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Digital Practices of Student Citizenship: A Case Study of Chinese International Students in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Research on international students often focuses on academic adjustment and institutional support. Less attention has been given to how they acquire social and emotional support, which is also crucial for their academic success and retention. Drawing on qualitative data collected through online observations and interviews, this paper explores how Chinese international students engage in mutual social and emotional support by performing their student identities on Chinese social media platforms. Informed by the theoretical concept of digital citizenship, the paper argues that digital practices of student citizenship demonstrate the agency of international students in sourcing the social and emotional support that underpins their study. The paper further argues that research on international students should switch its focus from support provision to the construction of inclusive and equal social environments in host societies, environments in which different identity performances can be acknowledged and community engagement fostered.

Keywords: Digital citizenship, Chinese international students, student identity, social media, social support, emotional support

INTRODUCTION

Research focused on international students has increased substantially as a result of significant growth in the number of students studying outside their home countries in the past few decades (Mittelmeier et al., 2023). Given the major shifts in social and educational contexts associated with this educational mobility, a key concern of this body of research is students' adjustment to and navigation of their academic studies (Bastien et al., 2018; Mohamed & George, 2025; San & Guo,

2023). Research on this issue has identified the main challenges and difficulties faced by international students in academic adjustment, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and different modes of instruction (Martirosyan et al., 2019; Wang & Hannes, 2014), while informing the provision of various supports which have produced positive outcomes in students' academic adjustment and performance (Heng, 2022; San & Guo, 2023).

However, much of the support provided by higher education institutions to international students tends to focus on areas directly related to their academic work, such as tutoring and writing programs (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Although this kind of instrumental support is useful and involves interaction, it does not allow a level of intimacy and engagement or offer the kind of social and emotional support essential for sustaining their academic involvement; moreover, it does not contribute to their resilience in the face of academic pressure (Chavajay, 2013; Cruwys et al., 2021; San & Guo, 2023). Among the institutions that provide social support to international students, research suggests a mixed effect on international students' academic engagement, with some proving helpful (Jiang et al., 2022; Xiao, 2021) and others being ineffective or underutilized (Lee, 2013; Pho & Schartner, 2021; Young et al., 2013). This highlights the need to understand students' help-seeking behavior, an understanding that is essential if meaningful, useful, and culturally sensitive social support can be delivered to them (Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024).

This research therefore focuses on how international students derive social and emotional support for their academic studies through the creative use of social media, an increasingly common avenue through which international students provide and receive both information and social support (Gomes, 2018; Martin, 2020; Martin et al., 2014). It finds that Chinese international students are actively performing their student identities and contributing to an imagined community of their peers through a set of creative digital practices on social media platforms. These digital practices arguably enable them to receive social and emotional support and to experience a sense of belonging within the digital communities of Chinese international students, outcomes that are crucial for sustaining their academic engagement and ensuring their retention.

This paper starts with a review of the literature concerning social support for the academic success and overall wellbeing of international students and then introduces the concept of digital citizenship, which informs this analysis of Chinese international students' digital practices that offer them social and emotional support while studying in Melbourne, Australia. After the methods and findings of this research are explained, the implications of this research for transnational higher education research are discussed, and the possibility of reframing the issue of providing social and emotional support to international students is proposed.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND CITIZENSHIP

International students face multiple challenges in adjusting to new academic and social environments (Astley, 2024; Wu et al., 2015; Xue & Kaur Mehar Singh, 2025). To help them navigate these challenges, a variety of supports have been provided to enable a good study experience. While academic services were the focus at an earlier stage, social and emotional support have attracted increasing attention in recent decades because of their positive impact on international students' academic performance and wellbeing (Arthur, 2017). This was especially the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, when access to social and emotional support was shown to contribute significantly to international students' engagement with academic study and their general wellbeing (Joseph & Sudhesh, 2023; Ke et al., 2023).

