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Online Social Networking and International Students' Adjustment

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ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS'
ADJUSTMENT

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership in Higher Education.

by
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December 2016

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the phenomenon of social media in international students' lives. It depicted how international students use social media during their stay in a host university. It asks, "How do international students develop their personal networks in the host country? What social media applications are used by international students during their stay in the U.S.? The study incorporated qualitative methods to interpret the experiences of 12 participants from 9 different countries studying in an American rural school of southern area of the U.S. Participants were interviewed individually for 30-45 minutes. The study findings were divided into 4 themes based on the major themes that emerged from the research questions. These themes were, *Arrival Experiences*, *Online Support*, *Expanding Personal Networks*, and finally, *Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms*.

Findings suggest that international students do not depend on social media to address academic issues but rather prefer in person interaction with lab mates and faculty members for those problems. International students do, however, depend extensively on social media to help them adjust socially and culturally in their new environment. They use social media to maintain and develop ties to the host community by bridging friendships and establishing bonds. The results suggest that WhatsApp is a favorite app followed by Facebook. Interestingly, international students did not rely on apps that are popular in the U.S. Their reasons for this are related to their social capital needs and are discussed in Chapter 5.

Key words: Social networking, social support, social networking sites (SNS), international students, acculturation, international students' adjustment.

DEDICATION

To my Father, Mother, and Nibras,

I can see your smiles fill the sky with joy...

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to begin by thanking the Department of the State for granting me the opportunity to be a Fulbright scholar, a milestone that led to shaping and reshaping the person that I become today. I am beyond thankful to my advisor, Dr. Russell Marion, who supported me and guided my work with his deep insight and thoughtful comments. This work would not have been completed without the dedicated feedback and support of my committee members: Dr. Robert Knoeppel, Dr. Angela Naimou, and Dr. Mathew Boyer. And finally, I want to thank my family, your love gave me the strength I needed during my academic journey.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of the Internet and its many applications has brought tremendous opportunities for communication all over the world, and its potential for bringing people together seems unlimited. This dissertation looks at how this potential works for international graduate students in U.S. universities. Specifically, it explores the relationship between international students' online activities and their adjustment to their host country.

On the recent, 12th birthday of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg wrote: "When I wrote the first code for Facebook in January 2004, I hoped it would help students at my college connects and brings our community together. Today more than 1.5 billion people around the world use Facebook to stay connected with friends and loved ones" (Zuckerberg's Facebook official account, 2016). Zuckerberg's software targeted students and was intended to "bring community together"; what we don't know is how Facebook and other social networking sites are impacting international students and social adjustments of international students.

Online social networking is a significant topic that is widely discussed within academia. Previous literature discussed online social networking in relationship to various psychological and sociological issues faced of American students (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007) and on general issues of acculturation by internationals (e.g., Littlemore et al., 2011; Poyrazli et al. 2012; Snell & Zhou, 2015). However, I found little research that describes how online social networking contributes to the adjustment of international

students when they come to the U.S. to study. This current work seeks to bridge this gap by examining international students' experiences with online social networking in the U.S.

The research adopts a phenomenological approach, which explores deeply the experiences reported by study participants. I focus on the social networking experiences of international graduate students. Participants discuss what social networking platforms they use and how they use them. The impact of this phenomenon on their adjustment to life at their institution is analyzed.

Educational leaders continually seek ways to improve students' academic experiences, and this research contributes to that effort. It asks how international graduate students use social media to explore and adjust to their new environments. Understanding this phenomenon gives educational leaders new methods to improve international students' services in the host institution.

Summary Review of Literature

Academic challenges that dominate the literature on cultural adjustments by international students include language proficiency and adaptation to a different educational system. Academically, English proficiency is one of their main challenges. Noam Chomsky compared language to a "handshaking protocol". Since the dawns of civilizations, the communicative abilities of human beings were controlled by their verbal exchange and linguistic abilities. Students with limited linguistic abilities face isolation and marginalization by their peers (Lee and Rice, 2007). Language proficiency is not limited to learning the structural forms of English from textbooks. Littlemore et al.,

(2011) notes that metaphorical terms and illustrations used by professor contribute to academic struggles. These metaphors are culturally inherited and socially constructed. Every native individual in the hosting community understands what these metaphors represent. Littlemore's et al. study noted that international students are missing a fair amount of information inside their classes due to such illustrations and metaphorical usage of language by professors.

Acculturation, "the degree to which immigrants maintain their ethnic culture and accept or reject the new dominant culture" (Snell & Zhou, 2015, p.179) by these students is challenged by norms and traditions that are strange to them. The speed of their adjustment depends on the cultural backgrounds of students and by their age. The older the student is the harder it is for that student to accommodate to their new life. International students are a vulnerable population that experience acculturative stress and cultural struggle. They need to be oriented properly and guided in gradual steps to adjust to their new environment.

Establishing bonds and bridging relations with members of the host institution helps them abate cultural stresses. Social support can play a vital role in making their transitional process easier. Poyrazli et al. (2012) compared the level of social support with the levels of acculturation stress among international students and found that high levels of social support reduce acculturation stress. Their findings indicate that English proficiency uniquely contributes to the reduction of international students' acculturative stress and academic performance. Similar study findings by Lin (2012) concluded that social support contributes to the academic wellness of international students. Lin's study

recommended bridging the gap between school and internationals so that they can achieve higher academic performance.

International Students and Online Social Networking

The proliferation of online social media has created massive opportunities for communication. However, there are few scholarly investigations of the impact of online social media on international students' experiences in American institutions. There is an enormous body of works that addresses online socializing by American students on U.S. campuses, but the needs and interests of American students are relatively different from the needs and interests of their international peers. Those studies of American students address the effects of social media on psychological and sociological adjustments to the college environment by American students (Ellison et al., 2007). Yet, there is no rich literature examining the experience of international students with online networking and the way they use it to adapt to their new environment in the U.S.

There is limited literature addressing the nature of relationships that emerge from online socializing by internationals. There is some research on this topic in other countries, however. For example, a study of Australian universities was devoted to explore social networking preference of international students (Saw, et al., 2013). Saw's et al findings "suggest particular sites such as Twitter and YouTube should be considered by libraries as a means to engage both international and domestic students. Institutions with large Chinese students' population should consider the use of Renren" (2013, p. 156). Such findings direct attention to the need to conduct studies in the U.S. on such issues. My study enriches the literature by investigating which sites are preferred by

international student for social communication, how internationals use online networking for socialization, and what impact social networking has on the process of acculturation.

Finally, it is important to determine if online activities on social media contribute to positive social interactions and whether they support offline interactions by internationals. A previous study suggested, “Future research might focus on the problem of identifying what activities on SNSs are central to obtaining meaningful social support or building social capital from those which are not” (Lin et. al, 2012).

My study recognizes these gaps in the literature and focuses on online social networking via social media. It explored how international students use social media in the US, how international students create networks of relationships with other individuals of the host institution, and what social networking websites are used by international students to interact with others.

Statement of Problem

Given the development of online social media communication and its implications in today’s life, it is important to examine the phenomena of online communication in international students’ academic lives in the U.S. Social networking helps students adjust to their host country. How, then, can U.S. academic institutions provide a positive atmosphere for international students regarding the creation and leveraging of social network? It is a worthy issue to be studied?

This research explores social adjustments by internationals from the perspective of *social media* and *online* social networking. When international students are first accepted to a U.S. institution, they are still abroad and they depend on distance

communication to learn about and communicate with the host institution. Suburban institutions are located in small cities and towns that may not be well acquainted with problems faced by international students. These areas don't provide the degree of information for internationals on public media that one finds in metropolitan areas and big cities of the U.S. This impacts how international students use social media before arrival, upon arrival, and during their stay in the U.S.

There is limited literature in the U.S. that attempts to identify international students' usage of online networking to adapt to their new university. There is a need to investigate social media usage and its impact on international students in the U.S. Because of this gap in our understanding, I ask: How does the usage of social media impact their networks of relationships of international students in the host institution?

Purpose of the Study

The huge gap in the literature that examines the online social networking activity of international students on U.S. campuses frames the purpose of this study: I explore the online social networking of international students and how it contributes to their adaptation to their new environment. A rich body of literature on international students describes language adjustment, academic adjustment, cultural adjustment, and immigration status. There is no rich literature on how social media contributes to their adjustments. This study, then, goes beyond existing literature and focuses on socialization via social media. The study describes existing forms of online social networking and how they link to international students' offline, "real life" socialization and adjustment. Suggestions are provided on how administrators can use online networking to best serve

communication between international students and their new environment in American universities.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is reflected in its intention to dive into an important aspect of international students' cultural adjustment, one that has been relatively overlooked by researchers: online social networking of international students. The findings of this study can help us understand international students' experiences with online social media. From this, practitioners will have a better understanding of how to integrate international students into their host institution using social media applications.

This research fills a gap in literature by developing a deeper understanding of how online social networking might enhance the academic performance of international students. The importance of this study is that it will help enable practitioners to determine what kind of social networking practices can be implemented to improve the adjustment experiences of international students. Accordingly, this will help improve their sense of belonging in their new environment. Eventually, improving the experience of life in the host institution should lead to improving their academic performance of and graduation rates.

Theoretical Framework

For this work, social networking and social support will be defined within the frame of a theory of social capital. Social capital is described by Valenzuela et al. (2004): "The core idea of social capital is straightforward: It is the resources available to people through their social interactions" (2004). It has also been defined as "access to and use of

resources embedded in social networks” (Lin et al., 2008). From this view, social networking can be understood as the investment in social interactions that create connections with other individuals in ones’ environment. Valenzuela et al. (2004) concluded, “Improving individuals’ well-being and quality of life are byproducts of social capital”. We define social support as the assistance provided through social interactions to the individual; it can be logistic, material, or incorporeal. This kind of assistance contributes to the recipient’s well-being and to the quality of his or her life.

This study looks specifically at online social networking. For the purpose of this research, online social networking covers all kind of online communication via social media. It includes various social media applications and websites. The research interprets the experiences of international students with social media sites and applications during their stay in the U.S.

Social capital is constructed from meaningful, strong relationship. The idea that social capital theory links social networking to academic performance is evidenced in the research literature. It began with Bourdieu (1986) who was the first to analyze the concept. He studied social capital inside family structures and found that a strong social capital relationship between parents and their children contributes to the child’s better performance at school. Numerous research works followed that discussed the relationship between social capital and students’ performance. According to Dika and Singh (2002) the idea of linking social capital to educational outcomes emerged in the 1980s. They stated that Coleman (1988), for example, used High School and Beyond (HSB) data to conclude that a lack of social networking plays a crucial role in dropout rates. In

conclusion, the larger goal of my study, then, is to frame international students' adjustments and eventually their academic performances in the context of social capital theory.

Research Question

- Q1- Does participating in existing SM networks impact International students' adjustment? How?
- Q2- What are the links between online activities and students' personal networks? Do online activities affect social interactions in real life with the host community?
- Q3- What kinds of online activities engage international students with their home and host community? What SM programs do they use? What are their favorite SM apps or websites?
- Q4- How can this knowledge impacts practitioners as they look at future possibilities for online services?

Methodology

The research design is built as a qualitative analysis study that corresponds to the major points of interest in the research investigation. More specifically, this study is classified as a phenomenological qualitative study. A phenomenon is anything that is experienced by individuals as it is, or as Giorgi put it: "It means the presence of any occurrence given precisely as it is given or experienced" (1997). The study focusses on how students interpret the effects of social media on their experience in America. In particular, the research investigates whether social media has an impact on international students' adjustments to their U.S. campuses in the rural areas of America. The

sensitivity of the students' social experience cannot be explored by a quantitative method because quantitative methods are based on preconceived hypotheses; for this research we need to explore ideas and interpretation of personal experiences. The researcher needs to hear personal stories and individual experiences. Consequently, in-depth interviews are used for collecting data.

Limitations of the Study

The research has few limitations. First, because of limited resources, it has been conducted in a single institution where access to participant was convenient. Future studies could enhance the findings by conducting similar studies on multiple campuses. In terms of international students' preferences of social media apps and websites, a quantitative study on larger body of students could enhance the findings and make it generalizable to bigger population.

Definition of Terms

- *Social Media(SM)*: according to Kaplan and Heinlein (2010), "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61).
- *International Students (IS)*: are identified as non-American students who come on immigration visa to reside temporarily in America for the purpose of study only. All other categories of immigrants are not considered international students by this study.

- *Institutions of Rural Area*: The Census Bureau distinguishes locations as “urban areas represent densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses... “Rural” encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.” (Census Rural and Urban Classification, 2010)
- *Features of Social media platforms*: “In the distribution and sharing of information and news, there is a wide variety of platforms serving a multitude of needs. Each of these platforms provides their users with a different set of features that enable them to collaborate, share, publish, and post information as deemed useful to their community and context of discussion”(Krishnan & Rogers, 2014, p. 76). Some examples are blogging (Blogger.com, Tumblr), texting (Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp), and sharing platforms (YouTube).

Organization of the Study

The research is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 has a description of the background of the study, its purpose, and its significance, research questions, the theoretical framework, summary of methodology, and limitation of the study.

In Chapter 2 previous research works are discussed. It reviews literature and identifies gaps in the previous studies. In Chapter 3, there is a presentation of the methodology for the study. This chapter includes the research design, demographics of participants, instrumentation of the study that imply data collection processes, and analyses.

Chapter 4 contains a description of the study's results, which has been grouped into four sections according to four themes that emerge from the research analysis. These themes are: Initial Assistance, Online Support, Expanding Social Network, Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, contains the interpretation of the findings of the study. The implication for practice and offers suggestions for further studies are also revealed. A few appendices, such as the interview protocol and transcripts of students' suggestions for future practices, are attached.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The significance of international students on U.S. campuses has been discussed in the literature from two major perspectives, economics and academics. Economically, according to the Association of International Educators Report (IIE, 2014), international students contributed \$24 billion to the U.S. economy in 2013 alone. Academically, international students are “a vital component of research universities,” and they are considered to “be highly important to U.S. innovation” (Hegarty, 2014). Administrators of universities believe that

International students bring unique perspectives and ideas to our institutions. As the global economy grows, so does the importance of having a diverse student body. Universities must look for ways to continue to attract the best and brightest from across the globe if we are going to prepare our students for a modern workforce. (AAU Report, 2005)

More specifically, it is evident from the literature that the number of international graduate students is growing. Currently, there are 72 percent more international students studying at U.S colleges and universities than were reported in Open Doors 2000 (IIE Report, 2014, and NAFSA, May 2014).

This large percentage of incoming international students requires initiatives to help them cope with the stress of adjusting to their new environment. Providing them with services that ease their transition to the host institution contributes to their sense of well-being and to their academic performance (Lin, 2012). While the recent trend in

online social networking via social media applications offers new ways of communicating and exchanging information, according to Fread (2014), “little empirical research has been conducted regarding the use of social media to communicate with individuals from the student’s home country as a way of coping with the stress associated with acculturation” (p. 3).

This chapter begins by reviewing international students’ challenges and needs, including how they are being met by current institutional practices. Next, previous literature on the role of online networking in academia and in establishing relationships among students is reviewed and the gaps in this discussion of social media in the context of international students addressed. Finally, the theoretical framework of the study, the theory of Social Capital, is introduced and discussed as a guide for examining the social networks of international students and their circles of friendships.

Challenges of International Students

Academic Challenges

When arriving in the U.S., international students have varied levels of English proficiency and knowledge about its educational system. This lack of awareness of available academic services and the inability to access them adds a barrier to the students’ adjustment academically. International students come from varied backgrounds with different abilities for using the online systems of universities in the U.S, an issue that is further compounded by their poor English skills, which prevent their active interactions with peers in study groups and other group assignments (de Araujo, 2011). Students with these limited abilities face isolation and marginalization by their peers (Lee and Rice,

2007). Moreover, studies have found that poor spoken English is a more significant barrier than issues with written English, with students with good writing skills feeling marginalized because of their accents (Sherry et al., 2009). As Sherry et al. (2009) emphasized, this problem is exacerbated because some students “rarely use English outside of the University” (p. 45); to address this problem, “they may be encouraged to get involved in informal conversational groups as a way of enhancing their skills and confidence speaking in English” (p. 45). Similarly, many studies have focused on the need to improve the verbal skills of international students, in particular their comprehension of metaphorical phrases (Littlemore et al., 2011).

In addition, the academic performance of international students is influenced by their level of adaptation to American educational systems and their access to appropriate services. Studies have shown that during their first year of study, their performance usually is lower than their American peers (Banham & Yunke, 2009). However, over time it tends to rise to that of U.S. students, probably, in part, because of their gradual adaptation to the new academic system of the host institution.

Past research has also explored the role of technology in relation to student’s performance, with Zhadko (2011) highlighting the role of technological preparation. He suggested that more research should be conducted on current technical training programs, saying “this kind of study could establish a foundation for a basic technology training curriculum, which would be used to better prepare future international students for their college experiences abroad” (p. 169).

Furthermore, many graduate-level international students are often accompanied by spouses and children, meaning these domestic demands may impact the time devoted to study and academic work (Cairns et al., 2015). To address this situation, programs specializing in providing family support are important to help these spouses of international students become independent. Such programs enable them to have access to transitions services and healthcare systems.

There are also indirect factors that contribute to the academic stress of international students, one being the interaction with faculty because it affects a student's sense of belonging to his institution. On one hand, research confirms the importance of the professor-student relationship on the student's performance, with international students with positive attitudes about their professors bridging relations based on trust and support (Glass, 2012). Other studies "affirm that inclusive classroom practices and professors' intercultural competence play a critical role in creating a positive campus climate for international students.... international students [are]... influenced by their perceptions of adjusting to the academic and disciplinary cultures in which they are socialized by professors" (Glass et al., 2015, p. 363).

However, other researchers who have investigated international students' relationships with their professors have found that

International students from Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia rate the quality of their interactions with professors significantly lower than their peers from the North American and Southern Asia (Glass et al., 2013; Glass et al.,

2014). The findings illustrate disturbing accounts of neo-racist attitudes by professors” (Glass et al., 2015, p. 363)

The quality of the interaction with professors, including their attitude toward internationals, can impact these students’ academic adjustment and performance.

Cultural Challenges

Living in a new environment exposes international students to a different set of cultural values and societal systems. The first reaction to an unfamiliar environment has been called cultural shock, which is defined as “anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg, 1960, p. 142). The adjustment to a new environment depends largely on the processes and services provided by institutions, including orientations, welcoming events for incoming students, and the activities fostering engagement and integration sponsored by the institution. An atmosphere that enables international students to create social support systems enhances their sense of belonging to the new environment of the host institution, further enhancing their adjustment.

