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Home Away from Home: International Students and their Identity-Based Social Networks in Australia

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of identity in helping international students form social networks at an Australian institution and how these networks contribute to creating a sense of home away. The findings suggest that international students form distinct social networks that are not necessarily solely made up of fellow students from their home countries. Rather, international students form a mixture of social networks that are based on the complex individual identities of each student centred on a variety of common factors, such as: course of study, place of work, neighbourhood, culture, religion and personal interests (hobbies). Hence many students are part of social groups that consist of international students from their specific region and beyond, as well as local (Anglo and non-Anglo) students. These locally based social networks complement existing home-based networks which are maintained virtually through social media to create a home away from home.

Keywords: International Students, social networks, identities, Australia

In 2011 Australia welcomed 332,700 international students, yet little is known about how their complex identities influence the social networks they make in order to negotiate everyday life in their overseas host nation. Emerging studies (Gray, Chang & Kennedy, 2010; Sawir, 2008; Kashima & Loh, 2006) are showing that international students in Australia create identities and social networks that are tied to the host nation while studying. As transient migrants, international students may have neither a singular national home-based identity, nor social networks exclusively connected to the home nation. Many transient migrants have multiple identities (Appadurai, 1996), and identity, rather than place-of-birth-based social networks dominate their sojourn in Australia. A study that includes identity-based social networks is crucial as we do not fully understand the different forms of social and cultural identities which transient migrants possess. By identity, this paper adopts Anthony Giddens' (1991) understanding of the term to mean a process of continuous individual development, which takes place on a daily basis. Identity thus is not static but complex and developing. According to Giddens (1991), postmodernity poses the challenge for individuals to

create their own identities. He notes: “What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity - and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour” (Giddens, 1991, p. 70). Furthermore, identity is influenced by an individual’s interactions with others in their surroundings. Giddens (1991, p.54) explains that a “person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self”. Thus identity is individualised and continuously evolving primarily because of the postmodern condition of globalisation. This paper adopts Giddens’ notion of identity as being both individual yet complex due to everyday encounters with others. The implications of Giddens’ notion of identity provide a way of exploring the role of the shifting layers of the identities of international students that are the results of their new experiences through social networks in their adopted country.

Challenges with Being Away from Home

Li and Gasser (2005) examined whether contact with individuals from the host country, ethnic identity, and cross-cultural self-efficacy of Asian international students predicts their sociocultural adjustment. The researchers found that contact with the individuals from the host country partially mediated the effect of cross-cultural self-efficacy on sociocultural adjustment. However, contact with the hosts did not mediate the effect of ethnic identity on sociocultural adjustment. Brown and Holloway (2008) investigated the initial stage of the international sojourn at a university in the South of England. They found that the initial stage of the sojourn was not characterised by feelings of excitement. Students were overwhelmed by negative psychological and emotional symptoms more commonly associated with culture shock (Ward et al., 2001; Ryan, 2005; Brown and Holloway, 2008). Khawaja and Dempsey (2008) compared international and domestic students enrolled at a large Australian university based in a capital city on variables such as accommodation, financial satisfaction, social support, mismatched expectations, academic stress, dysfunctional coping, and psychological distress. Results demonstrate that in comparison to domestic students, international students had less social support, used more dysfunctional coping strategies and had greater incongruence between their expectations and experiences of university life.

Zhang and Goodson (2011) systematically reviewed 64 studies published in peer-reviewed journals between January 1990 and January 2009 to identify predictors of psychosocial adjustment of international undergraduate and graduate students in the United States. They found that the most frequently reported predictors included: stress, social support, English language proficiency, region/country of origin, length of residence in the United States, acculturation, social interaction with Americans, self-efficacy, gender, and personality. The literature also has some suggestions for solutions to these challenges including adequate orientation (e.g. McKinlay, Pattison and Gross, 1996) and transition support services (e.g. Kudo and Simkin, 2003; Velliaris and Warner, 2009) and also the formation of same-culture networks (Sawir, 2008).

