International Students’ Acculturation Information Seeking:  
Personality, Information Needs and Uses  
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ABSTRACT  
As part of a larger study on acculturation information seeking (AIS), this poster presents preliminary findings of a survey of 188 international students in the United States. The study surveyed the types of information needs related to academic and everyday life, those that were challenging to fulfill, and the sources used for AIS. Using the Big Five Inventory, the study also tested the relationship between AIS and personality. Findings show that individuals with different personality traits viewed different needs (e.g., health, legal information) as challenging. Similarly, respondents with certain traits favored certain sources that were seldom used by others (e.g., those with high openness use social Q&A sites more frequently). Recommendations for better sharing of acculturation information are discussed.

Keywords  
Acculturation, international students, information needs, information behavior, personality, sources selection

INTRODUCTION  
Cross-cultural transition is increasingly frequent in this globalized world. Recent statistics show that there are more than 200 million international migrants worldwide (United Nations, 2010). Acculturation is the process in which an individual learns about and adapts to the sociocultural norms of the host country. Successful acculturation can contribute toward the newcomer’s productivity and quality of life.

The importance of facilitating newcomers’ transition is reflected in the amount of research on organizational entry, which focuses on employees’ adjustment to an organization (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). Over the last two decades, more attention has been given to everyday life information seeking (ELIS) (Savolainen, 1995) and the role of individual factors in information behavior (Fisher & Julien, 2009; Nahl & Bilal, 2007). Newcomers’ ELIS for acculturation, however, is rarely studied. Research suggests that information behavior can vary with personality traits (Heinström, 2003, 2006; Farmer, 2007). Nevertheless, little is known about the relationship between AIS and newcomers’ personality. The influence of personality on information behavior requires further investigation.

This study focuses on international students in the United States. In the LIS field, most research on international students has focused on their academic adjustment (e.g., Liao, Finn, & Lu, 2007; Yi, 2007) instead of their ELIS (Jeong, 2004). Beyond LIS, research on international students was mostly from psychology, sociology, and education, where information seeking and use is not the main research focus (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

There are about 690,000 international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2011). This is a substantial group of students whose information behavior, particularly the ELIS aspect, needs to be better understood. The current study addresses the following research questions: 1) What are the important and challenging academic and everyday life information needs for acculturation purpose? 2) What are the channels and information sources used? and 3) What are the relationships between personality and AIS?

This study can contribute in several ways. First, it is one of the few studies including ELIS of international students; their use of traditional and social media is examined. Second, multivariate analysis helps shed light on the relationships between personality and information needs, usages, and barriers; this can encourage similar studies of different population. Finally, it offers empirical findings for university officials, information service providers, and system designers to deliver acculturation information and services that are responsive to individual diversities.

METHODS  
An online questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions was developed through pilot testing with 7 international students. Also included was a 44-item Big Five Inventory (BFI). BFI measures five dimensions:
Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Openness to new experience. BFI is an established instrument that has demonstrated an average of .80 alpha reliability, a .85 3-month test-retest reliability, as well as convergent and divergent validity with other instruments (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008).

The current study used a convenient sampling method. Invitations were sent out to international students enrolled in a Midwest public university through a mass e-mailing list. Participation was voluntary. Data were collected in spring 2011. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS. As a nonprobability sample was used, the responses may not be representative of the university’s international student population. In addition, the findings are not intended to be generalized to students at other universities. Future studies may be conducted at multiple institutions and include information service factors as explanatory variables. This will help define the commonalities and differences in international students’ AIS across institutions.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS
The study received a total of 188 complete surveys. There were more female (56%, n=188) than male respondents (44%). About 46% of the respondents were doctoral students; 20% were master’s students, and 31% were undergraduates. A majority (80%) of the respondents were originally from Asian countries, followed by about 10% from South America and 8% from Europe. More than 27% of the respondents had been in the United States between 1 and 3 years.

