

Social Media Use for Inter/Intra Ethnic Communication and Social Capital: The Case of Chinese Student Migrants in Belgium

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Abstract: In this study, the author examined how Chinese student migrants in Belgium arrange their social media use for inter-and intra-ethnic communication in their everyday practices and how the usage experiences influence the Chinese student migrants to obtain social capital online. Based on the qualitative semi-structure migrants interviewes, this study successfully recruited 17 Chinese student migrants in Belgium. In this regard, based on the epistemology of the qualitative approach, this study demonstrates the students' everyday practices and meaning constructions of utilizing social media. The present study finds that the Chinese student migrants seldom use social media to conduct inter-ethnic communications in their study life. The participants point out that their participation in inter-ethnic communication with the local or other international students is limited, functional, and study-oriented. In contrast, by using social media to conduct transnational communication, the Chinese student migrants in Belgium are able to receive emotional attachment and support from their family and friends. In this regard, the social media use experiences for the Chinese student migrants are having a positive effect to gain the bonding social capital; however, the effects of bridging social capital for them are limited to information searching, not for inter-ethnic communication.

Keywords: Social Media, interethnic communication, social capital, Chinese student migrants, Belgium

1. Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) has developed rapidly since the 1990s. The internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC) has gradually become an alternative method to traditional face-to-face communication. Therefore, scholars have focused on exploring how the internet use experiences could influence people's social life. A report from *Internet World Stats* shows that the number of internet users around the world increased significantly from 1995 to 2017. In 1995, the number of internet users was 16 million and that number increased to 4.1 billion in 2017. There are now more than 2 billion people using the internet in Asia, accounting for more than 50% of the world's internet users (Internet World Stats, 2018).

The relationships between the users and internet technology changed with the type of web, from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Tim Berners-Lee maintains that, in the era of Web 1.0, the functions of the internet were simple, only providing the user with the opportunities to read the information and content on the internet. Therefore, he defined the Web 1.0 internet services as the read-only

web. The internet users did not have the right to create the information on their own and they could not interact with other users on the internet, which means that the social functions in the Web 1.0 era were insufficient (Berners-Lee, 1998). Moreover, O'Reilly elaborates on the functional changes from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0; he states that the 2.0 website could not only be used to allow the user to read, but also to empower the user to create information content on the internet. The Web 2.0 websites became known as the read-write web. Specifically, the relationships between the user and the website became as a user-centric and participative web; people could create the content, share the information, and even have some social interactions with others on the websites (O'Reilly, 2007; Choudhury, 2014).

Social media are one of the most popular Web 2.0 technologies. Boyd and Ellison's (2008) definition of social media is based on Web 2.0 technology. They argue that social media could allow the user to openly create a personal profile, which changed the anonymous characteristics of the era of Web 1.0. By utilizing social media, a user could have opportunities to know other users' personal information and have more chances for further offline interactions among the users.

There are several kinds of social media platforms, including social network sites, instant messaging, streaming media, discussion platforms, etc. In 2017, the top five social media platforms in the world were Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. The top five platforms in Belgium were Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr. However, the social media usage habits in China differ from those in the West and the rest of the world; in 2016, the top 10 social media platforms in China were WeChat, Weibo, QQ, RenRen.com, YOUKU, Douban, Zhihu, Meituan, MoMo, and Meipai (Wang, 2016, pp. 25-56).

The social media usage differences between China and Western society make the author curious about how these usage differences may influence the social life of the users, especially in the context of the Chinese student migrants' overseas study experiences. It is worth to note that since the study of migration is increasingly focusing on migrants from more varied backgrounds and streams, such as international student migration (King, 2002). In this study, the author applies the term "Chinese student migrants" to refer to the international students who come from mainland China and are now studying in Belgium for academic degrees (King & Raghuram, 2013), rather than short-term sojourners. With these considerations, this paper explores the issues regarding the role that social media plays in Chinese student migrants' everyday life. It also examines whether social media facilitates the Chinese student migrants in engaging in inter-ethnic communication or whether it strengthens the frequency of their intra-ethnic communication (Zhao, 2016).

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Theoretical Concepts of Intercultural Communication and Social Capital

After the 1980s, intercultural communication became a prominent research field within the communication discipline, aiming to explore the communication behaviors between people who have different cultural backgrounds. The concepts of intercultural communication have become the umbrella ideas for containing all aspects of communication that involve cultural differences.

