

***Microblogging and Life Changes:
An Ethnographic and Statistical Analysis of Young Adults***

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Abstract

Microblogging has revolutionized people's interaction on the web. This paper investigates the changes in the microblogging practices of young adults after they have experienced life changing events associated with studying and working overseas. To test for the presence of significant changes in microblogging behaviour the empirical analysis focusses on young Chinese adults who have moved to Australia to study and/or work. The data consists of a three-tier approach, with the first tier being based on questionnaires; the second tier consists of formal in-depth interviews; while the third tier involves an ethnographic analysis of online and offline participant behaviour as well as information collected from two focus groups.

The behavioural changes of the participants are analysed using a range of statistical models which take into account microblogging practices relating to social media platform choices, behavioural strategies and frequency. Formally this involves using panel ordered probit models to identify potential significant changes in social media practices. In specifying the empirical models, key demographic attributes characterizing the participants are also incorporated into the analysis, including gender, age, location, duration, education, enrolment status and work status. The empirical results reveal evidence of significant changes in key social media practices of Chinese young adults in moving from China to Australia.

Keywords: social media, study overseas, work overseas, three-tier approach.

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Introduction

With the rapid development of information technology, people have become closely connected to the Internet, with many people linking their real lives and online lives together. Young adults often update their daily lives including physical activities and mental activities such as their thoughts, their feelings and their comments on social events and social phenomena on their social media websites, suggesting that the two basic motivations of using social media are belonging and self-presentation.

Young adults studying or working in foreign countries strongly desire to become connected with their old and new communities and to present themselves by sharing information with their followers who may or may not be their real friends, but nonetheless share common interests or common friends (Seidman 2013). To a certain extent, social media represents a modern digital collection of the opinions of young adults, as it reflects and exhibits the young generation's views of life and the world in general, which are shaped by their own life experiences while at the same time simultaneously shaping their own lives.

When people reach a certain life stage, some expected and unexpected life changes do impact people's internet habits (Anderson & Tracey 2001). Whilst many researchers in various disciplines analyse how social media reflects and affects young adults' lives and opinions, very few researchers investigate the impact of life changes on the social media practices of young adults (Kwak et al. 2010; Williams, Terras & Warwick 2013). Indeed it is this area that the present paper plan to investigate by identifying the role that social media plays when young adults are confronted by life changing events or circumstances. The aim of this paper is to study the impact of life changes on young adults' microblogging practices, where the focus of the research participants is on Chinese young adults who are currently pursuing further study of a Master or a PhD, or who are currently working in Melbourne.

The Mobility of the Young Adults

In January 2014, the China Internet Network Information Centre issued the 33rd Report on Statistics of Chinese Internet Development (CNNIC 2014) which showed that by the end of December 2013 there were 618 million internet users in China, of which 45.5% were microblog users. Young people with ages between 20 and 29 years were the main group of Chinese netizens, corresponding to 31.2%. In the light of the 2012 Sina Weibo's User Development Report, up to 92% of Sina Weibo users were born after the 1980s (Baiduwenku 2012), which is commonly referred to as Generation Y, or as 八零后 (ba ling hou) in China.

With the globalization and social changes happening in China, more and more 八零后 (ba ling hou) are inspired to travel abroad to pursue further education or obtain foreign work experiences (Xiang & Shen 2009; Zweig, Changgui & Rosen 2004). In 2014, approximately 694,400 mainland Chinese students were studying abroad and the top three destination countries were the United States, Japan and Australia (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2014). The vast majority of international students remained interconnected globally through the use of email, VOIP (i.e. Skype) and social networking sites such as Facebook and Weibo (Herold & Marolt 2011).

International students from China are of critical importance to the Australian higher education sector, with nearly 87,497 students currently studying in Australian universities, TAFEs, and language schools (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2014). Indeed, China is currently the largest exporter of international students. There is a number of push and pull factors explaining the large number of mainland Chinese pursuing their studies overseas (Solimano 2008). From the push perspective, increases in household incomes of Chinese enable more families' children to experience overseas education. In fact, international education is now a dominant trend in Chinese society. Many Chinese parents view overseas education as advantageous for exposure to foreign languages and cultures as well as access to their perceived higher education infrastructure and experience. Chinese parents feel that these possibilities also offer their children advantages in future competition for employment (Yang 2007). Moreover, changes in government policies have resulted in more positive attitudes towards supporting international education. In the case of the pull factors, information on host countries' tuition fees, living expenses and living environment (i.e., whether the host country has a natural disaster or not; or whether the safety issue is serious in the host country) and the state of international relations between the host country and the Chinese government, have a significant influence on the decisions of parents concerning the education choices for their children. In making these choices, parents also take into consideration of places where their friends and relatives recommend studying overseas. In some cases even the social links of parents to a foreign country is a key factor.

