WeChat Use and Offline Interpersonal Relationships Among Chinese College Students

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Abstract. This article explores and analyzes the current situation of social media use among Chinese college students, and points out that, except for some extreme cases, the use of social software does not bring too much negative impact on Chinese college students' offline social interaction under the premise of normal social media use. In the process of the analysis, special phenomena of Chinese college students' social media, such as "media independence", "intergenerational communication", "emoticon", and "WeChat Moment", are introduced.

Keywords: Social media; Media independence; Intergenerational communication; Emoticon; WeChat Moment.

1. Introduction

The use of social media is increasing in the technologically advanced twenty-first century. Social media, as a platform for information exchange based on user relationships, can provide services for a variety of fields and user types. In China, the use of social media is closely related to life, and people use social media for communication and information exchange; this application, which breaks down time and space constraints, is believed to provide people with greater convenience. WeChat, as one of the most popular applications in China's social media market, has maintained its competitive edge. WeChat's total number of users has reached 1.299 billion, according to Tencent's Q2 2022 results . Chinese university students are among them, and they are an important part of WeChat users.

While WeChat has improved the daily lives of Chinese college students, it is undeniable that WeChat has reduced communication among Chinese college students to some extent. WeChat use has become a habit for Chinese college students, rather than a way for them to pass the time. Taking several universities in Beijing as an example, Chinese college students are frequently seen using WeChat in public. WeChat is most commonly used by college students who walk alone in public. They do not typically carry cell phones in their schoolbags, but rather hold them in their hands to respond to messages from friends or group chats. In addition, even college students who walk in groups use WeChat in between walks. However, these are the behaviors of people using WeChat in public when the number of people is relatively small, whereas the behaviors of people using WeChat while waiting for the elevator in the dormitory or the school building are more representative of college students gathering to use WeChat. When waiting for the elevator, many students choose to pick up their phones and open various social software, particularly WeChat, to pass the time.

This phenomenon has become more common in recent years, prompting people to reflect

on it. Some may argue that using WeChat frequently could have a serious negative impact on Chinese college students' interpersonal relationships in reality. However, in my perspective, using WeChat would not cause problems of offline interpersonal relationship except in extreme individual examples. This essay seeks to response to the public's concerns and point out that the risks are overestimated.

2. Chinese college students' use of WeChat affects offline communication

People's concerns about WeChat and interpersonal communication are not unreasonable. On the contrary, they are worth exploring. To begin with, online chatting through WeChat could possibly weaken offline interpersonal relationships, making an impact on Chinese university students' feelings

of happiness. Online talking, which replaces offline conversation, tends to lessen people's sense of "belonging," namely, the "degree of integration" of an individual into a community. Interpersonal relationships are inextricably linked to cultural institutional patterns, and their formation, maintenance, and consolidation are all a part of culture. However, interpersonal relationships are portrayed differently in various cultural contexts. Even if presented in different ways, the Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler's view that "all problems stem from interpersonal relationships" has parallels with Eastern cultures . Whereas healthhy offline interpersonal relationship connect tightly with Chinese people's concept of happiness. "Happiness is defined in terms of interpersonal relationships in the East, where collectivist cultures predominate, and drives people to balance positive and negative emotions, and self-embedded social relationships are the best predictors of happiness" . In other words, one of the most important factors influencing Chinese people's well-being is their ability to integrate well into groups, and Chinese university students are no exception. However, college students' "media dependence," as evidenced by their use of WeChat, tends to erode the degree of integration of Chinese college students in the group. According to media dependency theory, the relationship between media and audience is "interactive but not reciprocal", and the services that WeChat can offer are more appealing than the audience's resources, creating an unequal status between media and audience. As a result, the happiness of Chinese university students is likely to suffer indirectly.

Furthermore, it is difficult for college students to completely resist "media dependence." According to Erving Goffman, the front stage is a place where people "perform" for a specific purpose, while the backstage is a place where they can return to themselves. Joshua Merovitz further suggests that electronic media has an impact on both the front and back stage. He claims that because of the prevalence of electronic media, "Location's interconnected components are ripped apart. Wherever a person is now—at home, at work, or in a car—he can be reached and communicated with" . WeChat has pushed the boundaries of time and space, constantly transmitting information to college students via the Internet, making it impossible for their brains to rest in the web of information that envelops them. Checking who has updated their WeChat Moment before going to bed, first checking the class WeChat group of student assistants in the early days to see if they have notified any news, chatting with their families about recent events while eating at noon, and opening their phones when they come out of the library in the evening to see if anyone has sent them a message in the previous two hours. Because of the blurred line between front-stage and backstage the brain unconsciously immerses itself in the "ocean of information" and then unconsciously becomes part of the "ocean." This unconscious behavior frequently results in Chinese college students "accidentally" wasting more time and generating anxiety, and then they need to use cell phones more to relieve anxiety, forming a vicious circle that is difficult to break in a short period of time.

