

## **INTERNET CONSUMPTION IN A NEW HOME**

**INTERNET CONSUMPTION IN A NEW HOME**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through an interpretative lens, the current study examined how international students' Internet use affects their new lives in the host country. Eight Chinese graduate students participated in this study. The data was collected through face-to-face qualitative in-depth interviews, which were guided by a semi-structured interview guide using open-ended questions. It was found that the Internet plays a significant role in the development of these students' social capital in a new country. International students use internet to maintain the newly-built social relations in Canada and the old ones in China. Through the Internet, the students can get informational and emotional supports, which are essential in the acculturation process. It was also indicated that the Internet is a transnational space where these students can manage the complex interactions of differing cultural values and norms between China and Canada without synthesizing differences. The findings of this study are expected to make contributions to the knowledge of the experiences and support needs of International students on campus. Recommendations for school programs and policies are outlined.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Universities in North America attract a large number of foreign students every year. There has been an unprecedented and dramatic increase in international student mobility in higher education in recent decades, and students from East Asian countries occupy a comparatively big share in international students in the universities of North American (Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005). International students encounter a number of challenges associated with acculturation, an important process in adapting to a new culture (Rogler, Cortes, & Malgadi, cited in Ye, 2005). The psychological and physical demands for acculturation can create acculturative stress, which often derives from difficulties with language use, cultural adaptation, educational progress and other issues (Allen, Amason,& Holmes, cited in Ye, 2005). It is well documented that people with less emotional and social support due to the lack of social interaction, or what Putnam called social capital (2000), are more likely to have less well being, more depression and higher levels of disability (Sum, Mathews, Pourghasem & Hughes, 2008). It is necessary for international students, the new comers to a country, to find people who can provide social and emotional support and thus these students can successfully adapt to the new culture (Kim, Yun & Yoon, 2009).

With its rapid development, the Internet has become very integrated into many people's lives. The internet has long been seen as an important mechanism for international students in constructing and brokering relations between host and home

countries (Ye, 2005). In addition, one's Internet exposure was found to relate significantly to one's acculturation to the new society (Lee & Tse, 1994). It was revealed that the Internet can provide the opportunity for isolated people to improve social networks, because the Internet can overcome time and spatial restrictions. (Mellor, Firth, & Moore, cited in Sum et al, 2008). Without these time and spatial restrictions, the Internet, therefore, can help people to strengthen and maintain social capital. As a result, knowing just how the Internet impacts the lives of international student is a matter of importance as this understanding could have implications for post-secondary education programs and policies. With interpretive social science framework, my research interests lie in international students' cultural identity and social capital in Canada, how internet impacts their cultural identity and social capital and what are these students' understandings of it. My research is targeted to Chinese graduate international students since on one hand I am a Chinese graduate international student myself, and have known the cultural and social background of this group. On the other hand, there is less studies regarding this group.

My decision to pursue this study was framed by my own experience as an international student who came from China to Canada to pursue a master degree. I noticed the rising popularity of the Internet, and discovered that it had become an indispensable part of my life as an international student. I gradually developed a desire to explore the experiences of other Chinese international students and their Internet

consumption. Also, I felt it was meaningful to make a contribution to the knowledge of how the Internet might impact international postsecondary students' lives.

This thesis consists of six chapters. This chapter, as the introduction, gives an overall picture of this study including the background, reasons, and expectations for this research. The second chapter is a literature review, in which I review the academic literature on the international students' experiences and challenges in the host country, their social capital, the transnational identity and their Internet consumption. In chapter three, I talk about the methodological framework of the study, data collection, data analysis and the implications of the methodology. The fourth chapter discusses the findings of the research and the themes that emerged, including the challenges faced in Canada by the Chinese international students participating in this study, their social capital in the host country, their transnational identity and how their Internet consumption impacts their lives in Canada. Chapter five highlights some key findings and discusses how these align with the current literature. In the final concluding chapter, recommendations on the implications of these findings for postsecondary programs and policies are given.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review is organized to start with an overview on international postsecondary students' experiences and challenges when studying in foreign countries. I then introduce the concept of transnationalism in order to provide a conceptual way to understand international postsecondary students as a particular group of immigrants. Moreover, an introduction to the concept of social capital is provided for the sake of understanding social integration and social cohesion, and social integration and social cohesion are considered to help the international students to adapt to the host country in this study. Then the research about acculturation was summarized and linked clearly to transnationalism and social capital. The final section of the literature review covers the studies that have addressed the use of the Internet by international postsecondary students while living and studying abroad.

### **Lives of International Students**

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on international students since the 1950s (Rose-Redwood, 2010). Most of the existing research on international students focuses on students' acculturation processes in terms of academic performance, language, culture, and social relationships while attending higher education institutions in North America.

Rienties (2012) found that in English-speaking countries, international students with a western ethnic background tend to perform well academically and to achieve a good degree of social integration. In contrast, international students with a non-Western background are typically less integrated compared to other international students. Zhou, et al (2005) pointed out that Chinese international students were largely depicted as passive recipients and quiet learners in Canadian classrooms, because their language competence and cultural differences were the two primary barriers to participation. In their study about how international students adapt to a new cultural environment, Yeh and Inose (2003) found that self-reported English language fluency was a significant predictor of acculturative distress: higher English fluency was related to smoother interactions with classmates, teachers and other domestic people. Moreover, they indicated that students with better English appeared to be less self-conscious about their accent or ethnic background, and seemed to have fewer barriers to building social network in new environment. Yeh, and Inose (2003) also indicated that since North American culture and values were based on White European norms, European international students were significantly less likely to experience acculturative distress than those international students who were from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Social relationship is an important predictor of adaptation. It was stated that international students tended to have strong ties with students from the same ethnic background (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). Therefore, for international students, establishing social relationships with people with a similar cultural background and

forming ethnic communities within the context of the university are important strategies in the adjustment process (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). It was also found that domestic students usually do not have much interest in connecting with international students (Ward, 2001), and that most of the contacts that do happen, occur in academic settings rather than in social settings (Schreiber & Sondra, 2011). However, participation in one's ethnic community helps international students by acting as a buffer against some of the problems associated with their lack of assimilation into western culture and their inability to effectively interact with domestic students (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998).

In a study of trust between Asian international students and domestic Australian students, Guillen and Ji (2011) found that domestic Australian students significantly discriminated against Asian international students, and that this discrimination results in the Australian students having less trust in these Asian international students. Ye (2006) noted that the Chinese international students who were more satisfied with their interpersonal support networks reported less perceived hatred and, perceived discrimination, and reported fewer negative feelings caused by moving to a new country. Social support then appears to serve as a protective factor, as a buffer against life acculturation stress for international students. As Ye (2006) claimed, the feelings generated from the receipt of social support (such as feeling one has control over events) might function as an effective way of coping with stress. The quality of the support, more than the amount of support was most important for international students to cope with psychological disturbance during acculturation.

From a psychological perspective, in a study about self-efficacy and social support, Yusoff (2012) reported that self-efficacy and support from friends significantly contributed to international students' level of psychological adjustment. Specifically, international students with higher levels of self-efficacy showed higher levels of psychological adjustment. Self-efficacy was also related to social support, to having friends as friends, especially friends from host country helped the international students to adjust better (Yusoff, 2012).

In sum, moving from home to a country, the international students face many challenges in classrooms as well as in social lives. Inside classrooms, the language competence and culture differences are the barriers to academic participation, whilst outside of classroom, also due to the language and culture difference, the international students appeared to have less social relationships with domestic students. However, while on one hand the students are adapting to the language and culture in the host country, on the other hand, they can get help from people with a common cultural background. Therefore, the ethnic community can be regarded as a buffer against acculturative stress. Social relationship is necessary in the adaption process, because international students need social support from friends so that they can have higher self-efficacy and thus a better wellbeing. In addition, students without White European background were found have more acculturative distress.

### **What is transnationalism**

Transnationalism has emerged in the past decade as an essential concept in the study of international migration. It was first used by Randolph Bourne in his article “Transnational America” in 1916 in which he illustrated the importance of the immigrants to maintain their ethnic culture after moving to America (Garrett, 2011). Bourne argued that instead of forcing all immigrants to assimilate to American culture, America should accommodate the ethnic cultures into a cosmopolitan America, because people’s nationality was highly related to the connection between a person and their home country (Garrett, 2011). Differently, Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt (1999) understood transnationalism as a transnational field which “is composed of a growing number of persons who live dual lives, speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders” (p. 217). Generally speaking, researchers tend to depict transnationalism through a number of different dimensions.

Some researchers conceptualize transnationalism as the “high intensity of exchanges” (Vaquera & Aranda, 2011, p. 49), and gave examples from economic and political perspectives. Duany (2010), for example, indicated that remittances - “money sent by migrants to their countries of origin (p. 205)- became the second largest source of foreign exchange for many countries in the Caribbean and Latin America, and are one of the most tangible expressions of transnational ties. In general, remittances help to contribute to local economies, especially among places that lack capital, land and technology. Therefore, remittances are considered as “the strongest transnational

economic links between sending and receiving communities” (p. 206). From political perspective, Guarnizo, Portes and Haller (2003) illustrated that the significant and stable transnational field of political action connected immigrants with their polities of origin. Further, it was concluded that immigrants who were highly educated were more capable of following events in their countries of origin and more likely to seek a role in them. Immigrants whose families expect them to return home at some point were also more likely to retain political ties with their home countries than those who are never expected to return. On the whole, “transnational activism is a constructive phenomenon through which people respond to long distance social obligations and belonging and seek to transform political practices in their sending countries” (Guarnizo, Portes, & Haller, 2003. p. 1239). Through the lens of “exchange”, transnationalism is regarded as a two-way process: while immigrants are making contributions to the labour market in their host country, they are giving remittances back to the home country; and, while immigrants are building new social networks in the new country, they are tending to continue to take an active part in grassroots political activity back in their home country.

Other researchers, however, use a broader approach in which transnationalism is viewed as a social process that allows people to link their home country and host country via developed networks, patterns of living, activities, and “ideologies that span national borders” (Wong, 2007, p.82). From this perspective, many researchers argued that immigrants have social networks, belongings simultaneously in their host and home countries (Schiller, Basch, & Szanton-Blanc, 1995; Simmons, 2010; Wong, 2007).

For instance, Wong (2007) described that “with activities cutting across international borders, immigrants’ consciousness and social and public identities are configured within the framework of transnationalism and transnational social networks” (p.82). In this sense, from the transnational lens, people’s identities as immigrants are formed across the national borders. Similarly, Simmons (2010) depicted that immigrants are involved in “dual national allegiances (p. 171) and thus generate complex cultural identities and sense of belonging involving more than one nation. Cultural identity, as it is defined by Ovrebo (2009), is “the level to which a sojourner identifies with aspects of the home culture or the host culture in terms of behaviors, traditions, and beliefs (p. 6). Further, Simmons gave a depiction of individuals’ awareness of decentred attachments, of being simultaneously “home away from home”, “here and there” (Simmons, 2010, p.170). In my understanding, according to both Wong (2007) and Simmon (2010), immigrants can develop a complex cultural identity, because it is a combination of identity from both host and home country.

Schiller et al. (1995) indicated that immigrants “forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (p. 48). Through this argument we can see, transnational migrants are people who actively take part in the social cultural lives of the host country, while “at the same time, they are engaged elsewhere in the sense that they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated” (p. 48). In this regard, the authors

demonstrated that the immigrants needed a transnational field which links the cultural and social norms in host countries and countries of origin, this transnational field, I believe, is compatible with the complex cultural identity of immigrants.

