

ENHANCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT VIA SOCIAL MEDIA – A CASE STUDY OF WECHAT AND CHINESE STUDENTS AT A UK UNIVERSITY.

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Abstract

International students potentially experience stress in a number of areas whilst studying in the UK; encountering a range of challenges and adjustment issues. This research found that WeChat (a Chinese social media app) has helped Chinese students to address key communication barriers and study challenges within their university experience. This has led to an increase in their motivation in undertaking learning activities; as well as impacting on issues of engagement, performance and retention. Focus groups were conducted with Chinese students ranging from year two undergraduate to postgraduate level. Questionnaires were used to collect data in order to evaluate the influencing factors of the students' engagement and motivation when WeChat is deployed. Results show that social media can facilitate lecturers to achieve student-centred pedagogy within the blended e-learning environment. Moreover, effectiveness factors regarding the use of social media within higher education are identified to support the development of curriculum design and communication methods. The study seeks to make suggestions regarding the implementation of social media for international students within higher education according to the needs, education settings and cultural backgrounds of the "always on" generation.

Keywords: engagement, international students, retention, social media, student support.

1 INTRODUCTION

The UK is seen as one of the most attractive destinations for international students to study for a higher education qualification. The migration of students is a global trend (Sawir, 2005); along with the US, and Australia, the UK (Lannelli & Huang, 2014) continues to experience a growth in the number of applications and subsequent arrivals of international learners. Against the context of this worldwide growth in international education is the consistent growth of the Chinese market (Turner, 2006). China is the most likely home country of an international student in the UK (Crawford & Wang, 2015). Recent figures show approximately 86,000 Chinese students currently studying in the UK, showing a significant growth from 4,000 in 1998 (Lannelli & Huang, 2014). The emergence of educational migration from countries such as China has been the catalyst for much research around the drivers and challenges facing international students discussing how these learners are managed by the respective higher education institutions they arrive at (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The purpose of this paper is to focus on these issues (Cowley, 2016) against the context of social media as an emerging tool for learning, student support and peer interaction (Gomes, Berry, Alzougool & Chang, 2014).

2 THE MOTIVATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

International students are driven to study abroad for a number of 'push-pull' reasons (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Amongst these reasons are university reputation (Pimpa, 2005), the standard of education (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003), enhanced jobs prospects (Gatfield & Chen, 2006; Chen, 2008), networking opportunities (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Research has suggested that students are keen to improve not only their academic skills and knowledge (Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003); but also their level of employability (Waters, 2009) through the development of key transferable skills (Meredith, 2010). In contrast, other researchers have reported that international students may be motivated by other non-academic drivers e.g. family, friends (Shanka, Quintal & Taylor 2006), perceived quality of living in the chosen country (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Abubakar, Shanka & Muuka, 2010). A further thread of research points to the role of education agents as being key in the marketing and migration of international education and students (Gatfield & Chen, 2006; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2011). From a Chinese perspective, students are motivated to study abroad as a result of a crowded HE market in China, perception of low-quality pedagogy, the

difficulty experienced by Chinese graduates to find employment in their domestic job market (Lannelli & Huang, 2014).

The motivation for UK higher education institutions to target and welcome international students is multi-faceted (Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe & Caldwell, 2014). The financial incentive regarding the recruitment of international students is a key agenda item for UK HEIs (Soo & Elliot, 2010). Benefits do not just apply to tuition fees but also accommodation, cost of living, resources. In addition to the obvious financial incentive; higher education institutions can benefit from new or enhanced international links (Soo & Elliot, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), new research areas and opportunities (Ross, Heaney & Cooper, 2007).

