ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS AND INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE U.S.

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication

by
Ting-Yen Lao
Summer 2010
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of Ting-Yen Lao:

Online Social Networks and Intercultural Adaptation of International Students in
the U.S.

__________________________
Kurt Lindemann, Chair
School of Communication

__________________________
Carmen M. Lee
School of Communication

__________________________
Zheng-Sheng Zhang
Department of Linguistics and Asian/Middle Eastern Language

May 17, 2010
Approval Date
DEDICATION

I would like to thank my parents, Chih-An Lao and Hui-Lin Huang, and my sister, Chin-I Lao. Because of their support, I can study abroad and experience a different world. Their love and encouragement make me stronger and more independent while studying alone in the U.S.
Will, work and wait are the pyramidal cornerstones for success. —Louis Pasteur
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Online Social Networks and Intercultural Adaptation of International Students in the U.S.

by

Ting-Yen Lao

Master of Arts in Communication
San Diego State University, 2010

Intercultural adaptation has become a dominant issue in an increasingly globalized interaction context. It is especially important for international students who move away from relationships with family, friends and acquaintances in their home country to the United States. A series of adaptation difficulties may result in experiences of anxiety, tension and depression. Because of the progress of technology, communicative patterns have been brought to another level. Boundless networks created by the Internet not only provide more options for students to expand their social networks but affect students’ adaptation process. The emotions experienced by international students during this process can be difficult to access. As such, this study employed qualitative methods to better illuminate the communication of emotions online in intercultural adaptation. In this qualitative study, the researcher observed international students’ personal online websites and conducted interviews. Students used the Internet to initiate contacts with people from the host culture, interact with other international students, join online ethnic groups and maintain old ties with family and friends in home country. These findings hold significant impacts on students’ adaptation process.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2</td>
<td>REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Adaptation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Computer- Mediated Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online Social Networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3</td>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participant Observation and Field Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Analysis and Representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4</td>
<td>FINDINGS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I Learned More About American Traditions and Life Style Since I Met Her!”: Initiating Contacts with People from the Host Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Although We have Different Skin Colors, We are Tied Together.”: Interacting with Other International Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We are here to make friends, show supports, and give hands to those who need it.”: Joining online ethnic groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Our Friendship Never Ended Even We are Thousand Miles Away from Each Other.”: Maintaining Old Ties with Family and Friends Via the Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limitations &amp; Future Directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. The Hours of Interviewees’ Internet Use.................................................................13
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After a long travel from the other side of the world, this thesis is the destination of my graduate school life. It has been a long journey, whether pursuing my master’s degree in Communication Studies or living in a new culture where there are always challenges. But I can finally overcome these difficulties because I have met people who are enormously helpful to me.

The first person I want to thank is my thesis Committee Chair, Dr. Kurt Lindemann. He has been helpful in providing the most valuable advice in the whole process of my thesis. I really appreciate his understanding of me as an international student and patience in directing my thesis. Also, because of his open-minded approach, I am able to have more freedom and develop independent thinking while doing the study.

The next person I would like to thank is Dr. Carmen Lee. Being one of my thesis Committee professors, she has been providing me with the most precious ideas with her rigorous scholarship. I have been benefiting a lot from her professional suggestion.

Last, I am really grateful to Dr. Zheng-sheng Zhang. He has offered me the kindest help in giving valuable ideas to my study from his own experiences about this subject. Because of the encouragement of all the professors, I can finally reach my goal without fear.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Due to global communication changes and interdependencies in business, economics, and technology, intercultural competency has become increasingly significant in today’s world. This is especially important for many of today’s world travelers like students, who are traveling abroad at much higher rates than in the past. According to Thomas and Writer’s (2008) report, the number of non-U.S. students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions during the 2007-2008 academic year increased 7 percent from the prior year to a record total of 623,805. The number of students from China has increased 20 percent to 81,127 in 2008. By studying abroad, international students have opportunities to receive a good quality education and at the same time learn about other cultures (Lin, 2006). This phenomenon accentuates the necessity to study intercultural adaptation, which has been a prominent area of research for intercultural communication scholars for decades (Bennett, 1998; Lin, 2006; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). This research reveals that international students frequently experience anxiety, tension and depression which result from value conflict, social isolation, language barriers and other cultural differences (Lin, 2006). As such, it highlights the urgency for improving sojourners’ intercultural competence in the intercultural context.

A great number of international students come to the U.S. every year for better education. However, living in a foreign country is potentially accompanied by a lot of stress and anxiety because it causes radical changes in the routines of daily life as students move away from their longstanding physical interaction and built relationships with family, friends and acquaintances in home country (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Moving to a new country also means moving to another socio-cultural system. Therefore, it is important for sojourners to be able to cope with considerable cultural changes resulting from major cultural gaps (Kim, 2005).

Although researchers have long discussed ways of overcoming adaptation problems in a new culture, cultural adaptation has been further complicated because of the progress of technology: specifically, the Internet. Chen (2005) proposed that the Internet as a new,
rapidly expanding media has become an important communicative instrument that connects people from all over the world. Through the Internet, groups of individuals have opportunities to share similar or common interests and interact with each other. The Internet has been identified as having the potential to enhance interpersonal relationships and facilitate adaptation in the intercultural circumstances (Kraut et al., 2002). Such studies promise new understandings of cultural adaptation in the field of communication.

The World Wide Web is an irreplaceable complement to the traditional communicative means and it plays a critical role in improving international students’ life. Therefore, a cautious qualitative examination of Internet use regarding to studying abroad is a great importance to international students in the U.S.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In order to establish the foundation for conceptualizing the connections of Internet use and cultural adaptation, three relevant literatures will be reviewed in the next part: cultural adaptation, computer-mediated communication and online social networks.

CULTURAL ADAPTATION

Before discussing the problems international students may encounter in a new culture and strategies of dealing with these adaptation difficulties, the definition of cultural adaptation must be clarified. According to Burgoon and Hubbard (2005), cross-cultural adaptation is a socialization process by which newcomers establish and maintain relationships with others in a new social context. Samovar and Porter (2004) elaborated on this definition by explaining that cultural adaptation assumes people must directly interact with the host culture and adjust to all aspects of a new culture. Moreover, Brislin and Yoshida (1994) describe cultural adaptation as a change of people’s behavior in a new culture. This can often include the acceptance of cultural differences and behavior of change when interacting with people in host culture (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994).

The explanation by Kim (2005) adds supplemental dimensions of behavior to the definition of cultural adaptation. He emphasized the communication aspect of the adaptation process asserting that people adapt to a new culture through communicative behavior. Cultural adaptation reflects a process by which individuals who try to adapt to a new culture adjust their perceptions and communication patterns upon entering or interacting with another culture. This ties process occurs through communication is important, as language barriers can pose problems for sojourners.

In order to be quickly included in a new culture, sojourners approach members in the host culture when they arrive in a new environment (Berry, 1997). However, a high rate of new sojourners were found that their social ability is confined because of inadequate language proficiency (Yum, 1982). Sojourners now use the Internet as an alternative to meet people since the rapid growth of communication technologies. Through computer-mediated
communication, sojourners’ apprehension caused by insufficient English proficiency may be decreased. Online communication therefore plays an influential role on international students’ adaptation.