RQ1: Important and challenging information needs
The most important information needs were in education (M=4.5, out of a score of 5), followed by work/career (M=4.3), finance (M=4.2), and health (M=4.1). Interestingly, news about one’s home country was also perceived as important (M=4).

In terms of the information that is difficult to find, information related to work/career (M=3.5, with 5 being very challenging) was considered the most challenging to locate, followed by legal (M=3.4), finance (M=3.2), housing (M=3), and health (M=2.9) information.

RQ2: Source used for acculturation information seeking
The most frequently used source was Web search engines such as Google (M=4.5, with 5 being very frequently used). This was followed by websites of official institutions such as the university’s international students office (M=4.2), online resources from libraries (M=4.1), general websites (M=4.1), and social networking sites such as Facebook (M=3.9). Micro-blogging (e.g., Twitter) (M=2.4) and print resources (M=2.2) were seldom used for AIS.

RQ3: Personality and AIS
Figure 1 is a correspondence analysis (CA) map showing 5 personality dimensions and 11 types of information viewed as challenging to find. Items that are closer together are more related. CA is similar to multidimensional scaling (MDS) and exploratory factor analysis; these techniques provide exploratory analysis instead of confirmatory hypothesis testing (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). We found that, for example, respondents with high openness tended to rate interpersonal relationship information as challenging to find. High extraversion was related to challenges in finding U.S. culture info; for high conscientiousness respondents, it was legal information. The personality dimensions explained 27% of the variance. Further analysis will test if perceived difficulty and the importance of a need are positively related.

Figure 2 is the CA map of 5 personality dimensions and 15 sources that were least frequently used by the sample as a whole. The result shows that, for example, high extraversion respondents tended to report frequent usage of people sources, such as those from international student associations or social hobby groups. Respondents with high openness had higher tendency of using social Q&A sites and Twitter. Those with high neuroticism showed a higher tendency of using print resources from university offices—a type of reliable source. The personality dimensions explained 14% of the variance.

1 All 188 respondents answered the questions discussed in this paper, and therefore the sample size is 188 (n=188). For brevity, the number is not noted in subsequent reporting.
DISCUSSION
The preliminary findings indicate that everyday life information is more challenging to find than educational information. Information needs and source usage also vary with personality traits. Such findings call for more research on international students’ ELIS. Further studies may also examine the influence of other factors on AIS, such as the students’ countries of origin and their native languages.

The recent expansion of information horizons (Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon, 2001) due to technological developments is reflected in the findings. For example, all top-five sources were online, including Web 2.0 such as social networking sites. Millennials tend to use open Web sources frequently (e.g., Head & Eisenberg, 2011), which is also found here. But notable is that Web resources of official groups and libraries were highly consulted. Perhaps, being less familiar with the host country, international students placed more value on the credibility of the information sources. This may have implications for credibility assessment research (Rieh & Danielson, 2007).

A practical implication is that the aforementioned official organizations are in a good position to provide more types of acculturation information, especially the types that were rated as challenging to find.

Less frequent interaction with official staff and the underuse of social Q&A are worth noting, especially considering that the respondents frequently consulted official online resources as discussed earlier. This suggests that credible sources are valued, but that the respondents are selective about the channel for acquiring this information; they preferred official online materials instead of contacting official staff. This study’s ongoing analysis reveals that the most often cited barrier is a lack of relevant information.

This problem may be more directly addressed by contacting officials or by seeking experts’ advice via social Q&A, rather than by combing through open Web resources. One possible suggestion is to provide an online knowledge database that stores past Q&A specific to the host institution. Limiting access to members of that institution, and allowing each user high control over privacy settings may be welcomed, especially by those less extravert or open. Future study may explore how the interactive nature of social media can be further utilized to encourage collaborative information seeking. The goals are to better deliver personalized and relevant information to meet the acculturation needs of diverse individuals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
This research is funded by the Nanyang Technological University (Grant No. M58060019). The authors would like to thank the respondents for their participation. Thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers for their comments.

REFERENCES


