

**A Double-Edged Sword: Examining WeChat's Role in Chinese Student
Sojourners' Study Abroad Experiences**

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Abstract

The growing number of Chinese student sojourners (CSS) in the UK and the increasing popularity of social media among international students have received considerable academic attention. Some studies on CSS focused on WeChat (a Chinese multi-purpose platform that enables messaging, social media, and mobile payment), the most ‘favourable’ platform among CSS (Yu et al., 2019). However, few studies were conducted in the UK, especially in the updated context of British higher education impacted by COVID-19. Moreover, the pre-existing studies contradict wider literature and lack depth.

Adopting a nuanced and critical stance on international students, this empirical study investigates the role WeChat plays in CSS’ sojourning experiences. Participants are 17 Cross-cultural Communication (CCC) MA students from Mainland China. Research data comprised the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE) (Byram et al., 2009), semi-structured interviews, WeChat screenshots, and research field notes. This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach, utilising a hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that WeChat serves as a double-edged sword in participants’ sojourning lives, facilitating co-national connections and providing sociocultural support but limiting their intercultural ties thereby leading to a lack of independence. WeChat also enables participants to gain timely well-being support though the long-term effect is unknown. Additionally, the intercultural encounter (IE) sense-making process on WeChat was found to be an enriching process of collective learning, with participants enhancing their intercultural communicative *competences*(ICC) through dialogic reflections.

This study supplements the lack of empirical studies on CSS’ social media use and intercultural transition in the UK, enriches understanding of acculturation and ICC theories, contributes to the knowledge of improving methodology rigour, and gives practical insights to international students and the British higher educational institutes. Due to the lack of diversity in research samples, the findings may not apply to other CSS. Future research could benefit from a longitudinal study involving CSS participants from various disciplines.

Key Words: social media; WeChat; Chinese student sojourners; acculturation; intercultural encounter

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Abbreviations

ABC: Affective, Behavioural, and Cognitive

AIE: the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*

CCC: Cross-Cultural Communication

COVID-19: the Coronavirus disease

CSS: Chinese Student Sojourners

ECLS: School of Education, Communication, and Language Science

HE: Higher Education

HESS: the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency

ICC: Intercultural Communicative Competence

IE: Intercultural Encounter

MDA: Multimodal Discourse Analysis

TA: Thematic Analysis

TVTA: Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis

UNESCO: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UK: the United Kingdom

US: the United States

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Situated in the interdisciplinary fields of applied linguistics and intercultural communication, this ethnographic study addresses the relationship between social media use and Chinese Student Sojourners' (CSS) studying abroad experiences. With *sojourners* referring to people residing in new cultures without a permanent settlement intention (Church, 1982), *student sojourning* here refers to those who reside abroad to pursue higher education (Anderson et al., 2016). Specifically, this study investigates how CSS' behaviours on WeChat (a Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media, and mobile payment app) and WeChat's role in CSS' sojourning experiences, particularly in their everyday lives, acculturation, and intercultural encounter (IE) sense-making.

According to the statistics by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2023), the CSS have been the largest international student cohort worldwide. More specifically in the context of British higher education (HE), CSS has remained the biggest international student group for over a decade (the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESS), 2023), contributing to the internationalisation in British HE (Bolton et al., 2024). However, there is a lack of understanding of CSS, especially in their social media use in the UK. The existing literature is even more sparse regarding their use of WeChat – a multi-purpose Chinese social media platform that enables messaging, social media, and mobile payment. This empirical study is important because it not only deepens understanding of the CSS but also provides insights into the importance of the Chinese social media platforms in shaping the sojourning experiences of international students, which was significantly overlooked by previous studies but is vital for the internationalisation of the British HE.

This study focuses on 17 CSS enrolled in the 2021/22 academic year at a University in England. Qualitative data were collected from February to May 2022 to explore the role of WeChat on their study abroad experiences, particularly in how WeChat integrates with different aspects of their lives and becomes ubiquitous. All 17 participants are Chinese mainlanders. Students from the two Special Administrative Regions – Hong Kong and Macao were purposefully excluded due to their historical, political, economic, and educational divergence from the mainland after the long-term isolation and its 'multi-layered complexities of colonial societies' (Ngo, 1999, p.288). All participants were doing a one-year postgraduate (taught) degree who experience challenges of 'triple transition', namely moving to a new country, a new educational system, and a new level of academic study (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Schartner, 2014).

It needs to be noted that though my study was not conducted at the height of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (year 2020 and 2021) when multiple lockdowns were implemented complying with various international travel restrictions, my participants were impacted by the COVID-19 due to the continuation of multiple restrictions (e.g., wearing face masks, social distancing, and vaccination pass in certain public places). More information about the research context will be elaborated later in Section 1.2.

This opening chapter proceeds as follows: as said, Section 1.2 presents the research contexts; Section 1.3 explains my research interest and personal experiences that led to this study; Section 1.4 elaborates the research rationale; Section 1.5 presents the research aims; and the last section (1.6) clarifies the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Research Contexts

My research is situated in the broader context of increasing global student mobility and the British higher education disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic (1.2.1). Following this, 1.2.2 presents the experiences of international students (including the CSS) and their social media use, and 1.2.3 outlines the complexity of CSS' background. Then, the traditional perceptions towards international students are problematised before I introduce a critical lens that guides my research (1.2.4). Lastly, 1.2.5 introduces WeChat for readers not familiar with the platform.

1.2.1 *International Student Mobility and British Higher Education*

Internationally mobile students are those who pursue higher education across national or territorial borders (UNESCO, 2023). According to the statistics provided by UNESCO (2023), the number of global international students has significantly increased over the last two decades (see Figure 1), contributing to HE internationalisation. The number nearly tripled, rising from over 2.2 million in 2001 to more than 6.39 million in 2021. By the time I complete my thesis, UNESCO did not release updated data for 2022 (the year my data was collected), and no valuable information could be found from trustworthy sources, but the ever-growing number of international students illustrated in Figure 1 depicted the increasing trend of international mobility globally. This trend continued even during the COVID-19 pandemic, which took over 6.9 million people's lives worldwide since its initial outbreak in December 2019 (WHO, 2023). Despite multiple mobility restrictions at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2021, the number of global international students increased from 6.38 million to 6.39 million (International Organization for Migration, 2024). China constituted the largest international student cohort, with over one million students - twice the number from India, the second-largest cohort (UNESCO, 2023).

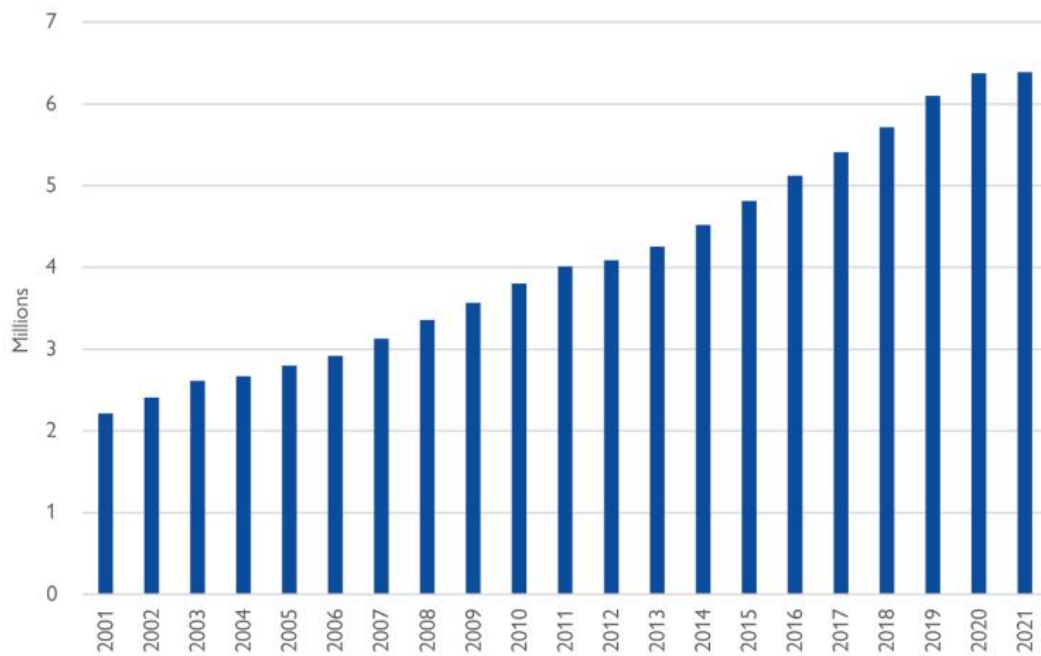


Figure 1:

International Students Globally, 2001 to 2021

Various factors have led to the rise in international mobility. Globalisation, university expansion and privatization all contribute to the internationalisation of the HE (Dobbins & Kwiek, 2017). The popularity of academic sojourning also attributes to the expanding middle classes worldwide that demand better education, the increasing value of international education in the global workforce market, and governments' promotion of internationalisation strategies (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2020). In addition, international students contribute to an essential source of income for many universities (Schartner, 2014). Consequently, many universities prioritise internationalisation as a key strategy in response to the financial crisis (Jones et al., 2016) since the tuition fees of international students are often much higher than those of home students. Though some researchers (Connell, 2013; Matthews, 2014) criticise that the HE has been commodified as a service industry for income generation, the internationalisation of the HE is recognised for producing a high-quality work force for the global labour market (Harrison, 2015). Moreover, international student mobility enables individuals to gain personal growth (Council of Europe, 2016) and facilitates countries to maintain relationships during economic and political turbulence (Altbach & De Wit, 2015).

The UK has been the world's second leading host country for international students, after the U.S. (UNESCO, 2023). The UK welcomed 605,130 international students in 2020/21, and the number further increased to 679,970 in the year 2021/22 (Bolton et al., 2024). The large number of

international students has brought a lot of benefits to the UK. Firstly, the presence of international students enhances the internationalisation of the British HE by bringing a diverse culture to campuses and preparing students for working in a global environment (Bolton et al., 2024). Secondly, international students create tremendous economic incomes. According to a governmental report (GOV, 2024), the British HE ‘exports’ were valued at approximately £21.7 billion in 2021, which increased by 81% since 2010. During international students’ stay in the UK, the 2021/22 international student cohort was estimated to create a total net economic benefit of £37.4 billion (London Economic, 2023). The financial gains from the international students demonstrate the effectiveness of the market-led mechanism adopted by the UK to reform its public sectors (Hunt & Boliver, 2021).

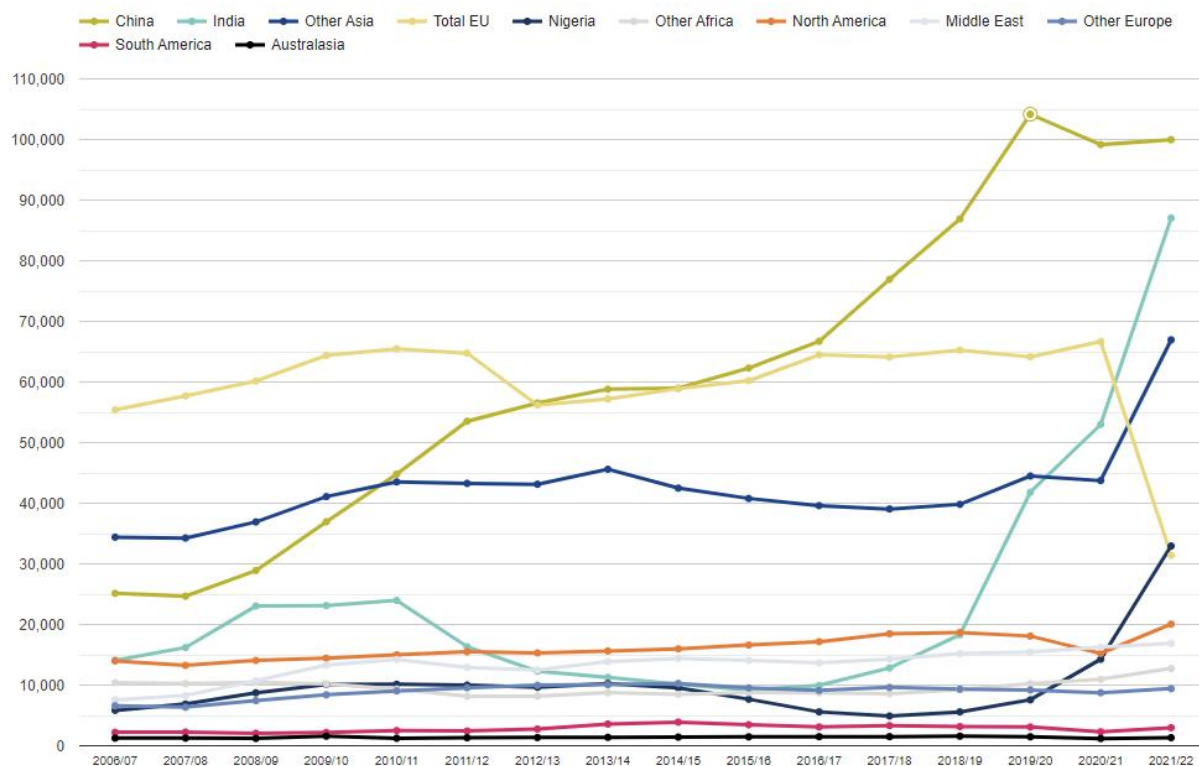


Figure 2:
International Students in the UK (HESA, 2023)

According to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESS) (2023), Chinese students have been the largest international student cohort in the UK for over a decade (see Figure 2). There has been a rising trend since 2006/07, although the number of Chinese students slightly declined in

2020/2021 due to COVID-19 (HESS, 2023). Specifically, the number of international students from Mainland China (excluding the two SARs of Hong Kong and Macao) reached 141,870 in the 2019/20 academic year, with approximately 60% postgraduates. In 2020/21, the number dropped for the first time in over a decade to 99,160 (HESS, 2023). In the following year (2021/22), the total number of CSS increased to 99,965 (Bolton et al., 2024), showing a recovery from the COVID-19 disruption though the number did not reach the pre-pandemic levels.

The abrupt decrease of the CSS in the year 2020/2021 (Figure 2) exemplifies how COVID-19 has impacted the British HE and particularly CSS mobility. COVID-19 profoundly impacted tertiary education globally with international students being the most affected (Brammer & Clark, 2020) or the ‘most vulnerable’ (Firang, 2020, p.820). The vulnerability of international students includes great psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, loneliness, and depression), financial difficulties, and a lack of government support (Firang, 2020; Misirlis et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020). Compared to other groups, CSS were more severely affected. At the beginning of the pandemic crisis, COVID-19 was addressed as the ‘China/Chinese virus’ or ‘Kung Flu’ even by powerful politicians, resulting in the rise of discrimination against the Chinese community in various countries (Zhu et al., 2022). More specifically in the UK context, researchers highlighted that CSS generally experienced enormous disruptions and stresses (Zhao, 2023). They experienced not only anxiety about their health condition and uncertain policies (e.g., unpredictable visa policies and a series of xenophobic policies targeting Chinese graduate students) but also worried about their safety with numerous reports of discrimination or even assaults targeting Chinese (Yu, 2021; Zhao, 2023). In addition to more noticeable physical confrontation or violence, Zhu and her colleagues (2022) highlighted the existence and risk of symbolic violence, namely the ‘gentle violence imperceptible and invisible even to its victims through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition’ in everyday social practices (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 2). For example, wearing face masks during the outbreak of COVID-19 became an act of distinction that resulted in othering and stigmatisation. Instead of admitting the scientific evidence of wearing masks in reducing the spread of the virus, such health practice was often targeted by radical individuals, or ‘tolerated’ by authorities or institutions (such as universities) as ‘cultural differences’, which is denaturalising health behaviour and legitimising symbolic violence. Moreover, CSS studying in the UK held health beliefs and ideologies distinct from the host community, thus, they tended to stay ‘tightly connected and oriented to the homeland’ in the diasporic online space to cope with all these disruptions and challenges (Zhao, 2023).

