Today, over 4 million people are on the move to pursue tertiary education outside their countries of citizenship (OECD, 2015). Australia alone has witnessed a dynamic growth of international student enrolments over the past two decades from fewer than 100,000 in 1994 to over 600,000 in 2015 (Department of Education and Training, 2015).

Among them, 79 per cent are between 18–29 years old (Department of Education and Training, 2016), most of whom may use social media on an everyday basis (Sensis, 2016). With the popularisation of smartphones and other digital technologies such as laptops and tablets, most international students of this generation are considered to be ‘digital natives’ who are not only capable of, but rely on these technologies in their daily lives (Prensky, 2001).

Recent scholarship on the interaction between migration and digital media points to the contingent impact of information communication technologies on the lived experience of both permanent and transient migrants. In this context, there is growing academic interest in the role of new media – in particular social media and Web 2.0 developments – in the lives of international students.

This research digest provides an overview of the extant studies on social media use among international students within educational contexts and in their wider everyday lives. Firstly, it reviews the diversified attempts to define social media, as distinct from traditional media. This is followed by an examination of the empirical research, from three identifiable perspectives, on social media’s relevance to the lived experience of international students in their host societies.
To begin with, social media applications, especially social networking sites (SNS), have been an innovative and influential tool with which international students are engaged – both in and out of classroom – for learning purposes. Further, social media platforms are a key source of information for international students, which help them build a “sense of connectivity with what’s happening around them” (Binsahl et al. 2015, p. 91). In addition, transnational social networks are established and maintained through the use of social media. Keeping in contact with families and friends in the home country has been identified as a major purpose for using social media, providing the social and emotional support needed to help adjust to the new environment. Finally, previous studies suggest that international students increasingly use of social media to navigate their everyday lives during their sojourn, to mitigate acculturative stress and improve psychological well-being.

DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The emergence and popularity of social media and Web 2.0 technologies have fundamentally changed how we communicate interpersonally and disrupted our concept of how media works. Facilitated by the increased availability of mobile phones with internet access, “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2012, p. 13) are no longer only receivers of information, but more often producers and circulators of online content. However, the extant definitions of social media are underlined by diverse concepts (Mandiberg, 2012, p. 2). Despite growing empirical interest in social media use, scholars find it difficult to give a definitive explanation of it (Fuchs, 2014; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). In his critical introduction to social media, Christian Fuchs (2014) offered a selective list of attempts to define Web 2.0 and social media where a variety of online socialities were discussed (pp.35–37).

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These definitions highlight human-centered actions and practices. For instance, Boyd defines social media as “a collection of software that enables individuals and communities to gather, communicate, share and in some cases collaborate or play” (Boyd, 2009). Users, instead of editors, are thus central to the generation of online content (Boyd, 2009; van Dijick, 2013). Similarly, Lovink (2011) argues that one of the key features of social media is that “it provides users with free publishing and production platforms that allow them to upload content in any form, be it pictures, videos, or text” (p. 5). Others emphasise connection and interaction. Terranova and Donovan (2013) regard social media as “a new typology of distribution of information” which is “based in ‘real’ social networks” (p. 297). In a more metaphorical manner, Gauntlett (2011) contends that, with the introduction of Web 2.0 technology, websites are no longer like individual gardens but “come together to work collaboratively in a shared space” (p. 3).

Despite the diversity of ways to conceptualise social media, it is generally agreed that it ceases to follow the ‘one-too-many’ paradigm that dominates traditional media; instead, it centralises users – who are now creators of online content – and facilitates the emergence and/or maintenance of human connections through two-way communication. Therefore, it is crucial that we emphatically study the diversified practices through and around social media, including (but not limited to) inter-personal communication, postings, social networking and information seeking. We also need to examine the social contexts and implications within which these practices are embedded.
SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Academics and educators have been aware of the educational potential of social media and of students’ increased use of social media for learning purposes (Goodyear & Ellis, 2008; Junco et al., 2010; Hung & Yuen, 2010). For example, the potential of social media to function as an educational tool was defended by Junco and his colleagues in their experimental study of 125 students’ Twitter use for academic purposes. The research findings suggest that using Twitter “for educationally relevant purposes” increased student engagement in the learning process and improved their academic performance (Junco et al., 2011, p. 119). The study also contended that Twitter, as an educational tool, helped to “engage students and to mobilize faculty into a more active and participatory role” (p. 119).