**Computer-Mediated Communication**

As has been discussed, people adapt to a new culture through communicative behavior. Burgoon and Ebesu Hubbard (2005) mentioned that communication is the heart of cross-cultural adaptation. Sojourners are like native-born children who have to experience the process of enculturation, in which people learn how to appropriately interact with other members of the culture and live in the company of others (Grusec & Hastings, 2007). Sojourners have to learn to adapt to the communicative patterns of this new culture. A person’s anxiety that he or she feels in a setting of intercultural communication plays a key factor in affecting their socio-cultural adaptation. High level of communication apprehension may result in an individual’s communication avoidance and communication disruption, and may hinder someone from socializing with people in the host culture (McCroskey, Gudykunst & Nishida, 1985). Communication anxiety influences an individual’s ability to have effective and successful communication with others, especially when communicating with people from different cultures (Gudykunst, 1995). A sojourner’s feeling of anxiety associated with huge differences in languages, attitudes and behaviors may limit their capability of expressing ideas appropriately and interpreting received messages correctly.

Newcomers’ awareness of apprehension while communicating in different value and belief systems may result in experiences of feeling isolated and lonely in the host society (Wang & Sun, 2008). When sojourners relocate to a new environment, sojourners’ social ties that were established before in their home countries with family, friends and acquaintances are hard to maintain (Adelman, 1988; Furnham, 1988). Building new social networks in the host country usually takes some time. Sojourners’ social developments may be impacted by strong feelings of isolation and alienation from sources of social support that are generally considered to be essential for the significant development changes (Choi & Chen, 2006a). In fact, loneliness has been identified as one of the most considerable problems experienced by sojourners and a major symptom of culture shock (Chataway & Berry, 1989; Taft, 1977).
The feeling of loneliness eventually motivates some sojourners to use the Internet as a way to achieve their communication satisfaction since they may not achieve the fulfillment of positive communicative expectations through face-to-face communication (Hecht, 1978; Pornsakulvanich, Haridakis, & Rubin, 2008). According to McKenna and Bargh (2000), individuals who are socially incompetent tend to feel lonely and try to conquer their problems through online social interactions. In Papacharissi and Rubin’s (2000) research, shy and lonely individuals may use the Internet for social compensation when they are not satisfied with their offline interpersonal relationships. It can be inferred that international students who feel lonely have preference of online social interactions than face-to-face interactions because of less communication anxiety caused by language differences in online world (Caplan, 2003). As for international students, online interactions were less intimidating and more satisfying than face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, some researchers have consistently found that Internet users’ living situations would be improved by Internet use because it allows them to have more access to various information (Bauer, Gai, Kim, Muth, & Wildman, 2002), build and expand their social circles (Katz & Aspden, 1997), and enhance their physical well-being (Kang, 2007).

Additionally, Internet use may eliminate barriers related to time and distance (Jones, 1997). The World Wide Web is usually available when international students come to study in U.S. Liu (1996) argued that when international students come to study in the U.S., almost all of them are exposed to the Internet because it is: (1) widespread and easy to attain the access on university campuses; (2) required for students to reach academic achievements; (3) a necessity in the “cyberculture.” Therefore, the frequent use of Internet offers international students in U.S another opportunity to build and widen their social networks through online networking websites which may diminish the difficulties students encounter during adjustment.

**Online Social Networks**

The term “social network” refers to a web of social relationships and social linkages such as friends and family (Acar, 2008; Kaplan & Hartwell, 1987). An abundance of research discusses the contribution of social networks as a way to maintain physical and psychological health. This process is called social support (Choi & Chen, 2006b; Walker, MacBride, &
Vachon, 1977). Social support is defined as the satisfaction or instrumental function achieved through social connections (Kaplan & Hartwell, 1987). The more social connections an individual has, the more support he or she may perceive. Three kinds of social support have been explored in the literature of interpersonal communication research: informational, emotional, and tangible support (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Informational and tangible support function to facilitate problem-solving action by providing useful information such as advice, and tangible substances like goods or services. Emotional support is designed to help sojourners’ with overcoming psychological difficulties by making them feel more positive, such as providing concern, empathy, and sympathy (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). In the case of international students, Winkelman (1994) postulated that social support networks can help international students to ameliorate stress, reduce culture shock, and facilitate intercultural adjustment. However, social networks are usually not available in international students’ initial stage of relocating to a new culture. Besides traditional social networks, people now have more access to participate in different online social networks and interact with other people because of the increasing access to the Internet.

Different from traditional social networks, virtual communities allow connections across space and physical boundaries. These communities are “gathering points for people with common interests, beliefs, and ideas and are supported by a variety of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) genres’’ (Barnes, 2003, p. 227). Online communities are comparable to the conversation that happens in coffee shops, community centers, restaurants, and other public places. The virtual community is just like the concept of the “public sphere” where individuals and groups get together to discuss common interests and reach a consensus (Rheingold, 2000). In some research, CMC technology has been hailed as a way to enhance and develop interpersonal relationships (McCormick & McCormick, 1992). Walther (2007) has found that CMC can facilitate relational communication more efficiently than face-to-face interactions. Internet use helps individuals build relations and widen their social networks by enabling involvement in various online communities as well as helping them share their interests and concerns with others in the group through online communication. For example, Internet users can discuss a specific topic or make friends with people who share similar interests. Choi and Chen (2006a) asserted that the experience of online interactions help “validate one another’s experience and perceptions and provide great
amounts of encouragement, understanding, and empathy to one another” (p. 2). In the case of cross-cultural adaptation, international students may receive supports through interacting with members of online communities.

According to Social Network Theory proposed by Marsden and Campbell (1984), an individual’s social network consists of strong ties and weak ties. A tie represents the relationship between an individual and another member in the network. When people are connected by weak ties, their relationships are more casual, such as acquaintances or work relationships, and they engage in fewer, less intimate sharing and exchange fewer kinds of information and support than those who reported stronger ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002). On the other hand, people who are strongly tied are more intimate with each other. They are inclined to be involved in more self-disclosure and exchange different forms of resource with others. Individuals who have strong ties with each other tend to demonstrate similarities in attitudes, background, and experience. According to Kraut et al.’s (2002), CMC serves as a supplement for individuals who are socially anxious and isolated to develop social connections. Online social networks may recompense for lack of offline social networks because people who are socially apprehensive may feel more comfortable in initiating intimate relationships online. Through frequent and companionable interactions with ties built online, Internet users can develop the emerged ties into a long term and close contacts (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Many online ethnic social groups have been established since the Internet is more available than before. It offers sojourners a forum to communicate with each another about their common concerns of living in a new culture (Ye, 2006).

Online communities can serve as a crucial component to cultural adaptation. Choi and Chen (2006a) investigated the influence of online community on immigrants and found that online support complements traditional social support for immigrants when they are in the new host culture, especially when they have inadequate real life social networks. For example, the online group, Taiwanese American Professionals (TAP), aims to help Taiwanese-American with social network establishment and career development. Other research about online social groups conducted by Baym (2001) also accented the adaptive function of interpersonally support for group members in online communities. He argued that some online groups such as International Student Association and Taiwanese Student Association are clearly supportive because they purposely provide useful information to
other members. Other organization, while formed to discuss hobbies or other common topics, may nevertheless provide social support.

Besides receiving various types of support from online group members, Bakardjieva’s (2003) study further reported that people in online communities had found solutions to deal with their life problems through participating in online groups. For example, someone might post his or her difficulties of living in a new country online and obtain advice from other group members. A similar observation was reported by Choi and Chen (2006b), who confirmed that informational support played an especially important role for the immigrants because it helped them reduce life difficulties and ease anxiousness by providing shared knowledge about living in a new cultural setting. This indirectly diminished the uncertainties and facilitated the process of psychological adaptation. In the case of international students, who experience the transition of leaving from their home country to a new cultural setting for pursuing their educational goals, have strong tendencies to seek help and support by gaining different sources and establishing personal networks in order to cope with the feelings of alienation and disappointment in their transitional period.