Social Networks of International Students

There have been debates about the importance of social networks of international students in host countries. Data from 200 intensive interviews with international students in Sawir’s (2008) study revealed that two-thirds of participants experienced problems of loneliness and/or isolation, especially in the early months. Sawir identified three kinds of loneliness experienced by international students: (i) personal loneliness because of the loss of contact with families; (ii) social loneliness because of the loss of networks and (iii) cultural loneliness, triggered by the absence of the preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment. While Sawir (2008) maintained the importance

of same-culture networks because he felt they are often crucial for international students, yet cannot substitute adequate pastoral care by universities or ensure satisfactory engagement with local cultures, Russell et al. (2010) indicated that social connectedness included links connecting to local Australians, family and co-cultural friends (friends from similar cultures).

Russell et al. (2010) also identified three patterns of adaptation among a sample of 979 international students attending a large metropolitan university in Melbourne. The first group of students (58.8%) were considered “positive and connected” – meaning that this group of students felt more connected to Melbourne and had less cultural and psychological stress in general. They were also generally happy with their financial state, health, and academic progress. The second group of students (34.4%) were considered “unconnected and stressed” – meaning they were socially isolated and reported highest levels of stress generally about their financial situation, their lifestyle balance, and their academic progress. Finally, the “distressed and risk-taking” group (6.7%) were also socially isolated and reported high levels of stress, and depression. They were involved in risk-taking behaviours such as involvement in drugs, gambling, unsafe sexual practices, and self-harm. In addition, Arkoudis et al. (2012) indicated strategies for enhancing domestic-international student engagement. This suggests that social networks in host countries can be multi-dimensional. Therefore social networks (whether same or mixed culture) is a complex phenomenon but it’s unclear the impact of these networks on the identities of international students and vice versa. The next section explores some of the complexities of the potential relationships between social networks and identities.

The Relationship between Social Networks and Identities

International students may not have a singular national home-based identity or participate in social networks exclusively connected to their home nation. Due to their transnational migration many international students have multiple social identities which are based on their encounters with others as noted by Giddens (1991) and identity-based social networks. These are based not solely on the place of their birth but also on the following factors: heritage connected to the broad categories of race, ethnic culture, national culture and religion; gender, and general interests such as hobbies. Moreover, because international students in Australia often have the intention of successfully converting their residential status to permanent (Robertson, 2011), they have a vested interest in fostering stronger links to their host nation. Emerging studies (e.g. Sawir, 2008; Kashima & Loh 2006) have shown that international students in Australia create social identities and networks that are tied to the adopted nation while studying. Consequently, they find the transition back to their homeland challenging.

Individual and group identities have become increasingly challenging to define or recognise because of the circulation of people, ideas and cultures. This globalization is facilitated by the spread of communication and media technologies. Arjun Appadurai (1996, pp. 30) notes that the global cultural flow and circulation of people, finances, technologies, media and ideas have created new collectives and thus identities. However, new collectives are unique as they become, what Benedict Anderson (1983) calls “imagined communities”, which exist outside their geographical and national boundaries. In his work on nationalism, Anderson explains that his understanding of the nation is complex, as it departs from ideas of colonial struggles into something else in this modern era. He further explains that ideas of nation (nationalism, nation-ness) are still informed and complicated by events in history, geography, regional politics (political proximity), migration, and demographics (historical events and geography). He notes that in light of globalization, nations are now not limited to physically confined spaces but can instead be entities of imagined political communities that are ‘both inherently limited and sovereign’. (1991, p. 224). While Anderson specifically looked at how communities maintained their national and cultural identities outside

their homelands, his notion of the imagined community allows us to build upon his theory of the imagined community in order to unpack the complex identities that are evolving as part of the globalisation process.