Inter-ethnic communication, which refers to the behaviors of communication between people from different ethnic groups, is one of the subfields in intercultural communication (Orbe & Harris, 2008). In the contemporary era, some scholars claim that social media could help people to overcome the communication obstacles of time and space, thus helping them to communicate with each other more conveniently and at less cost. With these considerations, researchers are curious about whether the social media use experience could facilitate engagement in inter-ethnic communication or if it could strengthen the communications within intra-ethnic relations (Koltsova, Nikolenko & Alexeeva, 2017). The present study intends to examine both the inter- and the intra-ethnic communication patterns of the Chinese student migrants in Belgium. It will also look at whether the social media use experiences could enhance the students in conducting inter-ethnic communication with students from different cultural backgrounds or not. In addition, it will explore the meaning for the Chinese student migrants in utilizing social media to manage the multi-dimensions of their social life when studying abroad.

This study is also interested in whether the social media use experience could assist the Chinese student migrants in obtaining online social capital. Social capital refers to actual and potential social resources that are embodied in an individual's social networks and interpersonal relations. By using these types of social resources, people have more opportunities to acquire resources and benefits that they want in their practical lives and these can help them to solve life problems (Antheunis, Vanden Abeele & Kanter, 2015). Putnam (2002) divided the individual level of social capital into two categories: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is found between family members, close friends, and in other strong ties of interpersonal relations. Maintaining good relations and a high frequency of interactions with a person who has close intimacy with us provides opportunities to access rare resources and get emotional attachment support. Individuals acquire bonding social capital through these actions. The interpersonal relationships in the bonding ties are exclusive and have mostly homogeneous personal backgrounds. Therefore, although people gain emotional support from strong ties and close intimacy, they may reduce the possibilities for receiving new and useful information from these relations. In contrast, bridging social capital is found between the weak ties of members, including co-workers, classmates, and acquaintances or members of the community or religious organization. Putnam indicated that bridging social capital refers to people acquiring social resources and support from the networks with heterogeneous individuals. Because the personal backgrounds in the heterogeneous networks are diversified, one of the most prominent functions of bridging social capital is to help people to obtain new and different points of view and information (Granovetter, 1983; Norris, 2002). Consequently, the prominent literature of social media use and the inter- and intra-communication studies could be divided into three main arguments, as explained in the following subsections.

2.1.1 The Argument of Social Media Use for Facilitating Inter-Ethnic Communication

In this argument, the scholars claim that social media helps people to overcome the traditional limitations of time and space for communication and it allows users to communicate more easily and conveniently with people from different cultural backgrounds. Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna (2006) argue that the internet creates a friendly user-safe environment for

communication; they also claim that, in the internet communications environment, people have more power to manage and control the processes of the patterns of communicating. Therefore, this friendly communication environment could further construct personable internet spaces for people to conduct inter-ethnic communications; as a result, they optimistically regard that, by utilizing the internet for inter-ethnic communication, individuals could develop the competencies both for understanding the differences between cultures and between each other. Hampton, Lee, and Her (2011) find that, because of the emergence of social media, there are several different social network platforms (mobile phones, social network sites, blogs, instant messaging, etc.) that could facilitate people in communicating with each other and further assist individuals in expanding their interpersonal networks. They state that utilizing social media platforms for communication and network formation could help people to gain social capital. In the international student dimension, Lin et al. (2011) explore whether the user experience of social network sites could help the international students in America to obtain social capital and assist them in solving their life adaptation problems. They find that, by using Facebook, the international students could maintain high frequencies of transnational communication with their relatives in their home country; moreover, Facebook has become the platform for international students to conduct inter-ethnic communication with diverse cultural and national backgrounds. They believe that the Facebook use experience for the international students not only helps the students to gain social capital but also to adapt to the new study life in the United States.

2.1.2 The Argument of Social Media Use for the Bonding of Intra-Ethnic Communication

In contrast to the first argument, some scholars find that because social media has made transnational communication cheaper and easier, people have stronger motivations for conducting intra-ethnic communication to gain emotional attachment and support with their bonded tie relations. Anderson (1992) indicates that internet usage experiences may exacerbate the negative effects for immigrants adapting in a host society, as these experiences could further marginalize the immigrant in the host country. Anderson believes that the internet has a daydream effect on the immigrant, meaning that, instead of trying their best to learn and adapt into the place where they have settled down, immigrants may be easily satisfied in applying the internet to make strong and close connections with their friends and relatives in their home country. Komito and Bates (2009) found that Polish immigrants use social media to construct virtual ethnic enclaves on the web. Therefore, although the Polish immigrants may live in different places around the world, they could still maintain a high frequency of interactions and communication with other Polish networks. Nonetheless, the authors maintain that, although these intra-ethnic communications and interaction networks could help the Polish immigrants to keep close intimacy and strong cohesion ties, it may cause the opposite, with negative effects for the immigrants in knowing and adapting into the host society. Rydin and Sjøberg (2010) believe that the internet provides an easier and cheaper way for immigrants to construct virtual ethnic enclaves and homeland spaces in the digital imagination. As a result, the immigrants could easily maintain their original social life styles and interact with other users online; doing so could further strengthen the sense of intra-group solidarity and identity.

