Credibility Across Borders: Online Information Evaluation of Chinese International Graduate Students

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This study investigates the experiences of Chinese international graduate students in assessing the credibility of online information in the U.S., focusing on their challenges and the underlying reasons for these challenges. Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, information diaries, and focus group discussions, the research reveals that these students often struggle to assess the credibility of U.S. online content without being aware of their difficulties. The findings show that their judgments are influenced by their pre-existing understandings of authority and prior internet usage in China. Additionally, their sense of estrangement, stemming from their outsider status in an unfamiliar online environment, exacerbates these challenges. This study underscores the complex interplay of sociocultural, political, and educational factors in shaping their assessments. It recommends that U.S. higher education institutions incorporate culturally sensitive information literacy instruction to support international students from diverse backgrounds, thereby enhancing their academic experiences and empowering them as information-literate global citizens in a digital society.

Introduction

In the digital age, the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and substandard information online—facilitated by the ease of content creation and distribution—has underscored the importance of verifying the credibility of online sources. The dynamic nature of digital information (Lynch, 2016), the rise of influential social media figures lacking traditional oversight (Kim & Kim, 2022), and the profound influence of personal biases on credibility assessments (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013) present significant challenges in determining trustworthy sources.

International students, especially those studying in a non-native language country, face compounded challenges in assessing online credibility. They not only consume information in a different language but also navigate a vast and unfamiliar digital landscape with an

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overwhelming volume of content (Chang & Gomes, 2020). This issue is particularly significant given the increasing presence of international students in U.S. higher education. According to the Open Doors 2025 Report, the United States hosted about 1.2 million international students in 2024/25, marking a 5 percent increase from the prior year and confirming its position as the world's leading study destination (IIE, 2025a).

While existing research acknowledges the challenges international students face in assessing online credibility (Crist & Popa, 2020; Rodriguez, 2014), there is a notable gap in exploring the underlying reasons and specific nature of these difficulties (Sin & Kim, 2018). Previous studies have identified the struggles international students encounter in evaluating the credibility of online information within the digital landscapes of host countries (e.g., Sin & Kim, 2018). However, this study aims to address the need for a deeper examination of the factors contributing to these challenges.

This study examines how Chinese international students assess the credibility of U.S. online information. Although China is now the second-largest source of international students in the United States, following India (IIE, 2025b), Chinese students remain a substantial population whose distinct linguistic backgrounds and prior experiences within a highly regulated digital ecosystem shape particularly complex approaches to credibility assessment. These transnational information experiences position their navigation of U.S. online information environments as a critical site for understanding how information literacy is culturally and geopolitically situated. By illuminating their experiences navigating an unfamiliar digital information environment, this study seeks to inform the development of more culturally responsive information literacy instruction in U.S. higher education institutions.

Literature Review

This literature review first explores the intricate relationship between information literacy, authority, and cultural influences. It then offers an overview of the online environments that Chinese international students encounter and navigate. The review concludes by examining existing research on the information literacy of Chinese international students.

Information Literacy, Authority, and Culture

Evaluating misinformation is a critical component of information literacy, which was traditionally viewed as a collection of abstract, universal cognitive and technical skills (ACRL, 2000). However, the last decade has seen a paradigm shift in information studies toward recognizing information literacy as a socially embedded practice (Papen, 2013; Savolainen, 2007), aligning with New Literacy Studies' emphasis on social constructivism (Barton et al., 2000; Street, 2003). This approach views information literacy as a social practice, deeply rooted in specific sociocultural contexts and constituting a dialogic process shaped by collective social dynamics rather than solely individual motives (Savolainen, 2007).

Reflecting these evolving views, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) updated its framework in 2015, underscoring the constructed and contextual nature of information literacy. Its *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* introduces foundational concepts including the principle that authority is constructed and contextual, recognizing the variance in what constitutes authority across different cultures (ACRL, 2015).

Research has shown that cultural factors significantly influence the credibility assessments made by individuals, including international students, who must navigate complex new informational and cultural landscapes (Limberg et al., 2012; Mansour & Francke, 2017). Studies have highlighted that international students' cultural backgrounds profoundly impact their evaluations of information credibility (Crist & Popa, 2020; Rodriguez, 2014); however, gaps remain in fully understanding the cultural and non-cultural factors influencing their credibility assessment challenges.

