

# Exploring the Impacts of Social Media Usage on a Chinese International Student's Identity Development

Xiangting Xu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Edinburgh, EH7, 5BH Edinburgh, Scotland, The United Kingdom

Correspondence: Xiangting Xu, University of Edinburgh, EH7, 5BH Edinburgh, Scotland, The United Kingdom.

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## Abstract

International students' experiences of studying abroad include constructing their identities in an intercultural context. While much scholarly work on international students' identity development has concentrated on language learning and adaptation to the host culture, there has been limited investigation on how the usage of social media influence international students' identity development. Social media, such as Twitter, has opened up a wide range of possibilities for cross-cultural engagement. Although Twitter is officially restricted in mainland China, it has become a popular and cross-national digital platform for Chinese students who study abroad. This paper responds to the need for intercultural research on social media by examining how the media shapes an international student's identity. Informed by positioning theory, it chose the case of Wei, a Chinese postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh. By examining Wei's identity position in her narrative about Twitter, the findings demonstrated that the arguments on Twitter would strengthen the students' sense of national identity and responsibility of being an intercultural mediator. Furthermore, it implied that social media had a great potential for developing students' critical intercultural thinking and intercultural competence.

**Keywords:** international student, social media, positioning theory, identity

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## 1. Introduction

With the rise of social networking communication, Internet is allowing people to become more socially connected. The use of social networks serves as a bridge for cross-cultural communication (Mihailidis, 2014). Thus, for Individuals, their interactions with the reality of a virtual global society are becoming more frequent and intimate, contributing to individual growth

processes (Sun, 2012). However, when people are exposed to an unfamiliar online social circles, they may experience identity conflicts and crises. Especially for students, they are susceptible to these identity challenges as they transit to an unfamiliar cultural environment and connect to people who speak different languages (Stuart & Ward, 2011). This case may happen when a Chinese international student feels uncomfortable

in using the western social media. As studying abroad has become an aspiration for many families in China, many Chinese students choose to go abroad and experience the local culture. Since the majority of western social media platforms are blocked in China, Chinese international students have never been exposed to these platforms until they study abroad. Thus, they will be shocked by different opinions on media that they have never known. For example, the various voice on Twitter includes a lot of criticism about China. Many people attack the Chinese' socialist system and think there is no human right in the country. In this way, Chinese students may experience self-doubt and identity crisis.

As a result, I'd like to provide a glimpse into the tension dynamics that arise when a Chinese international student's identity is challenged, as well as how the student resists, renegotiates, and reconstructs the challenged identity in a social media context. I will do this by examining a Chinese international student's intercultural experience on Twitter, following the positioning theory offered by Bamberg (1997). Drawn on existing literature, I firstly situate the study and argue for a combination research of identity and social media usage. Then I provide an in-depth look at the identity positions in Wei's narrative and examine Wei's identity development in Bamberg's three-position levels (1997). And then, I integrate the results of my research and discuss the broader significance of the findings. Finally, the study brings the implications to the practice of identity in social media usage. By doing so, we may drive insights into how international students evolve selves through communication on social media.

## 2. Literature Review

Given the growing popularity of identity as a research topic in education, there is a commonly acknowledged definition. Identity, in Norton's (1997) words, is "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (p. 410). In the inter-disciplinary study, however, identity can be investigated from various theoretical viewpoints. From a positivist standpoint, an individual's identity is defined as

what is connected to him or her due to his or her membership in a given category (Antaki et al., 1996). By viewing identity as an individual's characteristics in a certain category such as sex, race, sexual orientation, and so on, this perspective also focuses on identity's static nature.

Similarly, essentialists believe that identity is an objective fact that is a part of one's cognitive make-up. Identity, according to this viewpoint, is obtained from one's awareness of membership in categories (Christy et al., 2019). Though viewed as a static reality by both positivists and essentialists, identity is regarded as a dynamic phenomenon by constructivist theorists. In the constructivist view, individuals continually build and make sense of themselves, using the cultural discourses and narratives accessible to them (Campbell, 2000). Throughout discussions or written exchanges, identity is established, built, or negotiated. This led to the formation of ethnic identity, minority identity, social identity, and national identity, which are all constructed under individuals' backgrounds and actions.

