

# Social network sites and the ideal L2 self: Using Myspace in a Chinese EFL class

**James A. Kelley**

Tianjin University, PR China  
jakelle@memphis.edu

*Little work has yet explored the potential for the use of social network sites (SNSs) in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, but recent trends in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) research suggest that SNSs may be a powerful context for language learning by offering students access to online communities of practice and/or imagined communities (as interpreted by Norton et al.). This paper reports on an exploratory study of how the use of an American-based SNS in a Chinese EFL class affected student motivation. Results suggest that SNS may be particularly useful in fostering attitudes traditionally related to integrativeness through the creation of imagined communities when viewed through Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System.*

## Introduction

### *Playing in the park 2.0*

Throughout my years living, studying and teaching abroad, mostly in mainland China, whenever I felt my language learning routine growing stale or found myself drawing away from the local culture, all I needed to do was go outside. Usually I “retreated” to a public park or a street-side food stall. Mostly I would just sit. Sit and watch. Sometimes someone might engage me in conversation or I might be unable to contain my curiosity and begin asking silly, “foreigner” questions. More often than not, however, this experience of being out and about, being among, if not with, the locals helped me feel better. I do not know that it increased my communicative competence or directly fostered social connections that would lead to greater

cultural understanding, but I usually felt better and had found something to spark renewed interest in language and culture learning: old couples waltzing; young kids trying to get a flimsy kite to fly; teenage couples trying not to be seen; an old man and his bucket of water, painting Chinese characters on the concrete with a giant brush. Sometimes for this introvert in a foreign country, there was no substitute for such unmediated public spaces.

In their recent introduction to a special issue on social network sites (SNSs), Boyd [sic] and Ellison (2008) describe Myspace and Facebook as “‘networked publics’ that support sociability, just as unmediated public spaces do” (p. 221). Much like my own experience in such public places in foreign countries, these networked public places have different groups engaged at different levels and doing a number of different things together. Like their non-virtual counterparts, these networked public spaces can serve a vital purpose in cultural and linguistic learning. These 21st century gathering places are a largely untapped arena for language development, whose benefits may be particularly useful to EFL students.

## Literature review

### *L2 identities and the Internet*

There has been a steady shift since the 1990s in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) research toward an understanding of the complex learner and the learning context. Much of this research has built upon poststructural or constructivist views of the self, positing the self as multiple, contradictory, and a site of struggle (Norton, 1995, 2001; Pavlenko, 2001; Gao, 2007; Park, 2007; Lam, 2004; Canagarajah, 2006; McKinney & Norton, 2008; Norton & Gao, 2008). This work has often attempted to challenge older, more static notions of the self and add complexity to our ideas of the self and identity, making them context specific, fluid, and co-constructed through dynamic social processes. The application of these theories and concepts to the field of TESOL has created a number of new avenues for discussion and research that tries to more clearly reflect the natural depth and complexity of language learning.

Part of this widening view of the learner is a consideration of how imagination might play a crucial role in language learning (Norton, 1995, 2000, 2001; Lam, 2004; Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Carroll, Motha, & Price, 2008). Norton’s work describes language learning as “help[ing] us attain the identities we desire” (2001, p. 166) and as such is aimed toward future identities and anchored in the imagination. This emphasis on “future selves” demands a work of the imagination, but is also always socially situated. In explicating this notion, Norton borrows from Benedict Anderson’s (1991) idea of “imagined communities.” A number of researchers (Pavlenko, 2001; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Dörnyei, 2005; Carroll et al., 2008; Gao & Xiu, 2008; Gu, 2008; Gu, 2009) have deployed this notion of imagined communities in an effort to describe more accurately the goals and pathways of language learning in today’s Global/World English context.

Dörnyei (2005) describes the notion of imagined communities (in its language learning sense) as useful in describing, “various international or World English identities... as these identities concern membership in a virtual language community” (p. 98). This research field has emphasized how imagined communities – while virtual and conceived of in the imagination – can be a significant motivating factor for language learning. Norton and Gao (2008) give one description of an imagined community for a group of language learners in China: “English is not only associated with the target language culture, but an

imagined community of ‘Chinese elites’” (p. 111). Dörnyei’s (2005) work emphasizes the way that imagined communities are related to the “idealized L2-speaking self” whose “mental construction is partly based on our real-life experiences of members of the community/communities speaking the particular L2 in question and partly on our imagination” (p. 102).

While there has been much work that has explored the connection between language learning and the development of L2 identities and imagined communities, little research has yet to explore this connection in the light of recent technological trends – especially the popular rise of SNSs. Research on SNSs, itself, has focused extensively on issues of identity (boyd, 2006; Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008; Kelley, 2009; Mallan & Giardina, 2009; Pearson, 2009; Sessions, 2009). This work has been useful in explicating the fluid, interactive, and often co-constructed nature of identity on SNSs. The co-constructed nature of identity on these sites, what Mallan & Giardina (2009) call “wikidentities,” could be viewed as a reification of the participatory social processes of learning (Wenger, 1998), one in which the context is an “ego-centric” collection of “friends” arranged around one’s self (boyd & Ellison, 2008). While the above studies have largely been done in the fields of communication and computer-mediated communication (CMC), the insights into the nature of identity on SNSs align well with recent social and poststructural theories of language learning. These sites allow for a more overtly constructed version of the self; i.e., one that can reflect an “imagined self” (Sanderson, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008; Sessions, 2009). This view of the self, with its emphasis on fluidity and imagination, is not simply a tenet of self-presentation and CMC in the Internet age. It is also a crucial concept in some recent research into motivation and L2 learning.

