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Social Media for Social Support: A Study of International Graduate Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Based on 15 in-depth interviews, the present study aims to understand the common challenges international graduate students face and the coping strategies they employed, types of social networking sites (SNS) used, and social support sought from their relationship during graduate school. Common challenges faced are loneliness, stress, feeling overwhelmed with graduate school, and difficulties adjusting to a new culture. Coping strategies include sharing experiences with relations whom they trust and understand their situation, and joining online communities via SNS. The participants use both public and private SNS to seek social support depending on the various functionalities offered. SNS use depends on the affordances such as convenience, affordability, trust issues, and privacy. Most sought-after types of social support are emotional and informational via SNS.

Keywords: higher education, international graduate students, interview, SNS, social support

INTRODUCTION

Graduate students, including international graduate students, cope with feelings of social isolation and are prone to more stress than the general public and report that their stress is attributed to their graduate programs (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Cahir & Morris, 1991; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; McAlpine et al., 2020; Natriello, 2002; Stubb et al., 2011; van Rooij et al., 2019). Particularly international graduate students find it difficult to maintain and build new relationships, create a professional identity, and manage their socialization process into their new roles (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Lee, 2009).

College students are digital natives on account of their usage of digital technologies to communicate and share information online (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Xu & Jiang, 2018). They use social networking sites (SNS) to stay in contact with their friends and family members but also create and manage new connections. SNS are a subset of social media and are used to create public or private profiles, articulate a list of users with whom they share a connection with, and maintain existing relationships through online interactions using the platform (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Seo et al., 2016). In this paper, platforms to connect with people and share information online are referred to as social networking sites (SNS). These platforms offer communication affordances to maintain social relationships, engage in relational maintenance activities, and to access resources, like social support (Ellison et al., 2007, 2014). In this study, affordances are referred to as the potential for action that new technologies and SNS provide to users (e.g., connectivity, interactivity, and exchange of knowledge). SNS are popular among students because of their suitability and convenience, providing access to information, and social support (Elsaadani, 2012). Research indicates that SNS compensate for a lack of physical proximity and are a great source of emotional comfort (Correa et al., 2010). Facilitating relationships through SNS help people cope with challenging issues and provide a basis of communication to reach out for social support. In a new culture or environment, students' social media use increases to help them adjust (Lin et al., 2012; Seo et. al, 2016; Zhou et al., 2008).

Previous research in this scholarship has mainly focused on how first-year college students use SNS to seek social support (Kalpidou et al., 2011; McCarthy, 2010; Phua et al., 2017) and little research has been conducted on international graduate students (see Hyun, 2019, for a review). This study is important for several reasons. First, this population is understudied in media and communication research (Seo et al., 2016). Second, the number of international graduate students has increased over the last several years in the United States (McCarthy, 2019). Third, this population relies on SNS to stay in contact with their family, friends, and relations living abroad or at a geographical distance (Straumsheim, 2014). Fourth, it is worthwhile to explore how and why international graduate students in the United States use SNS to seek social support and if SNS help them cope with feelings of stress and enhance their well-being. Fifth, few studies have used qualitative methods to explore this population's experience with their graduate programs in the United States (Hyun, 2019).

Lastly, on average, international graduate students are prone to more stress-related environments, including academic responsibilities such as Graduate Teaching Assistants, Graduate Research Assistants, and Graduate Assistants (Khawaja et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2018).

The present study aims to understand the common challenges international graduate students face and the coping strategies they use during their graduate degree programs. In addition, this paper examines how and why do international graduate students use SNS to seek social support from relationships. Furthermore, this paper explores the type of SNS used and social support (emotional, informational, and instrumental) sought from their relationships.