Social relations with friends from the host country have been found to expedite the acculturation process of international students (Nizami, 1998) while studies have also found that a lack of a strong connection with the host society has a negative impact (Wilson, 2007; Akawna, 2015). The problem of isolation is more serious for first-year students who have higher rates of acculturation stress. Newcomers need to integrate into the society to ease their transition and to buffer the psychological stress caused by the feelings of strangeness and loneliness. Linguistic barriers again appear as an obstacle in

socializing with others, with studies confirming that “while most studies focus on English for academic purposes, it is important to state that knowledge of the English language helps students in building social relationships as well” (Akawna, 2015, p. 277). Accordingly, social connectedness and investment in community relationships are crucial for the assimilation of internationals in their new setting. However, there are many cases where students don’t feel they are engaged actively in their local communities (Kusek, 2015). The absence of these investments in social relationships impact students’ general sense of well-being.

Another reason for cultural issues is limited counseling resources that introduce international students to the host country’s system and the available institutional services. Many factors play a role in these limited resources, including student-adviser ratios and the funding of international students services. For example, international students do not have much knowledge about the housing system of the host country, and this lack of legal information exposes them to exploitation, in particular increased fees and rents, by local property managers. In the U. S., the housing services provided to international students vary from state to state and from school to school. While some top tiers schools, such as the University of California at Berkley, offer special international housing facilities, other schools, like the one at which this study was conducted, lack targeted housing services for international students.

Further, the limited access to financial resources prevents international students from participating in some social events necessary for adjustment. This issue is

compounded by immigration restrictions prohibiting off-campus employment, leaving students with limited options and financial resources.

Immigration Visa Challenges

One of the primary challenges facing international students is the necessity to maintain legal status throughout their years of study; any mistake in meeting deadlines can result in the termination of their legal status and the loss of their opportunity to complete their graduate degrees. There is a rich body of literature addressing the immigration rules and the restrictions involved in international students being able to attend an academic institution legally. For example, although there is a critical need for internationals to work in the STEM-related physical science field in the U.S. (Armstrong, 2003), visa issues impact their progress toward degree completion. Armstrong referenced the 2003 American Institute of Physics Report of 2003, when he confirmed that a “physics department chair reported that about 20 percent of the international students who were admitted into physics programs were unable to start their semester because of visa problems” (p. 23). Most of these cases are related to the nation’s security procedures. According to Powell’s (2002) work, “there is an intrinsic tension between advancing scientific knowledge and national security” (p. 349). This conflict between the two goals of providing educational opportunities and meeting national security requirements affects the progress of international students who want to continue their studies without having to return to their home countries to renew their legal paperwork.

However, since visa status is defined by the procedures of the Department of Homeland Security, American universities are restricted by its rules and cannot create

their own policies, meaning that the American institutions need to work within these limits to provide the best legal consultation services that they can. For example, American institutions can work with their international students, making sure that international students meet their deadlines legally. Furthermore, academic institutions can provide services to educate international students about their legal status, obligations, traveling restrictions, work opportunities, and optional training.

As this literature review and analysis suggest, the needs of international students can be summarized as, first, academic challenges such as linguistic issues and difficulties adapting to the educational system. Second, international students benefit from appropriate supporting networks and engagement in meaningful activities as both facilitate their transition to their new environment. In an effort to address these needs, universities offer a varied range of policies and processes through their educational leaders and professionals for their international students.

Current Institutional Services

International students are a diverse group with less commonality than is perceived by the staff who facilitates international students' services at U.S. institutions. It is true that international students share the similar experience of traveling abroad and studying far from their homes and families. Further, they experience similar feelings of homesickness. But this diverse group comes from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and they need to be treated equally by institutional facilities. The complexity of their origins and backgrounds emphasizes the necessity of addressing the needs of each student and/or cultural group individually. Students from East Asia, for example, have a collectivist

mindset that contradicts the individualistic setting of their American peers (Sato & Hodge, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2013). Some institutions hire bilingual staff members who are able to converse with new students in their native language. However, these practices are limited to universities that give a high priority to globalization. In addition, these institutions usually have a high ratio of staff to students.

Some schools provide orientation programs to familiarize international students with their new environment. However, these orientations are usually brief and include all international students. Researchers have suggested including special orientations tailored to students from specific countries to address some of the more pronounced cultural differences. For example, “in China, indirectness is known as one of the major Confucian virtues.... Direct confrontation should be avoided at all costs. Therefore, when facing Americans’ direct criticism, Chinese students were frustrated, stressed, and confused” (Yan & Berliner, 2013, p. 73) However, research suggests that currently such orientations are not offered by institutional services in the U. S.

American universities, being much older than The Department of Education (initiated in 1979), have the freedom to set their own admission standards according to the policies of that agency. One of the major obstacles for international students who want to pursue an education in the U.S. is the language barrier. For this reason, colleges grant conditional admission for international students, giving them a specified amount of time to improve their language skills and become comparable to their American peers. In addition, there are various language programs preparing international students prior to their studies.

Furthermore, international students often do not understand metaphorical conventions in the U.S., something that further impacts their adaptation to the country. Two approaches can help: First, language courses that focus on metaphorical usage in English should be developed and offered, and second, professionals should disseminate awareness among faculty on campus through workshops to help them understand and address the linguistic issues of internationals in their classes. Paraphrasing the metaphorical ideas can enhance the understanding of internationals who are not familiar with the idioms and metaphorical expressions.

Moreover, facilitating social activities that engage international students in informal learning of English is also beneficial for their academic performance. Such social activities programs differ in quality and efficiency depending on the institution's strategic focus. However, providing this type of support for international students has been found to be a significant factor in helping students use these educational systems proficiently and effectively.

Some universities have ombudsman services for addressing the academic problems faced by students within their programs. However, these services usually require time and effort from the students who, thus, prefer not to use them. Gill et al. (2013) proposed that administrators on campus activate more assistance processes and train ombudsmen to be "timely in the resolution of complaints; focused on oral/interactive communication with consumers; and provide online grievance resource. Ombudsmen should be proactive and influential in the policy environment, strategic in influencing service provision, and integrated rather than sectorial" (p. 4). These strategies

could enhance the exchange of information between students and their ombudsman, helping to address their needs and the problems faced in their programs or on the campus of their host institution more quickly.

Tailoring activities and practices that address the need of specific ethnicities would facilitate international students' adjustment. Research encourages administrators to offer pre-academic classes for international students that explain the cultural differences between their culture and that of the American society. The emerging forms of socialization through online social networks and social media are rich areas for investigation to examine how international students use them while they pursue a degree at their host institutions.

Online Social Networking and Internationals

Social Networking and Academic Adjustment

Social networking has already been implemented in formal and informal learning programs (Chen & Bryer, 2012), with research suggesting the acquisition of English can be enhanced through its use (Lee & Ranta, 2014). Social media has the capacity to aid communication between individuals because it is not passive like TV where the back and forth conversation excludes viewers. In identifying the importance of social networks, researchers pose the question: "How can teachers tap into this vast resource of NSs and authentic language? One possibility is to follow Blattner et al.'s (2009) example of easing students into using Facebook. Teachers and students could use it as a source of authentic language for analysis" (2014, p. 40).

Moreover, Wang's (2013) study, which proposed using social networks for learning in general, also highlighted the use of Facebook in a class activity: "Both the teachers and students were able to receive prompt feedback for a range of questions that were posted on the site.... It allowed students to engage in their learning activities according to their individual needs and individual pace. Meanwhile, by Facebook Chat, a feature similar to MSN messenger, students were able to see who is present online and process online chatting with them in a real-time" (Wang, 2013, p. 190). The researcher concluded that "Facebook use in instruction assists students in achieving better grades, higher engagement, and greater satisfaction with the university learning experience" (p. 180). Thus, he recommends the use of Facebook as "an educational communication and interaction tool to enable faculty to assume a more active and participatory role in teaching and learning" (2013, p. 191).

Social Networking and Students' Social/Cultural Adjustment

Online social networking has been discussed in the context of the social adjustment of American students on U.S. campuses, with much research analyzing the impact of social media on the adjustment of American undergraduates during their first year in college. For example, the study conducted by Kalpidou et al. (2011) found a relationship between the activities of freshman students on social media and their adjustment to college life. Similarly, DeAndre's study (2012) examined 265 first-year American students who were engaged in a social media websites that prepare them for their life at their new institution. Participants "were invited to use the website prior to their arrival on campus. Before receiving access to the website, they were asked to

complete a pre-test survey” (p. 17) the results suggested that “site usage increased students' perceptions that they would have a diverse social support network during their first semester at college campus” (p. 1). As this study indicated, social media engagement has a positive impact on American students prior to their arrival at the host campus.

Moreover, online social capital has been discussed in relation to offline (in-person) interaction, with one study examining online interaction via social media and its impact on American students' in-person/offline social life (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). The results from this study “indicate that college students use instant messaging and social networking sites to interconnect with others, particularly those from their offline lives. They show that emerging adults' offline and online worlds are connected and they use online communication for offline issues, and to connect with people in their offline lives” (p. 432) Many other studies have examined social media and American students' adjustment to college (Kalpidou et al., 2011, Valenzuela, 2009, Subrahmanyam et al. 2008) their findings indicating that social media usage enhanced American students' adaptation to their new environments. For example, Valenzuela (2009) explored the relation between online social networking and social capital, asking if social media sites like Facebook contribute to the support and well-being of American students. His findings confirmed a positive relation between social media usage and American students' access to social capital. However, the research exploring the social media networking of international students on U.S. campuses is limited despite its importance on the national level.

Conversely, studies in other parts of the world have examined the phenomenon of social networking on international students. For example online orientations via social media applications provided to international students prior to their arrival to the host country were explored by Shau and Crook (2015) in their study of Chinese international students attending institutions in the UK. Shau and Crook conducted two pilot studies and one field study on these students before their arrival to the country. The students participated in an online blogging website created especially for the study, with the results suggesting that the participants benefited from this online communication as this interaction impacted their social adjustment positively. The validity and generalizability of this study needs to be confirmed by further research using a diverse population of international students. Likewise, the environment of UK universities may differ from the environment of U.S. universities, since the European system of education is in general different from the American system. In addition, research conducted by Australian scholars (Saw et al., 2011) identified the website preferred by Chinese students, finding that RENREN was more popular than Facebook for these students. The study concluded that their “findings confirm that for some international student populations, social networking preferences differentiated between the domestic students’ preferences” (2011, p. 156).

The study conducted by Lin et al. (2011) investigating the concept of social media and adjustment was quantitative and broad while the study reported here is qualitative, providing the students the opportunity to express their individual perceptions and attitudes towards social media. These researchers recommended that “ future

research might therefore focus on the problem of identifying what activities on SNSs are central to obtaining meaningful social support or building social capital from those which are not” (2011, p. 436), suggesting further investigations on “the link between both online and offline social capital and students’ adjustments” (Lin et al., 2011, 463). This area requires more research because the link between online socialization and off-line (in person) socialization is not clear in the context of international students. Studies have analyzed American students’ social media interaction and offline interactions, with Pempek et al.’s (2009), for example, suggesting that “Facebook was used most often for social interaction, primarily with friends with whom the students had a pre-established relationship offline” (p. 227). However, the same question concerning how online socialization via social media impacts offline in-person relationships has not yet been addressed in the context of international students.

Theoretical Framework

Frames of Social Relationships

In *A Bigger Picture* (2009), Keeley identified three frames of social relationships depending on the types of people interacting: Bonds, bridges, and linkages. Bonds are “links to people based on a sense of common identity (‘people like us’), such as family, close friends and people who share our culture or ethnicity” (2009, p.103), while bridges are “links that stretch beyond a shared sense of identity, for example, to distant friends, colleagues, and associates” (2009, p. 103) and linkages are defined as: “links to people or groups further up or lower down the social ladder” (2009, p. 103). Based on these

definitions, this research categorized the social circles of the participants to frame their social bonds, bridges, and linkages.

Theory of Social Capital

Social capital is “generally defined as the actual and potential resources embedded in relationships among actors” (Leana & Pil, 2006, p. 353). Since this study is concerned with the use of social media in the host country, building relationships will be analyzed based on the themes of the social capital theory. The significance of social capital on the individual’s sense of satisfaction, his sense of having social support, and consequently his general sense of well-being is evidenced in literature. Requena’s (2003) study, for example, confirmed that “the importance of social capital lies in that it brings together several important sociological concepts such as social support, integration and social cohesion” (p. 331). His study surveyed the relation between the social capital of workers at an organization in Spain and their sense of satisfaction, finding “a strong and significant association between social capital and levels of satisfaction and quality of life at work” (p. 356). Social capital guides this study because its basic hypothesis revolves around social networking and social support, which serves the ultimate goal of this research to investigate ways that contribute to the international students’ sense of well-being. Thus, strategies which invest in social networking and social support fit perfectly with the goals of this study. Since this study is concerned with the use of social media in the host country, building relationships will be analyzed based on the themes of social capital theory.

Social capital criticizes media outlets for their lack of two-way communication, i.e. the audiences are passive listeners and do not participate in the communication. In *Bowling Alone (1995)*, Putnam asserted that passive media, like TV, encourages people to be more isolated and less interested in volunteer work, meaning there is a decrease in social capital (Putnam, 1995). His research emerged from an interest in the possible benefits of the opposite type of social networking media, ones that are not passive but rather provide back and forth communication. Ultimately, he was interested in whether this media would impact the richness of off-line socialization. As his research suggests, social capital provides a vehicle for analyzing the complicated aspects of socialization, including social networking, social support, and connectedness.

Social capital can also help categorize the aspects of successful social networking. Citing Coleman, Dika and Singh (2002) suggest “Social capital is intangible and has three forms: (a) level of trust, as evidenced by obligations and expectations, (b) information channels, and (c) norms and sanctions that promote the common good over self-interest” (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 33). In investigating the idea of trust as an initial form of social capital, Goddard (2003) confirmed that people who engage in relationships with high levels of trust are more open to exchanging information and showing support and care for others. In relation to this study, building a successful networking system depends on trust. Therefore, types of bonds that tie international students to others in their network will be identified by the students’ level of comfort in exchanging information with those ties and the persons with whom he or she exhibits a high level of care. More

specifically, this research aimed to investigate how participants developed their links to others on campus to establish stronger relations.

Dika and Singh's (2002) second argument was that information channels emphasize the importance of social capital in exchanging knowledge. Several scholars have suggested that social capital is an intangible resource which can have impact overall student performance (Dess & Shaw, 2001). In addition, Marion's work (2015) conceptualizes four traits provided by social capital: information, knowledge, resources, and access to people who perform tasks. Thus, having strong channeling systems for international students will improve their abilities because information channeling among members of a social network empowers the capability of these members to have access to more knowledge and information about their environment culturally and academically.

Norms that influence and control social relationships were challenging to the researcher of this study because of the diverse backgrounds of the international students. They come from different cultural backgrounds and varied norms. The question becomes if international students share basic norms or if they have different conceptions about friendship and relations in general that is different from the social norms of American community. Community is usually understood as a group of individuals who share such aspects as beliefs, roots, or cultural characteristics that distinguish them from others in addition to shared goals and conception about future and shared values in life. The term *community* was introduced as a "cousin concept" to the term *social capital* by Farr (2004) as he confirmed that "social capital is complexly conceptualized as the network of associations, activities, or relations that bind people together as a community via certain

norms and psychological capacities, notably trust, which are essential for civil society and productive of future collective action” (2004, p. 9). The shared sense of community in modern societies is marked by openness and inclusiveness.

However, based on the literature that discusses communities on U.S. campuses, local host communities in small towns and rural areas can be seen as less diverse and more exclusive with an explicit conception about the meaning of being American which is different from other cultures and communities. Even though the community is diverse in terms of background and ethnicity, there are still fairly rigid categories. For example, one is seen as White or Black, Hispanic or Asian American. As a result, international students are seen as different since they don't fit into these boxes. Their population is ignored when speaking about minorities on U.S. campuses, explaining why conducting more research on the socialization of international students is important to this minority as an uncategorized population within the larger community.

Summary

The significance of having a diverse body of international students is acknowledged by experts, as it helps expand the perspectives in U.S. colleges. In addition, it contributes to the U.S. economy. At the same time, this diversity is challenging for professionals of international services not only in terms of managing this population but in providing services that address their needs, specifically the issues of academic challenges, cultural problems, and immigration status. The literature has shown that the current status of the services varied among institutions, but, in general, there is a continued need for improvement.

This research investigated online social networking, exploring one aspect of the issues international students face in adjusting. It traces the experiences of international students with social media and explores its contribution to their adjustment. Several studies have researched the impact of social media sites on the academic level of U.S. students, finding SNS contributes to improved academic performance. Other studies investigated the impact of SNS on the adjustment in the context of American freshmen college students. However, there is limited research on its effect on the adjustment of international students. This study addresses this limitation using the social capital theory, appropriate for this research because of its basic assumption that social capital derives from people interacting with one another. This component is founded on the ideas of social networking and social support as capital that can be invested in human relationships.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study used a phenomenological qualitative methodology. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology “is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants (p. 14). As this definition suggests, a phenomenon is anything that is experienced by individuals without external interference, which as Giorgi (1997) explained, is then recorded by the researcher “precisely as it is given or experienced (p. 1). This methodology is appropriate for this research as it investigates the relationship between online social networking and the attitudes of international students about their new cultural environment on U. S. campuses, attempting to better understand their lived experiences as they make this adjustment.

Online social networking is defined as a phenomenon by researchers in the study of complex social relations. Anderson and Rainie (2010), for example, argued that online communication is a significant phenomenon in their survey of 895 technology stakeholders and critics investigating the opinions of online social networks and their effects on social relations. Their results indicated that 85% of the participants agreed that online communication does “improve their social relations and will continue to do so through 2020” (p. 2). As a phenomenon, online social networking has created new definitions and perceptions of terms like *friendship* and *privacy* (Anderson & Rainie, 2010), suggesting the need for more research on these emerging forms.

In addition, a phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study as it corresponds with my goal of exploring individuals' lived experiences with social media. Creswell (2009) describes a phenomenological approach as one that "involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). This type of inquiry will assist me in developing the patterns need to articulate meaning from the data collected.

Moreover, a phenomenological design helps to specify the focus of a study as it's "aim is to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place" (Smith, 2015, p. 28). The focus of this study is on how international students interpret the effects of social media on their experiences in America. Thus, the themes surrounding the students' social lives in this analysis are, in one sense, pronged and bifurcated, meaning that their lives are divided into separate stages before and after arrival in the U.S. In another sense, the process of moving from ones' home country to a U.S. university is not simply a separate before/after event; rather it is a process, albeit a temporary one. A phenomenological analysis allows for the specificity needed to observe both this process of moving and adjusting and the experiences of international students with online social networking during this process of moving to the United States. This approach, then, offers a fuller understanding of how this phenomenon of social networking relates to their overall experience of living abroad.