3 KEY CHALLENGES TO PROGRESSION

When embarking upon their higher education sojourn; international students may face a number of potential challenges and areas of adjustment (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Key literature points to these challenges as being broad in range and split into two different areas: academic/institution based issues (Turner & George, 2011; MacMillan & MacKensie, 2012; Lahlafi & Rushton, 2015) and non-academic/social issues (Msengi, 2003; Russell, Rosenthal & Thomson, 2010; Brown, Edwards & Hartwell, 2010; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Liu, 2012). When considering the academic problems international students may face in a potentially acculturated (Berry, 2005) learning environment; perhaps a useful starting point would be classroom based issues (Sawir, 2005). International students may be inhibited or even intimidated by their new learning environment; this could impact them in a number of important areas: forming positive relationships with classmates (Ying & Han, 2005), communicating with the class tutor, participating in group work, undertaking formative and summative assessments e.g. discussion, interview, presentation (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000). The ability of international students to effectively undertake assessments may be impacted upon by issues regarding comprehension and writing skills. Research has noted that international students may potentially be confused by what is being asked of them when undertaking an essay or exam. (Carroll, 2007) notes that issues of plagiarism may be problematic for international students when producing written work. To compound this issue further, international learners may struggle to produce the same level of work in a different language (Lillis, 2001). It is important to note that learning and writing in a second language may be made more difficult through the need to understand and express subject-specific technical language (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2003). A further aspect of writing which may potentially challenge international students is that of critical thinking (Lieberman, 1994; Robertson et al., 2000).

In addition to the aforementioned challenges facing international learners; these students may also have to contend with language barriers both academically and socially. The language barrier has been put forward as a major barrier facing international learners when studying in the UK (Zhang & Brunton, 2007). The obvious nature of language issues in international students is compounded by the potential for language related problems to impact on all other aspects of their student experience both academic and non-academic; having a potential psychological impact (Zhang & Goodson, 2011) on a student causing them to become withdrawn and lacking in confidence. A number of researchers (Gu & Maley, 2008; Turner, 2006; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006) have focused specifically on the challenges facing Chinese students when undertaking a UK higher education qualification. (Quan, He & Sloan, 2016) argued that a fundamental barrier for Chinese students was understanding the new learning methods they encountering in the new culture they found themselves studying in. (Gu & Maley, 2008) suggested that Chinese students struggle with language; in particular the regional accents of their tutors. The possibility of Chinese students experiencing a culture shock when studying in the UK is highlighted by (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Turner, 2006) who referenced the feedback of Chinese students who spoke about the emphasis placed on independent learning as being something they had never experienced before.

Non-academic challenges and barriers are important factors in the sojourn of international students. Research has indicated that international students can face many new and strange issues once arriving in a new country to study (Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015). These non-academic challenges can take different forms and can happen at different stages of the student experience. In addition to the possibility of homesickness (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002) felt by international students; (Rees & Porter, 1999; McInerney & King, 2012) spoke of the potential for students to struggle with issues outside of their university studies e.g. settling into new accommodation, issues of finance and

banking, travel arrangements, new schedules and routines (Bradley, 2000; Lee & Rice 2007; Msengi, 2003; Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011; Liu 2012). Consequently, students may struggle to adapt both in the psychological (Ward & Kennedy, 1993) and sociocultural (Sam, Vedder, Ward & Horenczyk, 2006) sense. The responsibility for ensuring students are supported in addressing both academic and non-academic issues is that of the host university (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Hayes & Lin, 1994). An entirely Chinese focused study was undertaken by (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006), looking at the adjustment issues faced by Chinese students in the UK. The feedback indicated that the students found it challenging to both make friends and get used to the pace of life in the UK. The students also spoke of issues of finance and accommodation as being potentially problematic to them. In a similar study of Chinese students (Gu & Maley, 2008) identified feelings of homesickness and isolation as key challenges and issues.

4 SOCIAL MEDIA AND HIGHER EDUCATION

An important development in the growth of international education is social media. The various social media sites and apps are considered to be important tools which are used by both students and institutions (Gomes et al., 2014). The benefits of social media in international education are seen as being multi-faceted to those who use it. From the perspective of students; international learners can benefit and are motivated to use social media for a variety of reasons (Forbrush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). Research has suggested that international students are keen to use social media as a means of building and maintaining positive relationships with their home culture networks (Hjorth, 2011; Hjorth & Arnold, 2011). These networks can be based in the host country or in a student's home country (Gomes et al., 2014). Focusing on this idea of social media as a tool for connecting (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2012) with others; (Russell et al., 2010) suggested that international students will also use social media to connect with local people in the host country. This view is shared by (Kim, Yum & Yoon, 2009) who noted that international students will enter into such connections with both home and host country networks with the ultimate view of meeting the necessary academic outcomes. The suggestion that international students use social media as an academic tool (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield & Fiore, 2012) is expanded on by (Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2011) who indicated in their research that the use of social media to discuss academic questions and ideas had a positive impact on the performance of the international students involved. (Ryan, Magro & Sharp, 2011) described social media as a multi-dimensional tool which provided international students with the opportunity to build community and a sense of belonging; easing their own anxiety and sense of inhibition whilst also providing a forum for the exchange of academic ideas and discussion.