Similarly, the possibility of SNS to supplement face-to-face teaching is examined by Hung and Yuen (2010). They found that most participants “developed strong feelings of social connectedness and expressed favorable feelings regarding their learning experiences in the classes where social networking sites were used as a supplementary tool” (Hung & Yuen, 2010, p. 703). Admittedly, the adoption of this technology in the teaching and learning processes is not without possible challenges such as “spam and phishing attacks” which are worrying educators (p. 713). Other researchers and critics are also concerned with social media’s negative effects on grades and learning processes due to the students’ excessive reliance on these technologies (Stoltak et al., 2011; Keen, 2007).

The contingency of social media’s educational potential is further examined in studies specifically addressing international students’ academic activities through this technology. It has been suggested that there is a variety of ways for international students to use social media for learning purposes, including “aggregating links and contents, encouraging discussions and sharing of ideas, and supporting communication among members of the group.” However, it does not automatically lead this population to appropriate them in such ways (Ismail, 2010, p. 89). The findings of a recent study on five Saudi female international students in Australia suggested heightened awareness of Facebook being an educational tool. However, four out of five students have not actually used Facebook for educational purposes despite acknowledging the educational potential of social media and thinking positively about the impact it has on their academic performances (Binsahl et al., 2015). In a similar vein, Gray et al. (2010) contended that social software tools, now more commonly known as Web 2.0 applications, are potentially beneficial for both domestic and international students. However, the authors pointed out the danger of “assuming that social software is automatically appropriate for educational purposes” (p. 39). They also argued the importance of re-purposing social software for learning processes and the leading role of educators “in designing appropriate online learning activities and environments” (p. 42).

Further, Alfarhoud et al.’s recent study (2016) discovered that international students use social media for more than educational purposes during class, including communicative and entertainment reasons. Although some interviewees reported social media being helpful in terms of getting information, which facilitated their comprehension of the course content in class, most of them referred to social media as sources of distraction that poses negative impacts on their class participation and concentration (Alfarhoud et al., 2016). Therefore, the technological properties of social media alone do not guarantee positive educational outcomes.
SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE

Recent scholarship on the relationship between migration and new media technologies points to the contingent impacts that technological advancement has on both permanent and transient migrants (Cabanes & Acedera, 2012; Hjorth, 2007; Hjorth & Arnold, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Parreñas, 2005; Dekker & Engberson, 2014; Diminescu, 2008; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Komito, 2011; Qiu, 2014; Qiu & Yeran, 2010). This extensive body of literature enriches our understanding of the mediated nature of contemporary migration and the everyday lives of the migrants. Among the advancement of internet technologies, the emergence and unprecedented development of social media applications have attracted substantial attention. In the context of international student mobility, social media is also practised in a wider context for varied purposes. In this section, studies on international students’ use of social media in different aspects of life will be analysed.

Social media for information seeking

Educational institutions now face challenges providing information for their students efficiently. The increasing use of social media by both domestic and international students gave rise to a change in patterns of information seeking behavior (Kim et al., 2011; Saw et al., 2012; Chang, Alzougool, Gomes, Berry, Smith & Reeders, 2012; Alzougool et al., 2013). In examining the potential of SNS in international students’ everyday life information seeking (ELIS), Sin and Kim (2013) suggested SNS being an important and frequently used channel through which the respondents access everyday information. Similarly, the results from Binsahl at al.’s study (2015) of Saudi female international students in Australia pointed out that this group “considered SNS as a source of information which helps them to have the sense of connectivity with what’s happening around them” (Binsahl et al., 2015, p. 91). While the study did not come to a clear conclusion about whether the students adopted SNS as a source of information on an everyday basis, they reported “using Facebook to gain knowledge on various social and political events” (Binsahl et al., 2015, p. 91). These international students regard SNS like Facebook as more effective and reliable sources of information when compared with the Arab media.