2.1.3 The Argument of Social Media Use for the Construction of Multiple Meanings in Everyday Practice

This argument differs from the previous two arguments for applying the dichotomy of positive and negative perspectives for explaining the relationships of social media use experiences and their implications for social capital acquisitions and migrant life adaptations. In this argument, the scholars argue that, in the contemporary era, the functions of media are not just for communication; people may utilize different media platforms in various ways; in doing so, they could further construct a diverse range of media usage meanings according to their daily life practices. As a result, Madianou and Miller (2012) propose the idea of polymedia to understand the multidimensional consequences of media use in the context of individual social life and interpersonal communications. Specifically, the purpose of the media study is to explore how people use the different media platforms as tools to construct the diverse meanings in their everyday life practices, which include personal relationships, intimacy, emotional attachment, inter- or intra-ethnic communication, etc. Dekker, Belabas & Scholten (2015) explore how the second generation of immigrants utilizes social media both for inter- and intra-ethnic communications in the various purposes. They find that, based on instrumental reasons, second-generation immigrants utilize social media to conduct inter-ethnic communication to get new information, find jobs, and discuss the issues regarding the common interests of gaming, sports, and culture. In addition, they find that second generation immigrants may use social media for intra-ethnic communication to acquire emotional attachment, support, and we-ness identity.

2.2 The Social Media Use of Chinese Student Migrants Studying Abroad

Most of the literature on the social media use of international students focuses on exploring the experiences of the English language countries, which include the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Forbush & Foucalut-Welles (2016) explore the social media use experiences and their effects on the adaptation to overseas life of Chinese students in the United States. These authors found that the social media use experiences have several positive effects on the overseas Chinese students; they point out that these experiences could help the Chinese students to expand their interpersonal networks and assist them in adapting more successfully into the new life in the USA. Li & Chen (2014) compare the different social media use experiences between Facebook and Renren and how these usage experiences could have different effects for America's Chinese students in gaining social capital online. These authors claim that the use experiences of both Facebook and Renren could help the Chinese student migrants to gain bridging social capital; however, the effects of these social media use experiences for acquiring bonding social capital are limited. Moreover, Ye (2006) finds that, in the United States, the Chinese student migrants who are more active in using social media for intra-ethnic communication could have more opportunities to get both instrumental and emotional support from other Chinese students. Ye also claims that if the Chinese students engage in intra-ethnic communication more frequently with other Chinese students, this could help them to adapt into life in America and assist them in achieving good academic performance. In this regard, Ye reveals that whether the Chinese students are able to obtain the support of

the co-ethnic groups by using social media has become a crucial factor that influences their adaptation and academic performance in the United States.

Several studies explore the social media use experiences of Chinese student migrants in the United Kingdom. Shao and Crook (2015) study how blog usage experiences could help Chinese student migrants to overcome the obstacles for the issues of life and cultural adaptation in the UK. They find that, by utilizing online blogs, Chinese students get accustomed to sharing their daily life and feelings regarding their study abroad experiences. By utilizing online blogs, the Chinese students maintain a high frequency of interactions and communications with other Chinese students; in doing so, they share their study experiences in the UK with each other. As a result, the authors claim that these online interactions could not only help the Chinese students to overcome the challenges of the adaptation, but they also could facilitate the Chinese students to organize offline interactions and social activities. Carey (2017) explores the social media use experiences of the Chinese international students in the UK and finds that using social media assists the Chinese students in communicating with international students of other ethnic backgrounds and in improving their own English language proficiency as well.

Other studies explore how Chinese international students use social media when they are studying in Australia. Martin and Rizvi (2014) demonstrate that Chinese international students are using social media in constructing online spaces for merging the home and the host cultures. On the one hand, the Chinese international students show and perform their host society imaginations of Australia on the social media pages; on the other hand, they are also utilizing social media as a platform to perform their home country's cultural backgrounds and identities. In this aspect, the authors indicate that the social media are becoming online cultural hybrid spaces, and in this space, the Chinese international students could simultaneously maintain the home and the host culture and identity. Saw et al. (2014) compare the Chinese international students' different social media platforms usage experiences, between Facebook and Renren.com, and how they could use these experiences to influence the students further in gaining social capital online. These authors found that the Chinese international students in Australia are accustomed to utilizing Renren.com for organizing social interaction activities directed toward other Chinese students. Therefore, the use experiences of Renren.com could help the students to gain emotional attachment and support from other co-ethnic users. These authors also point out that there are differences between the social media usage experiences of the Western and the Chinese students. In this regard, they suggest that more research should be conducted to explore how the social media usage differences have different social implications for the Chinese international students.

