

# *Social Media Use in Adjustment and Adaptation of Chinese International Students*

--a case study of douyin

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**Abstract:** This research aims to understand how the Chinese international students in foreign countries use the social network (Douyin) to deal with the adaptation problems in studying abroad. Douyin is the most popular media app in mainland China which is used by Chinese international students a lot (Haima, 2018). This study tries to explore their using characteristics and the satisfaction they can obtain through this social media.

## 1. Introduction

The Center for China and Globalization (CCG) published the “Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad 2017 (CGC, 2017)” which showed that in 2016, the number of overseas Chinese students is the highest in the world. According to this report, the proportion of self-funded students studying abroad has been over 92%, and nearly 90% of the funds come from their parents.

Thanks to the rapid development of Web 2.0 technology, these Chinese international students can use some instant messaging (IM) apps to stay in touch with their families. In addition to those IM apps, they will also use some domestic social network service (SNS) to follow the trend in China. User-generated content (here after UGC) is a term coined by social media researchers which refers to digital artefacts created by ordinary people acting on their own behalf as. It was opposing to corporations and commercial interests which has the intention of uploading contents to the Internet for common users (Burgess, 2018). Douyin, as a video sharing platform, is one of the most popular UGC app among young students in China. As a platform to provide weak ties development, the role of social media cannot be ignored. Social media’s core function builds the identity which helps the users’ self-promotion and protecting privacy. These functions are benefit for adapting to the new environment (Kietzmann J. H., 2011). Bernal used the diaspora online as a manifestation of the national characteristics. Some ethnic groups displayed traditional habits when using specific network communication tools (Bernal 2006). This research will provide an overview of using domestic country UGC platform (Douyin) to help those Chinese international students to build the identity and adapt to a new environment. In addition, it will propose a new direction for the development of social media.

In the recent three years, there is a short video sharing app called Tik Tok which known as Douyin (抖音短视频) in China. It has two versions which the international version is called “Tik Tok” and the Chinese version is called “Douyin”. As mentioned before, I will use the Chinese version to do the research in this paper. “Douyin” comes out in September 2016 and it becomes a big hit after it sponsors a Chinese talent show called “The Rap of China.”

## 2. Literature Review

The sojourner's concept was first proposed as an imagined “job” by sojourners which would be finished in a short period and they would choose to travel back to their hometowns at the end (Siu, 1952). Sojourner is used to defining those people who are staying in foreign countries for a short time and they do not belong to any local culture group (Ward, 1997). It includes the business people, international students, missionary, some professional skill worker and etc. The major research focuses on the adjustment and adaptation of international students in different ways. Duru and Poyrazli examined how those factors works in social patterns on adjustment difficulties among some Turkish international students studying in the United States (Duru, 2011). The research objects in this study are focus on the Chinese international students' adjustment. Young and Schartner tried to explore students' academic performance and their social relationship during their sojourn. They found the cross-culture communication education helped most of their master students deal with the academic trouble in the early time and helped them finish their study with high academic achievement. And also, these international students could build their private relationship with classmates and other people in the host country with the help of cross-culture communication (Young, 2015). The use of social media benefits for international students develop their social network in the local community. It is the important factors for adjustment.

Many sojourners use social media to imagine that they still live with their family and friends in the home countries. Kim exhibited that through Internet-mediated communication, the international students in South Korean could gain the information and resources from their home countries (Kim, 2009). Chen's research on Swiss immigrant women used WeChat to keep in touch with relatives and friends in the home

country. At the same time, the study found that they also used social media to get support from local Chinese organizations to get job and learning opportunities (Chen, 2017). This paper would discuss whether the acquisition of such resources can be realized on UGC platform like Douyin and whether Chinese international students can obtain social support through it. Most of the sojourners use domestic social media to engage in procurement service and increase their income. The research found that they have strengthened their original personal identity and developed a new mixed identity which is to integrate themselves into the local culture during using social media. It posited that many common factors that contribute to the establishment of international students' identity, including economic and social relationships. King and Ruiz-Gelicesdo had a survey to find out those students' 'European' identity who used to study abroad (King and Ruiz-Gelicesdo 2003). Jung and Hecht discussed the depression level of international students because of different identities (Jung, Hecht et al. 2007). These studies develop ways and means for international students to build an identity, including their psychological adaptation through social media support which is benefit for adjustment during sojourn (Gomes, 2013).

