

International Students' Perceptions: use of Wechat for Study and Recreation in Graduate Programs at Northeast Normal University in China

SARFRAZ ASLAM

(correspondence author)

Faculty of Education, Northeast Normal University
Changchun City, Jilin Province, China

ATIF SALEEM

MUHAMMAD JUNAID

Faculty of Education, Northeast Normal University
Changchun City, Jilin Province, China

Abstract:

This current study aims to investigate the International Students' Perceptions about the use of wechat for study and recreation in graduate programs at Northeast Normal University in China. The study used quantitative research method. A self developed questionnaire consisted of 15 items including demographics was used to collect data. The sample was comprised 97 international students, 50 male and 47 females from Faculty of Education, School of Psychology, School of Life Sciences and School of Chemistry. The results indicate: 1) almost all of the respondents use WeChat every day. 2) Knowledge seeking is a major factor in using WeChat among international students. The item "Attraction of educational and recreational activities encourages me to use wechat" and "Wechat is a good platform for sharing educational information" recorded the highest and second highest mean score (4.03, 3.97). 3). WeChat is a good way to learn and get information about education and recreational activity for international students. M.A & PhD Information group, M.A & PhD Chat group and StudyatNENU provide those educational activities and material to students.

International students have positive perceptions about the wechat use for their study. International students' majors and length of stay in China influenced perceptions about the use of wechat.

Key words: WeChat, International Students, Study, Recreation.

INTRODUCTION

Social Media is the product of information revolution and growing rapidly in the last decade. It has changed the way of people's communication and information flowing. The facts that motivate people to use social media are about information, entertainment, convenience, and social interaction.

WeChat is a mobile communication tool developed by Tencent in China, first released in January 2011, claimed "the new way to connect" and "a way of life". It is available for almost all kinds of mobile platforms, such as Android, iPhone, Windows Phone, computer windows and so on. Social networking sites and message apps have been more and more popular in mobile users, for chatting, recording, showing, expressing and education (Lin et al., 2011; Karpinski et al., 2013; Gao et al., 2013).



It's free to download, install and use. WeChat enjoys group chat, supports sending voice, photos, videos and text messages. It also supports social networking via shared streaming content feeds and location-based social plug-ins ("shake", "look around", "drift bottle" and "Facebook connect") to chat with and connect with other WeChat users. According to "The 33rd Statistical

Report on Internet Development in China” released by China Internet Net-work Information Center (CNNIC, 2014), by the end of December 2013, China has had 500 million mobile Internet users, more than 80 million that at the end of 2012. Mobile instant messaging has the largest number of mobile Internet users, accounted for 86.1%. At the same time, the number of micro blog users had reduced to 281 million, 37.4% of the micro blog users shifted to WeChat; the number of users of social networking websites had reduced to 278 million, 32.6% of the social networking websites users shifted to WeChat. According to Tencent’s report, the combined MAU (monthly activated users) of WeChat(Weixin) reached 355 million at the end of December 2013 (Tencent, 2014).

WeChat is featured with the characteristic of ubiquitous learning, being available for almost every student at any time anywhere. According to Xinhua, WeChat total users reached 600 million worldwide in October 2013 (Wikipedia, 2014). WeChat provides multimedia communication with text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, broadcast (one-to-many) messaging, photo/video sharing, location sharing, and contact information exchange. WeChat supports social networking via shared streaming content feeds and location-based social plug-ins ("Shake", "Look Around", and "Drift Bottle") to chat with and connect with local and international WeChat users. Photos can be taken and embellished with artistic filters, captions, and placed into a personal photo journal for sharing with other users. User data is protected via an on-demand contact list backup and retrieval to/from the cloud. WeChat claims to provide a social networking platform that emphasizes user privacy and fast response performance (Wikipedia, 2014).

The question to be addressed here how wechat is providing platform for international students for study and recreational activities at Northeast Normal University in China. This University is a famous university of China and

having many international students, it offers a variety of programs of different levels for international students. This university have many schools e.g Faculty of Education, School of Life science, School of Chemistry etc and ISO (international student office) and almost every unit has a specific wechat group such as, Faculty of education: M.A & PhD Information group, M.A & PhD Chat group, ISO: StydyatNENU. University and teachers try to make their programs more conductive for students. The current study aims to assess the presence of wechat using among international students who are using wechat and studying at normal university and examine the role of wechat in providing the study and recreational facilities.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