5 WECHAT

WeChat is a widely used social media app (Gao & Zhang, 2013). It was developed in China and launched in 2011 (Mao, 2014). Key to its popularity is its multifunctional and flexible usage (it can be used on a range of platforms) (Lihong, 2013; Lien & Cao, 2014). The app, which is free to download is primarily used for social purposes (Lien & Cao, 2014). A study focused on the motivations (Lien & Cao, 2014) for using WeChat, indicated that trust was a key element in attracting users to WeChat. Additional research (Lihong, 2013) has indicated that WeChat is also used for educational purposes; the majority of this research has been conducted in China and not in a western context (Mao, 2014).

6 RESEARCH METHOD

This pilot study adopted a mixed methods approach with two focus groups (n=10*2) and questionnaires (n=13). There are 21 Chinese students in the Business School in 2016-2017. The focus group size was limited between 8 and 12 participants as advocated by (Tynan & Drayton, 1988). The initial group was conducted to identify and pre-test the influencing factors regarding the effective use of WeChat in UK HEIs. Subsequently, questionnaires were developed according to these results. 13 valid questionnaire responses were collected via Survey Monkey. According to Cronbach's Alpha test results, these data have a high level of internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.950$). This internal consistency allowed further analysis to be conducted with t-test, regression analysis, and principal component analysis. These tests were conducted in SPSS23, to find any correlations between variables as well as the impact on students' engagement, motivation, retention, performance and perceived effectiveness of WeChat. WeChat communication was conducted in Chinese, with a Chinese associate lecturer facilitating its use. Finally, the second group asked participants to explore more in-depth information in relation to the questionnaire results. Both groups were conducted in

English and lasted two hours. Focus group results were analysed in Nvivo10, using thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke & Terry, 2015). Students were coded as F1-1, F1-2, and F1-10 in group 1 and F2-1, F2-2 and F2-10 in group 2.

7 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main findings from this pilot study suggested that effective WeChat communication enhanced Chinese students' motivation, engagement, and perceived performance on the course. Six influencing categories were identified and verified, with at least 16 variables causing variances among students' perceptions of these. However, students' indication of their motivation, engagement, and performance improvement, primarily depends on their perceived relationship with the lecturer.

7.1 WeChat and communication barriers within higher education

The majority of the students indicated that the transition process between Chinese and British education had been extremely difficult. They were unclear of what they were expected to do, and not sure who or how to ask. However, WeChat appeared to (1) alleviate their stress by helping them socialise with peers and lecturers, (2) reduce the communication barrier through using informal and instant messaging, and (3) engage students more often through the notification function. Similar to results shown in (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014), several students indicated feelings of stress due to the new environment and cultural differences. Many Chinese students also felt it was difficult to "fit-in" (Quan et al., 2016) with F1-1 indicating: "We, Chinese students, are too lonely here. Basically, no one can understand us. We feel helpless". The students went on to suggest that their stress was helped through the use of WeChat (see WeChat moments example in Fig. 1 & Fig. 2). "WeChat connects everyone together, and the help we can get from WeChat made our life so much better. We cannot live without it" (F1-10). Secondly, students believed that the WeChat helped them overcome the communication barrier with lecturers because it is informal and instant (see WeChat conversation example in Fig.3). Most students agreed with F1-5 that they "do not even know which word to use for emails, which is for telephone conversation, which is for report writing, which is exams or essay questions". This was due to language issues. WeChat appeared to help students to communicate with the lecturer more frequently through the use of more concise and convenient messaging (in comparison to email). However, this only works when the lecturer also provided support outside their working hours. Thirdly, the students identified that they can struggle when there is a vast amount of new information "...too many emails in my mailbox every day. Too many things not dealt with" (F1-9). Nevertheless, students felt WeChat helped them with this issue through the notification function as it became a habit to monitor it all the time, with F1-6 indicating "...when I see a red dot, I will click on it". Interestingly, the same was not said for email.



