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Chapter 1: Navigating Online Down Under: International Students' Digital Journeys in Australia

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Abstract

Research focusing on the experiences of international students tends to centre directly on their educational experiences rather than their everyday lives outside study. Moreover, much of this research has concentrated almost exclusively on the various impacts of the *physical, geographic* mobility of international students as they move from one country to another, with very little exploration of their digital experiences. There also exists extensive research on the social media and information seeking experiences of young people in different regions of the world. Some of this research provides a comparison between different sources of information and uses of social media. However, there has been little research on what happens when young people move between regions or countries. Borrowing Chang and Gomes' (2017a) concept of the *digital journey*, where in crossing transnational borders, migrants might also cross digital borders, this chapter provides some concrete examples of the digital experiences of international students as they transition—wholly or partly—to the Australian digital environment. How do international students transition from certain online environments into others that may be completely different, even alien, to what they have previously experienced? By referring to qualitative and quantitative data we collected from three separate projects which we conducted between 2012 and 2017, this chapter shows that in making the digital journey, international students in Australia do not so much quit their original digital comfort zones as widen their digital horizons. Understanding international students' digital journeys is particularly significant since it has implications for future research in international student well-being and the provision of support services for students.

Introduction

International students represent a large group of transient migrants moving in and out of their host country annually. Each new cohort of international students needs information and support for their transition to the host country where they will be studying and living for, at least, a few years. At the start of academic semesters, new international students arriving in Melbourne, Australia are welcomed at the airport by volunteer international students who once were in their shoes. Organised by The City of Melbourne (the local government of Melbourne), and partnered with Study Melbourne (the education export section of the Victorian State Government), various educational institutions, and Melbourne Airport, 'The Welcome Desk', 'is a one-stop shop of information for students arriving in Melbourne, Victoria ...[and] ... provides you with information and advice when you arrive. The friendly staff and volunteers will answer your questions and will provide you with free information, advice and a Welcome Pack.' (Study Melbourne, 2017)

The Welcome Desk is not the only place where students are provided with information about their sojourn. Much of the information available to students from universities and state or local governments is themed around their everyday lives (e.g. transport, accommodation, health and food), and the premise is that once armed with this information, newly arrived international students will be well equipped to make the transition from home to host country. The students then usually enrol in institutions where Orientation and Transition Programs continue to pile more information onto them in order to equip them to cope with their new host city and institution. Unsurprisingly, a lot of this information is now provided online, as institutions and governments seek to move into the digital space.

In these standard information provision practices, two assumptions are made. The first is that the journey for the international student is most importantly a physical one. Since the very early days of international students arriving in Australia, the focus has been on the transition of students into their new physical environments. Current practices in Orientation and Transition Programs are based on decades of wisdom about what works and what does not in acculturating international students. Unsurprisingly, these programs are often focused on the physical, emotional and social transitions of the student. There is little or no attention paid to the digital journeys of students in this digital age. The second assumption is that the digital space is culturally homogenous, such that anyone from any culture should be able to navigate their way online and effectively access information from the online platforms provided by Australian governments and institutions. This assumption is based on the idea

that students are ‘digital natives’ who are familiar with finding information online (Prensky 2001).

This chapter questions these two assumptions by suggesting that international students do not only make a physical journey but are also required to make a digital one. We discuss the concept of *digital journeys* developed by Chang and Gomes (2017a) and provide data from Australia to illustrate this concept in more detail. Our examples also illustrate that the digital space(s) that international students traverse are in fact not homogeneous, but vary in significant ways from place to place and culture to culture. We refer to separate projects we have undertaken between 2012 and the present in order to explore the *digital journeys* concept. These include Gomes’ 2013 to 2016 study of transient migrants in Australia (which is a larger project that includes Singapore, briefly referred to later), Chang and Gomes’ current study on the information-seeking behaviour of international students in Australia, and Martin’s longitudinal ethnographic study of the social and subjective experiences of international students from the People’s Republic of China in Australia (ongoing since 2015, with a pilot study in 2012).

Not Just a Physical Journey

Perhaps unsurprisingly, research, policy and practice in the area of international education have often concentrated on the physical journeys that these students make. International students often study in countries whose national cultures and identities are dissimilar to their own. Globally, the majority of international students travel from countries in Asia to ‘developed’ western nations (OECD 2015, *Education at a glance*: 352). In doing so, they enter into countries where unfamiliar forms of linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity can be challenging. Hence, placing emphasis on the physical, geo-cultural journey is necessary in order to help new international students acclimatise.