Online Ecology of Chinese International Students

The online information ecosystems vary significantly across countries, influenced by political, ideological, social, cultural, and economic factors, including governmental regulations, media ownership, and internet penetration rates (Ashley, 2019). In contrast to the relatively open online public sphere in the U.S., China's digital landscape is highly regulated, ranking as the least free among the 65 countries evaluated in Freedom House's global internet freedom assessment (Freedom House, 2025). Since 2009, major platforms like Google, Wikipedia, and Facebook have been blocked, promoting a more uniform and controlled dissemination of information (King et al., 2017).

As a result of this regulatory context, prior to studying abroad, Chinese students predominantly engage with a restricted digital environment, relying on domestically available services that are functionally similar to Western platforms (China Internet Watch, 2024). A study by Chen and Yang (2019) found that despite access to unblocked foreign content via VPN, many students chose not to explore these resources, indicating a tendency to adhere to familiar digital spaces.

Upon relocating, these students confront entirely new digital ecosystems, a transition that Chang and Gomes (2020) term "digital information ecologies," which describes the complex, context-dependent environments that shape how international students access and process information. This adjustment is compounded by cultural, academic, and informational shifts, increasing these students' vulnerability to misinformation, as they must navigate these unfamiliar terrains without the benefit of contextual familiarity (Porshnev et al., 2021). Further research by Gao (2023a) indicates that Chinese students in the U.S. display varying transnational information-seeking habits, influenced by the nature of the information they pursue.

Despite these challenges, research shows that multilingual international students can adeptly manage multiple information sources across different languages and cultural contexts (Reyes et al., 2018; Gao, 2023b). This ability not only counters the deficit narratives often associated with international students' information literacy but also highlights their capacity to utilize transnational information resources effectively.

Credibility Assessment and Chinese International Students

Studies indicate that international students frequently encounter noncredible, irrelevant, and outdated information, with difficulty assessing information quality being significantly higher among them compared to domestic peers (Click et al., 2017; Sin, 2015; Sin & Kim, 2018). Yoon and Chung (2017) documented how international students' information needs and behaviors evolved from pre-arrival through early settlement, with information credibility identified as a key concern throughout the transition.

Focusing on Chinese international students in the U.S., Rodriguez (2014) used the ACRL's earlier framework to reveal that these students often evaluate information based on the reputation and ranking of the source institution rather than content quality. Crist and Popa (2020) further explored these students' perceptions of "authority," showing a strong trust in teachers as credible sources. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, research showed that Chinese students relied heavily on information from China for making critical decisions regarding health, safety, and international travel (Gao & Kohnen, 2023).

Other studies have suggested that cultural differences in educational philosophy may underlie the challenges Chinese international students face in assessing information in the U.S. (Chan et al., 2011; Ku & Ho, 2010). Davies and Barnett (2015) argue that critical thinking, a key skill for evaluating information credibility and considering diverse viewpoints, has historically not been a focus in many Asian educational systems, potentially for centuries. Some other scholars show that Chinese students often struggle to meet the critical thinking standards expected in Western graduate programs (Lucas, 2019; Zhang, 2017). Furthermore, unlike the U.S., where the ACRL promotes information literacy as a core library objective, China does not have a comparable professional organization dedicated to this purpose.

This review highlights the pressing need to better understand how Chinese international students assess the credibility of information in unfamiliar digital environments, aiming to identify specific challenges they face and suggest targeted interventions.

Method

This study is a part of a larger research project employing a basic qualitative research approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to examine the online information-seeking experiences of Chinese international graduate students. The principal focus of the project was on understanding their literacy practices in information seeking, the evaluation of the credibility of online information originating from the U.S., and the sense making of these experiences by the students. Specifically, our research questions for this article were:

- What challenges do international graduate students from China encounter when assessing the credibility of U.S. online information?
- How do participants describe the factors influencing these challenges?

Participants

We employed a purposive sampling strategy to select six participants who represented information-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) from a large public university in the Southeastern United States. Participants met the following criteria: 1) they were born and they completed their entire K-16 education in mainland China and 2) they were enrolled in graduate programs within the College of Education.