According to the previous studies, there have been no consensus conclusions for the social media use experiences or the social implications of the students studying abroad. In this regard, the author is curious about the types of circumstances and motivations in which the Chinese student migrants would use social media for inter- and intra-ethnic communication, and also, how the social media use experiences influence Chinese international migrants in Belgium to gain social capital online. The current studies of international students' social media use primarily direct attention to the Western or English learning contexts; few studies explore the international students' social media use experiences in Europe, especially in Belgium (Peng, 2015). To fulfill the research gaps, the author chose the Belgium Chinese student migrants as the

research subject and explored their social media use experiences in their daily life of studying in Belgium. The author also examined how the Chinese student migrants in Belgium arrange their social media use for the everyday practice of inter- and intra-ethnic communication, as well as the usage experiences that influence the Chinese student migrants to obtain social capital online.

3. Research Methods

The aim of the current study was to explore Chinese student migrants' usage experiences and the meaning constructed by utilizing social media in their study life in Belgium. To accomplish this goal, a qualitative approach was adopted to conduct the data collection and analysis. In a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews are a frequently used method for collecting data; they are also regarded as an effective means of collecting the experiences, feelings, and daily practices of human beings, thereby assisting researchers in gaining a deep understanding and learning the respondents' feelings and construction of meaning in their daily practices. An in-depth qualitative interview can provide more opportunities in which the participants can conduct self-discourse to explain their different life experiences, according to their own language (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011).

In the data collection, the author collected the qualitative data from December 2017 to May 2018 by conducting semi-structure interviews. Both convenient and snowball sampling were employed in selecting the research respondents in this study. First, some Chinese student migrants in Belgium, who were familiar with the researcher, were selected to participate in the interviews. Afterwards, they were asked to recommend other Chinese student migrants to be recruited as respondents. A total of 17 Chinese student migrants from mainland China, who studying in Belgium now, were interviewed in the present study (10 males, 7 females; 9 students from KU Leuven, 5 from the University of Gent, 2 from Université Catholique de Louvain, 1 from Vrije Universiteit Brussel; 3 undergraduate students, 8 graduate students, and 6 doctoral students). The students determined the venue for the interviews; the venues included dormitories, student restaurants, and cafés. In addition, some of the students were interviewed via WeChat (i.e., social media). The researcher used a pen coder to record the contents of each interview. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each, and the language used in the interviews was Chinese. In addition to individual online interviews, the author used email and instant messaging interviews as a theoretical sampling data collection method of post-fieldwork (Lamoureux, 2011). Furthermore, the author believed that the students' online and offline lives were quite integrated. As a result, the author not only conducted online observations and interviews but also participated in offline social activities with the research participants approximately once a month, such as having dinner or going exercising and shopping together. By doing so, the author could further observe how the Belgium Chinese student migrants utilize social media in their everyday life in the online and offline sphere of life. The demographic information of the research participants is showed in Table 1.

In the data analysis procedures, after the interviews, the researcher transcribed the audio data into verbatim transcripts for analysis. This study employed the thematic analysis method to gather, sort, and analyze the data. First, the researcher read these verbatim transcripts repeatedly

and in-depth. During the reading process, the researcher encoded and conceptualized the data; then the key concepts were generated from the data. Second, the concepts, which have similar attributes and contents, were categorized as the analysis themes with higher level concepts. Finally, the relationships among the themes were established (Ahmed, 2017). Moreover, three approaches were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

1. *Intercoder reliability.* Two research assistants (studying PhD social science program in KU Leuven) coded the qualitative data independently. Codes, coding rules, and emerging concepts were discussed at regular intervals. The intercoder reliability of this study was .89, which means that the coding consistency was acceptable (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). All disagreements regarding codes and concepts were discussed to reach consensus among the researchers.
2. *Respondents' confirmation.* Both the verbatim transcripts and the preliminary results of this study were sent to the respondents via email. If needed, the respondents could correct any inappropriate content to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the information. Then, the researchers accordingly revised the verbatim transcripts and the preliminary results based on the respondents' replies.
3. *Peer debriefing.* Moreover, the author also invited research colleagues who are also the PhD students or postdocs in the Interculturalism, Migration and Minorities Research Centre to help the author to conduct the regular peer debriefings and analytic triangulations of the preliminary finding written in English, in which they could discuss and raise feedback for both the preliminary results and the data analysis process. For instance, the preliminary results only indicated the Chinese student migrants' experiences of intra-ethnic communication; however, through peer briefing, the researchers decided to collect more data to examine whether the Chinese student migrants also could conduct inter-ethnic communication by using social media, thereby comprehensively realizing their experience regarding social media use.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Research Informants