International students as a special group of immigrants are living in a place that is culturally, socially and academically different from their home country. They need to assimilate the host country's culture and learn to effectively interact with domestic students, because these are the factors that influence their adjustment process (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). But on the other hand, the home culture and the home educational context are deep-rooted (Zhou et al., 2005), and thus the international students are living in a transnational world when they are studying in a new country. In this study, rather than seeing transnationalism from an "exchange" perspective, I am emphasizing the complex cultural identity of international students. Simmon (2010) used the term "transnational being" (p. 170) to describe this complex cultural identity. So, in this thesis, I also use this term to illustrate the complex cultural identity of international students.

### **Social Capital Theory**

The first systematic analysis of social capital was given by Pierre Bourdieu who defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu, cited in Portes, 1998). Bourdieu's

(1986) definition of social capital was very functional, seeing social capital as a tool of social and cultural reproduction, and emphasizing structural constraints and unequal access to institutional resources based on class, gender and race. Coleman (1988) interpreted social capital as social control and social norms that imposed limitations on social behaviors and social boundary, and these norms or limitations are created through interactions across social networks. Both Bourdieu and Coleman agreed that social capital is something that is generated by and accumulated through relations among people (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Portes (1998) emphasized this “relation” by comparing social capital with economic capital and human capital, concluding that “whereas economic capital is in people’s bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships” (p. 7). In other words, a person possesses social capital from others, and it is from others not himself that his/her advantage comes (Portes, 1998). Further, Portes (1998) articulated three basic functions of social capital which are applicable in a variety of contexts: “as a source of social control; as a source of family support; and as a source of benefits through extra familial networks” (Portes, 1998, p. 9). This “extra familial networks” in Bourdieu’s definition, refers to the “institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, cited in Portes, 1998).

Putnam (2000) distinguished two types of social capital: bridging and bonding. According to Putnam (2000), bonding social capital refers to dense networks of homogenous group of people, and bridging social capital to loose networks of socially

heterogeneous groups. In the migration literature, bridging social capital refers to contacts with natives – with members of the host country – as these contacts bridge immigrants with people of different ethnicities, cultures, and socioeconomic positions (Putnam, 2007). One argument is that bridging social capital may be significant for immigrants because it provides them with non-redundant information about labour market opportunities and influence. Natives have access to more and better information about salaried employment than immigrants do, having naturally been longer exposed to the host-country labour market (Putnam, 2007). This is information that would not be available to an immigrant within their close circle of relationships. This is important as researchers have argued that immigrants have much more access to high-density networks of people from the same ethnicity and similar socioeconomic status (bonding social capital) rather than to social contacts that bridge groups (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). As a result, social contacts with the bridge groups are understood to be ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1982). To the contrary, bonding social capital concerns itself with the creation and maintenance of strong ties between emotionally close members in densely-knit networks such as family and close friends. In other words, while weak ties have informational values, strong ties are characterized as emotional support (Kim, Yun & Yoon, 2009).

Even though the definitions of social capital are different, with using the term “institutionalized relationships”, “social networks”, “extra familial networks” and “weak/strong ties” (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000), all

the scholars linked social capital to the social relationship and its potential benefits of people. Sum, Mathews, Pourghasem, and Hughes (2008) indicated, “Social capital theory suggested that there are some abilities and values rooted in social networks and relationships that create certain kinds of benefits for people to use” (p. 204). Further, Sum et al. pointed out that the relationship produces potential benefits for people who are connected, and the benefits are in various forms such as “valuable information acquisition, financial gain, job creation, education diffusion, or other instrumental and emotional support” (p. 204). So in this thesis, social capital is defined as the social relationships people have and all forms of benefits brought by these relationships.

For international students, social relationship is an essential predictor of adaptation (Ye, 2006), because the social support (can be seen as a form of benefits) helps these students to cope with stress generated by the change to a new country. Since the international students are living under more than one cultures, languages and social norms, there is a transnational social network for them, through which, these students can not only get social support from families, friends from their home country, but also gain benefits from the relationships built in the host country. Thus, it is necessary know international students’ lives in a new country through the lens of social capital and transnationalism.

#### **Through the lens of acculturation**

Acculturation is a term used in immigration studies. The most commonly cited definition of acculturation was given by Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits (1936): “Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (p. 149). It was seen as the broader concept of culture change when people with different culture backgrounds came together: the subsequent culture changes could happen in either or both groups of people. In this definition, the culture changes were understood at the group level. However, from an individual level, Graves (1967) introduced the concept of psychological acculturation, referring to changes in a person who participates in a culture contact situation and is influenced by the new culture as well as the changing original culture.

In recent literature, acculturation was defined as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). In the process of adaptation to the new cultures, people can experience acculturative stress due to culture conflicts, so in another article, Berry (2006) pointed out four possible categories of acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization. Specially, people who are in the category of assimilation are those who identify most strongly with the receiving culture: they have no wish to keep their original culture identity but to seek interaction with new culture. In contrast, people who can be put in

the category of separation are those who hold on to their original culture and avoid interactions with others. However, there are people who have interests in both cultures, and have strong identifications with both cultures, so they belong to the category of integration. On the contrary, marginalization refers to those who have low identification with both cultures. From these four strategies we can see people's different acculturation strategies are determined on the basis of people's different attitudes and behaviors, and the extent to which they are motivated to maintain their original culture and to engage in the receiving culture. Many people then experience a double culture identity, which was called "bicultural identity" by Arnett (2002). According to Arnett (2002), people who are living in different cultures develop a bicultural identity that "combines their local identity with an identity linked to the global culture" (p. 774). The "local identity" is rooted in their original cultures while the "global identity" refers to the identity emerging as people adapt to new cultures. This "bicultural identity" was, in Wayland's (2006) article, created when people are experiencing transnationalism.

It was pointed out that being exposed to new cultures, people frequently endure anxiety about the lack of predictability of the new culture's worldview (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). According to Chen, Martinez, and Bond (2008), the anxieties come from the change of the culture and the lack of language abilities. Individual language barriers can create acculturative stress, which means the better the language skills of immigrations, the less acculturative stress they have when living in a multicultural place (Chen, et al., 2008). Also from the lens of language ability, Valdez, Mills, Bohlig and Kaplan (2013)

indicated that as individuals come to a new place with different cultures, their language dominance may shift in order to accommodate new cultural information and social ties. Thus, language ability has significant implications for the formation of social capital in a new place, because “relationships of trust, mutual expectations, and shared values are closely tied to language” (Coleman, cited in Valdez, et al., 2013, p. 335). In a study of acculturation and social capital, the authors found that people’s social capital “increased along with acculturation and that greater social capital was associated with fewer depression and anxiety” (Valencia-Garcia, Simoni, Alegría & Takeuchi, 2012, p. 183).

The introduction of acculturation helps me to understand transnationalism and social capital in a way that they are connected: people’s transnational being is formed in the acculturation process when people experience changes in cultural identities, and in this process, nurturing social capital helps to relieve acculturation anxiety and stress. Thus, the concepts of social capital and transnationalism are useful when understanding this acculturation process.

### **The use of the Internet of international students**

Most of the literature that looks at use of the Internet by international students appears to focus on students’ adjustment processes and social network building.

When looking at the adjustment process for international students, Lin, Peng, Kim, and LaRose (2012) found that Facebook helped students to participate culturally

and socially in their new surroundings. Those who interacted with domestic students on Facebook had a better adaptation to the host country. Ye's (2005) study provided an understanding of the links between internet use and acculturative stress of International students. It showed that those who have higher English proficiency were more likely to have better adjustment to the host country: English proficiency was positively related to satisfaction with life in the host country, but negatively related to perceived discrimination and perceived hatred. What matters here is that, English-language internet content contributed to the development of one's English ability, because the English-language is a free learning resource which is easily accessed to. In addition, Ye (2005) further pointed out that since the internet can help international students gain higher acceptance of the customs and values of the host culture, using internet-based social media thus helped to reduce cultural shock.

In terms of building social capital through the Internet, Kim et al. (2009) indicated that in their study, international students used the Internet to build new relationships with local students as well as with students sharing the same ethnicity in the host country. More specifically, according to Phua and Jin (2011), international students could build social capital through the activities of their online social network. They intended to form a strong social group with the purpose to replace the social capital they had lost in the transition process to a new country, so these students appeared to use the Internet to get both bridging and bonding social capital. With the premise that life satisfaction and social trust are important predictors of one's social

capital, Valenzuela, et al (2009) concluded that the one who have higher life satisfaction and social trust happened to use Facebook more often. “Intensity of Facebook use was positively associated with life satisfaction and social trust (p.889)”.

In sum, as ones who come to a new country where the language, culture and life styles are different from home countries, the international students tend to experience an acculturation process. Transnationalism can be seen as a complex identity that by which international students forge and sustain multi-strained social relations that link together their countries of origin and settlement. The social relationships can be understood through the lens of social capital theory, from which the multi-strained social relationships can be viewed in a clear way. Literature on the Internet use of international students generally reveals how important the Internet is in international students' lives. All these researches constitute the knowledge foundation of my research.

The literature helps me to build my research in two ways. On the one hand, the literature on the lives of international students helps me to have an overview on how researchers have shaped international students in previous studies, which gives me an overall idea of the experiences and possible challenges for international students. On the other hand, the studies of transnationalism and social capital provided conceptual ways respectively to understand international students. Transnationalism gives a framework to analyze and understand the transnational process of international

students by considering them as a special immigrant group, while the concept of social capital helps to understand how social relationships impact on international students' lives.

However, there are some limitations existed in literature. Firstly, even though there are many articles presenting the Internet consumption of international student, many of them are based on quantitative research, lacking giving information about how students' understanding of the roles that the Internet play in their lives. The lack of participants' detailed narrative hinders my ability to appreciate the influence of the Internet on international students' acculturation process. Secondly, some of the literature discussed how the Internet contributed to people's social capital, for example, Phua and Jin (2011) explored the relationship between the Internet and bridging/bonding social capital of a group of international students, but few discussed the relationship between transnationalism and the use of the Internet. Furthermore, there is few literature combining international students, transnationalism, social capital and the Internet consumption the way I do. In addition, with an interpretive social science approach, I will more focus on listening to people's narrative, understanding their experience and knowing about their understandings of how the Internet influence their social capital and transnational identity. All these make my study important and I hope to make a contribution to this knowledge gap.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Theoretical Framework -- Interpretive social science

Interpretive social science is, I feel, a nice fit for my study on the basis of considering my understanding of the nature of the world (ontology) and what knowledge is and how/where can I get it (epistemology).

It is stated that “As a culture, we were aware of the seals and the walruses on top of the ice, but we didn’t know what they were doing underneath the ice” (Seungetuk, cited in Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p.v.). I believe the nature of the world is more than a fact that can be seen from surface. As an interpretive researcher, I focus on people’s understandings of the world shaped by their different perspectives and life experiences. Multiple realities, instead of a single, unitary one are articulated through the lived experiences of people (Singer, 2005). With this ontology in mind, I believe there is more than a single structured way of accessing such realities (Singer, M.,2005). From my interpretive perspective, the “explanation of social reality” is constituted through describing and interpreting how people conduct their daily lives (Neuman, 1997). Moreover, this interpretive approach seeks to determine how individuals define what they do (Neuman, 2011).

