

The Relationship Between Instrumental Use of Social Media and Psychological Security Among Chinese International Students Living Alone in Thailand

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between instrumental use of social media and psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand. Acknowledging that international students increasingly rely on digital platforms for practical information and daily management without immediate support, this research integrates Uses and Gratifications Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Social Support Theory, and Cross-Cultural Adaptation frameworks (Katz et al., 1974; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Berry, 1997). Through a quantitative survey of 400 Chinese international students in Thai universities, the study examines how goal-oriented social media use—including information seeking, problem-solving, guidance, and adaptation support—relates to emotional stability, safety, confidence, and coping ability. 1) Respondents showed high levels of both instrumental use and psychological security. 2) A moderate positive correlation was found between the two variables. 3) Regression analysis confirmed that instrumental use significantly predicted psychological security. 4) The regression model explained 16.1% of the variance in psychological security. These results indicate that greater instrumental use of social media is associated with lower perceived uncertainty and higher levels of confidence among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand, offering implications for universities and policymakers to improve student welfare through targeted digital strategies.

Keywords: *Instrumental Use of Social Media, Psychological Security, Chinese International Students, Living Alone, Thailand, Cross-Cultural Adaptation*

1. Introduction

The global expansion of international education has generated both opportunities and challenges for students pursuing degrees abroad. Chinese international students constitute one of the largest outbound student populations worldwide, reflecting China's strategic emphasis on internationalization, cultural exposure, and academic competitiveness (Li & Bray, 2007). Thailand has emerged as a particularly attractive destination for Chinese students due to its geographic proximity, cultural familiarity, relatively low cost of living, and robust educational collaborations between Thai and Chinese institutions. Although studying abroad facilitates personal growth and cross-cultural enrichment, living independently in a foreign country exposes students to vulnerabilities in psychological well-being, belongingness, and adaptive capacity. These difficulties are compounded for students lacking family or social support networks, underscoring the growing relevance of investigating their coping mechanisms.

Social media occupies a central role in the daily lives of international students, serving as a tool for connection, information seeking, emotional support, and identity negotiation. Research suggests that digital platforms offer indispensable resources for individuals navigating unfamiliar cultural and social environments, providing both social connectivity and functional support (Chen & Choi, 2011). Instrumental social media use refers to purposeful, task-oriented engagement with digital platforms aimed at obtaining information, solving problems, coordinating activities, and managing daily life demands (Whiting & Williams, 2013). For Chinese international students living alone in Thailand, such instrumental use encompasses gathering localized information, communicating with university staff, accessing community groups, learning about safety-related issues, and maintaining ties with family and friends in China. These functional applications become critical coping strategies when students face uncertainty or lack immediate support in their physical surroundings.

Psychological security constitutes a pressing concern for students studying abroad. Defined as an individual's sense of safety, stability, and emotional assurance within a given environment (Maslow, 1943; Edmondson, 1999), it is often diminished among students living alone due to limited familiarity with local systems, language barriers, cultural differences, and perceived social isolation. Scholars contend that

psychological security significantly influences academic performance, mental health, adaptation, and overall well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students who feel emotionally secure and confident in their ability to navigate challenges tend to adapt more effectively to new environments and develop greater resilience. Conversely, low psychological security may precipitate loneliness, anxiety, stress, and difficulties in academic or social integration.

The relationship between digital behavior and psychological well-being has garnered considerable scholarly attention. Studies indicate that social media can either enhance or undermine psychological security, depending on patterns of use (Ellison et al., 2007). Instrumental use such as seeking information, coordinating support, or employing digital tools to address immediate problems tends to foster a sense of control and stability, thereby bolstering psychological security. Students rely on platforms including WeChat, Xiaohongshu, Douyin (TikTok), Line, and official university social media channels not merely for entertainment, but for navigating daily tasks, accessing local communities, and obtaining real-time information about their surroundings.

Despite growing interest in international student well-being, limited research has examined the specific relationship between instrumental social media use and psychological security among Chinese students living alone in Thailand. Existing studies often adopt a broad focus on mental health, cultural adjustment, or general social media effects, without investigating how purposeful, task-driven engagement with digital platforms supports emotional stability. This gap calls for a more targeted investigation that highlights the unique interplay between instrumental digital behavior and psychological well-being among a vulnerable yet understudied population.