The mobility of young Chinese adults has led to their parents using social media as well. With many Chinese parents creating their own microblogging and Wechat accounts after their children have travelled overseas for the simple reason that they want to know their own child's updates. Given the increased numbers of Chinese young adults travelling overseas, this demonstrates that just like "earth on the move" (Cresswell 2011), the worldwide trend of studying and working abroad is affecting not only the lives of young adults and their microblogging practices, but is also affecting their friends and relatives' social media practices.

Literature Review

In the literatures on microblogging and life changes many researchers tend to focus on the role of the Internet on first year college students' social and academic transition to their college lives. However, less research is undertaken to shed light on the role of social media in the transitional life of graduate students towards further education and employment overseas and how life changes may influence their microblogging practices.

Recently, Leung (2006) has found that, "stressful life events are significantly associated with the consumption of the Internet for mood management (such as entertainment and information seeking) and social compensation (such as recognition gaining and relationship maintenance) motives"(p.1). More recently, Li et al. (2010) have analysed the relation between stressful life events and problematic Internet use amongst adolescent and college students. As microblogging is a web-based service, regardless of whether life events are stressful or positive, there are potential connections between life events and microblogging practices. Identifying the strength

of these connections and the nature of these connections represents an important part of this paper.

De Choudhury, Counts and Horvitz (2013) have explored the impact of a major life event caused by childbirth on new mothers' moods and behaviour. This work is of particular use to the present study as these authors examined the impact of childbirth and postnatal course on the twitter posts of new mothers. Their results show that, "approximately 15% of the new mothers show significant change compared to other mothers and to a random set of Twitter users" (p.1), demonstrating that after people experience a life event, their microblogging practices change as well to a certain extent along with people's life courses. Contrary to the quantitative research methods of these authors, an ethnographic design combined with statistical methods are applied to analysing young Chinese adults, with the focus on the changes of people's microblogging practices after experiencing life changes.

Methodology

Currently the mobility of Internet and multi accesses to the Internet via different vices enable young people within one ethnographic group to move across multiple locations. (Coleman 2010; Garcia et al. 2009; Horst, H, Hjorth & Tacchi 2012; Marcus 1995). Postill and Pink have suggested how ethnographers should be able to understand social media ethnography by understanding the concept of daily routine, movement, and sociality in relation to the nature of the internet as an ethnographic site (Postill et al. 2009; Postill & Pink 2012). But, as already observed, in social media ethnography participants no longer need to be physically located in one single research site (Madianou & Miller 2012). In this study the research participants are young Chinese adults who use social media, and who share at least one common life change which is the experience of moving from China to Australia. They do not have to be physically located in one field site, but can be located over multiple sites.

To identify the impact of life changes on social media practices a three-tier approach is applied in the present paper. The first tier consists of using questionnaires to identify important demographic characteristics underlying the social media behaviour of young adults who have moved from China to Australia for either study or for work. Seven main characteristics are identified consisting of:

1. Gender
2. Age
3. Location
4. Duration
5. Education
6. Enrolment status
7. Work status

This strategy has the advantage that it would be possible to "customize" the questions at the format interviews conducted in the second tier of the analysis described immediately below, thereby revealing a deeper insight into the life changes of young adults. This also has the advantage of saving time for the in-depth questions conducted in the next stage of the analysis. The number of effective questionnaires collected is 186.

The second tier involves conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews of the participants to identify how their social media behaviour has changed. Four sets of questions are adopted consisting of Ice-breaking questions, Social Media Experience questions, Life Changes after Coming to Australia, and questions relating to Reflections on the Life Changes and Personal Social Media Practices. There are 20 interview questions in total, however depending on the responses of the participants' questionnaires in the first tier of the research, not all questions are posed. Moreover, to extract vital information from the participants a number of ancillary questions are also used in some cases depending on the responses of the interviewees. The total number of ethnographic interviews conducted is 44, consisting of 35 semi-structured formal interviews and 9 informal interviews.