According to Neuman (2011), the interpretive approach endeavours to elucidate the inherent meanings in social contexts through a close examination of subjective social reality. Many previous studies on media consumption of international students

were done from a particular empirical lens (eg. Lee, Lee & Jang, 2011; Phua & Jin, 2011; Eun-Ju, Lu, & Jeongwoo, 2011; Gray, Chang, & Kennedy, 2010), through which the researchers could find the natural laws as well as verifying their hypotheses. However, in my research, what matters is “understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds” (Neuman, 1997, p.47); in other words, people’s feelings, their specific experiences, and the ways they describe such are what I want to focus on. Moreover, the participants’ personalities, cultural and family background, and social contexts should also be taken into consideration. As Neuman (1997) has stated, “evidence about social action cannot be isolated from the context in which it occurs or the meanings assigned to it by the social actors involved” (p. 72). So, my research strives to understand transnational being (Simmons, A.B., 2010) of international postsecondary students and whether (and how) the use of the Internet might reinforce this being by looking at how Internet use impacts on their social capital. Overall, it is my intention to foster an interpretive explanation (Neuman, 2011) insofar that this research is able to produce a greater understanding about the complexities and challenges of international postsecondary students studying at universities in Canada.

### **Methodology -- Phenomenology**

With an interpretive theoretical framework in mind, I chose phenomenology as my methodology, because phenomenology is seen as a philosophy that provides a way to “exploring the reality of life and living” (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy & Sixsmith,

2013, p. 18). Tuohy et al. (2013) further indicated that the “reality of life and living” is referred to the study of people’s lived experience. Snyder (1973) illustrated that through phenomenological lens, human being should be regarded as a subject rather than an object. In other words, people’s different experiences and understandings are the rich resources for me, and as I described in the last section, the “multiple realities” can be obtained through this interpretive lens. Therefore, phenomenology will help to get at the core of experience, emphasizing the importance of personal perspective and interpretation.

According to Singer (2005), phenomenology emphasizes the importance of making the researcher visible in research rather than regarding them as a detached and impartial observer. As interpretive research is a value-based theoretical framework, my reflexivity also becomes part of the study, and phenomenology is able to give me the space to reflex myself in the research (Singer, 2005). In short, a phenomenological approach includes a respect for multiple realities, a stance of collaboration, and “prescribes techniques that emphasize reflexivity” (Singer, 2005. p. 273).

### **Positioning myself**

As noted, my decision to pursue this study was framed by my own experience as an international student. I believe that sharing how I have come to understand how the

Internet may impact the lives of international students like myself will shed light on the fact that I am an insider.

I am an international student who came from China to pursue a master degree in Social Work at McMaster University. The language and culture differences always cause communication problems when I try to interact with local people. I feel isolated in classroom because I cannot completely get involved in the conversations with other students. I feel uncomfortable when ordering food in restaurants knowing nothing about the menu. As a social work student, I am highly exposed to the topics of race in classroom, which is something I never heard about in Chinese classroom. “White privilege”, “Chinese identity”, and “people of colour” are terms I didn’t even know before I came to Canada. All my experiences here in Canada make me think about who I am and what it means to be an international student.

Gradually I became sensitive about my identity as an international student or as a Chinese person in this multicultural country. Because of the feeling of isolation, I began to have a strong desire to make friends with local people. Using the internet to communicate with local friends became my daily routine, because the internet (eg. Facebook) helps me know more about local friends and also helps me to communicate with them in a convenient way. In addition, listening to CBC radio online every morning is a way for me to know about the Canadian society and to improve my English language skills. For me, the internet is a window to knowing Canada.

However, maintaining my own cultural identity is also important since I have lived in China for over twenty years and all my family and friends in China keep reminding me of my Chinese identity. Talking with my parents and friends though video chat online helps me get emotional support, especially when I first arrived at Canada. I realize how the Internet is important to me as an international student; not only does it help me to build new social networks in a new place, but it is also a bridge between me and my country.

As an international student myself, I have my own experiences and understandings of my research topic. Thus, I have biases and even certain expectations of the research. Through an interpretive phenomenological lens, the researcher is the main instrument for data collection, data analysis and data interpretation (Paisley & Reeves, cited in Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2008). As one who doesn't have to try to be value free, I will bring in my inherent biases and self-reflection, because in interpretive research "bias itself represents a rich source of data (Onwuegbuzie, et al. 2008, p.2). So for me, knowledge is produced by the participants, by me, and through the interplay between us.

### **Data Collection**

The aim of my study was to explore the experience of Chinese International Students in Canadian universities and how their Internet use impacts their social capital in a new country. Their experience was explored through: (1) Revealing the

phenomenon of transnationalism as it appeared in everyday life. (2) Understanding the meanings these students ascribed to their experience of the phenomenon of Internet consumption in a new country. With interpretive phenomenology framework in mind, I conducted my research with a small group of participants, as it made sense to analyze detailed case-by-case data instead of working towards generalizations. As a result, the data was collected through individual face-to-face interviews with eight Chinese international graduate students.

The participants were recruited through posters displayed around the campus of McMaster University. Specifically, six out of the eight participants were recruited directly through the posters; the other two participants are actually people I knew well (approval for their inclusion was granted by the ethics board). I told them there would be posters of my study posted through campus that they could go and see if they wanted to take part in my research. After learning about this opportunity, both of them voluntarily chose to be participants. The participants included five female students and three male students; and six of them were pursuing their Master degree while two of them were Ph.D. students. Except for one Master student who was in his second year, all participants were in their first year here in Canada. Their majors varied: Civil Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Labour Studies, Business Administration, and Biochemistry.

A semi-structured interview format, using a research guide as needed, was the method I used. This form of interviewing allows both the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue where initial questions can be modified in light of the participant's responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas as they arise (Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2008). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted in private study rooms in McMaster Mills Library. While four interviews were done in English, the other four were conducted in Mandarin according to the participants' preference. I translated the Chinese data into English. Two of the participants were willing to provide their Chinese first names for use in my thesis, while the other six participants were willing to provide their English first names so as to keep their Chinese names confidential. All interviews were audio recorded for the sake of data analysis with the participants' permission. I transcribed all the data after finishing the interviews.

Generally speaking, all of the eight participants were willing to share their experiences with me and they seemed to be comfortable with the questions I asked. Nobody chose to withdraw from the interview or skip a particular interview question. Six of the participants seemed to be more active than the other two; they shared a lot of their experiences, their thoughts and understanding and sometimes also talked about many issues not directly related to the questions I asked. Compared to these six participants, the other two (a male and a female participant) did not talk a lot. They answered the questions briefly, and did not talk in depth about their thoughts or

opinions. However, both of them did participate in my research voluntarily. There might be several reasons why they did not talk very much. Firstly, it could be related to their personalities; they might tend to be quiet people who did not speak very much in everyday life. Secondly, it might be because the way I asked the questions did not inspire them to talk much. For instance, one of my questions was “do you think the Internet is important to you and why?” Instead of giving a detailed response, one of the participants just answered, “Yes, very important, I use it everyday”. After reviewing the way I asked questions I determined some needed to be changed, and I also chose, in the later interviews, to share a small piece of my own experience when direct questions failed to elicit much response so that it would inspire the participants to share more. Thirdly, for one of those two participants, the male participant said he did not use the Internet very much, so he did not have much to talk about when I asked, for example, how the Internet helped him in terms of building social capital in Canada. This said, I appreciate all the contributions these students made to my thesis.

I found it was difficult to systematically follow the Interview Guide (Appendix A), because some of the more active participants usually took over the discussion, and it was better for me to ask the questions at the right time (when they were pointing out some issues). In addition, many of the participants raised some points that were interesting but were not included in my Interview Guide. One thing I found interesting was that the participants who did the interview in Mandarin tended to be more active than those who did in English. I think it is because on one hand, it was more comfortable

to talk in their first language so that they (the participants who did interview in Mandarin) might have comparatively more desire to talk; on the other hand (and according to my own experience when answering questions in English) the other participants needed to think and translate at the same time, and therefore they might not be able to think (and then speak) as much as they could do in Mandarin.

### **Data Analysis**

The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis is to explore in detail how people are making sense of their personal and social world. As Smith and Osborn (2007) mentioned, interpretive phenomenological analysis “has a theoretical commitment to the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between people’s talk and their thinking and emotional state” (p.54). In other words, this ‘chain of connection’ is complicated: the participants tend to express what they are feeling and thinking, whilst the researcher need to interpret people’s mental and emotional state from what they have said.

From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, I should try to understand the content and complexity of the meanings first. So, I started my data analysis by listening to the interview recordings for at least two times for each, to make sure I could understand the overall meaning before I started to transcribe and select themes. By repeating listening to the recordings, I always had a better understanding of the content and picked up the previously neglected information.

In phenomenology, analyzing data needs “two lines of inquiry”: on one hand, phenomenology explores a “constituting process” by which people’s perceptions are generated in the social world, and on the other hand phenomenology also explores the nature of researchers’ concepts and the difference between his/her concepts and those of the social actors (Hekman, 1980). Thus, I kept myself open to the lived experience of the participant and kept questioning the narrative, hoping to integrate my own understandings, thus adding new perspectives that broaden the knowledge.

### **Implications of my methodology**

The major strength of my methodological framework is that it enabled me to study meaningful social action, not “just the external or observable behavior of people” (Neuman, 1997, p.69). People’s understanding and specific experience or thinking cannot be measured through numbers since there is always a meaning and purpose behind the surface.

The other strength is that the researcher plays an active role during the research. On one hand, the active communication I had with the participants helped to gain their trust and to encourage participants to share sensitive information and enable me, as the researcher, to dig deeper whilst exploring an issue. On the other hand, through an interpretive approach, I, as the researcher was able to constantly reflect on the process, which meant that I, too, was a creator of knowledge (Charmaz, 2006). Similar to what Carter, S. M & Little, M (2007) pointed out, “knowledge will be a product of the specific

interactions and relationships between researchers and participants in the specific context of their study (p. 1319)”.

According to Charmaz (2006), exploring research participants’ lives ‘from the inside’ often gives a researcher otherwise inaccessible views, views that to researchers from the outside would be “limited, imprecise, mistaken, or egregiously wrong” (p. 14). As an international student and one who shares many cultural and social similarities with my participants, I considered myself as an insider. Sharing the same cultural background and identity as an international student, as well as sharing the same language, I appeared to encourage the participants to openly share their ideas and concerns. The participants seemed willing to tell me their deepest feelings and emotions and this, I think, was attributed to the fact that I am an insider who is supposed to be able to understand them more. Being an insider, I felt, resulted in much deeper interactions, which are necessary because depth and breadth are both import in conducting qualitative research (Lowenberg, 1993).

However, being an insider also had various limitations. I might automatically assume that I could understand my participants because I was in the same stage of lives as they were. In doing so, I would make assumptive conclusions and therefore might not be able to communicate or interpret the results of my research correctly. Another concern is that because there were possibilities that the participants would regard me as one of them, they might omit relevant information with the assumption that I had

already aware of it but actually I might not know. This could lead to incomplete conclusions or conclusions that were clouded by my own personal experiences rather than reflecting theirs. This would affect how I shaped my perceptions and the data and led me to impose my own personal experiences and informed views onto those of the participants, override theirs, and inevitably blur the boundaries between the participants and me as the researcher (Jaspal, 2009).