Our criteria targeted individuals raised and educated in mainland China, particularly those with significant exposure to the mainland Chinese internet before beginning their graduate studies. This focus was chosen to understand the experiences of individuals transitioning between digital information environments. We specifically selected Chinese graduate students, who may possess more deeply rooted Chinese worldviews and cognitive patterns compared to undergraduates. To reduce variability in information literacy and credibility perceptions across disciplines, we limited our study to participants in the field of education. This group was also chosen due to the expectation that education majors would have a heightened aware-

ness of information literacy, which would be beneficial for their future careers. Additionally, our affiliation with the College of Education facilitated easier recruitment of these students.

We selectively invited participants from the eligible pool to ensure diversity in hometowns, family backgrounds, genders, degree programs, and year levels. All six participants arrived at or returned to the U.S. campus in August 2021 for the current academic semester, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 summarizes their demographic details.

TABLE 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Degree Program	Year Level[a]	Total Years of Studying in the U.S. at the Time of the First Interview
Yan	Female	22	Master's	2nd year	3 months
Xinxin	Female	23	Master's	2nd year	1 year and 3 months
Haiyang	Female	25	Master's	2nd year	1 year and 3 months
Cheng	Female	24	Ph.D.	1st year	1 year and 3 months[b]
Ling	Female	29	Ph.D.	1st year	2 years and 3 months[b]
Zhan	Male	29	Ph.D.	1st year	1 year and 3 months[b]

[a]The year level as reported by participants at the time of the first interview.
[b]Total time includes the time spent on their master's degree at a U.S. institution.

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of three rounds of semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006), weekly diaries documenting information-seeking activities, and a focus group discussion. Given the complex and contextual nature of information literacy (Hicks & Lloyd, 2016; Lloyd & Williamson, 2008), Seidman's approach was chosen to capture participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them.

Each of the three interviews focused on a specific aspect: the first addressed participants' online information-seeking experiences in China; the second explored their experiences in the U.S.; and the third reflected on the overall meaning of their information-seeking across contexts. On average, each interview lasted about 100 minutes and was conducted virtually due to the pandemic.

After the completion of the second interview, participants were also asked to maintain a weekly diary, documenting one information-seeking incident each week for four consecutive weeks. The diary was administered as an online questionnaire distributed every Friday. To further explore issues that may not have emerged in the interviews, a 95-minute focus group discussion was held (Krueger, 2014).

Interviews were conducted primarily in Mandarin Chinese, with occasional use of English, reflecting participants' linguistic preferences and comfort, particularly given the shared linguistic background between participants and the interviewer (the first author).

Data Analysis

Upon collecting the data, audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed directly in Mandarin, as recommended by Blair (2016), to preserve the nuances and complexities of participants' experiences. The transcriptions were then imported into NVivo 12 for qualitative

data analysis. The first author led the initial coding, focusing on segments related to participants' evaluations of online information in the U.S. context. This analysis leveraged the first author's fluency in Mandarin, ensuring an accurate interpretation of the data. Collaboration with the second author followed, facilitating discussions that identified areas needing further analysis.

The primary analysis centered on data from the second and third interviews, with the first interviews reviewed retrospectively to contextualize participants' experiences. This retrospective examination was crucial in understanding how past experiences influenced current evaluation practices. The analysis began with an initial interpretation of transcripts, applying tentative labels during the reading and marking process (Seidman, 2006).

The constant comparative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used to openly code the first participant's interview data; this process was subsequently applied to the other participants. Codes were refined and expanded as necessary, with earlier interviews revisited during each iteration to ensure consistency. The cross-participant analysis categorized data based on the challenges in assessing online credibility and the factors influencing these challenges. Recurring patterns and themes were identified through this method, supported by thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To strengthen the analysis, findings were triangulated with data from participants' diaries and focus group discussions, which helped confirm, expand, and clarify the results. Ongoing communication with participants ensured they reviewed and approved translated quotes and provided valuable feedback on the findings. This iterative process enriched the study's depth and reliability.

Findings

This study found that most Chinese international graduate students struggle to assess the credibility of U.S.-specific online content, often without realizing these difficulties. Three key factors contribute to these challenges: pre-existing views on authority; prior exposure to online information in China; and a sense of estrangement as outsiders in an unfamiliar online environment.