Anderson and others such as Stuart Hall (1973; 1992), Frederick Jameson (1991), Rey Chow (1993), Homi Bhabha (1994) and Ien Ang (1985; 2001), in their eclectic work on society and culture have in many ways attempted to make sense of the subject of identity by investigating and unpacking collectives, their lifestyles and their products - including art, literature, architecture, and the media. The media, in particular, has become an expanding focus for enquiry within the academy with branches examining different forms (entertainment, news and social media) and platforms, which can be corporeal (e.g. films screened in cinemas, television programs, DVDs, memory sticks) and virtual. The rise of direct user engagement with media such as comments on news and online forums has provided consumers with unprecedented broadcasting power. These researchers (Hall, 1993; Jameson, 1991; Chow, 1993; Bhabha, 1994 and Ang, 2001) have theorised the social and cultural identities of different collectives that are defined by, become part of, and have emerged from national and transnational boundaries. Their invaluable research has uncovered the role of (shifting) identities in questions concerning individual and group determinants, as well as identifiers of belonging, identification, self-description and representation.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1994) notion of *habitus* where cultural production is based not only on the individual's everyday experiences but on their self-interest, and Anthony Giddens' (1991) proposition that an individual's identity is not merely based on past experience, this paper explores the maintenance, formation and rediscovery of identities and social networks as dynamic, ongoing mechanisms that have function and purpose.

Even though international students may be transient for now, their individual identities and social networks exist for future purposes and are possibly intrinsically linked to the adopted nation yet still are connected to identities and social networks of past and ongoing experiences. Such a complex situation enables a multitude of bridges that connect the international student as transient migrant to their host nation, homeland and possibly beyond to constructs such as race, ethnic culture, national culture, religion, gender and general interests.

Increasing work in the broader area of migrants and the media (e.g., Hjorth & Arnold, 2011) have shown that digital technology allows migrants to remain connected to their home cultures and societies by creating virtual social networks and by providing direct communication with friends and family both residing in the homeland and elsewhere. Rising improvements in communication technologies that take the form of digital technologies (e.g. smart phones, skype, social media and email) create a sense of belonging and connectivity in imagined spaces (Leong, 2011; Evers & Goggin 2012). Simply put, migrants therefore form social networks based on their multiple social and cultural identities and will use available ICTs to extend and maintain their social networks.

While there is a correlation between identity and social networks - where individuals in a network have common singular, multiple, or overlapping identities - the purpose of this research is to explore what drives the identity and social network formation of international students studying at Australian institutions of higher learning.

Identity and Social Media

How international students utilise social media technologies to express their identities and navigate the new contexts they encounter can inform understandings of hybrid identities. As of September 2012, according to Socialbakers (www.socialbakers.com/countries/continents/), there are 245,725,060 Facebook users in Asia, which represents a 6.35% penetration or proportion of the

total population who choose to use Facebook. In South America there is a higher penetration of 33.65%, with 133,471,000 users. Australia and Oceania have 14,498,180, which represents 41.83% penetration. Social media does represent an important new trend. In this paper we follow Kaplan and Haelien's (2010) multidimensional definition of social media whereby social presence, media richness, self-presentation and self-disclosure are incorporated. Social media, in our study refers to social software used for social interactions, which include sharing different types of media such as: video, personal responses to other people's content, and posts including self-disclosure and events of everyday life. These posts are way of managing how people present themselves in everyday life to their social networks.

Self-presentation and self-disclosure are linked to notions of identity. According to Goffman (1959), self-presentation is the way people manage the impressions others form of them. Self-disclosure is a strategy people use as a way of presenting themselves to others, which may be influenced by social context – meetings at work, dinner with extended family, or coffee with our trusted colleagues. Depending on the social company and their perceived expectations, different aspects of self will be shown. This also applies to social interactions on line, but with one key difference. Online spaces create hybrid or collapsing contexts where family, friends and work colleagues may well be in the same place (Marwick and boyd, 2010). This has interesting implications for cross-cultural communication and clearly impacts how international students negotiate their identities.

Keeping in Touch through Social Media

The increasing use and connectivity made possible by improvements in communication media and digital technologies have enabled transient migrants such as international students—more so than ever before—to remain connected to their national homelands (Hjorth, 2011; Hjorth & Arnold, 2012) by creating virtual networks and by providing direct communication with friends and family both residing in the homeland and elsewhere. This connection is clearly important, and yet a more sophisticated understanding is required of their emerging and hybrid identities.