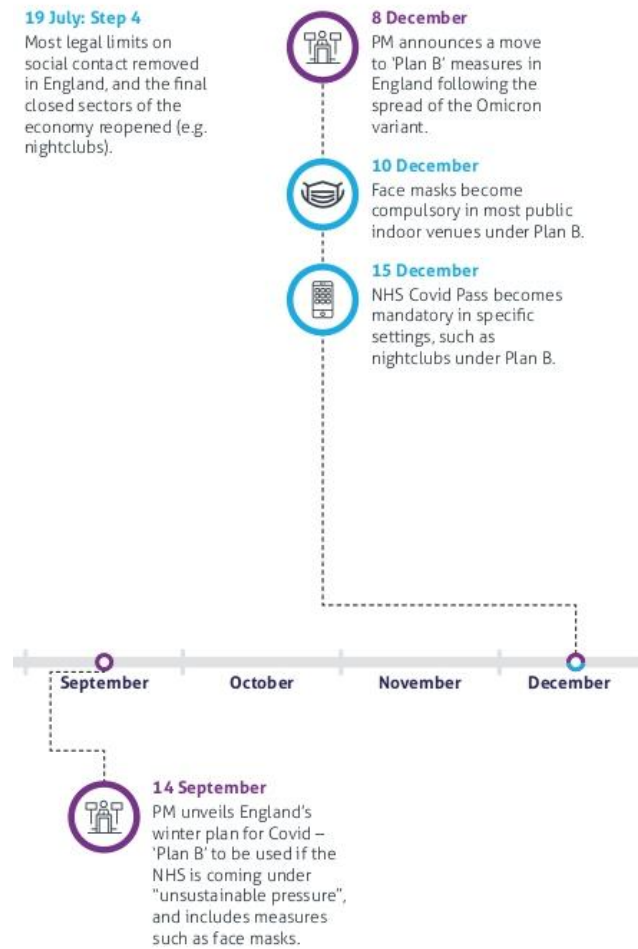


Figure 3:

Timeline of UK Government Coronavirus Lockdowns and Restrictions (Sept-Dec 2021)

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the experience of my student participants is of paramount importance to this study. With most of them arriving in the UK in August 2021, my participants faced the health challenges of the global pandemic and various public health restrictions that impacted their social interaction. To be specific, though the British government lifted nationwide lockdown and international travel constraints in England in early 2021 (Institute for Government, 2022), the rising cases of the Omicron variant sparked new travel restrictions and mask mandates (see Figure 3) during my participants' stay in the UK. It was not until February 2022 that the incumbent Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the 'Living with COVID' strategy to remove the remaining legal restrictions (GOV. UK, 2022). Such circumstances disrupted my participants' everyday lives and affected their sociability. For example, during the interviews, one participant attributed dissatisfaction

with her social life directly to COVID-19, claiming that ‘I don’t feel content with my life because now we still have COVID-19, sometimes I still don’t dare to go outside to meet local people. I am afraid that they have COVID-19’. Another participant talked about holding health beliefs and ideologies distinct from local residents. Several others reported being discriminated against, which evidenced that racism and discrimination stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic arguably exist in the social context they lived in.

1.2.2 *Experiences of the International Students and Chinese Student Sojourners*

Researchers claim that sojourning is an enriching experience. Brown (2009) highlights the transformative power of international sojourning, especially in offering students opportunities for self-discovery and development in intercultural communication skills. Niehoff et al. (2017) focus on international students’ personality traits and discover their higher agreeableness and openness than peers who do not sojourn. Petersdotter et al. (2017) add that academic sojourning increases international students’ perceived self-efficacy, namely the self-belief to accomplish various challenging tasks and cope with adversity (Schwarzer et al., 1997). Schartner (2014) summarises that academic sojourning can improve international students’ academic achievements, professional performances, language proficiency, intercultural skills, self-reliance, as well as self-awareness.

However, studying abroad can be demanding and stressful. Researchers (Schartner, 2014; Evans, 2009) find that international students generally experience challenges that are greater than their local counterparts. In addition to overcoming logistic difficulties (such as finding accommodation or familiarising themselves with local transportation), international students need to overcome cultural differences, language barriers, and emotional challenges (e.g., loneliness, homesickness, isolation, and anxiety) (Fritz et al., 2008; Sawir et al., 2008). Moreover, studying abroad might incur identity-related conflict (Kinging, 2013). Similarly, CSS experience language barriers, cultural and habitual differences, academic stress, social isolation, and a lack of interaction skills (Wang et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2017; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhu & O’Sullivan, 2022). In the UK context, researchers find that CSS go through ‘a considerable amount of accompanying stress’ that involves both confrontation and adaptation to unfamiliarity (Cushner & Karim, 2004, p.292). They also struggle to overcome communication barriers and academic challenges (Cowley et al., 2017), have difficulties adjusting to very different social, cultural, and educational systems, learning styles (Huang, 2008; Quan et al., 2016; Wang, 2010; Zhu & O’Sullivan, 2022), and lifestyle (Lin, 2002; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006), as well as battle to accommodate distinct political structures and views (Hail, 2015). Moreover, being the biggest international student cohort in the UK and significant financial contributors, Chinese students

are targeted for ‘profit-making intention’ (Sheng, 2023, p.2). Consequently, some CSS demonstrate acceptance attitudes towards such marketisation and show distinct features of customer identity, understanding the necessity to keep the HE institutions functioning with sufficient funding. In contrast, some are critical of applying this consumerism mechanism to teaching and learning.

Moreover, the ever-increasing number and skewed intake of CSS students potentially form ‘structural’ or ‘institutional’ conditions that lack racial or cultural diversity (Yu & Moskal, 2019). A typical example of such a ‘structural’ condition can be found in the increasingly evident ‘Chinese schools’ where CSS make most of the student composition (e.g., business schools) (Yu & Moskal, 2019), limiting opportunities for high-quality intercultural engagement and personal growth. This phenomenon challenges the idea that diversity is an inherent part of British universities and requires an update of the understanding of the context of CSS’ studying experience (Yu & Moskal, 2019).

Many previous studies on international students focus on the impact of their social media behaviours on sojourning. After reviewing empirical studies conducted in various contexts (e.g., Netherlands, US, UK, Pakistan, China), it is evident that social network sites provide international students with important information (Hamid et al., 2016; Sandel, 2014; Yu et al., 2019), social and mental support (Li & Peng, 2019; Misirlis et al., 2020; Sandel, 2014; Yu et al., 2019), means to connect with host and home culture (Martin & Rizvi, 2014; Sawyer & Chen, 2012), as well as enhancement in their academic performance (Amin et al., 2016; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016) and acculturation (Lin et al., 2012; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Rui & Wang, 2015). However, very few relevant studies focus on international students’ use of home social media platforms.

More specifically to CSS, with high user intensity, WeChat is revealed to be CSS’ most ‘favourable’ and ‘frequently used’ platform (Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019). It is an efficient and cost-effective tool that supports students’ acculturation and social integration (Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019) (More will be unpacked in Chapter 2, Literature Review). However, very few studies focus on the UK context. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic had a big impact on CSS (mentioned in 1.2.1) and imposed big change to people’s way of communication and social media use (Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2021; Goel & Gupta, 2020; Venegas-Vera et al., 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct empirical research to make clear Chinese students’ WeChat use and studying experiences in the UK amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to CSS’ central role in this study, I will briefly introduce their background in 1.2.3 to enhance readers’ understanding.

1.2.3 Understanding the Background of the CSS

This part introduces some key terms concerning the CSS (e.g., *China* and *Mainlanders*) and the complexity of being *Chinese*, including its racial, cultural, ethnic, and lingual attributes.