Impact of Sociocultural Beliefs on Authority

The challenges Chinese international students face in evaluating online credibility stem from deep-rooted sociocultural beliefs, as their inclination to trust traditional authority figures within Chinese culture often hinders their ability to accurately assess trustworthy sources in the U.S. context. Moreover, the professional presentation of U.S. websites often leads to an assumption of credibility based solely on formal aesthetics. Furthermore, a perceived hierarchy that prioritizes English over Chinese content diminishes their propensity to critically evaluate the credibility of English-language online information.

Preference for "Professional" Design

Participants tended to trust online sources with specific design features, reflecting an expectation from China that official websites adhere to formal visual standards. Ling noted, "All their websites look very organized and formal," while Haiyang observed, "Even small businesses have their own websites. They are highly functional, and you can make appointments there." These comments suggest that participants associated a conservative, official appearance with trustworthiness. This reliance on the formal and authoritative presentation style of U.S.-based

websites led participants to conclude that information from these sources was professional and credible.

This positive inclination toward professional-looking websites made participants vulnerable to credulity when encountering lesser-known English sources with polished designs. For example, Xinxin initially trusted an online English news article that appeared formal and reliable, assuming it was from an official U.S. news outlet. However, after watching a video that exposed the outlet's true nature, Xinxin realized the biased news was from a notorious content farm. Xinxin stated:

> Their website and newspaper name seemed authentic, so I believed their reports were objective ... But it turns out it's an Indian media outlet paid to spread fake articles bashing other countries, including China ... There's no actual newspaper, just an online news site.

Participants' reliance on visual cues led them to trust most U.S. websites, even those that weren't necessarily credible, and sometimes misjudge official sites lacking a polished aesthetic. For example, when searching for the official state curriculum standards website, Cheng initially questioned its legitimacy due to its less professional appearance, stating,

> I'm not familiar with this organization's abbreviation, and the flashy, cute design doesn't seem authoritative ... In China, official websites always look serious—like the National Education Examinations Authority (中国教育考试网), where the logo is on the top left.

Cheng's experience highlights how her cultural preference for formal website aesthetics initially hindered her recognition of an authentic U.S. educational website. In the United States, professionalism often includes diverse and dynamic visual designs that prioritize functionality, user-friendly interfaces, and informational clarity over traditional appearances. Official websites, particularly in contexts like K–12 education, may adopt a more approachable or playful design to connect with their audience. As participants adapted to the U.S. online environment, they had to learn to evaluate credibility beyond just visual design.

Information Hierarchy

Participants placed significant importance on website design when judging credibility in the U.S. context. However, they consistently trusted U.S. online information over content from China, reflecting a perceived linguistic and cultural hierarchy, possibly influenced by historical narratives of white supremacy.

Even in China, students showed a strong preference for English-language information, especially academic content—a tendency Ling described as "hard to explain and natural." This trust deepened over time through positive experiences with U.S. information during their studies in the U.S., where they had regular access to such content. All participants viewed U.S. information as exceptionally high-quality, trustworthy, and well-crafted. Xinxin shared these observations:

> I find myself trusting U.S. websites without really knowing why, probably because we've always put English on a pedestal in China. People who were good at English were respected, and now, English videos are considered as more advanced ... English sites like Wikipedia feel more credible than Chinese ones like Baidubaike[4] ... It's a hard bias to shake off, likely just the influence of white supremacy.

Xinxin's perceptions reveal an implicit bias that privileges information from certain countries, particularly English-dominant contexts. Her "inexplicable" trust in U.S. websites reflects widely circulated social narratives in China that associate English language with authority and global legitimacy. The mention of "white supremacy" underscores how these perspectives shape trust in information sources, with linguistic factors contributing to perceived credibility, as seen in the preference for English Wikipedia over Baidubaike.

This bias is further reinforced by the historical association of white supremacy with colonialism and imperialism (Mignolo, 2007), which has positioned U.S. information as more authoritative globally. Haiyang echoed this, acknowledging that her trust in U.S. sources might stem from cultural beliefs that place Western countries, especially the U.S., at the top of a global hierarchy:

> My trust in U.S. information likely comes from a belief that Western nations, especially the U.S., are more advanced and influential than China, despite my efforts to change this view ... I still feel their official information on medicine or technology is more reliable.