However, today, the international student is often in the process of becoming a seasoned sojourner. They are increasingly accumulating not only extended periods of time overseas prior to the commencement of their studies, but also the desire for further mobility after the completion of their diploma or degree. In her study of transient migrants in Singapore and Australia, Gomes (2017) found that international students in Singapore in particular had a wealth of experience living in transience prior to their study sojourn in the city-state. Often, this was because of the professional circumstances of their parents: as minors, they followed their parents to the places where they were employed. Others

experienced prior overseas study in countries other than those they were currently studying in. This resonates with Martin's findings that international students from China studying in Melbourne often had significant experience of internal educational mobility within China, frequently having moved cities one or more times during their primary and/ or secondary education prior to arriving in Australia (Martin 2014). Moreover, both Gomes and Martin found that the international students they surveyed in Australia and Singapore (for Gomes) had strong aspirations for further transnational mobility, with hopes to work, live and possibly study further outside both the home and host countries. Many students revealed, in particular, a desire to move to the financial and cultural capitals of Europe, America and Japan such as London, New York, and Tokyo.

For this generation of international students, one key facilitator of this increasingly global view of one's life trajectory is the Internet and access to information digitally. Digital access to information from abroad impacts on young people not only prior to their educational journeys, but also during their time of overseas study. For example, Martin and Rizvi (2014) point to the fact that while living in Australia, international students from India and China frequently access transnational virtual spaces: spaces that are accessed through apps from their home country, with content in home country languages, and linking 'back' to friends and family at home, as well as out to co-ethnic diasporic communities both locally and worldwide. This underlines again the importance of considering the role that the digital practices play in the experiences of international students.

Definition of Digital Journeys

The *digital journeys* concept first developed by Chang and Gomes (2017a) 'refers to the transition that an individual makes online from relying on one digital bundle of sources to the other new bundle, perhaps based on the new host country or internationally' (313). Based on collaborative work they have undertaken on the information-seeking behaviours of international students in Australia (Gomes et al. 2014, Alzougool et al. 2013a & 2013b, Chang et al. 2012), Chang and Gomes suggest that a digital journey takes place:

"...when an international student starts to rely on a new digital bundle of sources that is distinct from any pre-existing ones. Digital Journeys represent the acts of moving to-and-from old and new digital bundles of sources. It is arguable that where an international student continues to rely heavily on pre-existing digital bundles of sources while experiencing the new host country they are in effect ...translocals. On the other hand, it may also be possible for international students to make the full

digital journey and abandon their pre-existing digital bundles of sources by relying only on what the new host country has to offer.”(313-314)

‘Translocal’ refers to transnational subjects such as international students whose everyday experience is marked by the interweaving of relationships, information and communication that are connected both to immediate (in their current geographic location) and distant (transnational) localities. In their work on social media and Chinese international students in Melbourne, Martin and Rizvi (2014), for instance, found that their respondents were able to connect with their home nation through active and daily use of non-English platforms (e.g. Weibo). However, they argue that this does not necessarily represent a ‘disconnection’ from Melbourne as a locality, since localized Chinese-language media such as Weibo and WeChat offer resources that *aid* students’ localization in Australian cities (local information, guides to the city, local news and so on). In such situations, students have either added new sources to their digital bundle or have enhanced their existing bundle with more, yet similar sources of information (such as using Chinese-language apps like WeChat to navigate the local spaces of Melbourne).

Chang and Gomes (2017a) observe that there are two primary aspects of the digital journey that a sojourner such as an international student may make:

- a) the internal factors of the sojourner, such as self-identity, collective identity and digital skills, which may motivate and enable the international student to embark on a digital journey (or mitigate against that journey being made); and
- b) the factors that enhance the journey, which includes new online sites’ usability and convenience, devices, and other online netizens (314).

The digital journey concept highlights that these are transitions that *may or may not occur* for international students, or *may take different forms for different students*. This is because journeys can be experienced differently or take different forms depending on the sojourner. However, it does not imply that students ‘should’ make a complete transition, nor that those who do not are necessarily cause for concern. Supporting Martin and Rizvi’s argument that localities have been re-defined through ubiquitous transnational connections in the digital age, the notion of digital journeys is intended to help us explore the various possible types of transition between these newly configured localities.

Internal factors driving digital journeys

Chang and Gomes (2017b) suggested that for international students, self-identity could determine how far or near they might journey online. For example, whether a student sees herself/ himself as someone who is adventuring into a new world or, alternatively, as wanting to preserve his/ her home culture strongly, may impact on how much they move away from familiar sources of digital information.