I knew that I could make assumptive conclusions as I did have certain expectations of all my interview questions, what I did during the interview was to ask the participants for confirmation. After getting the answer from the participants, I usually asked them “do you mean by...” Or “so, can I say...”, thus, I think I did avoid at least several “assumptive conclusions”. For example, I myself felt much academic pressure, and thought the participants might also have the same feeling. During the interview with Geoff, I asked him about pressure in his life in Canada, and he said “it is about my study here”. Without further thinking, I assumed that he had much academic pressure as I did, and I asked “so, can I say that you have much academic pressure”. But much to my surprise, he said no and told me actually he felt good with his study, what gave him pressure was the high tuition fee. However, for my second concern, I felt some of the participant assumed that I knew the answer and naturally omit information. For instance, Fu sometimes said “as you must know” or “you may know this”, and then stopped talking. I kept asking for more information in this case.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

The analysis of the transcripts of my interviews with the eight participants revealed several main themes that assist in understanding how internet impact Chinese international graduate students' lives when they are living and studying in Canada.

I will firstly describe the theme “experience of being an international student” by summarizing the main feelings and challenges for these students in their studies and social lives. I will then talk about the second theme, which is how internet helps the participants to adapt to the Canadian society in terms of learning the language, making friends and integrating into Canadian society and communities (such as the university communities). Last but not least, since these Chinese international students are exposed to an environment where language and cultures are different from those in China, the third theme will be organized to talk about how the internet helps to balance between the Chinese and Canadian social capital and cultures.

### **Experience of being an international student**

As this research attempts to explicate how Internet impact Chinese international graduate students' lives in Canada, an understanding of their feelings and the challenges they experience here in Canada is necessary because it shows a picture of what their lives are like in a new place.

### **English as a barrier**

When asked early in the interviews “what’s the general feeling and challenges of being an international student”, many of the participants (6 out of 8) began to talk about language problems. For those who did not mention language problems in response to this question, they said that language is a barrier in many aspects of their lives in later interview questions.

Generally, English was regarded as barrier in both academic pursuits and social life. Academic pressure is high especially for graduate students. Some of the participants indicated the difficulties they came across in their studies because of the language barrier:

I still remember the first course I attended, the professor has Europe accent, it's very hard to understand his accent for me who's English is not that good, so I had to use a recorder to record everything he said. [Caroline]

In China we use our mother language to study, it's much easier, quite easy for me to understand the lectures you have during the class. But here, totally English, you have to spend much more time on your study, and for me the first semester, I don't think I can understand every material during the class, even the last day of the class, so it takes time to get used to the language...it makes you feel stressed... the marks is not as good as I have in China. [Tracy]

In our class, the professors always ask questions, all the students are usually very active since the participation accounts a big share of the grades. When the time I could understand the questions, other students have already answered. It's so competitive. [ Lynne]

The experiences of the participants reveal that English ability strongly influences students' understanding of the teachers' lectures as well as study materials used in

class. In addition, the English level also affects students' classroom participation; especially graduate students who are usually in a smaller size of class. As a result of the English barrier, these Chinese international graduate students feel stressed about their studies here in Canada.

However, not all the participants feel pressured about study. One participant named Geoff stated that "I feel very good in my study because I did learn lots of new things and make a lot of academic progress...my supervisor knows my English is not that good, he speaks slowly and doesn't push me".

Many participants expressed that English is also a challenge in their social life. Jun pointed out that getting into a discussion with English-speaking people and expressing himself were hard. Sophia emphasized several times during the interview that English is the main barrier for her in communicating with local people in Canada although she thinks she is easygoing and likes to make friends:

The biggest challenge abroad is language, especially for me all my lab mates are Canadian. When I was in the lab in China, all people speak Mandarin, I always talked with them randomly or even gossiped sometimes, but here when all the lab mates are talking or laughing, I can almost understand nothing, which is really hard to get closer to them....I can accept the culture here and I am outgoing, I like to make lots of friends, it should be very easy for me to adapt into their (Canadian) life, but I find myself still "out of their life", I think that's because of the language barrier. [Sophia]

#### **Fewer common topics of conversation with non-Mandarin Speakers**

A shared language is essential for communication between people; the lack of ability in spoken English causes difficulties for Chinese international graduate students when talking with English speaking people. All of the participants indicated that it was harder to make friends with local people or people from other countries than with people from China. Because of the language barriers and also culture differences, the international graduate students from China reported that they did not have many common topics of conversation with local people or those who are from other countries. Lynne pointed out that conversations with local students were “superficial”:

I don't know what to talk with local students...just like “Hi, how's your study going..” very superficial thing...then just stop...really hard to have some deeper conversation with them... [Lynne]

Two of the participants explained why the conversation with non-Mandarin speaking people was superficial - because it is hard to understand the jokes or idioms, and also because people's thinking patterns are different.

Since we have a language problem, we can have basic communication, but the problem is that I don't understand the jokes or idioms and sometimes people are lazy to explain because you have so many questions and keep asking “excuse me” ...And I think understanding jokes is quite essential...if a guy just wants to show humor and wants to tell a joke, if you do not understand, it can be very embarrassing...People joke on each other and this will increase emotional bonding with each other. [Geoff]

People tend to hang out with those who share the mother tongue language, because when you are speaking different languages, your thinking and even behavior patterns are different. Also, because of the cultural difference, people's concerns are different, for example, we don't care much about the Canadian news here, and they don't care about Chinese news either. [Fu]

When talking about the few common topics of conversations with her Canadian labmates here in Canada, Sophia also told me a story from which we can see that even though she (together with other Chinese students) has a desire to talk with foreigners it is often really hard to find topics:

When I was in China, there was a visiting professor in our lab and he came from Pakistan, everyone in my lab (all Chinese) wanted to talk to him, but our conversations were kind of superficial, after asking “where are you from” “how do you like here”, it seemed to have nothing to see. We of course didn’t regard him as one of us, and I guess here, we (international students) are like him (the Pakistan professor). [Sophia]

Tracy, however, believed being true friends with non-Mandarin speakers is possible, but it takes time and effort. She shared her story about her friendship with Nancy, a Canadian student:

I think with student from the same country, we’ve got more common topics, for the topics during our chat, we can dig deeper....it’s very easy to pick up a topic and then you can enjoy and spend a few hours on one topic....but with the students here (and from other foreign countries), we don’t have many similarities from the very beginning, so the topic between us is just some greeting words, such as “hi, how are you?”, “how’s it going?”... it takes time to go deeper...for example. Nancy and I, we know each other for about 9 months. At the very beginning (the first 4 months), we talked very simple things, such as “how’s your weekend?”...but from the second term, when we both were Teaching Assistant in a course, we’ve got some connections, we need to cooperate, work together, and help each other to solve the problems of the course. It makes us feel that we are closer, and also the topics between us are much more deeper, like, we started to talk about our faith, our family background, and our hobbies... what’s more we started to hang out with each other’s friends, take part into the same activities, and share more with each other, so our relationship is stronger and stronger. [Tracy]

According to Tracy, being a close with a Canadian friend is possible, and with more time spent together, the topics between an international student and the Canadian friend could be deeper and thus the friendship could be stronger.

### **Social network is limited to Chinese people**

As a result of the language barrier and having fewer common topics of conversations with non-Mandarin speakers, the participants reported that they tend to limit their social network to primarily Chinese people. One participant stated “Honestly I don’t think I have a social network with foreigners here....I just hang out with Chinese students” [Lynne]. From the participants’ perspectives, it appears that it is easier and more natural to have a stronger tie with Chinese people due to sharing the same language and culture, so emotionally the participants tend to feel closer to other Chinese people:

One obstacle is to make friends with the local people... Actually I feel much closer to Chinese students due to we have same culture, we understand each other’s joke and we watch the same TV shows or movies before and we can talk about the things happening in China, which is very strong bonding...but for Canadian friends, real Canadian friends actually I don’t have too many, I have a few Canadian friends but they are very interested in Chinese culture, so what we always talk about is still Chinese culture. And for the international students from other countries like Korea and Russia, we have good relationships but we are not too close. Emotionally we feel closer with Chinese students. [Geoff]

Sophia pointed out that it’s also easier to have Chinese friends:

It’s very easy to know Chinese people, you can meet new Chinese people from your own Chinese friends and then hang out together after which we usually share contact information....gradually, you will have a circle of Chinese friends, but it seldom happens with foreigners. [Sophia]

The narratives of the participants reveal that a good grasp of the English language is not only essential for good academic performance, but also indispensable in building and maintaining social capital in Canada.

### **How internet impacts students' social capital in Canada**

In this study, social capital refers to the social relationships people have and all forms of benefits brought by these relationships. For international students, their social networks with local friends, families, ethnic groups are regarded as their social capital, but they are also desiring of social capital as valued in the Canadian context.

Even though communication with non-Mandarin speaking people is always accompanied by language obstacles, the participants are eager to have local friends as well as friends from other countries. Geoff stated that “I want to enjoy this community...I mean, talking with Canadian, having more Canadian friends”. To achieve this desire to communicate with local people, Caroline found a Homestay so that it would be easier for her to integrate into Canadian life:<sup>1</sup>

The desire to make friends with local people is the main reason I found a Homestay, because I really want to see what Canadian life is. My Homestay families are very nice to me, they always share our cooking time on the internet....because they are doing some photo editing work, they said they could

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<sup>1</sup> Homestay: Homestay is a form of tourism and/or study abroad program that allows the visitors/ students to rent a room from a local family to better adapt to the local lifestyle as well as improve their language ability. (Rivers, 1998).

help me take photos when I graduate... they are so nice and give me a feeling of home. [Caroline]

With the proliferating influence of the internet in people's daily lives, these participants regard the internet as a helper for them to learn English, make friends, and get involved into the Canadian society and community. In other words, the Internet helps to strengthen international students' social capital in Canada.

### **Internet as a resource for English Learning**

According to participants' descriptions, the internet plays a very pivotal role in students' learning of the English language and thus their developing and maintaining of social capital in Canada. Two of the participants indicated that the internet has many resources for improving their English language skills. Geoff reported that he learned English from many resources online such as news, TV shows (from which he can learn English while he is having fun online):

In order to learn English, I read news, and I watch English TV shows online and also speeches like TED Talk.....when reading news, I feel that some writers of the articles use very good phrases, and you can learn from reading them. So I feel very happy because I can learn....improve my English, I even write down all the new phrases in a notebook..... Sometimes they (Canadian friends) say some idioms , for example, "what are you trying to pull?", and it's a phrase I didn't understand, so at that time I just tried to search on internet, and (on internet) some people asked the same question, and English-speaking people gave explanations, so I will know....somehow increase my language skill and confidence, next time when people say this, I will understand...Another thing online is watching American shows, TV shows like Big Bang Theory. You can learn English while you are having fun. There are a lot of jokes and they are American style also Canadian style humors. [Geoff]

Caroline stated that watching movies or TV dramas helps to improve her English, as well as her knowledge of Western culture. What's more, she also indicated that after coming to Canada, she started to watch movies/ TV drama without subtitles.

Watching movie or drama is a good way to learn language and from the movie, you can see their life and culture.... when I was in China when I watch American TV drama, I would use youku (a website) and it has Chinese subtitle, but here I really don't want to see the Chinese subtitles... [Caroline]

However, not everyone used the resources available through the internet to improve their English although all the participants did think the English language was a barrier. Jun pointed out that even though English is a barrier, he did not purposely learn English from the internet. When asked about “did you try to improve English through the internet?”, Sophia appeared embarrassed and answered “oh, that’s a shame, I didn’t”.