These dynamics likely made Haiyang and other participants more inclined to trust U.S. information without skepticism. Having experienced China's restricted and censored information landscape, which was often filled with homogeneous perspectives and limited viewpoint diversity, many participants perceived the U.S. information environment as more trustworthy. They believed U.S. sources offered greater opinion diversity, objectiveness, and transparency. As Haiyang put it, "I generally trust U.S. information more. It seems more transparent, like how the CDC openly states the negative effects of COVID-19 vaccines."

This perceived disparity in the quality and reliability of online information between China and the U.S. contributed to a bias favoring U.S. sources, potentially making participants more susceptible to trusting questionable U.S. information due to its perceived objectivity. These observations underscore the complex interplay of language, historical esteem, and global recognition in shaping trust biases, revealing a deeply ingrained and challenging bias among Chinese students toward U.S. information sources.

Influence from Digital Past

Students' previous experiences with online information significantly hindered their ability to assess credibility in the U.S. information landscape. Accustomed to a more restricted in-

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[4]*Baidubaike (百度百科) is a Chinese online encyclopedia operated by Baidu, similar to Wikipedia, but with content that is collaboratively edited under platform moderation and subject to China's regulatory and censorship framework.*

formation environment, they struggled to distinguish credible sources from misinformation. Disappointing experiences with Chinese search engines, coupled with challenges in finding reliable information, led them to place undue trust in U.S. sources. Additionally, their lack of information literacy education further disadvantaged them in navigating this new information environment.

From Walls to Open Horizons

Before studying abroad, Chinese students navigated a censored online environment limited by the Great Firewall,[5] distinct from the open internet in the United States. For instance, Ling recalled learning about the coronavirus in Wuhan, China, before "COVID-19" was even a term. She said,

> The Chinese media downplayed the virus, but my cousin, who checks international news through a VPN, wasn't so sure ... I know how the media in China can shape what people think, so I checked out foreign news with a VPN too, and it was a whole different story ... The English sites said it would be bad, so I got myself a bunch of masks, and they were right.

Ling's trust in English sources was validated by later events. However, after moving to the United States, she couldn't uncritically accept English content. This challenge was shared by all participants, whose previous isolation from a broader online environment may have led to an overreliance on English sources.

Participants found the transition from a censored to an open internet both refreshing and overwhelming. Some encountered videos and commentaries on Chinese political and historical events that differed from what they had learned in China. For instance, Cheng immersed herself in information pertaining to Chinese history. As she shared:

> I'm uncertain about these sources ... They present information in a documentary style that seems genuine, but it's hard to judge their reliability ... These reports contradict what I've seen online in China, but it's good to know alternative viewpoints.

Cheng struggled to assess the credibility of sources that conflicted with her prior knowledge, ultimately viewing them as just "alternate viewpoints." Similarly, Xinxin explored videos on Chinese history but, unlike Cheng, didn't focus on evaluating their credibility. Instead, she prioritized gaining diverse perspectives without concern for the accuracy of the information.

Trust Shaped by Disappointment

Negative experiences with Chinese search engines like Baidu[6] led participants to view Google and other American sources as more trustworthy. Many expressed frustrations with Baidu,

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[5]*Great Firewall (防火墙) is the government-imposed barriers that restrict and regulate internet access within mainland China.*

[6]*Baidu (百度) is a major Chinese technology company and the operator of Baidu Search, the most widely used search engine in China.*

citing its abundance of ads, perceived unreliability, and unhelpful search results. Zhan, for example, remarked, "I spent hours browsing ten web pages but found very little useful information. Baidu killed itself." Haiyang echoed this sentiment, saying, "I think Baidu is going to close down."

During their international travel amid the COVID-19 pandemic, participants uniformly avoided using Baidu for information, preferring Chinese social media platforms instead. Ling explained, "I never considered using Baidu to find a Chinese government website. I don't know which site to go to, and I doubt I'd quickly get the information I need." This avoidance reflects a general skepticism toward Baidu.

Conversely, participants had a positive view of Google, particularly compared to Baidu. They tended to trust top-ranked results on Google's first page, believing these results to be reliable. Haiyang remarked, "The first results should be good because they appear to everyone who enters the same search; otherwise, everyone would be fooled." Zhan also relied on a figure he found at the top of a Google search for pandemic updates. He noted:

> It was the top result on Google, and I trust Google. Their algorithm simplifies info processing and optimizes search results ... The figure looked authoritative. I think it is unquestionably reliable, so I didn't check the source or question its credibility.