Figure 1: Example of lecturer's moments shared with students



Figure 2: Example of students' moments shared with lecturer/friends



Figure 3: Example of the use of stickers and emoji between student and lecturer

7.2 The role of WeChat for Chinese students within higher education

Where the focus group found that students strongly agreed that the personal support from the lecturer through WeChat significantly reduced the communication barrier, the questionnaires supported the

assertion of the effective use of WeChat in relation to its positive influence on students' engagement, performance and motivation (see Tab. 1). Moreover, although the correlation is not significant between the extent of how WeChat was effectively used and student retention ($r = 0.551$, $\rho = 0.051$), there is significant correlation between the use of WeChat and the improvement of students' engagement ($r = 0.750$, $\rho = 0.003$), performance ($r = 0.763$, $\rho = 0.002$) and motivation ($r = 0.769$, $\rho = 0.002$) according to the students' opinions.

Table 1: Percentages for improved engagement / performance / retention / motivation/ WeChat effectiveness

	Entirely Agree	Mostly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Entirely Disagree
Improved engagement	30.77%	38.46%	15.38%	15.38%	0	0	0
Improved performance	46.15%	23.08%	15.38%	7.69%	7.69%	0	0
Improved retention	30.77%	38.46%	15.38%	7.69%	7.69%	0	0
Improved motivation	46.15%	15.38%	15.38%	7.69%	7.69%	0	7.69%
WeChat is used Effectively	76.92%	0	7.69%	7.69%	0	0	7.69%

In the second focus group, some students suggested that their main purpose for using WeChat is to provide "...a simple convenient way to connect the lecturer and students together" (F2-1), and they do not expect lecturers to use it to populate learning material but to answer the students' questions. Whereas, F2-3 preferred the learning material to be shared on *moments*, so that they can read them more conveniently. F2-2 explained that the lecturer has already used Moodle to publish study material and WeChat is a tool to facilitate this learning environment by providing "...real-time responses to students asap".

Students compared WeChat with alternative social media communication tools, and maintained that WeChat is the best choice for them primarily because (1) alternative tools might be restricted in China, e.g. Facebook and Twitter; (2) WeChat has more functions, "...such as file transfer, translator, and lots and lots of stickers and emoji" (F2-1); (3) students believe WeChat is a part of their culture because "...almost any Chinese person who has a smartphone has a WeChat account" (F2-4). Fig 4 highlights students' perceptions of WeChat functions in relation to its use within UK HEIs. This figure is adapted from (Kietzman, Hermkens & McCarthy, 2011), which is a framework used to demonstrate the function blocks of social media tools. Conversation or communication had been mentioned by students 27 times in the first group, and WeChat dominates social networking communication within the Chinese community (Yang, Chen & Li, 2016). Compared with other functions, namely: 'group' function (mentioned six times), 'share' (three times), and 'relationship' (three times), 'conversation' is the function students use on a daily basis. Furthermore, 'identity', 'reputation' and functions for 'relationship' were not mentioned. However, WeChat provides a function for identity (user's profile information) and reputation (through activities on *moments*), but it does not appear to show 'presence' and 'relationship' of users. For example, the relationship between user A and B will not be visible to user C if one of them (A or B) is not a friend with C. Students felt lecturers (who are deemed to have high authority with a good reputation) should take control of the communication platform by setting up groups, sharing information and taking a lead in the conversation. As such, the connection between reputation and the other three functions of share, conversation and groups can be found. This is due to lecturers having a higher level of authority when considering the application of WeChat within UK HEIs (see Fig.5).