Two types of ties in cross-cultural adaptation have been proposed in prior studies: new relationships built in the host country, and distant long-standing relationships in the home countries. When sojourners enter a new cultural environment, it is very significant for them to construct close ties with friends and “compatible others” in the host culture (Adelman, 1988). According to Choi & Chen (2006a), expanding new relationships is helpful on facilitating sojourners’ adjustment to the new cultural environment. Relational networks, such as informational and emotional support, allow newcomers to be conscious of security and well-being. A newcomer’s social networks also supply him or her with various types of information about the host culture. Studies have shown that establishing close relationships with new ties, especially interactions with people of the host culture, are positively correlated with successful adaptation (Choi & Chen, 2006a). Strong ties not only provide informational support and validation, but also satisfy an individual’s emotional needs as long as close relationships are built.

Moreover, it is also suggested in some studies that maintaining old ties is necessary and beneficial for sojourners (Ying & Liese, 1991). Although these old ties may not be adequate and supportive enough to help sojourners conquer adjustment difficulties, they
function as an easement to reduce anxiety by offering comfort and stability in cross-cultural transition. With the rapid development of communication technologies, sojourners have more ways to interact with their long-distance, long-standing social networks. The Internet, mainly through email and online social network sites, has accelerated communication and further make the ties between family and friends, especially those too far away to visit in person closer than ever (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). However, some research reveals that frequently using Chinese-oriented Internet allows Chinese students and scholars in the U.S. strengthen Chinese cultural value but impeded them from understanding American culture and decelerated their acculturation (Melkote & Liu, 2000). The frequency of using ethnic-language social networking tools to communicate with old ties may bring adverse results to students’ adaptation.

Whether it is the maintenance of ties with new relationships or old social networks, the value of online social networks relies on members’ participation and information exchange. The web can provide perspectives from across different demographic groups, diverse ages, and a plenty of experiences (Finn & Lavitt, 1994). As has been emphasized, the large number of members may help to promote a sense of universality that decreases feelings of alienation. Being aware that they are part of a larger cultural group can help sojourners adjust and reduce feelings of isolation or alienation (Braithwaite, 1996). This phenomenon prompts communication scholars to learn more about how the patterns of Internet use among sojourners especially international students in the U.S. are connected with adaptation to the host culture (Beom, 2003).

As shown above, existing research illustrates the significance of technology in helping international students facilitate intercultural communication competence, which will aid students in setting realistic expectations and ultimately in meeting those expectations. It is important to gain an understanding of the cultural adaptation process that has emerged as an imperative element in this “global village.”

While the research about online social networks and cultural adaptation had been conducted by several studies through quantitative method, only some of research is qualitative and an even smaller portion is ethnographic. Very few studies provide international students’ personal stories of using online social networks and adaptation experiences. Personal stories are important in understanding communication cultural
contexts. According to Littlejohn and Foss (2005), “cultures communicate in different ways, but all forms of communication require a shared code.” Ethnographers conduct detailed analyses to study how these shared communication codes function in diversified contexts, understanding that “speech communities are constituted in local and continuous performances of cultural and moral matters” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). International students form a cultural group in which members share communication behaviors and codes. Drawing the stories shared by international students enables the researcher to “understand the social actor’s experience and perspective and elicit the language forms used by social actors in native settings” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). The researcher can further provide explanations for students’ behavior of social actors and “understand native conceptualizations of communication” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Specifically, understanding how online social networks influence international students’ adaptation process can best be achieved through the gathering of elaborate, descriptive information about students’ emotions like shyness and loneliness since adaptation is a series of psychological process. As such, this paper aims to answer the following questions by presenting specific intercultural adjustment experiences from international students at SDSU:

RQ 1: How do Chinese/Taiwanese international students use online social networks to be included in the host culture?

RQ2: What coping strategies do Chinese/Taiwanese international students use to diminish adaptation difficulties through online social networks?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of online social networks to students’ cultural adaptation by examining stories. In doing so, this paper will extend theoretical understanding of cultural adaptation. In addition, this paper will provide conclusions for future research endeavors. To do so, this study will: (1) explain international students’ process and stages of using online social networks in transitional period, (2) explore the coping strategies that international students use through the Internet, and (3) provide directions for future studies. In the following chapter, I begin with explaining the research sites and subjects and then give details to the data collection and analysis procedures.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The literature review and the research questions presented above accentuate the necessity to collect information from observations and interviews of international students. Intercultural adaptation is not merely a psychological, but an interactive communication-based process of sojourners (Kim, 2005). Ethnographic methods allow us to see the process of international students’ adjustment and unravel the importance of it. The following sections, data collection, interviews, participant observation and data analysis and representation, explain the process taken in this research.

DATA COLLECTION

In order to “inquire about occurrences in the past” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) and enable the researcher to reflect on his thoughts from narratives of international students talking about their cultural adaptation experiences, the researcher chose international students as research subjects because they are recognized as one of the most frequent kinds of travelers to the U.S. (Lin, 2006).

Because of the greatest growth rate of Chinese international students in the U.S. (Thomas & Writer, 2008), research subjects in this study are 10 Chinese/Taiwanese international students who are over 18 years old and enrolled at SDSU regardless of their gender and major. I did online observation on the websites of international students and related organizations. I analyzed textual data such as the messages and the comments that are posted by students from online settings. According to Walstrom (2004), online observers, or participant-experiencers, “entail the role of active contributor to the group being studied. This role specifically refers to a researcher who has personal experience with the central problem being discussed by group participants” (Walstrom, 2004). Although researchers do not have access to directly observe users while studying their communicative behaviors online, they can experience what it is like to participate in the group by reading and posting messages to the group site. Moreover, researchers are allowed to study an online group with completely
unobtrusive observation in online settings which is beneficial to the validity of the study. By doing so, I not only found and solicited potential interviewees, but also took field notes to record what I saw, heard, and felt and examined connection between students’ experiences of using online social networks and cultural adaptation.

**INTERVIEWS**

As previously mentioned, the ethnographic method is adopted in this study for several reasons. First, one value of this study is that it will be focused on students’ personal experiences, elicited through interviews. An interview, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), is “an event in which one person (the interviewer) encourages others to freely articulate their interests and experiences”. They further stated that interview enables researchers to “understand the social actor’s experience and perspective through stories, accounts, and explanations”. Interviews are a way to travel deeply and broadly into subjective realities; therefore, the interview has been a preeminent method in communication and the other social sciences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In other words, only by interviewing students in person can we explore the influence of online social networks in students’ adaptation deeper.

Furthermore, this study involves students’ emotions involved in how they adapt to a new environment. Interviewees’ emotional reactions and facial expressions will be recorded as a reference to help understanding students’ adaptation experiences, which cannot be achieved by other means except conducting interviews. All ten interviews were transcribed into 54 pages of transcription which is the main data resource of this study. All the interviewees were allowed to choose a pseudonym they preferred to be identified by in the study. Participants who did not choose a pseudonym were assigned one to ensure confidentiality (see Appendix A and B). Table 1 shows the hours of interviewees’ Internet use each day.

**PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND FIELD NOTES**

Observations and writing field notes are also important parts of the ethnographic process. According to Van Maanen (1988), field notes are “gnomic, shorthand reconstructions of events, observations, and conversations that took place in the field”. Field notes allow the researcher to understand the true perspectives of the subject being studied and
Table 1. The Hours of Interviewees’ Internet Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tracy</th>
<th>Fan</th>
<th>Tang</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>Lo</th>
<th>Sky</th>
<th>Jackie</th>
<th>Liz</th>
<th>Pan</th>
<th>Vivi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1-3 hrs/day</strong></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4-6 hrs/day</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7-9 hrs/day</strong></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Over 10 hrs/day</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to access the subject and record what they observe in an unobtrusive manner. Besides, “interviews and field notes can complement each other very well, but only rarely can one substitute for the other” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002)

Online observation was adopted and field notes for this study were taken on the most popular online social network website among Chinese/Taiwanese students such as Facebook and Renren.com. They are created to form a community and provide a place to share interests with an increasing number of people in the network. The users are allowed to leave individual messages on a public board, share photos, track friends and organize events, etc.

Some online international student organizations such as Taiwanese Student Association (TWSA) and Chinese Student Association are recognized as the websites which would benefit the study. By observing the interactions among Chinese/Taiwanese international students on international student organizations websites, I had more opportunities to interact with international students and found potential interviewees, as well as learned about their experience of using online social networks.

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), “field notes should be written immediately after each fieldwork section. The more time that elapses after observing, the more likely that deteriorating memory will dilute the fidelity and detail of the account”. Thus, the 21 page field notes in this study taken from 15-hour observation on online social networking websites were recorded by my own thoughts and feelings without interference from any other people and were all completed within 24 hours after the observations in order to ensure the reliability and validity of field notes.
DATA ANALYSIS AND REPRESENTATION

After data collection from observations and interviews, it is significant for the researcher to “label and break down (or decontextualizing) raw data and reconstituting them into patterns, themes, concepts, and propositions” (Spiggle, 1994). One of the steps of doing analysis is to code the data. Codes link the data and the categories posited by the researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). By coding, the researcher will be able to put different patterns found from data into the emergent categories.

The above steps will help the researcher manage the data, make it more useful, and ease the transition to the next step: interpretation, which involves the analysis and the translation of an object from one meaning into another (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The researcher expects to present “an interpretation that we can depend on to both explain and enact the cultural code - is one that sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

This study is expected to benefit scholars who take ethnography as a method to study intercultural communication and function as a reference for students who plan to study abroad. The findings of this research will be introduced in the following sections.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

International students usually experience anxiety, nervousness and loneliness while studying abroad. After reviewing relevant literature and the research methods for this study, the following section integrates with field notes and interview responses reveal Chinese/Taiwanese students’ experience of using online social networks. I will respond to these research questions:

RQ 1: How do Chinese/Taiwanese international students use online social networks to be included in the host culture?

RQ 2: What coping strategies do Chinese/Taiwanese international students use to diminish adaptation difficulties through online social networks?

First, I will explore how Chinese/Taiwanese international students, who do not feel comfortable in face-to-face communication with native English speakers, gain emotional support and acquire information about native culture through initiating friendships with people from the host culture online. Second, I will unravel how Chinese/Taiwanese students gain feelings of belongingness and security by sharing similar adaptation experiences with other international students in online communities. I will then elaborate how online ethnic groups such as Chinese Student Association and TWSA help Chinese/Taiwanese students adjust to the new environment by providing students an online space to meet friends from the same country and gain support. Last, I will offer examples of how Chinese/Taiwanese students maintain their established old ties with family and friends in home countries through the Internet, which is important in helping students conquer psychological difficulties during adaptation.

The responses to the research questions are organized around four aspects regarding how online social networks affect international students’ cultural adaptation: initiating contacts in the host culture, interacting with other international students, joining online ethnic groups and maintaining old ties with family and friends through the Internet.
“I LEARNED MORE ABOUT AMERICAN TRADITIONS AND LIFE STYLE SINCE I MET HER!”: INITIATING CONTACTS WITH PEOPLE FROM THE HOST CULTURE

International students have a desire to meet new friends in the host culture because they are usually far away from their old contacts and want to integrate in the new environment quickly. Tracy, a sophomore International Business major from Taiwan, had a hard time meeting new friends in the beginning. She said she always wanted to meet native-born friends, but it was just too hard for her to approach American classmates because she was not confident about her English proficiency and was afraid to speak English. This was until she met her American boyfriend on MySpace:

I met some friends on MySpace because I found that it’s so much easier to type than speak in English. It is also the way I met my boyfriend. My boyfriend is interested in learning Chinese. So when he saw my MySpace profile, he sent me a message and asked me to be his language-exchange partner. We started to talk on MySpace. We met up and hung out sometime at school. After about two months, we decided to move on to the next level of our relationship. We’ve been together for 10 months and I really have a lot fun being with him. Internet is definitely a way for foreigners to meet new friends especially for those who think they are shy and not fluent in English.

Tracy finds herself more comfortable making friends on MySpace. Some studies have revealed that the World Wide Web is an efficient tool that provides a means for shy students to meet new people and expand their social networks by building lasting relationships with others (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Online social networks are frequently used by international students to meet people in the host culture, particularly when international students perceive themselves as shy (Chan, 2009). Some research has shown that introverted individuals are more likely to use online tools to build contacts than outgoing people (Anolli, Villani, & Riva, 2005). Using online social networks as a way to initiate a relationship with another online member is frequent for nowadays Internet users. In the study of McKenna et al. (2002), more than half of their respondents had moved their web-based relationship to the face-to-face realm. By participating online communities, Tracy gradually built her social ties through the Internet.

The relationship of her and her boyfriend is identified as a strong tie. They are intimate with each other and are inclined to be involved in more self-disclosure (Marsden & Campbell, 1984). The formation of a relationship depends on the level of two individuals’
self-disclosure to each other (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). The more self-disclosure individuals who are connected by strong ties involve, the more intimacy they perceive. As discussed in Chapter 1, strong ties may satisfy an individual’s emotional needs as long as close relationships are built, which not only decreases adaptation difficulties international students face but also strengthens their emotion of belongingness to the new culture (Choi & Chen, 2006a). The fact that Tracy finds it easier to communicate in English online contributes to these ties.

Contrary to what some might initially think, friendships initiated through the Internet are often more stable and enduring than traditional relationships (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995). Fan, who is a second-year MBA program student, is glad that she met a friend from the host culture on Facebook:

I met this girl, Emily, on Facebook. She started to talk to me on Facebook because she is an undergraduate business major and she wanted to ask something about taking graduate level classes. We just talked about school stuff but finally found out that we both love pop music! We sometimes study together and go to concerts. She even invited me to have dinner with her family on last Thanksgiving Day! I really appreciate everything she did to me. And of course I learned more about American traditions and lifestyle since I met her. She’s very smart and sweet!

It is important for international students to build close relationships with friends in the host culture because international students left their family and friends, and came to the new country with a lot of uncertainties (Adelman, 1988). According to Uncertainty Reduction Theory proposed by Berger and Calabrese (1975), the ideal way for individuals to decrease unpredictable elements of people is to increase their knowledge and information. This concept can be extended to the intercultural adaptation process, where sojourners may feel less nervous and anxious if they learn more about the host society. Fan was able to do this via Facebook. Fan implies that her feelings of uncertainty are lessened since she spent more time with American friends and learned about American traditions and lifestyle. For Fan, being more involved with her native friend, Emily, is helpful for Fan in gaining knowledge about the host culture, which not only increases her feeling of belongingness but also reduces her nervousness while living in a new environment.