### *Integrative motivation, investment, and the ideal L2 self*

Imagination factors importantly in Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System. In this model, motivation is cast, essentially as “perceived discrepancies between the learner’s actual and possible selves” (Dörnyei, 2009, p.29). This reformulation seeks to maintain the core of Gardner’s influential concepts *integrative motivation/integrativeness*, defined in its most recent formulation (Gardner, 2001) as “a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community” (p. 5), while adding the cognitive and process-based insights of the last three decades of research (Dörnyei, 2005 for his overview). Where Gardner and associates’ integrative motivation was developed (and often proved most useful) in bilingual Canada, Dörnyei’s model seeks to be more useful in the new climate of globalization and World Englishes (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). This context, in which the concept of *integration* is less salient than in the original Canadian contexts, makes concepts like “native speaker” and even “language community” less meaningful. Dörnyei’s (2009) L2 Motivational Self System conceives integrative motivation as the *ideal L2 self*, containing what the learner aspires to become through language learning, attitudes toward L2 speakers (the closest approximation to *target language/culture* we have), and the *instrumental* benefits to come through language learning (p. 29).

Dörnyei’s work has not drawn specifically on Norton’s (1995, 2001) notion of *investment* – that critiqued the static nature of motivation as conceived in previous SLA research – but it offers a framework for understanding motivation that includes her idea of flexible/ changing notions of the self and the social transactional nature of language learning (i.e. students *invest* in identities to get cultural resources). Dörnyei’s (2005) analysis of the

interrelationship between motivational variables showed *instrumentality* (conceived of as a “practical/utilitarian dimension associated with the concrete benefits that language proficiency might bring about” p. 70) and *attitudes toward L2 speakers* as direct antecedents to *integrativeness* (see Figure 2 below). Dörnyei (2005, 2009) points out that this suggests integrativeness is still a crucial – if bigger and wider than had been imagined – element in the motivational picture.

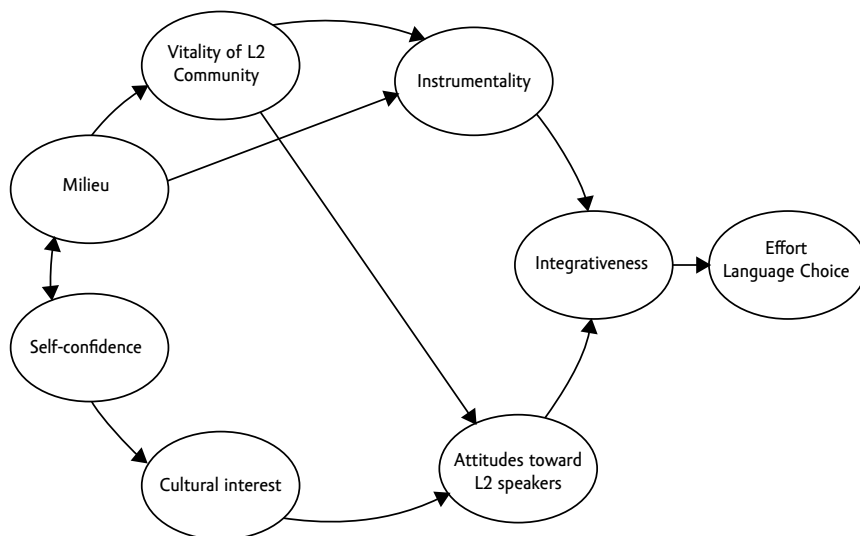


Figure 1. The interrelationship of the motivational variables and the criterion measures (from Dörnyei, 2005, p. 102)

With this expanded notion of integrativeness – one that sees it to contain ideals about the self (future possible selves and imagined identities) and how these identities might be socially actualized (imagined communities) – it seems natural to examine the ways that *SNSs* (with their focus on identity creation) might make such identity work more meaningful for language learners. “Technology can create new social contexts that shape how learning takes place” (Warschauer, 2004, p. 15) and *SNSs* may be one such empowering context with their emphasis on identity creation through interaction and a theoretically global reach.

### Motivation research in Chinese EFL

For much of the history of English teaching in China, motivation research has focused on linguistic outcomes (Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2007, give a good overview of such research). More recently, however, research has begun to explore issues of identity and a “self-concept” in Chinese *EFL* learners (Gao, Cheng, Zhao, & Zhou, 2005; Gao, 2007; Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2007; Gao X., Cheng, & Kelly, 2008, Gu, 2008, 2009). This work has shown that language learning can be associated with identity change in Chinese *EFL* settings, resulting in increased global self-confidence (Gao, Cheng, Zhao, & Zhou, 2005; Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2007) and viewed as a tool for developing a “desired social status

and identity” (Gao X., Cheng, & Kelly, 2008, p. 24). These results suggest that Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System (with its expanded view of integrativeness to include notions of the self) might be a useful theoretical framework for further motivation research in China.