The third tier is based on tracking the social media behaviour of the participants both online and offline. Undertaking online observations needs much more patience to observe and to understand the participants who are remotely co-presented somewhere logged on his/her social media account. It is difficult to identify all of the participants' updates as a few of them would delete their posts soon after they had posted them. According to the Chinese young adults' social media experiences, three popular social media platforms are identified as the online observation field. These are Sina Weibo, Wechat and Facebook (Herold & Marolt 2011; CNNIC, 2014). This part of the research also involves interacting with the participants online. The total period that participants are observed online and offline is 9 months, occurring from March to November in 2014. In the case of the platform Sina Weibo, in order to observe 21 participants' updates, a "special focus" group was created. For Wechat, 31 participants' accounts were observed, while on Facebook the number was 17. Finally, two focus groups study were also completed.

An important advantage of the proposed three tier approach adopted in the present paper is that it provides a way to triangulate the data. This provides a broad snapshot as well as a nuanced and chronological approach enabling the identification of the impact of life changes on social media before and after coming to Australia.

Characteristics of Participants

Of the 186 participants who completed the questionnaire in the first tier of the analysis, 94 are male and 92 are female participants. Table 1 provides a breakdown of their ages in terms of gender. The ages range between 20 and 41 years, which is a reflection that the study focusses on young adults. The age distribution is positively skewed with a modal age of 24 years.

Age	Male	Female	Combined
20	1	5	6
21	7	10	17
22	10	9	19
23	9	14	23
24	28	28	56
25	17	16	33
26	5	3	8
27	6	3	9
28	1	1	2
29	2	0	2
30	3	0	3
31	2	2	4
34	1	0	1
37	0	1	1
40	1	0	1
41	1	0	1

Table 1: Range of ages of participants, classified in terms of gender.

The majority of the participants are located in Melbourne. There are only 12 participants living in other cities in Australia, with one in Sydney, two in Canberra, three in Wollongong and four in Adelaide. As some of the participants studied in other cities in Australia before moving to the city where they are living at the time the questionnaire and interviews are conducted, it was decided to ask the participants how long they lived in Australia rather than conditioning on a specific city. Table 2 shows that the majority of participants have lived in Australia for between 2 and 5 years since moving from China, with just over 70% of the participants having lived in Australia for more than 2 years.

Years	Number	Cumulative	Cumulative Percentage
Less than 1 year	17	17	9.14
Between 1 and 2 years	36	53	28.49
Between 2 and 5 years	80	133	71.51
Between 5 and 10 years	44	177	95.16
More than 10 years	9	186	100

Table 2: Duration (in years) of participants living in Australia since moving from China.

The majority of the participants are studying either at the graduate level with 65.59% at the Masters level and 6.99% at the PhD level. The proportion of participants studying for a Bachelor's degree is just under 20%. This finding is also consistent

with the age distribution of the 186 participants in the sample given in Table 1 where the modal age is 24 years, thereby corresponding to an age when students will most likely have already completed an undergraduate degree and are furthering their studies at a postgraduate level. Most of the participants studying are enrolled full-time. Only 10 out of the 186 participants are not studying at all. The majority of students are not working, with some working part-time and just a few full-time. Of the 10 participants not studying, 9 are working full-time and 1 is working part-time.

Determinations of Social Media Behaviour

This section uses statistical models to identify which of the seven demographic factors identified above in the Methodology section, are the main drivers of social media behaviour. In identifying these determinants, social media behaviour is defined in one of two ways: (1) The duration of time spent on social media; (2) The number of times social media is used.

Young Chinese adults use a range of social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Renren, Sina Weibo, and Wechat. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the duration (in years) that participants have been using social media when living in China and Australia. The majority of the participants have been using social media for at least 4 years. About a quarter of them have been using social media for between 2 and 4 years, while a small proportion (under 10 percent) are only relatively new (less than 2 years) to social media.