The present study addresses this gap by pursuing three research objectives: 1) to examine the level of instrumental social media use among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand; 2) to assess their level of psychological security; and 3) to investigate the relationship between these two variables.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- 1) to examine the level of instrumental use of social media among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand;
- 2) to assess the level of psychological security of Chinese international students living alone in Thailand;
- 3) to investigate the relationship between instrumental use of social media and psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand.

Based on these objectives, one hypothesis was proposed. H1 states that instrumental use of social media has a significant positive relationship with psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand.

These objectives and hypotheses were designed to examine both general and specific relationships. The first objective examines the level of instrumental social media use, providing descriptive benchmarks for understanding students' information-seeking and functional connectivity habits. The second objective assesses psychological security, shifting the focus from negative pathology to positive resources, and identifying areas where mental health support is most needed. The third objective investigates the relationship between the two, testing whether instrumental use serves as a protective buffer via information and social ties, or alternatively induces overload. This structure enriches cross-cultural adaptation theory and offers actionable evidence.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between instrumental social media use and psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand. The quantitative approach enables systematic variable measurement and statistical analysis, ensuring objectivity and reliability. A cross-sectional design captures participants' current experiences at a single time point, which is appropriate for transient adaptation states. Structured questionnaires facilitate consistent data collection across a large sample, supporting both descriptive and inferential techniques. Instrumental use is operationalised as a unidimensional construct (confirmed by EFA), encompassing goal-oriented activities such as information seeking and problem-solving. Psychological security is measured as a multidimensional state

involving perceived safety, stability, and coping confidence. Standardised self-report instruments transform subjective experiences into quantifiable data. Although the design precludes causal inference, it is well suited to identify associations between variables. Overall, this framework aligns measurement, theory, and analytical strategy, offering a rigorous and methodologically sound foundation for addressing the research objectives.

3.2 Population and Sample

The target population for this study is Chinese international students currently enrolled in higher education institutions throughout Thailand and living alone, i.e., without immediate family members. According to data released by Thailand's Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI), the number of international students enrolled in Thai universities reached 28,052 in 2024 (Thailand.go.th, 2025), confirming their demographic significance. This subgroup is theoretically relevant because independent living intensifies challenges in emotional adjustment, social integration, and perceived security, thus increasing the functional importance of instrumental social media use for managing academic and daily life abroad.

Applying Taro Yamane's sample-size formula (Yamane, 1967) with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error yields a required sample size of 395 respondents. The sample is drawn exclusively from currently enrolled students residing independently in Thailand. This sample size affords adequate statistical power to examine the relationship between instrumental social media use and psychological security, while remaining feasible given practical constraints of time and accessibility. Such targeted sampling strengthens the relevance of the findings for this specific population.

3.3 Sampling and Research Instrument

This study employed a non-probability sampling approach combining purposive and volunteer sampling. Purposive sampling was appropriate because participants needed to meet specific inclusion criteria: Chinese nationality, current enrollment in Thai educational institutions, at least three months of residence in Thailand, and regular social media use. Volunteer sampling was used because the questionnaire was distributed through online channels where Chinese international students were likely to be active, including university social media groups and WeChat communities. Screening questions confirmed eligibility before respondents proceeded to the full questionnaire. Due to geographical dispersion and privacy restrictions on student lists, probability sampling was infeasible. While this method limits representativeness, it was practical for this exploratory study.

The research instrument was a structured online questionnaire developed from the conceptual framework and relevant literature on social media use and psychological well-being. The questionnaire contained five parts. Part 1 screened respondent eligibility. Part 2 collected demographic information (age, gender, study level, institution, length of stay). Part 3 measured instrumental use of social media, capturing goal-oriented activities such as information seeking, problem-solving, practical guidance for daily living, and environmental adaptation support. Part 4 measured psychological security, assessing emotional stability, self-confidence in independent living, and perceived ability to cope with uncertainty. Part 5 included open-ended questions for additional suggestions and recommendations. All measurement items were adapted from existing validated scales on instrumental social media use and psychological well-being (Whiting & Williams, 2013; Sheldon et al., 2011; Ye, 2006) and modified to suit the study context.

