reconnect
Reconnecting relationships through technology

The Role of WeChat in Building Relationships amongst International Students

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In recent decades, there has been an increase in studies on international students' use of social media in their host countries. However, there has been limited investigation on how these students utilise social media to help them learn and adjust to their new surroundings. The purpose of this study is to find out how one group of Chinese international Students (CIS), utilised WeChat to support their living and study through building relationships amongst each other in New Zealand (NZ). Nine in-depth individual interviews were conducted focusing on critical incidents that these students experienced while studying in NZ. The analysis of these incidents yielded several themes. The findings identified that CIS used social media in many different ways but primarily to help them maintain and create social networks in their host country, construct and sustain community, and engage in peer interactions and collaborative learning. Overall, CIS frequently utilised WeChat for connecting with peers to cope with variety of issues, including emotional support, building a social network, an outlet to vent about stress, isolation and depression, amongst many others. This study highlights the importance of social media in creating a sustainable connection amongst peers that contributes to student wellbeing in the higher education sector.

Keywords: Social media, International students, Connecting peers, WeChat, New Zealand, Higher Education.

Introduction

An international student is defined as, individuals who "leave primary support networks to undertake an academic program, often in a new linguistic and cultural context" (Barker 2012, p. 201). International students are known to experience a number of transitional problems and difficulties when relocating to the host country Separated from their familiar support systems, such as families and friends, international students may suffer from isolation and loneliness whilst also coping with academic and living stressors (Neri & Cemalcilar et al., 2005; Ville, 2008).

With the advancement of Web 2.0 technologies, international students commonly use social media to settle themselves in host countries (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media is virtual spaces that enable people to create and share interest, ideas, thoughts and practices and is participatory and collaborative in nature (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The foundation of Web 2.0 in social media enables users to create profiles, connect with friends, generate content and interact with each other synchronously (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Research consistently demonstrated that international students utilise social media to negotiate their challenges in the new country (Fruzzetti, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mikal & Grace, 2012).

Social media plays a significant role in effective communication among users, particularly in informal settings where conventional teaching and institutional activities rarely engage or reach students (Bull et al., 2008; Madge et al., 2009). It also fills the gap and builds a bridge in connection with formal teaching and institutional activities, particularly with courses which also have online components to their learning. This is because social media enables users to create their own spaces, which leads to increased conversations among students. It is vital to build relationships with peers for supporting student wellbeing. Consequently, using social media is likely to enrich student experience by building peer relationships and promoting student wellbeing (Kizgin et al., 2019).

Though some studies have found that there can be a detrimental effects to wellbeing when using social media (Alavi et al., 2011; Thomée et al., 2011; Zaremohzzabieh et al., 2015), social media could be exceptionally

beneficial for students who are isolated or require more flexible and informal learning spaces (Orton-Johnson, 2014). In the context of international students, social media allows them to consolidate old networks and form new networks through regular communication online, which may positively affect their wellbeing (Zhu, 2011). As social media provides flexibility for students to engage with each other, it has been proven that social media enables students to build communities and retain connections with peer network (Ryan et al., 2011; Tosun, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

Despite the widespread use of social media among international students (Ryan et al., 2011; Tosun, 2012; Zhu, 2011), little is known about how international students use it to support themselves in the new environment of their host country (Veil et al., 2011). Hence the aim of this study is to explore how international students utilise social media (particularly WeChat) to assist in establishing themselves and engaging with western cultures in their new host country. This study chose Chinese international students (CIS) in New Zealand as research subjects for two reasons: Firstly, due to substantial cultural and societal differences with western culture, CIS are more likely to face additional problems and difficulties throughout the adjustment process in the host country (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Secondly, past studies conducted in New Zealand indicated that CIS have fewer opportunities to form friendships and receive little local support from domestic students during their time in New Zealand (Holmes, 2005; Spencer & Chen, 2004). Thus, CIS regularly seek support from online social networking sites such as WeChat to cope with issues encountered while studying in the host country (Ye, 2006). This paper also aims to explore the role of WeChat in building student-to-student relationships among CIS. In particular, how do CIS use WeChat to influence their experience of overseas studies and maintain peer relationships?

Methods

In order to explore the research question in-depth interviews were undertaken with nine CIS at the University of Canterbury (UC) in NZ. To recruit students posters inviting participation were distributed across campus and online. The study received approval for the university Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC 2021/158). Nine students from four faculties, of which seven were female, and five were postgraduate students were interviewed between late 2021 and early 2022.