This study is significant because it assists in establishing, developing and strengthening various economic, industrial, cultural and social two-way bridges between Australia and the countries of origin of International Students (primarily from Asian nations but increasingly from Europe, North America, South America and the Middle-East). International Education is Australia's second largest export services sector behind tourism according to Austrade (Australian Education International, 2011). The well-being of international students in Australia is crucial if this sector is to continue its favourable impact on Australia's balance of trade. International students also contribute to Australia socially through the changes in ethnographic and cultural landscapes through their presence. During their sojourn, international students form a relationship with Australia, which influences their future dealings with their host country either from within Australia or from overseas. Understanding the complex relationships between identities and social networks is critical to both the creation of a home away from home, as well as a sense of well-being, for international students.

Therefore, this project aims to answer the following questions:

1. What impacts do social networks have on international students' identity(ies)?
2. Which social media outlets and online communities do international students interact with?
3. What practical implications are there for helping international students manage their health and lifestyle?

In this paper, we explore the role of identity in helping international students form social networks at an Australian institution and how these networks contribute to creating a sense of home.

Methods

Sample

To achieve the aims of the project, a focus group methodology was used as a way to elicit rich in-depth data from students describing their social networks. The qualitative methodology enabled the researchers to probe further into the motivations for using the particular information sources that respondents reported to gain a rich data set. It also allowed discussion within each focus group about the similarities and differences in using these sources. More importantly, the interaction between focus group members allowed researchers to observe differences between student groups. A range of issues was raised and discussed in the focus groups relating to: (i) the students' social identities/roles; and (ii) their social networks;

The target populations for this research project were undergraduate and postgraduate international students enrolled at The University of Melbourne (UOM) and the *Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology* (RMIT) University and international students from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges in Melbourne. For the purpose of this study, international students were defined as students from foreign countries physically studying in Australia. Participants were excluded if they were not international students. Participants were recruited via advertising in staff and student newsletters of these institutions. Potential participants contacted the research assistant who ascertained their eligibility and explained the study to them. Those who agreed to participate were then scheduled for a focus group session that was convenient to them. Participants were compensated for their time with a gift voucher. Focus group discussions were audio recorded with the consent of participants. The duration of the focus groups ranged from 70 to 120 minutes, depending on the size of the group and depth of discussion.

A total of seven focus groups were conducted with international students from undergraduate and postgraduate programs at both universities and with students from TAFE colleges. As indicated in Table 1, the sample included students from a range of countries and across different educational levels—from vocational education and training (VET) to postgraduate studies (coursework and research higher degree).

Table 1

Focus Group Participants' Background

	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Educational Level</i>	<i>Discipline Areas</i>	<i>Countries</i>
<i>Focus Group 1</i>	5	M (2) F (3)	Undergraduate	Commerce (4) English (1)	China (2) South Korea (1) Vietnam (1) Hong Kong (1)
<i>Focus Group 2</i>	3	M (2) F (1)	Postgraduate	Commerce (1) Communication (1) Architecture (1)	Iran (1) China (1) Singapore (1)
<i>Focus Group 3</i>	6	M (1) F (5)	Postgraduate	Public Health (2) Medicine (1) Teaching (1) Art (1) Psychology (1)	Japan (1) USA (1) Brazil (1) Sri Lanka (1) Bangladesh (1) Vietnam (1)
<i>Focus Group 4</i>	6	M (2) F (4)	Undergraduate	Commerce (2) Engineering (2)	Indonesia (2) Hong Kong (2)

<i>Focus Group 5</i>	4	M (1) F (3)	TAFE/Private Colleges	Law (1) Food Science (1) Business (2) English Language (2)	Malaysia (1) Brunei (1) Chile (2) China (1) Turkey (1)
<i>Focus Group 6</i>	5	M (1) F (4)	TAFE/Private Colleges	Business (2) IT (1) Design (1) Early childhood education (1)	Brazil (1) China (1) Indonesia (1) Thailand (1) Kuwait (1)
<i>Focus Group 7</i>	6	M (1) F (5)	TAFE/Private Colleges	Business (2) General English (2) Marketing (1) Hospitality management (1)	Colombia (3) Brazil (1) Chile (1) Vietnam (1)

After transcribing the focus groups in full, transcriptions were analysed manually using thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2006). This process involved reading and re-reading the selected text, coding, preliminary categorisation, and further classifying the data into categories. This was iterative process to verify the accuracy of these categories. As the data was coded and recoded, the themes were expanded, contrasted and discussed amongst researchers.