Tang, a Hospitality major from Hong Kong, also said she learned more about the host culture by making native friends on Facebook:
I don’t usually chat with my American friends on Facebook, but I feel less stressed and embarrassed when I talk with them on Facebook. I’ve learned some slangs… or I should say Internet language like “TTYL” and “BRB” when I chat with them. I also found some topics that are common in China are more private for American people. For example, one of my American friends told me that it’s not polite to ask about someone’s salary, family problems or financial issues if you don’t know him well. So I would just avoid talking about it. I think it is important to understand a culture because I feel more engaged in a conversation if I know what I can and can’t say in the culture. And we can have better interactions on the Internet if I know my American friends’ way of using slangs and emotional icons when we chat online.

Diversifying communication channels is important for sojourners because they can gain more adjustment knowledge (Yum, 1982). Newcomers are encouraged to utilize a broad variety of communication medias that expand further than their own ethnic group. In order to obtain the information for cross-cultural adjustment from diversified communication channels, it is best for international students to establish relationships not only with people from the same culture but with people in the host culture. In Tang’s example, she feels more comfortable communicating with her friends from the host culture by obtaining knowledge about the host language on the Internet. According to Gudykunst (2005), knowing more about natives’ languages and dialects is useful in predicting host people’s behavior accurately and reducing sojourners’ anxiety. Through communicating in a variety of channels with natives, Tang was able to acquire more knowledge about natives’ behaviors and attitudes like what subjects are more proper in a conversation with American people. As a result, Tang is more apt to feel more involved and included in the host culture.

As discussed in the literature, new relationships can help foster newcomers’ adaptation to the new cultural environment (Choi & Chen, 2006a). A newcomer’s social networks function to provide him or her with feelings of security as well as various types of knowledge about the host culture. Studies have consistently found that interactions that results in close ties with members of the host culture are significantly linked to successful adaptation (Winkelman, 1994). It can be inferred that the more friendships Chinese/Taiwanese students establish with host-cultural nationals, the more feelings of inclusion and belongingness they may experience in their adaptation process. One of the participants, Tang, said, “I always tell my roommate that if she wants to experience American culture, she has to hang out more with American people. Go to movies, parties… or camping. Just have some fun!” Another participant, Fan, also said her life here has become
more enjoyable since she established friendships with people in the host country. Both Tang and Fan agreed that international students should meet more local friends for learning more about the culture. Online social networks offer a way to do this that helps non-native speakers avoid feelings of anxiety associated with not knowing the language. Another way that students more successfully adapt is by establishing feeling of belongingness with other international students, discussed in the following section.

“ALTHOUGH WE HAVE DIFFERENT SKIN COLORS, WE ARE TIED TOGETHER.”: INTERACTING WITH OTHER INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Besides hanging out with students who are from the host country, international students find benefits in meeting other international students who are from different countries. April, a Finance major student from China, recounted her experience of meeting her Indian boyfriend online:

The first time I talked with my boyfriend is on Facebook. Actually he already noticed me and wanted to make friend with me at coffee hour [an event host by the International Student Center where International students share cultures with each other every Friday], but he was just too shy to talk to me in person. He tried to find me on ISC [International Student Center] Facebook group and added me as his friend. It happened in last summer when I went back to China for vacation. He sent me a lot of messages and asked me to have dinner with him. He knew that I love sushi so he said we should go to eat sushi sometime together. We get to know each other more and we decided to be in a relationship after we are both back to San Diego. Although we have different skin colors, I feel we are tied together. I am really glad that he sent me the first message on Facebook.

In April’s example, Facebook serves as a way for her to meet other international students. One reason why international students are inclined to meet other international students from different countries might be that they share similar experiences of living in a new culture. In my online observations of such Facebook interactions, I recorded what Lo, an international student from Taiwan, posted on her Facebook “What’s on your mind?” section and the responses from her friends:

Lo: didn’t catch the last bus after school, spent 1.5 hours walking home!!!!
Enzo: lol it happened on me before. It really sux… and people on the bus are always weird…you should be more careful next time when you take the bus at night.
Mitsuho: It wouldn’t happen if you are in Tokyo. At least our last train leaves at 12:30 a.m. not 9!

Amy: The same in Taipei 😊

Peter: I can give you a ride. Just give me a call next time. (Fieldnotes, 2/5/2010).

Even though Lo and her friends have different cultural backgrounds, they seem to encounter similar difficulties during cultural adaptation like learning the bus schedule. When asked about whether Lo feels included or excluded by using the World Wide Web to communicate with others, she responded:

I feel included in ISC and ICF [International Christian Fellowship]. I joined ISC and ICF groups on Facebook where I found a lot of international students. A girl, Mabel, who is from Malaysia also the student of SDSU was in charge of contacting students of this group and a always hosted different events by sending group messages. We usually discuss everything on the website like where to have fun in San Diego, where are the good restaurants in the city and internship opportunities. We also plan parties on weekends. We are just like a small “United Nations”!

Lo describes an online space where she feels included and comfortable getting along with other members. People tend to develop close interpersonal relationships with people they are relatively similar to (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). According to Gudykunst and Kim (2003), cultural backgrounds, race, and ethnicity are all the factors that contribute to the fundamental idea of a cross-cultural relationship. Typically, people form close relationships with those who are similar to them in terms of demographics, attitudes, and backgrounds (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). Both Lo and her friends on Facebook are international students at SDSU and encounter similar experiences, which allow them to easily relate to one another. Sharing these experiences helps international students cope with the difficulties of adapting to the host culture. By joining online groups such as the ISC with a great number of international students, a sense of universality is promoted, which lessens feelings of alienation (Choi & Chen, 2006a). As for international students, perceiving that they belong to a cultural group is helpful for them to adjust the new environment and reduce feelings of isolation and alienation (Braithwaite, 1996). It can be concluded that making friends with other international students who experience similar situations is important to Lo’s adaptation in American schools.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, sojourners feel the need to acquire enough knowledge and information because it diminishes their uncertainties in adaptation process. Papa and
Papa (1992) illustrate that diverse interpersonal networks enable newcomers to gain a variety of information. Communication diversity in race and background contributes to sojourners’ social circle by providing many possibilities and opportunities for information. Using Lo’s experience as an example, it is clear that she and the ISC and the ICF members not only have fun together, but also share the information about job opportunities and traveling by mass transit.

Another Taiwanese student, Tracy, also reported that she acquired plenty of useful information related to getting California driver’s license from ISC online bulletin:

It’s so inconvenient to live without a car in San Diego so I decided to take driver’s license test and rent a car. It was my first time to take driving test so I was kind of lost. But on ISC discussion board, I found people talking about things like where to take the test and how to pass the test. Some people shared their experience of taking the test and even voluntarily offered to practice with you before the driving test!

Tracy solved commuting problems and made her life here easier by gaining information about how to legally drive in the host country from a group formed by international students. By diversifying social relations with other ethnic groups online, Chinese/Taiwanese international students are able to receive sufficient knowledge about the host culture. This helps international students cope with difficulties in the acculturation process and eventually feel included in the host culture. Additionally, obtaining information online from other experienced peers from the same country is equally helpful in students’ adjustment.