In addition, because the Internet is a social space, Chang and Gomes (2017b) proposed that communities play an important role in the online space. Therefore, the collective identity as experienced by the international student can also impact on how far they journey online. Some examples of collective online identification could include: gamers, pet owners, LGBTIQ+ communities, drama, music, sports, or political affiliations. In some international student communities, nationality itself functions particularly strongly as a collective identity—as Martin has found in her ongoing research in the Chinese international student community in Melbourne. Since belonging is an important part of the self-perceived identity, where there is strong existing sense of belonging through pre-existing social media ties, the likelihood of moving into new digital communities may be decreased.

The digital skills of the international student are also an important consideration. Esfahani and Chang (2012) highlighted the impact of digital skills in determining international students' information seeking strategies. This also includes students' digital literacy levels.

External factors impacting on digital journeys

Chang and Gomes (2017a) also pointed out that the user experience of international students in using new sites and sources of information in the host country can determine whether they make the digital journey or return to more familiar sites. They argued that because of differences in aesthetics and expectations of what a 'good' website or app might be, it is important not to assume that all international students will necessarily have a positive experience of using sources designed and promoted by Australian institutions and governments.

The role of accessible online communities in the host country that address the needs of new international students will also play a part in whether they are able to find new networks across cultures and contexts. Moreover, the role of new online communities is crucial in providing emotional and social support in the new environment. However, it should be noted that these communities can take different forms. For example, some online communities in the host country consist predominantly of co-nationals (as in the example

above of WeChat localized in Melbourne), while others facilitate greater cross-cultural mixing (as we have found with globally popular multilingual apps like Facebook and Instagram).

Finally, Chang and Gomes (2017a) brought up the role that a diversity of devices and platforms might play in understanding the digital journeys made by international students. While it is true that students might switch devices over time, an understanding of the platforms they rely on helps us to unpack their digital experiences. Here, we introduce the concept of polymedia to the discussion on digital journeys. When studying Filipino and Caribbean transnational families, Madianou and Miller (2012) explain that individuals and groups who are mobile remain connected to their friends and families back home through the use of a *variety* of technologies. This happens for three reasons: first, they have access to a wide range of mobile and internet-based media; second, they are literate in digital media; and third, access to internet-based communication technologies is increasingly becoming free (e.g. free yet sometimes limited wifi access in public spaces). In their introduction to *Beyond New Media: Discourse and Critique in a Polymediated Age* (2015), Herbig, Herrmann, and Tyma extend Madianou and Miller's concept of polymedia by observing that people use different platforms to maintain different types of interactions and relationships. This implies that international students might use 'different bundles' of platforms as they move across countries, which should be explored.

The remainder of this chapter draws on data from interviews and participant-observation with international students in Australia to provide illustrations of the different factors impacting on international students' digital journeys.

International Students in Australia

In 2016, education services in Australia brought in AUD\$22 billion through full-fee paying international students. By the end of 2016, there were 712,884 international students (including exchange students) enrolled in education institutions throughout Australia (Department of Education and Training, 2017). These students came from a range of countries throughout Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, the European Union and elsewhere. While the majority come from the Asian region, students from China continue to represent the largest group of international students studying in Australia. It is in this context that Martin and Gomes conducted their separate studies.

Martin is conducting a five-year qualitative study, funded by the Australian Research Council, in which she is following a group of 56 female tertiary students from pre-departure,

in China, through several years of study in Melbourne, Australia, and on to their post-graduation destinations (female students are targeted since they outnumber male students, and Martin's broader questions concern the impact of international study on young Chinese women's gendered identity). The study is designed as a longitudinal ethnography, intended to enable a holistic understanding of participants' everyday experience in the informal domain. Martin's methods include several rounds of audio recorded interviews; hundreds of hours of regular, non-audio recorded 'hanging out' with participants both one-on-one and in small friendship groups, sometimes including participants' non-participating friends, classmates and family members; participant-observation at full-day large-group activities; and ongoing daily virtual interactions with all participants, plus around 170 additional contacts in Melbourne's Chinese student community, both via Facebook and Instagram and via the Chinese social media app WeChat, which is currently the most popular social media app used by Chinese international students in Australia.

Concurrently, as part of her broader Australian Research Council study looking at the lived experience of transient migrants in Australia, Gomes queried respondents about their self-perceived identities, social networks (friendship groups), concepts of home, and media and communication use. In 2013 Gomes conducted her fieldwork in Melbourne in the Australian state of Victoria by interviewing 60 international students. She interviewed undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in the state's higher education institutions and diploma students studying English in ELICOS colleges. Her respondents came from various parts of Asia,

The Digital Journeys of International Students in Australia

In the following section, we illustrate the concept of digital journeys through the reported experiences of international students.