Years	Number	Percentage
0<1	4	2.15
1<2	11	5.91
2<3	22	11.83
3<4	25	13.44
4 or more	124	66.67

Table 3: Duration of time (in years) spent on social media in China and Australia.

In order to understand the factors determining the duration of time spent by the participants on social media, an ordered probit model is specified and estimated using maximum likelihood methods based on the 5 categories listed in Table 3. The choice of an ordered probit model follows from the characteristics of the data which by construction are ordered discrete random variables and thus has the advantage of formally embedding the qualitative features of the data into the structure of the statistical model. To allow for heterogeneity amongst the participants in the time spent on social media the probabilities are expressed as a function of the 7 characteristic variables. The key driver is found to be *Gender* which is statistically significant at the 5% level. This factor is also shown to have a positive relationship with the duration of time spent on social media suggesting that female respondents appear on average to spend longer than males on social media. It is important however, to point out that from the formal interviews conducted in the second tier of the analysis, many respondents do not realise how much time they spend on social media. Some participants claim that they log on to social media several times a day, but may only

have a quick check of their friends' updates. If there are no more updates, they would immediately sign off.

The relative importance of *Gender* as one of the key statistical factors that affect social media practices is also consistent with many of the qualitative outcomes of the formal interviews. During the interviews many female participants are more excited than male participants talking about their social media behaviour and they are better at giving specific examples to explain what kind of posts they often post or they like to repost. Male participants, on the other hand, are easy to "forget" what they have posted. They seldom rely on the "expert" on social media especially concerns of dealing with a relationship. Many female participants study posts of "relationship experts" or "star signs" very carefully and then learn to put this knowledge into their own relationship practices. Another finding is that it is harder to identify one's gender just by looking at his/her reposts as original posts are more likely to be identified as the way one is talking or interacting with others.

To test for changes in the number of times participants use social media per day on average via three types of devices, namely computers, tablets and smart phones, before and after moving to Australia, a panel ordered probit model with fixed effects is specified and estimated. The advantage of this modelling strategy in the present application is that it provides a way of combining information of data from alternative groups in terms of platforms (computer, smart or tablet), to extract more precise information on the relative importance of the factors that determine social media behaviour. The statistical results show that *Age* is an important factor in determining social media behaviour which is significant at the 10% level and nearly significant at the 5% level. The statistical results also show that there is an inverse relationship between times spent on social media and age, suggesting that social media is a relatively young person's activity with the number of times social media is used a day by a person which progressively decreases on average for older participants.

The statistical results concerning the determinants of the number of times that participants use social media also show that *Location* as regards cities that participants live in Australia, is also an important driver of social media activities. However, as noted already, as the majority of participants in the sample are from Melbourne it is difficult to assign too much weight to this result.

Changes in Social Media Practices

Table 4 demonstrates the changes in the percentage of five social media activities allocated on average per week, before and after coming to Australia. Five activities are considered: Original Post, Repost, Like, Comments and Mention (@). The major change in activity since coming to Australia is the reduction in the percentage of time allocated to Original Post, where the sample mean has fallen from 20.53 to 15.96. Upon further inspection of the statistics in Table 4 shows that there has been a switch from Original Post to Repost and Like since coming to Australia. However, performing a difference of means test on these two activities does not reveal any significant statistical changes. This result can be interpreted that the switch from Original Post to other types of social media practices is evenly spread thereby not showing up as a significant change in any one activity. Besides, many of the participants claimed that it is harder to post something original than repost their

followed accounts' posts. If they want to post some personal thoughts on Sina Weibo, they have to think about the potential readers and they have to make their language more condensed because of the 140 word limitation of microblog.

Activities (per week)	Before Mean	After Mean
Original Post	20.53	15.96
Repost	20.94	21.98
Like	29.82	34.32
Comment	20.93	20.18
Mention (@)	7.78	7.71

Table 4: Statistics on the percentage of social media practices on average per week allocated to alternative activities before and after coming to Australia. (As 9 of the 186 participants did not use social media in China before coming to Australia, the sample size is reduced to N=177.)