Further, in Saw et al.’s study (2012), more than half of the respondents used Facebook as a platform for information gathering. At the same time, the study noted that students from different cultural backgrounds tended to choose different platforms for this purpose. For example, Chinese international students in Australia used Renren (a Chinese site similar to Facebook) as much as Facebook for finding information (Saw et al., 2012). However, the specific reasons underlying the diversity of choices of social media platforms remain unanswered in the study. One of the possible explanations could be that international students preferred those platforms with which they identify (Chang, Berry, Alzougool, Gomes & Reeders, 2012; Chang, Alzougool, Gomes, Berry, Smith & Reeders, 2012). Their “perceived self-identity, social roles and the social networks they belong to” play an important role in influencing what particular platform these students use for information seeking (Chang, Berry, Alzougool, Gomes & Reeders, 2012, p. 2). This is intriguing as it reminds education and service providers of international students’ diversified practices on social media platforms and their different preferences for where they go for information.

Social media for transnational connections

The literature also suggests a close correlation between social media use and the maintenance of transnational connections. While the interaction between transnational practices and social integration among migrants has become the subject of much research, the relationship is contingent on migrants’ own considerations and the social contexts in which they are embedded (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013; Dekker & Siegel, 2013). This open-ended relationship is also reflected in studies on social media use and transnational connections among the international students. For example, Gomes et al. (2014) pointed out that the use of social media facilitated students to keep in touch with friends and family in their home nation. This contributed to the formation of “imaginary bonds with their homelands” and offered them “virtual home-based support networks” (Gomes et al., 2014, p. 13).
Similarly, in Transnational Student-Migrants and the State, Shanti Robertson examined international students’ everyday lives in the context of the education-migration nexus. They pointed to the fact that different modes of communication were utilised by the student-migrants in Australia to maintain and mediate global social networks. Among the various modes, social media was widely adopted for “social contact with globally dispersed friendship networks” (Robertson, 2013b, p. 156). The real-time interaction offered by social media enabled the students to be always updated about what was happening with their friends and family and to conveniently maintain their relationships. This, according to the respondents in the study, facilitated future mobility for the student-migrants because of their global networks mediated by social media.

This theme was further exemplified in a separate study by Gomes (2015) who revealed that by “connecting with the home nation through social media”, international students in Australia managed to maintain an aspiration for transnational mobility after graduation. They kept track of their friends and family through social media so that they were always updated with what was happening in their homeland, even though they were overseas (Gomes, 2015). The use of social media offered the students a kind of mediated intimacy which, to some extent, substituted the need for a real presence of their family and friends in their countries of origin. It is this connection that boosts their decision to live a mobile life.

Nevertheless, the transnational connections facilitated by social media and other mediated communication modes are not without pitfalls. Robertson’s research findings suggested that the simultaneity and convenience facilitated by digital connectivity could possibly result in a loss of obligation and a sense of neglect when replies were postponed or forgotten. The constant attention required by the instant communication tools can also be a burden or a cause of friction between individuals separated by long distance. The intimacy mediated by digital technologies could be a poor substitute for real-world interaction (Robertson, 2013b).

Social media and socio-cultural integration

There has been substantial research on the potential for social media to facilitate or hinder integration of international students into their host societies. According to Gomes (2015), social media offers students a unique way to “fit” into Australian society. This is particularly typical for those from China who created Facebook accounts after their arrival as they believed that it is “a regular communication feature in Australia” (p. 53). Having a Facebook account was seen as a necessity to show their adaptation to Australian-ness or localness, which facilitated everyday interaction with their Australian and international counterparts. This suggests a potential symbolic function of social media in the everyday lives of international students.

From a spatial perspective, Martin and Rizvi (2014) explored how Chinese and Indian international students inhabit Melbourne through the use of social media. The authors argued digital media’s potential to transform the students’ sense of locality and belonging from the dichotomy of here/there to a syncretic co-presence of homeland and Australia (p. 1028). In other words, the locality experienced by international students is no longer in singular form but a constant shift from one place to another. This is made possible through the use of both local and transnational media where simultaneity and connectivity are offered (Martin & Rizvi, 2014). Martin and Rizvi’s study provides empirical evidence that suggests the potential of social media to aid international students in navigating the city, thus shaping their sense of both local and transnational belonging.