## 3. User-Generated Content Platforms

User-generated content means that those contents are created by common users instead of some professional media staffs (Hermida, 2008). Because of the UGC video is short like 15 seconds, and with some video editing techniques, the common content becomes interesting. The audience also can understand the author's meaning directly and make it easier for readers to concentrate on them, thus considered to the reading habits of fast-paced content in the new era. These contents are uploaded to some video sharing platforms, like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and so on and there are many pieces of research about that. However, most of them focused on the platform itself and give little attention to the users. In a scholars' research work about an UGC platform in mainland China called Bilibili, they conducted a research about the popularity prediction problem in UGC sites and add.

In China, the most popular UGC platform is Douyin. According to the developers of Douyin, ByteDance Datadance published its annual report showed that it has more than 300 million registered users until 2018 (Bytedance, 2018). Besides, according to the QuestMobile China Mobile Internet 2018 Annual Report, Douyin's MAU are over 360 million which ranked the top of mobile applications (QuestMobile, 2018). We can see that the UGC platform represented by the Douyin is a new trending, while the research on it is still not that much. Therefore, the research scope is wide, and the value of research is high. The existing researches mainly focus on the platform's operating and marketing model, future direction, and the user's motivation to use it.

Guo proposed that the popularity of the short video sharing platform is due to that the short video fully respects the expressive rights of the general public and satisfies their desires to perform. At the same time, Guo pointed out that Douyin has some shortage which limited its development like the repeated content and lack of social function, and he proposed some development strategies (Guo, 2018). The emergence of Douyin is not only based on the development of technology, but also the fragmentation of people's social behavior and changes in consumer demand. In order to be more responsive to the trend of the times (Cui, 2018). Cui also pointed out that PGC, the combination of Professional Generated Content (here after PGC) and UGC is the future development direction of the social network. Wu uses and gratifications theory to analyze the motivation of Chinese college students to use Douyin mainly for social purposes. For viewers, they want to get entertainment and obtain information, while for publishers, they hope to gain social recognition and self-expression (Wu., 2018). Based on the social need, college students work as "performers" and "participants" to establish and maintain their self-images on Douyin which means they have strictly impression management (Liu., 2018). However, indulging in excessive performances will make young people lose value in real life. When people participate in the process of video production and promotion, they will be unable to act as a complete outsider to evaluate the content, which will make them lose media criticism. Meanwhile, they can spy on others' privacy easily through Douyin which may make them over depend on this app. Besides, they can help them make a self-centered social scope (Guo X., 2019). A survey about universities' students in some regions has concluded that more than 70% of college students would use Douyin and believe that they could broaden their horizons (Wang, 2018). By doing some surveys about Douyin and some social media apps, it not only can help people understand the process of media development, but also can provide some personalized opinions for some commercial companies.

#### **4. Weak Ties: Familiar Strangers**

In the process of the social network rising, everyone enters the network in a specific way. Everyone's position on the Internet is relative to one's real-life position. For instance, many

social networking sites will recommend friends on the page, and people are in a weak relationship network. In Kietzmann's definition of social media, he defined seven functions included relationship. The way and the number of information exchange in the social relationship of social media determine whether people would be linked together to maintain existing relationships. Online communities with identities have more value in their relationships (Kietzmann, 2011). Haythornthwaite mentioned

the use of social media need to consider the tie between people which determines the motivation, meanings, and expression of communication. This research also mentioned that weak ties are built on social media will be limited. To solve this problem, the connectivity between members can be maintained by implementing a new way that keeps all members connected. Through some exercises in receiving or providing group communication, members will be more proficient in using new media for relationship maintenance (Haythornthwaite. C, 2002). People would connect with others through the "comment" and "like" functions on Douyin which helps them to find their own position in the online community and to build the weak tie on it. Granovetter proposed that unlike the strong tie, the weak tie is not an intensive network. But people would be organized if they recognized the central person of the weak tie. This research connected a private interaction under the macro and micro level to show the strength of the strong and weak ties. It was pointed out that the discussion of the weak tie could be used to explore the relationship between small groups (Granovetter, 1977). In this report, this theory will be used to analyze participates' needs and motivations. We can see from the preliminary literature reviews that past researches are mainly focused on the SNS and international students separately. There is a lack of in-depth discussion on international Chinese students use SNS to the benefit of themselves to develop the new identity. To be more specific, this article discusses the following research questions:

*RQ1. How do users (Chinese international students) use Douyin and why do users have these habits of using this app?*

*RQ2. Does the content in Douyin have an impact on real life? What effect does the content have on their real life? How does it affect real life?*

## Methodology

The primary research method for this study is qualitative methods included virtual ethnography and in-depth online observation. The qualitative method gives us a detailed introduction of existing social realities and it suited for researching the specific context (Creswell, 2007). The virtual ethnography is a kind of Internet study method based on participatory observation and in-depth interviews. It was featured by Christine Hine, who gave a crucial contribution to the development and systematization of ethnography as a method to bridge offline and online realms (Caliandro, 2017). "Douyin" can be seen as an online community which based on the same habits. Malinowski refers that participatory observation is an important feature of field research (Schensul, 1999). Participant means the starting point of ethnographic research.

## 5. Online Observation

Choosing Douyin as an observation medium to explore student adaptation consider the following factors. First of all, according to the gatekeeper theory, the traditional media has a common problem, that is, the editors of the content are professionals. So, the information about the Chinese international students' efforts to seek adaptation or establish new identities through the media is processed. As a UGC platform, Douyin provides me a platform to directly observe

their expression. Secondly, although there are many UGC platforms, as mentioned in the previous annual report, the 150 million DAU and 360 million MAU of the Douyin make it rank high position of all UGC platforms. At the same time, Douyin users are mainly young people in first- and second-tier cities. The young people here mainly refer to the post-90s generation, and the

student group is the main member of using it. Therefore, Douyin provides the best condition for observing the behavior of the student group.

After preliminary observation, the number of uploaded videos per day for international student tags exceeds one million, and manual operations could not achieve the comprehensive coverage, so I chose the popular video rankings as the research object in this article. These trending videos appear relatively random and they are not interfered by user behavior. Short videos that are randomly recommended by the “Douyin” algorithm during this time period can be observed, and I would choose the main subject being the international students as the valid sample.

## **6. In-Depth Interview**

Interviewing is a major method of qualitative research and provides a rich focus for contemporary ethnographies (Briggs,2007). Through in-depth interviewing, researchers can understand the life experiences and opinions of a certain social group. The interview data can help us explore the formation process of specific social phenomena and methods for solving problems. I will use semi-structured interviews to conduct one-on-one in-depth interviews with interviewees for data collection.

## **7. Participants**

Before in-depth interviews, it needs to understand the basic information of the interviewees. Therefore, in the interview outline, the author designed the interviewees' gender, age, education, occupation, and region. The main purpose of this in-depth interview is to understand the users' behavior and what they want to obtain from it.

Therefore, in the interview outline, the author designed the basic situation of the using the “Douyin” as well as the time, place, preference, purpose/demand, behavior, and other issues.

This study takes the snowball sampling to choose participants. All participants in this in-depth interview are in the age from 19 to 29 and the major they are in included Entertainment management, Communication, Economics, Social work, Arts and Computer Science. All of them could speak Mandarin fluently, so it could be easier for me to get information from them. Most of the interviews are conducted by using WeChat voice chat and there are three participants are in Macau during the summer vacation, so I have chance to meet them in some coffee shop and interview them offline. Face-to-face communication would be better to observe their facial expressions and body language to gain an in-depth understanding of the media usage of Douyin. All the interviews were around an hour and the content were audio recorded and translated into text.

## **8. Analysis and Findings**

Chinese international students would use home social media to connect with family and friends who live in China, including WeChat and Weibo. Likewise, they would use some domestic application for follow the trending at leisure time. Some UGC platforms like Douyin

and Bilibili could provide them with the information trend and amusement. In this chapter, I will analyze the data collected from the Douyin and the content collected in the interview.