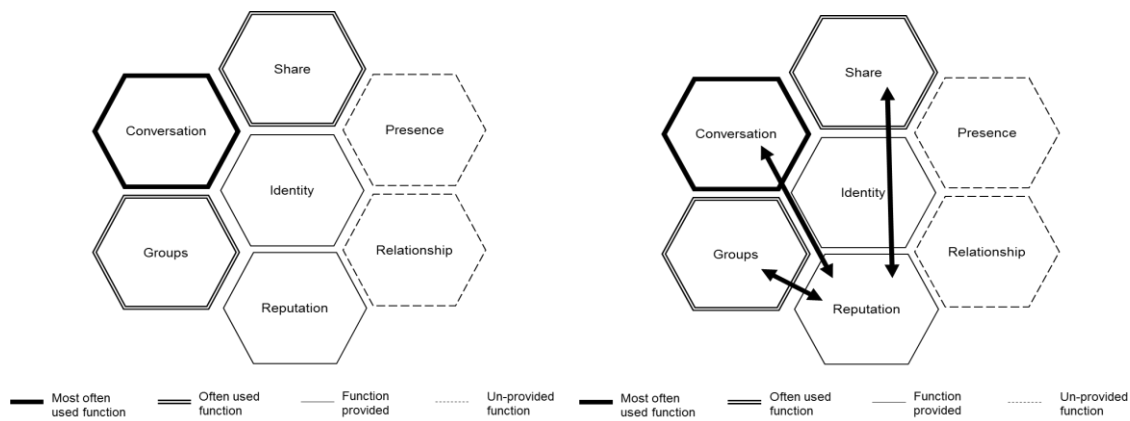


Figure 4: Functions of WeChat within Higher Education

Figure 5: Connections of WeChat Functions within Higher Education

7.3 Main categories of influencing factors

Six main influencing categories were identified from the first focus group, (1) lecturer's communication style, (2) lecturer's communication frequency, (3) student's learning environment, (4) learning context, (5) student's prior learning experiences, and (6) student's learning style. According to results through linear regression analysis, students' perception of these categories have influence on whether the lecturer has used WeChat effectively ($r^2 = 0.990$, $F = 102.824$, $p < 0.001$). However, when measuring the effect of their perception on these categories in relation to the students' engagement, performance, retention and motivation, it was found that these categories had (i) significant positive influence on students' performance ($r^2 = 0.925$, $F = 12.333$, $p = 0.004$); (ii) some degree of influence on students' engagement ($r^2 = 0.774$, $F = 3.429$, $p = 0.080$) and motivation ($r^2 = 0.774$, $F = 3.422$, $p = 0.080$), but (iii) did not have significant influence on students' retention ($r^2 = 0.547$, $F = 1.209$, $p = 0.412$). One student suggested that "how effectively the WeChat is adopted in the university might have some impact, but we will not make our decision on this, because we are looking for the usual stuff which is considered by all Chinese students, you know, the reputation, the ranking, and job possibilities" (F2-10), this view was strongly supported by the other students in the focus group.

The students' shared the belief that their "performance will definitely be improved if [they] receive help from [their] lecturers" (F2-1), but their motivation and engagement levels depend more on their relationship with the lecturers. Moreover, F2-7 highlighted that whether the lecturer is approachable is closely associated with their perception of the effectiveness of the use of WeChat and their academic performance, indicating that "...if the lecturer is not so serious, we can be more relaxed, and we learn better if we are relaxed". Similar to these focus group results; questionnaire results showed that students' evaluation of the communication style ($t = -3.686$, $p = 0.010$), communication frequency ($t = -4.138$, $p = 0.006$), and learning environment ($t = 2.589$, $p = 0.041$) are the three categories that significantly contribute to the regression model regarding the extent of improved performance (Improved performance = $-2.379 * X_{\text{communication style}} + 2.697 * X_{\text{communication frequency}} + 1.416 * X_{\text{learning environment}} - 0.823 * X_{\text{learning context}} - 0.391 * X_{\text{prior learning experience}} + 0.389 * X_{\text{learning style}} + \alpha$).

Focusing on the students' motivation and engagement, F2-2 commented that "I just feel so happy every time a teacher gives me responses. I do not think most teachers actually understand Chinese students. If they are very approachable, of course, I will take this teacher as my friend, and I am very happy to talk to this teacher or do anything with this teacher". Research on the impact of student-teacher relationship on students' motivation, engagement and performance found a good relationship has a positive impact on students' performance (Maulana Opdenakker & Brocken, 2013; Wubbels Brekelmans, Mainhard, Den Brok, & Van Tartwijk 2016), although this was conducted within schools rather than universities. Some students maintained that they will not interact with lecturers who are unapproachable and although social media can help to improve interactions between lecturers and students (Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia & Chang, 2015), these students believe nothing will be improved when they think the lecturer is unapproachable. Moreover, F2-6 added "I think students' motivation and engagement mostly comes from the students themselves. For some students, no matter what you do, they will not ask any questions". It is important to note that although WeChat has an importance role in assisting the communication between students and lecturers; students' motivation

and engagement are mostly influenced by their perceptions of the lecturer's personality and their own learning style.