Social support refers to the social resources made available to international students by their institutions and to students' social connections with family, friends, and significant others (Peltonen et al., 2017). At the institution level, it often takes the form of student information and consultancy services, as well as social events designed to assist adaptation to university life and facilitate the building of social networks in a new cultural context (Hussain & Shen, 2019). While there is no denying the importance of social support for students' academic performance and general well-being, research exploring the actual social and emotional support provided by higher education institutions tends to reveal a mixed picture. While some studies suggest a positive impact of social and emotional support on international students' academic success (Brouwer et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2019), other findings suggest that such support is either ineffective or underutilized by international students (Lee, 2013; Young et al., 2013). This inconsistent evidence indicates a need to understand how international students actually seek social and emotional support and how such support can be designed and delivered in more accessible and culturally sensitive ways (San & Guo, 2023).

The mixed evidence concerning the effect of social support speaks to the deficit lens usually used when viewing international students (Deuchar, 2022a; Tran et al., 2022). More research in recent years has investigated the proactive strategies and practices international students use to navigate their academic and social lives in host societies (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007). Fu and Li (2022) examined Chinese international students' collective initiatives in organizing volunteer language teaching programs on an Australian campus as a space for social support and engagement with people from different cultural and language backgrounds. Deuchar (2022b) also highlighted the kinds of emotional, social, and practical support that Indian international students provide to each other at Australian universities throughout their educational sojourns. In recent decades, with the development of social media, a significant component of mutual support among international students has been sourced online (Binsahl et al., 2015; Gomes et al., 2014; Jayadeva, 2020). This highlights the necessity of thoroughly examining

international students' 'digital journeys' to understand their effective engagement and communication with each other (Chang & Gomes, 2017a).

This study further explores international students' social and emotional support practices on social media. To understand how international students derive social and emotional support through their engagement with different digital communities, digital citizenship is employed as a conceptual tool. In this paper, digital citizenship can be understood as a form of social and cultural citizenship defined by the norms, values, and practices generated by the mutual engagement of members of a certain digital community (McCosker et al., 2016). It goes beyond the conventional definition of citizenship, which is tied to one's legal and political status within a nation-state and provides new possibilities for people to connect and engage digitally for recognition and belonging on platforms such as Facebook and WeChat (Fu, 2021; Fu & Cook, 2021). A key mechanism in the practice of digital citizenship is identity. As a fluid concept associated with individuals' relationships and engagements with different social communities (Cahill et al., 2015), it is formed and reinforced through their discursive and repetitive performances in relation to existing social discourses that shape people's thinking and behavior (Butler, 2011; Cahill et al., 2015). Engagement with online communities, a core aspect of the practice of digital citizenship, reflects the extent to which individuals are identified with and recognized as citizens through shared knowledge, norms, values, and practices within these digital communities (Isin & Turner, 2002).

Since international students are often transient migrants without legal citizenship status in their host societies (Gomes, 2020), digital citizenship affords a useful lens through which to render visible their digital engagement with different communities in seeking social and emotional support, support that enables them to perform their student identities in host societies and to experience a sense of belonging (Solmaz, 2018). By exploring their digital citizenship practices, helpful insights can be gained into how inclusive societies and enabling digital environments can be constructed by higher education institutions and host societies to enable international students' practice of their different social and cultural identities in a manner that will benefit both international students and Australian multicultural societies.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach to examine the discursive and diverse digital citizenship practices of Chinese international students. Online observations and interviews were used to collect the data. Online observation captures the objective traces of participants' online activities, whereas interviews complement the analysis and interpretation of these data by contextualizing it within the background information and personal accounts provided by participants about their online activities. The process of participant recruitment and data collection was approved by the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Melbourne[i]. Fifteen Chinese international students studying in Melbourne were recruited through three channels. First, the project information

and recruitment advertisements were disseminated to Chinese student associations at the University of Melbourne, Monash University, and RMIT University. Six participants were recruited in this way. Second, the researcher observed postings on the Chinese social media app RED (also known as Xiaohongshu or Red note), which is an image/video-sharing social media service designed to save and discover information, similar to Pinterest. Through observation, potential participants located in Melbourne were identified and approached online. Of the thirty-five students who were approached, six agreed to participate. The other three participants were referred by participants recruited through the first two methods. These 15 participants, 10 females and 5 males, were studying at four different universities in Melbourne in 2023. Nine of them were students at the University of Melbourne, four at Monash University, and two each at Victoria University and RMIT University. Among them, four were undergraduates, and eleven were studying at the master's level. Five had been studying in Melbourne since high school, whereas eight had completed the university foundation course. Most of them had lived in Melbourne for more than three years. They had built unique social networks in Melbourne and were actively engaged in online activities in their everyday lives. Table 1 shows basic information about the participants:

Table 1: Basic information of the participants

Name of Participants (Pseudonyms)	Sex	Program of study
Jane	Female	Master of Education
Elien	Female	Bachelor of Biomedical Science
Chloe	Female	Master in Computer Science
Yiping	Male	Bachelor in Computer Science
Tina	Female	Bachelor in Economics and Finance
Claire	Female	Master of Teaching
Annie	Female	Graduate Degree in Early Childhood Teaching
Rosie	Female	Master of Translation and Interpreting
Tess	Female	Master of Business
Hannah	Female	Master of Global Media Communication
Olivia	Female	Master of Teaching
Tony	Male	Bachelor of Commerce
Steve	Male	Master of Design
Jimmy	Male	Master of Biomedical Science
Danny	Male	Master of Landscape Architecture

The online observation was carried out on WeChat (the largest social media platform in China for instant messaging, group chatting, and sharing of life moments) and RED. The choice of platform was based on the popularity of these two social media apps among Chinese international students. Approval was sought from the participants for the researcher to observe their engagement activities on these two platforms. To avoid sensitive data being collected through online observation, the participants were asked to nominate ten artifacts (from their text, image, and video posts) for further analysis of the digital traces left on these platforms from the beginning of their study time in Melbourne. During this process, some participants also granted permission for observation of their Instagram pages. The researcher spent four weeks on online observation and collecting background information. This was followed by in-depth interviews in which participants were asked about the stories associated with their online participatory activities represented in their ten nominated artifacts, with the intention being to develop a contextualized understanding of their digital citizenship activities. Owing to their availability and convenience, both online interviews via Zoom and face-to-face interviews were conducted and recorded after school hours.

All the interviews were semi structured, using approximately twenty interview questions grouped into three categories: questions seeking basic information about the participants; questions regarding their online activities; and questions exploring the meaning of these online activities for their lives in Melbourne. The order and specific content of the questions changed depending on the participants' responses to the open-ended questions and the social media platforms they used. This was to ensure that the interview questions were relevant to participants' diverse online activities and inclusive of all the digital engagement through which they practiced their digital citizenship.

All the interviews were conducted in Chinese. The data were transcribed verbatim in Chinese via iFly, a speech recognition software tool for transcribing Chinese-language recordings. The interview transcripts were cleaned in Microsoft Word and coded via NVivo. Given the different types of data collected and the exploratory nature of this research, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen to identify the main themes related to participants' digital engagement and the notions of citizenship expressed in their digital practices.

FINDINGS

Studying abroad represents an opportunity for Chinese students to acquire an internationally recognized qualification for employment, a chance to broaden their horizons by living overseas, or simply a means of becoming more independent and showing that they are capable of managing their own lives. Among all these goals, navigating academic life and obtaining qualifications are their predominant goals. This is well illustrated by participants' performance of student citizenship in communities on social media platforms and through their civic engagement with these virtual communities.

Performance of Identity as a Committed Student

Previous research has shown that the identities of international students are significantly shaped and moderated by their experiences in digital spaces (Chang & Gomes, 2017b). This is also the case for the participants in this study, whose performance in terms of student identity represents a significant proportion of their digital activity in Melbourne. Through active engagement in performances of their identity as international students in a range of digital communities, they derive social and emotional support and experience a sense of connection with and belonging among other international students present in these communities.

RED is the major platform for their performance in terms of student identity. It is favored by international students in Melbourne because the application emphasizes the place of the local community, which is reflected in its content recommendation algorithms that are based on users' geographical locations. This algorithmic feature, coupled with the usual connective functions of social media, such as hashtags (a word or number that is followed by the # symbol and is used on social media to categorize and track content), makes it a highly efficient platform for international students in Melbourne to connect and engage with each other. Typical posts of Chinese international students' digital identity performances include the sharing of meaningful moments in their study lives and complaints about and struggles with academic assignments, all of which are experiences common to other Chinese international students to which they can relate and that will be easily recognized.