In describing avenues for future motivation research in his 2005 study, Dörnyei pointed out the dominant theme of *context*. Based on poststructural and constructivist views of the self, research on the L2 self cannot be separated from that of the learning environment. Yang (2008) emphasizes the important role of the teacher on motivation in the Chinese EFL context, noting that “the language teacher is critical because s/he teaches the language and often is the first person, and commonly the only person, to introduce the language to the students and the only person who uses the language whom students can contact” (p. 95). This suggests one way in which the learning environment might be related to attitudes toward L2 speakers and integrative motivation. This motivational affect of the teacher could easily be intensified by the teacher being from an English speaking country (as *foreign teachers* often are in China) and therefore seen to be a direct representative of the L2 culture.

The role of the teacher and specific learning environments has started to be empirically tested using Dörnyei’s identity-based motivation model. One such study is Cheng & Dörnyei (2007) in which they replicate a study of motivational strategies used by Hungarian teachers (Dörnyei & Cziser, 1998) with EFL teachers in Taiwan. This study, among other things, reported two “trouble spots” or underutilized macrostrategies for motivation in the Taiwanese context: making the learning tasks stimulating and familiarizing learners with L2-related culture (p. 172). The present study seeks to continue this exploration of how specific learning contexts and strategies might benefit language learners. While Halvorsen (2009) and McCarty (2009) commented on the motivating affect of SNS site use in a Japanese EFL context, this paper seeks to begin an empirical exploration of how SNS contexts might best be used and begins that conversation by attempting to measure changes to attitudes related to integrative or ideal L2 self-related motivation in a group of Chinese EFL learners.

## Method

### Research questions

Due to the social nature of interaction, the inherent support of “sociability,” and the emphasis on “imagined identities” in SNSs, it is hypothesized that adding a component of such work to an EFL class might be effective in raising students’ integrative/ideal L2 self attitudes toward motivation. Also, because of the multimodal and user-controlled nature of presentation and communication on such sites, it is hypothesized that previously less motivated students might feel more motivated by the SNS context. In an effort to explore these hypotheses, the following research questions were explored:

1. Is there any correlation between SNS work and comparative increases in survey measures of integrative-related motivation?
2. Does SNS work affect those more/less integratively motivated more acutely?
3. Do any specific elements of student motivation show signs of being impacted by the use of SNSs?

### *Teaching and data collection context*

The research site was a large urban university in mainland China and the participants were all non-English major first year graduate students. Eight classes of Advanced Level Oral English students participated in the study and each class consisted of students from different majors. Four of the classes (N=124) were presented with the option of creating SNS profiles and submitting written work using site tools for the duration of the term (+SNS) with the remaining four classes (N=129) acting as a control group (-SNS). I acted as participant-researcher and *foreign teacher* by instructing all eight classes of students based on the same syllabus that focused on intercultural communication activities and student-led small group discussions. Each class met once a week for two sessions of 45 minutes and the teaching term lasted 15 weeks. Class sizes ranged from 29 to 34 students.

At the beginning of the term, students in +SNS classes were invited to visit the instructor's Myspace profile page, join the US version of Myspace, and "friend" the instructor. The decision to use Myspace was based on its popularity with American youth (in an effort to create the possibility of a more authentic intercultural audience); its relatively open access in China (at the outset of the project, most functions were accessible, whereas Facebook, another popular American-based SNS, was completely inaccessible without virtual private network (VPN) access); and the precedent for its motivation-generating use in Japanese EFL classes (Halvorsen, 2009). There was enthusiastic participation in this phase of the activity with many students publishing blogs before any instructions or assignments had been given and making "friends" outside their circle of classmates (interestingly, many of these "friends" were independent English musicians who aggressively promote themselves on Myspace).

Throughout the semester, +SNS students were asked to post their language learning journals on their own profile page blogs. These assignments asked them to reflect on their experiences and prepare for specific speaking activities. Discussion topics, in which each student was responsible for preparing an introduction and list of discussion questions for a topic of their choice, were also posted. In addition, students were given the opportunity to turn them in on paper. Again, participation was almost one hundred percent with only two of 124 +SNS students posting no blogs. In addition, +SNS students were invited to visit their classmates' sites and comment on their work. -SNS classes participated in the same activities and assignments but turned their journals and discussion materials (topic introduction and list of questions) in on paper. The student-led small group discussions in both -SNS and +SNS were conducted in class during class time while all SNS work was done as homework outside of class. All students had access to internet-connected computers in the university computer labs and most reported having Internet access in their dorm rooms.

### *Questionnaire instrument*

At the beginning of the term each of the eight classes was administered a bilingual questionnaire that collected demographic data, technological variables, and information about students' integrative/self-related attitudes toward motivation in the form of 19 six-point Likert scale items (See Appendix). At the end of the term, all students were asked to respond to the same questionnaire with an abbreviated version of the variables sections and the identical motivation-related items.