China is a multilingual country with most population in the world. There are different via of communication between people, but now a day's technology is being used by every person to deliver messages. It is the age of technology so Educational institutions are now providing every bite of information by using their websites and different apps. Use of Wechat at universities is the most frequent way to deliver educational material, information and recreational activities information to students and general public. Northeast Normal University is having a large number of national and international students. wechat a sharp tool used by NENU to provide information and material to students. There are many on working wechat groups in NENU, e.g. M.A & PhD Information Group, M.A & PhD Chat Group, StudyatNENU. M.A & PhD Information Group provides information about educational activates and different schedule, messages from school secretary and study material from different professors.M.A & PhD Chat group provides platform for chatting and also for recreational activities. International student office (ISO) wechat group name SudyatNENU, it

provides information about all activities e.g. semester starting, ending, vacations, recreation, achievements, admissions etc.

The pedagogy mainly consists of a STARS instructional pattern focusing on situational experience and a virtual training pattern focusing on role-play different policing roles based on designed scenarios. The virtual learning can be implemented through role-plays in class, or virtual learning online after or in class, which is carried out via free software like We Chat, a student determines to act as other participants including his/her peers, teachers, and experts, through keying in words, sending audio or video messages. Wechat is considered as sharp communication tool in China. NENU's international students get familiar very fast with wechat use in their studies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were formulated to facilitate data analysis and achieve the research objectives.

1. What are the key factors of international students' wechat using?
2. What do student perceive of using wechat in their studies?
3. What do student perceive of using wechat in recreations?

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The university in which this research has been done is situated in the northeastern region of Jilin province Changchun city China. Northeast Normal University, or NENU, is an institution of higher learning under the direct administration of the Ministry of Education, being selected as one of the universities given priority in construction of the 211 Project (www.nenu.edu.cn). There were two reasons for choosing this

university. First, the researcher is doctoral student of this university since 2015, so the investigation was easy and suitable for researcher. Second, the investigated university is a well-known normal university, which accepts a large number of students at different levels from more than fifty countries of the world. The researcher chose the international students as participants of the study. This study is an endeavor to fill the gap. Oliva recommended that the students of high school or above are mature enough to give their opinion about the curriculum (1992:110). She also admitted that they can help and affect the decisions of curriculum developers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The using of social networking sites and message apps has been a hot research topic in new media research. Social networking sites and message apps have been more and more popular in mobile users, for chatting, re-cording, showing, expressing, venting and so on (Lin et al., 2011; Karpinski et al., 2013; Gao et al., 2013). Re-searches on WeChat are mainly from China. Zhan and Yan (2013) find that WeChat's influence on network interpersonal communication is more apparent than real, and most of the users use WeChat to maintain and pro-mote the relationship of acquaintance.

Research programs on the application of WeChat in learning include constructing learning environment on campus based on WeChat which mainly talks about the using of WeChat in class instruction (Hao Zhang, 2013). Some researchers (Xiao et al., 2013; Bai et al., 2013) claim that WeChat is evolving from a pure message tool into a multi-functional platform, such as Game Center, Official Accounts and Payment. At the same time, WeChat has been introduced into education, to improve teaching and learning, such as mobile learning, blending learning, ideological education, and so on (Yuan et al., 2012; Li, 2013; Bai & Hao, 2013).

But few studies have addressed on factors of undergraduate students' WeChat using. Zhan and Yan (2013) find that WeChat's influence on network interpersonal communication is more apparent than real, and most of the users use WeChat to maintain and pro-mote the relationship of acquaintance. Some researchers (Xiao et al., 2013; Bai et al., 2013) claim that WeChat is evolving from a pure message tool into a multi-functional platform, such as Game Center, Official Accounts and Payment.

WeChat is featured with the characteristic of ubiquitous learning, being available for almost every student at any time anywhere. WeChat is a mobile text and voice messaging communication service developed by Tencent in China, first released in January 2011. The app is available on Android, iPhone, BlackBerry, Windows Phone, Symbian and OS X platforms. Languages supported include Traditional/simplified Chinese, English, and so on. WeChat is supported on Wi-Fi, 2G, 3G and 4G networks.

The review of related literature on wechat using provides ample proof of its usefulness in studies and recreations of international students. Technologies deployed shifted from computer software to LAN (Local Area Network) in the multi-media sound labs and the Internet, to the present Wi-Fi technology as a result of the rapid development of smart phones, as the survey conducted in March of 2013 and a year later showed that the percentage of smart phone users increased from 70% to almost 100%, which served as the overwhelming factor to shift our focus to the most popular software of smart phone users in China called WeChat.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Viewing the non-experimental descriptive nature of the study, a survey method was adopted to collect the required information

(Johnson & Christenson, 2010).The study was a quantitative survey research design. The questionnaire was developed in English.