### **Internet helps to communicate with local friends**

Access to internet-based resources to learn the English language is not the only way the internet was reported to be helpful. As noted, many of the participants expressed a lack of confidence speaking English that often persists while they are trying to become more proficient English speakers.

In Canada, I prefer to use social media to contact with local people (English-speaking people)..... In China, if I need to contact somebody, I would definitely use cell-phone, but here I am kind of fear of using cell-phone (it's like face-to-

face), sometimes because I have to phone my landlord if I need to contact her, I feel so feared and just don't want to do that. [Suzy]

There are several reasons for this concern (why Suzy lacks confidence in speaking English): on the one hand, Suzy spoke of how “my spoken English is not so good, if communicating face-to-face, it would be kind of nervous and embarrassed”, while on the other hand, Geoff stated “if I talk to people in person, people can notice my accent, and they'll find my English problems, because if I speak quickly I will have lots of grammar mistakes”. It is apparent that both Suzy and Geoff do not want to give people the opportunities to judge them based on their English skills.

However, the internet provides people with a non face-to-face communication platform, and most of the participants said they like to use the internet for this reason - as an alternative tool for communicating with English speaking People.

Generally to Chinese students, writing (English) is better than speaking (English), I feel more relaxed to type online than speaking face-to-face, and for the local people, they may feel more comfortable to see the English words than listening (to your nonfluent English). [Jun]

Geoff and Jun pointed out that due to their lack of proficiency with the English language, grammar mistakes and misunderstandings are things that cannot be avoided in face-to-face communication, but the internet can help to reduce or even avoid this.

Online I can think what I'm gonna to say and I can even write them down, if I find a grammar mistake, I can correct it and then post it (on facebook or comments). [Geoff]

Communicating through internet could avoid some misunderstandings due to language barrier, if you don't understand a word or a phrase, you can check online before you reply to others. [Jun]

Two participants took this idea further in that they considered the internet as an "icebreaker" that might facilitate people's level of comfort: "If people are shy, they can use internet as ice-breaker when communicating with others".

Another interesting finding related to this idea of confidence is that two of the participants reported that they feel more comfortable talking with other international students or community members for whom English is not their first language:

I have confidence when talking with those who's English is also not the first language....Like when I communicate with my Korean friend, I feel confident even I have grammar and expression mistakes.....but I feel much more nervous to communicate face-to-face with native English speakers. [Suzy]

When I talk with Canadian people, I may ask more, such as they say something using a word or phrase I never heard of, I will ask them....somehow, it slows down the communication, cause we have to always stop and they explain and sometime you just lose the feeling that you are talking and you know...you forget what you are going to say...but with international students because we all slow, I feel more comfortable.....that's how it works....[Geoff]

Suzy and Geoff pointed out it was comfortable to talk with other international students in English because the participants felt confident and had less pressure.

### **Internet helps to find common topics of conversation**

The rich resources online give the participants opportunities to find common topics of conversation with non-Mandarin speakers. The data reveals this happens in two ways: one way is to help them come to know about the popular topics in Canada,

the other one is that it provides opportunities for them to interact with Canadian people and people from a third country on the internet.

Geoff reported that he tries to learn about the popular Canadian interests (such as hockey games) to get prepared for conversations with local people:

Watching hockey games online is partly because I want to have the common topic with Canadian people...Actually that's the only reason (I watch hockey), I never played hockey before, even the rules I don't quite understand, like they can fight during the games....You can watch it online or you can just read the news about it, you don't really need to watch the game, but you can know the information about the games, or the players, you can know how it goes or something like that.....News becomes topics when I talk to Canadian people and they read news so that they know what I'm talking about, share our opinions about it.....that's the most reason I read news. [Geoff]

With this same purpose of finding common topics of conversation with non-Mandarin speaking friends, some participants use the social networking websites to communicate with their foreign friends, because on the one hand, there is usually much personal information on the social networking websites, it is a window to know about others. On the other hand, it is convenient to make comments on others' updates online. When asked about how she maintained friendships with her Canadian friends, Sophia thought for a while and said "when I comment on their updates on Facebook, we sometimes started to communicate. Our interaction online is a way to communicate". Similar to Sophia, Jun and Geoff discussed how they connected with their foreign friends through websites and how Facebook plays an indispensable role in developing the new social capital here in Canada.

After meeting people, if I feel there is a possibility to have a further contact with them, I usually ask if they have Facebook, renren or WeChat accounts. Using online social network is helpful to remember the names of people. If they are not Chinese, it's easy for me to forget their names if I don't add them as friends on Facebook. In my perspective, it's hard to have a deeper conversation with foreigners; I cannot imagine how can I interact with my foreign friends without Facebook.....You could see what happened to some of the foreign friends on Facebook, to see their updates, so that I can have some common topics with them when meet....otherwise, I don't know what to talk about next time we meet. [Jun]

From the social media, sometimes you can know this guy's hobby, like you can see his picture (for example) he is playing hockey, you will know this guy likes hockey, so you can talk hockey with him (when meet)... [Geoff]

### **The Internet helps to integrate into the Canadian society and community**

As has been made plain in this chapter, the social life of this group of Chinese international graduate students tends to be limited to circles or networks of other Chinese students: they appear to have weak bond with Canadian people and those from other countries, despite a desire to be part of the Canadian society. However, it is not easy for them to establish more Canadian friends or become involved more actively in their non-Chinese communities: "I don't have many opportunities to get involved in the Canadian communities or be true friends with Canadian people" [Fu].

Nevertheless, with the wealth of available information and all kinds of social networking websites, the internet is regarded by participants as a way to get involved in the Canadian society. For example, the participants reported that they usually find

information about different activities from various websites so that they can take an active part and come to know more about Canada.

Internet gives information about volunteer opportunities, and other opportunities, for example, information of some events are on website, also the school website, there was an event called Hamilton Crawl, which show you around Hamilton, showing you the companies in Hamilton, other ....like, I went to CBC Hamilton, Spectator...I went inside to look what they are working, and also I went to Hamilton Museum in downtown...these kinds of opportunities I found them online and get involved and feel like....what I learned is that ..the first Tim Hortons is in Hamilton (Ottawa street), I know that I feel like "I even know this", just enjoy the community, involved...[Geoff]

I have some groups on Facebook, like the McMaster Group (the Student Success Center group). Because sometimes they post some really useful information there, like workshops, really good for you, teach you something...[Caroline]

I like the fact that I have some groups on internet so that I can get important information about the group activities.....and also I find the emails from International Student Center are very important, they provide us with many notices such as activities... [Sophia]

According to these statements, the Internet is like a window for the international students to get involved in activities in Canada. School websites, Facebook and School Email are the ones the participants mainly get activities information from.

### **How Internet helps students to balance two cultures**

#### **Double identity**

Most of the participants reported that they usually connected with their families and friends in China through the internet, informing them of their new lives in Canada and keeping up to date on what is happening back home. Fu described that "I tell my families what I have experienced as well as the challenges I came across here in

Canada...and also the food and weather". Some participants indicated that although they are physically living in Canada, they still have their Chinese identity:

Even one day I can speak English as fluently as Canadian people do, and I can adapt to the Canadian society totally, I still have Chinese blood, that's something cannot be changed. Most of my families and friends are now in China, and I do have many sweet memories in China, I just want to keep the Chinese identity and networking. [Suzy]

Sophia stated that being in Canada enhances her Chinese identity, and when she talked about the Chinese culture, she showed a sense of national pride by saying, for example "whenever my foreign friends saying that they like Chinese food, I feel very proud and happy".

After coming to Canada, my Chinese identity is enhanced. Because I am in Canadian society, I feel that I am kind of special and many Chinese heritages are very important and I just neglected them before....I have much more interests in Chinese things, like Classical Chinese Poetry, Tea Ceremony....So when I spend time online, I spend more time on those Chinese things....Maybe because I want to stay in Canada longer, I want to keep my Chinese identity. I think the more you know about your own culture, the easier for you to adapt to the Canadian society, because the two cultures are mutually reinforcing. [Sophia]

Since the participants have been in Canada for a period of time, they acknowledged that they are inclined to be influenced by Canadian cultures as well. Lynne indicated that she began to say "hi" to strangers on street because many of the Canadians she has met do that, even though people don't do that in China. Fu described how he was influenced by the Canadian culture and even have Canadian identity:

Now I started to celebrate holidays here, like Christmas day, Thanksgiving or Easter Day, I am not a Canadian, but I just feel like I want to be part of Canada.... I started to go to Church on Sunday, it's also a good way to know the culture and

religions here...You can see that I also have Canadian identity, it is something inside me. [Fu]

Reflecting this influence and the simultaneous pull to maintain connections to their home culture, Geoff stated that “I am influenced by the culture here, you can say I have a mixture of cultures”.

This dual way of being is a general feature of the stories of the participants as revealed through the interviews. The participants stated that the double identities bring them the feeling that they need to have social networks in both China and Canada, so that they can have a sense of belonging. One participant illustrated “I cannot say I am a Chinese if I don’t have a circle of friends in China”. Another participant reported that her network with Canadian friends give her a feeling of home in Canada. The “circle of friends” (social relationships) and “feeling of home” (benefits brought by these relationships) are what I have conceptualized as social capital in this study. Being involved in two nations, the participants reported that they not only have the desire to develop and then maintain their social capital in Canada, but also have the willingness to retain their established social capital in China:

I want to make friends with Canadian people, it gives me a feeling that I am part of the Canadian society.....as for my friends in China, they are still my friends I just want to know how their life is going.... don’t want to lose my web of friendships in China....Whenever I come back to China, I can still meet them in person and hang out with them. [Geoff]

#### **Use of the Internet as a mechanism to maintain double identities and social capital**

Participant discussions around this notion of a double identity shows that the participants tend to work to maintain social capital in both their host country and their country of origin – primarily through the use of the internet. Maintaining this double identity is made difficult because of the geographical distance, so the internet is like a bridge over the ocean between China and Canada. Caroline had a sense of happiness when she talked about her university friends in China and how the internet helps her to keep in touch with them:

I always contact them (her university friends in China) through renren (Chinese version of Facebook) or qq (a Chinese chatting tool) on the internet, we can share our life stories in the new places and it's like we are together.....when I was travelling around Canada, I sent them postcards and after they received them they posted on social networking website and told me how beautiful the cards are so that I could know they received the cards.....internet makes it so convenient for me to connect with my families and friends in China.” [Caroline]

Geoff described that knowing about Canadian cultures is part of his Canadian identity and how he uses the internet to both maintain his Chinese social capital and develop his Canadian social capital:

I use renren maybe mostly just want to have connection with friends (in China), but at the same time I use Facebook to communicate with friends in Canada, and sometimes I use it to learn more culture things, for example, I follow the Toronto star and the Hamilton Spectator and they share the news about Canada so that i can know things happening here. [Geoff]

When I asked Fu how important the internet is in terms of building or keeping social capital, he first said “I don't use websites often, I don't use it to make friends...”. But when I asked him if he has a social networking group online, he laughed and said

“actually, I just realized that I created a group on qq, which is a Chinese group through which Chinese people in McMaster could share good news or information about everything...”. So, from Fu we can see that while sometimes people may not notice how the internet impact their life, the internet may actually play a pivotal role in their life with a double identity.