| Code (Participant) | The time in Belgium | BA/MA/PhD level of student | Major | Name of University | Gender/ Age |
|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| P1 | 1.5 | MA | Accounting | KU Leuven | Male/ 23 |
| P2 | 1 | MA | Business | University of Gent | Female/ 26 |
| P3 | 1 | MA | Social Science | KU Leuven | Female/ 24 |
| P4 | 3.5 | PhD | Engineer | University of Gent | Male/ 31 |
| P5 | 3 | BA | Management | KU Leuven | Male/ 20 |
| P6 | 1 | MA | European Studies | KU Leuven | Female/ 23 |
| P7 | 2 | MA | Language | KU Leuven | Female/ 27 |

| | | | | | |
|------------|-----|-----|---|--|------------|
| P8 | 2 | BA | Communi- cation | Université Catholique de Louvain | Male/ 20 |
| P9 | 1.5 | MA | Education | KU Leuven | Male/ 23 |
| P10 | 5 | PhD | Political Science | Université Catholique de Louvain | Male/ 32 |
| P11 | 3.5 | PhD | Cultural Heritage Studies | Vrije Universiteit Brussel | Female/ 31 |
| P12 | 2 | BA | Business | University of Gent | Female/ 20 |
| P13 | 4 | PhD | Biomedical Science | KU Leuven | Male/ 28 |
| P14 | 1.5 | MA | International Business Economics and Management | KU Leuven | Male/ 23 |
| P15 | 1 | MA | Food Technology | University of Gent | Female/ 22 |
| P16 | 3 | PhD | Social Science | KU Leuven | Male/ 29 |
| P17 | 4 | PhD | Education | University of Gent | Male/ 33 |

4. Results

4.1 Social Media Use for the Everyday Practices of Studying in Belgium

Almost all of the Chinese student migrants in Belgium use social media in their everyday life. For instance, 16 of the student respondents (95%) in this study had the habit of using social media every day; they connected to social media using various electronic devices such as laptops, smartphones, computers, and wearable devices. In addition, Chinese student migrants frequently use social media for transnational communication while they are living and studying abroad. In this study, 11 of the student respondents (65%) use social media almost every day to connect and communicate with their friends and family members in China. In this respect, the Chinese student migrants have established the habitus of transnational communication in their daily lives of studying abroad. Through frequent social media contacts with their friends and relatives in the home country, the Chinese student migrations in a foreign land (i.e., Belgium) can catch up with the life situations of their friends and family members and share the emotional feelings (both sweet and bitter) regarding their life studying abroad, thereby receiving both emotional support and attachment from their friends and family members in the home country (Nedelcu, 2012). For example, respondent P5, an undergraduate student enrolled in KU Leuven, indicated the importance of social media use in their life of studying abroad, as below:

As I am merely a sophomore now, my parents in China care for my life situation here all the time. For example, when I came to Belgium, I had no idea about cooking and using some household appliances; hence, my mom was often contacting me using video chats of both WeChat and QQ, where she had taught me how to cook or how to use washing machines. I think the social media is very important to me in my life of studying abroad. (P5)

Fourteen student respondents (82%) in this study indicated that, by using social media to contact and share each other's daily life with their friends and family members of the home country, they could receive a kind of emotional connection with/and obtain support from them. Respondent P11, a doctoral student enrolled in VUB, expressed her relevant experiences:

In my first year of staying in Belgium, a terrorist attack occurred in Brussels Airport. At that time, the international students here were nervous. Especially my parents, relatives, and friends in China, they were all worried about me. I remember that I contacted my parents almost every day to announce that I was fine. On the one hand, this can make them feel relieved; on the other hand, this can make me feel a sense of support and reliance. (P11)

Respondents P6 and P13, master's and doctoral students, respectively, from KU Leuven, both explained how to use social media to contact their friends and family members in their daily life and what their user experiences and meaning of social media were.