Selection of Participants

Population of Interest

The general population of interest for this study includes international graduate students living temporarily in the U.S. and attending a public land-grant, Carnegie I research university in a rural area of a southeastern state. International students in this environment have more pressure to adjust than those attending urban universities due to the lack of available support resources. Poyrazli et al. (2007), who studied the barriers to adjustment at a semi-urban university, concluded that their results

Reinforce the value of taking an ecological perspective in understanding the well-being of individuals in their community. The findings show that the ability of the student to adjust depends not just on the individual but also on many aspects of their physical and social context. For example, while in an urban area transportation may not be an issue for the students, it is for those in a more suburban or rural settings

In addition, a rural environment lacks diversity in such areas as food choices and existing communities of internationals from the same ethnic and cultural background. This study focuses on graduate students in particular because they are more vulnerable to adjustment issues than undergraduates who begin their educations at relatively younger ages and, therefore, can adjust to living in the United States more easily.

Since there are multiple interpretations of what it means to be a non-American student, this research identifies international students as those who are temporarily

living in the United States for the purpose of attending school. Thus, immigrants and other categories of foreign students are excluded from it.

Sample Participants

According to past research, the criteria for choosing participants in a phenomenological study include feasibility, access, and representativeness of the population (Cohen, Manion, & Morison, 2011, pp. 152, 154). Since the potential participants in this study all attend the same southeastern university, they have established a relational bond that usually exists among communities of international students who come from the same backgrounds although these students come from nine different countries. As Creswell noted, “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites...that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (2009, p. 178)

A total of 12 participants from both genders were purposefully selected for this research, all at least in their second year of study in the U.S. Second-year rather than first-year students were selected because the newer students are just starting their social circles and they have yet faced adjustment issues to the extent that they are able to articulate what they are going through. Participants with more advanced experience are able to reflect on their social networks because they have spent at least one year in the host community. As a result, they have already established relationships and can report on their social life and experiences in the U. S. better than can new students.

This sample size is appropriate for qualitative research because this approach “uses sampling techniques that produce samples that are predominantly small and

nonrandom. This is in keeping with qualitative researcher's emphasis on in-depth description of participants' perspectives and contexts." (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 177) As the researcher, I limited the participants to a small number for the purpose of concentrating on their detailed experiences. This group of internationals, who belong to the general body of international students from more than 100 countries at the university, represents a diverse population of nine different countries. This diversity is significant because it allows the research to avoid conclusions that are valid for only a specific cultural background. The identities of participants were protected as they are referred to by pseudonyms throughout the discussion of the data. In addition, the university where the study was conducted is discussed anonymously to further protect the participants.

Since the population of interest is international students at U.S. universities in a nonurban area, I have chosen an institution in a rural area. In addition, since I am focusing on graduate students, the location has to be a research university that enrolls graduate students and has graduate programs. The selected institution is a medium-sized public research university (Carnegie I research institution) in the Southern U.S. Additionally, access to the target participant in this study is relatively feasible. The university has students from over 100 countries thus it also was possible to select a relatively representative sample.

Instrumentation

The interviewer was the primary instrument used to collect data for this study, the first phase of which included collecting data through interviews. Participants were designated by the country of background. A total of 15 possible participants have been

identified, and 12 participants were selected. The purposively selected participants vary in their demographics to represent both genders and to represent as many different countries as possible. The names of each student will be concealed with a nickname. Following these interviews, the second phase of the instrumentation began: memorandum checking via sending the transcripts of the interviews to each participant to ensure their accuracy.

Data Collection

The 15 potential participants in this study were initially contacted verbally, with those 12 agreeing to participate being asked to take part in an interview with the researcher. These meetings were conducted either in person, by phone or Skype, depending on the participants, to build the rapport needed for this study. These individual interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes using an interview protocol (see Appendix I on page 138) consisting of open-ended questions to enable students to elaborate their answers with detailed information. They were recorded because “using a tape recorder has the advantage that the interview report is more accurate than writing out notes” (Opdenakker 2006, p. 3).

Design of Interview Protocol

The interview questions designed to address the research questions for this study were divided into the following four main themes:

1. Initial Assistance: This section included questions asking about the participants’ initial arrival experiences and how they began to form friendships in the U. S. As the researcher, I, paid particular attention to any mention of online assistance using social

media or any arrangements made online using social media (SM) prior to the students' arrival to the host country and host institution.

2. Online Support: In this section students were asked about institutional/formal support as well as informal/community support provided to them through social media networking. These questions covered their lived experiences throughout the process of moving, acculturation, and adjustment. In addition, participants were asked to reflect on the role of SM in their adjustment, how they navigated their new environment using SM, whether using SM contributed to this adjustment and, if yes, in what ways. Participants evaluated existing online services and gave their suggestions/ideas for future practices.

3. Expanding Personal Network: This theme examined the students' social lives, the questions asking about their interactions and the process of establishing relationships with their host community in connection with social media usage, focusing on if social media played a role, and, if yes, in what ways. Social capital theory was a guide for interpreting the relationships established which were categorized into bonds, bridges, and linkages. Concerning more personal relationships, students were asked about how they met new people and made friendships, and their use of social media and online communication in relation to building friendships and attending events.

4. SM Usage and Favorite Platforms: This last theme focused on international students' usage of SM and their favorite social media platforms, what is popular among them and what kinds of social media they use while in the U.S. Students were also asked to evaluate their social media usage while living in the host country.

Coding

The raw data collected in this study through texts transcribed from the recordings of the interviews, subsequently were coded into structured themes to organize the results and enable transparent analysis and interpretation. According to Saldana (2009), coding involves using “ a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 4). This study used Nvivo to aid in the process of coding.

The first step in this analysis used open coding where each transcribed document was examined individually and statements coded into nodes representing different ideas; then using axial coding, these nodes were combined based on the similarity of their concepts and grouped under related themes because as Corbin and Strauss (1990, p. 7) explain, “concepts that pertain to the same phenomenon may be grouped to form categories” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7). Subsequently, using systematic coding, patterns were created based on the coded data, and in the most advanced level of analysis, the data were coded into the following four themes of this research:

- Initial assistance, first arrival experience
- Online support, institutional and community support
- Expanding personal networks, internationals’ social life in the U. S.
- International students’ usage of and preferences for SM platforms

As mentioned previously, in addition to these four themes, new ideas/suggestions for future study stated by participants will be taken into consideration to be included in the implication of results. The research questions explore the phenomenon of social media

and internationals adjustment. Therefore, it's helpful to understand the initial and continuing online support provided to internationals if it exists, did online communication using social media contributed to the process of adjustment? If yes, in what ways? How do internationals use social media in their host country? What are the popular social media apps and platforms among internationals? The coded themes try to answer each of these research questions. The transcript of the interviews, titled Interview Protocol, can be found in Appendix I; it is divided into sections showing each theme and its related questions.

Data Analysis

Following the coding process, the individual nodes representing similar themes or topics were grouped into child nodes, which were subsequently combined into parent nodes using Nvivo. These parent nodes represent the four thematic structures seen in Table 1 below along with their associated research questions:

Table 1

The Four Themes Resulting from the Data Analysis with Associated Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes	Final Four Structured Themes
1. Does participating in existing SM networks impact International students' adjustment? How?	-Initial assistance -Online support -Institutional and community support	1/Initial assistance 2/ Online support -Institutional support -Community support
2. What a kind of online activity IS are engaged in? What SM do they use? Or prefer?	-Popular platforms -Favorite SM Apps and platforms	3/social media usage and preference of platforms

3. What are the links between on-line/ off-line activities? Do online activities affect real-life social communication with their host community?	-Social life -Expanding personal network -Bonds/bridges/linkages	4/Personal network and relationships
4. How can these knowledge impact practitioners as they look at future possibilities for online services?	-Satisfaction level of existing online services -Suggestions for the future	- Attitudes and suggestions for the future

The data collected were analyzed and grouped under those four themes, with each theme being interpreted separately. Personal networks, for example, were analyzed within the frames of social capital theory, and social relations were divided into the three categories of bonds, bridges, and linkages. Bonds, the strongest form of relationships and as such central to the analysis of this study, were identified through their levels. According to Chriss (2007, p. 5), the social bonds consist of four levels: “1. *Behavioral*: Involvement, 2. *Cognitive*: Commitment, 3. *Affective*: Attachment, and 4. *Evaluative*: Belief.” This type of analysis enabled me to envision how international students manage to create bonds. Additionally, networking patterns were categorized into different forms depending on their types because “SNS and other internet-based communication tools have created new social circles and new categories of relationships, expanding the possibilities for contact and connection. The depth of these connections generally vary by platform, location, or group e.g. Facebook” (Anderson & Rainie, 2010, p. 19).

Data Collection Challenges

This study involved a few challenges. First, I, the researcher, a non-native speaker of English, conducted interviews of other non-native speakers, meaning linguistic misunderstandings may have occurred. For this reason, I adjusted the rhythm and speed of questions. In addition the use of recorders during the interviews helped me capture answers that were heavily accented. Moreover, the question of resources led to the decision to conduct the study within a single institution. Future studies can enhance the findings by conducting similar studies on multiple campuses.

In addition, the Hawthorne effect could possibly impact my study. According to Miller and Brewer (2003), this effect involves the potential change in participants' behavior that can result from their perception of the researcher's preferences or an awareness of the attention they are receiving coupled with the feeling of being observed by the researcher. The result of this consciousness of being part of a study leads to answers that do not address the questions of the researcher accurately, meaning that this change in behavior or answers affect the accuracy of the results of the study in general. To address this issue, I avoided leading the respondents or otherwise signaling a preference for a response and attempted to build trust and rapport with the participants as detailed in next section.

Researcher as Instrument

Being an international student myself enabled me to contribute to my own study by being and acting as interior agent of the population of interest. Sword (1999) gave an account of the role and presence of a researcher in qualitative study, confirming that

We cannot separate self from those activities in which we are intimately involved. I believe that disclosure of how one is inherently enmeshed in the research enhances the legitimacy of findings and new insights.... It is the researcher's familiarity with previous works and sensitivity to participants that deepens understanding and enhances the creation of meaning (p. 277).

As an insider to my population of interest as an international student over the past five years, I experienced the stages of assimilation and integration into a new society. This experience is significant for my work as it allows me to envision what the participants of study have gone through. Therefore, I was able to capture their experiences transparently. However, conducting research at my home institution has its challenges. Some of the participants are personal acquaintances of mine, meaning I had to distance myself from my previous experiences with them. To address my bias and the other challenges, I used memorandum checking, the process of ensuring the accuracy of transcripts by submitting them to the participants for review and confirmation, to make sure I had transcribed the interviews clearly and fairly.

In addition, procedures were used to address other potential challenges and to obtain as rich and legitimate data as possible. Trust is important in a researcher-participant relationship for enhancing the accuracy and amount of informative data reported by participants. As it is conceived as a deep level of comfort in a relationship between any two individuals, it implies a feeling that each can rely on the other during the interaction. Since I conducted a qualitative study involving personal rapport in the interviews, it was important to gain the trust of the participants so that they provided

honest answers. According to Dundun and Rayan (2010), the absence of trust creates an uncomfortable environment that makes the participant reluctant to deliver detailed information about himself and/or his personal experiences with the phenomena being studied.

Rapport is defined by Rayan and Dundon (2010) as “involving the exchange of meaningful dialogue and demonstrable behaviors so as to shed light on the social world of those who live and experience the phenomenon being studied” (p. 4). In addition, Bloom (2007) describes it as “the degree of acceptance and cooperation” (p. 2). Building rapport and developing a constructive relationship can enhance the level of trust between the researcher and the participants, eventually allowing the researcher to gain honest and complete information from them. On the one hand, the participants’ feelings of being observed could become a barrier preventing the researcher from obtaining quality data. On the other hand, participants may provide inaccurate information that lacks credibility for the research because they anticipated the answers wanted by the researcher as the result of the Hawthorne effect.

Furthermore, conducting research at the workplace of the researcher raises concerns of bias because of the existent links between me as a researcher and my research location. This can also affect the quality of the data provided. For this reason, I took appropriate steps based on previous literature to help reduce these concerns. First, I adopted an appropriate type of interview. There are several types of interviews based on the theoretical approach adopted, one being the positivist approach, which envisions participants as passive objects who are there only to deliver facts. This approach is not

useful for my research because of my concern that my participants would feel as if they were only being investigated so that they could provide direct and truthful information. Because I interviewed international students, a positivist approach could make my participants reluctant to elaborate on their personal experiences.

An emotionalist approach may also affect the credibility of the data. While I emphasized with my participants to create rapport, I did not want to manipulate their emotions as they then might not have provided accurate data about certain issues. For these reasons, I believe a constructive approach for the interview was most appropriate for this research as it allowed me to see my respondents as active agents who could interact and engage in a meaningful conversation. This approach contributed to creating a constructive conversation through trust and rapport, giving them the opportunity to express themselves comfortably, enriching the quality of data obtained.

Second, past research has found the quality of the interviewee's experience depends largely on the type of atmosphere created by the researcher. More specifically, the use of laughter and a sense of humor during a conversation create a comfortable environment, which breaks the ice and build rapport especially between different genders, i.e. female interviewer and male interviewee (Grønnerød, 2004). In addition, empathy for participants' stories is also significant for bridging trust and creating a positive atmosphere during the interview (Gair, 2012). For the purpose of creating an environment enriched by trust and rapport, I took these into consideration when deciding on my protocol. I began each session with a simple off-topic conversation to allow the respondent to relax and grow accustomed to being interviewed. The questions then

gradually escalated; I avoided asking deeply personal questions about social networking at the beginning, reserving them for later when the participant was more open and receptive. Since I did not want my personal response to their answers affecting the data, I hid my reactions, especially when the answers did not agree with my expectations. Also, I did not ask critical or judgmental follow-up questions during the conversation, avoiding, for example, any suggesting judgment of the participants' choices of approaches for adjusting to their environment. In addition, I avoided asking about reasons for having limited circles of friendships such as if the person is an introvert, and I avoided criticizing their personal opinions even if they appeared racist or unfair, or if they opposed my personal beliefs. This approach ensured the conversation continued without making the participant reluctant to give thorough answers.

Third, I considered the Hawthorne effect while developing the protocol for the interview. In particular, I, as a researcher, was careful to ensure that my choice of words was specific and clear to my respondent. For example, I referred to online social communication as online, distant, virtual communication rather than focusing on social media only because the term *online* is general and can include any type of website, not necessarily only social media websites or apps. The term *distant* may include phone calls, emails and other forms of communication. In addition, I left it open for participants to specify websites and avoided repeating names of specific ones even if they were it is repeatedly mentioned by other interviewees to protect the integrity of interviewees' answers. Repetitive terms may convey to the interviewees that these are

central ideas to the researcher, and as a result, they will, then, think that these are the answers the research is seeking.

Furthermore, since I am acquainted with some of the participants, I diligently maintained an honest, professional rapport. Accordingly, I began the interview by clearly explaining to them the nature of my study to mitigate our previous relationship influencing the information that provided, specifically their giving inaccurate information because they thought that is what my study needed. This honest rapport was also reached through the memorandum checking and by comparing answers for contradictory data or inconsistent responses. Finally, I made sure that the wording of questions was the same for all participants because, as Foddy (1993) explains, “small changes in wording sometimes produce major changes in the distribution of responses” (p. 4).

To ensure the validity of my data, I adopted a constructivist approach for my interviews and created an ecological setting that led to a comfortable environment for my respondents, including taking into consideration the Hawthorne effect so that participants were not affected by their awareness of being part of a research study. This design helped participants focus on providing honest answers representing their real opinions and reflections on their personal lived experiences.

Summary

Qualitative research methods were used for this phenomenological study of international students at a rural southern U. S. university. Interviews conducted via phone or Skype were used as the primary instrument for collecting data from a total of 12 participants. The data were then coded into the four themes addressing the research

questions: initial assistance, online support by institution and community, personal social network, and internationals' usage and favorite social media platforms. Social bonds and networking patterns were classified based on specific criteria. The data were analyzed and uploaded using the Nvivo program.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Chapter Four presents the results of this study, beginning with the demographics of the participants consisting of gender, the current stage of study, and the country of origin. In addition to using pseudonyms, this study also kept the majors of the participants anonymous because the populations of some international students are small, meaning those not part of the larger communities like the Indian and Chinese could be easily identified by their course of study. The second section of this chapter, the Structured Themes, is divided into four subsections, each analyzing a concept that has emerged from the research questions. The final section concludes the chapter by presenting information gleaned from the participant's responses that was not expected.

Demographic Statistics of Participants

The participants in this study come from diverse backgrounds representing nine countries, specifically, the regions of Latin America, Europe, Middle East, and Asia. The students' ages range from 24 and 41, with 59% being female and 41% male and 59% pursuing an MA and 41% a Ph.D. The table below summarizes the demographics of the participants.

Table 2

Demographics of the Research Participants

Name (age)	Male/Female	Current stage	Country of Origin
Rick (25)	Male	2 nd year MA	Brazil
Elizabeth (24)	Female	2 nd year MA	Kurdistan

Anita (30)	Female	3 rd year PhD.	Pakistan
Leticia (32)	Female	2 nd year MA	Argentina
Harry (25)	Male	2 nd year MA	Brazil
Mark (25)	Male	2 nd year MA	Bolivia
Ferazi (36)	Female	2 nd year PhD.	Pakistan
Ann (41)	Female	4 th year PhD.	Philippines
Sandra (34)	Female	3 rd year PhD.	Indonesia
Bob (32)	Male	2 nd year MA	Argentina
Beatrice (29)	Female	4 th year PhD.	Poland
Howard (26)	Male	2 nd year MA	India
12 participants	5 Males	5 PhD. students	9 Countries
	7 Females	7 MA students	

Structured Themes

The participants' responses were categorized based on the four themes of *Initial Assistance, Online Resources and Support, Expanding Personal Network, and Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms*. The first, *Initial Assistance*, reports the international students' first arrival experience, the agents who were their first contacts and/or first assistants, and the initial communications among international students via social media. The second theme, *Online Resources and Support*, describes the primary online resources available to support international students, including both formal institutional support and informal community/student support. The third theme deals with *Expanding Personal Networks*, including the levels of relationships (bonds, bridges,

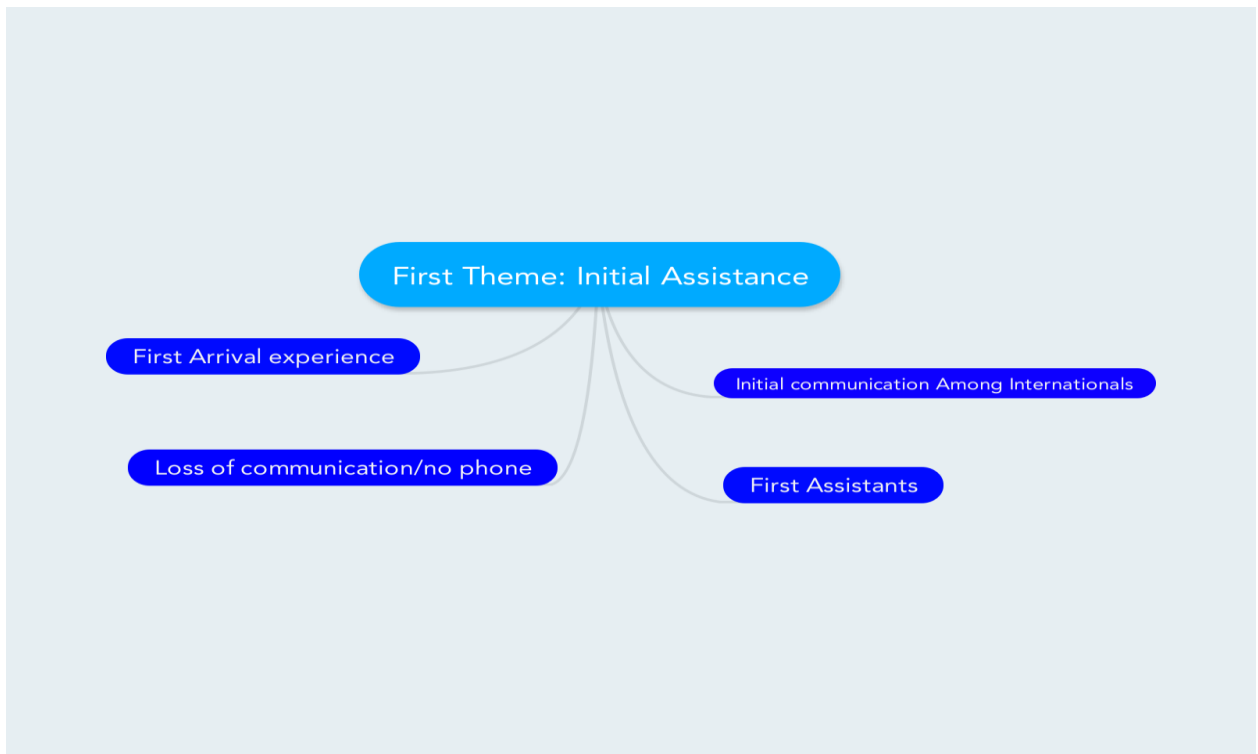
linkages) discussed in connection with the online social media activities of the participants. The fourth and final theme, *Social Media Usage and Platforms*, analyzes the popular networking websites/apps reported by the participants as well as their favorite social media platforms. In addition, an evaluation of their use of social media while living in U.S. is provided by the participants.