Many participants claim they constantly change the platforms they are using. Before coming to Australia, many would spend time on Sina Weibo, but after coming to Australia they started using Wechat, and gradually “forget” Weibo. One of the two main reasons for this change in behaviour is that their friends may move from one platform to another platform, so they would follow their friends and move the whole group of friends to a new platform and continue their social media communication with a new experience. The other reason is that as they moved from China to Australia, they would try to integrate into the new community. They would adopt the platforms that are more often used by the people living in the local area, such as Wechat, which are widely used by the Chinese community in Australia. Some participants claimed that they created their Facebook accounts after they came to Australia, but then they found that they were not quite used to the features of Facebook. Somewhat more importantly, if most of their friends were at Wechat or Sina Weibo, they would eventually leave Facebook and return to the platforms where they were more comfortable with.

Another reason for changing platforms comes from a relationship point of view (Gershon 2011). Here is a story shared by a participant in an interview:
“We started dating in spring time on Facebook, but we broke up in winter on Twitter...then I deleted my Twitter account.”

This participant chose to use Facebook to get to know more friends since coming to Australia. Later on he got to meet a girl on Facebook and started dating, but when he decided that he wanted to end this relationship, he chose another platform, which in this case was, Twitter, for breaking up. As he said:
“When you break up on Twitter, it becomes so simple, just drop her a line, ‘Let’s break up’ and then it is done.”

Young adults use different platforms for their own different purposes. They choose platforms according to the platforms special features as well as according to their

feelings and observations on these platforms, as another interviewee mentioned in the interview:

“Facebook feels friendlier to me compared with Twitter. On FB, I can see people’s profile and albums, while on Twitter, is a little bit cold, people just post 140 characters, with more abbreviations and less concerns.”

As the old saying goes, “Birds of a feather flock together”, which implies that the people who they follow on social media partly explains who they are to a certain extent. With the life changes from moving overseas, young adults start to live under new circumstances and meet new people. Also over time young adults gradually build up their value system which, in turn, has an impact on the way they interact with social media. Here is one of the interviewee’s narratives:

“Before, I only follow hot girls and my friends on the social media, now, I prefer to follow professionals...it is time for me to think about my career and my future.”

Many participants experienced a similar situation, as they progressed in their studies or their work they started to follow professionals or some official accounts to extend their social network as well as to obtain more information from these accounts.

“Before I came to Melbourne I was majoring in linguistics, now I have started studying accounting. I need to learn more about accounting even outside the classes since I don’t have much background in accounting...Follow these people who are specialized in accounting also gives me a view of what kind of work can people do after graduating from accounting.”

Among the 21 participants, the most number of accounts followed is 1075, while the least is 77. The participant with the greatest number of followers has 799 followers, while with the one who has the least followers has 67 followers. Some participants have more followers than the accounts he/she follows. The one who follows less doesn't mean he/she has less followers. Some of the participants when they started using a platform tried to follow as many people as they could with the hope that people whom they followed would follow them back, with the sole aim of making their accounts look even more popular. As participants moved to Australia, even before their arrival they started to follow more accounts about local Australian information, such as public transportation, shopping, Australian culture, local cuisine etc. As they eventually settled down, people would select and keep a few accounts which they viewed as being more trustful and helpful.

Conclusion

The microblogging practices of young adults could change after experiencing life changing events from moving overseas to study or to work. This paper has provided an investigation into changes in the microblogging practices of young Chinese adults moving to Australia. A three tier approach was used consisting of the development of statistical models, undertaking in-depth ethnographic interviews and observing people’s social media behaviour both online and offline. The statistical analysis identified important demographic factors underling social media behaviour as well as changes in young adults’ social media practices after coming to Australia. The ethnographic analysis from the interviews and participant online and offline observations explained how these changes to social media behaviour occurred, with

respect to who to follow, which social media platforms to use in different situations, as well as a selection of content when making original posts and reposts.

It is vital for Chinese and Australian governments, educational institutions and businesses in general, to understand the experiences of Chinese young adults in Australia. It is also vital to understand the role that social media plays when these young adults are working and studying overseas, especially when they are experiencing a range of life changes due to different living circumstances, different cultural backgrounds and different social contexts. The findings of this study are of great value in helping educational institutions as well as governments understand both the online and offline behaviour of young adults who are living overseas, and how to improve their wellbeing. A further innovation of this research is that it provides a new methodological framework that combines ethnographic and statistical analysis of qualitative data obtained from questionnaire results.

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