“WE ARE HERE TO MAKE FRIENDS, SHOW SUPPORTS, AND GIVE HANDS TO THOSE WHO NEED IT.” JOINING ONLINE ETHNIC GROUPS

A high rate of Chinese/Taiwanese students prefer approaching members of student associations before and after they arrive in the U.S. for more information of studying abroad. I captured the main goal of TWSA@SDSU on TWSA site and recorded it in my fieldnotes:

TWSA@SDSU is an open group and their goal is: “We help anyone with any kind of issue here in San Diego. We are here to make friends, show supports, and give hands to those who need them by hosting social events and providing networking opportunities within the community.” From the description, the goal of this organization is to build an online community for Taiwanese students to share information and look for help and support. (Fieldnotes, 2/1/2010)
The online bulletin board of TWSA@SDSU provides Taiwanese international students a space to communicate with each other, and to initiate and address specific questions and concerns. A sense of community can be enhanced through these online interactions (Murphy, Hawkes, & Law, 2002). An online conversation between a new Taiwanese student, Alexis, and another TWSA member, Taylor, recorded in my field notes illustrates the ways this interaction enhances community:

Alexis: I just graduated from UCLA, and I'm doing a master's at SDSU right now. New to San Diego.. so hopefully I'll meet some of you :]

Taylor: hihi, i graduated from UCLA as well and i'm doing postbac @ SDSU. nice to meet you

Alexis: Nice to meet another UCLA alum! How do u like it here?

Taylor: meh theres not that much too like because i dont see many asians on campus and school is life is pretty boring me as a postbac. it might be better for a grad student like yourself. :D

Alexis: But san diego is so beautiful!! LOL... i dont think grad school life is much better.. i dont' even have classes on campus this year... so pretty isolated.

(Fieldnotes, 2/3/2010)

Organizations like the TWSA can serve as a social support network (Kaplan & Hartwell, 1987). Being a member of these types of organizations during a student’s travels to a foreign culture is helpful in decreasing his or her anxiety and uncertainty (Hullett & Witte, 2001). Therefore, the formation of social networks in organizations can serve as a coping mechanism of stress (Zimmermann & Applegate, 1994). From the conversation above, it can be inferred that the TWSA site functions as a mediated channel which enables a student who is new to San Diego to meet other friends from Taiwan and perhaps decrease his or her feeling of isolation. Adelman (1988) argued that international student organizations contain a network of ‘‘compatible others’’. In this case, “compatible others’’ refers to other students from China/Taiwan which ultimately contribute to help group members enhance their control over the environment by providing tangible assistance, acceptance or assurance. Sky, an Information Systems major from China, described how Facebook functions as a means for her to communicate with other Chinese students:

I both talk with my friends in home town and friends I met here on Facebook. There’s a function on Facebook that users can join any groups they are interested in. Everytime when I have questions, I ask for the information I need on it. For example, I am a member of Chinese student association. When I want to do some shopping or have some fun on weekends, I leave a message on the main page wall
to ask other Chinese students if they can give me a ride to supermarket or if they
wanna go clubbing together!

In Sky’s example, members of Chinese Student Association provide tangible support
to each other and help each other to meet basic needs of living in a new country. A web-
based forum like the TWSA discussion section functions as a public space where members
can share common issues, help each other to reach mutual goals, and provide support to each
other when encountering difficulties. Research indicates that sojourners have an innate
tendency to approach and communicate with their ethnic peers. These communication
activities among the same ethnic group members are beneficial in their cultural adaptation
process. Sojourners from collectivist societies, especially, value collective social support
more than those from individualistic societies do. This suggests that an organization whose
members are from a collectivist culture such as China and Taiwan has a tendency to provide
social support to its members, which will effectively diminish Chinese/Taiwanese
international students’ uncertainties and nervousness in a new cultural environment
(Adelman, 1988). It is probably the reason why Sky finds herself feeling involved when she
interacts with other members of Chinese Student Association on Facebook.

Besides satisfying their emotional and tangible needs, online ethnic groups also
supply international students with informational support. In an interview with Jackie, a
Chinese student who majors in Computer Engineering, he mentioned that he obtained the
information he needed by initiating a discussion on the bulletin of Chinese Student
Association forum:

I was in a car accident in last year and I really needed to know where and how to
get my student health insurance covered. Most of my friends couldn’t give me any
advice because they didn’t have this experience before. Only a day after I posted
my question online, a student who was in the same situation told me who to
contact and what paper works I need to do. It’s helpful.

Online ethnic groups have become an irreplaceable media for international students to
obtain useful information. Informational support is most useful when newcomers are able to
handle the situation after utilizing the information that is provided by other members
(Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Online ethnic groups satisfy Chinese/Taiwanese international
students’ need of some particular information which cannot be achieved by traditional media
such as radio, TV, newspapers, and magazines. Jackie turned to online members of Chinese
Student Association for advice. In short, joining online ethnic groups and communicating
with students from the same country through online social networking websites not only satisfies Chinese/Taiwanese students’ basic requirements of living in a new environment such as food, traveling and entertainment, but also provides specific information for and help students to confront their adaptation challenges. In next section, I will discuss students’ needs of comfort and stableness from old ties which now can be more easily achieved by the Internet.

“OUR FRIENDSHIP NEVER ENDED EVEN WE ARE THOUSAND MILES AWAY FROM EACH OTHER.”: MAINTAINING OLD TIES WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS VIA THE INTERNET

In addition to getting tangible and informational support in the host culture, maintaining established ties with family and friends has been shown to provide great emotional support and soothe international students’ anxiety in the adaptation process. It is particularly easier through interaction via the Internet. Online barriers that are caused by time and distance do not pose the same problems as with face-to-face interactions. Different from when communicating with native people in English, Chinese/Taiwanese students are involved with more complex and emotional subjects when interacting with their old ties in the ethnic language. When talking about the experience of using the World Wide Web as a tool to maintain old ties, Jackie said:

Facebook is blocked in China so the website I use to contact my friends in China is “人人 www.Renren.com”. I always upload the pictures and they share videos and pictures with me. We talked about everything like our plans for vacation and things happened on our common friends. We also play games on it. It’s very fun to use. We not only share good times. Everytime when I have pressure from school and feel upset, I always complain to my best high school classmate Jerry. He always makes me feel encouraged. Our friendship never ended even we are thousand miles away from each other and we have time difference. I never felt ignored by my friends because I can always join their conversation online!

Some studies suggest that keeping a close connection to one’s cultural origin may function as an emotional mediation which helps him or her feel encouraged and contributes to a better mood. Jackie gained emotional support from his friend in China through communicating online. Especially during the initial transitional period, the support students get from family and old Chinese friends are beneficial to their adjustment (Ying & Liese, 1991). As discussed in Chapter 1, although these old ties may not be sufficient or helpful
enough to aid sojourners overcome adjustment difficulties, they serve as an emotional support to decrease anxiety by offering comfort and steadiness in students’ intercultural transition. A conversation on the Facebook profile of Liz, a Taiwanese student who majors in Accounting, and her friend, Angie, in Taiwan illustrates the idea that international students use online social networks to receive comfort from their old ties:

Liz: OMG! I miss you so much!
Angie: heyyyyy miss you too! how’s everything going there?
Liz: not so well…提款 final week is coming and it really stresses me out! you??? I wanna go Momo again, I miss the time hanging out with my girls! Ahhhhh
Angie: oh Liz…we miss you so much too! but think about it…you’ll fly back after the final, it’s only 3 weeks left!!!! then we can get together again! so cheer up my friend! you know you are always a lucky girl😊
Liz: can’t wait!!!!!!!!!!! (Fieldnotes, 2/2/2010).