First Theme: Initial Assistance

Initial Assistance discussing the first arrival experiences, the loss of communication/lack of phone, initial assistants, and initial communication among international students, is summarized in the following diagram:

Figure (1) Diagram of the first

theme:



Arrival Experience

International students described their first arrival experience as a difficult period, full of adversities and ambiguities. They saw it as “a very hard period, it was very difficult, “a problem” and “definitely overwhelming.” Finding accommodations was particularly stressful for them since they were overseas before their arrival to the U.S. Anita, a PhD student from Pakistan in her third year of study, described it as “one of the worst experiences” in her life because her visa was issued late. She had only a two-day notice before she had to fly to the host country. Having no connections, knowing no one at the host institution, and being unable to rent housing were major problems for her as well as for other international students. More specifically, when asked about her first arrival experience, Anita said:

*So when I first came here, **I came without preparation or contacts**; that was one of the worst experiences, because I had to come here on a 2 day notice because of visa issue. My visa was issued late and I had to come. At first I thought I will come next semester, so I did not arrange for housing. The classes had already started, so I came here 15 days after the classes has already started, because they said if you come within 2 days, we can register you for classes and you are good; otherwise, I had to wait for the next semester, so I got my visa late and I came here on a 2 day notice...I was searching for housing before that but because they ask for a deposit, I did not want to sign a lease or do anything from there.*

Anita’s experience is supported by Mark’s, a Bolivian second-year MA student:

That was problem because I didn't know anybody. I didn't have any contact with anybody from the U.S., so I didn't have a connection with the university or anybody. I tried to look for it in email, and I couldn't find any group or anything. So when I came here I took a taxi from the airport because I didn't arrange for anything with anybody and I stayed in a hotel because I didn't know anybody for three days; during those three day, on the first day, I got a connection. I went to the students services and they said there is a group and look for (group's names on SM), so they gave me some advice but I had to do it myself.

The lack of contacts in the host country, whether formal or informal, was a challenge, one that prevented students like Anita and Mark from making adequate arrangements for their move prior to their arrival. The communication with local services inside the host country was stressful and sometimes unproductive due to a lack of understanding of the needs of international students. Ann, a PhD student from the Philippines, expressed feelings of being lost and helpless because she felt that no one was seeing her problems from her perspective as an international student unfamiliar with the U.S. environment. She had a specific problem with local rental services when she was trying to arrange for housing, stating that:

There was no information that could be useful on all on the schools' graduate website; there was no information that I could use. I had to research on my own through Google...I had to call them (landlords) because we had a lot of miscommunication about the pay, the person I was talking to did not seem to understand that I was an international student, that I had no checkbook, I had no

account... and she didn't seem to have the patience to deal with me. ...In my program I tried to email somebody, but they couldn't help me, because they couldn't see my needs from my perspective. Because they are Americans, they did not have the stress that I had.

The location of the school was also a barrier for international students, who found it difficult to find information about the community. The university used in this study is located in what is considered a suburban area. Smaller communities like this are not as popular in social media as metropolitan areas. Therefore, international students have limited information about small towns and these suburban environments. Sandra, for example, a third-year PhD student from Indonesia, stated that she faced difficulties learning about the university where she was going to study, responding that:

Well, yes, first of all it is really difficult to get to know this university because I've never been to this part of the world, so it was kind of challenging to find any kind of information. In the beginning of course I tried to find any community I mean coming from the same country with me, but it was difficult because there were not too many people from my country in the United States.

-Sumood: And when you say looking, where you do look? Through emails?

Websites?

-Well of course Google, I googled every single community from my country, or any kind of information about this university or this state, so it led me to Wikipedia; it barely linked me to a Facebook page or a blog. I was sort of expecting a kind of blog or Facebook to help me to link with something or some

information or a person, but I couldn't find anything other than Wiki at that moment.

Even though Sandra had visited America before and was acquainted with its culture, she found it difficult to matriculate at a suburban school. The lack of contacts and the miscommunication with local services due to their lack of understanding of international students' needs was a challenge. In addition, the difficulty in learning about the host campus/community of suburban areas is an essential problem faced by international students like Anita, Mark, Ann, and Sandra.

However, a different version of the arrival experience was recounted by students who found contacts in the host country. Bob and Harry, both MA students from Latin America, were able to contact students at the host institution from countries of the same region. As a result, they managed to arrange for accommodations for their first few days after arrival online. As Bob said:

In my case it was different, so before coming here, I already knew some people who actually came from my country, so I contacted these people because we have something in common; we both came from the same country with the same scholarship. So I knew a few people before getting to Clemson; I actually spent the first night here with them.

-Sumood: how did you communicate?

- Bob: With them, it was on phone, actually before quitting my country's phone, and probably WhatsApp. I don't remember if I used WhatsApp, because in my

country WhatsApp is a big thing, so mostly teenagers and young adults are using WhatsApp, more than regular text messages.

Students who conducted extensive searches on social media were often able to find fellow citizens in the host country. For those students, being part of continuing conversations on social media enriched their knowledge about preparing for travelling to the host country. One of those students, Ferazi, a second-year PhD student from Pakistan, described her experience as “overwhelming but was not inconvenient.” She used social media to reach out to groups of students who either were already in the U. S. or were about to come to the country. These students were able to help with such concerns as visas, paperwork, and accommodation arrangements. Eventually, she was able to connect with someone from her country of origin who resides and studies at the host institution that helped her with accommodations and first day arrival arrangements. Similarly, Howard, an MA student from Asia, had a smooth transition because of the strong online community support he had in the host country. Howard stated that:

There is this [a group name] association and they have a FB group page and everything; they arrange rides from the airport and help with accommodations. So my rent starts on the 15th and I was here on the 11th, so I had to stay with someone else, and they arranged that and I was camping at somebody's place and there were supplies and everything.

This support came from a large community of internationals, whose members unite their efforts and sources to help their fellow citizens when they first arrive from abroad.

Loss of Communication/Loss of Phone

International students adjust gradually to the host country, with one issue being buying a phone and deciding on the plan, the services, and the carrier company. For example, it took Ferazi 20 to 25 days to decide which carrier to use. Therefore, her communication with her contacts in the host country occurred primarily through Facebook. Not having a phone upon arrival to the host country impedes the communication needed for first arrival arrangements. Leticia, a second-year MA student from Argentina, made arrangements for housing via email, including making an appointment to meet her landlord to get her keys as soon as she arrived from the airport. However, she expressed how stressful it was, how she was afraid she would lose contact with her landlord because she did not have a phone to call him. As she said:

We communicated with the owner; then I arrived at the airport, and I took a cab and arrived here and have arranged this meeting before coming here, so it was like if I lose my ride or something I will lose the contact with the owner because I didn't have phone. I mean I left my phone in my country.

Fear of losing communication was also shared by Anita who came to the U.S. with no previous arrangements except a post on Facebook to a student group telling them she was coming the next day. Anita said:

One of the students said he can come to pick me and another one said that I could stay with her for few days when I come here, but I did not have their contact number; I did not ask for it and they did not provide it. Also when I came here I don't have any means of communication; I did not have a phone that worked in this country.

Even after their arrival in the U.S., international students are confused about the communication system and phone plans, so it takes them time to figure out which plan and carrier service are appropriate for them.

First Assistants

When participants were asked to talk about their first arrival experiences, they highlighted that assistance came primarily from two sources: persons from the same or a similar background and the same religion, and online contacts through emails and social media. Here are some examples of their answers.

Sandra, a PhD student from Asia, looked for sources on her host university website and on social media, eventually finding a family from her home country she communicated with through social media:

- Sumood: then who arranged your flight, ride from the airport?

-Sandra: I tried it myself, so yeah I ended up knowing one fellow citizen who graduated from the same university, and then he connected me with another (name of country) family from another city.

-Sumood: Ok and how did you contact them, through phone?

- Sandra: Oh that one was through FB, yes, because they are not students and for some reason, it's easier for them to connect with each other on FB at that time.

When international students search for assistance, they seek to connect to their fellow citizens, people of their religion or those who share a similar background. People of the same origin and/or faith are the first to be contacted by international students reaching out to people abroad. While social media also provides them the opportunity to connect to

people different from themselves, the comfort of similarities and commonalities was the most influential for the people and communities contacted. For example, Anita, a PhD student from Asia, contacted a social media group of international students on Facebook. In addition to their initial assistance of giving her a ride from the airport and accommodating her, Anita's mother helped her connect relatives residing in a neighboring city who provided further assistance.

While Anita was helped by her relatives, other students found assistance through ties through their churches. Rick, an MA student from Latin America, was able to find a host family by contacting his Presbyterian church back home. His church arranged for his accommodations with a sister church in the U.S. Another student from Latin America, Harry, had support from a student from a similar background. Harry talked about his first contact in the US:

Harry: The only contact I had was my future roommate; at least I had him, he was the one. I mean he have been here for like a week so he knew at least more.

- Sumood: So how did you communicate?

- Harry: We met on FB actually.

-Sumood: Is he from your home country or another place?

-Harry: No he is from [a neighboring country].

Almost all initial communication with contacts was made through social media, except for a few cases where emailing or phone were used. More specifically, nine of the 12 participants, or 75%, depended on social media (SM) for communication with the people who first helped them, while two participants used email or phone communication and

one student did not have any sources to contact. More importantly, there was a preference for contacting people from a similar background or other international students rather than depending on the host country or the host institution. In general international students reached out to other international students for aid and initial support using online communication.

Initial Communication among International Students

Results showed that the initial communication of the respondents with other international students was more supportive than that with host students. When the participants discussed these social connections, they revealed feelings of comfort when they were able to socialize with other international students. Ann, for example, discussed her initial circle of friendships, which she didn't have until her second semester, saying:

When I started to meet the other international students, that's when I felt I can actually talk to people about the challenges of being here and being international students, and being actually heard... So in my second semester, I felt suddenly comfortable and I felt like ok, I think I will be able to do this because I have people I can talk to.

Sandra was put in contact with another international student by her academic director. She talked about how her initial communication with this student enabled her to increase her circle of acquaintances:

I don't have many options but international friends; it is the person from my department, she connected me with everybody, both people from the same department and other international students....Now I have a lot of friends, from

different cultural backgrounds and sometimes we share our difficulties in terms of dealing with a different culture and we help each other that way.

When international students discuss their interactions with U.S. students, they acknowledge the difference between themselves and their host community. Ann, for example, thinks that these differences create obstacles to understanding international students' initial needs. She talked about her first efforts to communicate with people from the host country:

I emailed the president of my program's organization, and I asked about things, where should I go, whom should I speak with; he couldn't really give me any useful information, because like I said he is American, and he didn't see my needs.

On the other hand, Ferazi, a second-year PhD student, thinks that there are some issues only national students can help with. For example, when asked to give suggestions for improving international student services at the end of the interview, he suggested that connecting new international students to senior international students on social media would be advantageous to the newcomers. When asked about her opinion about connecting international students with American students, she said:

Yes, they can be helpful in many other ways, I mean, because there are many things that only Americans can answer about their culture, and I mean there are many questions which only a native can answer, but the same kind of concerns can be answered by someone who has been living in the USA for maybe 2 or 3

years, so I would say it is more helpful if you get connections with international students; they have same concerns.

International students expressed feelings of well-being when they communicated with their fellow international students, stressing that these peers have a deeper understanding of the challenges they face at the host institution. Based on the comments of participants, it appears that connecting new international students with internationals who have been in America for a while helps prepare them for their move and residency in the U.S.

In conclusion, the first theme, *Initial Assistance*, that covered the period of transition in international students' lives revealed the initial difficulties international students faced and the challenges resulting from the lack of a means of communication upon arrival to the host country. It revealed that students relied on assistance first, from people of the same origin and/or faith and second from others via social media. International students expressed the relief they felt when communicating with other international students.

Second Theme: Online Resources and Support

The second theme, *Online Resources and Support*, analyzes the available online networking services offered to international students by formal institutional agencies as well as informal /community agents.

Section One: Institutional Support

Different concepts emerged through the interviews with the participants about the formal online support provided by the institution to international students. This research

defines formal support as any online service presented by institutional staff, i. e. its representatives or employees, as part of their official work on campus. This section first discuss the students' awareness of existing services, some of the issues concerning the coordination inside the International Students' Services Office, and finally, the participants' level of satisfaction with the current institutional services.

Awareness of Existing Services: The institution where the study was conducted has exemplary facilities in terms of online technological services across all campus departments. More specifically, the International Student Services Office has its own page on the university's website, offering links to resources and online information concerning immigration papers, visas, health insurance companies, local DMV services, and various forms. Moreover, it includes contact email addresses for the staff in the office in addition to its physical address. While this page does not have a directory of social media addresses for a twitter account or a Facebook page, several pages on FB represent the institution's official offices although some of them are not very active.

To determine the participants' reports about their use of social media or any other online services on campus, the students were asked about their knowledge of existing online services before their arrival to the host institution and/or whether they had been contacted by the International Students Office (ISO) before their arrival to the U. S. Of the twelve participants, only two knew about international students' page on the website of the school, and only one of these reported visiting the website at least once to get the address and the building where the ISO is located. Most of the students were confused about the exact online services specified for international students. Ferazi, for example,

was not aware of the ISO's web page. When asked what she thought of the existing online services provided by the institution and if there was a website, Ferazi responded:

- Ferazi: Personally, I don't believe that! Especially the international student s office, they don't use social media, and they should do that in first place.

-Sumood: Like do what? Can you give an example?

-Ferazi: I mean the FB medium; it is the most popular among students, and they don't exist on FB. Does the international student office exist on FB?

-Sumood: I don't know; you tell me.

-Ferazi: No they don't; of course, they don't.

Anita, a third-year PhD student who has already spent a few years on campus, denied any knowledge of the existence of an institutional online website or of online services provided to international students. When she was asked the question about the ISO web page, she replied:

- Anita: No, nothing is provided, like there are some pages, but...

- Sumood: Have you been to the website of international student services?

- Anita: They don't have a website!

- Sumood: Actually they do have a website.

- Anita: I don't know of it.

While several participants conveyed that they did not know about the existing services before their arrival to the host institution, these students learned about them after living in the U. S. for a few months. Beatrice, for instance, highlighted the absence of

publicity about the existing services such as the lack of information about them on the university website, stating:

I think there are some networks; I didn't use them when I first came here because I wasn't aware of them, and I think now there are more, especially FB groups. I think new students just don't know of them. If there is any information on the university website that there are many groups that can help you with your arrival and you contact them through different ways, either have the email address or the FB group name or just any other contact information and just any information this group exists that would be helpful, because I know there are many groups and there are many people willing to help students, but very often this information doesn't get to international students. They are not aware of this available help.

Similar to Beatrice, Elizabeth expressed feelings of stress over not knowing about many of the services available on campus, learning about them months after her arrival.

Elizabeth comes from a third world country with no email accounts for college students and only limited online services for institutions. Therefore, she did not have any expectations in terms of online services, and she was overwhelmed by the information she received during orientation after her arrival. She said:

Elizabeth: I had no idea we have email address; all I knew is that we have this iRoar Banner that we can sign in to register for classes and that is it, and without being in the university there is no other way to connect to this place, when I opened my email there was 50 unread emails; it was overwhelming, because I just got here and I am just like in a very big shock...

Sumood: Ok, so before you came did you go to the university website? Did you check the international students' office?

-No, I didn't have any idea what those things could be; actually I had no idea if there is something like that, so my only idea was to register for class and that's it, nothing else.

When she was asked about her opinion of existing services, she said:

Actually there are a lot of resources on campus that I didn't know about until about six months after being in Clemson, because of the system that they use to introduce international students, They have just this orientation which is very overwhelming...everything you are told about ...50 resources in just one day.

Other participants were also unsure about the available online services. When Bob, a second-year MA student from Argentina, was asked about his knowledge of existing social media services specifically for international students, he answered:

Bob: I don't know if I could recognize like a very specific targeted social media or social media strategy to reach international students. I don't think I can judge their performance because I don't know; they may have something.

-Sumood: I am not asking you to judge their performance, I am asking about your knowledge of existent services.

-Bob: No, I am not aware of the different channels they use to specifically target the international community.

The only student who confirmed using the ISO website was Howard, a second-year MA student from India, who stated:

I haven't really seen too much, not as active as the other ones like (name of student informal group). There are usually times when I go to international services so I go to their website to look up their room number or working hours or something like that. I did look up some of the procedures for paper work and I have done some of the forms, strictly official things.

As these responses suggest, some students were completely unaware of any existing online services, while others revealed that they knew about the opportunities available after spending months at the institution. Only Howard knew about some of the services provided online; however, he emphasized that he didn't rely on the International Students Services Office for informal needs. He used its website and went to the physical office only to complete official paperwork.