## **9. Users' Habits of Douyin**

In the immigrant group, the female Filipino immigrant will be more active to contact relatives and friends in the home country in any aspect. (Parreñas, 2001). Nowadays, with the rapid development of new media, most female immigrants would use home social media to connect with relatives and friends and many of them even could get job offers from the social media information (Alampay, 2013). Among the 220 samples which are collected, there are 202 short videos in line with the previous requirements for video selection which are valid samples. There are 70 male students and 132 female students. And also, from participants in the interview, there were 6 female and 4 males. In the Douyin annual research report in 2018, there are 59% female users and 41% male users (Haima, 2018). The gender ratio in the data collected conforms to the main gender ratio of Douyin, and the results are representative. There is not much difference in the gender distribution of using Douyin among international students, but female users are slightly more than male users. The female international students would be more likely to choose to use this platform.

From the collection of 202 short videos, the students studying abroad using Douyin are mainly located in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. These countries have rich teaching resources and advanced teaching concepts, which are the main reasons for attracting Chinese international students. But these countries and China have completely different cultural backgrounds and social environments. So many Chinese students will feel it is hard to adapt when they enter a totally different context.

Many Chinese international students might feel lonely and sad, so they choose to use social media to relieve their stress. Sawir reviewed that international students with social network support showed better mental and physical health when they feel

stressful (Sawir, 2008). There are some mobile phone applications in host countries that are similar to Douyin. Chinese international students used it once, but they found because of different context, it was hard to get the punch line on host social media. At the same time, either recommended by friends or found on other social media, they found there were many Chinese international students uploading the relevant content of studying abroad, they are easy to resonate with those people. Among the 202 pieces, more than 30 pieces are about the introduction of studying abroad, including the necessary items which you need to prepare before going abroad, how to pass customs quickly, some local life strategies and so on. Mao is a master student in Japan, which has been studied in Japan for two years. Since Japan and China only have an hour difference, she can easily connect with family members through social media. Douyin became popular at the Chinese New Year in 2017, when she just finished her first semester and returned home from Japan. She found everyone in her family were binge-viewing Douyin and she believed that she would have no common topic with her family and friends if she didn't use Douyin.

## **10. Sojourners: Chinese international students' adjustment and adaptation**

Studying abroad means live in a place which is completely different from the context where they lived before. Because of their living habits and education methods in different countries are various, Chinese international students need to have an adaptation process.

## **11. Life adjustment**

The living adjustment is related to how long they have been that place. There is no standard for the level of life adaptation which makes it hard to say whether Chinese

international students adapt to local life well. So, in this research, it is mainly based on their subjective feelings. Chinese international students in different places have troubles in eating and living habits. There are 42 out of 202 pieces are about living habits. Living habits of some western countries are totally different from Chinese habits, so it takes them to spend time learning to adapt. Some of them choose to record it in a funny way and post on Douyin. They are looking for the people who have the same problems, and they may figure it out together. Besides, this kind of video could give advice to those who have not yet come to study. Wang has studied in New York for three years and he has another way to deal with it. And he started to use Douyin two years ago and he has 60,000 followers on it.

## 12. School adaptation

Some people choose to study abroad to get a better education, to access more advanced research, to increase their experience, and to broaden their horizons. Meanwhile, some people who have a rich family choose to study abroad is because they cannot get an ideal university offer in China or following others blindly. No matter for what reason, they have to study hard to get the diploma. Many international students will take their academic achievements as an important goal for them to study abroad (Spencer-Oatey, 2006). Thirty percent of the collected pieces are about the school life which includes catching up the due date of their final thesis, preparing for group assignment and some tucao contents about their teammates and difficult assignments. Tucao is a kind act of pointing out that something is ridiculous or silly with the funny and harsh comments (Hsiao, 2015). Most of the contents on Douyin are played in this way. They would use this way to express their pressure and complain. And also, they uploaded this kind of video to seek comfort and encouragement. Zeng is a year two students in a Japan university. She experienced a very difficult period of language adaptation and she told me that those study videos on Douyin let her know other students still working hard, even though they feel tired. She felt being really motivated by those contents. And also, she said that she has received a lot of encouragement from other Chinese students on Douyin.