Zhan's strong confidence in Google led him to accept the first figure he found in his pandemic search as "unquestionably reliable," without scrutinizing the source. This reflects the participants' deep trust in Google's ranking algorithm and its ability to streamline information.

Nevertheless, these students remained oblivious to the fact that not all U.S. online information is inherently reliable. The top-ranked Google search results can include sponsored content and be fraught with unreliability. Numerous studies have underscored the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation in the U.S. online landscape during the era of Web 3.0, particularly evident during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Grinberg et al., 2019) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Cinelli et al., 2020).

Information Wilderness

Before studying abroad, none of the students had received any form of information or media literacy education in China. Ling mentioned that the term "information literacy" was entirely new to her, and she first encountered it through participating in this study. All participants noted that their prior academic experiences in China lacked a focus on online information seeking, making their academic engagement in the U.S. significantly different. From elementary school through college in China, there was little expectation for students to independently gather information for academic work. Mandatory computer classes in elementary and middle school focused mainly on word processing and other basics. As Ling put it, "In our computer classes, we only learned basic office software, and the only information-related task was using Baidu to search with keywords." This pattern continued into college, where students rarely had to find their own online information sources. For example, Cheng shared:

> Here, it's common to bring laptops to class, but in China, we rarely do. We simply attend class, listen to lectures, complete assignments, and take exams ... And, like,

> for Teacher's Qualification Test, the college informs us of registration details and preparation requirements; we don't need to search for anything ourselves.

As these students transitioned to U.S. higher education, they entered an environment that prioritized independent study and critical thinking, requiring them to actively search for information as part of their graduate studies.

Estrangement as Outsiders

Participants' sense of estrangement as outsiders in the U.S. online environment hindered their ability to assess credibility. This estrangement stemmed from three factors: lack of familiarity with U.S. sources; linguistic and cultural differences that undermined confidence in evaluating English content; and the absence of accessible human sources for consultation.

Information Agility Divide

Most participants considered themselves skilled information seekers within China's online environment, reflecting a common tendency among youth to overestimate their information literacy (Rieh & Hilligoss, 2008). They expressed confidence in identifying misinformation on familiar platforms like WeChat.[7] While they took precautions to avoid scams, they did not systematically assess information credibility, believing that China's more restricted and straightforward information landscape made such scrutiny unnecessary compared to the U.S. context.

Participants were familiar with online phenomena unique to China. For example, Cheng recalled first encountering the "internet water army" while reading an entertainment story, sharing:

> I once searched for a movie star's scandal, saw biased comments under the video ... Later, I realized internet water armies were hired by companies for a fee ... they create fake accounts on [Chinese] social media to manipulate discussions and influence public opinion.

In addition, participants were confident in identifying "native advertising," wherein sponsors pay content creators to embed their brand or mission into the content. They were also aware that top-ranked advertisements on Baidu searches often lacked credibility.

Participants' proficiency in navigating the internet stemmed from their deep familiarity with Chinese online culture. Growing up in this digital landscape, they felt confident in their understanding of online behaviors, trends, and communication styles unique to China. Their exposure to Chinese social media platforms, search engines, and forums gave them insight into how information is disseminated and consumed. As a result, they believed they could "intuitively make reasonable judgments," as Xinxin put it, based on their knowledge of the information ecosystem and the typical traits of misinformation.

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[7] *WeChat (微信) is a versatile Chinese messaging, social media, and mobile payment app, offering features such as text messaging, voice and video calls, and financial services.*

In the United States, participants had to adopt new strategies for evaluating information. Like many of their U.S. counterparts, they relied on heuristics and shortcuts that are often unreliable indicators of credibility. For example, Ling viewed domain names (e.g., .com, .gov, .org) as the "sole criterion" for assessing U.S. content, while Zhan questioned, "What other indicators can be trusted if the official domain name fails?" Yan even believed that domain names were regulated by the government, further illustrating their reliance on these cues. Yan stated,

> The U.S. has taken rigorous measures in regulating and supervising the internet. So, their websites ending with formal domain names, like government or organization, can be trusted ... This high level of credibility is ensured by its network management system.

