

Research on the Impact of Social and Emotional Support Provided by Chinese Social Media on Overseas Chinese Students

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Abstract:

This study investigated the impact of Chinese social media on social and emotional support for overseas Chinese students. The survey results of 120 Chinese students overseas showed that most used Chinese social media to stay connected with family and friends and relieve negative emotions. The study showed that Chinese social media platforms play an important role in promoting the maintenance of emotional connections, alleviating loneliness, and supporting cross-cultural adaptation. In addition, although most students reported positive mental health outcomes, the emotional support provided by social media may not fully address cross-cultural adaptation issues and psychological stress from academic pressure, cultural differences, and language barriers. Although these platforms are important tools for emotional support, they have limitations in providing comprehensive social interactions and psychological support compared to offline interactions. This study emphasizes the need for all sectors of Chinese society to establish a more complete emotional support system for international students to enhance the happiness and cross-cultural adaptation of overseas Chinese students.

Keywords: Overseas Chinese Students; Social Media; Emotional Support; Cross-Cultural Adaptions

1. Introduction

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, particularly after the launch of the reform and opening-up policy, the Chinese government has developed increasingly comprehensive policies for sending students abroad, while also actively collaborating with other countries to create pathways for Chinese

students to study overseas. As the Chinese economy continues to develop and the phenomenon of globalisation intensifies, self-funded students have become the majority of Chinese international students. The intense global competition for top talent has presented excellent opportunities for Chinese students. As indicated by data from the UNESCO Data Bureau, the number of overseas Chinese students exceeded

one million in 2023. Nevertheless, issues pertaining to cross-cultural adaptation and the dearth of social-emotional support in the context of being away from home have emerged as significant challenges encountered by a considerable number of international students. A substantial body of research indicates that a significant proportion of Chinese students experience feelings of loneliness, culture shock, and academic pressure during the process of adapting to life in a foreign country [1]. Also, academic pressure is a strong threat to negative emotional experiences for overseas Chinese students. The academic environment and requirements abroad may differ from those in China. International students need to adapt to new learning methods and evaluation standards, as well as cope with challenges related to reading, communication, and writing in a non-Chinese language context, which adds considerable academic pressure.

In the context of the accelerated development of the internet, social media has become an indispensable aspect of people's daily lives, particularly for Chinese students residing abroad. Domestic social media platforms, including WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, have become indispensable conduits for Chinese students abroad to remain connected with their home country, access information, and seek social support. The use of social media enables overseas Chinese students to maintain emotional connections with their families and friends in their country of origin. Furthermore, through online communities and the algorithms of social media platforms, international students can seek support from peers who are in similar situations, thereby developing a combination of online and offline social interactions. This emotional support has the potential to have a significant impact on the mental health, emotional regulation, and cross-cultural adaptation of these students [2].

The extant literature indicates that social-emotional support exerts a pronounced influence on individuals' mental health and adaptive capabilities, particularly in unfamiliar cultural contexts [3]. Investigating the influence of Chinese social media on the social-emotional support of Chinese international students not only helps address their issues of mental health and facilitates cross-cultural adaptations, but also offers practical guidance for educational institutions, parents, and social media platforms, thereby assisting Chinese students in more effectively navigating the challenges of studying and living overseas.

2. Literature Review

With the increasing prevalence of overseas students, many scholars have conducted research on overseas Chinese students and their situations abroad. One common source

of pressure that overseas Chinese students encounter is the process of cultural adaptation. Cultural adaptation can be defined as the psychological process that occurs when an individual changes as a result of continuous direct interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds [4]. As students from disparate cultural backgrounds, overseas Chinese students may encounter obstacles about language barriers, cultural dissonance, and a perceived lack of belonging. Such challenges could potentially give rise to adverse emotional experiences and, in extreme cases, psychological issues. Furthermore, homesickness is a common emotional consequence among students residing abroad, particularly in light of the financial and logistical challenges associated with reuniting with family members [5].