(2005, 2007) in analyzing the motivation and identity change in Chinese undergraduate students. Gao et al.'s studies considered a wider range of motivation orientations with a much larger population. Items from Gao et al.'s studies were selected based on their perceived value for analyzing integrative-related and investment/L2 ideal self-related motivation. Other items were adapted or added to reflect the researcher's particular interest in and understanding of the current shift in the integrative model based largely on the reviewed work of Norton (1995, 2001) and Dörnyei (2005, 2009).

## Analysis

Pre- and post-test results to the motivation questions were averaged separately and compared for each participant to give each student a *change value*. Change values were compared between **-SNS** and **+SNS** groups; less integratively motivated students (**LOW INT** or *those posting below the mean value for integrative motivation in pre-questionnaire*); and more integratively motivated students (**HIGH INT** or *those above the mean in pre results*). In addition, change values for each motivation item were averaged and ranked for both **-SNS** and **+SNS** groups in order to see if there might be any correlation between **SNS** work and changes in specific questionnaire item responses.

## Results and discussion

### *Narrative description and local limitations*

While initial student response to Myspace was strong and the site seemed to provide relatively open access (with the notable exception of online chat), as student involvement began to increase the availability of certain functions in Myspace became progressively limited. Soon after the initial wave of student profile creation, participants attempting to post comments on each other's profile pages were greeted with the following message:

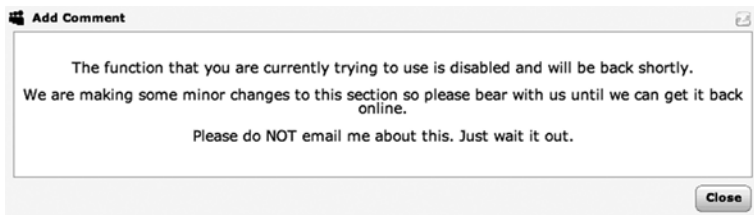


Figure 2. Myspace-generated error message

After the first few weeks of students adding photos and setting up profiles, attempts to add new pictures were frustrated and then weeks later viewing pictures was met with the same result. These efforts were not met with the seemingly Myspace-generated error message, but instead were continually re-routed until the browser reported failure (MacKinnon, 2009 gives a fuller description of this phenomenon), suggesting that this was due to the Chinese "Great Firewall's" filtering.

Despite these limitations, participants were still able to post blogs, respond to blogs, and

leave and respond to status updates (short messages posted on their home page intended to answer the question *What are you doing right now?*). Many students continued to do this enthusiastically and used status updates to express frustration or dismay with the limits of other functions. These posts themselves became an interesting expression of participants using available resources in unintended ways toward their communicative goals (as described in Mallan & Giardina, 2009). Finally, with two weeks left in the teaching term, attempts to read blogs and view profiles were met with the same failure to connect that previously frustrated the posting and viewing of photos. At the time of writing, the only modes of participation still open were the posting of status updates and sending of private messages. Students continued to share frustration and dismay about the inaccessibility of the site through status updates until the end of the term.

### Questionnaire results

Despite the above limitations, some statistically significant changes seemed to emerge between -SNS and +SNS groups suggesting that future projects with increased access and functionality might prove even more useful toward affecting student integrative/ideal self-related motivation.

#### 1. Is there any correlation between SNS work and comparative increases in survey measures of integrative-related motivation?

All eight classes reported a mean increase in the integrative/ideal self measure, suggesting that this increase might be a function of the learning environment in general rather than the use of SNS. It is worth noting that the participant-researcher was also a *foreign teacher* (from the United States) and therefore could be seen as representing an L2 speaking community. Dörnyei (2005) points out that attitudes toward L2 speakers is a direct antecedent to *integrativeness* and Yang (2008) emphasizes the important role of the English teacher in motivation for Chinese students. Future work might specifically explore the role of the foreign teacher in Dörnyei's self system.

Though all classes reported increases in the motivation measure, the individual class means show that all +SNS classes posted statistically significant changes and accounted for four of the five highest mean change values among the eight classes (Table 1). These results seem to suggest that all classes experienced an increase in integrative/self-related motivation and this affect might have been intensified by the use of SNS.