Coordination: The Office of International Students' Services delivers a face-to-face orientation offering information ranging from living off-campus and health services available to the reporting of sexual harassment and safety advice for incoming students at the beginning of the semester. However, all of this information, including current online services, is presented in one day during the first week of students' arrival and right before classes begin. In addition to Elizabeth's comment about the orientation being overwhelming, Bob also talked about his experience attending orientation, stating that although it was very informative, a large amount of information was presented. When asked if he has been told about online services, he replied:

Sumood: Did they refer you to online things like, ok guys you can go there and find this information?

-Bob: Yeah, but honestly, especially in the beginning, every time someone says something about www. bla bla bla, I only hear bla bla bla .edu, yeah soo ..

- Sumood: There was too much information to process?

-Bob: Yeah, I am pretty sure they mentioned websites to check; hmm, I don't know if I am following them on any social network.

Sandra further confirmed that the orientation was helpful but overwhelming, reflecting on her experience:

- Sumood: How do you evaluate that orientation? Was it like helpful?

- it was good, it was good. I had like three orientations, one for graduate students and one for international students, but honestly, because it was happening at the same time in the first week we arrive here, so there was like...I believe there was a bunch of information, but it was just too much information.

As these participants indicated when asked, they were introduced to online services among other facilities and services on campus during orientation, but this event, although informative, was overwhelming.

The university's website includes contact information for almost all the faculty and staff in the departments and facilities around campus. However, the promptness in replying to emails varies from office to office and from one faculty or staff to another. As a result, the participants interviewed for this research faced challenges when they emailed various offices and facilities at the host institution because they did not receive prompt responses. In some cases, email was found not to be an effective way to communicate with some offices. In addition, various students were turned down when

they tried to reach out to certain services while still in their home country. Anita, for example, talked about her efforts to get in touch with someone to give her information about housing in her host city, saying,

I did not know anyone, because I came on a 2 day notice; the only contact I knew, I contacted the international students' office, and nobody answered my email. I contacted the department coordinator at my department, and no one helped me or gave me a contact of someone who would help me; like everybody said that housing is not their issue to provide any support regarding housing or your arrival; nobody offered help to me. Maybe they had no idea of my situation, but whoever I could find the email of and contacted did not offer any help; the only help I got is that I happen to find (name of students' FB group) that is here at the university on Facebook.

Since Anita was unable to get a useful response from an official school representative to guide her on housing, she approached informal community groups who helped her with her transitional preparations and accommodations in her host country. Likewise, another student, Sandra, faced similar challenges when she tried to contact the office international students' by email. When asked if she had received any information from the school about her future situation as a graduate student at the university, she confirmed that:

At some point, they only provided me with one form of document basically saying congratulation, you are accepted. I think in that letter, or whatever document I had, they gave me one contact person, but it failed because that person no longer worked there during that time, so they were in some sort of transition that I didn't

understand, I just don't get what happened, but it was kind of difficult for me at that time to find valid information.

Sandra also felt lost, with no valid helpful information to use to arrange for her accommodations.

However, the university website provides some information about housing, but it is not specifically tailored for international students. When Howard was asked if there was specific information about housing on the website, he said:

Yeah, there was information about housing, but I felt that was ...hmm I would say not completely in the context of international students. I believe there was information about on-campus housing options, and I believe there are other websites, but I think it was much easier and more informative in the (informal FB group name).

Thus, international students were unable to recall information about available online services included in orientation because of the overwhelming amount of information they were exposed to on that one occasion. In addition, some students revealed that emailing was not always successful in obtaining the information about and access to the services they needed. Finally, participants stated that the functionality of the website sometimes failed to lead them directly to information that could address their needs as international students.

Level of Satisfaction: Although the institution does not provide rich information about accommodations and the other needs of international students, it has well-established online facilities concerning academic requirements. Since the information on academic

services is of high quality, the international students were not particularly challenged in finding such information. Moreover, some students thought that the information concerning academic requirements was more than enough. For example, when second-year MA student, Leticia, was asked to give her opinion of existing online services, she responded:

I think, hmm, it could be better. I mean for academic stuff it is mostly ok; you could extract some information. It could be clearer, I think, for academic stuff and things related to the institution like this shuttle and bus stuff; it's ok. But for everyday living here, I think the university doesn't have much more information about that; for example, I didn't know that I was going to need a car here, I mean in my country I just walk and buy stuff.

Similar to Leticia, Ann, a fourth-year PhD student, shared the same concerns about available support services on campus as she talked about her experience with non-academic services provided by the institution. While she used the International Students' Services Office to complete the required paperwork and enrollment forms, the school was not equipped to deal with her other needs as an international student. As Ann said:

Ann: We had to register and get an ID; there was no information for a single person like me who had to be on her own, so I don't feel like they were actually equipped to handle a solo student coming in. They had their own protocols from their side, but they couldn't see my needs from my side....They know ok I have to sign you in, here is your paper you have to sign and here is your ID, but in terms of ok so how could I get there, who do I talk to, what is the next step you know,

just practical things like that, to give you access to places that you need to go to be identified as a student, to be identified as a person, there was nothing from them that will help me from my end get those things done. For them institutionally they have protocols, they have steps, but for me to be able to get to that level where we both were recognized as entities, there wasn't anything for me to follow.

These results suggest that the institutional online support exists primarily for official paperwork, documentation, and formal academic services only.

Results also suggested that some available services are not publicized widely enough.

Various participants commented on coordination issues related to publicizing events taking place on campus. More specifically, students indicated that they were unaware of some social events on campus; especially those important for helping them increase their social networks. For example, Elizabeth confirmed that there were plenty of social events happening on campus, yet she didn't know about many of them. When she was asked about the reason for her ignorance, she answered:

Sumood: So how do you justify that? Why are there some events you are not aware of?

- Elizabeth: I think because, I don't know, I think there is not enough publicity for these events; the website, the school website is very intimidating; it is not a site that makes surfing easy. You have to search a lot to kind of get to what you want; it is not a directory for your purpose.

Ferazi also agreed, adding that there were also web programs and services that were not introduced to or publicized among students widely enough:

I think it is not as advertised as it should be, because many people still and I am not talking about my classmates only, they are not aware that Adobe is connected to Clemson, that it gives this opportunity for sharing their works, not only personal things, but sharing their projects, their videos and classroom assignments. Not many people know about that; personally I think it's not as advertised as it should be.

Furthermore, participants expressed varied opinions of the current available online services, stating that there are places for improvement. Although these suggestions are discussed fully in the context of *Implications for Practice* in Chapter Five, some examples are listed here. For academic matters, paper work, and official procedures, most students were satisfied with what is provided on the website. Howard, for instance, praised the online services of the International Students' Services Office saying:

“depending on the services they provide, I think they are doing a fine job, as for the paper work and official matters and so.” Leticia also said that there was more information about academics than what was needed for international students. However, when it came to issues concerning the non-academic needs of international students, the participants underlined some concerns and issues. For example, Mark from Latin America said:

I haven't found any services that help you to connect like to peers with something you need, or it's too bureaucratic to go through somebody in the university; in the end they are probably going to connect you, but it is easier to have a WhatsApp

group and you can ask, and someone will answer you probably there. I don't think there are many things in general for international students; social media is one of that stuff. Like they don't know what answers are there; they are not familiar that there are people that are trying to get in touch. Like what you need what international people need when they get here, they don't know how to contact with these organizations; they don't know what these organization do, so you have basically to talk to someone personally and they will give you these organizations; they will give you how can you contact with them, but the university doesn't have these means to give you those information; they don't know, like they don't know that my organization... We tried to incorporate them into the WhatsApp group but I don't think they have been able to expand that network.

In conclusion, students were of two minds about existing services. Participants agreed that the institution has good online services for formal registration and enrollment information, as well as for academic purposes, yet not so good for the other needs such as accommodations and commuting. Furthermore, the results show that some existing services are not publicized adequately to meet the needs of international students. Overall, the consensus of the participants was that the online services available for them are poor, especially in terms of social media services.

This first section discussed the formal institutional online services provided for students, first identifying students' awareness of them. It also discussed the issues related to coordination, with students expressing their opinions regarding orientation and other

issues like communication with the institution online facilities through email. Finally, participants evaluated current online services of their institution, their level of satisfaction varying depending on the type of online services provided.

Section Two: Informal/Community Support

Online Support and Academics: The American system of higher education is very competitive in providing academic assistance to its students. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education ranks institutions according to the strength of their academic programs and graduation rates. Since advising plays an integral role in students' achievements and their graduation rates, it plays a major role in U.S. universities. The American system of education has several academic advising models for enriching the student experience and providing the necessary academic guidance (Gordon et al., 2011). The institution in this study uses the Satellite Model of advising in which "each school, college, or division within the institution has established its own approach for advising" (Gordon et al., 2011, p. 8). The institution in this study has a very supportive academic system, and the participants expressed more satisfaction with the face-to-face/in-person advising than with online assistance. The results in this section suggest that social media are not effective in solving academic problems or for providing academic advice.

Participants were asked if they used online sources to deal with critical situations concerning their academic pursuits, with most denying depending on social media for this purpose. Sandra, for example, confirmed that she used email at times to ask about

academic issues but not social media. In a similar context, Bob stressed the professionalism of academically related matters, saying:

So, there are a lot of people from the department and from the lab that I keep contact through FB, but I don't usually use FB or other social media to gather information about academia or academic stuff. If it is professional I use email; if it is more social or informal communication, I tend to use FB or WhatsApp.

Elizabeth also distinguished between academic as formal/professional needs versus informal needs like social support and support with adjustment issues. When she was asked if she used social media or online communication to seek help with academic issues, she answered:

Hmmm, more or less, I think in terms of academia, no. I think social media is mainly for events and entertainment and socialization, but when it comes to academia, no. The academia here is just you can't find information online or on a website; you just have to go face-to-face to your department....For academic issue most of the time you have to go face-to-face to your department; they will fix it all the way. That's how I feel it works.

Beatrice explained that she felt more comfortable talking in person about her academic problems. For issues in her lab, she prefers discussing them in person. Howard added that he couldn't rely on information from his lab mates, saying,

Yeah I will talk to my lab mates, but that information is not reliable most of the time. I would go the professor or staff; they are really helpful. I can just walk in and talk to them about that.

These data from international students suggest that social media communication is not effective when seeking information or assistance about academic needs or problems. The institution studied here has a strong support system of faculty advising and department facilities to help students with their academic needs via email or face-to-face communication. As a result, students do not depend on social media to meet their academic needs.

Online Support and Social/Cultural Adjustment: The results showed that participants used social media during their first arrival adjustment. SM was also an important element in their social lives during their stay in the U.S. In contrast to academic needs, which depended primarily on face-to-face and direct communication with institutional resources, international students used social media extensively for social adjustment issues, in particular for providing an introduction to American culture and for meeting their accommodation needs. Introduction into the culture is an on-going learning process in which students find themselves overwhelmed by cultural situations. They try to find answers for these situations that are different from what they are used to back home.

Respondents identified the importance of SM for finding accommodations and material supplies. This section begins by discussing the students' experiences using social media for dealing with accommodation needs and then explores how these internationals use social media to learn about American culture. The final part of this section highlights the students' thoughts about the informal nature of the help provided through social media.

The students' initial struggles to adjust to their new environment began as they prepared to travel to the host country, asking many questions about the process, and the results of this study found that the participants used social media early in their process of moving to the U. S, communicating from a distance with the host community via these platforms. Bob, who began to seek answers for his questions by posting them to student groups on Facebook, said:

I started asking a lot of questions such as where could I stay here, what was the best airport to land in; for the first time I was actually considering using [name] airport and then some people from the group suggested to me using (airport name) instead, and it was a much wiser decision....That was very great help and actually someone posted in one of these groups something about renting in the city. It was also very useful, and other guys told me something about getting free rides from the airport to the city. I used it and I saved like \$80.

- Sumood: and that was all through FB communication?

- Bob: Through FB, yes.

International students also used social media to communicate with others to learn about unfamiliar places and how to get to them. For example, Leticia had to use public transportation to go to a certain building for a lab meeting, and a student helped her using FB communication. She said:

Like one of the girls, on the first days, I had to go to the university to a particular lab that is in the middle of the woods, and I didn't have idea of how to get there. I didn't have a car, so I talked to her through FB and she explained to me

everything about how to take the bus and how to take the shuttle to arrive there, because I had no idea. I thought I could walk you know, but it wasn't in a walking distance and she explained everything.

In addition to the struggles that international face during their first few days after arrival; other issues appear later in students' lives during their stay in the U.S. When they needed guidance on these issues, they approached their community on social media to get answers. When Anita was asked what she would do if she needed to see a doctor or to buy something, she replied:

What I can do is to write a post or send a message to a friend that I am looking for a place to buy this thing, which would be the best place in the area? Like I can ask local people who are friends with me on FB which dentist would you recommend; like in this way it can help if they have any recommendation.

Ann, on the other hand, uses social media to gather information; however, she does not rely completely on what people say. Instead, she said:

I would go and ask people on a group page, or in a chat, people you know had experience with these doctors. I would ask them; at the same time I would be researching online for recommendation and then I would match their experiences, my friends' experiences, with what I found on Google and then I make a decision.

-Sumood: I see, and when you say group pages, what do you mean? Which sites?

- Ann: Oh that would be on FB. I usually post something on FB if anybody know where bla bla bla, or where the DMV is etc. and then somebody would respond or send a chat message.

All twelve participants confirmed their dependency on social media for obtaining information about their accommodation needs and about the moving process. Howard, who confirmed using social media to gather information or opinions, was the only participant who stated that when it came to buying personal items such as clothes, he used Google searches to find stores.

International students also used social media to obtain information about the culture of their host community. Acculturation and integration into a new environment are gradual, continuous processes of learning about the host community. Rick, Mark, and Bob mentioned in their interviews the advantage of having ongoing conversations with their international peers on social media to share their experiences of certain situations. Mark confirmed that he used to have such conversations on social media, especially during his first semester on campus. International students are faced with situations where they needed assistance in how to behave in a given cultural context. For example, when Ferazi was asked if she has any contacts who help her adjust to American culture, she replied that one of her American classmates was helpful with cultural concerns:

So whenever I have a question, I used to write him message on FB; ok so we are going to dinner what kind of costume I should wear, because we had a Halloween party 3 months after I got here in this country, so they were talking like lets wear a costume, and I was wondering what costume I am supposed to wear. I don't know anything about Halloween. I mean all my knowledge about Halloween is based on what I have seen in movies, so I was wondering what if I don't have a

dress, should I go, should I not? So I used to write him a lot of messages and I can say he was very patient with me with all my questions and everything.

- Sumood: And how did you say you communicated with him?

- Yes, FB messages

Students need help with the various holidays, celebrations, and traditions that are unique to this country because they find it difficult to know how to behave in certain situations as they are not natives. For example, Harry talked about using social media for answers about confusing cultural situations like tipping at restaurants, saying:

So most friends that I made are also international students, but I did make some American friends, and those friends, usually when I have question, I'll send them a message on FB and I would ask like hey is this okay? Is this not okay? Yeah, so just the other day I had this friend that I texted asking about tipping, so I had question. I learned that this is how it works: when you are in a restaurant, you are tipping. From a previous question to an American friend I learned that if you get something to go you don't tip, so I learned that and just the other day I was thinking what if it was like in between. What if you go to Chipotle, for example; you are eating in, but you are not being served by staff, like do you tip, or do you not tip?

This discussion of the results highlighted the informal support provided to international students by their community through social media. Data indicated that students do not depend on social media for academic purposes but rather for social/ cultural adjustment purposes. In terms of social adjustment, international students utilized social media

platforms to gain assistance with accommodation and logistics. In addition, students were introduced to American culture through social media, the participants obtaining significant information by communicating with individuals from the host culture as well as senior international students who have been in the U.S. for longer periods of time.

Third Theme: Expanding Personal Networks

This section explores the theme, *Personal Network*, discussing how students expand their social relationships and network. More specifically, it analyzes students' usage of social media in the context of networking with others, focusing on the role of social media platforms in expanding their social networking in the host country. The definitions of social relationships are important to this discussion. Keeley (2009) identified three frames for social relationships, depending on the type of people involved in the interaction: Bonds, bridges, and linkages. According to him, bonds are "links to people based on a sense of common identity, such as family, close friends and people who share our culture or ethnicity" (2009, p. 103), while bridges are "links that stretch beyond a shared sense of identity, for example to distant friends, colleagues and associates" (2009, p. 103). Finally, linkages are defined as the weakest connection between students on a network map as they represent "links to people or groups further up or lower down the social ladder" (2009, p. 103). This research utilizes these definitions to guide the analysis of students' networks in the host country, discussing the following four main points:

1. Social events, advertisements
2. Linkage: attending events

3. Bridges: SM as medium of maintaining friendships
4. Bonds: online/off-line socialization

The diagram below maps these four points:

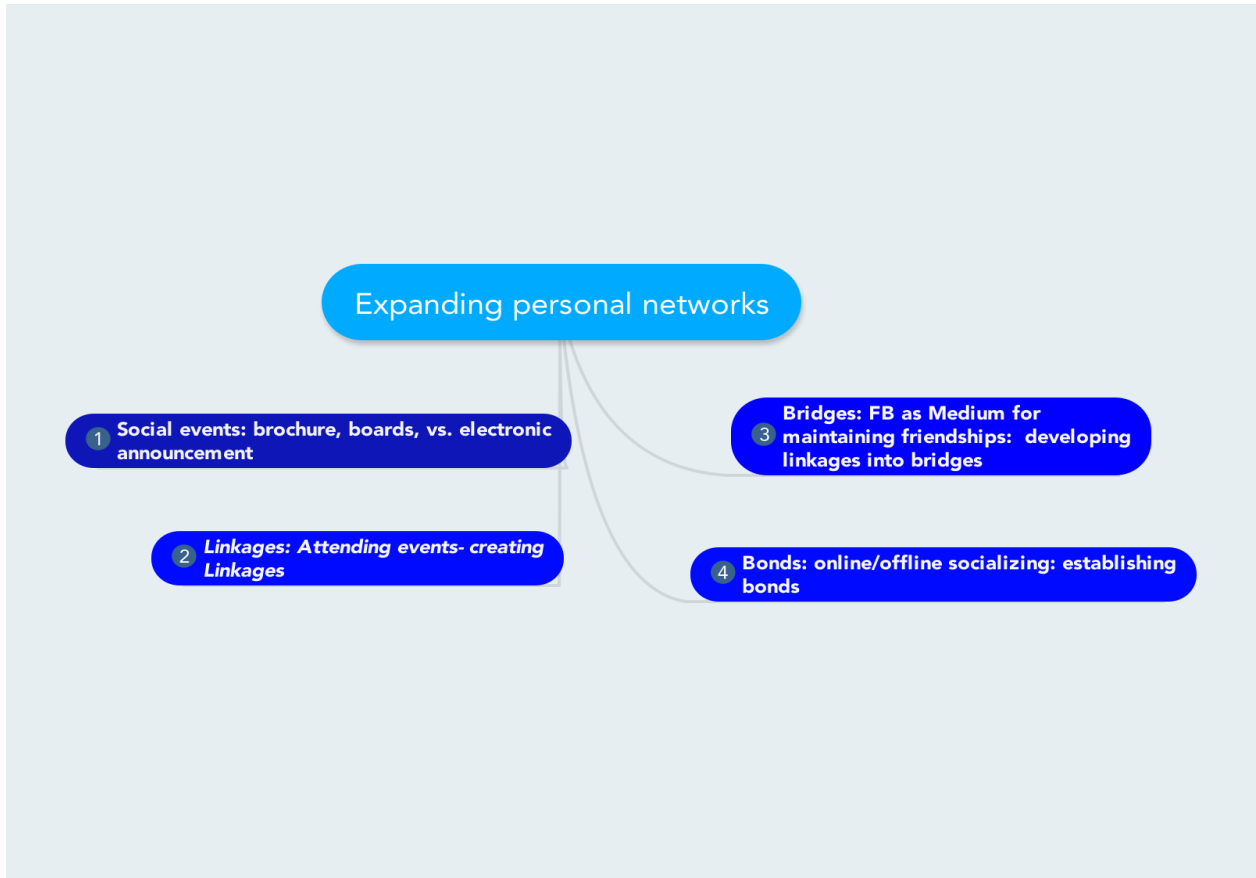


Figure 2 A Diagrams of Personal Networks.