This misplaced trust in domain names is not unique to Chinese students, but the participants' level of confidence in domain names as a credibility indicator was particularly pronounced.

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

All participants perceived their status as cultural outsiders and their English language proficiency as barriers to evaluating English online content with the same confidence they had in navigating the Chinese online landscape. Haiyang, for example, viewed her "ease and familiarity of reading in Chinese" as a significant asset, while her lack of familiarity with English made evaluating U.S. content challenging. Other participants shared this sentiment, noting that they could quickly assess the formality, reliability, and nature of Chinese content based on linguistic cues alone, without needing to reference the source.

However, when consuming English content, challenges arose. Haiyang admitted, "When I read English website content, I can only say I read and try to understand it, but it's uncertain to what extent I grasp it. Sometimes, I lose my discernment." The cognitive effort required to comprehend English left little capacity for evaluating credibility. Xinxin also struggled, recalling an experience with an online promotion for a SIM card: "I decided to get a new SIM card for my phone, but I was still uncertain about the details ... I was worried about misunderstanding something and whether it was genuinely real."

These obstacles stem from three main factors. First, the English learned in China is academically oriented, making it difficult for participants to distinguish appropriate expressions for different online contexts. As a result, webpages often appeared similar to them, lacking clear language style cues for credibility. Second, understanding "internet Englishes"—including colloquial expressions, abbreviations, and slang—proved challenging for students who learned English as a foreign language. Lastly, the mental effort required to code-switch and comprehend English content online diminished their focus on evaluating its credibility.

The cultural nuances embedded in U.S. online information make it difficult for Chinese students to discern misinformation. While participants were confident in spotting obvious advertisements, they struggled with subtler tactics unfamiliar in China. For instance, Zhan stated, "I can easily recognize blatantly false information like fake advertisements, but I might not detect it if there's an intentional trap." His concern reflects the challenge of identifying deceptive content that uses selective presentation or ambiguity to mislead.

Participants also faced difficulties due to a lack of cultural background knowledge. Zhan, for example, described feeling cautious and somewhat helpless when trying to gather trustworthy information for purchasing a car in the United States saying, "I perceive myself as a conservative person. I had to have 100% trust in information to guide my actions." As he elaborated:

> I don't know much about English terms for buying a car or insurance, so I googled 'car dealer + [city name]'. But I just browsed because I couldn't judge credibility; I am not familiar with those dealers ... I compared prices and read comments, but if I am in China, I'd just go to Dianping[8] and find everything quickly.

Zhan's attempt to use English-language platforms like Google to gather information on purchasing a car highlights a strong sense of alienation. Despite similarities between Google reviews and niche Chinese websites, he struggled due to linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with the specific context. His limited knowledge of car-related terminology and unfamiliarity with dealerships intensified this feeling of disconnection. While the process of researching online for car buying may resemble practices in China, the accumulation of subtle differences creates a distinctly challenging experience. Zhan's difficulties underscore the complex challenges of navigating a foreign information landscape for critical daily decisions, where language barriers, unfamiliar information sources, and lack of culturally contextualized knowledge pose significant obstacles.

Absence of Human Sources

Participants' sense of estrangement stemmed from being physically distant from their familiar support networks. In China, they had access to family, friends, and acquaintances for advice and information. In the United States, however, they lacked these human resources, forcing them to rely on the internet even when they felt uncomfortable doing so. Haiyang specifically highlighted this lack of support, emphasizing the challenge it posed, sharing,

> In China, I didn't always rely on the internet. I could get information from people around me ... When I first came to the United States, I wasn't used to using online resources, but I realized it's necessary because I can't always rely on other international students. In China, I could easily ask for help, but here, I'm less likely to.

Even though all participants were connected with other Chinese students studying at the same university, Haiyang noted that these peers weren't always the best source of information. Instead of turning to them, or to other human sources from the university or her peer group, Haiyang felt that she needed to seek out her own information. Zhan appeared to agree with Haiyang:

> We don't need to search online much in China; info on things like baby formula and newborn care just comes to us through people around us ... But here, I have

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[8]*Dianping (大众点评网) is a popular Chinese online platform that provides user-generated reviews and ratings for various businesses and services, such as restaurants, hotels, shops, and entertainment venues.*

> to actively search, mostly online ... It feels different; people rely on online info and like to find things themselves.

