Chinese international undergraduate students' perceptions on the role social media played in their choice of university

Shiyong Chen[*]

BA Instructional Technology and Media, Columbia University, New York, US
sc5313@tc.columbia.edu
[*]*Corresponding author*

Abstract: This dissertation explores the perceptions of Chinese students on the role social media marketing plays in the process of choosing their university, and the limitations of social media marketing. Due to limited existing research in China, this dissertation adopted a qualitative approach, gathering data through online semi-structured interviews with four middle-class Chinese undergraduate students of mixed genders who are currently studying in the UK, and who have the experiences of using social media platforms in their university selection process. Two are studying at University College London, and the other two are at King's College London. The findings show that social media is widely used in the information search and evaluation stages in the decision-making process. However, social media plays a minor role in their university selection compared to other word-of-mouth sources such as from family and teachers. The study argues that the existing literature lacks explorations of the effects of the cultural context, social class, and the rise of education agents in students' university decisions.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Higher Education, Social Media Platform

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, the higher education market has become extremely competitive (Bélanger et al., 2014). One of the main challenges for higher education institutions is to gain success in the international market through overseas recruitment. In order to achieve this, universities have to use a variety of activities aimed at attracting prospective students from all over the world (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). With the rise of ad blockers and target audiences who actively avoid marketing information, social media is increasingly regarded as one of the starting points to engage potential students. Social media has not only become the main information source for consumers around the world, but has also played an important role in the life of university students (Galan et al., 2015), in which prospective and currents students utilise it to communicate with friends, learn about the latest campus news, and build professional contacts (Fujita et al., 2017). Therefore, higher education institutions have regarded social media as an important component of their marketing communication strategies, and it is being used as one of the new mediums in student recruitment (Galan et al., 2015).

As a Chinese international undergraduate student studying at a British university, I found that the majority of international students, including myself, used social media in their decision-making process of choosing their undergraduate programme and universities. Through these experiences, I have realized the importance and need for universities to have a deeper understanding of how prospective students use and feel about social media marketing to attract students. Taking an overview of the trend of global students studying abroad, China has the world's single largest and fastest-growing group of international students (Wang, 2020). Furthermore, China also has the most complex social media landscape and the largest user base in the world (Crampton, 2011).

However, there has been limited research on how prospective students use social media and the impact it has on their decision-making process when choosing a university (Galan et al., 2015). Especially in China, most research has collected statistical information from institutions, without adopting qualitative research to understand university selection from the students' perspective. To bring a contribution to this gap in the research, by interviewing four Chinese international students studying in London, this small study will focus on Chinese students' perceptions of the role social media marketing played in their university choice process, and the limitations of social media marketing[1-4].

2. Theoretical influences and Literature review

In this chapter, I will explore some of the existing literature surrounding the role of social media in students' university decision-making and also include a review of some key empirical studies. As the emergence of social media marketing is quite recent, my literature review will only draw on the latest studies and only go back ten years. I originally intended to mainly focus on China. However, since there was only a little literature in China, I have also looked at other countries, such as Australia, Germany and India. The literature search was conducted using UCL Explore and the Web of Science. Throughout this paper, the term social media will refer to the 'forms of electronic communication (such as blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content' (Edosomwan et al., 2011, p.79).

I will start by reviewing Bourdieu's theory of capital, and the theoretical background regarding the higher education decision-making process. This will be followed by a discussion of the choice factors and evaluation sources when choosing a university. It will then go on to the exploration of the use of social media in students' university choice, and the role it plays in students' decisions in choosing their universities. Finally, I will point out the limitations of social media marketing in university choice.

Theories: In order to better understand Chinese students' university choices in the decision-making process, this study applies Bourdieu's theories of capital to some of the findings. In Bourdieu's conception, people's class position is determined by their volume and structure of capital (Riley, 2017). Capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), is regarded as the sums of assets that are put to productive use and can be categorized into economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. Economic capital is defined as the material assets that are 'immediately and directly convertible into money and maybe institutionalized in the form of property rights' (Bourdieu, 1986, pp.242). Social capital is considered as 'sum of the resources that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 119). Cultural capital is a person's familiarity with society's legitimate culture (Bourdieu, 1984). Moreover, in the field of education, cultural capital refers to academic credentials (Bourdieu & Nice, 2001).