Participants

Total 100 participants were selected, to whom the survey has been distributed. Three participants did not respond. In total, 97 participants responded to the survey with a response rate of 97 %. The number of male participants was 50 (51.5%) while that of female participants was 47 (48.5%). There were 97 participants included from the 34 from PhD, 37 from M.A and 26 from exchange/Language/visiting category. The students of the first, second and the third semester were selected from the classes. Among the total participants, the ages ranged between 20 and 29 years (57 %), which comprised 56 students, while 30 participants were aged between 30 and 39 years, which comprised almost 30% of total and was the second largest age group. Hence, we can say that more than 57% of the participants belonged to 20–29 age group.

This age can be considered mature enough to understand educational problems and respond appropriately. Because the investigation was about educational activities and the participants also belonged to the university, they were aware of the technicalities and seriousness of the problem. Among the remaining participants 11(11 %) were between 40-49 years. Participants were from different countries of the world including Pakistan, Canada, Russia, Turkmenistan, Tanzania, Yemen, Korea, South Sudan, Sudan and Ukraine.

Data collection and analysis

A quantitative design was exercised for the study, it spotlights on gathering and investigating, quantitative data in a sole study. Quantitative data was collected by administering a questionnaire. All the ethical considerations in the research had been taken into account while doing the research. The

researchers administered self-tailored questionnaires for the study. The Likert Scale form of the questionnaire was employed for its suitability during the study. At first, the scale was piloted and then refined according to the feedback of pilot testing. The last draft, consisting of 15 items (included demographics) was finalized for the study. The five points rating scale was used.

The options for the statements were: strongly disagree, agree neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The reliability of the instrument was 0.79. The total items in the scale were 10 when it was finalized for administration (excluding questions about demographic information). The questionnaire was administered by the researcher himself with the help of some of friends. The researcher was able to do the job smoothly and the presence of the friends was helped in communicating with the participants. All the questionnaires were collected by the researcher within two days. Only three respondents did not respond .When the data collection process was completed, the data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table1: Demographic Characteristic of sample

Variables	N=97	Percentage %
Gender		
Male	50	51.5
Female	47	48.5
Age		
20-29	56	56
30-39	30	30
40-49	11	11
Program Enrolled		
PhD	34	34
Master	37	37
Language/others	26	26

The table 1 indicates that percentage of female students (48.5%) was lower than that of male students (51.5%). International students: PhD (34 %), M.A (37%), and others (26%) were using wechat at NENU. 48.45% students were using wechat more than two years. 51% students were using wechat daily 2-4 hour/day.

Table2: Percentage distribution of factors about International students' wechat using at NENU.

Sr#	ITEM	SA%	A%	UD%	DA%	SDA%	MEAN
1	The using experience of wechat in studies is better than expected.	1.7	9.4	42.5	33.1	13.3	3.47
2	I feel satisfied that wechat meets my recreational needs.	0.6	8.3	33.7	42.0	15.5	3.64
3	Wechat helps me to keep in touch with my fellows.	0.0	4.4	23.8	46.4	25.4	3.93
4	Wechat helps me to keep me up-to-date about recreational activities.	3.9	16.6	41.4	28.2	9.9	3.24
5	I often chat with unfamiliar peoples on wechat.	23.8	39.8	26.5	8.3	1.7	2.24
6	Wechat is a vital tool for me regarding information.	1.7	9.4	46.4	36.5	6.1	3.36
7	Wechat is monotonous breaker for me.	2.2	7.2	32.6	40.9	17.1	3.64
8	Wechat is a good platform for sharing educational information.	0.0	4.4	23.2	43.1	29.3	3.97
9	Majority of my teachers and classmates use wechat.	0.0	9.9	42.5	27.6	19.9	3.57
10	Attraction of educational and recreational activities encourages me to use wechat.	0.0	7.7	17.7	38.7	35.9	4.03

Table2. Indicates that item “Attraction of educational and recreational activities encourages me to use wechat.” recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.03). The second highest mean score is “Wechat is a good platform for sharing educational information” (M = 3.97), followed by “Wechat helps me to keep in touch with my fellows” (M = 3.93) and “Wechat is monotonous breaker for me” (M = 3.64). The lowest mean score is the item “I often chat with unfamiliar peoples on wechat” (M = 2.24). The second lowest mean score is “Wechat helps me to keep me up-to-date about recreational activities” (M = 3.24).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Finding reveals that, most of the International NENU's students are satisfied with WeChat because using experience of WeChat is better than expected and meets their communicational needs. Almost all of the respondents use WeChat every day, and 17.53% of them use WeChat more than 2 hours per day. The influence of educational and recreational activities is a major factor in using WeChat among international students. This is based that all of the items related to studies had recorded high mean scores, such as "Attraction of educational and recreational activities encourages me to use wechat." (M = 4.03), "Wechat is a good platform for sharing educational information" (M = 3.97), "I feel satisfied that wechat meets my recreational needs." (M = 3.64). On the contrast, only 8.3% of the respondents agree with the item "I often chat with unfamiliar on WeChat" (1.7% strongly agree, 8.3% agree, M = 2.24).