Social Events, Advertising: An important approach for expanding personal networks in the host country is by attending events publicized to students. Today's lifestyle has created a dependence on online calendars and advertisements. The results of this study found a shift from the traditional announcing of events on bulletin boards with brochures and flyers to electronic announcements. These electronic announcements include the use

of any online medium to advertise social events including email and social media platforms. This shift to online publicizing makes students more dependent on online media for learning about social events on campus and in the host city. Participants conveyed that they focused on online announcements more than other methods. For example, Beatrice stated that she gives more consideration to online advertisements than flyers:

I noticed that I don't really look at information boards. I rely on electronic resources. So if someone has a flyer of something, I will not check it. I don't read flyers, but if I get an email or if it is posted on social media, I will definitely see it.

Bob commented on an organized event planned by one of his social groups for the near future at the time of the interview, confirming the new culture of reliance on electronic announcements. When he was asked if he attends any events published on social media, Bob said:

Yeah, I would say all of them; actually one group is now organizing an event that is happening 20 days from now. We are hanging posters in our departments but I am pretty sure all of the people that will come to this event will notice it through Facebook or emails, not the brochures hanging on the walls.

Social media has become a place for learning about events even when the student is not close to the agents or groups publicizing the event. Ann explained that sometimes a student is indirectly related to certain groups but is not following them on social media, yet he or she receives information about the events or is notified by friends who follow these groups. Ann talked about the way she learns about events:

I find these usually on Facebook, because I am connected to them through other friends who are connected to them and they connect me to these events. They invite me because they know I might be interested. For example, my Asian friend connected me to the Asian trips. I know about them through her. So when I see that, oh there is another trip being planned or they have hike or something, then I would probably go.

Other participants like Mark and Anita explained that it is easier to follow-up with events on social media, with Anita adding that creating an event on Facebook allows a student to RSVP and the event is then added to his or her calendar automatically, making it easy to track. Tracking events and receiving reminders are very practical for busy students like Sandra, who is a Ph.D. student and a mother, meaning she has to take care of her family as well as her studies. Reflecting on her experience with electronic announcements of events, Sandra stated:

It's really helpful actually to remind me or to put me on track; most organizations, I mean my university has a lot of organizations, and they maintain their FB group, or FB messages, and they create an event and they invite me, and if I am interested I will say yes, and then it links to my agenda, so for some reason it help me to remember, oh yeah this day I have this thing.

-Sumood: Does it like send reminders?

- Sandra: Yeah it blocked my agenda. I made my iPad calendar, so it just links. I guess I linked it but it just helps. If I say "maybe" or "interested," FB will send me reminders: you have one event soon, just in case I totally forgot it.

International students have learned to find out about events from various resources, with the data revealing that students' narratives about their attendance at social events almost always involved social media usage. Participants explained that they learned about social events by logging into electronic resources like email and social media. Traditional ways of advertising such as bulletin boards, posters, and flyers do not attract the students' attentions as much as they did in the past.

Linkages, Attending Events: The research asked whether attending events published on social media has a lasting effect on student's personal network. Participants were asked to expand on social events published online, specifically if they developed strong networks from these events. Results showed that students were unable to create strong friendships or bonds with people who attend these events unless further communication occurs, for example, adding them to a social media account and/or meeting them again at other social gatherings. Attending events is useful, though, in expanding students' linkages and creating new relationships in their networks. However, Mark finds it difficult to establish friendships at such events, commenting:

It's hard...You can have a good time there but I haven't found like a good friendship at those events, so friendship will be like those people who I have a longer relationship with and I can talk with anyone on a regular bases, but with people that I found at those events, I had good time at the moment but I couldn't be close to them regularly.

Participation in social events publicized on social media linked Bob to other people, yet, as Mark likewise suggested, they did not become close friends. Bob reflected more specifically on his experience of creating friendship from these events:

It's not that frequently here, I wouldn't say you make a lot of friends out of these events; certainly you will meet new people, but I don't say that they are close friends. You will say hi and maybe you go out one or two times for dinner, but that is it.

- Sumood: Do you think that these kinds of events extended your social circle?

- Bob: Yeah for sure, so being part of those events allows you to know more people and then one day you are having lunch by yourself at dining hall and you see this guy that you met at a random event, and then you start sharing a meal with them, so yeah, it's helpful.

Harry, on the other hand, thinks that, at such events, a student ends up meeting the friends of his or her friends, becoming a friend with their friends. As Harry said, “Most of the time when you go to an event and your friend is also going to that event and you meet like the friends of your friend, so you end up making friends with those people; that’s how I think it usually goes.” Network studies refer to this phenomenon as transitivity—the friends of my friends are likely to become my friends (Borgatti et al., 2013).

Events include other opportunities for socialization that come as a result of having mutual friends. Harry’s answer, however, is consistent with the idea that it is necessary to have further social meetings with a new acquaintance before students are able to form bonds with others at a hosting institution. Nevertheless, participants confirmed that these events

are good opportunities for meeting new people and for expanding their links to their host institution and local communities.

Bridges: International students take advantage of social media services to strengthen and maintain their social circles; their communication on FB and WhatsApp (the most popular social apps, as will be discussed later) enables them to maintain relationships and continue communication with individuals in their host community, thus creating bridges with other people (e.g., with distant friends, colleagues and associates). When participants were asked if they managed to start friendships with someone they met online, they stated that usually it was the opposite: Initial interpersonal communication is important before beginning a conversation on social media. Thus, international students use social media to enhance relationships that have already been established off-line in real life, meaning online communication by itself cannot establish friendships. Beatrice, for example, shared her opinion about adding people to her online social media accounts:

I don't really look for people on social media and become friends with them on social media and then meet them in person. I just look for events; then I meet people, and then I become friends with them on FB, so with social media I stay in contact with friends who I meet in person, through events I can find on social media.

Beatrice uses FB to develop friendships with new acquaintances she meets at events.

Adding people to her FB after meeting them in person moves relationships forward and strengthens her links to acquaintances who then become friends. Similarly, Anita arrived to the U.S. knowing no one. Anita indicated that she began establishing a circle of friends

by joining FB groups and attending their events; then, she added the people she met in person to her FB. From there, her friendships developed:

So it was like I joined this community group online; a person showed me that there are these pages and I should join them, and they post events like when you can go and meet people, so at first I did not know who is this person, but then I started going to their events and then I met some of them who became friends; of course you can't be friends with all of them, but still it's mostly because of these pages and these events that I managed to find people whom I know now, like many of them.

Similar statements made by other participants showed that personal relationships can be maintained, enriched, and sustained through social media applications.

The development of today's online technologies has created new definitions for old concepts, one of which is friendship. Friendship on social media is different from its traditional definition. Today, a person met only once can be added as a friend on social media. Gradually, linkage to this new friend can develop into a true friendship. Sandra, for instance, explained how she bridges her friendships with other people by adding them to FB. The idea implied by adding someone to a personal SM account is a willingness to establish bridges and further develop this relationship. Sandra evaluated the role social media in developing her friendships, saying:

In terms of creating networks yes, yeah because a lot of people have FB, not so many people have other apps like Instagram or whatever; most people usually have FB so if I met someone off line and I still want to maintain a communication

with him or her, then I will probably say “I am going to add you on FB”; that means we are going to be friends.

Harry also pointed out the significance of online communication on SM in developing bridges to other students, explaining that he begins online communication with people he has met in person. Usually he begins with formal conversations until the relationship moves gradually into friendship. As Harry said:

So, when you meet someone, like your classmates and then you add them on social media, on FB, and then WhatsApp, and then you just start talking about work; that’s usually the main topic, yeah, just getting together, trying to get together just to work on assignments, and then from that, you start to make plans to go out and do other stuff.

Moreover, international students use social media to sustain existing friendships. Students maintain their bridges with friends with whom they have close relationships in person by continuing communication with them on social media. Mark, for example, commented saying that “my social network online is based on my friends on campus, there are some other people on these networks but they are not the ones I communicate with all the time.” For him, social media is a reflection of his personal network, the place where he maintains his real-life network. Ann also viewed social media as an opportunity to sustain her friendships, saying:

I think I mainly use social media to sustain and maintain relationships, so I create the relationship offline and then the conversation keeps going on social media. That’s how I use social media, and especially now that I have a lot of friends who

have graduated and have left, those connections stay strong based on the conversation. I can say that I have a network of people in different parts of the U.S., and in different parts of the world.

The results from this study on bridging friendships using social media focused on two points. First, students do not use social media to establish friendships online, but rather international students develop their bridging links online after initial interpersonal communication off-line. Participants search for events on social media, and after meeting people at these events, they continue the conversation online. Students stated that they enhance and develop these bridges by using social media. Gradually, contacts who begin as distant linkages or bridges to the student leverage into friends over time through the continued communication on social media—that is, they may become bridges in a personal sense. Second, in addition to strengthening new ties, social media sites and apps help students to sustain bridges that already exist. Both of these types of friendship can continue to develop and strengthen, eventually forming bonds.

Bonds: The current study investigated international students' bonds with other individuals based on the use of social media. Bonds, recognized by a high level of reciprocity (two-way ties) among its members, are the strongest ties in a social network. While they are established easily among people of the same ethnicity and background, they require more effort among people of from different backgrounds. When relationships become bonds, individuals have managed to embrace their differences, establishing strong connections to one another. The results from this study revealed that

participants utilized social media platforms to maintain communication with friends and strengthen these friendships into bridges and then into bonds.

Results also showed that a link between online and offline communication. Online communication through social media was used to enhance friendships by contacting others and arranging for offline, in-person social meetings. Bob, for example, stated, “If we are planning to do any type of activities, it will be with the help of FB or WhatsApp.” In addition, Leticia said that participating in social media enriched her friendships with people who later became close companions she meets regularly to go to downtown or to engage in other activities. Even though some international students arrive at their institution with no prior knowledge of available social media applications in the U.S., they adapt to SM and incorporate it into their communication. Beatrice, for example, indicated that she depended on phone communication with her initial friends when she first arrived, later using social media more often until now when she contacts everyone using social apps like FB. Furthermore, social media apps provide a medium of communication with a wider audience, with international students using it for informal communication to stay in touch with friends and to develop their relationships into bonds. Mark, for example, talked about his experience with social media when he first began to use it to communicate with his friends and schedule social meetings:

When we were starting, because we were all international students, we didn't have like a phone; once we had phones and we were able to get online more often and more efficiently on a daily basis, we created a WhatsApp group... for each week when we have to organize going downtown to have a drink or dance a little

bit, or even having lunch during the week in the dining. It's not like a planned event but it is always nice to ask if somebody will be there to have somebody to sit with; it is easier, it is just one text and you know, somebody will say I am going, I will be there in three minutes, or no I am not going.

Ann shared similar ideas about the use of social media in improving ties and forming bonds with other members in her social circles. Like Mark, Ann commented on the convenience of social media communication and its role in enhancing friendships by arranging social activities that strengthen her bonds into connections. Ann was asked about her experience with social media as she made her first circle of friends at her host institution:

- Sumood: Ok and when you say that in the second semester you started these friendships, did you start to have an online communication with them when you want to talk or was it all in-person, meetings?

-Ann: We would text a lot, also on FB. When the FB group page was created I think things began to snowball because we started to have better relationships, better friendships. We started timing things, timing meetings for dinner and stuff like that. We also use Viber... so for instance one of the members says hey am having a party or my group and I are going to have games or something so why don't you guys come down? And so it's posted on FB on the group page and I would go if I have time and wanted to go.

In summary, the third theme of this research discussed the personal networks, or bonds, of international students. These personal networks were examined from the perspective

of online social media sites and applications. First, there was a shift from traditional advertisement to online publicizing of social events. Second, attending events published online on social media helps expand students' linkages. Yet, these events do not lead to friendships unless further communication on social media occurs. Third, the results indicated that students used social media to establish bridges with others at their host institution, and finally, the results showed that international students take advantage of available social media services to strengthen their friendships and form ties that lead to establishing bonds with their friends at the host institution.

Fourth Theme: Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms

This section reviews the results concerning the most popular social media sites and apps used by international students during their residence in the U.S. A numeric count shows that all participants prefer video communication with their families back home; meaning apps like Skype and Facetime were the favorite means of communication with family members. Table 3 lists the means of communication with family members:

Table 3 Social apps used to contact families back home

N	Name	Number of times mentioned
1	Skype	10
2	Hangout	2
3	Facetime	1
4	Line	1
5	Path	1

Total 5 Apps

As this table shows, Skype is the most popular app for communicating with families back home. When it comes to communicating with friends in the U.S., the result suggest that texting apps were the most popular among friends. Table 4 presents the popular social sites and applications used by participants during their residence in the United States.

Table 4 Popular social apps used in the U.S. by IS

N	App	Number of times mentioned
1	WhatsApp	8
2	Facebook	6
3	Viber	4
4	Twitter	3
5	YouTube	2
6	Skype	2
7	Flicker	1
8	Instagram	1
9	Group me	1
10	Telegram	1
11	YikYak	1
Total	11 Apps	Most popular: WhatsApp and FB

Various themes emerged from the interviews concerning the students' use of social media websites and Apps. First, students rely on the social media popular in their communities,

meaning they do not use apps that do not have an established background of users. Rick mentioned that his favorite social media app is Telegram, which has many good features, yet he cannot use it because “no one is there,” in reference to his friends and acquaintances. Ann also expressed her opinion of the usefulness of apps:

I think the social apps you get to are the social sites or apps because people are already there and they find it useful; for me any way, it's useful for me because people are already there, I don't have to try and establish the usefulness of the app. If I find a useful app, I would probably tell my friends about it, but if there is no an uptake and already used, it's not going to be as useful.

Second, the use of social media and other online communication depends on the recipient of the communication. Some students mentioned that they text with their American peers because WhatsApp is not popular in the U.S. Bob, for example, said, “So with international friends here it's 100% WhatsApp, or 99%, but with Americans it's phone calling or texting on FB.” There are regional apps, those popular only in a certain region of this world. Sara, who comes from Asia, stated that she uses Line and Path:

Sandra: In my country with my family we only use phone apps, that mean WhatsApp, Line or Viber, you know.

-Sumood: Online? What is that?

-Sandra: Line, yeah it's big in Asia.

- Sumood: what kinds of apps are famous there?

-Sandra: Viber, oh and Path, Path is like social networking, so Path is kind of our FB. And of course WhatsApp, it is the same as Blackberry messenger; Viber is not so famous, so we tend to use Line and WhatsApp.

- Sumood: so do you go now to Path just to stay connected to your old friends?

- Yes, most people still use FB, but for some reason Path is huge in my country.

International students also highlighted some of the features of social media apps that they incorporate in their daily communication with other people while in the U.S. One of the important apps used often by international students is Skype. Because it incorporates video calling, it is used primarily for distant communication with family members back home. Yet, participants emphasized that it is not practical for daily use because of the need to be in a quiet environment and the need to time their call with the time zone back home. Leticia, who has a big family back home, uses Skype regularly with her family. Nonetheless, for everyday communication with her sisters and nieces, she uses WhatsApp. In addition, Mark stated that “I use Skype but I don’t use it a lot because you have to be online at a specific place.” He expressed the way he uses social media apps saying that:

I use WhatsApp most of the time during the week and I use Skype probably once a week to have like a formal chat from 15-20 minutes, like to say hello and for special occasions I use Skype, but for everyday conversation, to say what I am doing, where I am going or how am I every day, it’s a message via WhatsApp.

In addition to Skype, Facebook, also used by international students, is their preferred daily communication with others. Even though Facebook may not be the favorite app, it

is very popular. For example, when Sandra was asked about her favorite social media apps, she replied: “I don’t know if it became my favorite but the most efficient is FB, it helps me connect to a bunch of people back home and here.” She considered Facebook a convenient way to stay connected with others from her home and in the U.S. Anita also reflected on the features of Facebook, emphasizing that it combines everybody from her home country and her host country in one place, saying:

I think FB is the most favorite site of networking; it is because it is easy to keep everyone at one place instead of having too many websites and trying to keep in touch. Here (FB), they are in one place and there is this family list and friends list. So these things I want to show to my family, these things I want to show to my friends.

Furthermore, based on the data, the most popular app used by international students is a texting app called *WhatsApp* because according to the students, this app is easy-to-use, informal, and incorporates the ability to talk to a large audience via group texting. Ann, for instance, noted that:

Ann: In WhatsApp you can just keep joking with one another and it can get really embarrassing but it’s ok.

Sumood: So it’s more like casual and informal you think on WhatsApp?

Ann: Yeah, that’s a good way to put it, yah, super casual and informal and people just keep joking and nobody will get offended.

Mark added that he prefers WhatsApp for daily communication, saying:

Now I think my favorite will be WhatsApp, because it allows you an instant communication and it's almost without errors, and allows you to call somebody. It's just internet, so I use it a lot to talk to my girlfriend every day, just to talk because it allows me to move around and it doesn't cost. It gives me a better service so that would be my top option. For communication the other segment will be Facebook and then skype, so that would be my third option.

In conclusion, the fourth and final theme of this research analyzed the results of international students' social media usage, focusing on the social media apps being used by international students, including their favorite. The results found that WhatsApp is their top choice followed by Facebook. Participants indicated that social media apps need to have an established background of users for them to be able to use them effectively. In addition, students mentioned several apps that are popular in certain regions [ethnic apps] in the world but not in the U.S. Finally, students reflected on some features of the popular social media services that they use regularly. As a result of these findings, this research found WhatsApp to be the most significant app used by international students.