Respondent P6 utilized the concept of "*Hua jia chang*" (talk and chat about something in their everyday life in their study life experiences) to explain how he contacted and communicated with family members in China by using social media in his daily life:

*Before studying in Belgium, I did not have any experience regarding living abroad for a long time. I only had some experience regarding going abroad with my family or friends for traveling. This is my first time to study and live alone in Belgium for a long time. Since I am a little used to the life here, I usually contact my parents via Wechat or QQ every few days. Sometimes, we use a voice service provided by the above social media to talk with each other; sometimes, we also use video chat to talk with each other. We often share each other's life situation; you know... it's like "*Hua jia chang*." After chatting with my family, I always feel like my heart is warmed. I like this kind of feeling. (P16)*

Before respondent P13 came to Belgium to earn a doctorate, he had a long-term partner in China. Because of the work, his partner has yet to come here; however, the contacting immediacy provided by social media can make up for the problem of being unable to meet with each other:

Because of her work, my girlfriend has yet to come to Belgium. We have to be separated by space. Before coming here, I met with her almost every day in China, so we did not

use social media to contact each other every day. However, I think the social media is helpful for our situation now. Because we only meet each other one to two times per year; I have contacted her via social media almost every day since arriving in Belgium. Sometimes, we have a long chat for an hour in a day. In doing so, this can make me feel that I fell in love with her again, because of using the social media for communicating with such frequency. (P13)

Based on the above, we know that the Chinese student migrants' experiences of using social media can break through the boundaries of time and space. By using social media to maintain highly frequent interactions with their friends and family members in the home country, this kind of function, namely "immediate communication," can assist Chinese student migrants in Belgium in conducting high frequency habits of transnational communication, in a low-cost and convenient way, with their friends and family members in China (Kraemer, 2013). In addition, the instant connectivity, which is a function of social media, allows people to contact each other both immediately and conveniently; it can also make the flow of transnational emotional attachment and support both easier and more possible.

4.2 Social Media Use for the Inter-Ethnic Communication of Studying in Belgium

This study shows that the Chinese student migrants do not use social media frequently for inter-ethnic or inter-culture communication. Only six students (35%) in this study use social media for communicating with other students with different ethnicities and cultures. It is worth noting that this kind of online communication is not as easily transformed as the interaction in the offline situation. For instance, respondent P9 (a master's student in KU Leuven) indicated the following:

I seldom use social media to chat with Belgian students or other international students online. I often use the unique social media made by China (e.g., WeChat or QQ) because I already used to do so. Besides, it is a little inconvenient to use different social media (e.g., Facebook, Line, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.) when chatting with Belgian students and other international students. (P9)

Since unique social media systems (e.g., WeChat or QQ) exist in China, the habits of using social media between Chinese student migrants and other students (i.e., Belgian students or other international students) are different. This type of difference not only makes the transaction cost higher for Chinese student migrants in conducting the inter-ethnic and inter-cultural communication, it also decreases their motivation and possibility of using other social media (e.g., Facebook, Line, Twitter, WhatApp, etc.). Respondent P4 (a doctoral student in Gent University) further explained that the reason for using other social media to communicate with other students with different ethnicities or cultures is to discuss academic work.

Except for a few students coming from China, most students in my laboratory come from Belgium and other countries. Sometimes, we use WhatsApp to communicate

with each other to discuss the academic work or experiments. Actually, except for discussing the above, I seldom use this kind of social media (i.e., WhatsApp) to interact or chat with other Belgian students or international students. (P4)

Two master's students from KU Leuven, P3 and P7, expressed that the language difference is a big obstacle for them in communicating with other students.

Although the Belgian students in KU Leuven could speak English very well, their mother language is not English. There are three different language districts in Belgium, the Dutch-speaking district, the French-speaking district, and the German-speaking district. Taking KU Leuven for an example, the mother language of most students is Dutch; therefore, they communicate with each other in Dutch, even in the social media. When we or other international students want to chat with Belgian students, they have to transfer their language into English to communicate with us; don't you think it is inconvenient? For us, actually, using Chinese to chat with students coming from China is more comfortable and easier than chatting with foreigners in English. (P3 & P7)

This kind of language difference use makes the Chinese student migrants feel that it is difficult to obtain or even correctly interpret the local information. For instance, the information regarding the local strikes of public transportation are usually announced on the website in Dutch or French, rather than English. Under the circumstance of being unable to understand Dutch or French, it is really hard for Chinese student migrants to accurately understand the local information related to their daily life in Belgium. Therefore, when facing similar situations caused by a difference in the language being used, social media has become a crucial tool for the Chinese students to acquire practical daily life information, by asking or interacting with other international or local Belgian students (Oh, 2016).

Based on the above discussion, we realize that most Chinese student migrants in Belgium do not often utilize social media to conduct both inter-ethnic and inter-culture communication. A few Chinese student migrants use social media to interact with Belgian students or other international students only if they have to discuss an assignment or satisfy some instrumental need (e.g., inquiring about local information). However, this kind of interactive experience regarding inter-ethnic and inter-culture communication cannot be as smoothly transformed as daily offline interactions between Chinese student migrants and Belgian students. In this regard, a previous study, conducted by Dohmen (2012), explained the Dutch-speaking students' habits and characteristics in using social media. Dohmen indicated that, because the land area of Belgium is not large, most Belgian students choose to study in universities close to their hometown; however, this situation is quite different from that of the students in the United States. Because the land area of the US is large, most American students have to study in universities that may be far from their hometown. The study indicates that the US students are more likely to expand or manage their interpersonal relationships by using social media. In contrast, since Belgian students choose to study in universities close to their hometown, they can both maintain and interact frequently with their existing interpersonal networks.