Conceptualizing Social Support

Most conceptualizations agree that social support is relational and defined as a function of aid that is obtained from an individual's social network such as family members, friends, and co-workers (Lin & Kishore, 2021; Thompson, 2008). Social support has various forms, including emotional, informational, and instrumental. Emotional support alleviates negative affect in another person, knowing that someone is understanding and can help accept and deal with an issue, having empathy for a person's situation or problem, and enabling a person to communicate their anxieties and fears, trust, respect, and even love them (House, 1981). Informational support happens when information is shared with others to help address a problem and mentor or guide a person. Instrumental support occurs when others provide specific help or assistance to a person and financial support. The perception for individuals to seek social support from their social network can lead to a reduction in the perceived threat of the stressful situation by helping a person's perceived ability to deal with the potential demand (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Stress-related research implies that stress has damaging effects on a person's physical and psychological health (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). However, social support has shown to help reduce stress. Generally, those individuals who have strong social support have less stress, less physical and psychological problems, as well as lower mortality rates than those with less frequent and weaker social support (Jackson, 1992; Reblin & Uchino, 2008).

The mentioned studies highlight the importance of having social support networks during a person's life, but more research is needed to understand how and why SNS influence the composition of international graduate student's social networks. Particularly when international graduate students often rely on SNS for social support from their loved ones in their country of origin.

Social Support and International Graduate Students

Graduate students experience new and daunting life changes. Oftentimes, they find themselves transitioning from their parental households, experience an increase in their autonomy, and face new responsibilities. Their worldviews, values, and even identities are challenged by new academic and social circles (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004; Seo et al., 2016). Graduate students might have

already gone through the process of leaving their parental households and experience an increase in their autonomy through their undergraduate years in college, but many still face the challenge of adapting to a new environment, coping with financial and academic stress, handling new academic responsibilities and workloads, and familiarizing themselves with a new culture (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Schwartz-Mette, 2009). These challenges can result in difficulty developing and exhibiting professional competence as well as having an impact on their psychological well-being (Colman et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important for students, particularly international graduate students, to alleviate the stress associated with graduate school.

Past literature suggested that social support from friends, families, and classmates is an important factor in dealing with these challenges (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Goplerud (1980) studied psychology graduate students perceived levels of stress and social support during the first six months of the program and found that students who reported higher support were less stressed and had less health and emotional problems. Similarly, in another study, researchers examined college students' emotional, social, and academic adjustment to college and argued that local support networks are important for this to be a positive adjustment (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Social support helps reduce stress by offering emotional or other types of support to an individual as well as making them feel cared for and belong to a network of communication (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Turning to friends, family members, peers, or supervisors for social support can be an effective strategy in coping with challenges of a graduate student's life such as combating feelings of social isolation and reducing stress (Byers et al., 2014; Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

Uses and Gratifications as Theoretical Framework

Since the 1940s, uses and gratifications theory (U&G) has been widely used to understand why people engage in and use certain types of media to satisfy their needs (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994). In the field of media and communication science, scholars have applied this theory to explore digital technologies like SNS to understand specific reasons that motivate users to engage with online content (Ruggiero, 2000). Each SNS yields unique affordances and functionalities, allowing users to use each site for a variety of motivations and reasons. Research has found that people use SNS for entertainment purposes, to obtain information about others, pass time, seek information, maintain interpersonal relationships, connect with like-minded people, receive companionship, and seek social support (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Lampe et al., 2006; Seidman, 2013). Little attention has been given to the relationship between the use of SNS and social support in the context of U&G theory (Wang et al., 2019), particularly studying international graduate students and their use of SNS to seek social support. Methodologically, previous studies have applied quantitative methods with U&G such as surveys and experiments (Ahmad et al., 2016; Ellison et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2019), however, in the context of our study, the theoretical framework of U&G allows

us to understand participants' reasons for SNS use and the type of social support sought (i.e., emotional, informational, and instrumental).

SNS and Social Support

Early studies of online social support investigated how supportive communication patterns emerged in online environments, particularly compared with face-to-face interactions (Baym, 1998). A study undertaken by Braithwaite et al. (1999) suggested that people develop unique features such as employing emoticons and signatures to deliver nonverbal cues and facilitate strong relationships for social support. Other studies of online support found relationships among mediated social support, online social networks, and health outcomes. People who spend more time communicating via online support groups are more likely to have a larger online support network and higher level of support network satisfaction (Rains & Young, 2009; Wright, 1999; Wright & Bell, 2003). These studies reveal that people who communicate online receive increased social support reception and satisfaction.