The post shown in Figure 1 is an example of a meaningful moment in a Chinese student's study life in Melbourne. The photo post titled 'First day of the new semester #studyinMelbourne #Unimelb' has received ten likes and three comments. These posts, often featuring photos or short video clips taken at moments meaningful for the students, are shared on social media as a way of documenting their study lives in Melbourne. By including hashtags relevant to their identity as international students, these posts can help them connect and interact with other Chinese international students in Melbourne. Tony, an undergraduate student studying for a Bachelor of Commerce degree at the University of Melbourne, often shares photos on RED taken at the university library late at night, with captions jokingly revealing the stress and difficulties he experiences in relation to his study. Figure 2 is an example of such posts on RED. It shows in the foreground the assignment requirements for a core subject with a due date on it, with the desk and couch at the library as the background. The picture caption reads: 'xxx (the subject code) is like pushing me to the death, two emojis of grinning sweating face, #Melbourne #UniversityofMelbourne #Library #LifeinMelbourne'. This post received six likes and five comments.

Figure 1: A participant's post on RED

Figure 2: A participant's post on RED
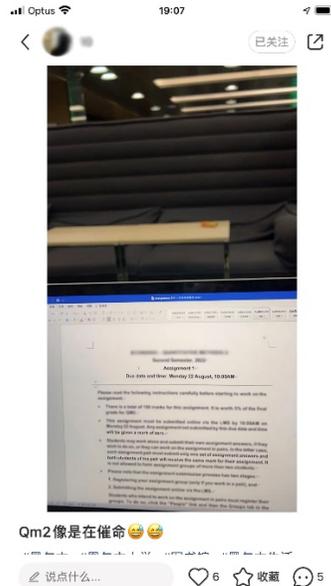
In another similar post, he included another photo taken at the library at night. The foreground of the photo shows the interface of some programming software,

whereas the background shows other students studying at the library. In the caption, he wrote: 'mid-term is painful, two crying face emojis, #Melbourne #UniversityofMelbourne #Library'. This post was liked 22 times and was commented on by four viewers.

Danny, a master's student in landscape architecture, shared a picture of his week two assignment for his graduation project. The pictures in this post are the sketches for his project. He said in the caption that 'The sketches are ugly. What should I do?'. In the text of this post, he said that although the sketches looked ugly, they were the best he could manage to produce because of a tight course schedule. He felt embarrassed because the sketches of other classmates were all refined and beautiful. He also remarked that the roughness of his sketches could be his style, as it saved him much energy, allowed him to be bold in design, and, most importantly, clearly conveyed his ideas, which were appreciated by his supervisors. This post was liked 14 times by others.

In another post, he shared the pictures of his assignment. The post was captioned: 'Why academia these days is so competitive and stressful | Pre-Midterm'. In the text of this post, he said, 'Master is so busy, fifteen charts a week is what's going on, I wanted to study and do an internship at the same time, but there's just not enough time! The course is two days on, five days off, but it actually requires you to work on it seven days a week, angry demon emoji, #SpiricalInternalFriction #NotesInspiration #Melbourne #MyDailyRoutine #LandscapeArchitecture #BuildingArchitecture #MemoriesofStudyAbroad'. This post about his struggle to balance study and internship resonated quite strongly with others connected through '#MemoriesofStudyAbroad', receiving 74 likes and 25 comments.

The performance of student identity is also common on WeChat. A performance could be related to an interesting argument picked up from a reading, a happy moment when receiving positive comments or feedback from a favorite teacher, or a demotivating moment. Figure 3 shows an example of a post of this type. It is a laptop screenshot showing someone Googling 'how to graduate without doing anything. The caption on this picture post says, 'Literally my mood right now'. This post was liked by her friends on WeChat 16 times after this screenshot was shared.