### **A transnational space in the online world**

Several participants stated that they are physically far away from China, they always pay attention to Chinese news:

Although I am here in Canada, I often browse Chinese website, because I also want to know what happened in China, and want to watch Chinese TV shows. [Caroline]

Because my families are in China, I still want to know the events, news...basically everything about China. [Suzy]

I don't have a specific reason why I still browse Chinese websites and read Chinese news...sometimes it's just for fun....you know, reading Chinese news is very relaxing (compared to reading English news), it's like reading stories.... The other reason may be that I am a Chinese, I just want to know what happened in my country....After coming to Canada, I started to pay attention to the oversea policies of China, which I did not care at all (when I was in China)...because it is related to myself now. [Fu]

By turning to Chinese Internet sites, the participants were able to learn about what happened in their home countries and understand the context where those events were situated. Their knowledge of China can also be got from western media. One

participant indicated that since there is less freedom in Chinese media, Chinese people cannot access many media resources inside China. As a result, they sometimes see these materials online for the first time when they are in Canada:

There are many videos on YouTube that are forbidden in China, I have desire to watch these videos (usually they talk about some sensitive issues of China) so that I can understand China from an outsider perspective. [Jun]

Some participants demonstrated that they like to pay attention to Canadian news on Chinese Internet sites.

When I am reading news on Chinese website, if I see the news about Canada, I subconsciously will click on the title and have a look at what happened, it's like Canada is a key word in my life now. [Fu]

If I see articles talking about Canada on renren, I will “share” it because I think that's useful to me. [Suzy]

Jun, and one other participant mentioned that after coming to Canada, they liked to keep a watchful eye on the different perspectives on a particular topic emerging from Western and Chinese media to help in understanding their own culture from another perspective:

Before, I only watch news from Chinese media, but after coming to Canada, if I see some news from Canadian websites, I will have interest in knowing the perspectives and attitudes of foreign media (English webistes)....so I will search the news in google Canada (after seeing some news on Chinese websites) and see how different or similar the perspectives from media of different countries. [Jun]

Sophia talked about her understanding that Chinese media usually describe a bright side of western society but western media tend to have extreme views about China.

I see much more media freedom from foreign media, but sometimes could have extreme views....I like to see the western understandings of China from webiste, sometimes China is not as bad as what it has been described in the western media. [Sophia]

Jun had the same views as did Sophia:

...but I think sometimes the views from western media are not very objective...And I also find that the descriptions about western countries from Chinese media are not objective either... they are not very matching with what I see with my own eyes...For example, yes, the pollution in China is more severe than here in Canada, but you cannot say our Chinese people have less environmental awareness....we have so large poplulation you know....according to my living experience in Canada, I think Canada has more paper waste than in China. Also, our number of cars per person is far less than Canadians. [Jun]

It was revealed from the data that the western media sometimes give negative stereotyping of China. However, the participants disclosed that this stereotyping is actually not impacting on their sense of identity as Chinese:

Yes, I noticed the negative impression of China in the western media. This is because they only have partial knowledge of China when they start to criticize. But I don't feel that this does some negative effect on my Chinese identity. People I meet so far just care who you are but not where you are from. [Tracy]

When people are talking about the negative part of China, I try to explain....but usually I choose to avoid this topic...I know they are not giving a whole picture... As for my Chinese identity, I don't think it is impacted. I always admit that China has so many problems and I also believe we will solve it eventually... And I hope I can contribute to this. In a way, the negative comments of China to some extent increase my sense of responsibility of being a Chinese.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the key findings from this study will be highlighted and discussed, drawing again on the research literature. There appear to be distinct patterns of social capital for this group of students which relate to Putnam's (2000) distinction between bridging and bonding social capital. In both types, the Internet appears to play a pivotal role in helping this group of Chinese international graduates developing social capital in the host country and also maintaining the existing social capital in their country of origin. As international graduates attend Canadian university, participants are currently living in a place where the language, culture and social norms are different from their home country, thus they show transnational beings. This highlights our awareness of how the Internet, as a handy medium, can help them to keep their transnational being and have an impact their everyday lives.

### **Social Capital in a new country**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Sum et al (2008) suggested that social networks and personal connections are forms of capital, from which one may generate benefits. The "benefits" for the international students in this study can be talked about through the constructs of bridging social capital and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). As was addressed in Chapter 2, the literature makes a distinction between bridging social capitals and bonding social capital, which can also be referred as weak ties and strong ties respectively (Kim, K., et al, 2009). I will focus on looking at the different networks

that international graduate students engage with, the relationships and purposes of their relationships with these networks and the different kinds of beneficial result.

Generally speaking, the participants tend to have bridging social capital (weak ties) with their Canadian friends, in contrast to having bonding social capital (strong ties) with other Chinese in Canada and China.

The responses of my participants reveal that these students have a strong desire to have Canadian friends and to get involved in the Canadian society which is supported by Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011) finding. In the finding, it was pointed out that although the majority of international students' friendships were with people from their same country, international students "preferred friendships with host nationals, and desired more contact with host nationals" (Hayes & Lin, cited in Hendrickson et al. 2011, p. 283). However, the social network they establish with Canadians cannot be seen as bonding social capital (strong ties) since these international students come to discover they are not able to emotionally rely on this Canadian networks. Hendrickson et al (2011) in their research also found that it was "weak ties" with the "host nationals". Putnam's (2000) constructs of bridging social capital and weak social ties seems to better explain participants' Canadian networks and relationships. According to the participants, the need to have Canadian friends is most likely based on the need and desire to acquire instrumental benefits; pursued more for the purposes of practicing oral English, of learning about Canadian cultures, and getting information about daily life in Canada. For example, this was revealed by the participant who told me she found

Homestay when she arrived in Canada because she wanted to know what Canadian life and culture. Although she lives with a Canadian family and has been able to practiced oral English along with learning Canadian culture, she still does not form a strong emotionally bond with them. Similarly, other participants reported that they seldom share secrets or receive emotional relief from their Canadian friends, largely as a result of their language barrier and culture gap. In contrast, they've reported that they do turn to their Chinese friends for this emotional relief. In my own experience, I also had a Homestay family in my first and second terms here at McMaster University. While they did help me a lot in terms of practicing English speaking and getting to know the Canadian cultures. Like the participants in my study, I usually choose to talk with my Chinese friends when I had emotional troubles. I felt that my Homestay families could not completely understand my situation as they have not experienced similar life transitions. Cultural difference was also an issue for me as sometimes I do shared my experience and thoughts with my Homestay families, but it has always turned out that they could not understand it in the same way as I have, and thus I felt frustrated at times during the communication process.

What I also found interesting was the question of why this might be so. One of the participants discussed her experience at school in China when there was a Pakistani professor at one of her labs: the participant and all of her Chinese lab partners did not regard the professor as “one of them”. This participant suspected that the domestic students in Canada also do not regard the Chinese international students as “one of

them". This led me wonder whether this was true: do Canadian students not consider international students to be "one of them"? Is this why the participants were less likely to develop more emotional connections with other Canadian students? According to an earlier reported study, the investigations have concluded that there is a low level of social interaction between international students and domestic students (Ward, Masgoret & Gezentsvey, 2009). Schreiber and Sondra (2011) illustrated that although domestic students had reported relatively favorable perceptions of international students, domestic students were largely uninterested in initiating contact with their international peers (Schreiber & Sondra, 2011). Most of the contacts that domestic students have had with international students occur in class, in an on-campus job, or in another academic setting, rather than in a social setting (Schreiber & Sondra, 2011). Intergroup anxiety and stereotypes are significant predictors of the "uninterested" attitude towards international student (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovem, 2002). Intergroup anxiety is caused by the difference of economic, culture, and social norms between two groups of people. Stereotypes, according to Stephan and Stephan (1996), might also be associated with means of prejudice. Suzy (one of my participants) also expressed that she felt she was seen as being different. She gave an example of her feeling while in class; she felt that the Canadian classmates tend to talk with each other but seldom talked with her.

The proposal that Canadian students may not regard international students as "one of them" reflects, to some extent, a sign of low self-efficacy with International

students. People with low self-efficacy are less willing to learn new behaviors and adapt to new environment (Hechanova, et, al., 2002). There seems to be a conflict between the efforts participants put into learning a new language, culture, activities and the statement of self-efficacy. Based on my own experience, all these efforts do help us to be more involved in Canadian cultures, but this sense of low self-efficacy subconsciously discourages us from learning new behaviors. For example, in order to be more like a Canadian, I tried to begin learning about Hockey since Hockey is a very popular sport in Canada. However, one day my Homestay family invited me to watch a Hockey game with their friends in Toronto, I still turned their offer down because I still had no interest in Hockey and felt that I did not belong to their friends circles. Therefore, low self-efficacy may be one of the reasons why the participants do not have stronger networks or many social relationships with Canadian people.

There are two other possible reasons as to why participants may have bridging social capital but not bonding social capital with Canadians; one reason is that all of the participants have only been in Canada for one or two years (7 participants are first year graduate students, but only one is a second-year student). This is short duration to build strong social networks and relationships in a new place. During the interviews, one participant spoke of her friendship with a Canadian student and she indicated that it takes time to develop a strong relationship. Another participant discussed that after being in Canada for over half a year, she began to hang out with her Canadian classmates. She said it was “a big progress” considering the fact that she seldom involve

in their (the Canadian students) conversations in the first semester here in Canada. In their research, Hawke, Vaccarino and Hawke (2011) pointed out that one of the difficulties for the friendship between domestic students and international students is lack of time. I believe that time is an important factor to develop language proficiency and make these international students become more culturally aware, thus helps them to participate in the development of the bridging social capital.

Secondly and another related reason for the lack of bonding social capital could be related to the participants' academic goals. All the participants are graduates who, generally speaking, face more academic pressure than undergraduate students (Zhou, et al., 2005), as a result, they tend to spend less time on social activities which would allow them to build stronger relationships with friends. For example, one participant stated that he spends most of his time either in the lab doing experiments or researching academic journals online: he has limited time for a social life.

Academic pressure ranks one of the highest among the stressors for Chinese international students in North American universities (Yan, 2008). International students have greater academic stress than domestic students due to different cultural values and language (Essandoh, 1995). During the interviews for some participants, academic pressure is something I did not ask but it had come up. It was indicated in an earlier study that high academic expectation and financial issue contributes to the academic pressure of the international students (Mori, 2000). The high academic expectation comes from the fact that many international students are top students in their home

country schools (Mori, 2000). One participant discussed that she felt a big psychological gap after coming to McMaster University, because she used to be the top student at her Chinese university, but now due to language barriers and academic gap, she does not possess advantages compared to her Canadian counterparts. Only one of the participants has mentioned that financial issue caused his/her academic pressure. One participant told me it was a challenge for his parents to financially support him to study at McMaster University; he needed part-time jobs to support his study and thus resulted in more academic pressure. Therefore, it takes more time and effort to keep relationships with domestic friends than friends from the same country as a result of the difference in culture, language and values (Hendrickson, et al., 2011). Consequently, the academic pressure is one of the factors of bridging social capital (weak ties) between international students and their Canadian friends.

Even though the participants talked quite a bit about having fewer and weaker social connections with Canadian people, they did not reveal negative feelings towards these social and community relations and lack of interaction with domestic students that have been identified in literature (Trice, 2004). The participants did not appear to have the feeling of loneliness or dissatisfaction reported in the literature, because they are actively involved in new and established Chinese ethnic groups.