Table 1: Class by class mean changes and ranks

Group/Class	Pre	Post	Change	P-Value (Pre/Post)	Rank (1 = most change)
-SNS 1 (N = 30)	M = 3.74 SD = 0.35	M = 3.86 SD = 0.40	M = 0.12 SD = 0.43	P = 0.1349	8
2 (N = 25)	M = 3.80 SD = 0.51	M = 4.11 SD = 0.46	M = 0.3074 SD = 0.44	P = **0.0019	4
3 (N = 22)	M = 3.93 SD = 0.45	M = 4.06 SD = 0.44	M = 0.13 SD = 0.46	P = 0.1919	7
4 (N = 26)	M = 3.98 SD = 0.50	M = 4.16 SD = 0.48	M = 0.18 SD = 0.39	P = *0.0268	6
ALL -SNS (N = 103)	M = 3.85 SD = 0.46	M = 4.03 SD = 0.46	M = 0.18 SD = 0.43	P = ***0.0001	
+SNS 1 (N = 26)	M = 3.87 SD = 0.45	M = 4.21 SD = 0.53	M = 0.34 SD = 0.38	P = ***0.0001	1
2 (N = 28)	M = 3.94 SD = 0.57	M = 4.24 SD = 0.55	M = 0.3083 SD = 0.38	P = ***0.0002	3
3 (N = 27)	M = 3.84 SD = 0.45	M = 4.17 SD = 0.38	M = 0.33 SD = 0.38	P = ***0.0001	2
4 (N = 24)	M = 3.95 SD = 0.50	M = 4.18 SD = 0.43	M = 0.23 SD = 0.42	P = *0.0118	5
ALL +SNS (N = 105)	M = 3.90 SD = 0.49	M = 4.20 SD = 0.48	M = 0.31 SD = 0.39	P = ***0.0001	
ALL +/- (N = 208)	M = 3.88 SD = 0.47	M = 4.12 SD = 0.47	M = 0.25 SD = 0.41	P = ***0.0001	

\* = statistically significant

\*\* = very statistically significant

\*\*\* = extremely statistically significant

## 2. Does SNS work affect more/less integratively motivated students more acutely?

While the group exhibiting lower integrative motivation values at the beginning of the study (**LOW INT**) did show more significant overall changes in motivation when compared to the **HIGH INT** group, this was to be expected based on their lower base motivation values. Within the **LOW INT** group the difference in mean change values between **-SNS** and **+SNS** groups was not statistically significant, suggesting, again, that their increases might be a function of the general language learning environment in addition to their lower base levels of integrative motivation. Surprisingly though, when the **HIGH INT** groups were compared, a statistically significant difference emerged between **-SNS** ( $M = 0.03$ ) and **+SNS** ( $0.20$ ) groups ( $p = *0.0124$ ).

Table 2: Mean change values for LOW/HIGH INT

Group	Pre	Post	Change	P-Value (Pre/Post)
LOW INT (N=99)	M=3.47 SD=0.27	M=3.86 SD=0.40	M=0.39 SD=0.42	P=***0.0001
-SNS (N=51)	M=3.47 SD=0.28	M=3.81 SD=0.42	M=0.34 SD=0.44	P=***0.0001
+SNS (N=48)	M=3.47 SD=0.26	M=3.90 SD=0.38	M=0.44 SD=0.40	P=***0.0001
HIGH INT (N=109)	M=4.25 SD=0.27	M=4.36 SD=0.40	M=0.12 SD=0.36	P=**0.0010
-SNS (N=52)	M=4.23 SD=0.22	M=4.26 SD=0.38	M=0.03 SD=0.36	P=0.5873
+SNS (N=57)	M=4.26 SD=0.31	M=4.46 SD=0.39	M=0.20 SD=0.34	P=***0.0001

\*=statistically significant

\*\*=very statistically significant

\*\*\*=extremely statistically significant

The hypothesis that the use of **SNS** would lead to more integrative change for less integratively motivated learners was based on the multimodal nature of communication on these sites, a condition that, in the end, was compromised in the present study due to the local access and functional limitations of Myspace in China. This may be a question still worth investigating with a fully functional **SNS** that offers learners an array of levels and approaches to participation. More interestingly, though, was how the **SNS** appears to have affected the more integratively motivated students. This could be a function of such motivated students seeking out opportunities to interact with the **L2** community (as suggested by Gardner, 1991, p. 50–51) and the **SNS** allowed them another context in which to do so. This possibility points out the importance of measuring habits of participation in future studies of **SNS** use.

### 3. What specific elements of student motivation (if any) show signs of being impacted by the use of **SNS**s?

The aim of this question was (a bit more theoretically) to attempt a preliminary exploration of what specific student attitudes **SNS** work might target in order to see how they might best be strategically deployed in **TESOL**. The items that experienced the highest mean change values among both **-SNS** and **+SNS** were related to the language learning environment. Both groups exhibited significant change in attitudes toward motivation based on their fellow students (item F in Table 3). This affect seems to be a function of the general class environment and more particularly the mixed-major nature of the classes and the student-led small group discussion activities. In their language learning journals, several students commented on their excitement about being in classes with others from outside their major and how much they enjoyed leading and participating in discussions based on student interests.

Other changes associated with the learning environment showed signs of being intensified by the use of the **SNS**. The *affect of the teacher* (item C) and the *quality of the class* (item

D) showed significant attitudinal changes in ways that did not appear as conspicuously in -SNS results. Also, the item M and P results suggest that attitudes toward cultural interest products might have been impacted by the integration of SNS.