Figure 3: A participant's post on WeChat Moments
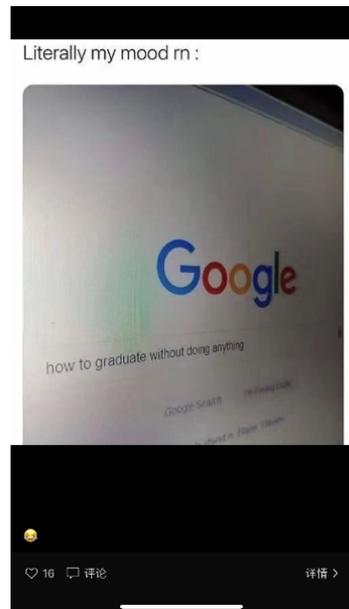
Jane, a master's student in education, posted an update on WeChat Moments noting 'Three assignments I need to write, 2000, 2500, 3000'. By listing the word limits of the assignments in her post, something that makes sense only to her fellow students, she shared her feelings of stress as a way of identifying with her WeChat contacts who are in similar situations. This post received 28 likes and many comments validating her stress, serving the exact purpose of this post.

Jimmy, a master's student at Monash University, posted a photo update on WeChat Moments taken at a medical lab in the early morning of a Sunday in January. The text of this update reads: 'A public holiday'. This post speaks to Chinese international students' shared experience of studying on public holidays, making it a typical performance of his student identity and an effective one for attracting recognition from fellow Chinese international students on his WeChat contact list.

Participants' performance of their student identity is threaded through with perceptions of being stressed by academic work, often accompanied by complaints about the hard work entailed in their academic programs, very much a shared experience among Chinese international students. This identity performance is also a highly targeted performance, artfully leveraging the affordances of social media platforms. This is first illustrated in their choice of social media platform. Although they perform their student identity on both RED and WeChat, participants are more open and upfront about their stressful experiences as international students on RED; it is a more open and public platform on which users are less likely to know each other in physical life. By using the hashtag function on this platform, they can easily obtain identity recognition as well as social and emotional support from other international students by including in their RED posts hashtags such as #StudyinMelbourne, #StudyinAustralia, #xxxUniversity, and #xxxmajor.

On WeChat, their ability to share their stressful student lives is much more implicit. A typical strategy used to achieve this is social steganography, a privacy tactic employed when engaging in communications on semipublic forums. It allows them to embed information in a message that can be decoded and understood only by those with whom they truly want to engage (danah, 2010). In the posts featured in Figure 3, the English sentences and the acronym 'rn' (meaning right now) in the post are not intended to communicate with the author's parents and families, even though this post is visible to them, but rather is a tailored performance for those who might be similarly stressed by their academic assignments at that moment. Similarly, in the WeChat post about assignments and word limits, the meaning of the three seemingly random numbers is understandable only to those who are facing similar tasks. By engaging in this tailored and highly targeted identity performance on WeChat, where they have access to all the people they know in physical space, they can obtain the emotional support they need. It comes via the instant validation of their feelings and emotions by friends who are in similar situations while avoiding letting their parents know about their stress and causing any concern.

This identity as a pressured but committed student is captured by the term ' 赶 due 人' (deadline catcher), a word they have coined to describe themselves.

By engaging in these digital identity performances through sharing their study experiences and recognizing these experiences through 'like' and 'comments', Chinese international students form a virtual community that provides mutual social and emotional support. This performance not only helps them cope with academic pressures and feelings of loneliness while working on their academic assignments but also provides the social and emotional validation they need to sustain their engagement with their studies; it strengthens their identities as committed international students.

Civic Participation in the Online Communities of Chinese International Students

In addition to obtaining social and emotional support and experiencing belonging through performing their student identity online, they also contribute to a virtual community of international students by sharing their experiences of navigating academic tasks and helping to improve other students' learning experiences through the use of social media. Tony, studying for a Bachelor of Commerce, posted a picture of a person putting his bare feet on a library desk. He titled his post, '*Jia ren men*[1] who study at the xx library, avoid this person (pensive sweating emoji)'. The text of this post reads: 'He puts his feet up on the desk you use for study, walk back and forth just do not study, looks neurotic and scarry #Melbourne #UniversityofMelbourne #Library'. When discussing this post in the interview, Tony said that he posted it to express his disapproval of this behavior and to tell other students to avoid this person at the library. To his surprise, the post was viewed more than 20,000 times and received many supportive comments. He thought that his post had generated some public pressure regarding such misbehaviour in the library and that it contributed to ensuring that the library remained a good learning environment.