China, officially known as the *People's Republic of China* (PRC), is the most populous country in the world with a more than 1.4 billion population. The administrative divisions of the PRC comprise 23 provinces, five autonomous regions, four municipalities directly under the central government, and two Special Administrative Regions (SARs) – Hong Kong and Macao. With Hong Kong being the former British colonial and Macao the Portugal colonial, their sovereignty was not resumed to PRC until 1997 (Hong Kong) and 1999 (Macao). After that, the governance of SARs adopts the principle of ‘one country, two systems’, exercising a ‘high degree of autonomy and enjoying executive, legislative and independent judicial power’ as stated in two fundamental laws - *The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region* (1997) and *The Basic Law of the Macao Special Administrative Region* (1999). The rest of the PRC is generally called *Mainland*, and the people are called *Mainlanders*. Compared to Mainland China, the SARs have been under different historical, political, economic, and educational systems due to their divergence from the mainland after the long-term isolation, separation, and ‘multi-layered complexities of colonial societies’ (Ngo, 1999, p.288). Moreover, the official language in SARs is *Cantonese* (a regional Han dialect), which is different from Mandarin utilised in the mainland (to be better explained later) and further reveals the differences between the two entities. Therefore, I view the SARs differently from mainland China and focus my research only on student participants from the mainland.

However, the above discussion does not indicate that the Chinese Mainlanders are regarded as a homogeneous group. Ethnically, according to the Seventh National Population Census, there are 56 minority ethnic groups in China though Han accounted for 91.11% of the population in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). Linguistically, 53 ethnic groups have their own languages (The State Council Information Office of China, 2022) and 30 of these languages have written forms. Among these, the most conventional language is *Hanyu*. *Hanyu*, literally means the language of Han, is not used exclusively by Han ethnic. Instead, it is now extensively used worldwide and is generally translated into English as ‘Chinese language’ (Ganassin, 2020, p.12). The standardised modern form of *Hanyu* is *Mandarin* (meaning official language), with *Putonghua* being its colloquial form, *Jianhua Hanzi* (simplified Chinese characters) being its written form, and *Pīnyīn* being its romanisation system. Other than Mandarin, there are various *Hanyu* varieties based on geographical distribution. According to the Chinese Minister of Education, there are ten varieties spoken in different regions of China. For

example, Cantonese is widely used in southern China, especially in Guangdong Province, Hong Kong, and Macao. These varieties are addressed as ‘dialects’ in this thesis to be consistent with the choices of the Chinese government, citizens, and scholars. While the northern dialects are intelligible to some extent, the southern ones are highly unintelligible (Ganassin, 2020, p16). In addition, with a total land area of approximately 9.6 million square kilometers, and a total sea area of about 4.73 million square kilometers, the regions of China vary in geography, climate, food, and clothing, leading to distinct regional cultures.

After presenting the broad research context of global mobility and British HE, introducing studies on international students and CSS, and then explicating CSS’s background, I will problematise traditional views and clarify the critical stance adopted in this research.

1.2.4 Critical Stance on the International Students

Traditional perspectives on international students tend to rely on nationality-based categorisations, employ a homogenising approach that treats them through a deficit lens, and overlook the interplay of global, national, and institutional power dynamics shaping their experiences (Mittelmeier et al., 2024). These reductionist perspectives are problematic, as they overlook the diversity of international students that transcend national borders and obscure the inequalities within sociopolitical contexts that other and disempower them. In this part, I will critique key arguments on international students and explicate the critical lens adopted in this research.

A critical stance necessitates dismantling reductive nationality-based narratives and embracing a nuanced lens that acknowledges international students’ heterogeneity. While nationality remains a ‘default approach’ adopted by institutions and researchers (Bennett et al., 2023, p.12), such simplified understanding fails to account for the multidimensional diversity of students’ identity affiliation, social class, regional cultures, linguistic practices, and geographic positionalities. For instance, as discussed in 1.2.3, CSS is a very heterogeneous group, comprising individuals from diverse geographic backgrounds who speak distinct dialects or indigenous languages. Thus, while nationality-based classification remains pragmatically unavoidable in studies like mine, international students must be viewed as heterogeneous with multifaceted identities and lived experiences (Bennett et al., 2023).

A critical stance also necessitates recognising the unequal power relations shaped by coloniality and initiating decolonisation. Often claimed to be the ‘darker side of modernity’ (Mignolo, 2007; Dunford, 2017), *coloniality* refers to the enduring power of colonialism that persists in modern society through the hidden logic of power, knowledge, and culture (Dunford, 2017). Coloniality remains constitutive mainly through three ways: capitalism, liberal-democratic institutions, and the Eurocentric

knowledge systems (Dunford, 2017). For international students, coloniality manifests in mobility patterns from the Global South to the Global North. For instance, the U.K. – historically the most expansive colonial power and now the world’s second-leading host country for international students, attracts a vast number from the developing world (e.g., China, India, Nigeria) (UNESCO, 2023).

Coloniality incurs hierarchical attitudes, with many associating cultures of the Global North with higher value and those of the Global South with inferiority (Karimi & Bucerius, 2018). This consequently perpetuates Western-centric perspectives in education, with the knowledge produced in Western frequently being mistaken as world generic. Such hierarchies often led to epistemic injustice, with international students being systematically disempowered, silenced, excluded, and even discriminated against (Lomer et al., 2023). For instance, they are often identified as outsiders and their differences are regarded as incompetent, inferior, and unwanted (Liu & Qian, 2024). Reflecting this in the research context, deficit narratives prevail in studies on international students. Many researchers focused disproportionately on their perceived inadequacies (e.g., language unproficiency, unfamiliarity with the host academic culture discussed in 1.2.2) while overlooking their potential for self-growth and contributions to cultural diversity, and intellectual richness (Lomer et al., 2023). This *Othering* mindset marginalises and disregards international students, which causes discomfort, discourages their reciprocal engagement with the host community, and entrenches stereotypes or discrimination (Liu & Qian, 2024). These power dynamics intensified amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with many Asian students, particularly CSS, being scapegoated and stigmatised as threats to the host society’s public health (Yu, 2021; Zhao, 2023; Zhu et al., 2022).

In response, this research adopts a critical stance that is individual-centred, complexity-focused, and equity-driven. Aligning with scholars who advocate researching WITH international students instead of ON them, I position participants as powerful agents of knowledge instead of exploitative subjects and endeavor to empower them during my whole research process. How this critical lens guided my research will be more explicitly illustrated in Section 3.4 Research Methods.

1.2.5 *WeChat, a Mega-platform for Chinese*

WeChat (known as *Weixin* in Mandarin, meaning micro-message) was first launched in 2011 by Tencent, a Chinese multinational technology conglomerate (see its icon in Figure 4). As indicated in Figure 5 (Tencent, 2024 cited in Statista, 2024), the number of WeChat users grows year by year. With only 396 million monthly active WeChat users in the first quarter of 2014, the number increased rapidly to 1,327 million a decade later, making it the 6th most popular social media platform worldwide

(Tencent, 2024). According to the World Population Review (2024), most WeChat users are based in China.