All main items used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Mean scores were interpreted using five levels: 4.21-5.00 as very high, 3.41-4.20 as high, 2.61-3.40 as moderate, 1.81-2.60 as low, and 1.00-1.80 as very low. This interpretation scheme was applied consistently to descriptive results. The questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in communication and social science research to assess content validity before data collection.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and overall levels of instrumental social media use and psychological security. Mean scores were interpreted using a predefined five-level classification scheme. Cronbach's alpha was computed to assess internal consistency, and all scales demonstrated acceptable reliability. Data were screened to remove incomplete and ineligible responses prior to analysis. Pearson correlation analysis examined the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables. Subsequently, simple linear

regression was conducted to test whether instrumental social media use significantly predicted psychological security, with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$. These analytical procedures directly corresponded to the study objectives of describing variable levels and identifying associations without claiming causality. All computations were performed using SPSS. Assumptions of linear regression, including normality, linearity, independence of errors, and homoscedasticity, were examined and no serious violations were detected.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Descriptive Results of Demographic Information

This section presents the analysis of data collected from 400 valid questionnaires completed by Chinese students studying in Thailand.

Regarding the respondent profile, the gender distribution of the respondents. The findings show that male respondents represented the largest proportion of the sample, with 179 individuals accounting for 44.75% of the total. Female respondents comprised 171 individuals (42.75%), while respondents identifying as non-binary or third gender accounted for 49 individuals (12.25%). In addition, 1 respondent (0.25%) preferred not to disclose their gender. Overall, the gender distribution of the respondents was relatively balanced between male and female participants.

The age distribution of the respondents. The findings show that the 18-20 years old group represented the largest proportion of respondents, with 135 individuals accounting for 33.75% of the total sample. This was followed by the 21-23 years old group, which included 87 respondents (21.75%). Respondents aged 24-26 years old comprised 66 individuals (16.50%), while those aged 27 years old or above accounted for 63 respondents (15.75%). The under 18 years old group represented the smallest proportion, with 49 respondents (12.25%). Overall, the findings indicate that the majority of respondents were concentrated within the 18-26 years old age range, with the 18-20 years old group constituting the highest proportion.

The education level of the respondents. The findings show that the majority of respondents were pursuing or had obtained a bachelor's degree, with 263 individuals accounting for 65.75% of the total sample. This was followed by respondents pursuing or holding a master's degree, comprising 77 individuals (19.25%). Respondents at the doctoral level represented the smallest group, with 60 individuals accounting for 15.00% of the total. These results indicate that bachelor's degree students constituted the largest proportion of respondents in this study.

4.1.2 Descriptive Results of Main Variables

The descriptive analysis indicated that instrumental use of social media among respondents was at a high level, with an overall mean score of 3.45. The highest-rated item, "Overall, social media is an important practical tool that helps me manage life while living alone in Thailand" ($M = 3.54$), reflected respondents' strong recognition of social media's functional role. Similarly, items related to problem-solving ($M = 3.49$), academic information ($M = 3.45$), daily practical guidance ($M = 3.45$), and decision-making support ($M = 3.45$) all received high ratings. Even the relatively lower items, such as learning about university procedures ($M = 3.40$) and seeking advice from online communities ($M = 3.42$), remained at a high level. This pattern suggested that social media served as a comprehensive instrumental resource, supporting information seeking, daily task management, and environmental adaptation.

Likewise, psychological security was reported at a high level, with an overall mean of 3.41. The highest-rated statement, "I am able to handle unexpected situations while living alone in Thailand" ($M = 3.49$), indicated perceived coping capability. Items concerning personal safety ($M = 3.47$), confidence in independent living ($M = 3.45$), and overall psychological security ($M = 3.43$) also scored highly. Emotional stability and self-control items ranged from 3.41 to 3.42. The lowest item, "I rarely feel overwhelmed by uncertainty" ($M = 3.25$), still fell within the high range. Collectively, these findings suggested that respondents felt emotionally stable, self-confident, and capable of managing daily challenges in a foreign environment.