Compared to US students, Belgian students seldom have the need to either expand or manage their interpersonal relationships by utilizing social media. Dohmen also pointed out that, because Belgian students' online interpersonal network overlaps significantly with the offline ones, international students in Belgium feel that it is difficult to use social media to promote their interactions and communication with Belgian students; moreover, they also feel that it is difficult to establish offline interpersonal interactions that are transformed by the ones they have online.

4.3 Social Media Use for the Intra-Ethnic Communication of Studying in Belgium

In contrast to the situation in which Chinese student migrants seldom use social media to conduct inter-ethnic or inter-culture communication; 15 Chinese student migrants among the respondents (88%) in this study utilize social media to interact with other Chinese student migrants almost every day. Respondent P14, a master's student in KU Leuven, described how she uses social media to discuss issues related to her student life in Belgium with other Chinese student migrants:

We established a chat community, "2017 beginners in KU Leuven," on WeChat. There are more than 350 members in this community. They are all Chinese student migrants. Because most of their majors are different, something interesting is often shared in this community. I think that we all come from China, so "Ren Bu Cing, Tu Cing (i.e., although we are not really familiar with each other; we all come from the same country)." It is really fun to chat with others in this community. Moreover, because we are students overseas, I often ask some question related to my daily life; for instance, where can I buy some daily necessities at a good price, how can I apply for some student services in KU Leuven, whether there are discounts for flight tickets. Basically, as long as I face some problems related to daily life in Belgium, I seek someone's help in the community. Not long afterward, others share their experiences and opinions to me. (P14)

In addition to the purpose of sharing experiences regarding daily life on social media, the Chinese student migrants in Gent University also established a community, "Order for Lunch and Dinner," to gather the Chinese students and the Chinese restaurant owners online together. There are currently more than 300 members in this community; these community members typically use this online community to order their lunch and dinner (P14). In doing so, the Chinese students not only have more opportunities to chat and interact with other co-ethnic students, but this community has also become an online platform for the Chinese students to perform their food identities of "Chineseness" (Liu Huang, 2010).

The online interactions conducted on social media, among Chinese student migrants, further promote Chinese student migrants' participation in offline activities and/or interactions with each other. The special cultural phenomenon, known as "bào tuán, (joint together for participating)" involves utilizing social media to get together to participate in offline social activities. Gao (2017) found that this phenomenon is often seen among the group of Chinese

student migrants; the rise of social media has led to the Chinese student migrants inviting others to participate and the offline social activities have become convenient and efficient.

The chat group established on WeChat, by Chinese student migrants in KU Leuven, is shown in Figure 1. The members in this chat group are Chinese student migrants with the same Christian religion. The members in this chat group also pray for each other and they invite the members to participate in other social activities that are not related to religious activities, such as dining together or watching movies.

Figure 2 shows another chat group on WeChat; focused on cherry blossom viewing, this one was built up by Chinese student migrants from several universities in Belgium. The students, who are going to participate in the cherry blossom trip, may register through this chat group. It is obvious that the Chinese student migrants' social media usage experiences are not limited to discussions regarding ethnicity issues. They also use social media to discuss other issues (e.g., the daily life of studying abroad, individual religious beliefs, traveling together, etc.) and they even participate in offline social activities, "bào tuán," together. The above shows both the diversity of the issues when Chinese student migrants conduct intra-ethnic communication by using social media and the importance of social media in their daily life of studying abroad (Dekker, Belabas, & Scholten, 2015).

