news sites regularly, led by online services such as CNN, BBC, and the *New York Times*. Being journalism students clearly matters, as they readily admitted, and exposure to these sites gives them an unusual perspective on news that they feel is missing from Chinese news sites, even though the same events are often mentioned on Chinese online sites and social media. Many developed the habit of checking these sites on important news issues, and welcomed the ease of access they otherwise could not get in China (due to official blocking).

Discussion

This study set out to examine social media use among 18 Chinese students during a three-month study abroad trip to the United States through the theoretical lens of media system dependency theory. Our findings confirm the indispensable role of social media in diverse aspects of the students' academic, social, and leisure lives throughout their sojourn, and point to various media dependency relationships during particular moments of disjuncture and ambiguity for this group of migrant students.

First of all, there is undisputable evidence that social media have been subsumed into the everyday life of today's college students, irrespective of the specific goals they pursue intellectually, socially, or pedagogically. There are, however, unique dynamics for international students who simultaneously inhabit virtual spaces crosscutting different sociocultural contexts. For acculturation needs, our research found that the original MSD assumptions of understanding, orientation, and play as major motivators of media use (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) continue to be valid, but this happens with new twists and alterations. These students' social media use has been heavily oriented along trajectories of specific tasks and required assignments. In fact, this action-oriented use has been cited by the students as the most important motivator guiding their social media experience. This clearly lends credence to the dominant role of "functional fitness" in Y. Y. Kim's (2012) tripartite cultural adaptation model with these sojourner students in their development of social media dependency. We suggest that a potentially fertile area of MSD research is to incorporate the concept of "functional fitness" in evaluating the role of conventional and newer media in inducing psychological and social well-being under circumstances of sociocultural adaptation. On the other hand, MSD theory has moved from the bounded media perspective of the 1970s to the currently expanded communication infrastructure theory in response to the media ecology wherein old and new media coexist with other forms of communication (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001; Y. C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). A synergy between MSD and cross-cultural adaptation theories has much to contribute to disentangling the interplay of media use and development of functional fitness in the process of community engagement and participation among migrant populations.

Previous research has found that understanding leads media dependency under conditions of heightened ambiguity and intense anxiety. In our study, however, information seeking for goals of understanding was found to be much less prominent. Moreover, a large part of the information-seeking behavior is secondary to the goals of task specificity (e.g., finding potential contacts via Twitter or Facebook for interviewees). This certainly is not to suggest that the understanding goals are less valuable in extrapolating media dependency relationships in the era of social media; rather, it points to the fact that a study abroad trip involves much less confusion or threat to the affected individuals, and that the plenitude of program-based assignments pushes action-centered orientation to the center stage. One particular utility with social media in fulfilling the goal of (self-)understanding is the affordance for self-presentation, a core attraction among the students in choosing both platforms and content.

Additionally, the aspect of interaction orientation, as proposed by Y. C. Kim and Jung (2017), also triggers prolific engagement with social media. The nature of social media interaction as revealed in the interviews is, however, multidimensional and multifunctional: interaction with family, fellow students in the group, friends in the home country, and locals in the host environment serves diverse purposes, and it is fulfilled by the students in multifarious forms. Also of note is that social media provide a prolific terrain for routine entertainment and play.

Acculturation also applies to adaptation to the social media infrastructure and the virtual culture in the host country. Alongside heavy reliance on Chinese social media, all students established varying degrees of presence in the popular U.S. social networking sites. Students' decisions to settle into unchartered networking territories vary quite a bit, ranging from task-driven motives (e.g., finding

interview candidates for news stories), to usability pursuance (e.g., curating pictorial data in Instagram, news feeds on Twitter), to novelty seeking. Platform-specific affordances weigh considerably in that process. We also noted that students' previous social media skills in China may transfer and facilitate their use while transitioning to new networking sites in the host country. Another interesting thread we found is that familiarity may breed distance in communicating via social media, because a number of students intentionally created alternative sites for content that they would not otherwise share with intimate networks. Moreover, the always-on communication environment enabled by smartphones and social media serves as a double-edged sword in that it allows constant connectedness but may also build up the real-time pressure and anxiety over having (or being expected) to maintain responsiveness to spontaneous demands and task assignments.

It was a culture shock for the students to experience the difference between the United States and China about the use of social media for study-related and miscellaneous purposes. In China, it is a widespread practice to treat social media as a hybridity space intermingling the personal, the work, and the social, while a clear distinction exists in the United States between personal and work life in maintaining separate lines of communication. As for intention to continue using U.S.-based social media, the default of being blocked out in China acts as a deterring factor—more as a nuisance than a technical barrier because most of them indicated know-how in hopping the virtual wall—although a few students were adamant in maintaining their presence on U.S.-based social media as way to maintain current social network relationships.

Finally, the findings have important practical implications for program designing and planning while universities contemplate study abroad trips. Considering the all-pervasive nature of social media and mobile communication among today's college students, it is essential that participants in study abroad programs be well prepared for opportunities and strategies in utilizing social media tools and applications to maximize their learning and living experience in the host country. But this cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach, and it has to be customized to the nature of the assignments and tasks the students are expected to complete as well as their existing social media expertise and expectations.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to contextualize our findings against the particularities of the group of students under study. Unlike typical international students who have no choice but to mingle with local students in adjusting to the host country, this group of sojourn students was compartmentalized for the most part during their study abroad trip in staying together for classroom and social engagement as part of the program design. The students are also quite homogeneous in their academic background, intercultural competence, and goal setting. The length of stay is rather unique, and shorter than that of most international students pursuing degree programs in another country. All these situational factors injected different motives in driving the students' social media dependency relationships. As Bierwiaczonek and Waldzus (2016) note, intercultural adaptation research has been informed by four groups of travelers: international students, expatriate employees, migrants, and refugees. The motive of the move within each group is an important antecedent in driving behavioral patterns and influencing adaptation outcomes. To what degree the dependency relations identified here are skewed by the particularities of this cohort bears

testing out in future research, and patterns of similarity and deviation under various conditions may contribute to theoretical development in this line of research.

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