Guided by the constructivist view, the study believes that there is a dynamic interaction between the agency of international students and their intercultural context. And for international students, one type of identity, national identity, is particularly important. National identity is defined as "a collective product" in the shape of beliefs, values, assumptions, and expectations (Kelman, 1997, p. 172). Indeed, researchers have discovered that studying abroad can increase one's awareness of national identity (Gieser, 2015). Compared to members of majority groups, members of minority groups are more aware of collective identity (Hail, 2015). When international students go abroad, they may believe that how local people perceive them is related to the impression of their homeland. In some way, those international students are unofficial ambassadors for their home country (Hail, 2015). However, identity negotiations for international students have been also reported in previous research. For example, Minera (2020) discovered that students negotiated identities to achieve in-person interactions. According to her findings, Chinese international students are usually labeled as foreign or different by local students. Their identities are frequently challenged for political or

social issues that they have learned about through the media, which reminds Chinese students that they are identified with their country and intensify their sense of national identity after negotiation.

Recent research exploring social networking spaces (SNS) has found that Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and other platforms, can help international students handle their identities (Croucher, 2011). International students adjust to their new culture through social media by connecting them to business, international, and transnational home networks (Croucher, 2011). For example, in Forbush and Foucault-Welles's (2016) work, Chinese international students who used social networking sites before and during the research had more diversified social networks abroad, including students from host countries, and reported much greater levels of social and academic adjustment. The similar result also happens on Li and Chen's (2014) research, where Chinese students in the United States who used Facebook developed more active engagement with the local community.

Despite the growing body of study on the use and adaptation of social media, the impact of social media on identity building has received less attention. However, SNS can enhance intercultural communication skills effectively. This research fills a gap in the literature on international students' SNS identity formation. It chooses Wei's story and analyses it using Bamberg's (1997) positioning theory. Positioning theory is considered a useful tool for identity development because it focuses on conceptualizing identity as discursively constructed (Norton & Toohey, 2011) and emphasizes how individuals engage in their social position (reflexive position) and interact with one another (interactive position). According to Davies and Harré (1990), the position is "a discursive process in which they themselves negotiate as observable and subjectively coordinated participants in co-produced plantations" (p. 48).

Positioning theory focuses on the dynamic aspect of identity construction through interaction. It rejects the idea of identity as a distinct entity, concentrating on the context the participants interact (Nikolaou & Sclafani, 2018; Bucholtz & Hall,). The position considers crucial ideological and cultural variables, as well as social and energy

hierarchies (Beeching et al., 2018). As a result, position theory equips the intercultural researcher with analytical methods for determining how individuals are positioned in the major context.

### 3. Methodology

This qualitative case study was conducted online through WeChat's online voice chat. The participant is Wei, a Chinese postgraduate student who studied in Edinburgh and she claims that she has high participation in social media such as Twitter and Facebook.

Firstly, narrative inquiry is used as a methodological approach in this research. While other approaches focusing on examining benefits, narrative inquiry is focused on experience (Sinclair, 2002). It can be narrowly defined as limited to the analysis of particular stories, viewed as "a form of living, a way of life" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 78). Aiming to make sense of the "actions, doings, and happenings" of the Chinese international student, narrative can help paint a picture of the student's life and identity (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 79).

The primary method for data collection was a semi-structured online life story interview along with five open-ended questions. The interview was conducted in Mandarin, which is both the research and the participant's national language. This is because staying in the original language can avoid the potential meaning loss (Van et al., 2022). Hence, I just translate the extract that is presented in the paper and manage to match its meaning in English.

My research questions are as follow,

How does Twitter impact Wei, a Chinese international student's national identity construction?