Danny, studying landscape architecture at RMIT University, recorded on RED the progress of his graduation project from preparation for week 1 to the end-of-semester exhibition. His posts documented details of the subject requirements for each week and the progress of his own project. When asked about his purpose in doing this, he said that he wanted to keep a record of his experience of this year-long subject. He tried to make each week's post as informative as possible because he wanted to give the students who came after him a general idea about how to perform their own graduation project by viewing his posts.

Similar civic and citizenship participation among the community of Chinese international students takes place on WeChat. Jane, a master's student at the University of Melbourne, started a WeChat group comprising 500 Chinese students in which information was shared about the subjects available in her

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[1] *Jia ren men* (家人们), literally translating to 'my dear family', is an internet slang term of endearment used to address others on the Chinese internet.

faculty; the participants gave each other suggestions on how to choose subjects. She also started several smaller groups, specific to the subjects at her faculty, through which students could help each other with their studies. In these small groups, the students assisted each other in understanding the assignment requirements, shared key documents/readings about the subject, reminded others about deadlines, and validated their feelings about subject assignments. In a screenshot of a WeChat subject discussion group set up by Jane, one student asked about the due date of the final assignment. The question was answered in approximately ten minutes, with a PDF document attached outlining the requirements of the assignment. Another student said, 'Goodness, already started to panic when I see 20 minutes of presentation and 10 minutes of Q&A'. This response was instantly validated by another student offering a meme of a terrified shaking rabbit.

Data on students' mutual engagement in this WeChat group demonstrate that the digital forum serves as a valuable space in which students obtain the informational, social, and emotional support they need to navigate their academic studies. Moreover, as safe spaces for them to share the difficulties and stress they feel when writing academic assignments, these groups also function as places where they can provide and receive social and emotional support by validating each other's reactions to academic pressure. Such support is crucial in helping them stay engaged with their academic studies and in overcoming the difficulties they face in that context.

DISCUSSION

This research describes Chinese international students' practices of mutual social and emotional support through performing their identities as committed students and engaging in civic participation in the online communities of their peers. This study contributes to the underexplored area of international higher education research on social and emotional support for international students. The new knowledge about how Chinese international students support each other socially and emotionally through mutual engagement on social media adds to the fledgling literature about the agency of international students in navigating social and emotional challenges while studying in host societies(Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Deuchar, 2022a). Through delineating the ways in which this support is sourced and provided, this research offers insights into how and in what ways institutional and social support can be designed and provided in a culturally sensitive manner that is meaningful and practically useful for international students.

Chinese international students' practices of student citizenship highlight the crucial role of social media in mediating and enabling their social engagement in host societies. Although research in recent decades has charted international students' digital media use from different perspectives (Chang & Gomes, 2017a; Martin et al., 2014), this is still a relatively under researched area in the study of international higher education. The need to further investigate international students' engagement in digital spaces has become even more urgent given the increased importance of digital technologies in delivering international higher

education following the COVID-19 pandemic. The creative digital practices of Chinese international students described in this paper offer insight into how social and emotional support can be incorporated into the design of digital learning environments. This study also highlights the necessity of further research into international students' use of social media to support the construction of inclusive digital services, infrastructure, and communications that are culturally sensitive and accessible to students, that can facilitate student engagement with subject learning, and that can enable meaningful connections among students with shared identities for mutual social and emotional support.

The adoption of citizenship as a theoretical concept provides a useful lens through which to examine Chinese international students' social media practices, that is, their avenues for connecting and engaging with others for social support and belonging. The importance of a shared identity in enabling meaningful citizenship experiences and fostering belonging has also been observed in other research (Metro-Roland, 2018); however, it has become particularly significant on social media(Binsahl et al., 2015; Chang & Gomes, 2017c). By describing Chinese international students' digital performance of their identities as committed students under pressure, this research illustrates how social media is leveraged by international students both to provide and receive social and emotional support and to sustain their academic engagement and retention. It also highlights the necessity of more research into the digital practices of international students through which they learn, explore, and practice meaningful citizenship for social connection and belonging.