Figure 4:
WeChat Icon (by Tencent)

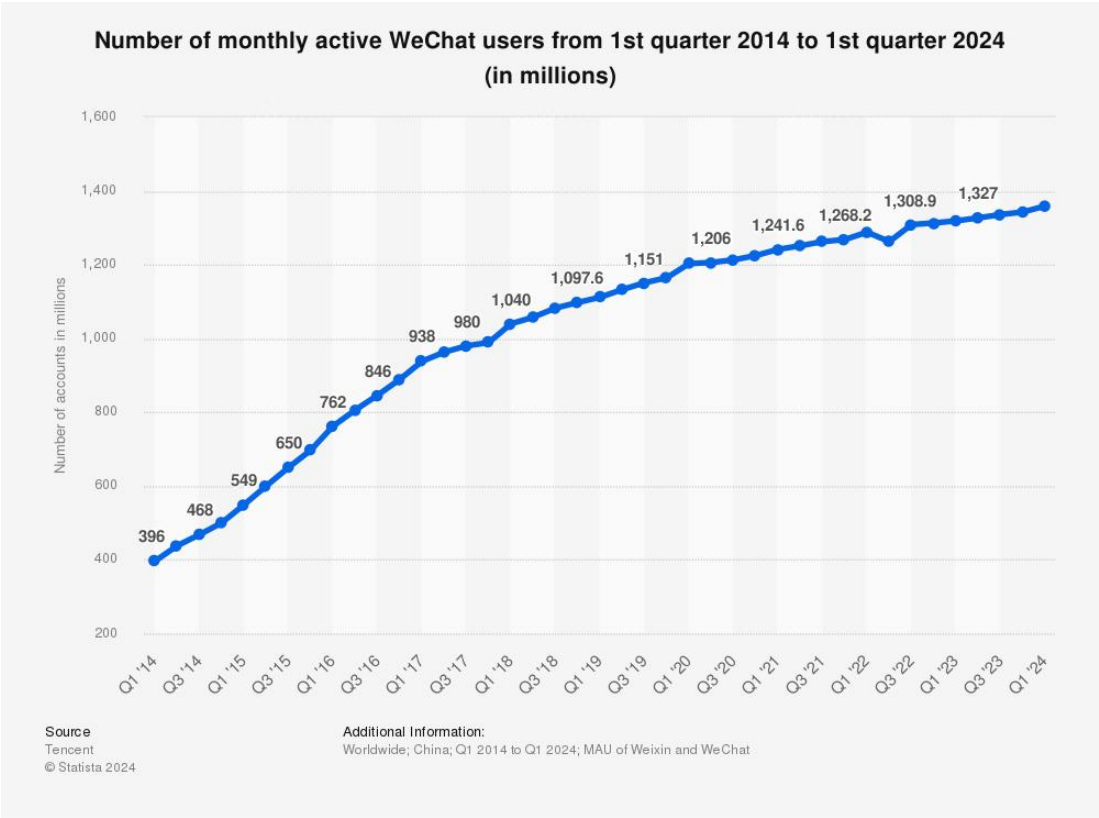


Figure 5:
Number of Monthly Active WeChat Users (2014-2024)

As indicated by its name, WeChat was initially developed to serve as a messenger platform, a walkie-talkie (Harwair, 2017), or as Tencent (2011) declared, ‘一种新的手机联系方式 (a new way to get connected through phones)’. Over more than a decade’s evolvement, WeChat has exceeded the concept of *social media* that ‘allows the creation and exchange of User Generated Content’ (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61). Instead, it has expanded to a ‘super-sticky’ mega-platform (Chen et al., 2018) with rich technology *affordances*, namely the ‘action possibilities and opportunities that emerge from actors engaging with a focal technology’ (Faraj & Azad, 2012, p.238).

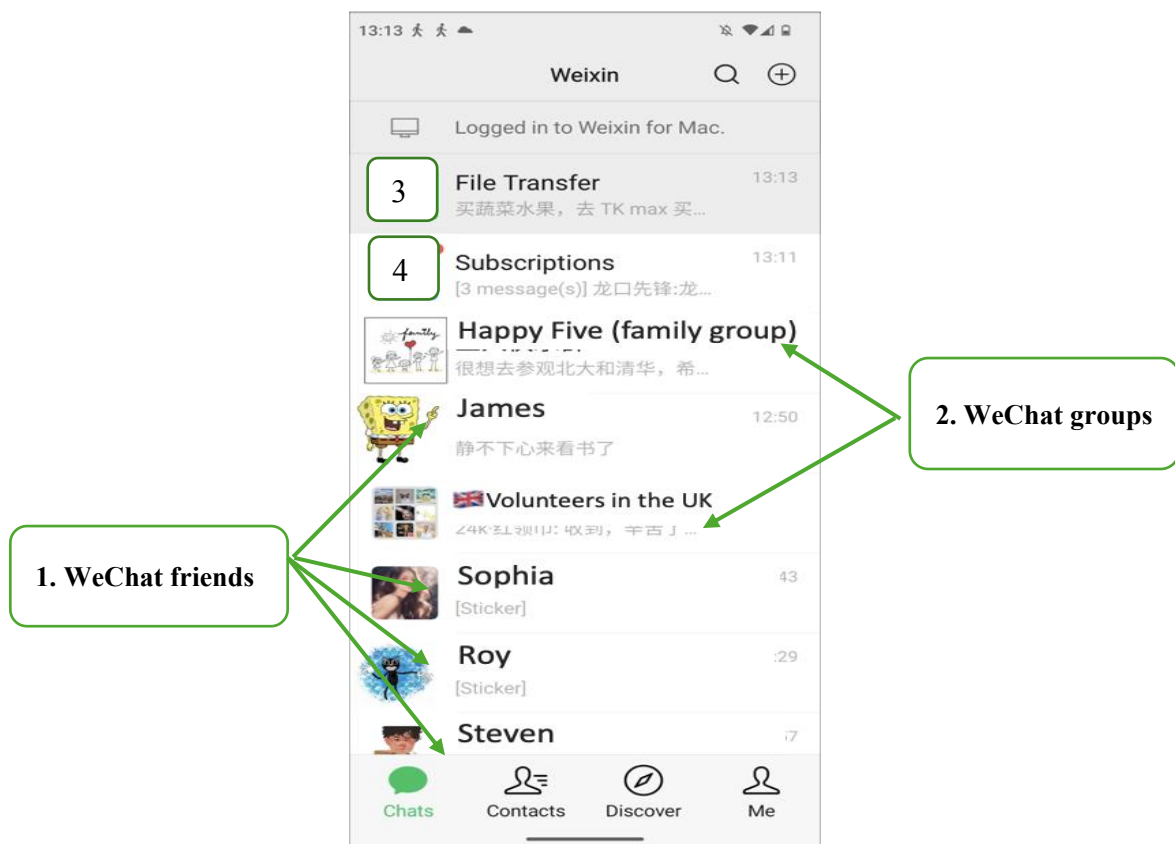


Figure 6:
Interface of WeChat (screenshot taken on 25/07/2023)

According to Bucher and Helmond (2018), there are low-level and high-level social media affordances. Low-level affordances are typically located in feature-oriented functions involving specific features, buttons, or screens of the materiality, while high-level affordances refer to user-technology relations that are nonobjective (Ju et al., 2019). As shown in Figure 6, the screenshot of my own WeChat interface taken in July 2023, WeChat enables the following key features. Firstly, users

can interact with individual WeChat friends through texting, sending voice messages, making voice/video calls, and sharing files, locations, or contact cards. Secondly, users can interact with multiple ones in WeChat groups (a maximum of 500 people for private accounts) though they do not necessarily have contact information of each other. Thirdly, the file transfer feature allows users to exchange documents, texts, pictures, or links between mobile phones and laptops. Fourthly, the subscription feature enables users to subscribe to WeChat public accounts (similar to the professional account on Twitter), giving them access to articles published by various enterprises, media outlets, content creators, and even authorities. WeChat moments (equivalents of Facebook posts) and WeChat mini-programs that link users to different companies/services are also popular. Moreover, in 2014, WeChat launched the feature of sending *Hongbao* (*Red Packet* or *Red Envelope*, digital versions of traditional Chinese monetary gifts). This combines modern technology with the long-existing Chinese tradition of giving lucky money in a Red Packet to family members during the Chinese New Year celebration to show affection and good wishes. In addition, with the launching and increasing popularity of the WeChat mini-program, WeChat adopted an apps-within-app model that enables users to gain information and get services without having to leave the app (Chan, 2015; Chen et al., 2018). These features enabled rich high-level affordances, fulfilling users' needs for socialising, file transmission, mobile payment, and entertainment in various contexts (see Chen et al., 2018; Ju et al., 2019; Montag et al., 2018). Consequently, WeChat users are 'glued' to this mega-platform without having to switch to other apps or websites (Chen et al., 2018).