Before the interview, each participant completed a pre-survey to gather demographic information and general WeChat usage data. This data was used to inform the interview and the resulting analysis. The interviews drew on the critical incident technique (CIT), which is a narrative inquiry approach aimed at recalling experiences of critical events with on a specific focus (Gremler, 2004). In this study we asked the participants to recall a situation when they used WeChat to assist them with their studies or life in New Zealand. The CIT approach was chosen as it can disclose the lived experience of CIS by describing significant events and outcomes of using WeChat that related to supporting their wellbeing. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes.

Drawing on Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis was used as an inductive process involving recognising themes while comparing and contrasting data. Using NVivo the analysis was undertaken in four stages. First, the researcher familiarised themselves with the data by reviewing and reflecting on the narratives using memos; Second, the data was coded exploring similarities and differences; Third, broad themes and subthemes were identified. Finally, the themes were explored in more depth. In this article we will explore the outcome of this analysis, in particular, the themes about how WeChat was used to reconnect relationships through technology.

Results and discussion

The predominant findings from this study indicated that WeChat could support CIS to maintain and expand social networks, build and sustain a community, promote peer interactions and collaborative learning. Those findings contribute to understanding how the use of WeChat influences the relationships of peers among CIS through the three different areas.

Theme 1: Maintaining and expanding social networks

Maintaining contact with friends and family in their home country
This study found that CIS used WeChat to maintain regular communication with pre-existing networks in China. All participants demonstrated the importance of using WeChat to keep in touch with their families and friends. It was found that WeChat appeared to be the most efficient and useful communication tool for CIS to manage relationships. Similarly, Krause (2006) also highlighted the significance of international students' digital lives in terms of staying in touch with their families and peers in the home country. Furthermore, Sandel

(2014) discovered that social media might be used to mediate cultural ties, which is critical to retaining cultural continuity with one's home country in order to cope with acculturation (Li & Gasser, 2005; Sandel, 2014). According to Mikal and Grace (2012), "continuity provided by a sense of connectedness and the consistency of online communities could reduce acculturation stress" (p. 300). Zhu (2011) explained that this digital experience can help international students maintain their cultural identity. In other words, social media can help international students practise and convey their culture (Park, 2016). Participant B emphasised the importance of maintaining contact with people in the home country after transiting to a new environment,

> 'WeChat helped me make a smooth transfer that allowing me to keep contact with previous networks, as well as allowing me gradually to adjust to the new environment. If those networks were taken away from me right away, I would have to be enforced to accept another habit. If that happens, it will be quite difficult for me, and I will feel extremely lonely. If there are no platforms for people to contact with friends when they come to an unfamiliar place, he or she will have to deal with all the issues on their own. Therefore, WeChat plays a critical role in the transfer to the new environment.'

The quote above highlighted the importance of WeChat for CIS in coping with the feeling of loneliness and isolation after moving to a new country and adapting to a new culture. Participant B suggest that WeChat helped him to reduce the stress and overcome loneliness. Previous research also found that social media enables international students maintain connection with their home country (Gomes et al., 2014; Komito, 2011). Social media may have the potential to aid international students' social adjustment to the new surrounding through keeping in touch with home culture and relationships (Gomes & Alzougool, 2013). According to boyd (2014), the reason why social media could help users keep in touch with people in both their home and host countries is that "social media alters and amplifies social situations" (p. 13).

All participants universally considered WeChat as an indispensable tool for keeping in touch with their friends and families in China. For instance, Participant G described how WeChat helped her ameliorate the feeling of isolation and loneliness after transiting abroad:

> 'I was very unfamiliar with the environment when just arrived in New Zealand. Because my English is not good, I'm afraid to talk. At that time, I used WeChat to communicate with my previous classmates, which was a crucial way for me to mitigate the anxiety during that time. I almost didn't know anyone here at the time and was not brave enough to make friends here. WeChat was the spiritual pillar of the moment, and I used it frequently to communicate with my friends in China.'

Participant G strongly highlighted the connecting support from her peers in China through WeChat after she moved to New Zealand, which helped her to reduce the communication and mental barriers due to the new environment. As Martin and Rizvi (2014) noted, social media could assist in the creation of "a feeling of ongoing connection with (home country) places and networks" (p. 1018). WeChat plays a significant role whilst transitioning to the host country, in maintaining previous relationships focused on enhancing the sense of connectedness of CIS and their wellbeing. This is because social media can transcend time and space to keep people connected.