The participants have developed strong ties with their Chinese friends in Canada. The strong ties are also called bonding social capital according to Putnam (2000). According to my participants, most of their Chinese friends in Canada are ones that they

have just met rather than the ones they had already known in China. They were able to establish these relationships and networks quite quickly. They usually share much information about everyday life, for example, banking or cell phone issues, with each other because it is easier to receive these information in the language that they are familiar with. Also, since banking or cell phone information is for everyone's interest, it is also necessary to know this information more accurately. All of the participants reported that they like to hang out with their Chinese friends because of sense of "home" when speaking Mandarin together. This is because there is no difficulty with understanding jokes or idioms, and because they usually have many common topics of conversation available to them. The participants indicated that they usually talked about deeper things with their Chinese friends, and that they also were able to emotionally rely on them. In line with the findings of other study, the participants seem to regard the ethnic community as a buffer from problems associated with a lack of assimilation of new environment (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). It was found that "the formation of friendships between domestic and international students is rarer than friendship formation amongst international students, and the most common type of friendship was with co-nationals" (Hawke, Vaccarino & Hawke, 2011).

Kim (2009) has indicated that "weak ties have informational values" and "strong ties are characterized as emotional support" (p. 154). It is true, seen from my data that strong ties have value of emotional support, while the weak ties do not seem to show it. However, according to my data and my experience, our Canadian friends provide us

more with cultural information, such as Canadian cultures, Canadian social norms and language related information. But the Chinese friends in Canada are always the resource for some daily life information (eg. banking issues). So, different with the literature, strong ties are also tied with informational values.

### **How the Internet works on students' social capital in Canada**

Generally, the data showed that the participants use the Internet more to maintain and strengthen their social capital (both bridging and bonding) with people they meet in Canada than to develop social capital (both bridging and bonding) with new people in Canada.

Many of the participants indicated that they didn't use the Internet very often to make new friends, because there was no sense of security in meeting someone online. Rather, they used the Internet as a way of maintaining relationships after meeting with their partner face-to-face. This point is in concert with the literature. It was stated that the Internet is "an extension of offline activities that provides a supplementary means of communicating besides face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations" (Nie & Erbring, cited in Kim, Yun, & Yoon, 2009, p. 154). In this argument, the author laid emphasis on the word "supplementary", which means that Internet cannot be considered a substitute for face-to-face communication.

As for me, I usually do not build new social capital through the Internet because like the participants have reported, I feel a lack of security to be friend with someone

that I have just met online. Once a stranger started talk to me by saying “Hi, can you tell me something about social work in Beijing” on Facebook, I felt confused because I had no idea how he knew me and why he asked another stranger on this question. Later on, I realized that I have put all my personal information (school information, contact information, etc.) on Facebook where people could easily search about me. For the sake of safety, I deleted all my personal information and from then on, I have never talked to strangers through the Internet. Cain (2008) indicated that searchability and invisible audiences are the main properties of many public sites; therefore, personal information can be easily accessed by strangers. So, I believe there is a risk of building a relationship online with a stranger since it’s hard to tell if he/she has bad intentions or not. Cain (2008) further pointed out that as a result of sharing personal information on Facebook with strangers, young people have incidents where they have been stalked and even had encountered uninvited strangers to their house. Therefore, safety concern is basically why my participants as well as myself do not develop new social capital by using the Internet.

However, the Internet is very helpful for my participants in maintaining and strengthening social capitals built in Canada.

How does the Internet have an impact on these students’ bridging social capital?

Due to the availability of rich information resources, the Internet helps international students find more common conversational topics that will facilitate their relationships with Canadian people. Social networking websites (such as Facebook) were

reported to be a good way to form socially network with local friends. The Internet also helps participants to communicate with local people when English is a communication barrier. The participants showed anxiety and unwillingness to speak English with native English speakers. Mak (2011) gave an explanation for the “anxiety and unwillingness” by indicating that Chinese students fear negative evaluations when speaking English (2011). I personally experience this “fear” when I am speaking English to a native English speaker, I feel he/she is grading my English skills, and naturally I feel shy and even nervous, especially speaking in public where there seems to be many raters. This fear of speaking English is, in Barratt and Huba (1994)’s study, related to the self-consciousness accent and ethnic background. The participants indicated that they did not want others to notice their accent when speaking English. From psychological perspective, Xu (1990) illustrated that the fear of making mistakes was the biggest obstacle to speaking English. However, I believe, the fear of speaking English is also related to Chinese culture. In our traditional Chinese educational culture, students are usually encouraged to be quiet in class and less encouraged to challenge teachers’ opinions. As a result, Chinese people, in my perspective, are influenced by this educational pattern, and in the case of speaking English, we inevitably appear to be less willing to speak. Ballard and Clanchy (1991) supported my argument, they pointed out that Chinese students tend to be more quiet and reluctant to express our own opinions publically.

However, the Internet is a buffer to these students since it provides them with a platform where students do not need to speak face-to-face while still having

interactions with others. What should be mentioned here is that the willingness to interact with English speaking friends online is not contradictory to the earlier point that “the participants do not regard the Internet as a substitute for face-to-face communication”, because according to my participants, the people who they are connected with through the Internet are also their friends in the offline world.

In addition, the Internet helps them to get involved into Canadian communities and society. The participants stated that the events posted on school or community websites, or provided by weekly school emails, or posted on social networking websites like Facebook is helpful for them to get to know Canada. These events help international students experience Canada. Some of the events (like visiting Hamilton Museum as mentioned by participant) are of informational and educational values which is a supplement of classroom education (Kendall, Murfield, Dillon & Wilkin, 2008). In addition, some of the participants pointed out that the more they get involved in Canadian society, the higher their self-esteem became. Geoff discussed that whenever hanging out with Canadian friends, he feels a better adaption to Canada and thus has a higher sense of self-esteem. It was described in literature that intensive use of Facebook benefits international students with low self-esteem, allowing them to feel better about themselves as a result of becoming more engaged with their college community (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

How does the Internet have influence on these students’ bonding social capital?

The findings suggest that the participants usually develop bonding social capital only with Chinese people here in Canada. Most of the participants are very goal-centered; they are studying hard and at the same time getting well prepared for a future job. One participant indicated that one of his Chinese friends here created an online group, where students (all Chinese) can share job hunting information, strategies for interviews, and other related information. The participant indicated that it was helpful if, for example, there was a job fair, to be able to discuss it online, to give suggestions to each other, and, in this way, to get to know each other better and thus create the possibility to become good friends. One participant created a group on qq (the Chinese version of Skype) where many Chinese students shared information about daily life, such as information about restaurant, sales, etc. As a result, they spent more time together and gradually became close friends. Personally, I usually get emotional support from my Chinese friends online, as opposed to Canadian contacts or to Chinese friends back in China. For me, my Chinese friends in Canada know more about my transition situation, and can generally give me better emotional support and suggestions.

Some of the participants stated that online group chatting was quite helpful for them to feel less stressed, because they could always get key information as well as emotional support from their Chinese friends. Ye (2006) discussed that among the international students who were involved in online ethnic social groups, those who had less acculturative stress usually perceived higher amounts of informational and emotional support from these online groups. Online Chinese social networks can

provide key information and knowledge about life in Canada, thus facilitating the management of daily situations for Chinese international students (Ye, 2006). This “key information and knowledge”, in my understanding, is of social support value. For these Chinese international students, since they are far away their families at home, the lack of social support from families can cause acculturation problems. Thus, this “key information and knowledge” from their online Chinese social group is of great importance to these students.

#### **The Internet helps to keep the transnational being**

As is well-known, Canada is a multicultural country, and the official policy of multiculturalism allows and encourages people to retain their cultural identities (Simmons, 2010). However, for international students who first arrive in Canada, they will inevitably encounter discrepancy between their constructed cultural identity and new value system of the new environment (Lewin, 2001). In addition, they have not established social networks from which they can get social support; therefore, they could be trapped into an identity crisis (Lewin, 2001). Living in a place where the language, culture and living patterns are different from their host country, the participants revealed a transnational being, and the struggle of trying to balance between different identities and languages.

The data demonstrated that, on the one hand, these students made great efforts to integrate into Canada. However, these efforts to become more connected do not

happen at the expense of their connectedness to their home communities and culture because they tend also to maintain their Chinese identity and social capital in China. To do this, the participants need a space that transcends any cultural identity and national boundaries. The Internet, without the geographical limitation of physical nations, becomes the medium through which participants manage their complex cultural identity and through it people can be exposed to a variety of values, ideas and news from any part of the world at any time (Kim, et al, 2009). This is in line with what I have mentioned in Chapter 2; these international students need a transnational field, which links the cultural and social norms in host countries and countries of origin. From the findings I can see the Internet is playing a role as a transnational field.

The participants thus maintained a transnational space in the online world. While the students are in Canada, they continue to use Chinese sites for informational content (i.e., Chinese news), emotional support (i.e., interactions with friends in China) and entertainment (i.e., Chinese TV Show). Most of the participants indicated they both want and need to keep their Chinese social capital. Phua and Jin (2011) pointed out that the use of the Internet has become significant for international students because many of their close friends and family members remain in China; therefore, they need to find a substitute for face-to-face meetings with them. At the same time, the Internet also helps these students to develop and maintain their new social networks in Canada, as well as provides various valuable information of Canada. In this way, for these students, the Chinese society and Canadian society are not separate and independent, but rather

a closely linked sphere in the online world. Therefore, the Internet becomes an “in-between zone” or “the third space” (Bhabha, cited in Kim et al, 2009) where “new forms of cultural meaning and production occur, blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question the established classifications of culture and identity” (p. 156). One participant reported that he was now a mixture of culture. The Internet had thus become the transnational space where these students can manage complex interactions of cultural values and norms between China and Canada without synthesizing differences.

An interesting finding was that through reading and watching the western media reports on the Internet, the participants came to see China from a new perspective. Since the Chinese government controls and censors the Internet in China, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are blocked in China (Crampton, 2011). After coming to Canada, many of the participants access the western media for the first time in their lives. China has been considered as an increasingly noticeable player on the world stage, but meanwhile, the participants note there were significant discrepancies between their understandings of China and that of the western world.

Some literature suggests that the western media can produce negative and sensational news about China to “feed their readers” who “actually have a mild interest in China but may take a considerable interest in reading 'bad China' stories” (BBC, 2009, May 04). The participants also felt that the western media were not portraying objective views toward China, but they believed it was good to experience the culture differences

in the online world. When asked about how the “western bad images” of China had influence on their Chinese identity, the participants demonstrated that the stereotyping of China did not impact their Chinese identity and further, one participant indicated that even though he agreed with the fact that the western media had extreme views about China, he also admitted that there were problems in China, and the stereotyping actually promoted him to have a stronger sense of patriotism as a Chinese, because he wanted to make contributions to the “problems of China” and made China a stronger country. However, I personally feel uncomfortable when I see or hear misconceptions about China. I once met a lady in church and we started a conversation. When talking about how and how often I contact my parents, the lady asked: is there laptop in your country? I felt very unease when I had heard this comment as if someone was looking down on me (Chinese people). Even though I understood it wasn’t personal, so I did not question back but I supposed that she has misconceptions about my home country through the Internet (or other types of social media).

As a handy medium, the Internet enables the participants to access Chinese news when they are in Canada. The participants keep being informed of the Chinese news and because of the transnational being, they usually keep a watchful eye on the reports on Canada in Chinese media. As one of the participants expressed, “Canada is a key word in my life now”.