Emotional support is designed to help sojourners’ with conquering psychological difficulties by providing concern, empathy, and sympathy (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). According to Cutrona and Suhr (1992), emotional support is usually to be given when the receiver is experiencing psychological disappointment which he or she is not capable to control. Chinese/Taiwanese international students are able to use e-mail and online social networks to communicate and interact with their close ties of family and friends like Liz did, especially if they are too far away to visit their old contacts in person through Internet technology (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). The Internet allows communication to be sustained on a regular basis even if there is a long distance and time difference between two individuals (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Howard, Rainie, and Jones (2001) concluded that the World Wide Web not only lets sojourners to keep in touch with their family and friends, but expands their social networks. They further proposed that a great number of respondents who utilized online social network tools to interact with relatives reported increased levels of communication with family members. These research outcomes revealed that online tools are more likely to broaden sojourners’ social contacts than marginalize them from the culture. Wellman, Haase, Witte, and Hampton (2001) concluded that individuals do not replace face-to-face communication with the Internet; however, they frequently use it to sustain longer distance relationships. Internet technology not only helps individuals build close and meaningful new relationships in a comparatively safe setting, but also enables them to stay in
touch with old ties such as family and friends which comfort international students and avoid them from sensing isolation and loneliness during the transitional period.

However, the efficiency of using online social networking websites to sustain old contacts is not always helpful to students’ adaptation if they exclusively use the Internet to maintain old ties instead of building new contacts in the host country. Pan, who is an Engineering major from Taiwan, addresses this tension. MSN messenger is his way of keeping in touch with his family:

I seldom use Facebook and I never used MySpace. I use MSN a lot because I use it to talk with my family in Taiwan. When I feel unhappy, I leave messages on MSN to my parents. I would leave messages like what things that make me upset happened. They always ask me to do my best. They said they work hard for me to study abroad because they want me to see more and learn happily. My family is very understanding but I know I am here alone. They can’t give me help when I have problems understanding lectures or accompany me when I feel lonely. I still have to face all the challenges myself.

In Pan’s example, consideration and encouragement from his parents helps to comfort him; nevertheless, this support does not effectively facilitate his adjustment process, evident in Pan’s description of his adaptation as exhausting and leaving him feeling helpless. Research conducted by Melkote and Liu (2000) revealed that frequently using Chinese-oriented Internet allowed Chinese students and scholars in the U.S. strengthen Chinese cultural value but hindered them from understanding American culture and decelerated their acculturation. Chinese/Taiwanese students like Pan who more frequently use online social networking tools to maintain old contacts than to build contacts in the host culture often fail to acquire information about the host society and enhance involvements with American culture. A similar situation occurred with another Taiwanese participant, Vivi, who is an International Business major. She said that she does not think that she has successfully adapted to this new culture:

I don’t think I have adapted to this place. I actually didn’t want to study abroad but my parents wanted me to go to a school in America. Now I really regret I made the decision. I didn’t know it could be so lonely here alone… I always look forward to the coming of summer and winter vacation because I can fly back to see my boyfriend and my friends. Usually I talk with my boyfriend on the phone on weekends. On school days, we write messages to each other on Wretch [a Taiwanese online blog entry] and talk on MSN. My friends are all very jealous that I can study abroad and have chances to make foreign friends, but I don’t really care if I have foreign friends because I just think we belong to different
worlds. For me, it’s more fun and easier to talk with Taiwanese friends than to hang out with “foreigners.”

The frequency of using native- or host-language Internet plays an important role in a sojourner’s adaptation. Burgoon and Ebesu Hubbard (2005) argued that sojourners who are engaged in more host-centered social communication, including the interaction via host-language Internet, may experience more successful acculturation. However, Vivi, who does not use host-language online social networks such as Facebook or MySpace, does not have the opportunity to interact with people in the host culture. Furthermore, sojourners may take more time to adjust the culture if they are involved with more ethnic social communication like the use of ethnic-language Internet and communicating in ethnic languages (Kim, 1988). It can be inferred that sojourners like Vivi who use Chinese dominant social networking websites more regularly than English sites would feel less connected with the host society. Also, Chinese/Taiwanese students who spend a lot of time communicating with old ties in Chinese language through the Internet may encounter more adaptation challenges since their communication channels may not diversify enough to attain useful information, compared with students who spend more time using host language Internet sites and expanding social networks with people in the host country during cross-cultural transformation. In the following section, I will discuss the conclusion, implication and limitation of this study.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This study examined international students’ acculturation experiences by analyzing students’ use of online social networking sites during their stay in the host culture. The results provide rich information about the dimensions of how international students’ adaptation processes are affected by their experience of using the World Wide Web while studying in the U.S.

In this study, international students’ interaction with other foreign students online emerged as a helpful tool in building students’ social networks, further helping students feel supported and less anxious about adaptation difficulties. By initiating new contacts and developing close relationships with people in the host society, students acquire information about the host culture and enhance their understanding of natives’ attitude and behavior especially those who identified themselves as shy and introversive. This finding is consistent with what Burgoon and Ebesu Hubbard (2005) proposed, namely that individuals adapt to a new culture through communicative behavior. By interacting with American friends in cyberspace, international students are able to gain more understanding about the communicative patterns and have better adaptation in the new cultural setting.

I also uncovered that Chinese/Taiwanese international students are inclined to meet other international students through online communities, since people often build interpersonal relationships with other individuals who have comparative background and experience with each other (Derlega et al., 1993). International students who expand their social network with sojourners from different ethnic groups online are able to receive adjustment knowledge from diversified communication channels, which also makes their adaptation process easier.

Besides forming groups with other ethnic group members, Chinese/Taiwanese students also approach students who are from the same culture by attending online ethnic groups such as the Chinese Student Association and TWSA. Perceiving himself or herself as a member of an organization during international students’ travels to an unfamiliar culture is
helpful in decreasing anxiety and uncertainty (Hullett & Witte, 2001). By sharing common adaptation issues with members from the same country on web-based forum, students help each other to achieve mutual goals, and offer support to each other when encountering difficulties (Ferguson, 1996).

Lastly, the Internet enables Chinese/Taiwanese students to keep in touch with their old contacts like family and friends in home country. Maintaining old ties through Facebook or MSN messenger provides students with comfort in overcoming psychological difficulties while adapting to a new environment. However, this use can hinder successful adjustment if students more frequently use the World Wide Web to participate in more communication with old ties in China/Taiwan than to expand new relations in the new country. Below, I will explain the implications of this study.

**IMPLICATIONS**

There are six implications in this study. First, the way of gathering adaptation information for international students has significantly evolved from traditional means like face-to-face interactions with people in the host country to online communication. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) illustrates that people’s uncertainty can be reduced as they collect enough information which enables them to foresee people’s attitudes and behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). This concept can be extended to intercultural adaptation process where sojourners may feel less nervous and anxious if they learn more about the host society. However, it does not consider that shy or reticent individuals may have difficulties gaining information through traditional means like initiating contacts with natives. As discussed in the first chapter, the higher communication apprehension an international student has in the intercultural transition period, the more difficulty he or she may perceive. It is ideal to reduce sojourners’ unpredictable elements by increasing sojourners’ knowledge about the host country (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and international students are now able to do this via the Internet. Some students need the ability to gain cultural knowledge with less intimidated and more comfortable feelings. The Internet just provides students a way not only to experience better interaction with people from different cultures but also to gain adequate information and support to overcome adaptation difficulties. These features of the Internet add another layer of meaning to URT.
Second, although the Internet seems to benefit students’ adaptation, it may also impede students’ adjustment to some extent. Students who frequently use the Internet to contact family and friends in home countries may promote the relationships with their origins but often fail to have sufficient communication with host people. This may not only hinder them from understanding American culture, but also increase their anxiety when having face-to-face communication with people in the host culture because the adequate knowledge of foreseeing host people’s behaviors and attitudes is not available. The influence of Internet use is found to be both beneficial and harmful to students’ adaptation in the study.