Transitioning between Digital Environments in Home and Host Countries

Although technically, the Internet is relatively borderless (with notable exceptions where censorship is in place), the practices of netizens vary significantly across countries. The Chinese international students in Melbourne who are participating in Martin's study overwhelmingly cite the Chinese app WeChat as their number one social media platform. WeChat is owned by Chinese company TenCent, hosts content nearly exclusively in simplified Chinese characters (used in PR China), and, as a media company located in China,

is administered and regulated by the Chinese state authorities. It is currently among the most popular social media platforms in China (WalkTheChat 2016), and students' use of it begins in China and continues during their stay in Melbourne. However, as noted above, this should not be taken to imply that Chinese international students somehow 'remain in China' through digital means while studying abroad, since WeChat, like Weibo, hosts multiple *local* news and information services that are specific to Melbourne, and whose content is created locally by authors and businesses within Melbourne's Chinese community (Martin and Rizvi 2014).

Martin's respondents use their personal WeChat feed (the Moments or *pengyou quan* function) not only to maintain contact with friends and family back in China, but also—and they emphasise that this can at times be an even more important function—to network with the Chinese international student community in Australia, which has needs and concerns that are specific to its situation, which are not relevant to or well understood by friends who remain in China. Thus, the students in Martin's study do make a particular kind of digital journey, despite largely continuing to preference a media platform hosted in their home country. They transition from city-specific WeChat content in their home cities in China, to Melbourne- or Australia-specific WeChat content authored by other Chinese international students, or other Chinese migrants, living in Australia. Elsewhere, Martin characterises WeChat's dual function as *both* 'ethnic local-community media' in Melbourne *and* 'transnational media' from China as making it a new form of 'ethno-transnational media' (Martin 2016). The extensive Melbourne-based Chinese community on WeChat, which incorporates both international students and longer-term Chinese migrants, functions like a locally-specific 'municipality' in the wider terrain of the transnational WeChat universe. This localized WeChat municipality co-exists with other online Chinese community resources widely used by Martin's study participants; for example, Yeeyi.com, a Chinese-language classifieds website that in 2015-17 was the most popular resource for newly arriving students to find a room or apartment to rent in Australia (rental deals with landlords in the Chinese community were often made via this forum even before students departed China).

At the same time, after their arrival in Melbourne, many of Martin's study participants have opened accounts on non-Chinese social media that are blocked in China—Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook—thus broadening their digital horizons.

Self-Identity and Digital Journey

Somewhat comparably to Martin's respondents, Gomes' respondents in Australia note that they continue the same or similar online activities as they undertook before their overseas study. These activities go beyond connecting to friends and family to include their everyday information-seeking activities and entertainment. A female undergraduate Southeast Asian international student in Australia, for instance, mentioned that she visits online shopping sites which are commonly used in her home nation rather than those in Australia (this is also a common practice among Martin's respondents, who tend to continue to prefer China's Taobao to America's eBay).

When it came to seeking daily news, many of Gomes's respondents tended to go online to look up news media outlets they were familiar with while in the home nation. It is worthwhile to note that these media outlets were not always nation-centric but rather globally known. For instance, an international student from Singapore might well access *The Straits Times*—Singapore's flagship English-language news outlet—but also the BBC and CNN; stating that accessing these news outlets was part of their daily routine while back in the island-state. While some of Gomes' respondents may access the news outlets which they are familiar with in order to keep up to date with the happenings in their home country and even elsewhere, her respondents generally were not keen to look at news websites in the host nation. A Singaporean male undergraduate student in Australia, for instance, explained that unless the issues in Australia were directly related to or relevant to him (concerning permanent migration for example), he was not interested in visiting Australian online news outlets.

Sometimes, getting news about home is a combination of intentionally seeking news and 'inadvertently' being provided with news through social media, as the following respondent from Taiwan who is in Australia explains:

"I think just use internet and some news or something – like yeah smart phone is very easy yeah to because it has apps, yeah they will tell you yeah, what happen in Taiwan, so I think it's very, very easy, but not for all day – you can't just all day look what happened in Taiwan; so maybe just the big things or something you will know and I think Facebook, every of your friend, lots of your friend and they will post what happened in your country so that's why I will, I would know but not full of everything."