In the contemporary era, social media has become a significant conduit for Chinese international students residing abroad to maintain connections with their families and friends in their country of origin and to access emotional support. Chinese social media platforms, including WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, have increasingly attracted academic interest due to their role in providing emotional support. The research by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe explored the relationship between social media use and social capital [6]. Their findings indicated that social media facilitates the maintenance and development of social networks, thereby enhancing individuals' social and emotional support. Similarly, Liu Qin, focusing on Chinese international students in Australia, researched how, in the context of the growing online society, social media usage affects cross-cultural adaptation for this unique group of sojourners [7]. The study found that the use of social media helps international students adapt more effectively to foreign cultures.

The existing research has predominantly concentrated on the role of international social media platforms (such as Facebook and Instagram) among international students. For example, Wang Jiachen's research indicates that in their use of social media, Chinese international students' self-set goals for cultural adaptation and the emerging needs upon arriving in the host country drive their various motivations and strategies for social media use [8]. In the process of transitioning between environments and identities, they tend to learn to adapt to different social media environments both domestically and abroad, using different platforms as important resources for obtaining information, building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and expressing personal emotions.

However, there is a paucity of research examining the emotional support provided by domestic Chinese social media platforms (such as WeChat, Weibo, and the Red) for Chinese international students. Some studies have

indicated that social platforms like WeChat assist international students in maintaining connections with their families and friends in their countries of origin, thereby playing a pivotal role in their emotional regulation and cross-cultural adaptation [9]. As a result, the study will be based on Chinese social media platforms, and investigate the impact of social and emotional support it provided to overseas Chinese students.

3. Methodology

The participants of this study are Chinese international students studying abroad. The specific selection criteria include individuals who are currently enrolled in foreign high schools and universities as Chinese citizens. The survey is comprised of several sections, the objective of which is to assess the following aspects: the participants are asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, field of study, and the country in which they were studying. The survey also enquires about the participants' usage of social media, such as the frequency of use, and the primary purposes for which they are used. The perceived level of social and emotional support is evaluated. An evaluation of the level of emotional support received will be conducted using relevant scales, such as the social support scale.

The mental health and adaptation abilities of the participants are evaluated using standardized surveys, including the Depression Self-Rating Scale and the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Scale.

The survey comprises a series of attention tests, including true/false statements, multiple-choice questions on social media use, and an attention check requiring participants to select a specific answer in order to ensure engagement. The survey was released on targeted Chinese social media platforms (Weibo and the Red), and participants could access the online survey platform via the link and complete the survey.

4. Results

The survey collected 120 responses from overseas Chinese students in various countries. Respondents' demographic characteristics, social media usage patterns, perceptions of social and emotional support, as well as their mental health and cross-cultural adaptation experiences were collected.

Firstly, the largest proportion of respondent students resided in the United States (50%), followed by the United Kingdom (33.34%), Australia (8.33%), and Germany (8.33%). Students aged 18-22 and 23-26 occupy the largest and second largest percentage of respondents respec-

tively.

Secondly, the results of the survey indicate that Instagram is the most commonly used social media platform among the respondents, with 83.33% of participants reporting regular use. Domestically focused platforms such as Red and TikTok are also popular, with usage rates of 75% and 66.67% respectively. This indicates their substantial role in providing familiar cultural content and community support. Weibo, another Chinese platform, is used by 41.67% of participants, while Facebook, a widely used international platform, has the lowest usage rate among the students surveyed, at only 16%. What's more, when asked about the main purpose of using social media, all respondents in the survey chose "Stay connected with family and friends", and over half of overseas students chose "Get domestic news information" and "Release emotions or seek emotional support" respectively.

Besides, for the time spent on social media per day, most respondents choose 1-3 hours, which sums up to 58.33%. It is worth paying attention that none of the respondent students chose less than 1 hour, indicating that using social media is prevalent among overseas Chinese students.

For questions aimed at social and emotional support of overseas students, more than 75% of respondents claimed they "sometimes turn to social media in China for support" when feeling down or having a hard time in life. Over 80% of overseas students agreed or strongly agreed that staying connected with family and friends through Chinese social media can help ease your loneliness abroad.