Additional Analyses

To draw accurate conclusions from the results, this study included a second phase of data collection. Participants were contacted with a follow-up question after the interview, focusing on why they preferred WhatsApp and why they did not try to reach out to Americans by exploring popular apps in the host country. The answers to these questions were significant.

After contacting all participants via phone, nine participants were reached and subsequently responded to the question. The answers to this question were grouped based on related explanations or justifications, resulting in five main reasons. The following includes the transcript of the question and the justifications that emerged from of participants' answers; the first two responses were particularly interesting:

Follow-up Questions:

Q: Why did you keep using WhatsApp? Why did not you try to reach out to Americans? Why didn't you try other apps that are popular among Americans, like twitter for example?

Below are the reasons they gave:

1. A safe space for people of color, exclusive
2. Do not feel as welcome on other sites
3. Feel comfortable with what using. Invite Americans to use international apps
4. Inexperienced with popular apps in the U. S.
5. Economic reasons, iPhone (and its apps) are not affordable for internationals.

The transcripts of the students' responses to these questions can be found in Appendix B.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings from this study, beginning with the demographics of the participants followed by the analysis of the results in relation to the four themes of *Initial Assistance*, *Online Support*, *Expanding Personal Networks*, and *Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms*. The results are summarized below:

Initial Assistance:

- **Arrival Experience:** A difficult experience but more difficult for students who did not have contacts in the U.S. Those who managed to contact people via social media had an easier transition.
- **Loss of Communication:** An issue during transition due to not having local phone service upon arrival.
- **First Assistance:** Initial help came from two types of assistants, either persons from similar backgrounds or persons found via social media.
- **Initial Communication among International Students:** Stronger than the communication with natives or American students when asking for assistance.

Online Support:

- **Institutional Support:**
 1. **Awareness of Existing Services:** Students were not aware of all online services provided by the institution.
 2. **Coordination:** Orientations were useful but overwhelming, and students didn't remember the online services mentioned during them; email communications were not always fruitful.
 3. **Level of Satisfaction:** International students were very satisfied with academic online services, but there was room for improvement for social adjustment online services.

- Community Support:
 1. Online Support and Academics: Social media was not important for academics. Students do not depend on SM services to solve academic issues.
 2. Online support and Social/Cultural Adjustment: International students relied on social media extensively for their introduction into American culture and for meeting their accommodation/material needs as well.

Expanding Personal Networks:

- Social Events, Advertisements: There is a shift from using brochures, posters, and bulletin boards to electronic advertising and online publicizing.
- Linkages: Students were able to expand their linkages by attending social events, but they were not able to create bonds unless further communication was maintained.
- Bridges: Social media was used to maintain, leverage, and sustain friendships. It enabled developing linkages into bridges.
- Bonds: Online communication on social media was utilized to create in-person social gatherings and establish bonds with other people.

Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms:

- Apps with video features were important for contacting family members back home, but not practical for everyday communication.
- There were regional apps, meaning ones used in certain regions of the world but not in the U.S.

- Texting apps like Facebook Messenger are very popular, and WhatsApp is the favorite app of international students.

The study had a second phase of data collection where students were contacted and asked why *WhatsApp* and why they didn't try to reach out to Americans by exploring apps popular here. The reasons were divided into five categories:

1. A safe space for people of color, exclusive
2. Do not feel welcome
3. Feeling comfortable with what they are familiar using
4. Inexperienced with popular apps in the U. S.
5. Economic reasons, iPhone (and its apps) are not affordable for internationals.

The qualitative data are discussed and analyzed in the next chapter, Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions. In addition, it discusses the implications for practice and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter interprets the findings from the interviews, relating them to social capital theory, the theoretical framework of this study. After summarizing and discussing the results, it presents conclusions based on the social capital theoretical framework, including implications for practice before concluding with suggestions for further research,

Summary of the Study

This study explored the influence of social media in international students' lives both before and after arriving in the U. S. To address the academic, social and cultural challenges they face, they use various strategies including social networking to cope with their new environment. The research investigated how international students use this new opportunity for communicating while they are studying in the U.S., focusing on the types they use in their daily lives and their effect on their ability to adapt to their host's culture.

Purpose of the Study

This study addresses the need for research on the social networking activities and the coping strategies of international students on U.S. campuses. As the existing literature on international students is primarily concerned with language, academic, and cultural adjustment as well as immigration status, there is not a rich body of research investigating how social media is used to help internationals adapt to their host country.

To address this need, this study, then, targets what could be called the digital socialization of international students, its purpose being to explore online social networking behaviors that influence their coping strategies.

Research Questions

The specific research questions addressed are listed below:

1. Does participating in existing SM networks impact international students' adjustment? How?
2. What are the links between on-line activities and student personal networks? Do online activities affect social interactions with the host community in real life?
3. What kinds of online activities engage international students with their home and host community? What SM do they use? What are their favorite SM apps or websites?
4. How can these knowledge impacts practitioners as they look at future possibilities for online services?

Theoretical Framework

The study examines the phenomena of social media in international students' lives from the perspective of the social capital theory, a theory that deals with investments in social networking that enable an individual to expand his or her relationships and to access persons who perform tasks for his or her benefit. As a part of this research, the study investigated the social networks of international students, how they expand their personal networks, and how they establish circles of social support. As

such, social capital theory is an appropriate framework for the analysis and interpretation of these results of this study.

Methodology

The methodology used for this research was phenomenological qualitative analysis. A phenomenon is anything that is experienced and interpreted without external interference. As this study examined how international students integrate the phenomenon of social media in their daily lives in the U.S., a phenomenological approach was the most suitable method for analyzing the resulting data. Twelve international students were purposively selected; each involved with a social group on multiple social media platforms. In addition to representing as many countries as possible, those selected were at least in their second year of graduate study because they have spent enough time in the U.S. to establish personal networks. In addition, students in advanced years have had more experiences and are more capable of reflecting on their social networks. These students were asked to participate in a one-time interview followed by memorandum checking after transcription of their responses.

However, after these interviews were transcribed and analyzed with the help of Nvivo, the initial results identified several undeveloped ideas requiring a follow-up interview. The participants were again contacted with a question asking them why WhatsApp is their favorite app though it is not popular in the U.S. Their answers were subsequently analyzed and incorporated into the discussion of the results.

Results

The results were categorized into the following four main themes that emerged from the research analysis. The first theme, *Initial Assistance*, discussed the arrival experiences of the international students, the results showing that they used social media to communicate with individuals inside the U.S. to help them with their transition process to the host country. Those who did not have contacts in the U.S. had a more difficult transition than those who did. The results also indicated that regular communication with phones was not used because internationals did not have them on arrival in the U.S. Moreover, communication via social media is more common than with phones among international students. New international students depended on other international students in the U.S. more than on national students, citizens or the host institution for help with their transition.

The second theme, *Online Support*, discussed the online support that is provided to international students from formal institutional sources as well as the informal support provided by community members. The results found that institutional support was available to participants only for enrollment requirements, official paperwork and official academic needs. There was no support for meeting the cultural and non-academic needs of international students, such as accommodations. In addition, international students did not depend on social media to discuss or solve academic issues; rather, they preferred face-to-face or direct communication with their adviser or department staff. While informal community online support was not useful for academic purposes, these social media offered holistic cultural support experiences and contributed to their social and

cultural adjustment needs. Specifically, international students used community support to find answers to questions, learn about the American culture, and to meet their non-academic needs.

The third theme, *Expanding personal network*, emerged from the interview question about online social media activities and the social networking of international students, specifically, if online activities impact in-person, real-life socialization. The results showed that international students tend to use online advertising for dealing with these issues, preferring social media for learning about social events happening on campus or in the city. While attending these events helped international students create linkages with others, it was difficult to establish bonds unless further sustained conversations took place on social media. Results indicated that social media applications are places where internationals maintained rich linkages with other members of the host community, these spaces helping them extend linkages (weak ties) into bridges (stronger ties). In addition, international students were able to establish bonds by having continued conversations online with other members of the host community. From these, they were able to arrange for in-person social meetings and gatherings that enabled them to strengthen their bonds in the host community.

The fourth theme, *Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms*, corresponded to the questions about students' use of and preferences for social media apps, the findings indicating that international students prefer platforms with video features for contacting their families back home, yet they don't prefer them for everyday use. Instead such texting applications as regular texting or Facebook Messenger are more popular.

Furthermore, international students mentioned apps popular in their home regions but unknown in America, like the Asian app Path. WhatsApp appeared to be the favorite app for international students. However, when they were asked in a follow-up question why they did not try to reach out to their host community by exploring apps popular in the U.S., they responded that WhatsApp is a safe space for people of color, that they did not feel invited or welcomed by the host community, they were comfortable with what they were using, they were inexperienced with the popular apps in the U.S., and finally, the U. S. phones with such apps are too expensive for them.

Students were also asked for suggestions for better social media integration by the institution. Their suggestions are in the *Implications for Practice* section of this chapter.

Discussion of Findings

Initial Assistance

The discussion of findings in this study is divided into four sections corresponding to the four themes resulting from the data analysis. The results of first theme, Initial Assistance found that international students who did not have contacts in the U.S. prior to their arrival had critical non-academic issues concerning their travel arrangements and accommodation needs.

International students who had difficulties such as delays in immigration papers needed immediate attention. For example, Anita's visa came only two days prior to her travel, one example of such situations that many international students face. Past research has found that among STEM majors "about 20 percent of the international students who were admitted into physics programs were unable to start their semester

because of visa problems” (Armstrong, 2003). International students and especially delayed students need to be in conversation with their institution to navigate their initial adjustment process into college. Yet, this study found that the institution did not provide such assistance, and there was no active communication with students accepted into the university while they were still abroad.

In contrast, this research found that students who invested in social media communication were able to find groups and other senior international students who provided them with initial assistance. In addition, students who were engaged in a continuous conversation with other international students on social media had acquired significant information about the moving process and study in the U.S. Since they had gained the social support needed for their transition, their first arrival experience was smoother and easier than for those who were not engaged in such conversations on SM. This support reduced their stress, a result consistent with literature which has found that a “high level of social support reduces the rate of acculturation stress” (Poyrazli et al., 2012).

In addition, students who had assistance through communication via social media also were better prepared to arrive in the U.S., a finding consistent with DeAndre, et al. (2012). Participants in their study “were invited to use [an orientation] website prior to their arrival on campus. Before receiving access to the website, they were asked to complete a pretest survey” (p. 17) and posttest one after using the website, the results suggesting “site usage increased students' perceptions that they would have a diverse social support network during their first semester at the college campus” (p. 1). Even

though this study was conducted with American students, it parallels the results of our research on international students, which suggested that international students engaged in conversations with members of the host institution prior to their arrival had a better idea of the social support at their institution. This knowledge impacted their initial adjustment process positively.

Moreover, this study found that international students were concerned about the loss of communication with local services in the U.S. because they did not have local phone service. Since these students have no means of communication by phone, the internet served as their communication source at the beginning of their adjustment period, convenient because they were able to log in from anywhere, including from airports and cafes.

Furthermore, results for the Initial Assistance theme revealed that the first assistants for international students were members of the same origin and faith with similar identities, except in a few cases when they contacted persons from a different background via social media. This lack of diversity poses a potential problem because; according to previous literature (Nizami, 1998) international students who lack connection with and in a host society can be negatively impacted by its absence (Wilson, 2007; Akawna, 2015).

However, there was no initial assistance from members of the host institution or American students, and the international students did not use SM to ask for any help. If international students established communication with American members of the host institution during the early stages of their transitioning process, it would reduce their

cultural issues and acculturation stress. International students did suggest that senior international students have an understanding of the challenges of the new students because of their experience with these issues. Communication with other international students, particularly seniors, via social media was important. Even so, it created circles of relationships that were isolated from the host community. There should be communication with American students as well because according to one of the participants, there are questions that only American students can answer. These results suggest it is important to engage international students in online conversations with American students when they are accepted to a U.S. institution.

Social media programs present a space and opportunity for such communication. Some international students were able to meet their first accommodation needs by communicating with members of the host community using these media. Online communication via SM addresses an important communication barrier as internationals do not have a viable phone when they first arrive. Finally, although engaging international students with other internationals is important because of their shared transitional experiences, it is important to engage American students in online conversations with internationals once they are accepted to address their cultural concerns before and upon arrival.

Online Support

The second theme, *Online Support*, presented results for both formal institutional and informal community support. Results showed that when international students were faced with academic issues, they did not depend on social media resources for two

reasons: there were no active institutional SM resources for academic purposes and international students did not trust the reliability and validity of informal community resources concerning academic issues. Instead, they preferred in-person or direct conversation with their academic advisors or department staff.

These results, which suggest social media is insufficient in meeting the direct academic needs of international students, does not support earlier studies which found that it is a useful tool to be integrated in academic settings. For example, Wang's (2013) study found that when Facebook was integrated into a class activity:

Both the teachers and students were able to receive prompt feedback for a range of questions that were posted on the site...It allowed students to engage in their learning activities according to their individual needs and individual pace. Meanwhile, by Facebook Chat, a feature similar to MSN messenger, students were able to see who is present online and process online chatting with them in a real-time (Wang, 2013, p. 190). Wang concluded, "Facebook use in instruction assists students in achieving better grades, higher engagement, and greater satisfaction with the university learning experience" (p. 190). As his participants were American students, my results suggest his findings may not be valid for international students who prefer face-to-face in-person direct communication rather than using social media for academic purposes.

For non-academic adjustment needs, the findings for the *institutional formal support* subtheme indicated that there is not enough publicity of existing online services. Some participants were not aware of the existing services, while others did not discover them until months after their arrival at the host institution, suggesting the need for the

institution to more actively publicize such information to international students. More specifically, international students indicated that although they looked for social media accounts for the school, they did not find any nor any useful information online on the university website regarding their social and non- academic needs. These results suggest that the university should invest in advertising and publicity for international students that introduce them to online services and social media websites used by the institution.

The primary reason the international gave for this issue of knowledge of and access to online services was the lack of coordination. According to the participants, the university's orientation session for new students was so overwhelming that they could not recall the information about online services that was given. Elizabeth, for example, did not know how to navigate the online services of either the institution's website or her email account. Consequently, her performance in classes was affected until she learned about the schools' website. These international students need more sustained information than a one-day orientation can provide.

Since international students depend on SM for learning about their host institution, online tutoring workshops posted to such sites would helpful for them before their arrival at the university, a conclusion supported by previous studies on training programs and their impact on student performance (Zhadko, 2011). Zhadko's study examined tech training programs, suggesting that more research is needed on these programs. He argued that his study "establishes a foundation for a basic technology training curriculum, which would be used to better prepare future international students for their college experiences abroad" (2011). Such preparation should begin as early as

international students are accepted to the host institution. My study supports Zhadko's by suggesting that one-day campus orientations are not sufficient to prepare international students for their life in the U.S. Instead, they need long-term orientation programs that begin as early as their acceptance to the host institution.

Such online orientations on SM have been explored by Shau and Crook (2015). The results of my study not only confirm their conclusion about the importance of online preparations prior to arrival but it also builds and expands on their research. Shau and Crook's study focused on Chinese international students attending institutions in the UK while my study examined students from diverse backgrounds. In addition, Shau and Crook conducted two pilot studies and one field study on these students before their arrival in the UK, with the participants using an online blogging website created especially for the study, the results indicating that the students benefited from engaging in this online communication. More specifically, this interaction impacted their social adjustment positively after arrival at the host institution. My results support their results for a diversity of student nationalities. In addition, International students in this study who engaged in online communication with members from the host institution via social media experienced an easier social adjustment than those who did not, further supporting the use of SM.

The one-time formal orientation was useful; yet, it was overwhelming and insufficient to prepare students for their new environment. International students need to be engaged in online programs that enhance their knowledge about the host institution and to get proper training on using the institution's services. In addition, social media was

found to provide the prompt answers to these students' questions as the results suggested that emails were no found to be the best way to communicate with institutional facilities. The more immediate access afforded by to online communication helped students obtain more timely responses to critical questions and issues while they were still abroad.

Finally, for *the formal support* subtheme, international students were satisfied with their institution's online services for meeting their official paperwork and academic needs but were not satisfied with the online services addressing social needs and accommodations. They could not find valuable information online to help them with their transitional period. These results further support the importance of online access through social media to information that international students need, especially from contacts in the U.S. In addition, social media offers the benefit of interactive communication and live chat, both which enable a more personable interaction with those providing the information needed.

While *informal community* online support via social media also did not provide international students with direct academic support, it was significant for social adjustment, acculturation, and meeting non-academic needs. Community support introduced international students to the culture of the host country as well as helping them meet their logistic needs such as accommodations and commuting as these platforms were good resources for information about everyday life in the U. S. These results support those of Sin and Kim (2013), who t found that "while originally intended for social capital maintenance, SNS are shown here to fill a surprisingly useful role in everyday life information seeking" (p. 115). However, the findings from our study

provided information on the sources that assisted students with this information, both community-led social media sources, institutional ones. These informal online social groups and social media communication have expedited international students' acculturation and adjustment to their new environment.

However, international students did not use SM to meet their academic needs, emphasizing instead the importance of one-to-one conversation between international students and faculty members. However, they relied on informal community social media resources to learn about the American culture and to address their non-academic needs, like accommodations and material needs. These findings suggest that institutions should invest in addressing the non-academic needs of international students via social media communication

Expanding Social Networks

The third theme is concerned with *Expanding Social Networks*, with the results of this study reporting a shift in the attention of internationals from posters and brochures to online advertising of events, meaning students attend those published on social media. These occasions are not only important for networking but also for the acculturation process of international students. Gomez et al. (2014) studied the relationships among language, leisure, social networking, and international student adaptation to college, concluding that "students' process of acculturation is positively related to participation in leisure activities, e.g., sports and social events" (p. 7). Our study found that internationals depend on event announcements via social media as well as the reminders

about these events to help them keep track of social events happening on campus and in the town.

The levels of social relationships were examined based on the social capital theory of links, bridges, and bonds. Linkages in international students' networks are expanded by attending social events. Yet, international students did not create bridges from these events unless conversations continued on social media. Furthermore, the results showed that international students used SM to develop relationships after face-to-face communication, findings that support the study conducted by Pempek et al. (2009) on American students' use of SM. Their study suggested that "Facebook was used most often for social interaction, primarily with friends with whom the students had a pre-established relationship offline" (p. 227). The results of our study confirm that international students establish offline relationships by attending social events and meeting people in-person before continuing the development of these relationships via interactions on social media.