All of Gomes' respondents, like Martin's, also let her know that they went online in order to stream or download entertainment (e.g. television shows, films and music) that they usually enjoyed while back home (see Martin 2016 for further discussion). Although all of Gomes's respondents admitted that the entertainment they often watched and listened to has been consistently North American (e.g. Hollywood fare), a few informed her that they did enjoy home nation grown or language-specific entertainment. A few South Koreans, for instance, said that they liked watching Korean dramas while overseas while a few ethnic Chinese respondents noted that they preferred listening to songs in Mandarin because they were 'softer' than English-language music. Meanwhile, a few others let Gomes know that watching visual productions from the homeland online allows them to feel a sense of identity, as the following male Pakistani student in Australia explains: "[Watching a] video [from] Pakistan it's an expression of my [Pakistani] background." For him, watching visual media that was made in Pakistan allowed him to connect with his Pakistani identity. (See also Martin and Rizvi 2014)

Collective Identity and Digital Journey

Gomes' respondents, like Martin's, informed her that it is important to feel connected to the home nation. They implied that these connections are made through digital connectivity both with co-nationals in their homelands (though not necessarily only with personal friends they made before leaving for overseas study), and also with those who are fellow diasporic co-nationals in the host nation or elsewhere. Respondents noted that they still wanted to maintain links with their co-national diaspora despite being in the host country for a number of years.

At the same time, Gomes's respondents also implied that they kept up passive engagement with their respective home nations through surveillance of the activities of their social media contacts. Here Gomes found that by reading posts and looking at photographs and videos posted by their social media friends (for example on Facebook), her respondents were able to keep up to date not only with their contacts' lives but also (indirectly) with the happenings in the home nation. For example posts by social media contacts might refer to recent political, cultural and economic events taking place.

Yet, some of Gomes' respondents indicated that the reason they were not strongly connected to friends in the home nation was simply because they had very few friends back home with whom they still maintained close relationships. Some of the international students

spoken to by both Gomes and Martin admitted that they had grown apart from the friends they left back in the home nation and at that point of their lives, were connecting in a more meaningful way with their fellow international students, since they felt that other international students better understood what they were going through.

Being an overseas student, in other words, creates a situation where the online community and collective identity become particularly important. Gomes' respondents noted that they found online communities specifically for international students from the countries they came from important to everyday life in Australia. For example, a number of South Korean students Gomes spoke to stated that they were part of online communities on Facebook and KakaoTalk. KakaoTalk is the most commonly used social media platform in South Korea and among diasporic South Koreans. These online communities allowed the South Korean international students to feel connected to South Korea by keeping in touch with news back home, as well as to connect with fellow South Korean diaspora in Australia who they felt shared similar experiences as them. This is comparable to the function of Weibo and WeChat for the Chinese students Martin is researching. Ji, a female South Korean who moved to Melbourne barely a month after completing an Australian architecture degree in another state explained to Gomes:

“[T]here’s a Korean community website thing and I haven’t done it for so long but when I was really bored I’d posted something or—yeah a lot of people were posting that—just trying to make friends; and in similar situations or they just came here and they don’t have any friends and they’re just looking to catch up with—something like that—so I’ll just meet with them if they’re similar age and whatever and then yeah; I actually have friend who I’m still good friends with since I first came here—she’s also Korean and she was first year uni student too... I use Facebook obviously—it’s a, yeah, that’s a big thing I think because it’s easier to meet people there because you kind of know them or you have mutual friends so it’s not so weird...”

These online communities, however, while providing support in terms of practical advice and similar experiences of living in transience overseas—elements that Gomes' respondents felt were important while they were in Australia—did not necessarily mean that users developed *close* bonds with people in those communities. Ji explains:

“I was looking for some information and there’s this website that’s just—cyber ... forum—so I just, yeah you’re just posting—some people ask questions and some

people answer... Yeah, and looking for houses, or housemates or yeah, jobs—for things like that.”

Ji's discussion of the online communities she is part of tells us that she looks to online communities that reflect her identity and experience as a South Korean in Australia. However, these online communities have varied traction when it comes to forming meaningful relationships with users. While on the one hand they are useful in terms of practical information and advice, on the other, they do help to facilitate face-to-face meetings with other diasporic co-nationals. One of the online communities Ji joins is a Korean community website which she explained is very active with users frequently posting onto the site. For Ji, this site facilitated a sense of the South Korean diasporic identity which allowed her to also meet with newly arrived South Koreans to Melbourne who she felt she could get to know primarily because they were, like her - South Koreans in Australia. The fact that this site has a lot of traffic may indicate that the South Korean diaspora find this space particularly useful when it comes to making new relationships based on a shared overseas South Korean experience. The shared South Korean diasporic experience in other words, becomes a bridge for identifying with each other so as to feel a sense identity and belonging. In other words, while intending to apply for permanent residency which meant that if successful, she would be staying in Australia for an indefinite period of time, Ji found that she was needing to feel more than ever connected to the South Korean diaspora rather than to a broader section of Australian citizenry. For Ji, moving from one Australian state to another even after spending 5 years as an international student, meant starting from scratch in terms of adjusting to a new place and building her real and online social and support networks with people she could strongly identify with – the South Korean diaspora. Yet this is only one part of the story.