### **Self-Reflection**

I am an insider in this research. I used to believe that being an insider, you enjoy the privilege of knowing more about cultural nuances, share the same language with the participants, understand quickly what the participants were talking about, and possibly having better interaction with the participants. However, after doing all the interviews, my perception of being an insider has shifted; there were also some issues with being an insider. Firstly, when the first interview was done, I felt so frustrated since all the data was predictable to me, and the answers to all the questions were very similar to mine. I felt the first participant did not provide me with any new information and I started to worry about my questions. But later on, I realized it was my expectation of “new” information that stopped me from valuing this information, and so I came back to the data and started to analyze it. Secondly, knowing that I could make assumptive conclusions, because I had bias and expected answers, I tried to avoid the assumptive conclusions by asking the participants for confirmation, as I described in Chapter 3. Several times, I misunderstood the participants, but thankfully the participants clarified things for me.

However, I think my reflection of my position as an insider influenced my process of data collection. Usually, I shared my experiences and my understandings of the interview questions with the participants, and I felt what I said to some extent could inspire them to talk more and thus, I got more data. My own experience also impacts my data analysis. I integrated my perspectives with the data I got from the participants,

rethinking it with my thoughts when I was listening to the recording for a second time. I usually gained a better understanding the second time.

Even though two of my participants were my friends, and I felt less comfortable interviewing them. I felt a little awkward talking with my friends in such an academic and professional way. When I started to introduce my research to the participants (my friends), one of them even started to laugh by saying “I did not expect that you are so serious”. I felt a little bit embarrassed but had to continue with the interview.

An interesting thing I noticed was that four of the participants chose to have English interviews. I did not know why they did so, but I did appreciate that they chose English, so that I would not have to do the translation work. However, I found that, within the same amount of time, English interviews are not as informative as Mandarin ones. One reason was that when we were talking in English, our talking speed was not as fast as in Mandarin. The other reason was that some points were unclear and there was a loss of information in the process of communication due to low language proficiency.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

Many scholars have documented the Internet consumption of Chinese international students, but only a few have researched this in a qualitative way. This study adds to this small body of knowledge and makes clear the importance of understanding how the Internet impacts the experience of being Chinese international Graduate students. Only through better understanding their experiences can we begin to address the difficulties they experience and formulate appropriate programs and school policies to better meet their needs. In this section I also make some recommendations for improved services for Chinese international students that might also be applicable to other groups of international students.

This study focused on exploring the lives of eight Chinese international graduate students who are currently studying in a Canadian university. It is revealed in the interview data that English language barrier is the main challenge for these students in both study and social lives. However, the results of this study put the emphasis on their social lives and talks about “social capital” and “transnational beings”.

The use of the Internet for the formation of a local social network and the improvement of language skills lead to better social adjustment in a new country. Online communication services can help international students to remain close to their

friends in China despite physical disconnection thereby maintaining social capital in China, and to develop and strengthen their social capital in Canada. This happens because of the awareness that it is not ideal and possible to interact with Canadian people only in the offline world.

In addition, the Internet has undoubtedly become an integral part of the everyday life of these Chinese international graduate students since they are living with a transnational being. The Internet is regarded as the “in-between zone” where these students can manage both their Chinese being and the Canadian being, which is in the formation process.

In sum, my research suggests that the internet is a significant way to help Chinese international students experience less acculturation stress when they are studying in a new country. Social capital can be nurtured through using interactive internet sites, and this is especially true to Chinese international students who cross physical boundaries from a country where the social media environment is less influenced by western countries. These students keep the pre-existing social capital as well as develop the newly-built one through the internet. Being exposed to different cultures and different Internet environments, Chinese international students maintain a bicultural identity by mobilizing a wide web of social resources. This qualitative study provides Chinese international students’ narrative of their thoughts, understanding and needs in this acculturation process, which is a missing part in the current literature. In

addition, the combination of transnationalism, social capital and acculturation provides a new framework in the literature on international students.

### **Recommendations**

International students' need to improve their English language skill and to learn about Canadian culture which suggests that school libraries should be using the Internet to deliver English online courses and Canadian culture courses for International students.

The participants' usage of Facebook indicates that, as a popular site, it should be regarded as a potentially powerful medium for engagement and support. The official school organizations (i.e., Student Success Center) should make full use of Facebook to support international students to become more involved in the school activities. The university could more actively use it as a marketing and promotional medium to push out information and announcements that are specifically targeted to international students. The International Student Office in school can similarly facilitate the development of online programs that help International students communicate with domestic students.

Since the participants reported there were fewer ways to get involved in local communities, the university might work with community organization to support them to design activities (and advertise such using Facebook and other social networking

sites) that will be beneficial to these international students' engagement and, by extension, have a positive effect on their acculturation process.

Since the ethnic group appears to be indispensable for international students, and the need to have access to news from and about international students' countries of origin, the ethnic students associations (i.e., Chinese Students and Scholars Association) in universities should help the students have more opportunities to make more friends from the same nations as well as provide with the highlighted news of their home countries.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

- 1) Information about you: What is your major in McMaster? Which year are you in? How long have you been in Canada?

2) Are there any similarities and/or differences between being a student in China and being a student at McMaster? (In this question I am hoping to explore their understanding of their social capital – defined as: the exchange of information, companionship, emotional support, tangible goods, and services at the individual level (Paxton, 1999).)

- in terms of friendships and social connections
- in terms of emotional support
- in terms of availability of and access to practical supports (e.g., information, financial, etc.)
- related to cultural differences
- with respect to academic pressures and challenges
- with respect to your sense of identify as a student

3) Can you tell me about how you used internet-based social media when you were a student in China? (What types? Why these choices?) (Internet-based social media includes email, facebook, twitter, skype, mobile device, chat-room, renren, qq, etc.).

4) Did you change your internet-based social media consumption pattern after you came to Canada? If yes, how and why?

5) Do you think internet-based social media is important to your life here in Canada? Why?

6) Which types of internet-based social media do you use here in Canada? Why these ones and not others?

7) What do you use internet-based social media for? (Here I am hoping to explore how they use internet-based social media to build social capital.)

- in terms of friendships and social connections
- in terms of emotional support
- in terms of availability of and access to practical supports (e.g., information, financial, etc.)
- related to cultural differences
- with respect to academic pressures and challenges
- with respect to your sense of identity as a student

8) With regards to the reasons you just gave for using internet-based social media, do you feel it is easier/more helpful to accomplish these things using internet-based social media than it would be in face-to-face interactions with others? Explain please?

9) Do you also continue to use internet-based social media to maintain your relationships and supports (i.e., social capital) in China? Please explain.

10) If you are still using internet-based social media to maintain relationships and supports in China while also using internet-based social media in Canada, do you one is more important than the other? If so, why?

11) How do Canadian internet-based social media and Chinese internet-based social media impact your life respectively?

**END**



## APPENDIX B

### LETTER OF INFORMATION & CONSENT FORM

#### **A Study of internet-based social media consumption of Chinese International Graduate Students in a Canadian University**

##### **Student Investigator:**

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### **Purpose of the Study**

I am doing this research for a master thesis. My study is about exploring the Internet-based Social Media Consumption of Chinese International Graduate Student in a Canadian University. Media Consumption in my study means the role media plays in your daily life. I am hoping to learn about your experiences as an international student and how internet-based social media impact your life here. I also hope to find out suggestions about how universities, communities and even the larger society could help Chinese international graduate students solve the existing acculturation problems through internet-based social media.

### **Procedures involved in the Research**

#### **a). Participants**

Eligible participants are those who 1) are Chinese international graduate students, 2) have been in Canada less than 2 years, 3) had earned a bachelor degree in Chinese University, 4) do not have a wide social network in Canada (e.g., arrived in Hamilton without friends from China, no families in Canada, spouses are not with them in Canada, etc.). 4 to 8 individuals are needed in this study. There are no limitations with regards to education program and gender.

#### **b). Study Method**

The data will be collected by face to face qualitative in-depth interviews. I will interview you through a semi-structured interview guide, with open-ended questions.

#### **c). Sample questions**

1) Can you tell me about how you used internet-based social media when you were a student in China? (What types? Why these choices?) (Internet-based social media includes email, facebook, twitter, skype, mobile device, chat-room, renren, qq, etc.).

2) Did you change your internet-based social media consumption pattern after you came to Canada? If yes, how and why?

#### **d). Length of time**

Every interview will last about 40 minutes to 1 hour. There might be re-contacts with you for follow up for the sake of clearness of the interview data.

#### **e). Interview place**

The data collection will take place on the campus of McMaster University in the private room either in McMaster Student Center or Mills Library.

**f). Others**

The interview will be audio taped only with your permission.

**Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:**

Some potential risks could be associated with my study. I would mention here the possibility of feeling uncomfortable, worried or upset by some of my questions, or you could remember acculturation issues, feelings of isolation and loneliness. Considering that English is not your first language, you might feel uncomfortable to talk in this language. In addition, you might have the risk of loss of privacy or being identified by others.

You should be aware that the interview could be conducted by either English or Mandarin since you may feel uncomfortable to talk to a Chinese in English or find it stressful to express yourself in English. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. You can withdraw at any time. As for social risks, every effort will be made to guarantee your confidentiality and privacy (please see the “Confidentiality” section below).

**Potential Benefits**

The research will not benefit you directly other than the opportunity to share their experiences. But I hope to learn more about international students' identity, the acculturation problem, your understanding of your isolation and how you regard social media in your life. This could help to make suggestions about how universities' international student offices, host communities, and the larger society could help you solve the existing acculturation problems through media.

**Confidentiality**

Every effort will be made to guarantee your confidentiality and privacy.

a). You will be asked whether you would like to use real names or pseudonyms in the research, and if you would like to use pseudonyms, you can choose any pseudonyms you want to use instead of real names. None of the information you provide will allow you to be identified, either by name (unless they choose to use your own names) or indirectly (by program level or other information such as physical description, where you live, roommates' names, etc.).

b). I will not identify anyone in the written material when writing the data.

- c). All the data will be kept in a locked desk where only I will have access to it.
- d). There will be password to log in my laptop so that information will not be leaked.
- e). All the data will be kept for 2 years (until 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2015). The thesis will be finished by the end of August, but data will be kept for a longer time for the sake of further research and publication.
- f). I will audio record the interview for the sake of data analysis only with your permission.
- g). No data will be taken back to Mainland China.

I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. However we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Since your group is small, others may be able to identify you on the basis of references you make. Please keep this in mind when you decide what to tell me.

### **Participation and Withdrawal**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw from the interview any time if you feel uncomfortable or for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form. There will be no consequences to you if you decide to withdraw, and all the data you have provided will be destroyed immediately. During the interview, if you don't want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

If you know me personally, your decision whether or not to be part of the study will not affect the friendship between you and me.

If you choose to withdraw, you will still keep the compensation.

### **Compensation**

As a participant, you will get a \$10 Tim Hortons Gift Card. If you choose to withdraw, you can still keep the card.

### **Information about the Study Results**

I expect to have this study completed by approximately the end of August 2013. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know.

### **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at: [cuis3@mcmaster.ca](mailto:cuis3@mcmaster.ca) or 905-906-8988

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance.

If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support

E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

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### **CONSENT**

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Shuang Cui, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until approximately August 2013.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.
- I agree that the interview can be audio recorded. Yes [ ] No [ ]
- I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.  
Yes [ ] No [ ]

If yes, please send them to this email  
address \_\_\_\_\_

or this mailing  
address \_\_\_\_\_

- I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_