In addition, Majority of my teachers and classmates use wechat. Influence international students. Only 9.9% of the respondents disagree with the item "Majority of my teachers and classmates use wechat." (0% strongly disagree, 9.9% disagree, M = 3.57). This may be because teachers and students compose a community and have shared experience. They teach and study together every day, have same courses and similar schedule, even alike ambitions. WeChat is based on acquaintance network, this result emphasizes the core of NENU's International students' WeChat using is educational activities. Only 9.4% of respondents disagree with the item "Wechat is a vital tool for me regarding information" (1.7% strongly disagree, 9.4% disagree, M = 3.36). This is because that most of the international students are post-80's generation and growing up in the internet age, using mobile devices every day. They accept new technology very quickly and naturally.

Within the atmosphere of friends and classmates created by WeChat, they pooled ideas and information, taking comfort from chatting; writing and read, as well as teachers are also using advance tools like wechat, QQ etc. The real advantage of any web-mediated learning approach is learning anytime, anywhere and for anyone, this is true for WeChat, so besides the above mentioned applications in university, WeChat a vital platform for learning after class. In this changing information time, various technologies and services emerge in an endless stream. As the fastest growing mobile application in China, WeChat has becoming an indispensable part of campus life. Studies and recreations, the key factors of international students' WeChat using, may be the same factors of information technologies acceptance among international students.

On one hand, it is necessary for university students to release stress and maintain the relationship between friends. On the other hand, it is important to let them understand that growth is the main task, and remind them to spend lots of time on learning instead of mobile apps. WeChat is becoming the most popular software among university students at present as the rapid development of smart phones; application of WeChat in education is necessary and feasible. The most striking advantage of WeChat is the non-synchronous chat and replay of the audio chat record, which allows teachers and students (including the user him/herself) to check the communication process to evaluate, correct or better the practice of interaction, it also allows the students to think for a while before interacting with other participants, which benefits especially for some introverted students or students whose English are not fluent enough to respond immediately.

Another advantage of using WeChat is the active role it plays in the student-centered learning approach; students are more interested and involved in the learning process with the access of pictures, audio and video materials, and interactions

with other participants, integrating self-directed learning with collaborative learning. Last but no means least, WeChat-based learning provides real communication environment and simulated workplace for international students, enabling introverted students to enjoy the learning process and strengthen their creativity, motivation and critical thinking.

Like any new technical applications in a field, the initial research does arouse interests and curiosity on the one hand, on the other hand, WeChat can only be a supplementary tool but not a leading tool in learning, and teachers may also need patience and courage to make the double-edged sword contribute to education. Teachers can assign learning tasks through sending pictures, texts or audio records, evaluate or comment on their performances. Wechat's best use of the teacher and the students in class to interact and collaborate with all the participants to practice vocational skills because applying knowledge is forever the ultimate goal of learning.

The present study investigated and compared the perceptions of the International students of Northeast Normal University about the use of wechat regarding studies and recreations at different level such as students of PhD, M.A and Languages programs.

1. The present study found that International students have generally positive perceptions towards the use of wechat for learning and recreational purposes.
2. Different wechat groups provide useful educational activities and material to students.
3. There was no statistically significant difference between PhD, M.A and Language students towards the use of technology.
4. There was statistically significant difference between male and female student' perceptions about use of wechat for learning purposes, males were more positive than females.

SUGGESTIONS

In the light of the result of the present research following suggestions for future can be put forward;

1. Findings of this study reveal that wechat is an important communication tool regarding educational and recreational activities, so keep in view these; universities may develop more suitable and accessible approach of using wechat among international students.
2. The results of present study showed several directions of research. This study specifically addressed studies and recreations through wechat of international students. But this issue may further investigated with respect to different level of institutions like secondary school, colleges, age, and gender.
3. In this research, the participants were the international student of NENU, this kind of study may conduct in some other universities also on large scale.

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