Moreover, there is the issue of intergenerational communication between parents and children, which is more prone to communication conflicts. College students' immersion in WeChat is not conducive to easing the conflicts to some extent. This intergenerational communication between parents and children is also closely related to college students' unique communication style. Chinese college students not only use WeChat as a communication tool, but also use Weibo as a social media application for communication. There, college students bring Internet buzzwords developed on Weibo that are unique to young people for daily communication. Internet terms are new and unfamiliar to parents of college students who do not frequently use microblogs or similar platforms. Even if they come to understand the specific meaning and usage of these Internet buzzwords, they do so with a time lag from when these buzzwords were most popular, which creates a new set of communication issues. Furthermore, in addition to the communication gap with parents or older relatives, the "emoticon" communication method, which is unique to social software such as WeChat, may impair college students' ability to communicate face-to-face. When college students communicate with others on WeChat, the use of emoticons improves the expression of personal feelings. This indicates that while they use emoticons, they face the risk of using emoticons during

online chatting but with the possibility of ambiguity and the weakening of offline face-to-face communication due to reliance on emoticons.

The WeChat Moment mode, in addition to WeChat chat, is one of the factors that influence Chinese college students' interpersonal relationships. WeChat Moment is similar to other social media platforms in that users select the text, pictures, or videos they want to share and post them in their friend circle, where other users can like and comment on them. In this case, Chinese college students have the same option as the majority of other users, and everyone will update the content of their WeChat moment selectively. Chinese college students are adept at using WeChat Moment's "blocking" function to show different content to different groups. Everyone has a tendency to show others only what they want them to see. According to Shirley Turkel, "the Internet has shrunk the real, complex side of people and magnified the perfect, sophisticated side; through sharing, people satisfy their need to be valued, recognized, and admired, and they may even gradually develop an illusion of their halo" . As a result, college students would consider the content of their posts from the perspective of others rather than their own emotional needs. In some cases, they fall into an infinite disguise trap by overly "disguising" themselves as if they were celebrities in society. This is because, while maintaining their online image, students have no way to avoid offline communication, and they frequently have to expend more effort to "whitewash" themselves in order to satisfy the image they present on the Internet. Such behavior not only makes real-life communication exhausting and insincere, but it also increases the risk of "failure of disguise," which can lead to anxiety and low self-esteem about one's own identity.

According to the analysis, WeChat could have certain negative effects on interpersonal relationships

3. “Overreading” the impact of WeChat Usage on offline communication

Is the overall reality as terrible as one might fear? Is it true that when Chinese college students use WeChat, they inevitably enter the "vortex" of social media, causing the total breakdown of interpersonal relationships? To begin with, it should be clear that the views and opinions explained previously concerning the interpersonal relationship issues caused by Chinese college students’ use of WeChat are reasonable. More research is needed, however, to confirm whether or not these worries are fully representative of the current social situation of the majority of Chinese college students.

The scholars Lingning Wang and Yi Liu conducted detailed studies and summaries on this question, entitled “Adoption, Exposure, and Dependence: A Study of College Students’ WeChat Use Behavior and Its Influencing Factors, "as well as"An Empirical Study of the Influence of WeChat Use on College Students' Subjective Well-Being." These studies investigate the problem of Chinese college students' Supposed "media dependence" on WeChat. WeChat use is "not serious except for the compulsive psychological dependence, and in other aspects, college students' WeChat dependence is not serious, which is very different from pathological Internet use," according to Wang's research . Among these, compulsive psychological dependence brought on by WeChat use is not as severe as it looks to be. This is a typical circumstance brought about by the use of social media. For instance, a lot of WeChat users claim they can't tolerate not checking their inbox for new messages. Arguably, it is possible to understand the "compulsive psychological dependence" found by the studies as related not only to WeChat as a social media platform, but also to the general social environment in which Chinese college students live. College students in any city and at any level are in a relatively "awkward" position in China's current social context, as they are not as mature as adults entering society but they are faced with choices about the future and confusion about their life, and they are suddenly in a state of confusion apart from their parents' well-considered protection. As they move away from the protection of their parents and into the environment of living alone, interpersonal relationships and information intake become an essential part of life, and WeChat has become one of the most important media for Chinese college students to obtain information and maintain interpersonal relationships. However, without WeChat as a communication medium, the

interpersonal relationship problems of Chinese college students caused by information communication will persist. WeChat, as an auxiliary tool for communication, cannot serve as the sole communication terminal. In other words, the interpersonal relationship issues caused by information communication are the root cause, while WeChat dependence is merely a byproduct. It is therefore clear that the reason for WeChat dependence is the need for real-life interpersonal relationships. WeChat, used as a support tool for online communication, is mostly used for communication in the online world and does not have a lot of complicated usage options. WeChat use will not cause Chinese college students to lose their abilities to communicate offline since they will instinctively look for other auxiliary tools when they return to the real world.