Enriching social life in the host country and keeping updated with the outside world
The results showed that CIS used WeChat to develop new friendships in New Zealand. Participant B stated that he mainly used WeChat for socialising in New Zealand. In his case, WeChat was primarily used by him for social planning and keeping up to date with news. This finding was similar to other studies where social media has the potential to broaden the spectrum of relationships in the host country (Hiller & Franz, 2004). Participant I clarified that WeChat is the greatest and easiest way to get into the local Chinese community because almost every Chinese in New Zealand uses it every day. As a result, CIS might make significant use of WeChat to expand their social lives and enhance their experience in New Zealand. Participant H noted,

> 'Joining more WeChat groups is the best way for Chinese international students to develop their social networks here. Many Chinese people will form multiple WeChat groups for a variety of reasons. You can always find what you need if you add a handful of WeChat groups. For example, on the UC Chinese students WeChat group, there is a great deal of information, including a variety of events for international. You can meet a lot of people If you can keep up with the news and participate in those activities.'

In contrast to Participant B who claimed socialisation as the primary motivation for using WeChat, Participant C noted, 'Sometimes I would switch off my WeChat on both my phone and computer, and put my phone in the drawer. I don't play games, but I will frequently open and check my WeChat updates, including WeChat public accounts and chatting with friends, which will distract me from my study'. A range of evidence suggest that social media could cause addiction that may inhibit learning (Junco, 2012; Lepp et al., 2015; Meier et al., 2016; Paul et al., 2012; Samaha & Hawi, 2016), especially for those with low self-efficacy and self-regulation skills (Meier et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the benefit of using social media as a supporting tool in terms of social connection is evidenced by many scholars (Ellison et al., 2011; Thai et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2013), including most participants in this study.

Interestingly, Participant A used WeChat to develop virtual friendships. She reported using WeChat to communicate with a friend met online:

> 'I have a good friend I met through online. We both use WeChat to discuss events that have occurred in our lives. Communication with her gives me a lot of confidence, which is a great feeling. She is currently in Beijing. We met in a fitness-related WeChat group, and she added me privately through the WeChat group. Because I usually send some relaxing and happy things to the group, like some photos of my cooking. Then she wants to become friends with me and share each other's daily routine together. For example, we ask each other if one of us has been to the gym, or if the aerobic speed has increased, and even how long the training time is.'

Participant A indicated that the communication with her online friend via WeChat enhanced her self-esteem. She noted that WeChat provides her with a virtual space to express and share her feelings and experiences, which positively improves her confidence. Additionally, the interpersonal relationship was developed due to the shared interests and constant interactions with the online friend. Consequently, the enhanced self-esteem and confidence through using WeChat to communicate with online friends improves participant A's life satisfaction and wellbeing.The increased self-esteem and perceived social support on social media can ease the symptoms of stress and loneliness (Shaw & Gant, 2004), which could significantly influence individuals' life satisfaction and wellbeing (Valkenburg et al., 2006). While past research found that new culture and environment in the host country could negatively affect international students' self-esteem (Brown et al., 1992), social media allows international students to connect with friends from the same cultural background online, which may result in higher self-esteem (Buddington, 2002).

Furthermore, Participant A believed that making these virtual friend has a value. She believed these virtual friends allowed her to express herself without any concerns. She noted, 'In this kind of virtual world, with someone I have never met in person, or in the state of strangers, I may be more open to share my actual ideas, even if they are strangers'. In this case, WeChat facilitates new social communications by alleviating fears or rejection, especially showing a profit for lower self-esteem users.

However this feeling was not shared by all participants, Participant D, reported a negative experience navigating information problems on WeChat:

> 'I was furious at that time. I felt compelled to reveal my personal information. It was when I recently relocated to New Zealand and was unfamiliar with the leasing process. I had some difficulties with a landlord I had known via WeChat during the process of renting a house, which cause the privacy disclosure. I had known the landlord in WeChat before I moved to New Zealand. He listed his house with home address, pictures, and a price, which I believe is reasonable. At that time, I was in a hurry to find a house, and I thought the house was fine. And I believe New Zealanders are trustworthy, so I had paid over two hundred deposits. But after I paid the deposit, the landlord disappeared and nobody answered the phone when I tried to call him. Finally, I had no choice but found a new landlord in New Zealand. One of my friends helped me post news in some rental WeChat groups. But this led to a misunderstanding with my new landlord. As a result, she took screenshots of our chatting history, including my enrolment, family relationships, and even my bank account details, and posted them to the WeChat group, which caused a heated discussion in the group. I was enraged and apoplectic by her behaviour. This incident left an indelible mark shadow on my heart that lingered for a long time.'