Bamberg's (2004) three-level positioning is employed to deal with my research question. Positioning level 1 within the framework addresses the question *Who are the characters, and how are they positioned in the story?* The focus in this stage was on a fine-grained linguistic analysis of the means used by the speaker to establish the characters in their story. Positioning level 2 addresses the question *How does the speaker/narrator position himself/herself vis-à-vis his interlocutors?* and focuses on the interactive work

accomplished between the participants during the interview. It seeks to answer why a story is told at a particular time (Blix et al., 2015, p. 171). Finally, Positioning level 3 focuses on how the informants position themselves vis-à-vis the normative discourses around them (Bamberg, 2004) and addresses how the episodes and short stories are “situated in relation to the social and cultural processes beyond the immediate telling situation” (Blix et al., 2015, p. 171). This can be seen as the final stage, where the researcher seeks to understand how participants answer the *Who am I?* question throughout the interview (Blix et al., 2015).

#### 4. Findings

Drawn from Wei’s narrative data, the findings toward the research question are given below along with positioning analysis.

Level 1 *Who are the characters and how are they positioned in the story?*

The characters in Wei’s story are Wei, Wei’s friends in China and twitter users.

Extract 1

*When I was in China, my best friend and I were growing up under the patriotic educations. Patriotism was a very common ideology for us. On Chinese social media, voice about China was basically the same about national pride. However, both of us didn’t often post views about China on social media platforms. My friend thinks the patriotism is too abstract while I think I have no motivation to post my love. In most of time we show patriotism because others do that. If you don’t love your country, then you are an alien.*

From Extract 1, we can see there is the position of Wei’s friends in China. Here, Wei’s best friend is indeed a collectivist. In her friends’ view, patriotism in China is an abstract thing that people are supposed to own.

Extract 2

*I found out many Twitter users from Western countries support Taiwan’s independence, believing that once Taiwan belongs to China, Chinese Communist Party will endlessly oppress their people. They took Xinjiang cotton incident to prove the brutality of the Chinese Communist Party, even if it is a fake new. They believe China will maltreat the minority group of Xinjiang. This opinion really shocks me, making me feel I am from a rural and autocratic place.*

Throughout Wei’s narrative, she position twitter users as the rumormonger about China. In Wei’s perspective, she was totally don’t believe what the twitter users said about China. In Extract 2, Wei use “endlessly” “oppress” “brutality” “fake” to show the words of these netizens are false news in her perspective. She also uses “shock” “fake” to express shock when she heard about that. In this way, the Twitter users are creating rumors about China.

Level 2 *How does the speaker/narrator position himself/herself vis-à-vis his interlocutors?*

Extract 3

*I have been to Xinjiang, which to me is a very unique and beautiful place. And Twitter users were basing their opinions 17. about the events in Xinjiang on the assumptions of the Western media, and 18. They were not proving their opinions with their own feet. Thus, I feel I have some responsibility to speak for my country. At that moment I realized that as a Chinese studying abroad, no one is in a better position than us to judge whether this information is true or not, and that as people caught between two ideologies, we are the most objective and neutral voices. Our socialist system has been underway for decades and there may have been some misguidance during that time, but there is no perfect state regime in the world. Our party and government do genuinely have the future and well-being of the people in mind when they govern the country. As a Chinese international student, I think I need to make people from other countries know our Chinese opinions. Since western social media twitter is lack of Chinese voice, people just believe what they get from the western media. So, my responsibility, is to make these people have a clearer and view China from various angles. Thus, I begin to correct others’ fake opinion and try to persuade people in a reasonable way.*

According to the extract 3, using different expression to show her feeling, Wei implicitly positions herself as a contagious narrator in relation to the audience. Meanwhile, she describes the her experience of media usage and give audience to from different perspectives. she understands both Chinese and Western world’s opinion and know the reasons for that. She seems more like a neutral narrator.

Level 3 *Who am I?*

Wei assigns so many positions to herself. To begin with, she frames herself as a collectivist who is

expected to support her country rather than her own will as a result of her patriotic education in China. Wei believes she represents the Chinese image when she travels abroad. She is cautious because what she does can influence the foreigners' positive or negative impression of China. And after receiving so many negative comments on Twitter, her patriotism was sparked. She began to speak for China. She corrects certain false beliefs and attempts to get others to listen to her voice. She is an intercultural mediator as an international student. She examines the media's influence and values the Western sense of liberty, also attempting to make Twitter users understand and have multi-perspective views about China. Besides, she tries to persuade some Chinese who are unconfident about China on Twitter. She is indeed an unofficial ambassador of China.