2.1 The decision-making process

From the perspective of marketing, higher education is categorised as a service, with the feature of perishability, variability, and intangibility (Simões & Soares, 2010). Furthermore, higher education is a trust-based service in which students make a one-time decision and have no opportunity to 'test-drive' their courses before choosing (Moogan et al., 1999, p. 213). Therefore, the choice of university is considered as a high-risk decision that involves a variety of risks, such as social, psychological, financial, and so on (Simões & Soares, 2010). This perceived risk and uniqueness of the service increase students' participation in the decision-making process, and makes university choice a high-involvement decision. Through having in-depth interviews with 12 international students in Australia, Galan et al. (2015) found that a high-involvement decision process consists of five stages: problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation. The problem recognition stage takes place when 'consumers realize that they have a unfulfilled need' (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2008, p. 12), in which students decide whether they want to go to university. After this stage, students will search for relevant information and evaluate their university choices in the stages of information search and evaluation of alternatives respectively (Moogan & Baron, 2003). During this process, students behave as 'rational consumers' to support their decision-making and evaluate potential universities by focusing on a series of their own choice factors (Tavares & Cardoso, 2013). Furthermore, students search and evaluate information from different types of source, and the information of the choice factors that students look for may change between different information source types (Le et al., 2020). Therefore, in order to understand how social media impacts students' decision-making of university choice, we first need to know about students' choice factors and the information sources for evaluation in their university selection process[5-8].

2.2 Choice factors and evaluation sources when choosing a university

2.2.1 The core choice factors

Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing amount of research on university choice factors (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). A number of studies have looked at the influence of factors

affecting students' decision-making when they are applying to university (e.g., Hagel & Shaw, 2008; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Mazzarol & Soutar 2002; Briggs, 2006). However, it is worth noting that the coverage of the term 'choice factors' can be perceived differently based on the scope of the discussion. In this dissertation, I will follow the perspective of Le et al.(2019), and define choice factors as the attributes of educational service, which are the characteristics of the universities such as university ranking, and location. However, through systematic review of the previous literature in global range, Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka (2015) argue that there is a considerable degree of fragmentation around university choice factors, and the research findings are far from homogeneous. There are several variables being frequently mentioned, and are categorized into five dimensions of choice factors based on existing studies (Table 1), which are university reputation, career prospect, teaching, administration, and student life (Le et al., 2019).

Table 1: Choice factors of prospects when selecting a university.