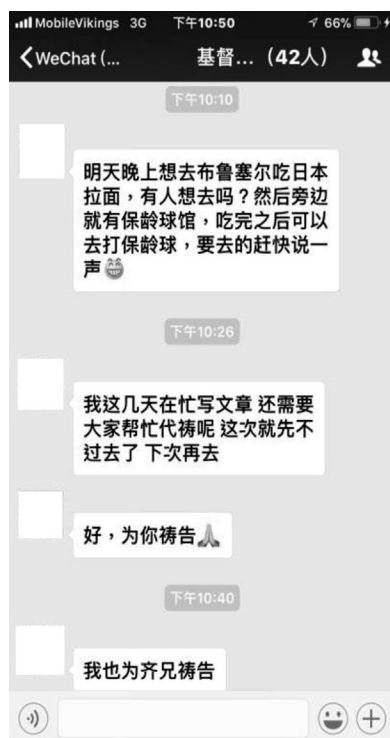


Figure 1. The Christian Chat Group

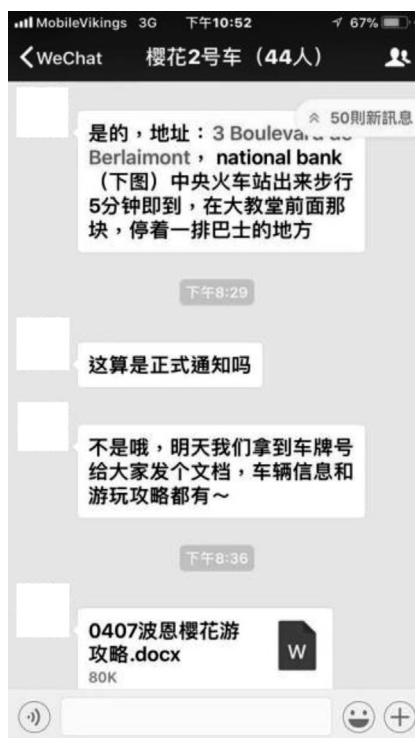


Figure 2. The Cherry Blossom Group

Source: Screenshot from the author's cell-phone

4.4 Social Media Use Experiences and the Effects of Social Capital Acquisition

In contemporary life, people can utilize social media by computers, tablets, smartphones, and wearable devices. With the assistance of these devices, individuals can use social media to engage in interpersonal interactions and manage their interpersonal relationships in any time or place, thus breaking through the geographic restrictions so that overseas students can engage in the everyday practices of transnational communication in their migrant lives. Moreover, the instantaneous connectivity provided by the internet and Wi-Fi can allow overseas students to communicate with their family members and friends immediately. According to the social media usage experiences of the respondents in this study, even though these Chinese student migrants had already left China to study abroad in Belgium, they still felt attached at home. By engaging in transnational communications in their everyday practices, they received emotional support from their relatives in the home country. In summary, through multiple forms of communication provided by social media, such as text, voice, and webcam, Chinese student migrants in Belgium frequently practice transnational communication and affective interactions with their family members and friends in their home country and they can receive bonding social capital as well (Rasmussen, 2014: 104-126).

According to the above discussion, we do know that Chinese student migrants can indeed establish both broader interpersonal relationships and closer interpersonal interactions with each other using social media; however, these experiences are not helpful for them in constructing closer interactions with Belgian students. We also know that Chinese student migrants often use social media to exchange new information and experiences related to their student life. In this regard, the experiences of Belgian Chinese student migrants regarding social media use are helpful for them in accumulating online bridging social capital; in particular, the effectiveness of bridging social capital is more prominent for getting new information and expanding the heterogeneous interpersonal relationships with co-ethnic groups, not the Belgian ones (Chambers, 2013, pp.7-16).

5. Conclusion

It is worth noting that this study's findings were based on the 17 research participants' social media use experiences, moreover, the epistemology of the present study is based on the qualitative approach. As a result, this paper is not trying to make generalizations but demonstrates the use experiences and the role of the social media in the Chinese student migrants' study life in Belgium as a case study (Shih, 2014). Regarding the use of social media in the Belgium Chinese student migrants' daily life, they often utilize social media for the everyday practices of transnational communication. Through frequently interacting and communicating with their family members and friends in their home country, closer contact between overseas students and their relatives can be promoted. Social media provides access to various emotional exchanges where overseas students can receive emotional support and attachment from their relatives in China. Regarding inter-ethnic communication, this study found that Chinese student migrants in Belgium do not use social media often for engaging in inter-ethnic communication with other ethnic groups. Notably, both language barriers and

social media usage habits are important factors in influencing the Chinese student migrants' use behaviors on social media. Among the respondents in the present study, merely 35% of the research participants use social media to interact with Belgian students and other international students to discuss academic work or collect local information; however, this kind of online interaction cannot be transformed as smoothly as daily offline interactions. Regarding the use of social media for intra-ethnic communication, in comparison with the above, the Chinese student migrants maintain frequent online interactions with each other and these online interactions can be further transformed as offline interactions as well. Specifically, the Chinese student migrants' experiences regarding social media use are also helpful for them in establishing and expanding intra-ethnic interpersonal networks. Based on these experiences, we could find that using social media for contacting with their relatives is beneficial for Chinese student migrants for obtaining bonding social capital. In contrast, regarding the function of bridging social capital, it is evident that Chinese student migrants in Belgium can use social media to obtain new information and expand their interpersonal networks with co-ethnic groups; however, their use of social media is limited with regard to expanding and cultivating their relationships with inter-ethnic groups.

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