In contrast to Wang, Liu argues that "no correlation was found between the intensity of WeChat use and either dimension of college students' subjective well-being" . However, Liu explained that "for college students, WeChat use may not lead to an increase in their life satisfaction or positive affective experience; however, an increase in WeChat-bridging social capital can lead to an increase in their negative affective experience" . Liu's perspective once again demonstrates that WeChat as a tool for maintaining interpersonal relationships is not the source of social anxiety for Chinese college students; rather, the energy consumed by those relationships that must be maintained is the most significant source of anxiety. The majority of the research samples used by Wang and Liu in their study are from college students in first-tier cities, and while they did not collect data from college students nationwide, the popularity of WeChat and the unique psychological condition of Chinese college students are similar across the colleges, so the conclusions drawn are also represented to some extent.

Aside from the psychological effects of WeChat use on college students, the unique forms of expression generated by the Internet—popular Internet phrases and emoticons—deserve special attention. Both of the perspectives of considering Internet buzzwords as the root cause of intergenerational communication conflicts and the use of emoticons as the cause of the decline in face-to-face communication ability are overestimated. First and foremost, intergenerational communication conflicts are more closely related to the family environment and education. Compared to family environment and education, internet buzzwords rarely contribute to a debate. The number of words presented to the audience is small, usually five Chinese characters, and they have very little weight in the language of communication, so they do not pose a significant barrier to communication. However, some will argue that a small impact does not imply a lack of impact. This viewpoint is correct, but measuring the positive and negative effects that the two sides of popular Internet words can have on intergenerational communication and even communication in other relationships is difficult. For example, misunderstanding of intergenerational communication due to popular Internet terms and promotion of intergenerational rapprochement due to popular Internet terms are two very subtle outcomes that are difficult to compare. As a result, the conclusion regarding Internet buzzwords and intergenerational relationships is also obvious. Internet popular word usage does have an impact on intergenerational communication, both positively and negatively, but not significantly. Some argue, however, that the use of emoticons can impede offline communication. This argument is not entirely implausible, but there is no concrete research to back it up, and based on the author's observations in life, this phenomenon occurs only rarely. Emoticons are seen as more of a help to online communication than a hindrance to offline communication. Because WeChat online communication lacks facial expressions and body language that can enhance the connotation of verbal expressions, emoticons naturally become a "helper" to assist the "emotionless" text.

Unlike the influence of popular Internet phrases and emoticons, one of the influences on interpersonal relationships that is yet to be considered is the content of Chinese college students' messages and WeChat Moments. It is natural for people to show the positive side of themselves on social media and reduce their negative image, such as by setting a "block" or simply reaching out to specific family and friends to discuss it. As a result, Chinese college students are more likely to view their WeChat Moment with friends as freer and happier. In general, the impact of WeChat Moments on offline interpersonal interactions remains to be investigated. Nevertheless, the only thing for

certain is that the demand of exchanging information is the root cause of offline interpersonal relationship issues, while WeChat is just a auxiliary tools to achieve the purposes.

4. Conclusion

In China, the influence of WeChat on Chinese college students is undeniable. However, WeChat, as a more functional than entertaining communication social media, has no significant impact on Chinese college students' offline interpersonal relationships. Instead of being a root cause, it is more like a auxiliary tool. The following conclusions can be drawn:

WeChat has been studied more and more during the period of its almost twelve-year operation. Yet scholars have not made clear, unified conclusions about the effects of WeChat use on Chinese college students' interpersonal relationships. Use of WeChat among Chinese university students has been linked in some research to negative effects on offline interactions, as demonstrated, although other studies have found no evidence of a connection between WeChat usage and offline interpersonal relationships. Perhaps that is the reason why it is hard to jump to a consistent conclusion.

The studies' polarized results reveal that these are most likely caused by the sample's lack of diversity. It would be challenging to compile opinions from all Chinese university students on WeChat use and offline interpersonal relationships because there are so many universities in China and such a considerable population of students. The study is restricted, because the sample was not diverse. I personally believe there is a strong correlation between variables such local economic status, upbringing, family status, gender, and subject major, with the desire for WeChat use. Many studies have limitations due to these external factors, and they frequently come to findings that are only indicative of the opinions of the Chinese university students chosen in the sample, rather than those of all Chinese university students. Furthermore, many people have "preconceived" judgements about WeChat use due to the negative perception of most social media. Different social media applications, even if they have commonalities, need to be viewed differently.

However, with the rapid growth and popularity of social media platforms, WeChat has incorporated many features from other social media applications, such as the introduction of video playback, in an attempt to attract users. Will the usage patterns of Chinese university students change as a result? Going forward, this is a question that needs to be investigated.

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