Dimensions and definition	Choice factors and explanation	Studies addressing this factor
Reputation The factors related to credibility of an institution and a result of its past actions or prior performance	*University Reputation*: The prestige of an educational institution	Baker and Brown (2007); Briggs (2006); Imenda, Kongolo, and Grewal (2004); Mazzarol and Soutar (2002); Moogan, Baron, and Bainbridge (2001); Soutar and Turner (2002); Simões and Soares (2010); Veloutsou et al. (2004); Walsh, Moorhouse, Dunnett, and Barry (2015)
	Degree Reputation: The prestige of a particular course, degree or discipline	Imenda et al. (2004); Mazzarol and Soutar (2002); Simões and Soares (2010); Walsh et al. (2015)
	Ranking: The position in ranking systems	Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, and Kelly (2008)
	Image: The overall impression made on the minds of the public about a university including functional and emotional components	Imenda et al. (2004); Pampaloni (2010)
Career Prospect The factors related to employability aspects during and post-university	*Post-degree Employment Prospects*: The job opportunities and career prospects post-graduation	Bonnema and Van der Waldt (2008); Briggs (2006); Imenda et al. (2004); Mazzarol and Soutar (2002); Soutar and Turner (2002); Veloutsou et al. (2004)
	Industrial Engagement: Business contacts and career guidance. The opportunities for internship and part-time jobs during study	Veloutsou et al. (2004)
Teaching The factors related to core values of education: what students learn and how it is delivered	*Course Flexibility*: The range of course availability and links to other courses	Chapman (1981); Imenda et al. (2004); Mazzarol and Soutar (2002); Price, Matzdorf, Smith, and Agahi (2003); Soutar and Turner (2002)
	Course Content: The judgement of academic and practical components of the course	Bonnema and Van der Waldt (2008); Moogan et al. (2001); Veloutsou et al. (2004)
	Teaching Quality: The style and quality of lectures and tutorials	Briggs (2006); Soutar and Turner (2002)
	Quality of Staff: The academic reputation of teaching staff	Briggs (2006); Imenda et al. (2004); Mazzarol and Soutar (2002)
Administration The factors related to management, administrative activities and requirements to obtain admission	*Types of University*: The class or operating model of a university	Soutar and Turner (2002); Stephenson et al. (2016)
	Administrative Efficiency: The satisfaction of students regarding administrative activities	Imenda et al. (2004)
	Entrance Standard/Requirements: The difficulty and requirements to get admission	Briggs (2006); Imenda et al. (2004); Mazzarol and Soutar (2002)
Student Life The non-academic factors regarding student experience	*University Resources*: The facilities and services	Dao and Thorpe (2015); Mazzarol and Soutar (2002); Price et al. (2003); Veloutsou et al. (2004)
	Psychosocial Life: Social activities and cultural climate on campus and in the local area	Bonnema and Van der Waldt (2008); Briggs (2006); Cho et al. (2008); Mazzarol and Soutar (2002); Soutar and Turner (2002); Veloutsou et al. (2004)
	Location: The convenience of the university campus. The choice of country or city by international students	Briggs (2006); Mazzarol and Soutar (2002); Moogan et al. (2001); Soutar and Turner (2002); Simões and Soares (2010)
	Cost of Living: Monetary factors regarding tuition fee and living cost	Mazzarol and Soutar (2002); Veloutsou et al. (2004)

The findings of the core choice factors varies across studies. In Le et al.'s (2020) study, which conducted survey questionnaires with 509 Vietnamese students who were about to apply for undergraduate courses, they found that the most important choice factors for students are 'job prospects' and 'quality of teaching'. However, choice factors in relation to university reputation was relatively unimportant to students, as considering the cost-related factors, they believe that the 'cost of living', such as 'tuition fees', is the third most important factor in choosing a university (Le et al., 2020). Such finding contradict the findings of Walsh et al. (2015) in which this longitudinal study involving 400 international students studying in the UK found that university reputation is influential for them, while tuition fees were relatively unimportant despite the increase in fees and irrespective of students' background. Similarly, by employing questionnaires and interviews with 169 Chinese students studying in the UK, Wu (2014) argued that the impact of university reputation or ranking was underestimated. In China, the good reputation and recognition of higher education institutions are very important. Chinese employers prefer to recruit students from reputable and world-class universities to enhance their competitiveness in an ever-insecure labor market. Therefore, for Chinese prospective students, good reputation was the dominant factor in selecting a university, followed by teaching quality. However, according to Drewes et al. (2006), students with lower grades make significantly different choices than those with excellent grades since students with lower grades would or could not apply to the top universities with small admission opportunities. Therefore, when investigating students' choice factors, it is important to take into account of the academic background and social context of prospective students[9-13].

2.2.2 Information sources for evaluation and WOM

An information search is the process in which consumers collect information to support the decision-making process (Blackwell et al., 2006). The use of information sources depends largely on the perceived risk and the engagement level during the process (Voyer & Ranawera, 2015). For services such as higher education that involves a higher perceived risk and participation, consumers rely more on WOM (world-of-mouth) sources to minimize the uncertainty of decision-making. However, it depends on whether the people from WOM sources know about the process, and this will be discussed further with Wu (2014)'s study in the following paragraph. WOM is 'person-to-person communication regarding brands, products,