The distinctiveness of WeChat with its primarily Chinese users and rich affordances profoundly shapes users' experiences in both China and abroad. In China, WeChat has become an integral part of many users' everyday lives (Montag et al., 2018). For example, WeChat is increasingly used at work, though some researchers criticise that it blurs the boundaries between professional and personal life (Zhang et al., 2021). Moreover, sending money through WeChat Red Packets to close ones on WeChat has become 'a routine activity for users all year round' (Chen et al., 2018, p. 75), particularly during important cultural celebrations. With the growing popularity of lightweight public accounts and mini-programs, WeChat users can interact with enterprises, media outlets, content creators, and even authorities, enabling them to access various commercial services such as hailing a taxi or booking a flight ticket. Users based in Mainland China can also use civil services such as paying taxes, filing lawsuits, or consulting local government services (e.g., public transportation). Given WeChat's transformative impact on users' lifestyles and the contemporary Chinese culture, some researchers

(Chen et al., 2018; Plantin & De Seta, 2019) argue that WeChat now serves as an infrastructure in modern Chinese society.

WeChat also significantly frames CSS' experiences. While some civil services are unavailable abroad and some services (e.g., hailing a taxi) are not applicable for Chinese sojourners, WeChat remains vital for CSS in maintaining social and cultural ties. Given that over 90% of its users are Mandarin speakers (Statista, 2023), many researchers are concerned that the platform's linguistic and cultural homogeneity fosters a culturally enclosed space that enforces shared Chinese culture context, helping CSS strengthen connections to their home culture (Park, 2016) and ethnic identity (Wang, 2018). For example, Park (2016) observed how CSS in California exchanged red bags to immerse themselves in the traditional Chinese collective culture of valuing reciprocity and social harmony. Park (2016) claimed that CSS use WeChat to pursue 'local' Chinese culture in a globalised context. Similarly, Wang's (2018) stated that content on WeChat is rooted in Chinese mainstream values, which provided her participants a venue to preserve their ethnic identity. These findings raise concerns that home social media platforms like WeChat may limit CSS' engagement with the local society (Gomes, 2015; Ladegaard, 2017; Ladegaard & Cheng, 2014). While more details of how previous studies find WeChat's role in CSS' experiences will be presented in the Chapter 2, Literature Review (2.3 more specifically), it is clear that WeChat as a culturally specific tool shapes the social and communicative dynamics of Chinese users both at home and abroad.

1.3 My Personal Interest in Conducting This Study

Before doing a PhD, I had been a Mandarin teacher for almost a decade in various contexts (China, Thailand, and Italy). Back then, a part of my work responsibility was to support students to take educational exchange programs. In this process, I saw many students struggling to adjust to a new environment. Moreover, as a working sojourner, I experienced various difficulties, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and psychological challenges (e.g., loneliness and anxiety) to adapt to the new working environments. These working experiences sparked my interest in intercultural communication studies, especially in sojourners' intercultural adjustment to the new environment. Considering the large amount of CSS all over the world, I began to develop research ideas focusing on CSS.

Moreover, being an active WeChat user for over a decade, I have observed the increasing societal impact of WeChat in not only China but also among the Chinese living abroad. This was salient when I was working in Thailand and Italy where WeChat played a vital role in both my private life and workspaces. Therefore, I began to finalise my research ideas to combine CSS studies and

WeChat to investigate how CSS use WeChat and what is its role in their experiences. My own academic sojourning experiences and the significant role of WeChat in this process also reinforced my determination to conduct this research. Specifically, being trapped indoors for almost the whole 2020/21 academic year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, WeChat helped me connect with others, so I felt less isolated. More importantly, I connected with hundreds or even thousands of peer CSS by joining various WeChat groups and we collectively built a big online Chinese community, from which I gained a lot of information about the local environment (e.g. local supermarket and café), learned about the vaccination information (e.g., when and where to get vaccinated and what documents is needed), and some practical help (e.g., getting cooking devices with half prices from other CSS through second-hand trading). As Chen et al. (2018) pointed out, I was able to get all this information and support without switching to other apps or websites. Moreover, connecting with the CSS community provided me with a sense of security and empowerment, which helped alleviate the stress, insecurity, and anxiety stemming from the hostile socio-political environment. This was especially important in the context of the scapegoating of Chinese people for the pandemic, which led to a dramatic increase in reported incidents of violence and racism—from 1,492 in 2018 to 2,212 in 2020, as documented by End Violence and Racism Against East and Southeast Asian Communities across 48 police jurisdictions. In these challenging times, being part of the supportive WeChat Chinese CSS community was crucial in helping me endure the hard times.

Driven by curiosity and personal experiences, I became intrigued to investigate the role of WeChat in CSS' sojourning experience. Moreover, after exploring the previous studies (both empirical and theoretical ones), I found that there were major research gaps on the topic, especially in the UK context, which led to a more solid justification for my research.

1.4 Research Rationale

Due to the rising number of CSS worldwide and the importance of them in shaping global student mobility and HE formation (discussed in 1.2.1), studies on CSS have attracted great academic attention. Research shows that studying abroad brings 'a considerable amount of accompanying stress, involving both confrontation and adaptation to unfamiliar physical and psychological experiences and changes' (Cushner & Karim, 2004, p.292). Specifically, many researchers have found that CSS encountered multiple challenges while studying abroad, cultural differences (e.g., lifestyles, communication styles, and cultural norms) (Aksoy et al., 2017; Gong et al., 2020), language barriers (Dovchin, 2019), identity conflicts (Brown & Brown, 2013; Kinginger, 2015), difficulty to adjust to the new academic environment (Elliot et al., 2016; Milian et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2015), lack of social

integration (Lim & Pham, 2016; Gomes, 2015; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Schartner, 2015), as well as emotional challenges (e.g., longlines, homesick, isolation, and anxiety) (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Students also need to adjust to academic requirements for new learning methods and critical thinking skills (Quan et al., 2016). However, few studies explored the role of home social media on CSS' sojourning experiences, especially the role of WeChat, the most important social media platform among them (Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019). Even fewer studies are based on the UK context, the second biggest destination for international student mobility. With CSS being the biggest international student cohort in the UK and the biggest contributor to the HE income, lack of investigations on CSS and their most 'favourable' and 'frequently used' platform (Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019) indicate a research gap that needs to be filled.

Moreover, I have observed contradictions between previous studies on WeChat and the wider scope of literature. For example, many researchers highlight the positive role of WeChat in supporting CSS' acculturation and social integration (Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019). However, the phenomenon of sticking mainly with co-national CSS students incurred concerns from The Council for International Student Affairs as early as 2004. In more recent studies investigating participants' social ties (co-national ties, host ties, and other international ties), researchers also expressed concerns on the phenomenon that CSS' pursuit of intercultural contact is not adequately responded to in various contexts, such as in the US (Lehto et al., 2014), Germany (Zhu, 2016), New Zealand (Zhang & Brunton, 2007), Belgium (Wang & Hannes, 2014), and the UK (Schartner, 2014; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Yu & Moskal, 2019). In addition, researchers found that CSS exhibited very high WeChat use intensity (Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019) and this engagement provided them with well-being support (Chen et al., 2022; Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018, 2019; Kim & Chang, 2021). However, these findings contradict concerns about the negative role of an excessive smartphone or social media behaviour on mental health, which is often associated with symptoms like depression, anxiety, and stress (Dhir et al., 2018; Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Seabrook et al. 2016; Wu, 2023).

Additionally, no previous studies investigated how participants might use WeChat to discuss their IE experiences, which is important in understanding CSS' sojourning experiences and potential personal growth. This study addresses this gap by investigating CSS' IE sense-making process on WeChat.

I drew on virtual ethnography in this study for its efficiency in describing and observing cultures in online communicative contexts (Leniban & Holmes, 2016). The virtual ethnographic

approach shares ideas with ethnographic study but applies them to online cultures (Jackson, 2006). Qualitative data were gathered through interviews, observations, and document and records analysis to study Chinese postgraduate sojourners' WeChat community, including HEI engagement in the community, and its influence on students' ICC development. This study will contribute to the understanding of intercultural theories such as acculturation, IE sense-making, and ICC development. The practical outcome of this study is to help students use WeChat efficiently to interact interculturally while studying abroad and to give reference to university or local institutions to increase understanding of the CSS engagement.