## 5. Discussion

The findings reveal how Wei's national identity is constructed through her social media usage. Wei's online experience result in her identity shift from a collectivist to an unofficial ambassador of China. Before Wei used Twitter, both she and her friends lived in a collectivist country where Chinese culture plays an important role in students' identity. In Chinese culture, loyalty to the state goes hand in hand with loyalty to the family (Bregnbæk, 2016). Hence, to show their patriotism is a kind of political correctness. That loyalty to the country is from the collectivist position, in which individuals follow the groups' common values. After being exposed to Twitter, Wei interacted with people who criticized China, and then her sense of national responsibility was inspired. Wei attributes the Twitter users' criticism to the lack of a Chinese voice and deliberate induction of western media. Under such context, she positions herself as a representative for China, tries to correct others' fake opinion, and thus become unofficial ambassador who conveys Chinese positive image. As Kelman (1997) states, national identity is reflected in individuals' normatively prescribed beliefs, assumptions, and choices of how they approach these experiences in their social practices. Through the positioning analysis of Wei, we can clearly understand Wei's beliefs and how other context such as Twitter users' criticism influence her identity.

Compared to Minero's (2020) research in the

literature review, both her and this research have a topic about how Chinese international student's national identity is constructed in a foreign country context. However, the conflict in my research is more sharp, for I focus more on the social media usage. Due to the individual image on social media being virtual, people don't need to carry responsibility for their verbal attacks. Hence, people's biases and opinions can be enlarged and spread far distances. This may intensify the conflicts between the two different ideologies. When one perceives his/her collective group to be threatened, a stronger sense of emotional attachment and loyalty to that group is activated or becomes more amplified. Hence, social media provides a new perspective to improve the international student's national identity in an unexpected way.

Since the study's findings are based on the analysis of only one international student's experiences of social media use, it may not draw generalized conclusions. Meanwhile, the researcher's subjectivities will affect the process of data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My similar identity as a Chinese international student will influence the research. Since we are Chinese, the participant may feel judged or insecure when she shows no concerns about China. My Chinese identity becomes a barrier for her to express honestly, particularly on some sensitive issues where participant may attempt to show their love for their country even if they are not willing to do that. However, Wei, in this study, shows a display of honesty, and positioning theory can help us examine her context position and her reasonable motivation.

## 6. Conclusion

This research adds to the body of knowledge about the effects of social media on the development of international students' identities. The findings revealed the significance of identity for a Chinese international student, as well as how her identity is shaped through her intercultural interactions on social media. It suggests that the communication and argumentation on Twitter can enhance the student's sense of national identity. As a result, social media provides students with a good opportunity to reflect on and reevaluate their previous views of self-identification, as well as the ability to build a new national identity with

more openness and inclusivity (France & Rogers, 2012).

Some implications for language education can be derived from the study's findings. In response to Lee and Markey's (2014) work on online intercultural experience, to help international students reconstruct their identity in a unfamiliar context, language teachers could design a telecollaborative project via social media, in which language learners from different cultural contexts can have a debate on certain issues. Students can thus obtain a deeper grasp of culture and develop fresh perspectives on identity.

As for further research, considered into diversity in Chinese regions and nations, it is important that research on the topic of Chinese international student identity development disaggregate differential context within China. Hence the sample in the researches are expected to be expanded from multiple dimensions, such as Chinese students in different gender, ethnic groups or socioeconomic status as Minero (2020) in his research put forward. Besides, there is a similar need for social media researches about how international students from different countries and cultural background reconstruct and renegotiate their identities in online platforms.

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## Appendix A

### Consent form of Wei

Title of project: Exploring on the Impacts of Social Media Usage on a Chinese International Student' s Identity Development

Name of researcher: Xu

I invite you to take part in my research study about usage of Twitter. You will join on a semi-structure interview to talk about your Twitter experience as an international student.

Please initial all boxes if you agree

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet March 2022 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

3. I agree that non-identifiable quotes may be published in articles or used in conference presentations.

4. I agree with the interview being digitally audio recorded.

5. I agree to take part in this study

Wei

Print name of participant Date Signature

April 20<sup>th</sup> 2022

Print name of the person taking consent Date Signature