Extending these findings to SNS, scholars have found a similar effect on social support exchange over the last decade. SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become an integral part of people's daily routines and are used for social support exchange (Li et al., 2015). One of the most popular SNS among millennials (18–34 years old) is Facebook with many users logging in more than once per day (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). These sites help foster, develop, and create interpersonal relationships and findings have shown that SNS emerged as a new avenue for two-way communication (Bicen, 2015; Kwon & Yixing, 2010).

Many scholars have found that the use of SNS provides new affordances for relational maintenance, reinforces existing ones, and can play a positive role in enhancing interpersonal relationships and well-being (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007). A few scholars found that when people use SNS, it not only promotes social capital (connections among individuals) and subjective mental well-being but also generates greater benefits for people suffering from low levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Also, individuals who use Facebook are shown to have closer, more trustworthy, and supportive relationships than people who don't use SNS. These findings imply that SNS have a profound impact on people with close relationships (Hampton et al., 2011). The number of Facebook friends has also shown to be positively associated with perceived social support that leads to a reduction in stress and increase in life satisfaction, particularly within groups who are prone to high stress (Kim, 2014; Nabi et al., 2013). This current study extends on previous empirical and theoretical findings and aims to understand perceived online social support using SNS and subjective well-being of international graduate students. The following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What are the common challenges and coping strategies international graduate students face and use during their time in college in the U.S.?

RQ2: How and why do international graduate students use SNS to seek social support from their relationships?

RQ3: What type of social support (emotional, informational, and instrumental) do international graduate students seek from their relationships?

METHOD

An in-depth, semi-structured interviewing technique (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) was used to collect data from 15 participants on how and why they use SNS to seek social support from their relationships and which SNS they use to do this. This approach was used as it provides a rich narrative account from each individual's point of view (Lamont & Swidler, 2014; Rufas & Hine, 2018). The interview guide was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board in early spring 2020. In total, 15 participants took part in this study. Eight participants participated in face-to-face interviews, while the remaining seven were conducted online via Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded.

A snowball sampling approach was used to recruit participants on campus. Flyers were distributed around campus and those interested were asked to recommend acquaintances who might be willing to participate in the study. Emails were also sent to international graduate student groups on campus. The flyers and emails provided a brief description of the purpose of the study, eligibility, how they can participate, and contact information of the researchers. The participants were between the ages of (22–35) years and either in the master's or PhD program. The characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race	Graduate degree	Preferred SNS
Adam	Male	24	Asian	Masters	Facebook Messenger
Barbara	Female	30	Black	PhD	Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube
Clarissa	Female	32	Other	PhD	Twitter
Diane	Female	30	Asian	PhD	WeChat, Facebook, Skype
Elsa	Female	30s (didn't want to specify age)	Black	PhD	WhatsApp, Twitter

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race	Graduate degree	Preferred SNS
Felix	Male	22	Hispanic or Latin American	Master	WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Snapchat
Greg	Male	27	Asian	PhD	Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter
Heather	Female	24	Hispanic or Latin American	PhD	Instagram
Ivan	Male	29	Central Asian	Master	Facebook, Messenger Twitter, WhatsApp
Jonas	Male	29	South East Asian	PhD	WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger
Khalup	Male	27	Asian	PhD	Facebook, WhatsApp
Lenny	Male	27	Did not wish to specify	PhD	WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram
Monica	Female	29	Asian	Master	WhatsApp, WeChat
Noel	Male	29	Black	PhD	WhatsApp
Oman	Male	25	Asian	PhD	WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger

Before the interviews commenced, each participant was asked to fill out a close-ended questionnaire pertaining to their demographic information and their general SNS use. Demographic questions such as age, gender, race, graduate degree, academic field of study, SNS use, and preferred SNS were asked. Interview questions were developed from a range of open-ended questions.