7.4 Identified variables for each main category

22 variables were identified from the first focus group. However, according to the principal component analysis results of the questionnaires, six from these 22 variables do not have a significant influence on the variances among participants. These are (1) X_{1a} : the use of Emoji/stickers, (2) X_{3c} : peers' engagement level with lecturers' *moments*, (3) X_{1e} : Chinese language-based communication, (4) X_{4d} : the difficulty level of the module, (5) X_{4c} : the usefulness of the content of shared information, (6) X_{5a} : prior experience of using WeChat with lecturers for communication (see highlighted). Therefore, students' opinions tend to be significantly different regarding the other 16 variables; which are relevant to lecturers' communication style/frequency, their relationship with the lecturer, the lecturers' engagement on WeChat, peer engagement on WeChat, the perceived convenience of WeChat, and Wi-Fi connection.

Feedback from the second focus group indicated that all the students prefer lecturers to use Emoji/stickers and informal language because they believe this can help them to be more engaged as they felt more "relaxed" (F2-8). As for the other five variables (X_{3c} , X_{1e} , X_{4d} , X_{4c} , X_{5a}), students maintained that their motivation, engagement and performance are not affected by peers' engagement, the difficulty of the module, the usefulness of the content of shared information, their previous WeChat learning experience or their personal learning style and preferences. This is due to WeChat being perceived as a tool for communication purpose only. F2-9 suggested that "*I feel I do not use WeChat to study, it is just for communication, instant messaging*", whereas F2-5 suggested that "*a lot of the material shared on the teacher's moments is quite helpful, an example being writing up a dissertation; showing how to develop research aim and objectives*". Students strongly agreed that the Chinese language based support helped their performance and that they can approach the Chinese lecturer when required. As such, combining information from both focus groups and questionnaires, variables for effectiveness of the use of WeChat should be mainly derived from two categories: X_1 : Communication style ($\beta = -2.379$, std error = 0.645) and X_2 : Communication frequency ($\beta = 2.697$, std error = 0.652), although all the categories contribute to the students' evaluation regarding the effectiveness of the use of WeChat.

Additionally, there is significant correlation between X_{1b} : the extent of emotional connection with lecturer and X_{1a} : the use of Emoji / stickers ($r = 0.890$), or X_{1c} : the use of informal language ($r = 0.940$), or X_{1d} : lecturers' engagement on students' *moments* ($r = 0.870$), or X_{2a} : frequency of 1-1 conversation ($r = 0.756$), or X_{2b} : frequency of lecturer's *moments* updates ($r = 0.876$), or X_{4a} : the amount of shared information ($r = 0.875$). Consequently, similar to the focus group results as discussed earlier, these correlations demonstrate that the relationship between lecturer and students on WeChat is associated with the use of emoji / stickers / informal language and the lecturer's engagement activities on WeChat.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Both qualitative and quantitative results postulated that WeChat not only alleviated Chinese students' stress and communication barriers within their studies; but also that an effective use of WeChat between lecturers and students can improve students' engagement with the university, their motivation for study, and their perceived performance on the course. Communication style and frequency, learning environment and context, prior learning experience and personal learning style are all factors which contribute to the extent WeChat has been adopted effectively and the subsequent level of students' performance/engagement/motivation. However, communication style and frequency are the two main categories that should be considered when UK HEIs wish to apply WeChat to facilitate interaction between students and staff. This is due to students' belief that informal conversation with stickers and emoji made communication easier and frequent responses from lecturers helped them to improve their performance and level of motivation. Moreover, students strongly agree that WeChat should be adopted in all UK HEIs where there are Chinese students, because it provides instant messaging and notifications which are more convenient and easier to use than emails. The question of whether WeChat can improve students' engagement, performance and motivation is dependent on the students' relationship with the lecturer. Additionally, students expect quicker responses if WeChat is adopted. Acknowledging these positive impacts of WeChat on

Chinese students in UK HEIs, it would be useful for universities to enhance their communication systems for oversea students and adopt apps such as WeChat for the Chinese students (and other international students). However, this is also impacted by the opinions of the university and staff who may not have positive attitudes towards the use of social media (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011). Further research can be conducted in other universities with both students and lecturers to help to develop a more comprehensive analysis towards how it can be adopted.

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