A more complex picture emerges from the experience of some of Gomes' respondents in having to 're-learn' home nation social media culture. Social media, as many studies (e.g. Gomes, 2016a & 2016b; Wong 2014) have shown, allow connectivity to international students' home nation. However, in order to keep up to date with what goes on in the home nation, some of Gomes' respondents had to make a reverse digital journey. In other words, they had to learn from scratch the digital environment of their home nation—something at which their peers who had never left were already proficient. Lao, for example, noted that before China blocked Facebook in 2009, this platform was one that he commonly used to keep in contact with friends he left behind in China, as well as those he made in Singapore.

However, because of China's subsequent blocking of Facebook, in order to keep up with his friends back in China, he later had to learn a new digital environment that he had not previously inhabited, due to his sojourn in Singapore. That is, he had to learn the Chinese social media environment (especially Renren) while outside of China. Unlike Chinese students who came *after* China blocked Facebook and who had thus learned and adjusted to Chinese social media platforms, Lao had to learn how to use these platforms while in Singapore to reconnect with his lost friends back home.

Moving abroad for study can also provide the impetus for young people to develop new online community affiliations. Drawing from the work of Graham Day (2006), Gomes (2016) writes that the notion of community is no longer static. Instead, migration and mobility create new communities based on emerging needs and new identities. International students, in other words, may form new affiliations with other international students, sometimes regardless of nationality, simply because they are foreign students whose shared experiences bind them together (as in Ji's case, above). As indicated above, since arriving in Australia, many of Martin's research participants have opened accounts on sites that are blocked in China. Some post material on Facebook or Instagram that might be 'sensitive' vis-à-vis their families—whether connected with their romantic lives, party-going, or other extra-curricular activities—and which they wouldn't tend to upload to their WeChat feed as that would make it visible to their parents. Martin also observes that, not surprisingly, participants' friendship groups differ significantly on Facebook and Instagram, with more non-Chinese friends commenting and interacting there, and students tending to post in English as well as or instead of Chinese, for their benefit. A handful of her participants are *more* active on Facebook or Instagram than they are on WeChat: these are students who see themselves as having made an active, reflexive investment in orienting themselves toward social life beyond the Chinese community, and use these platforms as a tool in extending and deepening their social relationships with non-Chinese friends met in Australia. Others freely mix participation in homeland and non-homeland social media groups. This was the case with one young woman from Nanjing, who showed Martin her densely populated phone screen to demonstrate her avid usage of WeChat, Weibo, WhatsApp, Facebook and more for networking with likeminded fans of *Star Trek*, musicals, cosplay, and movies. She also maintained a regular food-photography blog across WeChat and Instagram. These hobbies, to a significant extent enabled and enhanced by her social media-based networking, also spilled

out into this student's offline life, for example when she regularly attended Comic-Con other fan conventions in Australia, extending her local social connections.

Such networks indicate the potentially important social function of online communities that are not exclusively connected to the home nation. These networks may also be associated with evolving diasporic cultural networks that are transnational and relatively borderless.

Digital Literacy and User Experience

In her study with the group of international students from China, Martin's participants tend to see her as an 'insider' to the Australian university system and local social life, and regularly contact her (via WeChat's messaging function) with practical questions about everyday life and study. In the course of attempting to help her participants out with their queries about navigating local institutions—universities; real estate agents and regulators; medical providers; police; tax, immigration, census, labour and legal authorities; and so on—Martin has become aware of the challenges these students face in navigating the online resources provided by these bodies. On one hand, students face difficulty in *locating* the relevant information available on Australian websites; on the other hand, they also face challenges *effectively using* these resources (filling in online forms, locating contact details of the relevant authorities, finding information about what process to follow, et cetera).

This issue is perhaps particularly salient in relation to information provided by universities: many students have asked for Martin's help in locating, for example, contact details for student health or counselling services; where to apply for Special Consideration on assignments; even where to find the webpage of the International Student Office at their university. No doubt Australian institutions make their best efforts to make such information accessible and user-friendly, but evidently international students face challenges greater than those faced by domestic students in navigating these online systems. Part of the issue may be linguistic, but it seems plausible to suggest that obstacles may also be raised by international students' unfamiliarity with the layout, style, aesthetics and logic of the way information is presented in Australian digital environments (to see what we mean, compare the layout logic of the gateway webpage for The University of Melbourne, at www.unimelb.edu.au, with that of China's Henan University, at www.henu.edu.cn). In this sense, digital literacy and user experiences can be culturally bound and offer new challenges to assumptions about the nature

of digital spaces. Often, the trans-national diversity of such spaces is simply forgotten by usability engineers.