Overall, both variables demonstrated consistently high levels, implying that Chinese international students living alone in Thailand actively leveraged social media for practical purposes while maintaining a relatively secure psychological state. This supported the relevance of examining the interplay between instrumental media use and psychological well-being in the context of independent cross-border living.

4.1.3 Reliability and Validity Results

Reliability analysis demonstrated that the measurement scales used in this study had strong internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for instrumental use of social media (0.834) and psychological security (0.853) both exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming high reliability and indicating that items within each construct consistently measured the same underlying concept.

Validity testing further supported the robustness of the measurement model. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measures of sampling adequacy were 0.893 for instrumental use of social media and 0.907 for psychological security, both falling within the "excellent" range. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant for both constructs ($p < 0.001$), confirming that meaningful correlations existed among variables. Exploratory factor analysis revealed a unidimensional structure for both scales, with all factor loadings exceeding the 0.50 threshold, demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity. The total variance explained was 40.1% for instrumental use and 43.2% for psychological security, which is considered acceptable in social science research involving behavioral constructs.

Taken together, these results confirmed that the measurement instruments employed in this study were both reliable and valid, thereby providing a sound foundation for subsequent statistical analyses, including correlation and regression analyses.

4.1.4 Correlation Results

Table 1 Pearson Correlation Results

Variables	Mean	SD	X	Y
Instrumental Use of Social Media	3.45	1.213	1	0.401**
Psychological Security	3.41	1.218	0.401**	1

Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation results between instrumental use of social media and psychological security.

Presenting the Pearson correlation result between instrumental use of social media and psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand. The analysis revealed a significant, moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.401$, $p < .01$), indicating that students who engaged in more practical, goal-directed media use tended to report higher levels of psychological security. Descriptive statistics showed that both instrumental use ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.213$) and psychological security ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.218$) were relatively high within the sample. This suggests that purpose-driven social media engagement is meaningfully linked to emotional stability, confidence in independent living, and the ability to cope with uncertainty. As instrumental use increased, so did respondents' sense of safety and resilience while navigating daily life abroad. This finding provides preliminary empirical support for the proposed hypothesis and underscores the functional role of media in sustaining psychological well-being during cross-cultural adaptation.

4.1.5 Regression Results

Table 2 Regression Analysis Results

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig.	Interpretation
Instrumental Use of Social Media	0.385	0.044	0.401	8.740	<0.001	Significant positive effect

Note: $R = 0.401$, $R^2 = 0.161$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.159$, $F = 76.385$, $p < 0.001$

Table 2 presents the results of the simple linear regression analysis examining the effect of instrumental use of social media on psychological security. The findings indicate that instrumental use of social media was significantly associated with psychological security ($\beta = 0.401$, $t = 8.740$, $p < 0.001$). The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 76.385$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the predictor effectively explained variations in psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand. Furthermore, the model accounted for 16.1% of the variance in psychological security ($R^2 = 0.161$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.159$). Therefore,

Hypothesis 1 was supported, indicating that higher levels of instrumental social media use were associated with higher levels of psychological security.

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant theoretical and practical contributions to understanding the relationship between instrumental use of social media and psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand. The results revealed that respondents demonstrated relatively high levels of both instrumental use ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.213$) and psychological security ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.218$). More importantly, correlation and simple linear regression analyses confirmed a statistically significant positive relationship between the two variables ($r = 0.401$, $\beta = 0.401$, $p < 0.001$). The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 76.385$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 16.1% of the variance in psychological security ($R^2 = 0.161$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.159$). These findings support the proposed hypothesis and are consistent with multiple established theories.

The findings strongly support Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz et al., 1974; Rubin, 2002). Chinese international students actively used social media for practical, goal-oriented purposes such as obtaining information, managing daily tasks, solving problems, and adapting to the local environment. Platforms like WeChat, Xiaohongshu, TikTok, and LINE served as functional resources rather than entertainment outlets. This aligns with Whiting and Williams (2013) and Park et al. (2009), who found that users increasingly rely on digital platforms for utilitarian benefits. In this context, instrumental use functioned as an adaptive strategy to navigate unfamiliar social and cultural environments.