Findings

Social Networks

A comprehensive thematic analysis of focus group data revealed that students could be classified into four broad groupings based on the demographic make-up of their social networks. While these groupings are distinct from each other, students engaged in a variety of social activities, which sometimes overlapped.

Students whose social networks were dominated by international students from their home country (SNHC). Twelve of the focus group participants were classified into this category and included students from Vietnam, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Chile, and Colombia. Students from this group reported that they tended to socialize, study with, and often lived with other international students from their home countries. Pre-dominantly, they would also speak their home languages when interacting within this social group. Students engaged in food-focused activities (e.g., eating out together), social activities (e.g. hanging out, BBQ), visiting tourist attractions, or went shopping. Some students did study-focused work together or played online games.

Students whose social networks were dominated by international students from a variety of countries (SNIS). There were seven participants in this category and included students from Bangladesh, Singapore, Indonesia, Iran, Brunei Darussalam, Kuwait, and South Korea. This group of students reported that they tended to socialize with a range of other international students who are not necessarily from their home country. Sometimes, this might be due to a desire to interact across cultures while others reported that they found it hard to connect with students from their own countries, either due to small numbers of representative students or social differences. These students tended to communicate in a common language that all members of their social network are familiar with. Food-focused activities such going to restaurants together, social activities like simply “hanging out” at each other’s places, playing games and shopping again proved popular with the SNIS group. Some in this category also reported that they did study focused activities together.

Students whose social networks were dominated by Australian domestic students (SNAS). This group of students is smaller than the other three within our sample. There were five participants in this category and included students from countries around the world like Japan, China, Brazil and the USA. Participants reported that they actively sought to integrate and find local friends through study, work or general social clubs within their institutions or within the communities they live in. Some of the students might already have made Australian friends even before coming to Australia. This might have been through visiting Australia and overseas or through social networking sites. As one of the participants commented: “I already knew some people in Melbourne before coming...I’ve met other Australians because they go to my home country, like to travel, so I kept in touch... and since I got here, we became close and-Some – most are Australians actually” (PG/Brazil). They tended to speak English in their interactions. Students engaged in social activities (e.g. hanging out, drinking at pubs, clubs, bars), and some engaged in hobbies (e.g. playing guitar, sports, online computer games).

Students whose social networks included a mix group of students, both Australian and international (SNMS). There were seven participants in this category and included students from Sri Lanka, China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam, Turkey, Chile, Colombia and Brazil. This group of students reported that they almost seemed to have two social networks that do not always mix with each other. They tended to be the middle person ‘moving and travelling’ between their social networks. They report that they spoke different languages in each of their networks. Once again eating out, sports, listening to music together at a friend’s house or out at a venue, as well as shopping proved to be popular activities. Some South Americans invited their Australian friends to their houses to mix with their home country friends and to get to know each other.

In addition to the broad social network groupings, the research project also tried to examine similarities between students in the distinct groups of college/TAFE students, undergraduate students, and postgraduate students. It is worth noting that the researchers found that there were fewer commonalities within educational level groupings than there were within the social network groupings.

While many studies in the past have focused on country of origin as a way to differentiate international students from each other, this project found that focusing on country of origin could provide very misleading and incomplete information about international students. For example, students from China were represented in three of the four social network groupings above (SNHC, SNAS, and SNMS). In terms of use and access to information, the Chinese students in each of the social network groupings displayed more commonalities with other students in the same social network groupings than with Chinese students who reported other social network groupings.