For Haiyang and Zhan, the absence of trusted human sources in the United States compelled them to adopt an active information-seeking approach (Kohnen & Saul, 2018). In contrast, they relied on incidental encounters with offline information from real people in China. Zhan acknowledged the abundance of "good online info" in the United States, hinting that quality information is harder to find in China. Both participants suggested that independent information gathering is more valued in the United States.

In the example of Zhan's car-buying experience, he emphasized that "in China, if I'm uncertain about online information, I can simply ask my friends." This highlights how people around them serve as reliable information sources. Jing echoed this sentiment, noting that in China, "one can navigate life without the need to actively seek out information." As she detailed,

> In China, staying informed is easy; information is readily available. As a student, everything I need is shared in our class WeChat group ... I'm surrounded by classmates and friends discussing these topics, so I confidently follow their lead. I won't miss anything important.

The availability of human sources in China creates a strong support system for navigating information. When uncertainties arise, seeking clarification from friends helps verify and contextualize information, enhancing comprehension and informed decision-making. However, this reliance on social networks for information verification poses a significant challenge for international students abroad, where the lack of accessible human resources in a new cultural and social environment becomes a major obstacle.

Discussion and Implications

While Chinese international students share some challenges with domestic students, this research uncovers distinct dimensions unique to this demographic. The findings reveal that these students often struggle to assess the credibility of U.S. online content, frequently without being fully aware of their difficulties. Their judgments are significantly influenced by pre-existing understandings of authority and prior experiences with the internet in China. Furthermore, their sense of estrangement, rooted in their outsider status within an unfamiliar online environment, exacerbates these challenges. This study underscores the complex interplay of sociocultural, political, and educational factors in shaping their credibility assessments.

Building on the foundational work of Crist and Popa (2020), and Rodriguez (2014), which highlighted the information literacy challenges faced by Chinese international students, particularly their reliance on culturally ingrained notions of authority, this study extends the discourse by uncovering more intricate reasons behind their credibility assessment difficulties. Our findings reveal that these challenges are not merely a product of cultural transfer but are deeply embedded in a complex interplay of historical, socio-cultural, political, and linguistic factors. This nuanced understanding highlights how these elements collectively influence the ways in which Chinese international students evaluate online information credibility in the U.S. context.

Moreover, our research diverges from the predominant focus of prior studies, which have largely concentrated on international students' information practices within academic settings (e.g., Reyes et al., 2018). While academic information-seeking remains crucial, our findings echo the work of Hertzum and Hyldegård (2019), who argue for the importance of information needs related to everyday life. The experiences shared by our participants demonstrate the breadth of their information-seeking activities, ranging from staying updated on pandemic developments to engaging with social media, purchasing cars, and navigating promotional offers for acquiring SIM cards. These diverse information needs underscore the importance of considering the full spectrum of information practices that shape the everyday lives of international students.

This study offers critical insights for literacy scholars, academic librarians, and U.S. higher education institutions engaging with international multilingual students. First, it highlights the need for further research into how information literacy intersects diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such research should aim to deepen understanding of students' assessment practices and perceptions, thereby enabling educators to effectively bridge the information literacy gap through culturally and linguistically tailored approaches.

Additionally, the findings underscore the necessity for U.S. academic librarians to develop targeted interventions to enhance the information evaluation skills of these students. Echoing Hicks (2016), the study advocates for curricula and instructional strategies that are customized for culturally and linguistically diverse populations, moving beyond a generic, one-size-fits-all approach. This includes sensitizing students to cultural variations in perceptions of authority and credibility, which can significantly influence their academic engagement and success.

Furthermore, the research calls for U.S. higher education institutions to proactively support the integration of Chinese international students. This involves understanding and addressing their unique challenges related to sociocultural adaptation, linguistic barriers, and digital literacy. Institutions can provide targeted resources and support mechanisms that address these students' specific needs from the onset of their academic journey, potentially through pre-arrival and early semester interventions such as virtual seminars or workshops. These initiatives could ideally be designed and led by experienced international students, enhancing relevance and efficacy.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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