The results are also consistent with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Instrumental social media use appeared to strengthen respondents' competence by helping them solve practical problems independently, enhanced their autonomy by increasing confidence in managing life abroad without direct family support, and supported relatedness through maintaining emotional and social connections with culturally familiar peers. Sheldon et al. (2011) similarly found that purposeful use positively contributes to psychological need satisfaction and well-being.

The findings further align with Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social media platforms provided informational, emotional, and practical support that buffered stress and reduced uncertainty. Respondents accessed peer guidance and practical advice, which strengthened their confidence in handling daily challenges. This echoes Ye (2006) and Pang (2018), who reported that online support networks positively influence psychological adjustment among international students.

Additionally, the results are consistent with Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory and the Acculturative Stress Framework (Berry, 1997; Kim, 2001). Instrumental use of social media served as a coping mechanism that helped respondents reduce acculturative stress by providing localized information and shared experiences, thereby fostering environmental mastery and psychological stability. This supports Cao and Meng (2022) and Zhang and Jung (2020), who found that social media facilitates intercultural adaptation through support and cultural learning.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that instrumental use of social media is an adaptive resource associated with greater confidence and higher psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand. By integrating UGT, SDT, Social Support Theory, and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, the findings offer a unified explanation of how purposeful media use contributes to well-being in cross-cultural contexts. Social media should thus be understood not merely as communication tools but as essential practical and psychological support systems for international students abroad.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between instrumental use of social media and psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand. Data were collected from 400 respondents and analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability and validity tests, Pearson correlation analysis, and simple linear regression analysis. The findings confirmed that instrumental use of social media significantly predicted psychological security, supporting the theoretical premise that purposeful digital engagement functions as an adaptive resource in cross-cultural contexts (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Katz et al., 1974).

The correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship between instrumental use of social media and psychological security ($r = 0.401$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents who more actively engaged in practical and goal-oriented social media activities, such as seeking academic information, managing daily tasks, obtaining local information, and accessing support resources, tended to report higher levels of emotional stability, confidence in

independent living, and perceived safety. These findings suggest that the functional use of social media plays an important role in supporting the psychological well-being of international students living abroad.

The results of the simple linear regression analysis further confirmed that instrumental use of social media significantly predicted psychological security ($\beta = 0.401$, $t = 8.740$, $p < 0.001$). The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 76.385$, $p < 0.001$), explained 16.1% of the variance in psychological security ($R^2 = 0.161$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.159$). Therefore, H1 was supported, indicating that higher levels of instrumental social media use were associated with higher levels of psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand.

The study recommends that universities and student support services recognise the functional value of social media in international students' adaptation processes. Providing access to reliable online information, peer support networks, and practical guidance may enhance students' confidence and reduce acculturative stress. Additionally, fostering digital literacy and encouraging purposeful use of social media platforms could strengthen students' ability to navigate daily challenges independently.

Future research may extend this study by incorporating additional variables such as perceived social support, cultural intelligence, resilience, and coping strategies to further explore the mechanisms underlying psychological security. Longitudinal and qualitative approaches may also provide deeper insights into how instrumental social media use evolves over time and contributes to psychological adjustment in cross-cultural environments. Comparative studies involving international students in different host countries could further enhance the generalisability of the findings.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that instrumental use of social media is a significant predictor of psychological security among Chinese international students living alone in Thailand. Social media platforms serve not only as communication tools but also as important sources of practical information, social support, and adaptation resources. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the role of purposeful social media use in promoting psychological well-being and cross-cultural adaptation among international students.

6. Acknowledgements

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Rangsit University for its supportive academic environment, and above all to Asst. Prof. Duangtip Chareonrook, Ph. D., whose expert guidance, insightful feedback, and continuous encouragement were indispensable throughout the research and writing process. The author also deeply appreciates all the questionnaire respondents for their valuable time and contributions, as well as family and friends for their understanding and support.

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