Home

Table 2
Questions about home

Q. Where do you consider home to be?	Number of students	Percentage
Where they live	10	28.6%
Where they born (spent most of time/Where family lives)	18	51.4%
Both where they live and family live	6	17.1%
Where the people they love are	1	2.9%

Focus group data revealed that students had differing views of what is home. For example a postgraduate student from Japan said: “I think, where I live now is like, just a house really, like I can’t call it a home yet because I don’t know the people who I live with very well. I think my home is Japan and, yeah it’s hard to find a home, like a place I can call home” (PG/Japan). Another postgraduate student from Vietnam expressed her notion of home as: “for me...home is where I live” (PG/Vietnam) and an undergraduate student from China observed, “(home is) where we live, here in Melbourne” (UG/China) in response to the question about where they saw home as being. Another undergraduate student described home more fluidly as “where the heart is” and where their friends and family reside, noting: “normally I consider home is the place where I live with my family” (UG/ Vietnam). The aggregated data suggests that slightly over half (51.4%) associate home with their birth country. Slightly over a quarter (28.6%) had a more transient notion of home as being where they happen to live right now, that is Australia, and 17.1% had a layered view of home as being both here in Australia where they live now and at the same time being their birth country where their family live.

Employment of Social Media

Table 3

Most used websites

Q. What websites do you tend to use the most?	Number of students	Percentage
Facebook	27	77.1%
Emails (e.g. Hotmail, Yahoo)	23	65.7%
Searching sites (e.g. Google, Naver)	23	65.7%
News sites (local and international)	20	57.1%
Media sharing sites (e.g. YouTube)	10	28.6%
Jobs & real-estate sites (e.g. Gumtree)	8	22.9%
University portals	6	17.1%
Twitter	4	11.4%
Skype	4	11.4%
Wikipedia	4	11.4%
QQ	3	8.6%
Blogs	3	8.6%
Commerce sites (e.g. ebay)	2	5.7%
Academic Journals sites	2	5.7%
My space	1	2.9%
OoVoo (similar to Skype)	1	2.9%
Weibo	1	2.9%
Way book	1	2.9%

Table 4

Countries where friends are from

Q. Where are their friends from?	Number of Students	Percentage
Home country, local & overseas	15	42.8%
Home country & overseas	9	25.7%
Local & overseas	5	14.3%
Home country	3	8.6%

Home country & local	3	8.6%
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Students in all groups actively made use of social media to keep in contact with friends and family in their birth countries, host nations, and in Australia [e.g. “[I] use more of Facebook than the Korean equivalent [Minihompy]” (UG/South Korea) and “for an example an earthquake was in Turkey but I can read Facebook my friends will or something and I even all around the world they can share or we are so sorry for Turkey (TAFE/Turkey)”. Students from Mainland China tended to use Chinese social media such as Weibo (similar to Twitter), Renren (similar to Facebook) and various online forums for this purpose “I use QQ more,” (UG/China). Students pointed out that Facebook was the one tool that allowed them simultaneously to keep up with friends and family in their home countries as well as with new friends and acquaintances that they had made in Australia. Facebook was also a source of information if the students had a serious health issue. As one student commented: “Maybe you can still ask on Facebook but you set the privacy so that only a few people can see it, you can ask your friends” (UG/Brunei). However most students would go to a health clinic or hospital and use Google to search for symptoms “[I would] go to see a doctor... [and]...Google” (UG/Hong Kong 3). Some students indicated that they depended on social media networks such as Facebook for their news; this was especially true of those students whose social networks were dominated by international students from a variety of countries [e.g. “Facebook sometimes people post something too so I normally look on Newsfeed and see roughly what happens... Actually quite the same – keep in touch with friends and my sister” (TAFE/China)].

Connecting with Different Types of Students based on Complex Individual Identities

Table 5

Connecting with friends from a variety of social circles

Q. Do you have different groups of friends, so different social circles?	Type of groups of friends (social circle)	No. of students	Percentage
	Study (classmate) group	21	60%
	Very Close group	12	34.3%
	Workmates group	10	28.6%
	Housemate group	8	22.9%
	Prayer group	8	22.9%
	Home-country group	6	17.1%
	Occasional friend group	4	11.4%
	Hobbies group	4	11.4%
	Overseas friend group	3	8.6%
	Functional matters group (e.g. computing)	3	8.6%
	Voluntary work group	2	5.7%
	Language group	1	2.9%
	Facebook group page	1	2.9%

Students revealed that their social networks are not always directly connected to the home nation but are instead based on each students’ complex individual identities, which are negotiated by culture, language, religion and general interest. The data indicated that students did not solely socialize with others from their country of origin. Rather, they socialized with fellow international students who hailed from their home regions and local students who are culturally similar to them. One student responded: “most of my friends are international, so they are from, like India, Pakistan,

Nepal, Cambodia, Tanzania, Mozambique; a few are from Africa, and I also know some people from Bangladesh” (PG/ Bangladesh).