services, companies, and organizations that have an impact on consumers' purchase decisions' (Le et al., 2019, p.23). In the context of higher education, WOM is regarded as one of the most effective information sources to evaluate students' university choice (Patti & Chen, 2009). For example, family, friends, and teachers are considered to be the WOM influencers of prospective students (Simões & Soares, 2010). This can be seen in Le et al. (2020)'s study, the WOM source of 'siblings and relatives', 'teachers and school advisors' seem to be more important for students than the marketing-controlled sources such as university websites, brochures, and open day visits. Moreover, those students considered parents as the most influential information sources for evaluation. This is similar to the findings of Gibbons-Wood & Lange's (1998) surveys which were conducted with students in Scotland, that parents are the major influencer on the university selection, followed by friends, teachers, university visits and high school advisors. The quantitative research that examine the influence of family on Thai students' international education choices strongly suggests that the opinions from family are an important influencing factor, especially in Asian countries (Pimpa, 2005). A study by Lee & Morrishon (2012) on 11 Chinese students who are going to study abroad in New Zealand and nine parents suggested that Chinese parents played a central role in their children's university selection, and students seemed to be compliant with the will of their parents. In China, a Confucian heritage society, the status and role of parents need to be recognized. The notion of filial piety, or xiao qin, is central to the relationship between children and parents in China (Yang, 1996). Within the traditional value of filial piety, children must respect their parents and their desires. For example, Chinese students may display unquestionable obedience to their parents' views on university selection, even if this choice do not meet their own wishes.

However, Wu (2014) argued that there is little evidence that suggestions and evaluations given by parents have a long-term effect on students' university decisions, who seem to take more responsibility for their university selection. Moreover, instead of the Confucian culture, recent studies have taken into account social class, family background and support, and the community context. For example, through adopting interview and observation with 29 first-generation college students, Holland's (2020) study highlights that the differences in capital will result in different evaluation sources in students' decision-making process in China. The study found that the Chinese first-generation college students cannot rely on their parents for evaluation of university choice compared to students from a more privileged family; those students and parents without cultural and social capital, may face information barriers. Students whose parents have limited experiences in higher education faced challenges during the information search stage since cultural knowledge about universities is largely a result of parental education level (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). They may not have the access to social networks that could provide information to learn about and evaluate universities. In this context, counselors in students' high school play a key role for Chinese student to evaluate university choice through structuring access to university information (Holland, 2020). However, school counselors are commonly overburdened by too many tasks. Due to the limited resources and time, counselors may give students limited guidance, which might limit students' university choices (Baker-Smith et al., 2018). However, with the emergence of social media platforms, prospective students now have more effective sources to acquire and evaluate university information.

2.3 Social media's influence on students' university decision-making process

2.3.1 Social media marketing and eWOM

Since public higher education institutions are considered as not-for-profit organizations, there has been much controversy regarding labeling students as 'customers' for institutional branding and marketing purposes (Bélanger et al., 2014), although, this norm has been challenged in the past two decades. In the competitive higher education market, universities respond to these new market forces mainly by repositioning and differentiating themselves. Recently, with the increasing popularity of digital media, students are increasingly searching and evaluating information from social media platforms (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Simultaneously, social media has successfully attracted the attention of universities to connect students through using various types of social media platforms for information searches, evaluation, and decision-making. Asderaki & Maragos (2012) have identified the active participation of social media marketing activities on the majority of market-driven higher education institutions globally to expand international markets for more recruitment opportunities.

Moreover, the rise of social media has promoted the development of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is regarded as 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet' (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). According to Teng et al. (2015), social media is an ideal platform for eWOM expansion in the context of higher education, as students are using it on a daily

basis for information searching. Social media enables consumers to communicate with other people in online environments, which can potentially promote engagement among users, and circulate eWOM information. Compared with the traditional WOM, which is perishable and private, eWOM can reach a wide range of consumers, which becomes an effective and low-cost marketing communication tool (Le et al., 2019). Consumers can freely create and spread brand-related content and information in online communities (Vollmer & Precourt, 2008). It is noticeable that many universities have begun to use this channel as one of their communication strategies (Hayes et al., 2009). While prospective students receive WOM information from personal relationships such as friends and parents, they may want to seek information from various people to evaluate the information and to have different viewpoints (Galan et al., 2015). Since prospective students come from all over the world, eWOM on social media could be more extensive[14-15].