Table 3: -SNS significant questionnaire item results

Questionnaire item	-SNS Pre N = 103	-SNS Post N = 103	-SNS change N = 103	-SNS P-value
F) My desire to learn English depends on whether I like my fellow students in the English classes.	M=2.59 SD=1.01	M=3.20 SD=1.12	M=0.61	P=***0.0001
C) My desire to learn English depends on whether I like my teacher or not.	M=3.18 SD=1.28	M=3.33 SD=1.22	M=0.15	P=0.2947
D) My desire to learn English depends on the quality of my English classes.	M=3.86 SD=1.34	M=4.07 SD=1.18	M=0.20	P=0.1700
M) I have developed an interest in English because of my love for English songs and movies.	M=4.66 SD=1.06	M=4.80 SD=0.99	M=0.14	P=0.1626
O) I learn English in order to let the world know more about China.	M=4.00 SD=1.12	M=4.05 SD=0.92	M=0.05	P=0.6801
P) I am interested in English because of my love of English literature.	M=3.32 SD=1.08	M=3.54 SD=1.03	M=0.22	P=*0.0313

Table 4: +SNS significant questionnaire item results

Questionnaire item	+SNS Pre N = 105	+SNS Post N = 105	+SNS change N = 105	+SNS P-value
F) My desire to learn English depends on whether I like my fellow students in the English classes.	M=2.87 SD=1.23	M=3.54 SD=1.19	M=0.68	P=***0.0001
C) My desire to learn English depends on whether I like my teacher or not.	M=3.49 SD=1.39	M=4.02 SD=1.26	M=0.53	P=***0.0001
D) My desire to learn English depends on the quality of my English classes.	M=3.98 SD=1.37	M=4.44 SD=1.00	M=0.46	P=***0.0004
M) I have developed an interest in English because of my love for English songs and movies.	M=4.51 SD=1.11	M=4.87 SD=0.98	M=0.35	P=***0.0001
O) I learn English in order to let the world know more about China.	M=4.10 SD=1.08	M=4.35 SD=0.99	M=0.26	P=**0.0061
P) I am interested in English because of my love of English literature.	M=3.15 SD=1.04	M=3.56 SD=0.99	M=0.41	P=***0.0001

\*=statistically significant

\*\*=very statistically significant

\*\*\*=extremely statistically significant

These more detailed results suggest that SNS could be effective for fostering imagined communities as conceived in the reviewed literature. All these classes (-SNS and +SNS) showed signs of building a sort of learning community – what we might call *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998) – and this was related to their desire to learn English. This affect was intensified only a hair by SNS, but their attitudes toward more *virtual* and *imagined communities* (here represented by L2 cultural products) did show signs of being significantly impacted by SNS work. In fact, the notion of *imagined communities* when considered with Dörnyei's (2005) description of the interrelationship of motivation variables (see Figure 1 above) aids greatly in making a coherent picture of these findings.

Movies and literature were not a component of the class at all (though a small amount of music was used) making the +SNS specific comparative increases to items M and P quite surprising. However, if these items are viewed as *cultural interest* products and related to Dörnyei's (2005) analysis, we can see them as directly related to *Attitudes toward L2 Speakers*. When these results are combined with the response to item C (about the teacher) and the teacher is viewed as an L2 speaker and representative of L2 culture then a fuller picture of SNSs as impacting traditional *integrativeness* (which Dörnyei, 2009 equates with the *ideal L2 self*) via *cultural products and attitudes toward L2 speakers* begins to emerge.

This integrative/ideal self-affect seems to be corroborated by another item that showed signs of possibly being affected by SNS work (item O): *I learn English in order to let the world know more about China*. This item includes an element of the *ought-to L2 self*, described by Dörnyei, 2009 as “the attributes that one believes one *ought to* possess to meet expectations and *avoid* possible negative outcomes” p. 29 (italics in the original). It also includes the notion of intercultural exchange – though, it should be noted, in a more egocentric, student-purposed way. This could be interpreted as a kind of *pushing back* against the pressure of foreign cultural influence or viewed more neutrally as leveling the exchange of cultures. The item results, when considered together, seem to create an image of SNSs as an *imagined international community* in which cultural exchange is seen as going both ways.

## Conclusion

### Exploring imagined identities

These results seem to support much work that has been done with Chinese students in the area of motivation and suggest new possibilities for intensifying the affect of what is already being done. These results also come with the knowledge that the specific local limitations may complicate putting such measures into action.

As suggested by Yang (2008) the teacher does seem to have a great role in student motivation. This was obvious also in reading student language learning journals as they often cited the intervention of certain English teachers in their youth as important in transforming their interest from extrinsic (and test-driven) to intrinsic (and interest-motivated). The use of SNS showed signs of intensifying this affect – whether that was a result of *teacher affect* or *L2 speaker interaction* is an important question for future consideration: one that could begin to be explored through a SNS component used by Chinese English teachers. It is quite possible that SNS simply created another avenue (and increased opportunities) for teacher/student interaction and this might have affected measures of the motivational *affect of the teacher* – and even *quality of English classes* – in both -SNS (negatively) and +SNS (positively). Certainly, the level of access teachers give to students must be personally

weighed by individual teachers, but these results seem to suggest that SNS might be a useful context for teachers looking to expand interaction with students.

Cheng and Dörnyei's (2007) results in Taiwan showed the underutilization of strategies related to *stimulating language tasks* and *familiarizing learners with L2 culture*. The results of this present study suggest that an integration of SNS work would seem to be a useful strategy toward more student interaction with L2 culture. The broad results also seem to corroborate the contention of Gao, Y. (2007) that research on identities in Chinese EFL is still important. Students think of language learning in terms of how it will affect who they want to be (the second highest questionnaire item mean in both -SNS and +SNS was in response to *Good English skills can help me be the person I want to be in the future*).