In addition to being a useful concept for examining international students' digital practices, the notion of citizenship can also help shift the focus of international student research from providing support to constructing social and digital environments conducive to flexible community building and engagement. While the former research focus tends to view them as passive, vulnerable, and in need of support, the latter offers the opportunity to include them as one of many youth groups in a host society. This shift has deep implications for reshaping the rationale on which issues related to international students are predicated. By seeing them as citizens of a multicultural Australian society, they are no longer merely consumers of the Australian higher education product; rather, they can be acknowledged as active members of this society, capable of engaging with various social communities at different levels. Their appearance in and engagement with the host society thus present an opportunity and an impetus to improve equity, diversity, and inclusion in and beyond educational institutions rather than being a threat to or burden on either the quality of higher education in Australia or broader Australian society.

Although the participants in this study engage with multiple digital communities, ranging from those who are only loosely connected to those who actually know fellow users in their physical life, the findings seem to suggest that Chinese international students are still living in their own cultural bubble, despite the many affordances of social media in facilitating cross-cultural connections and interactions. Although the convenience of connecting with their peers on Chinese social media may encourage Chinese international students to remain within a

comfortable cultural bubble and make them reluctant to engage directly with multiculturalism in their host societies, their engagement with fellow Chinese international students on these platforms can also represent a form of 'everyday multiculturalism' (Mittelmeier et al., 2025). Such engagement provides a meaningful learning space for Chinese international students to share their experiences of engaging with diverse people and cultures and to learn from those shared by others. Moreover, Fu and Li's (2022) research has shown that engaging with co-nationals and their original culture is crucial for maintaining Chinese international students' cultural identity while studying in Australia. Such identity work is not at odds with their engagement with host societies but rather strengthens their confidence in performing their cultural identity in host societies and enables them to engage with other communities in an equal and confident manner.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines Chinese international students' creative digital practices of mutual social and emotional support through the theoretical lens of digital citizenship. The findings suggest that these students are actively involved in the practice of student citizenship through flexible engagement with different online communities of international students. Such digital engagement allows them to perform their identity as committed and pressured students—an identity recognized by other international students, thereby fostering a sense of belonging. They also engage with the imagined digital community of Chinese international students by building favorable conditions for other students' studies. By practising their student citizenship digitally, they experience supportive relationships as well as feelings of connection and belonging based on care, support, and acceptance, all of which are essential for a good study experience.

Chinese international students' practices of student citizenship on social media demonstrate their agency and capacity for leveraging available social, cultural, and technological resources to forge communities and derive the support they need for their academic study. This highlights the often-neglected dimension of social and emotional support in student services delivered at the institutional level. By delineating the digital practices of social and emotional support among Chinese international students, this research can inform the design of culturally sensitive social services that align with international students' needs and their effective provision on the basis of their habit of social and emotional support acquisition. The digital practices of student citizenship illustrated in this paper also suggest the need to switch the focus of international student studies from support provision to environment building. As Heng (2022) usefully noted, the agency of international students reveals 'other ways of living and doing', which not only serve to challenge the deficit judgments made by people in host societies but also 'guide us to create more targeted and socioculturally attuned support systems that are applicable not only to Chinese international students but also to other international students and domestic students from underrepresented populations' (p. 123). In other words, instead of focusing on how to help

(Chinese) international students, it is more fruitful for educational institutions and host societies to acknowledge them as capable youth groups in policies and social engagement practices rather than labeling or even 'othering' them. A positive framing of this youth group as a source of empowerment for the collective endeavour to construct a truly equitable, diverse, and inclusive social and digital environment would go a long way. Such an environment is conducive to the prosperity and intersection of different forms of civics and citizenship practices (Choi & Cristol, 2021) through which individuals are socially connected and are better enabled to belong.

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  x *None*
  ☐ *Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
  ☐ *Some sections, with extensive editing*
  ☐ *Entire work, with minimal or no editing*
  ☐ *Entire work, with extensive editing*

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