1.5 Research Aims

The research aim of this study is to explore WeChat's role on CSS' sojourning experience. The sub-aims include:

- To explore CSS' WeChat behaviour and how it affects their everyday lives.
- To investigate the role of WeChat in CSS' different aspects of acculturation (psychological, interactional, and sociocultural).
- To explore the significance of WeChat in enabling CSS to make sense of their intercultural experiences.

1.6 Thesis Outline

This opening chapter has introduced the study, making clear its background, rationale, and aims. Key terms were defined, and the research subjects (WeChat and the CSS) were discussed to enhance the readers' understanding.

Chapter 2 opens with a literature review of empirical studies on international students and their social media use before the discussion narrows down to research on the CSS and WeChat. It also discusses relevant theories, especially the acculturation theories and ICC theories to guide this study. The literature review on both empirical studies and theoretical literature identifies the limitations of extant studies on CCS, hence, the research questions emerged and will be presented at the end of Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology adopted in this study. After setting out the social constructionist paradigm and the ethnographic approach of the study, it describes how qualitative data were collected through various research methods and how data analysis was conducted following the interpretive approach. Moreover, the criteria used to judge the trustworthiness of the research is discussed. The chapter ends with an introduction to the pilot study conducted prior to the main study and reflections on it.

Chapters 4 to 6 present the findings of the study with each one addressing one respective research question. Regarding CSS' experiences in the WeChat virtual world, Chapter 4 explains how CSS participants use WeChat in their everyday lives and how this influence their sojourning experiences. Chapter 5 focuses on WeChat's role in CSS' interactional, sociocultural, and psychological acculturation, and Chapter 6 investigates how CSS made sense of their IE experiences with their WeChat interlocutors by engaging in intercultural discussions, a process found to be enriching to intercultural learning and ICC development.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I present answers to the research questions, outline the study's limitations, and provide suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Four areas of literature are highly relevant to this empirical research. The first area is empirical studies on student sojourners' study abroad experiences (Section 2.1), including more broadly the experiences of international students in various contexts, but more importantly, that of CSS in the UK. The second area (Section 2.2) is empirical studies on international students' social media use and more specifically CSS' use of WeChat. The third and fourth areas move from empirical studies to conceptual understandings of sojourning experiences. Section 2.3 encompasses contemporary theoretical models of acculturation, especially how previous models suit the purpose of this study. Finally, considering the potential of intercultural encounters (IEs) in fostering sojourners' transformative changes, Section 2.4 focuses on IEs and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). After summarising and evaluating key literature (both empirical and theoretical), the research gap is addressed in Section 2.5 followed by research questions.

2.1 Student Sojourners' Studying Abroad Experiences

Interacting with another culture enables intercultural engagement that involves values, beliefs, world views, habits of mind, and ways of being (Gill, 2016). To grasp a general understanding of the possibilities and challenges my participants may experience, this section starts more extensively with empirical studies on international students' experiences in various contexts (2.1.1) and then moves more specifically to CSS' experiences (2.1.2).

2.1.1 Study Abroad Experience – in the International Context

Studying abroad can be 'simultaneously troublesome and enriching' (Kim, 2001, p.21). Many researchers highlight the positive aspects of academic sojourning. For example, Brown's (2009a) ethnographic study finds that international sojourning offers students freedom from cultural and familial expectations and enables their self-discovery, which leads to transformative changes evidenced by improved intercultural communication skills. Niehoff et al.'s (2017) study focuses on changes in personal traits. They highlight that sojourning improves students' agreeableness and openness. In Petersdotter et al.'s (2016) study, the researchers find that compared with non-sojourners, student sojourners reveal higher levels of perceived self-efficacy, namely the self-belief that they can perform various challenging tasks and cope with adversity (Schwarzer et al., 1997). Schartner (2014) summarises that academic sojourning can not only lead to international students' academic achievements and professional development but can also improve their language proficiency, intercultural skills, self-reliance, and self-awareness.

Meanwhile, researchers (Schartner, 2014) acknowledge that after losing a familiar support system, international students generally experience greater challenges than their local counterparts. In addition to overcoming financial difficulties (Fritz et al., 2008), they also need to overcome cultural differences (e.g., lifestyles, communication styles, and cultural norms) (Aksoy et al., 2017; Gong et al., 2020), language barriers (Dovchin, 2019), identity conflicts (Brown & Brown, 2013; Kinginger, 2015), difficulty to adjust to the new academic environment (Elliot et al., 2016; Milian et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2015), lack of social integration (Lim & Pham, 2016; Gomes, 2015; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Schartner, 2015), as well as emotional challenges (e.g., longlines, homesick, isolation, and anxiety) (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Extensive empirical studies explored the challenges international students face. For example, a study on 20 European students in Turkey discovered that cultural distance (such as distinct religious differences and daily life practices) created big challenges that are hard for students to overcome (Aksoy et al., 2017). Another study on 15 New Zealand students studying in China highlighted how differences in lifestyles, communication styles, and cultural norms hindered their adaptation to the host culture (Gong et al., 2020). It needs to be noted that language barriers not only refer to language unproficiency but also linguistic racism in the form of ‘ethnocentric accent bully’ (speakers’ accents are laughed at or joked about) and ‘linguistic stereotypes’ (negative or even inferiority perceptions of speaking low proficient English) (Dovchin, 2019, p. 804). Findings of a study on 30 international students studying in Australia underlined that such linguistic racism could cause severe psychological damage (e.g., low self-esteem, fear, and anxiety over speaking English), and consequently lead to social withdrawal (Dovchin, 2019). In addition, international students have to adjust to a new academic system. Some researchers (Elliot et al., 2016; Milian et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2015) reveal that international students face challenges such as a lack of cultural knowledge of expected classroom practices, the pressure to transfer to the new learning systems and achieve good academic performance, and isolation from classmates. Postgraduate MA sojourners, in particular, experience three levels of transitions within a short period (approximately one year) (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013), including moving to a new country, moving into a new educational system, and moving into a new level of academic study. Moreover, empirical studies have proved that international students struggle to build local connections (Lim & Pham, 2016; Hendrickson et al., 2011). For example, at a Hong Kong University, international students and non-local students lived separate lives on campus, and they did not work together nor socialise unless forced to do so by staff members (Ladegaard, 2017; Ladegaard & Cheng, 2014). Asian international students in Australia also lived in a parallel society almost ‘exclusively made up of fellow international students’ (Gomes, 2015, p.515).

Many of the challenges mentioned above are observed in the context of the UK, the second leading host country of student sojourning (UNESCO, 2023) where this study is based. For example, a qualitative study investigating 104 UK-based international students from 25 countries revealed that international students in the UK experience language barriers (e.g., English unproficiency and difficulty in understanding the accent), lack of communication skills, differences in the education system (e.g., teaching style and school system) and culture (e.g., transportation, food, and weather) (Adisa et al., 2019). Regarding social integration, international students have difficulties in building and maintaining connections with local British (Brown, 2009b; Wright & Schartner, 2013). To be specific, their interactions are often restricted to superficial interactions with ‘university staff, and habitual and formulaic conversations with service personnel’ (Schartner, 2014, p. 236), and their social networks do not become more integrated over time but segregate with host cultural group (Rienties & Nolan, 2014). However, with the surging number of international students in the UK (discussed in 1.2.1), Schartner (2014, p.225) discovers that the lack of contact with British locals can be compensated by the ‘highly supportive’ international ties due to their shared ‘foreignness’ and experience. These international ties surpass her participants’ co-national contacts, offering mutual emotional and academic support that deepens their sense of belonging and alleviates both academic and intercultural stress (Schartner, 2014). Additionally, some studies highlight the identity conflict international students need to overcome (Brown & Brown, 2012; Kinginger, 2013, 2015). According to Kinginger (2013, 2015), studying abroad might incur identity-related conflict since students need to integrate and construct multiple identity categories such as nationality, ‘foreigner’, linguistic heritage, ethnicity, gender, and age. In another study involving participants from five different countries (Russian, Slovenian, Chinese, Indonesian, and Iranian), researchers pointed out that (Brown & Brown, 2012) academic sojourning influenced international students’ cultural identification. Key themes in their studies include: re-identifying with their home culture, allying with the West, resisting the perception of Western supremacy, and acceptance with stigma.