When asked about the biggest challenge in overseas lives, 75% of respondents chose "academic pressure", over 58% chose "cultural differences", and "language barrier" as well as "homesickness" each received 25%. For the evaluation of mental health and cross-cultural adaptation experiences, more than 75% of Chinese overseas students showed "Very good" or "Good" mental health conditions, and most students chose "helpful" in the information about cross-cultural adaptation provided by Chinese social media, occupying the proportion of 80%.

5. Discussion

The research on the impact of social and emotional support by Chinese social media on overseas Chinese students provided valuable data for demographic profiles of international students, patterns of their social media use, views on social and emotional support, along experiences related to mental health and cultural adaptation.

For the demographic profile of overseas Chinese students, the most popular countries for Chinese students studying abroad are the United States and the United Kingdom,

considering the vast reputation of famous institutions and rich educational resources and opportunities in the two countries. The majority of Chinese students pursue undergraduate and postgraduate studies abroad, indicating the prevalent desire among overseas Chinese students for higher quality education and better career opportunities.

The data collected from the survey revealed some patterns of social media use for overseas Chinese students. Nearly all students keep strong ties to Chinese social media platforms, resulting in an average time for social media usage higher than 1 hour per day for respondent students. For Chinese social media, Red has the largest proportion of users, which showcases how vast the influence Red has among overseas Chinese students. It can be attributed to the extensive user scale and diversity of topic discussions. The Red can provide overseas Chinese students with more informative knowledge and shared experiences among international students, thus enhancing its user stickiness and popularity. Also, TikTok prevails in Chinese students studying abroad, which may be due to the quick dissemination of short videos.

What is more, the findings revealed that Instagram was the most popular social media platform among the participants, with 83.33% of them using it. This indicates a notable presence of international platforms among Chinese students, suggesting that they utilize both domestic and international social media to fulfill diverse needs. These include maintaining connections with Chinese communities and engaging with peers and content in countries they currently study in. This dual approach may assist them in balancing their Chinese identity with adapting to a foreign culture.

One of the core findings of the survey is the supportive role that Chinese social media plays in the social and emotional support for overseas Chinese students. The majority of respondents reported that Chinese social media can connect their feelings with family members and friends and relieve negative feelings like loneliness and insecurity. Additionally, the survey indicated that Chinese international students utilize these platforms as a source of emotional support, particularly when confronted with challenges. However, perceptions of the adequacy of emotional support varied, with the majority of students interviewed indicating that they only sometimes received appropriate emotional support. This indicates that although Chinese social media offers viable avenues for international students to establish connections, it may not be a comprehensive substitute for face-to-face, one-on-one interactions or offline forms of social interaction. While online emotional support may facilitate communication, it may also limit the depth of emotional involvement compared to real-life interactions.

Moreover, most respondent overseas Chinese students have good mental health conditions, which indicates a healthy and sustainable development of education globalization in China. It was widely acknowledged that Chinese social media played an instrumental role in facilitating the process of cross-cultural adaptation. Such platforms permit students to gain access to the latest information regarding their home culture and to receive assistance from their fellow students who are in analogous circumstances. However, pressures from not only overseas studies but also cultural shocks and homesickness are issues that most Chinese international students have to overcome, and Chinese social media may have limitations in providing adequate social and emotional support. As a result, it is essential to build stronger online and offline support systems for Chinese students studying abroad.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the critical role that Chinese social media plays in helping overseas Chinese students cope with the challenges of studying abroad. Chinese social media is an essential tool for international students to maintain emotional connections, eliminate loneliness, and help with cultural adaptation. The emotional support provided by these platforms has its limitations, though, and additional social support resources may be needed to address the mental health issues and cross-cultural challenges faced by Chinese students studying abroad. Chinese social media platforms, student organizations, and educational institutions can cooperate to create higher-level online and offline social-emotional support systems to ensure that Chinese students receive the help they need to further their studies and lives abroad.

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