With this in mind, it seems that in teaching EFL we should always consider the importance of *vision* and *imagination* in the process of language learning. Gao and Xiu (2008) have shown how this idea of *imagining the self* is often related to cultural interest products (describing English songs and movies as "a screen where students could project their ideal selves or imagined identities" p. 98). This seems to be an important area for research in the future use of SNS: how are these cultural interests fostered by SNS work? Would a more functional SNS site (with less restricted access) but less *culturally* L2 work better in this regard? It is assumed that a Chinese hosted SNS (e.g. the very popular www.renren.com) would function better (as it might avoid the filtering experienced by the American-based Myspace), but would it provide the same *cultural interest* stimulation? Or perhaps the very *contested* nature of the site, that required students to engage creatively and strategically with increasingly limited means, was itself a motivating factor. These questions also begin to get at the difficult, complicated contextualization issues that come with using the Internet in the mainland Chinese context. These are important questions for future consideration, ones that I hope these results and this discussion will help to activate.

## References

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- boyd, d. (2006). Friends, Friendster, and Top 8: Writing community into being on social network sites. *First Monday*, 11 (12), 1–14. Retrieved March 23, 2010 from <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1418/1336>
- boyd, d., & Ellison, N. (2008). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 210–230.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2006). Toward a writing pedagogy of shuttling between languages: learning from multilingual writers. *College English*, 68 (6), 589–604.
- Cheng, H., & Dörnyei, Z. (2007). The use of motivational strategies in language instruction: The case of EFL teaching in Taiwan. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1 (1), 153–174.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *Psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self system. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 9–42). New York: Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z. & Csizér, K. (1998). Ten commandments for motivating language learners: Results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research* 2 (3), 203–229.

- Dörnyei, Z., Csizér, K. & Németh, N. (2006). *Motivation, language attitudes and globalisation: A Hungarian perspective*. Clevedon, **UK**: Buffalo Multilingual Matters.
- Ellison, N. (2008). Introduction to Social Network Sites. In G. Salaway, J.B. Caruso, & M. R. Nelson. The **ECAR** Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2008 (Research Study, Vol. 8). Boulder, **CO**: **EDUCAUSE** Center for Applied Research, 2008, Retrieved March 28 from <http://www.educause.edu/ecar>.
- Gao, X., Cheng, H., & Kelly, P. (2008). Supplementing an uncertain investment? Mainland Chinese students practicing English together in Hong Kong. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 18 (1), 9–29.
- Gao, Y. (2007). Legitimacy of foreign language learning and identity research: Structuralist and constructivist perspectives. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 16 (1), 100–112.
- Gao, Y., Cheng, Y., Zhao, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2005). Self-identity changes and English learning among Chinese undergraduates. *World Englishes*, 24 (1), 39–51.
- Gao, Y., Zhao, Y., Cheng, Y., & Zhou Y. (2007). Relationship between English learning motivation types and self-identity changes among Chinese students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41 (1), 133–155.
- Gao Y., & Xiu L. (2008). We could be heroes just for one day: Investment in English songs and movies and construction of multiple identities. *CELEA Journal*, 31 (4), 93–101.
- Gardner, R. (1985). *Social psychology and language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Gardner, R. (1991). Attitudes and motivation in second language learning. In A. Reynolds (Ed.), *Bilingualism, multiculturalism, and second language learning* (pp. 43–63). Hillsdale, **NJ**: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gardner, R. (2001). Integrative motivation and second language learning. In Z. Dörnyei & R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Motivation and second language acquisition* (pp. 1–19). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i at Manoa Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center.
- Gu, M. (2008). Identity construction and investment transformation: College students from non-urban areas in China. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 18 (1), 49–70.
- Gu, M. (2009). College English learners' discursive motivation construction in China. *System*, 37, 300–312.
- Halvorsen, A. (2009). Social networking and critical language learning. In M. Thomas, (Ed.), *Handbook of research on Web 2.0 and second language learning* (pp. 237–258). Hershey, **PA**: **IGI** Global.
- Kanno, Y., & Norton, B. (2003). Imagined communities and educational possibilities. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 2 (4), 241–249.
- Kelley, J. (2009, January). Writing the who into being: Wall posts in the new Facebook and the dialogical self. Paper presented at **UNC** – Charlotte English Graduate Students Association Conference 2009..
- Lam, W. (2004). Second language socialization in a bilingual chat room: Global and local considerations. *Language Learning & Technology*, 8 (3), 44–65.
- MacKinnon, R. (2009). China's censorship 2.0: How companies censor bloggers. First Monday 14 (2). Retrieved March 28, 2010 from <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2378/2089>.
- McCarty (2009). Social networking behind student lines in Japan. In M. Thomas (Ed.), *Handbook of research on Web 2.0 and second language learning* (pp. 181–201). Hershey, **PA**: **IGI** Global.