From the perspective of social adjustment and cross-cultural adaptation, Sandel (2014) investigated how American and international students perceived and interpreted social media as well as its impact on their lives in the United States. Through in-depth interviews with seven American students and 16 international students, the research suggested that online and mediated communication “enhanced the students’ experience, providing help with sociocultural skills, informational needs, relational bonds, and psychological well-being” (p. 1). As a result, social media helps students alleviate stress and feelings of homesickness during their sojourn.
Focusing on a particular group of international students, Chen and Ross (2015) challenged the conventional way of viewing Chinese students as “meek, quiet or standoffish” and unwilling to integrate (p. 177). Their interaction with the host society is somehow hidden and invisible “when viewed from the perspective that assumes a dominant, mainstream campus culture” (p. 177). This is partly because a space is provided by the information networks, social media and student organisations based in the enclave so that resources are accessible to Chinese students (p. 178). This process is mediated especially before their arrival in the United States when social media provides a platform for them to link up with the enclave in the host nation.

However, despite the positive impact indicated by the research above, other studies point to the exclusionary features of social media that may impede international students’ socio-cultural integration into the host society. For example, many reported that international students primarily built and maintained relationships with those from the same country (Lee & Ranta, 2014; Olding, 2013). This issue is further exacerbated when international students prefer home country social media platforms to those in the host country (Saw et al., 2012; Chang, Alzougool, Gomes, Berry, Smith & Reeders, 2012), especially for Chinese international students (Gomes et al., 2014; Rahman, 2014; Tian, 2015).

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Arguably, social media plays a vital role in the everyday lives of international students. However, its impacts on the abovementioned aspects remain contingent (Sleeman et al., 2016). Despite the technological promises of social media, international students do not necessarily use it in ways that others think are good for them. However, what educators could take away from the extant studies on social media use among international students is their reliance on the new technology for a variety of purposes including and beyond education. The contingency of social media is both an opportunity and a challenge towards international students and educators which requires careful educational design (Gray et al., 2010). This implies that education providers have the potential to take the lead in engaging students in an academically productive way and guide them to better explore the educational potential of social media. Moreover, social media is potentially an important channel through which international students pursue their own well-being (Wong, 2014) and relevant services could be provided. In this way, education providers would be able to maintain the connection with international students beyond the classroom to offer better support for students in their everyday lives.

At the same time, we should bear in mind the diversity of international students’ use of social media. For instance, students from different cultural backgrounds may use different social media platforms (Saw et al., 2012; Chang, Berry, Alzougool, Gomes and Reeders, 2012). Providing support for Chinese international students via Facebook may be less efficient than Chinese social networking sites like Weibo and others. Whether education providers should encourage students to migrate from ethnic social media platforms to those of the host countries remain unexplored.
Another area that needs some further attention is the interplay of international students’ social media practices and the social contexts in which they are embedded. As non-citizens who often live in the host country for just months or years, international students are unable to fully engage in all aspects of Australian life (Paltridge et al., 2012) – even though many remain in Australia after graduation for an extended period of time to work or apply for permanent residency (Baas, 2006, 2007, 2010; Robertson, 2013b; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). Being temporary residents excludes them from access to the social resources and welfare services that are available to Australian students (Marginson et al., 2010; Robertson, 2016).

Although there is growing interest in unpacking how internet technologies such as social media have been utilised to respond to these social contexts (see, for example, Martin & Rizvi, 2014; Gomes et al., 2014), we still need further academic exploration into this area. Moreover, while the socio-cultural impact of social media has been widely researched, the economic and political powers of this new technology in the context of international student mobility has received less attention. As temporary migrants, international students are not only engaged in academic activity; instead, they are also important players in the labour market (Nyland et al., 2009) and activist citizens (Robertson, 2013a, 2013b). It is highly likely that the international students are also active both politically and economically on these social media platforms.

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