There may also be cultural differences to consider in students' understandings of the best way of sourcing reliable information. For example, several of Martin's respondents remarked on their surprise at the widespread and reliable use of email as a means of communicating with teaching staff at Australian universities. In China, they said, if you need to speak with a teacher about some aspect of your studies, you must find a way to do so face-to-face, since teaching staff tend not to communicate with students via email, and staff email addresses can even be rather difficult to locate. Virtually the reverse seemed to them to be true in Australia. By extrapolation, this suggests that a fruitful line of enquiry might be to survey the extent to which international students from different countries *trust* information provided digitally, versus information gleaned in person from university staff: which would they tend to turn to first? It is possible that in Martin's case, some students with study-related questions (especially those enrolled at the university where she works) contacted her as a first port of call because, as a member of staff, they assumed information gleaned from her directly might be more reliable than what they would find online (although in practice, she simply re-directed them to the relevant online resources). In other words, it may be worth considering not only students' levels of *digital literacy* with Australian online information, but also their pre-existing *attitudes* toward information provided by institutions via digital means versus in person. These attitudes are likely to be shaped by students' prior educational experiences and the extent to which schools or universities in their home countries provide (or don't provide) key information for students via online means.

Polymedia and Platforms

The devices and polymedia used by international students are not always the same as those popular in the host nation. It is important to consider whether there is a shift in the use of devices when students move to the new host country and whether this might impact on the sites and polymedia (comprising different platforms) they use (eg. KakaoTalk, Orkut, WeChat, Instagram, YouKu, Baidu). This questions the assumption that all students will have access to, and familiarity with, similar devices and polymedia. Some students from developing nations might not have had high levels of access prior to their move to the host nation. With regard to devices, others might move from a predominantly desktop computer setup to a more mobile set of networked communication technologies. Relatedly, the

technical affordances of regional location can affect students' choices of sites. For example, while YouTube is blocked in China so that users must access it, if at all, via VPN, conversely, the popular Chinese video search engines Youku and Tudou run extremely slowly outside China, pushing Chinese students abroad toward YouTube.

Almost all the international students Gomes and Martin spoke to in Australia were, like other young people in their age group, multi-proficient when it came to social media use (boyd, 2014). They were also often easily able to cope with different types of social media platforms. Among Gomes's interviewees, while almost all respondents were Facebook users, they balanced this platform with other social networking sites such as Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, LinkedIn, MSN Messenger, Microsoft VChat, Snapchat, personal blogs, YouTube channels and Google Plus. The most-utilised combination of platforms reported by respondents was comprised, unsurprisingly, of Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. Snapchat and Google Plus were the platforms least popular with respondents. While balancing different social networking platforms is not unique, as seen in the profusion of apps that help users organise their many social media accounts (Moreau, 2015), what made international students different from their domestic peers—as corroborated in Martin's findings, discussed above—was the fact they took this balancing of platforms to the next level.

In Gomes' study, for instance, a Taiwanese respondent in Australia noted that he juggled different social media platforms based on language. He explained that in order to communicate with his ethnic Chinese friends (e.g. from Taiwan, China and elsewhere), he maintained Chinese social media usage. He juggled these with what he considered English-language platforms (e.g. Facebook) in order to communicate with 'western people or my friend[s] in Australia.' Therefore, while Herbig, Herrmann and Tyma's collection as well as Madianou and Miller's research exclusively looked at users who communicate in a single language in polymedia, Gomes' work with international students adds language as another dimension to this developing conceptualization of polymedia. This is corroborated in the findings of the other authors, also. For instance, Facebook supports languages other than English, and many of Martin's respondents use it bilingually: in both English and simplified-character Chinese, depending on context and intended audience.

Many respondents, like Martin's discussed above, also noted that they balanced platforms prominent in their home nations with the globally used Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn. Indonesian respondents, for instance, made extensive use of

BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), Line, and Path, while South Korean respondents were frequently active on KakaoTalk. While this platform allowed them to keep in touch with family and friends back home, it was also used to connect to other South Koreans also in transience in the host nation and elsewhere. The implication here is that international students might try on a different 'bundle of polymedia' prior to versus after arrival in a host country, depending on their needs and circumstances.

Thus, there is a diversity of polymedia used by international students from different countries. To some extent, international students seem to take up new platforms as they move across countries. However, it is important to consider the extent to which they become adept with these new platforms, and the fact that the new platforms seem likely to broaden students' polymedia assemblages rather than to simply replace the platforms they used before arrival.