2.3.2 The use of social media in university selection

To develop effective social media marketing strategies for higher education, it is important to understand how the prospective students use social media in their decision-making process of university choice. Galan et al (2015) revealed that the stages in which social media are most useful for prospective students in university selection are information searches and evaluation of alternatives. By using social media, students can explore and compare the information around the choice factors that they seek from eWOM on social media. Moreover, 11 out of 12 participants used Facebook and YouTube as the major social media platforms to gain information and evaluate university choices (Galan et al, 2015). A summary table that briefly defines the social media sites covered in this study can be found below (Table 2). Students benefits from official university accounts on YouTube and Facebook since they can receive up-to-dated information about various universities and courses to help them make decisions. This discovery supports and extends the findings of Constantinides & Stagno's (2011) study which conducted online survey with 1200 students in the Netherlands. One of the limitations is that they ignored Blogs which play an essential role in their university selection as they serve as an 'expert filter' and allow users to distribute critical messages as well as personal viewpoints and influences among them.

Table 2: Defining social media sites.

Social media sites	Definition
Facebook	A social networking site that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them. Facebook is used to keep in touch with friends, post photos, share links and exchange information.
YouTube	A popular free video-sharing website that lets registered users upload and share video clips online
Blogs	Short for 'Web log', a blog is a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author.
WhatsApp	A cross-platform instant messaging application that allows users to exchange text, image, video and audio messages for free, and also provides group chat and location sharing options.
Zhihu	A Chinese question-and-answer website where questions are created, answered, edited and organized by the community of its users.

In addition, "peer-to-peer communication via social media", the rise of "the role of influential peers" are becoming significant effects on students' university choices (Johnston, 2010, p.15). Prospective students as consumers are more likely to gain information from other consumers through social media, as they regard these resources as similar to themselves, as being more reliable and have no commercial reward from sharing eWOM information (Le et al., 2019). For example, in Shu & Scott's (2014) study which conducted survey with 232 Chinese international students in Australia, the findings indicates that the characteristics of the message have a salient impact on students' decision to adopt online information. To be specific, the authentic messages posted by third parties could persuade students to adopt that online information and make the final decisions. Also, prospective Chinese international students rely on information given by current university students, such as their real-life experiences and suggestions on university choices. Therefore, the students who act as ambassadors for the institution and record their personal campus experiences can provide a sense of familiarity and empathy for potential Chinese international students (Shu & Scott, 2014). Another study, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork of forty-five Indians who are going to study abroad in Germany, suggests that the relationship formed on WhatsApp and Facebook between students and users who have more information about their destination universities provides access to information that is difficult to find as well so helping them evaluate their

university choice (Jayadeva, 2020). By seeking public opinions from eWOM on social media, students believed that through such interaction in the application process, they can make suboptimal decisions while also gaining new opportunities. It has been pointed out that peer-to-peer communication through social media will continue to change the way universities interact with future students (Johnston, 2010).

Furthermore, through semi-interviews and non-participant observation, Jayadeva's (2020) study provides an interesting perspective on the correlation between social class and students' use of social media in their university choice. Social networks tend to reproduce privilege (Beech, 2015). For those students who have little social and economic capital, they cannot gather WOM information and suggestions of university selection from their existing social network and resources. However, Jayadeva (2020) argues that the 'Study in Germany' Facebook and WhatsApp groups have become a key tool and resource in students' university decision-making process. Such online communities on social media platforms have transformed students' social networks, increased their social capital, and changed their way and process of decision-making on the university by providing information and resources on how to navigate the process of going to a higher education institution in Germany.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methods

In order to produce a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) on the experiences and perceptions of Chinese international students of using social media in their choices of university, this research adopted a qualitative approach as the key methodology. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure the flexibility and richness of participants' responses (McIntosh & Morse, 2015), which allowed students to extend and discuss areas that I had not initially considered. Besides, the use of interviews also helped to clarify any confusion and misunderstanding in specific terms or questions. Compared with online questionnaires (Boyce and Neale, 2006), the benefit of using semi-structured interviews was that it enabled the flexibility to explore issues with the students being interviewed while also ensuring that key topics were covered.