## 13. Weak Ties on Douyin

Users would not use any new medium with a certain specific demand while users would find their demand during the using process. These demands are not static, so different needs would appear at different stages of media engagement. Douyin users generated the content to show themselves. The social interaction needs could also be satisfied during the process. Most of the international students shoot videos on Douyin for recording life and social sharing.

## 14. User's satisfaction

Chinese international students cannot express their true feelings on general social media like WeChat and Weibo, they try to avoid that their family members and friends worried about them too much. They would try to show an image of living comfortable lives in their WeChat moment. However, they do not need to worry about it on Douyin where provides them a stranger social network. They can express true feelings of an international student which is conducive to build their self-awareness and identity.

## 15. User's Weak tie

Weak ties can make the information flow freely between different groups which is difficult to obtain in their strong ties (Granovetter, 1977). People can search for timely, cross-class and ideological information in the weak tie social network which is more valuable for them. It could bring them knowledge expansion and experience accumulation. The social character of weak tie is the flow of information between different social groups.

From the collected pieces, we can see that Chinese international students usually hang out with other Chinese students. They rarely meet with students from other countries. During the in-depth interview, the interviewees confirmed this. Some Chinese international students plan to work in that country after they graduated from the university which means they have to try their best integrating into the local community. Building the weak tie from the stranger social media is the easy way for them to take the first step. They could have more opportunities to contact with the local community and make them get more work opportunities. Besides, people can turn weak ties to the strong ties by chatting and meeting offline. Compared with the strong ties, people could get into a different circle and get more suitable job information through their weak tie network (Granovetter, 1977).

The social capital generated by the connection between different groups is called “bridging capital” (Shirky, 2008). Weak ties have an advantage in acquiring social capital. If people can manage their own weak tie well, they can reconstruct their social network. Social capital facilitates individual social actions. The weak ties can not only help them get more information but also turn this information to the economic benefits. Some Chinese international students have strictly impression management on Douyin which could bring them economic benefits. C is a Ph.D. student studying in Thailand.

He has a considerable income every month because he ran a Douyin account of the Thai travel guide. In his short videos, there were many posts of local scenery and travel

## 16. Conclusions

This research aims to explore how the Chinese international students use the strange social network to deal with the adaptation problems in studying abroad. When Chinese international students go abroad, they may suffer from academic pressures because of the different language and class methods. They often need time to adapt to the new context. During this process, they may go through disappointed and even want to give up. Besides, due to differences in diet and living habits, they would feel discouraged and some of them may complain about their roommates. In their social life, even they practice a lot and perfect in the local language, it is still not easy for them to make friends with the local people, since it is hard to the break the limits of context. It makes them feel lonely and lose interest in socializing. Apart from the language barrier, the negative stereotype of Chinese international students is clingy and stick to each other. It is natural to find people that they can identify with when they go to a new place. They rarely try to integrate into the social circles of local people, even the local Chinese. It becomes a problem if they ignore the social with others for long, they can't interact with the rest of people.

This research expands research on the adaptation and adjustment of international students. Based on the previous literatures, Young examined the cross-culture communication could contribute to better adjustment for international students (Young, 2015). This research tries to search for more ways in using the medium for the benefit of international students' adaptation in the era of the rapid development of the social network. It has enriched the literature of using the social network to deal with sojourners' adaptation problem. And the weak tie could also give support to people in the strange social network. Also, it provides new media developers some

references on the future of developing social applications for strangers. Based on the annual report of Chinese students studying abroad, more people choose to study abroad with low age. This study does not refer to the adaptation of underage students, but it is also valued to study the adaptation of younger students. International students are a large group in China, and there are many valuable research topics. Douyin, as a strange social network, is released three years ago and gets popular rapidly. There are still a lot of arguments about if stranger social network could take over the traditional media like WeChat and Weibo.

Some limitations still need to be pointed out in this research. First of all, the data collected by online observation is small and most of them are concentrated in 2019. The conclusions drawn from this data may not be comprehensive. Secondly, in this research, there is no study on the adaptation and adjustment of foreign students in other countries, so it lacks comparative. In the process of interviewing, it may involve the participator's privacy, there is the possibility of concealing. Because this study uses the virtual ethnography method of the qualitative study, there will be a certain subjective tendency in the process of participatory observation.

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