Following the incident, Participant D became aware of the risk of security and privacy issues on social networking sites:

> 'Firstly, WeChat can't replace face-to-face communication. There may be traps and scams. Secondly, after all, WeChat is only a non-visible communication platform. Once the opposite party loses faith in people on WeChat, he or she may break the law by exposing other people's privacy and security. I have learned the lesion. We can't 100% trust people online, and we should communicate in person. Finally, we shouldn't share our personal information with others online, because someone might screenshot it and then make you famous.'

However, Participant A had a different viewpoint by saying:

> 'When it comes to the privacy concerns when conversing with stranger online, we must evaluate the risk for ourselves. I think everyone will need to make a judgement during online communication, and then we will get a sense of whether this person is trustworthy. I think that meeting up with anyone, even people in real life, carries a risk.'

To sum up, with the widespread utilisation of WeChat among Chinese people, a growing probability of misinformation and security issues may occur. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that WeChat is important for CIS to maintain and develop relationships. To intensively make use of the positive aspects of WeChat, it is advocated that users should develop 21st Century Skills (Griffin et al., 2012).

On the other hand, CIS viewed WeChat as a source of up-date information. Social media could meet international students' needs for critical information to help them survive in a new country (Sin & Kim, 2013). It allows individuals access to others who can share and contribute helpful knowledge and resources (Fisher & Julien, 2009). In this study, it was discovered that CIS used WeChat frequently to look for information and resources to help them acclimatise to the uncertain environment.

For example, Participant D reported that WeChat played a critical role in keeping her up to date on what was going on outside of the lockdown bubbles in New Zealand. She considered WeChat as a more effective tool to discover local news and information. As she explained: 'WeChat gave me a big favour during the outbreak because I could get the most up-to-date information from messages posted on a variety of WeChat groups. Like, my Hometown WeChat Group, Classmates WeChat Group, and Neighbourhood WeChat Group, provided me with the timely consultation and suggestions regarding the COVID situation, and helped me grasp the epidemic's progression and dangerous aspects to avoid, which made me feel good'. What she said reflected a similar finding by Palen (2008), the fact that social media could play a significant role in delivering essential information and support, as well as serving as an effective communication platform during a crisis.

In addition, she identified WeChat groups as the most useful function for extracting the latest news and information due to the collaborative and synchronous nature of WeChat group chatting. For example, Participant D reported: 'There is an embassy in the UC PhD WeChat group. He will regularly present the most up-to-date information for Chinese international students in New Zealand, such as New Zealand's new border policy, which will be beneficial to our studies and living here'. Furthermore, joining WeChat groups with shared interests allows CIS to contact with a larger number of individuals, assisting in the development of their social networks, which is critical for their adjustment. Meanwhile, the participants indicated a need for emotional interchange and assistance from friends and families via social media, to support them in adjusting to New Zealand. However, the results also informed social media users to carefully navigate information issues, including privacy concerns. It requires online users to develop their cognitive, sociological, and emotional skills in the online environment to have a better online experience and then enhance their wellbeing (Martin & Madigan, 2006).

Theme 2: Building and sustaining a community

Some participants used WeChat to create a community by bonding in a virtual space to communicate and support each other. For example, CIS frequently build a variety of WeChat groups to form discussions, exchange opinions, share feelings, and ask questions, which all contribute to building a sustainable community. WeChat enables Chinese people abroad to maintain a sense of community, even though it is mediated by technology. The exchange of knowledge and resources among members of social media groups, particularly when it is a mutual communication, contributes to the building and developing of a community (Komito, 2011). Some participants indicated that their WeChat group members would respond to their inquiries posted on the group, and mutually they would contribute useful information and resources in the group. As a result, WeChat could support the formation and development of communities through a shared commitment among CIS.

For example, Participant F explained, 'When we had difficulties in China, we normally asked for help and received support from our families and friends there. But in New Zealand, we are scared to communicate reveal our problems and troubles with our family for fear of them becoming worried about us. Hence, in the WeChat group, everyone actually acts as a family member to support each other in New Zealand'. Furthermore, she used WeChat to maintain ongoing communication among community members, which contributes to a healthy and sustainable community:

> 'We made some friends in person, and then kept in touch with through WeChat by sharing content. For example, he made a kimchi today, and asked if anyone in the WeChat group wanted to try it. Or someone complained the weather since the morning, like it was insanely hot yesterday and why it is so cold today? Simply start conversation with these interesting daily topics and then work together to solve some problems. I remember last time I was so angry and upset after teaching a child and talked about this in the WeChat group. Then others in the group discussed how they dealt with it, shared a couple of resources, and consoled one another. Sometimes we end up with gathering for a delicious meal.'