Ideally, I would have employed face-to-face interviews (Opdenakker, 2006), but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted and recorded in Zoom on my laptop in January. I divided the interviews into three parts: student background, evaluation of choice, and usage of social media, and ended with an open question to examine the overall influence of social media on participants compared to other factors. Besides, enabling their understanding of their universities' social media marketing strategies, I used the function of sharing the screen on Zoom to show them the image of content on social media accounts and the universities website to explore their responses, which provided them with a more intuitive way to understand the social media strategies used by universities. Prompts were included in each part of the interviews to get detailed information.

3.2 Sampling and Data Analysis

Considering the small scale of this study, purposive sampling (Ritchie et al, 2004) was applied in this research. I choose participants from my friends who are easily accessible and who showed interest to participate my research, and sent them the information and consent sheet, which included more detailed information about the study, the interview process and any ethical concerns. The chosen four participants were currently in their final year of undergraduate study, and aged from twenty to twenty-one years old. Although the participants were around the same age, I aimed for a more varied sample and choose two young women and two young men with Chinese nationality. For one female and one male, they are studying the Education Studies at University College London, and the other two are studying Theoretical Physics at King's College. They all considered themselves to come from a middle-class family. However, because the sample is so small and only confined to one small fraction of Chinese international students in universities in London, I am not making any attempt to generalize beyond my sample to the perceptions of other Chinese international students (Debscombe, 2003).

Audio records were transcribed directly after each interview. Audio recording provides an accurate record of the conversation and allows the participants to focus on listening rather than only taking notes (Gillham, 2000). Transcription allowed the use of direct quotations in the subsequent writing up of the research. To analyze my data from the interview, thematic analysis was used for its great flexibility and its characteristic of summarizing key features of large amounts of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). I have employed a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive reasoning which will build up

themes that further my understanding of Chinese international undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences on the role of social media in their choice of university by producing a set of a pre-empirical and post-empirical codes (Swain, 2018).

3.3 Ethical consideration

Throughout the interviews, this study followed the BERA (2018) ethical guideline. Consent form (Appendix C) and information sheet (Appendix B) were emailed to the participants that helps explain all detail information of this study and they all gave full consent to be recorded during the interviews. All participants were informed they had the rights to 'to withdraw at any time, or to accomplish the same result by having their data destroyed' (American Psychological Association, 1982, p.18). Anonymity and confidentiality were taken into account in data collection, and then stored and protected safely in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018). Code names will be used for anonymity, and their data is being stored securely on the UCL N drive. In order to protect my participants' identities, they will be pseudonymized. Since the interviews were conducted in the participant's first language, all quotes cited in the section are translations. For more information, please see the ethical form in the Appendix, where all ethical issues have been addressed.

4. Conclusion

By adopting a semi-structured interviews with four Chinese international students who are studying in the United Kingdom, this study provides some helpful practical insights into the experiences and perceptions of prospective students in using social media in their university selection process. It also explores the main choice factors that affect students' university selection and compares them with the impact of social media on students' university choice by considering contextual factors, such as the Confucian culture in China and including first-generation students, whose parents have not been to university. The findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature where information search and evaluation of alternatives are identified as the most useful stages in the university decision-making process (Galan et al' s, 2015). Besides, with the impact of the Confucian culture in China, the university choice is not an individual affair, but a joint decision with family, friends and teachers. An important finding of the study is the fact that besides these factors, education agents are becoming more and more important in international students' university decision. All the participants felt that WOM information of the above sources had a bigger impact on their decisions than the use of social media, as social media brought lots of concerns that related to privacy issue, authenticity of information, and stress and anxiety. This research is limited by the small sample size and has a low generalisability to the overall Chinese population. In addition, the middle-class family background of all the participants might affect the results to be oriented by the factors for middle class. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out a larger study with a larger sample with different social class backgrounds to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the usage of social media on Chinese international students' university choice.

Acknowledgments

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