In qualitative research, scholars often follow an interview protocol by starting with opening questions, transition questions, key questions, closing questions, and follow-up questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). For this study, participants were asked how they define social support in order to capture their understanding of the concept. Then, they were asked to relay their experience in their graduate program, types of challenges they face or have faced, and how these challenges impacted their physical, mental, and emotional state. These questions are aimed to understand how international graduate students cope with stress during their college years. Next, questions were asked how participants relieved those challenges, transitioning to questions asking them to talk about their relationships and why they approach these people to seek social support from. Questions were also asked which SNS they used to seek social support from

their relationships (i.e., family members, colleagues, friends) to help them cope with difficult situations during graduate studies and why they chose those SNS. Special attention was paid to how and why participants use SNS to seek social support from their relationships. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 mins.

Once participants were being interviewed, we commenced with transcription of the data. During and after the transcription and coding process, pseudonyms were used to allow for anonymity (see Toff & Nielsen, 2018). All interviews were transcribed using the software InqScribe. In the initial stage, interviews were coded in chronological order during the data collection process, using a combination of “open coding” by identifying themes line by line. In the next stage, the researchers used “focused coding” by searching for specific themes to group them into categories (Charmaz, 2006; Erba, 2018).

The researchers revised the list of codes and agreed on which codes should appear in each theme. In the final stage of transcribing the interviews, data were continually analyzed to achieve theoretical saturation of data. After each interview and analysis of transcriptions, the researchers compared notes and reached a consensus.

FINDINGS

The most common challenges international graduate students face are loneliness, stress, and feeling overwhelmed with graduate school, difficulties adjusting to a new culture such as language barriers, culture shock, and lack of guidance. In terms of coping with these issues, the most commonly mentioned coping strategies are sharing their experiences with those who understand their situation, relationships whom they trust, and reaching out to them via SNS. The type of SNS used includes WhatsApp, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Twitter, Instagram, and WeChat and depends on the functionalities of the SNS, such as convenience, affordances, cost, trust issues, and privacy. The findings of the present study suggest that emotional support and informational support were the most sought-after types of support via SNS. Meanwhile only two participants mentioned that they use SNS to seek instrumental support from their relationships.

Challenges: Loneliness, Stress, and Feeling Overwhelmed With Graduate School (RQ 1)

International graduate students face unique challenges during their time in college. Most participants indicated that they felt “overwhelmed” and “stressed” about the workload, have difficulties “adjusting to their new environment,” “having demanding professors,” “meeting deadlines,” and their new role of being both “teaching assistants and students.” Many students mentioned that they “get tired and lonely” (e.g., Barbara, Elsa, Jonas, Monica & Lenny), finding it difficult to connect with people with similar interests, and the pressure of “performing well and living up to the expectations of instructors and family members.” These challenges impacted them physically, emotionally, and mentally. Some

interviewees indicated that they struggle physically with their weight due to unhealthy eating habits as well as having back and shoulder problems from sitting in front of a computer screen and working long hours in the lab. Some interviewees mentioned that they often feel lonely during graduate school. Mentally, some participants said that they have been seeking help from therapists during the first few semesters of their graduate degree program. It was also found that mental pressure and stress depend on the semester and the workload, and most participants “feel overwhelmed, tired, and homesick.” Noel (a 29-year-old PhD student) struggled with health issues, suffered from homesickness, and had a challenging time finding the right resources at school. He often felt mentally overwhelmed coping with these issues. Similarly, Barbara (a 30-year-old PhD student) echoed:

Yeah, it was lonely and emotionally I would say I was sad uh and then this impacted me I didn't know but this impacted me health wise because just to keep up with this culture [...] Also I had the fear that maybe these students would be better than me coming in from a different culture so my first semesters were like, [...] so it was really a lot of pressure and then I didn't know this was impacting me. So in my second semester toward the end I felt sick. So it kind of impacted me emotionally, I was really sad at that point and I felt like maybe I made a wrong choice to come and study in the U.S.

Oman (29-year-old PhD student), Jonas (29-year-old PhD student), and Noel further stated that their graduate programs feel self-isolating because they are studying in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) field and spend many hours doing lab experiments. As Jonas said, “The supervisor expects me to continue working and wouldn't care about my mental or physical health.”