Table 6

Social activities

Q. What do you like to do socially?	Number of Students	Percentage
Eating out together/Food-focused (e.g. lunch, dinner, drink)	24	68.6%
Hobbies activities (e.g. playing Guitar, sports, games)	12	34.3%
Study-focused	12	34.3%
Hanging out (clubbing)	10	28.6%
Visiting tourist sites & special places	8	22.9%
Parties	7	20%
Shopping	7	20%
Religious activities	7	20%
Sleep over	3	8.6%
Going to Cinema	3	8.6%
Voluntary work	2	5.7%
Social activities organized by university	1	2.9%

From our data an example from the Asian region would be where Singaporeans socialized with other Asian classmates, including students from Malaysia, and Vietnam and locals who are ethnically and culturally Chinese [e.g. “Australian born Chinese, Malaysian, Singaporean, and people from Hong Kong as well, and local Caucasians” (UG/China)]. An example from the South American region would be where Brazilians socialized with Columbians and Chileans. Socialising with fellow international students from the region is facilitated by similarity in language. For example, from our data, students from China socialized with ethnic Chinese students from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia because of knowledge and fluency in Mandarin. Often, students socialized with classmates, co-workers, and neighbours and groups developed through online gaming, sports (e.g. soccer, cycling and rowing), religion (e.g. church groups) and hobbies (e.g. playing musical instruments).

Some students noted that they only mixed with local (Anglo) Australians if there was direct contact with them, such as the boyfriend of a flatmate. A student notes: “I live with my boyfriend and his brothers and his brother’s girlfriend they are Aussie, so I have to speak English” (TAFE/Brazil). Some students, particularly the undergraduates, revealed that they rarely or never socialized with locals because of cultural and language differences. As one student comments: “Yeah (it’s so hard to find Australian friends) and then they don’t really talk to the Asian people...they don’t really interact with us...so ... during the university lives, like after your lectures you don’t, we’ll have a coffee, no and it’s, very depends on what course you are. Like if, in commerce for organised history ... you will have, well all the chances are going up but, you know for actual real you don’t really have” (UG/China).

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that while some students directly identify with fellow international students from their home nations to form social networks, this is not necessarily the case for all students. Rather, students proactively form varied social networks based on the complex individual social and cultural identities of each of its members. Within the social group,

their identities are influenced by a variety of factors, including culture, language, religion, academic course, workplace, housing and personal interests (hobbies). This assessment ties in with Giddens (1991) theory of identity being individualised, complex and ongoing since it is influenced by encounters with others in the everyday environment. Sometimes these identities may overlap with each other and may include students from the birth country (e.g. Chinese students identifying with each other through language and culture).

This study also reveals that international students' identity-based social networks are local and are maintained through face-to-face contact and through social media contact. Moreover, these social networks provide the opportunity for students to engage in different forms of entertainment (e.g. going to the cinema) and social activities often revolving solely or in some way around food. This analysis fits in well with Russell et al.'s (2010) discussion on social connectedness to local Australians, family, and co-cultural friends

The use of social media to stay in contact with friends and family from the home nation may assist students with forming imaginary bonds with their homelands. Doing so provides international students with virtual home-based support networks, which then allow them the opportunity to pursue and form local social networks with students other than those who come from their countries of birth.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the ways in which international students from specific universities and higher education Melbourne institutions in Australia negotiate everyday life while living away from their places of birth. It reveals that international students have multiple identities that are neither a singular national home-based identity, or social networks exclusively connected to the home nation. Moreover, this study shows that international students have complex identities, which shape the development of local social networks which are not exclusively made up of international students from their home countries. These social networks then provide support for everyday life, particularly when it comes to engaging in entertainment and social activities.

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