Our findings also confirmed that international students used SM to develop their social networks with the host community, results supporting Lin et al. (2011), who found that "SNSs played an important role in assisting students to expand and manage their online bridging capital" (p. 433). However, our results differ from their conclusion that "the more they [international students] interacted with American friends using Facebook, the lower their offline bonding and bridging capital were" (2011, p.433). Our study found that Facebook was used by international students to communicate with their American peers more than with international students since WhatsApp is more common

among internationals. As a result, our findings found that Facebook-based interactions with American students did not result in less offline bonding; rather it was useful for sustaining friendships, enabling students to convert linkages with Americans into bridges, thus improving their offline interaction. This conclusion also applies to interactions with international students, except that they tend to use WhatsApp, not Facebook.

In addition, online communication via social media was used to plan in-person social gatherings, which also enabled international students to create bonds. This link between online interactions and in-person/offline social life is consistent with the study conducted by Subrahmanyam et al. (2008) of American college students, their results indicating “ that college students use instant messaging and social networking sites to interconnect with others, particularly those from their offline lives. They show that emerging adults' offline and online worlds are connected, and they use online communication for offline issues, and to connect with people in their offline lives” (p, 432)

Much research has examined social media and the adjustment of American students to college (Kalpidou et al., 2011, Valenzuela, 2009, Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). These studies have suggested that social media usage enhances this process, results similar to ours for international students. In conclusion, participation in social media enriched our participating international students' social network in their host countries and contributed to their social adjustment.

Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms

The fourth and final theme involves *Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms*. For Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), “social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 60). These applications have a variety of features, with the results of this study suggesting that unlike American students who popularly use Facetime and Snap Chat, international students used apps with video features, Skype in particular, to communicate with their families back home. International students prefer Facebook messenger and texting apps like *WhatsApp* for everyday life.

Since international apps popular in other parts of the world, referred to as Ethnic SNS by Park et al. (2014), are unknown in the American community, academic institutions could plan their orientation programs with an understanding of what international students are accustomed to using. According to research on the social networking preferences of international students conducted Saw et al. (2013) “particular sites such as Twitter and YouTube should be considered by libraries as a means to engage both international and domestic students. Institutions with large Chinese student population should consider the use of Renren” (2013, p. 156). American institutions, then, may consider investing in social media apps popular among international students, this research suggesting that appropriate platforms might be WhatsApp and Facebook/ Facebook Messenger as they are popular among the internationals studied here.

Since the application, WhatsApp, is not popular in the U.S., the participants were asked why they preferred one that is not popular among Americans. Several reasons were

given, including the feeling that they want to maintain separation from the host community by, as one respondent put it, using apps that don't "impose dominant norms on the users." International students are hesitant to use apps like twitter that are open to broad audience. Some students even said that they are careful with Facebook posts because they consider it formal and has a public distribution. *WhatsApp* on the other hand is more casual and, according to a respondent, "safe for people of color."

Second, the hospitality of the institution impacted students' attitude towards the social media of the host country. One participant stated that she did not try to contact Americans by using popular apps in the U.S. because she "did not feel that they try to reach out, so why should I?" (Elizabeth, rec. 2) This response invites leaders in academia to reflect on how they can make international students feel more welcome.

In addition, other students suggested that they didn't know how to use the popular apps in the U.S., and they feel comfortable with what they are used to. This response leads to the question of why international students do not make the effort to learn how to use the apps of the host country. It may be they are trying to maintain their own culture and identity by not adopting apps popular in the U.S., or perhaps they have never been offered the opportunity to learn these apps through a workshop, for example, or similar training.

Social Media and

International Students' Social Capital

According to Lin et al. (2008), "social capital is embedded resources in social networks." This paper's examination of the social capital of international students in the

U.S. shows that they begin as early as they are accepted to an institution to look for linkages and establish connections with members of the host country. Linkages, within the frame of social capital, create opportunities to “have access to people who perform tasks.” (Marion, 2016) The first subtheme of *Initial Assistance* indicated that students who sought linkages within the host country via social media obtained the assistance they needed on arrival, a situation that should encourage administrators to find ways to ensure that students have extensive links to the host community even before arrival.

More importantly, international students revealed that they are dependent on the bonds that tie them to communities composed of members with similar backgrounds or to other international students like themselves, especially at the initial communication stage in the host institution. However, this dependency leads to problems because it creates isolated communities of internationals, impeding the process of acculturation and assimilation as they are not actively establishing ties to the host community. Similarly, Lim and Pham (2016) found that social media communication with co-nationals impedes international students’ acculturation and adjustment to the host community. Thus, there is a need to provide opportunities for collaboration between national and international students to help them develop linkages and to establish relationships even before they arrive in the U.S. Social media provides a space for international students to contact different members of the host country to learn about it or to seek help. Administrators should look for ways to use social media to promote these linkages that will help international students better prepare themselves for their new environment. Although

linkages do not necessarily always develop into bridges or bonds, they are important in meeting students' needs by creating access to people who perform tasks.

The second theme dealt with the online support provided for international students by other agents (formal institutional and informal community). Although socializing via social media had no direct impact on students' academic adjustment, it was significant for social and cultural adjustment. Requena's (2003) study concluded that "the importance of social capital lies in that it brings together several important sociological concepts such as social support, integration and social cohesion" (p. 331). Social capital embedded in online community support in particular has a significant impact on international students' integration and cultural adjustment. International students were able to take advantage of their ties to members of the host community to pose questions and seek knowledge about cultural contexts. They invested in these online resources to exchange knowledge, ask question, or become oriented with the host community. Dika and Singh (2002) highlighted the importance of having such social capital for the purpose of exchanging knowledge.

More important, according to Goddard (2003), people who engage in relationships with high levels of trust are open to information exchange as well as showing support and care for one another. International students need to feel a level of trust with the contacts of the host community, whom they ask about the culture, indicating the importance of leveraged ties to these members of host communities. International students then use these bridges and bonds with trusted host community members to exchange knowledge via social media, investing in their online social capital

networks to learn about the culture. The literature review examined this issue in other parts of world and found similar results. For example, our findings are consistent with the literature that suggests that “migrant students used the online realm as an acculturative space to better understand the host country’s attitudes towards foreigners, thereby better equipping them for interactions with locals” (Lin & Pham, 2016, p.1).

The third subtheme, Expanding Personal Networks, is central to the discussion of social capital. While the first two themes explored how students initiate social capital on arrival and what resources are available to them through online support, expanding personal networks, on the other hand, reflects how students manage to establish and leverage ties via social media with members of the host institution on a regular basis during their stay in the U.S. Consistent with the literature that found “online networks are able to produce the structural features of social capital” (Sajuria et al., 2015, p. 708), our findings suggest that international students took advantage of online social networking to maintain and leverage their relationships with others. That is, online networking via social media contributed to the development of the international students’ social capital. Their use of online announcements of events showed that they developed new and added to their linkages if they are informed about events via social media applications. Given the importance of this space to international students in the development of their social capital, increased investment in the online advertising of events via social media is essential by host institutions.

In addition to establishing linkages by attending social events that are published online, the findings suggested that international students sustain, maintain and leverage

their ties to their host community via social media socialization. Their social capital was increased by joining social groups and engaging in meaningful conversations via social media. This socialization online gradually led to arranging offline meetings and in-person engagements that strengthened the students' ties to their new environment, enabling them to create bonds with members of the host community. These bonds were identified through high levels of trust, in-person interactions on a regular basis and a commitment to care for one another. .

The fourth theme, *Social Media Usage and Popular Platforms*, had two distinct subthemes. While international students used Facebook regularly and depended on it to learn about social events and to communicate with American students, they did not invest in other popular social apps of the host country. International students said that they preferred WhatsApp in particular, which is not popular in the U.S. In commenting on this difference in social apps, Farr (2004) observed that “social capital is complexly conceptualized as the network of associations, activities, or relations that bind people together as a community via certain norms and psychological capacities” (2004, p. 9).

These issues, as asked in the literature review chapter (p. 32), become how international students with different norms are going to negotiate in the new community. The reasons for their preference for WhatsApp may, in part, address this issue. As one participant explained, “WhatsApp and similar private apps do not impose the norms of dominant culture” as opposed to twitter, for example, that is more public. This reasoning may reflect the desire of international students to maintain their own cultural norms as well as their concern about being governed or judged by the dominant norms of the host

country. However, Farr's (2004) definition of community includes trust as an essential norm of any established community. The more international students trust, the more they feel comfortable about engaging with the host community and the popular social apps of its online community.

Implications for Practice

This study explored the experiences of international students as they were accepted by and enrolled in a host university, a journey that began before they left their home country. It was examined from the perspective of social media usage by analyzing student responses to interview questions. At the end of these interviews, participants were asked for their suggestions for future practice. The following list represents a summary of their suggestions for practices, with a more detailed development being found in Appendix B:

- Conduct an in-depth survey to determine which social media apps are more frequently used by international students.
- Create videos addressing international students' needs, for example housing agreements, upload them to YouTube, and then post them to Facebook; publicize them and make international students aware of their existence.
- Improve the institutional web page of international students. The navigation is confusing and the guidance is embedded in the website. Make it easy for surfing.

- Create an app for international students. Inform students about existing apps like the (university name) app, which includes a map of locations on campus.
- Inform international students about the different channels that they can use. Introduce them to the local social groups that have accounts on social media.
- Create accounts on social media that represent the international student services at the institution. Facebook, particularly, was mentioned as a platform that is very popular, easy-to-surf, and reachable by wide audiences. Students' concerns can be archived in files on the Facebook page.
- Provide webinars, real-time interactions, and live chats with the staff of the International Students' Services Office.
- Provide international students with maps that orient them to their departments, classroom buildings and surrounding service locations.
- Connect new students to international students already on campus and to volunteers in the host community willing to help them with adjustment.
- Have a presence on twitter and introduce internationals to it.

- Cooperate with social groups and organizations of international students on campus to exchange information about the needs of the newly arrived students.

In addition to the direct implications stated by the participants themselves, the interpretation of the findings of this research suggested that international students utilized social media services to explore their institution before arrival to the U.S., emphasizing the viability and advantages of investing in social media to present online workshops and orientation programs for international students before they arrive. The potential of enhancing communication opportunities with the host community offered by such an investment would further ease the transition of international students. As some participants suggested above, it is important to create channels, especially via social media, among newly accepted and senior international students as well as with members of the host community to help address the concerns of the internationals prior to their arrival.

The findings suggest that international students did not depend on social media for academic purposes; however, there was no active official social media available at the institution for academic-related issues. International students did not rely on this or on informal, community-based media to answer their academic concerns, preferring in-person interaction with their professors, a situation that has two implications: first, the institution can recommend that faculty members and professionals on campus provide more time for in-person meetings to discuss students' academic issues rather than using other methods of communication like email. The second implication is for institutions to

increase their investment in social media specified for academic concerns. It should also be investigated to determine its value for international students' academic needs.

International students invest in social media primarily for the purposes of social adjustment and non-academic needs, exploring informal community SM resources to learn about cultural situations and to address their material needs and accommodations on arrival. To build on participants' suggestions, it is helpful for institutions to introduce their new international students to available social groups and student organizations that exist on social media. In spite of the existence of significant community resources, international students are often not aware of them. It is helpful to point out these resources to international students.

Furthermore, social media was seen to have a significant impact on expanding international students' networks and bridging friendships. Since international students depend on social media to learn about social events, it is important to invest in organizing events via social media specifically aimed at engaging international students with American ones. Online announcement of campus social events via social media is important as it offers internationals the opportunity to meet people in-person, develop their social circles and then bridge their friendships. In addition, it would be helpful to introduce students to the social media accounts of local organizations so that they can follow these links and attend the events.

The last implication discusses the preference of social media platforms. First, institutions should understand the personal concerns of international students concerning social media. International student services should increase their investment in ethnic

apps like WeChat for the Chinese population. Since many students are afraid to leave their comfort zones, they use what is popular in their home country. It will enable them take fuller advantage of existing services if they are introduced to them it through their popular platforms. As institutions try to reach out to international students via social media, WhatsApp and Facebook are good options to begin with as other useful platforms are investigated.

Suggestions for Further Study

This study involves various limitations, one being its dependence on data from a single university. Future research should consider conducting similar studies on multiple campuses. In addition, the phenomenology approach aimed to capture the experiences of just a few students. A broader quantitative study should consider surveying larger populations of international students to produce more information about their social media preferences. In addition, since students suggested creating apps specifically for these students, future research could investigate what should be incorporated in such an app. In addition, the orientation programs for international students and their effectiveness should be studied. Before and after surveys that include open-ended questions might be helpful. Lastly, further research could examine experimental online workshops and orientation programs presented to students via social media to determine their efficacy.

Conclusion

This study explored the phenomena of social media in international students' lives during their period of study in the U.S. The study investigated how students use social

media in their host country, how it contributed to their adjustment, and what platforms they use in the U.S. Results suggested that international students who had initial communication with members from the host institution via social media were able to arrange for their accommodations and they had easier transitions. This study found that social media is not an effective means for meeting academic concerns; rather, international students preferred to discuss their issues in-person with their lab mates, academic advisers, or departmental staff. They preferred face-to-face or formal email communication to meet these needs.

On the other hand, social media was a significant contributor to international students' social adjustment and social networking. They use it to address their cultural concerns in the host community and to learn about American culture. The findings also suggested that the levels of relations were improved via social media communication; that is, international students were able to create linkages, develop bridges, and make bonds in their host community using social media platforms. WhatsApp and Facebook were the most popular apps, with the former being the favorite among internationals. The chapter concluded with several suggestions for future practices based on the students' perspective and on the findings from this study.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

The Interview Protocol

1-how did you start making friends or building relationships when you first arrived here?

2-Do you have any contacts that supported you through online communication before or upon arrival?

3-A-the most common problems are academic. Cultural, and immigrations struggles, have you had any particular struggle with any of these? Describe your case

B-If not, tell me if you have any concern or a question, where do you go to?

4-Which social sites you use for everyday interaction with your social community like family, friends and acquaintances?

5-Do you have a group or do you participates in any kind of activities off line (real life interaction) that has a base for organization on online social media?

6- Have any of your online social media contacts assisted you in your academic pursuits? If yes, in what ways?

7-What are your favorite online networking sites or apps? or What is your favorite social networking platform?

8- How do you use available online networking to navigate your new environment?

(Describe: for example if you want suggestion for a good place to buy something or to find good dentist nearby)?

9- What is your attitude/ level of satisfaction towards available online networking specified for international students by your institution?

10-What kind of online activates do you find useful and what do you want to see in future practices or services?

- What technologies do you see that institutions can implement in the future?

11- How do you evaluate your online social network?

Appendix B

Transcript of International Students' Suggestions for Future Practices

- If I am put in place to make decisions about that, the first thing that I would do is to make a big survey to find out which social media is the most used among international students if we are targeting them. (Bob)
- all the things that this(concealed name) group told me about, so for instant one big thing is to know how to rent a place, it's not the same in my country at least, so you sign agreement with differences between here and in my country, so you need to be aware of all these differences...I think videos are really helpful, so you can make a video and upload it to YouTube, but you post it to FB to make people aware that it exist, so its like: you are new to Clemson, make sure to check this video, and its like 5-10 minutes whatever, you come from another country you don't mind watching a 10 minute video that will teach you or tell you what to do in the first week you are here. or even before coming here. (Bob)
- First of all of course website, I know there are websites like that but there could be so much information. (Beatrice)
- I think it would be really helpful to create an app for international students, I know there is an app ,(university name) app, its like for the map and tell where things are, but at the same time I doubt it that most of the student hear about it, specially international don't know about that kind of stuff, I found out about it

from an American friend, so maybe app, creating an app for students will be more helpful. (Elizabeth)

- There are different technologies available but then it's a matter of, like most student don't know of what is available, when they come here, if they receive some information like follow FB page, or you can follow twitter, so something like that... that would have been really useful like if the international office recommended to me to contact these groups or contact these pages online or something like this or if they just have someone who can tell me, like...there are some places where you get guidance but those are embedded in the website and its too much..like too much confusing when someone is about to come to different country you already have a lot of stress and then you actually cannot figure out what resources you should be looking for...so if they exactly pin point you the resources...because you don't know what you should be looking at..I was looking at the graduate handbook that just provides the rules about the graduate school. (Anita)
- They can make a face book page where the internationals can post their concerns and they can reply to their questions, or keep some online archive of the problems that students come with and how to deal with them and something like this.
- I think FB could work, and could be clear, I mean they could have tips on FB, I mean when you are accepted in the institution, they can add you as a friend in FB, and they can show you there tips that can help you in the first weeks at least. (Leticia)

- what do I wish I had, maybe like maps of the city, maybe like a webinar, something like a webinar, that would be great. For international students to have everyone online together at same time and a person , how do you call that..

Sumood: Interact?

-Yes real time , like a chat, like people oh I found an apartment in that complex, is it far away from campus? How do I get there? And the person is like, no its not far, don't worry..., if a person talking specifically to me, ok you are engineering student, you r gonna be here, and then I tell her I live in this part of the city, and she like ok, you are gonna take this bus, you get off at that bus stop, and your building is called this, all these information. (Harry)

- being more practical in the use of FB, like promote international specific university FB page, that will give you the contact of what international organizations are there on campus, what other organizations, what there activities are, but it has to be directed to internationals, because when we arrive here, we don't know about any of these organizations, how to contact them and how to move in the university. Or even simple stuff like how to get a driver license, how to by something, any kind of information. (Mark)
- I think it's a good idea to let the students be in contact with other students who are already there, international students...

- Sumood: how about connecting internationals with American students?

-yes, they can be helpful in many other ways, I mean,because there are many things that americans can answer only about their culture and.. I mean there are many

questions which only a native can answer, but the same kind of concerns can be answered by someone who have been living in USA for maybe 2 or 3 years, so I would say it is more helpful if you get connection with internationals , they have same concerns. (Ferazi)

- well FB, because its super popular, it is good to have place to go on FB and people, you could actually see someone there and you can talk to, I mean you could do a lot of things with Fb and the university is creative to find ways to help students they will figure it out, also on twitter, you know a lot of big universities are on twitter, they could have had , a lot of things ..to twitter, like there are big traveling agencies, if you book your ticket and you have a problem , so you ask them how to solve it, there are actual people on the twitter feed who can connect you to person who can help you , you know, so the university can use twitter, the university can use FB, and I cant stress enough, I just wanna stress how twitter can be helpful to more instance if something was there. (Ann)
- I wish if they had a better webpage for international students and possibly maybe a chat option for international students. (Ann)
- I think a Facebook page...it will be easier to get the information to everybody than email... YouTube could be helpful if they like created instruction video... like oh everybody need to do 3 or 4 things when they get here, so to create like YouTube videos like steps, if you need this you should do this and this document ..I think if it 2 -3 minutes it would be easier and more helpful than like 'here, read this PDF'. (Rick)

- It's really hard for the people who work in international services to actually figure out what we need, it's really hard for them to have this context because they are Americans and they are used to the everyday living, and what we face is very different. So it might be really good idea for them to connect with the corresponding international students groups like Indian student association or I believe there Chinese students association and (concealed name) students association, and try to integrate them into their online services and investing in that. (Howard)

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