However, Khalup (a 27-year-old PhD student), Monica (a 29-year-old master's student), and Elsa (didn't want to specify age, Ph.D. student) were the only participants who mentioned that they didn't feel as overwhelmed during graduate school.

Challenges: Difficulties Adjusting to a New Culture (RQ 1)

Various socio-cultural factors such as academics, family, food, and friendship were the most mentioned challenges in adjusting to the American culture. Several participants indicated the culture they grew up in is more collectivist (e.g., Pakistan, China, or Kenya) in the sense that they could reach out for social support in-person more easily with their family members. Since they are living in the United States without their close relations, they rely on SNS to seek social support. For instance, Greg (a 29-year-old PhD student) stated “it's a cultural difference because this is kind of an individualistic society and we live together and we help each other and here people don't do it that way.” Monica found it challenging to make friends in her new environment, as she stated “I had a very strong accent when I got here. People used to judge me and I used to find it weird

that people judged me. I stopped expressing myself or talking to anyone.” Felix (a 22-year-old master’s student) also mentioned that English is not his native language and he had difficulty understanding his professors during lectures, especially when they talked too fast. Felix came from a culture in which he could easily make friends and talk about challenges during graduate school. While he has found friends in his master’s program, the mentality of being competitive for some students in the United States can be challenging. Similarly, Ivan (a 29-year-old master’s student) and Jonas had a difficult time during their graduate studies because they often felt “marginalized as foreigners.”

Most international graduate students highlighted that they came from different cultures and most of their close relations live outside the United States. Using SNS to reach out and stay in contact with their close relationships helped many of the interviewees adjust more easily to their new environment.

Coping Strategies: Sharing Experiences and Understanding Situations (RQ 1)

The most commonly mentioned coping strategies among international graduate students included sharing experiences with those whom they trust and understand their situation, joining online communities, and reaching out to close relationships via SNS. Interestingly, many participants highlighted that they don’t only seek social support from their close relationships (e.g., friends and family members) but also their distant relationships such as colleagues or friends. The students did not include their academic relations (e.g., professor, supervisor, fellow students, and colleagues) in their close circle. Lenny (a 27-year-old PhD student) pointed out “I like to talk about graduate school issues with my cohorts and advisors here rather than with my closer relationships. My department is very helpful and I can talk to my supervisor.” Adam (a 24-year-old master’s student), Jonas, Khalup, Lenny, Noel, and Oman mentioned that they reach out to their closest relationships whom they trust such as their girlfriend/fiancé or close family members such as mother, father, cousins, or childhood friends to seek emotional support. However, they don’t talk about their challenges during graduate school as their close relationships can’t understand and “identify with their situations.” As Monica echoed:

I can’t connect to family members anymore because they don’t know my situation in graduate school [...] I kept my feelings to myself because I didn’t want to upset anyone and there was also a time difference in not being able to connect with my close relationships.

All interviewees said the type of social support they seek depends on the person’s experience and objective in life. For instance, Diane (a 30-year-old PhD student) has joined a work-related group of people and a study-related group of people that she goes to for advice. Depending on their life experience and the problem, people in either group will resonate with or have similar experiences on a certain issue to give advice about some of the challenges they face during graduate school.

SNS Use: Affordances (RQ 2)

The type of SNS use depends on the affordances, such as ease of use, cost, convenience, surveillance policies, two-way communication, and privacy issues. Some interviewees mentioned that they feel uncomfortable seeking social support using public SNS such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. One of the main reasons international graduate students do not prefer using public SNS is because they feel “judged and uncomfortable.” For instance, Adam stopped sharing intimate thoughts on public SNS, instead he uses private messaging applications like Facebook Messenger that enable one-on-one conversation. Similarly, Khalup doesn’t seek social support on a public platform like Facebook because it’s an “attention seeking platform and the most he can get from posting content online are likes.” Monica raised the issue that public platforms give her a feeling of “disconnectivity” and “lack of empathy for her situation in graduate school” as opposed to private sites like WhatsApp. While expressing advantages of SNS, she pointed out the dark side of public SNS saying that “Facebook is not a good friend when you are in the dark side, everybody is fake and everyone is faking it.” Most participants prefer private applications like WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. As Jonas said “I use Facebook Messenger since most of my family is online and it is the most efficient way to stay connected.”