This respondent commented that she used WeChat to preserve connection and community through exchanging feelings and information via WeChat. The WeChat group members continued to engage in a rapport-building community by sending messages, images, and comments in the group. According to Rheingold (2000), a virtual community may occur "when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace"(p. 3-5).

Theme 3: Engaging peer interactions and collaborative learning

Some interviewees are aware of WeChat's potential as a medium for setting up collaborative learning opportunities as well as an informal learning network to share ideas and clarify issues. For example, Participant G utilised WeChat to ask questions about the course and discuss group assignments. She reported,

> 'We have several WeChat groups for different courses, which are used to address and discuss questions related to the course. It is very efficient to do group assignments through WeChat groups. We will allocate each person's job after we join the WeChat group. We can search for chatting history on WeChat even if we have forgotten the work or are unsure. Then someone will send their completed part to the group, where others may view it at any time. There is also a benefit that we don't have to meet at a specific time and place. It is extremely efficient for our studies when everyone is occupied with their lives. arrange a fixed time somewhere to meet up.'

This finding is in line with research by Mason (2006), who found the potential of social media to engage peer interactions and collaborative learning in an informal way. However, only one participant did not use WeChat for learning purposes. Participant A explained,

> 'In terms of learning, WeChat is little use to me. Because I have no Chinese classmates here, there is no learning group for me to join. If I have problems in my study, I will use Reddit, a widely used software here that is similar to Douban in China, but it is a foreign version of English. Because I study here, I suppose some experience in China does not necessarily suit for me. Therefore, I don't want to use Douban or WeChat for study. Actually, there are also a lot of people sharing experiences on Reddit. For instance, recently I just added a Reddit section dedicated to helping engineering students improve their resumes. I can take a screenshot of my CV and upload to Reddit, then it will give me advice on how to enhance it.'

Nonetheless, most participants demonstrated that WeChat could facilitate collaborative learning and develop peer relationships by building virtual communities to share information and collaborate with each other in a collective way. As a result, WeChat could support CIS to engage in their studies and enhance student success, as it creates an effective online environment for collaborative learning. This reflected a similar finding by Han et al. (2016), who discovered that social media may assist students with course tasks and assignments due to its features of diversity and flexibility for discussions and clarifying questions with other peers without the time and location constraints.

Conclusions

This study aims to explore the role of WeChat in the development of student and student relationships among

Chinese international students. The findings revealed that WeChat, as a social networking site, plays a critical role in maintaining and expanding social networks, building and sustaining community, promoting peer interactions and collaborative learning among CIS in host countries. Although some negative aspects of using WeChat such as privacy risks and distraction, were also demonstrated by several participants, all respondents agreed that WeChat serves a useful purpose in connecting peers. The relationship between technology and connections was investigated, adding evidence to previous studies indicating that social media is important for preserving ties and fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness among university students (Ryan et al., 2011; Tosun, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Maintaining original contacts and making new social connections through technology is especially crucial for international students when studying abroad.

This paper adds to the body of knowledge about international students and the role of social media in their lives. Unlike the majority of past research on international students' experiences and the influences of social media use on users' wellbeing (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kim et al., 2015; Steinfield et al., 2008), this research looked at how a group of international students utilise social media to for peer relationships among peers while studying in the host country.

The findings revealed that WeChat, as a social networking site, plays a critical role in maintaining and expanding social networks, building and sustaining community, engaging peer interactions and collaborative learning among CIS in host countries. Although some negative aspects of using WeChat such as privacy risks and distraction, were also demonstrated by several participants, all respondents agreed that WeChat serves a useful purpose in connecting peers. Furthermore, this research demonstrates the need of facilitating international students' social networking through the appropriate use of technology in order to improve their experiences in the host country. Future research can use a larger sample size, such as a large-scale survey, to test our findings further.

The findings of this study have practical implications for student support units in host countries. The results highlight the importance of using technology to maintain and develop a long-term relationship or community among peers. Despite the fact that people's preferences for technology adoption vary, an increasing number of students are looking for ways to stay connected in order to enhance their learning and wellbeing (Duffy, 2010; Greenhow, 2011; Rosenfeld Halverson, 2011; Siemens & Weller, 2011; Smith, 2010). As a result, using technology to develop student and student interactions is likely to maximise an ongoing and thriving closeness among students without regard to time or location. Students will be able to deepen their relationships, cooperate with one another, and improve their wellbeing as they become more flexible in keeping in touch with peers and profit from the rise of opportunities provided by technology. It could especially beneficial for international students who are in desperate need of making new friends or expanding their social networking opportunities, all of which contribute to a successful adjustment and personal growth in the host country.

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