- Mallan, K., & Giardina, N. (2009). Wikidentities: Young people collaborating on virtual identities in social network sites. *First Monday* 14 (6).
- McKinney, C., & Norton, B. (2008). Identity in language and literacy education. In B. Spolsky & F. Hult (Eds.), *The handbook of educational linguistics* (pp. 192–205). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Norton, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 9–31.
- Norton, B. (2001). Non-participation, imagined communities and the language classroom. In M. Breem (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* (pp. 159–171). Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
- Norton, B. (2000). Investment, acculturation, and language loss. In S. McKay & S. L. C. Wong (Eds.), *English language learners in the United States: A resource for teachers* (pp. 443–461). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Norton, B., & Gao, Y. (2008). Identity, investment, and Chinese learners of English. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 18 (1), 109–120.
- Park, J. (2007). Co-construction of nonnative speaker identity in cross cultural interaction. *Applied Linguistics*, 28, 339–360.
- Pavlenko, A. (2001). 'In the world of tradition, I was unimagined': Negotiation of identities in cross-cultural autobiographies. *The International Journal of Bilingualism*, 5, 317–344.
- Pearson, E. (2009). All the world wide web's a stage: the performance of identity in online social networks. *First Monday* 14 (3). Retrieved March 23, 2010 from <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2162/2127>.
- Sanderson, J. (2008). The blog is serving its purpose: Self-presentation strategies on 38pitches.com. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 912–936.
- Sessions, L. (2009). 'You looked better on Myspace': Deception and authenticity on Web 2.0. *First Monday*, 14 (7). Retrieved March 23, 2010 from <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2539/2242>.
- Tong, S., Van Der Heide, B., Langwell, L., & Walther, J. (2008). Too much of a good thing? The relationship between number of friends and interpersonal impressions on Facebook. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 531–549.
- Walther, J., Van Der Heide, B., Kim, S., Westerman, D., & Tong, S. (2008). The role of friends' appearance and behavior on evaluations of individuals on Facebook: Are we known by the company we keep? *Human Communication Research*, 34, 28–49.
- Warschauer, M. (2004). Technological change and the future of CALL. In S. Fotos & C. Browne (Eds.), *New perspectives on CALL for second language classrooms* (pp. 15–25). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Yang, Y. (2008). The importance of the teacher for developing interest in learning English by Chinese students. *International Education Studies*, 1 (1), 95–100.
- Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J. (2008). Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24, 1816–1836.

### Author biodata

James A. Kelley is a graduate student at the University of Memphis. He is interested in language learning and identity issues; Chinese language and culture; and technology and innovation. He was born in Nashville, Tennessee USA and is currently teaching at Tianjin University in China.

### Appendix

---

I.

Gender	Male	Female
Age		
Major subject		
English study start age		

---

II.

Do you have a computer at home?	Yes	No
Are you connected to the internet at home?	Yes	No
How many hours do you spend weekly on the internet?		

---

Rank the following activities according to which ones you spend the most time on while you are online

	games	email	chatting	reading news	surfing the web	research	social network sites	other
(1 will represent the activity that you spend the most time on, 2 for the next activity, and so on. If you do not participate in the activity please leave it blank. You can write another activity in the blanks if it is not listed.)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7

---

What social network sites do you belong to?

	none	QQ/Qzone	163	Niwota	Facebook	Myspace
--	------	----------	-----	--------	----------	---------

(Check all that apply and if a social network site that you belong to is not listed please write it in the blanks)

---

	1=Strongly Disagree	2=Disagree	3=Somewhat Disagree	4=Somewhat Agree	5=Agree	6=Strongly Agree
I am comfortable using a computer.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I enjoy spending time on the internet.	1	2	3	4	5	6



III.	1 = Strongly Disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Somewhat Disagree	4 = Somewhat Agree	5 = Agree	6 = Strongly Agree
I love English for no particular reason	1	2	3	4	5	6
My desire to learn English depends on whether I like my teacher or not	1	2	3	4	5	6
My desire to learn English depends on the quality of my English classes	1	2	3	4	5	6
My desire to learn English depends on the quality of my English textbooks	1	2	3	4	5	6
My desire to learn English depends on whether I like my fellow students in the English classes	1	2	3	4	5	6
Learning English is an important tool for me to connect with society	1	2	3	4	5	6
Learning English makes me feel like a success	1	2	3	4	5	6
Only with good English skills can I be the person I want to be in the future	1	2	3	4	5	6
I learn English because I am interested in connecting with English-speaking people in other countries	1	2	3	4	5	6
I learn English because I am interested in connecting with English-speaking people in China	1	2	3	4	5	6
I have special personal interests in language learning	1	2	3	4	5	6
I have developed an interest in English because of my love for English songs and movies.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I learn English just because I like the language.	1	2	3	4	5	6
I learn English in order to let the world know more about China	1	2	3	4	5	6
I am interested in English because of my love of English literature	1	2	3	4	5	6
I am learning English in order to go abroad and experience other cultures	1	2	3	4	5	6
I am learning English in order to emigrate to another country	1	2	3	4	5	6
Learning English is a necessary step to success in one's life	1	2	3	4	5	6
Good oral English is a symbol of good education and accomplishment	1	2	3	4	5	6