On the contrary to Adam, Khalup, and Monica, some of the participants (i.e., Greg, Barbara, Heather, and Clarissa) reported that they use Twitter to connect with online communities because of their unique affordances. For instance, Greg uses the hashtag #PhDLife on Twitter to engage and participate in conversations with fellow graduate students. Barbara prefers a more visually connected medium like Instagram and uses the hashtag #BlackWomenPhD’s to connect with people who have similar academic experiences and objectives in life. Heather (a 24-year-old PhD student) added that she doesn’t necessarily use Instagram to seek social support from her relationships but “shares pictures and stories” to let her close relationships know she is “coping as a graduate student.” Clarissa started using Twitter just to “share ideas” but found that some people on Twitter valued her ideas and thoughts:

On Twitter I will talk about my concerns, how to graduate or about being a Ph.D. student and all concerns I have about my personal life so I write everything and all of these things there. And people send me direct messages and ask if you are doing well or not, if you are sick and today I feel like you were depressed, these kinds of things. I mean I feel like I found friends.

Clarissa also mentioned that many people on Twitter have the same ethnic background, immigration status, and are PhD students with similar majors. A few participants revealed that they seek social support either on private or public sites depending on the type of social support they need. Lenny uses a WhatsApp research support group to hold a private conversation with colleagues from school. The affordance of WhatsApp is end-to-end encryption and allows users to feel a sense of safety and security in their private conversations. Lenny argued

that he “likes to use the call option on WhatsApp and the group chat function as it uses less data and is convenient.”

Other participants (e.g., Barbara, Elsa, Ivan, Jonas, Khalup, Victor, Noel, and Monica) divulged that they use “WhatsApp due to its accessibility and ease of use for one-on-one conversations.” The application allowed other affordances such as sharing of visual content (i.e., videos and pictures), memes, as well as functions like phone or video calls. Barbara stated:

I tend to use WhatsApp because it’s more of a phone call and with them (family members) it’s more like, we do a lot of talking and for my siblings there’s a lot of texting and we use like Instagram and go to Facebook and all these other platforms. My parents are not conversant with Facebook.

A majority of the participants asserted that they prefer seeking social support “via text instead of phone calls.” This is likely due to generational differences between the person they are communicating with.

Overall, most of the international graduate students who participated in this study use SNS like WhatsApp because it allows private conversations and offers international communication affordability, convenience, and safety features (e.g., encrypted messages) and “real-time” conversations.

Type of Social Support: Emotional, Informational, and Instrumental (RQ 3)

International graduate students revealed that the most sought-after type of social support through SNS includes emotional and informational. These types of support were sought from family members and friends outside their academic life and academic circle. Participants sought emotional support from family members because of their limited exposure to graduate school challenges. Diane says:

Usually we (mother) communicate on the phone. So I didn’t mention that much academic pressure to her, just the trivial life details like how’s the canteen food, how’s the dorm, how’s the roommate and how’s your classmate. Or who’s your supervisor, that kind of thing, so we just talk about that kind of stuff and she’s very supportive and says don’t stress yourself out and eat healthy. Sleep early and she says your hair is more important than your graduate career, so keep your hair, you can quit your graduate studies but keep your hair (laughs) [...] Though my mom can’t give me much academic help, the emotional support is really important. And financial support (laughs).

On the contrary, Clarissa’s husband is also in graduate school and offers her “emotional as well as instrumental support,” but not much informational support “because we have different majors.” Monica expressed that she seeks emotional and informational support from her graduate advisor and does not reach out to her close relationships to discuss challenges during graduate school because she doesn’t want her close relationships to worry about her struggles and issues. Khalup did not seek any social support from relationships through SNS. However,

he struggled with financial challenges (instrumental support) and did not reach anyone using SNS.