Factors Impacting on the Digital Journeys of International Students

Referring back to Chang and Gomes' (2017a) suggestion that there are both internal and external factors driving digital journeys, this chapter has shown the following:

First, there may be a change in online behaviour once a student moves across nations for study. This might include adopting new social media platforms, accessing new content via previously familiar platforms, finding new sources of information (in the home language or English or both), beginning to use platforms that were blocked in the home country, abandoning platforms with low functionality outside the home country, or finding new online communities. Therefore, the digital journey concept seems to be supported with reference to international students.

Second, the self-identity of the students is expressed in and related to their new online behaviours. Whether it is in re-affirming their pre-existing identities or supporting developing identities, the choice of information sources and social media platforms seem to be related to the ways international students navigate identity (e.g. choosing to use information based on countries of origin; reading newspapers of particular nations; using polymedia that is more popular in particular regions) while they are in the host nation.

Third, the collective identities of the students seem to play a significant role in the age of social media. The students highlighted the importance of online communities. Social media platforms are used to 1) maintain connections with friends from home, 2) find new co-

national networks online in the host nation, and/ or 3) develop other forms of networks based on interests and friendship groups. Students will do at least one of these, if not all of them. We argue that students who have done 2) or 3) have made a digital journey.

Fourth, the digital literacy of international students is not in question in this chapter. Rather, it's their *cross-cultural digital literacy* that needs to be better understood. While some studies continue to question the general digital literacy of students (even though they are digital natives) (e.g. Sandel, 2014), most have not addressed what happens when people move across digital environments between different countries, which might include encountering different languages, platforms, customs, aesthetics, means by which information is obtained and used, and logics of information flow. This chapter has shown the challenges that arise for international students in such contexts.

Fifth, closely related to the cross-cultural digital literacy of students is the usability of websites in host nations for the diversity of international students. This is to look at the phenomenon from the view of the information provider. As indicated, this could include (beyond language) factors such as aesthetics, layout and basic accessibility issues, in terms of cross-cultural comprehensibility in the way information is presented.

Finally, we should consider the digital affordances offered in terms of the polymedia and specific platforms that international students adopt. It is worth asking whether host nation websites could be easily accessed on the wide range of platforms used by students. In addition, in some instances, international students might have adopted new polymedia (since coming to a new host country) and might be less adept at navigating these and therefore, would need time to become more familiar with them.

CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Several implications for educational and governmental institutions that need to communicate more effectively with international students thus need to be highlighted.

Recommendation 1: Question the Assumption of the Homogeneity of “Digital Natives”

The international students interviewed by Martin and Gomes show a diversity of digital experiences. The experiences of these students also indicate the reality (and complexity) of the digital journeys they have made. We have shown that students have a diversity of skills, literacies and experiences. This suggests that if they are to communicate

and engage effectively, institutions and information providers cannot adopt a “one size fits all” strategy.

Recommendation 2: Acknowledge the accessibility and usability issues of websites and other online platforms, accounting for cross-cultural digital literacy and language considerations

This point focuses attention on the ways in which social media sites and websites are designed. We are not suggesting that institutions and governments need to provide websites in every language spoken by international students, though it would make sense to provide important information at least in the main non-English languages, bearing in mind the relevance of this for parents as well as commencing students. The main institutional website needs to consider cross-cultural access. Too often, websites are designed with a target audience of only the local community, even though the educational institutions purport to be international. Also, institutions need to engage via key social media platforms in different languages in order to more effectively disseminate key information. Ability to operate in the multilingual polymedia spaces of international students represents a key opportunity to communicate and engage effectively with them.

Recommendation 3: Include transition programs for students to introduce them to the new digital environment of host nation.

Current best practice in transition and orientation programs for international students tends to focus on the physical spaces, socio-cultural well-being, and academic needs of students. There has not been as much focus on students’ digital experiences. This recommendation acknowledges that the digital experiences of students are very much a part of their lives while studying in the host country. Therefore, institutions should seriously consider transition programs that focus on the digital worlds of international students, to familiarise international students with relevant new platforms, sites, digital customs, online communities and sources of information.

Recommendation 4: Build positive online communities that welcome international students and celebrate diversity

Because of the need to acknowledge collective identity and online communities, institutions need to support communities that engender positive interactions. It is important to ask the following questions in future research: What is educational institutions’ role in

fostering such interactions? Do they have a role in helping to construct positive online communities, or could they find a better way to support organically developed online communities? At the very least, institutions and host communities certainly need to ensure that existing online (and offline) communities are more inclusive and provide spaces for the sharing of diverse experiences, in order to make international students' journeys more rewarding.

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