Third, cultural norms of CMC and face-to-face communication may vary. Orgad (2006) proposed that the cultural fundamentals such as ethics, rules, communication expectations and preferences may affect and characterize online spaces and CMC. Besides, expression in CMC in diversified languages enables a different cultural practice from face-to-face communication (Danet & Herring, 2003). Other aspects such as the differences in cultural communication regulations and software standards that individuals from different countries meet should be considered when communicating online.

Fourth, this study provides a supplement for the integrative theory of Kim (2005), who proposed that cultural adaptation is the process of interactions between individuals and the host environment. Cross-cultural adaptation happens when people are involved with continuous communicative activities. In my study, international students gradually integrate into the host society through frequently communicate and interact with people in host country and home countries. It is helpful for students to move to a stage of integration in which sojourners both keep their original identity while simultaneously develop relationships and interact with the host culture well, and contributes to better adaptation.

In addition, the researcher’s role of being an international student provides a more precise insight to the study. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), a person’s experience of life can be a valuable research idea especially when a researcher “problematizes” his or her own experiences. A person’s experiences with different people and cultures may enable him or her to uncover something different from what had been stereotyped (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). My experience of studying in a different cultural setting helps me to better understand and explain the factors of students’ Internet use and cultural adjustment. However, I experienced a hard time identifying my role at the beginning of conducting interviews. I
sometimes unconsciously imply too many personal ideas during interviews. Too much involvement of the researcher to a topic may lead the study to a different direction. It was hard for me as a researcher to be a fully insider or outsider. After a while, I ultimately can be an in-between asker and listener, and focus on interpreting the “true value” of participants’ stories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Last, ethnographic method greatly benefits this study with a deeper insight of students’ Internet use and cultural adaptation. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the ideal way of understanding shared communication behaviors and codes is to explain the stories of “social actors” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). By drawing internationals students’ stories of Internet use and cultural adaption from interviews and online observation, the genuine part of students’ emotions and struggles during adjustment process is elicited. In the following section, I will illustrate what limitations this study has.

**LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

There are limitations in this study as well. First, it is a preliminary study in one university, SDSU. Besides, the limited number of interviews performed in the study and the study did not cover international students who are from other countries than China/Taiwan and whose native language is English. Because the group of international students is formed by multicultural individuals, the study will be more generalizable if diversified participants are engaged in future studies.

In addition, this study did not comprise some factors that may affect an international student’s cultural adaptation. For example, it did not account for whether or not students are proficient in the host language and if they had enough preparedness and an adequate understanding about the host society and culture. The above factors should be considered because students’ proficiency and confidence of communicating in English is important to their adjustment. Language proficiency not only affects their in class performance but also their ability to deal with challenges and attain satisfaction in life abroad (Chen, 2000). Moreover, the participants of this study are all frequent Internet users. Complementary influence of using the Internet to cultural adaptation may emerge if students who don’t regularly use online social networking tools are included. Also, other traditional means of gaining support and information such as newspaper and radio were not taken into
consideration in this study. According to Abrams (2009), Asian Americans’ understanding to Caucasian culture is related to the quantity and quality of television shows they watch. Television can not only entertain Asian Americans, but is connected to their perception to Caucasians. This can be applied to study students’ adaptation. Besides, students may learn current public issues in the host country and gain cultural knowledge by reading newspaper or listening to broadcast programs. Future studies should cover both traditional and modern means of gaining information and see if students’ adaptation result varies.

Lastly, most of subjects’ responses in this study were based on their memories at least one year ago, which may result in partial accounts of experiences. Therefore, researchers should understand the influence of time when studying cultural adaptation. By making up these deficiencies, future studies will benefit more for scholars in this field and help international students to enhance interpersonal relationships and facilitate adaptation in the intercultural circumstances.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE
I am doing an interview about international students' cultural adaptation experiences in SDSU. I'm not asking for donation and I'm not selling anything, but I sure would appreciate a few minutes of your time. Of course, all answers are strictly confidential and your participation is voluntary.

Background questions:
1. What’s your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What’s your major?
4. What’s your nationality?
5. How long have you been in the US?

Cultural adaptation:
1. How would you describe your experience living here in the first year?
2. How would you describe your adaptation to this new culture? Why?
3. Describe the process. How long did it take to adapt?
4. What difficulties were you aware of during your first semester here(school)?
5. Describe a time in which you felt excluded from… [insert a group here to be more specific].
6. Describe a time in which you felt included to… [insert a group here to be more specific].
7. Describe how you get along with American students.
8. Describe your social life here. [Like how do you meet new friends?]

Internet use:
1. How frequent do you use the Internet?
2. Do you use any online social networks like Facebook or MySpace? How frequent?
3. Describe your experience of using online social networks.
4. How is online social networks related to your adaptation process?
5. Does using online social networks make you feel excluded from or included to….?
   [Insert a group here to be more specific]

Coping strategies:
1. How did you solve these difficulties [Like what? Remind them of what you asked above]?
2. Have you looked for help from school or any organizations? How did these departments help you with solving the problems you had?
3. Have you looked for help from online resources? How did these resources help you with solving the problems you had?
4. What advice would you give to other international students?
5. What pseudonym do you choose to be identified by in my paper?
6. Is there anything else I should know about being an international student?

Thank you for your time.
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Dear Study Participant,

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

This study is being conducted by Ting-Yen Lao, a graduate student in the School of Communication at San Diego State University. This study will be supervised by Dr. Kurt Lindemann. The purpose of this study is to learn more about international students’ experiences using online social networks and cultural adaptation.

If you choose to participate in this study will be interviewed, during the interview you will be asked to discuss your experiences about how you adapt to a new culture through online social networks. The interview will take place at the conference room in International Student Center. This interview should take no more than an hour and a half and may be as short as 30 minutes. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview so that I can later transcribe it. You may still participate if you prefer not to be audio recorded.

You do not have to answer any question you are uncomfortable answering. If you begin to feel uncomfortable, you may discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently. This study may better illustrate the ways international students can take to overcome cultural adaptation problems. Besides, participants may experience greater self-awareness and self-confidence through sharing their stories in interviews.

I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study. There are no financial costs associated with participation in this study. You will not be paid to participate in this study.

The results of this research may be published, but your name will be pseudonymous. The published paper will not refer to any identifying information, including your place of employment, supervisors and other persons mentioned in the interview will be altered or omitted to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law. The interview will be recorded as an audio file and will be transcribed into a word file. The tapes and transcripts of this interview will be retained indefinitely for archival purposes and will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked office. Notes that may identify participants will be stored separately in a locked desk drawer in the PI’s office. Only the researcher has the access to all media or written records. All the collected data will be stored in a locked electronic file and will be eliminated soon after the whole research is done. The subject will not be able to review and edit the tapes prior to any publication.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to stop the interview at any time. If you choose not to participate, or to withdraw from the study before, during or after the interview, there will be no penalty and your refusal to participate will not affect your treatment at San Diego State University. If you have any questions concerning this research study, please call me at (619) 565-3945 or k32106@yahoo.com.tw.
If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research you may contact the Institutional Review Board at SDSU (619-594-6622) or irb@mail.sdsu.edu to report problems or concerns related to this study. The San Diego State University Institutional Review Board has approved this consent form, as signified by the Board's stamp. The consent form must be reviewed annually and expires on the date indicated on the stamp.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this consent form. You have been told that by signing this consent form you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

____________________________________
Name of Participant (please print)

_____________________________________ __________________
Signature of Participant            Date

_____________________________________ __________________
Signature of Investigator             Date