In summary, findings show that students face unique challenges during graduate school and use different coping strategies to mitigate their challenges. Participants use various SNS depending on their affordances to seek social support from relationships. For many interviewees, seeking social support depends on the issue and problems they face during their college life.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated how international graduate students use SNS to seek social support from their relationships. Through 15 semi-structured interviews, the type of social support (emotional, informational, and instrumental) as well as use and preference of SNS were examined. Results indicate that international graduate students face challenges during graduate school and difficulties adjusting to a new culture. The participants use SNS to seek social support from their relationships, however, the chosen SNS depend on the technical and communication affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), such as cost, ease of use, accessibility, private or public setting, and whether the participants' relationships use the site.

The types of SNS the participants mentioned to seek social support afford different cues, interactions, relational contexts, and perceived values to its users. Each site offers different ways for users to present themselves and how they interact with the people or groups on that platform (Wohn et al., 2016). All of the interviewees indicated that they seek some type of social support using SNS from people or a community of people who share similar experiences or objectives in life as they do. Emotional support and informational support are largely sought-after from close relationships such as family members or friends and academic circles. Instrumental support was rarely sought from relationships using SNS. One explanation why most of the participants seek emotional support from their close relationships is because they have little or no experience with academia. Another reason why instrumental support was not sought-after is because most international students' families can't afford to cater for their personal and academic expenses.

The findings in this study regarding SNS use for various types of social support aligned with the U&G theory. This theory postulates how and why people use certain SNS to fulfill their needs. In the context of this study, our findings suggest that a majority of the participants use SNS to seek emotional and informational support from different relations and groups but also depend on the particular affordance of SNS. Previous studies regarding U&G theory suggest that affordances like "convenience" is one of the largest motivations to use SNS. Our study validates that seeking social support is one of the motivations and reasons for choosing a particular SNS, as studies using U&G theory suggested (Alhabash & Ma, 2017).

As previous research indicates (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Kim, 2014), seeking social support from a person or group of people often depends on the emotional intensity, intimacy, reciprocal services, trust, and beneficial aspects for

a person's well-being. Interestingly, results in this study showed that the seeking of different social support (emotional, informational, and instrumental) didn't depend on the closeness, but rather on the similar situations in life between the participants and their relationships.

While previous research shows that international graduate students face challenges such as stress, culture shock, heavy workload, and homesickness, our study not only confirms these challenges but found that the students use different strategies to cope with these challenges by using various SNS platforms to reach out for social support from different relationships.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

The United States higher education institutions need to continually share resources and remind international students about support programs to help them deal with their challenges such as mental well-being. Offering workshops to help overcome language barriers and discussions about mental health issues could help students. Schools should consider alternate ways (i.e., using popular SNS platforms among international students like WhatsApp and WeChat) to reach out to international graduate students to understand their needs and provide support. Besides providing more resources, facilitating intercultural, and interracial dialogue can help create an open and respectful exchange of views between students from different cultures. The findings of this study can be used to advance institutions' policies to make sure they provide an equitable learning environment. The higher education institutions should invest more resources for inclusivity, diversity, equity, and accessibility to international graduate students.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has several limitations. First of all, we recommend that future research also includes the international undergraduate population to compare the two groups and include students from various schools to understand the challenges and coping strategies. Second, this study is confined to international students enrolled in United States institutions, and analyzing experiences of international graduate students in other countries might be helpful and yield similar or different findings. Lastly, more specific questions on how people use SNS to seek social support could be further investigated by doing a social media walkthrough as a method (Light et al., 2018). The walkthrough method could provide a detailed analysis on how the user navigates the SNS, which person or group of people they contact, and the type of support they seek. Future studies should investigate if individual cultural values have an impact on how international graduate students seek social support through online networking sites. Methodologically, future research should incorporate a mixed-method approach to understand the relationship between their individual cultural values, use of SNS, and the type of social support they seek online. Also, an interdisciplinary approach to study this scholarship can enhance our understanding to introduce new policies in higher education.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

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