As discussed in 1.2.4, traditional views towards international students often adopt nationality-based and deficit perspectives that undervalue power inequality and students’ development potentials. In contrast, this research adopts a more nuanced, critical, and decolonised stance that values and empowers international students. Therefore, despite some common difficulties listed above, international students are not considered as one homogeneous group but group with culturally diverse needs and experiences (Fritz et al., 2008).

This study focuses on CSS, the biggest student sojourner cohort in the UK (UNESCO, 2023). Therefore, in the next section, I will shift from discussing the general experiences of international students to examining the specific experiences of CSS studying in the UK.

2.1.2 *Chinese Student Sojourners' Experiences in the UK*

Compared with other international students in the UK, the most salient feature of the CSS is their lack of intercultural interactions. In an earlier study, Turner (2002) points out that co-national ties occupy the primary position of CSS due to their common language background, national identity, ethnic background, and shared difficulties. Though a more recent study (Schartner, 2014) reveals that some international students' lack of contact with British locals can be compensated by international ties due to the surging number of international students, this is not confirmed in studies on CSS. For example, Spencer-Oatey et al.'s (2017) mixed-method study finds that CSS are more dissatisfied with their range of friendships and struggle to socialise with people from different cultural backgrounds. Likewise, in Yu and Moskal's (2019) study, Chinese participants lack intercultural engagement. Yu and Moskal (2019) explain that this is due to the overwhelming number of Chinese students in some institutes, particularly in business schools, 'structural' or 'institutional' conditions occurred. Such structural conditions are also observed in the context of this study with the CSS being the vast majority (details will be given in 3.3, Research Context), which challenges the notion that diversity is an inherent aspect of British universities (Yu & Moskal, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate CSS' studying experience in the updated context of their sojourning context.

Cultural differences between China and the UK also forge challenges for CSS who have more difficulties in adjusting to very different social, cultural, and educational systems, learning styles (Huang, 2008; Quan et al., 2016; Wang, 2010; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2022), lifestyles (Lin, 2002; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006), as well as political views (Hail, 2015). For example, some earlier studies (Lin, 2002; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006) highlight that different cultural values and lifestyles create interpersonal barriers for CSS, as they struggle to find common topics or interests with their native peers. Researchers (Lin, 2002; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006) have exemplified that, unlike the prevalent 'pub culture' and 'heavy drinking' culture in the UK, their CSS participants display little interest in consuming alcoholic drinks, which limits their opportunities for interaction with their British peers. In a more recent study (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2016), participants' difficulties in social integration are found to be largely due to differences in habits or preferences, background knowledge, understanding of friendship, communicative styles, and taboos. In addition, many CSS are confronted with the 'misinformed, prejudiced, and offensive views' of China which may also lead to the rise of

tension and psychological stress or even social segregation (Hail, 2015). Zhu and Sullivan (2022) focus on the classroom culture in China and the UK, claiming that Chinese students do well in tests and assignments but not well in collaborative and engaging activities during class. They further explain that both culture shock and pedagogical shock cause in-class silence and disengagement. Cultural shock includes language obstacles and cultural differences. For example, in Chinese Confucian culture that emphasises harmony and face-saving, many Chinese students choose to remain silent in group discussions to avoid losing face in front of others or expressing disagreement with others in group discussions. Pedagogical shock refers to difficulties in adapting to a new learning approach and classroom expectations. Chiu et al. (2016) focus on the teacher-student role in two cultures when interpreting CSS' passive learning behaviours. They highlight that Chinese lectures often held a higher hierarchical role, dominating the classroom and expecting students to be completely silent and obedient. Therefore, even when CSS understand the expectation of the new environment, they seem to lack cultural knowledge and relevant skills of expected classroom practices and find it difficult to adjust to requirements for new learning styles (Wang, 2014; Zhu & Sullivan, 2022). To tackle academic difficulties, researchers (e.g., Quan et al., 2016) suggest that CSS should acknowledge the educational differences and adjust their expectations accordingly while maintaining an optimistic attitude.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the CSS more harshly. In 1.2.1, I explained how COVID-19 impacted the British HE and how CSS faced discrimination and enormous disruptions and stresses because of the social stigmatisation of Chinese (Yu, 2021; Zhao, 2023; Zhu et al., 2022). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed a big change in people's way of communication (Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2021; Goel & Gupta, 2020; Venegas-Vera et al., 2020). This was salient among CSS with those studying in the UK being found to stay tightly connected and oriented to the homeland in the diasporic online space (Zhao, 2023). Drawing on research diaries and interviews, it is discovered that CSS held health beliefs and ideologies distinct from the host community, consequently leading to separation from the host society (Zhao, 2023). Specifically, CSS participants built up an online cultural space to maintain in-group connections and alignments, a space Zhao (2023, p.9) described to be 'comparable to physical community space like Chinatown'. Their shared living conditions and similar concerns (e.g., health concerns) bonded them in creating a community with social and emotional support during the difficult time of the pandemic, but also distanced them from the hosting context and created boundaries from the host culture (Zhao, 2023).

To sum up, though plenty of researchers have explored international students' experiences, there is a lack of studies investigating CSS' sojourning experiences under the impact of the COVID-19

pandemic in the UK context. In addition, previous studies fail to address the structural condition of lacking cultural diversity due to the overwhelming number of Chinese students in some institutes (Yu & Moskal, 2019) and the challenges it poses to Chinese students' social integration and academic adjustment. Given CSS constitute the largest international student cohort in the UK and play a significant role in British higher education, it is necessary to conduct this study on CSS in the updated context.

2.2 Social Media and International Students

After a thorough exploration of international students' experiences, it is important to address studies investigating the influence of social media on students' academic sojourning experiences (2.2.1). Given that this study focuses specifically on WeChat, it is crucial to examine empirical studies on CSS' use of WeChat and how it affects their sojourning experiences (2.2.2).

2.2.1 Social Media in Relation to International Students' Sojourning Experiences

Social media is significant for international students in both personal and educational contexts (Sleeman et al., 2016). Empirical studies conducted in various contexts (e.g., Netherlands, US, UK, Pakistan, China) have underlined that social network sites (both local platforms and ones they started using before sojourning) serve as an important information source (Hamid et al., 2016; Sandel, 2014; Yu et al., 2019), provide social and mental support (Li & Peng, 2019; Misirlis et al., 2020; Sandel, 2014; Yu et al., 2019), help users to stay connected with host and home culture (Martin & Rizvi, 2014; Sawyer & Chen, 2012), enhance students' academic performance (Amin et al., 2016; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016), and facilitate acculturation (Lin et al., 2012; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Rui & Wang, 2015). For example, international students in Malaysia used social media as a dominant informational source over search engines and face-to-face communication (Bukhari et al., 2018). Quantitative research conducted on 322 international students in the US found that students were able to gain social support through social networking platforms, which reduced their acculturative stress (Li & Peng, 2019). Martin and Rizvi's (2014) research conducted in Australia discovered that social media could foster the presence of both home and host culture, influencing international students' sense of belonging and locality (Martin & Rizvi, 2014). A qualitative study conducted at a Turkish university highlighted the instrumental role of social media in language learning, improving cultural interactions, and staying connected with the homeland (Çömlekçi, 2020). Another research conducted in Turkey concluded that social media positively influenced international students' adaption to host country lifestyles and helped them to excel academically (Muyingo, 2017). Social media also influences the identity formation of international students. According to Yau et al. (2020), social media plays a critical

role in their identity integration, reaffirming identities related to home culture as well as supporting new identities as members of the host culture. Chang and Gome (2017) concur that social media allow international students to join or form communities based on their identities and sense of belonging. However, this can lead to many being isolated from the real world (Chang & Gome, 2017).

With the widespread use of different kinds of social media, researchers (Chang et al., 2012; Chang & Gomes, 2017; Gomes, 2015; Tu, 2018) expressed concerns about international students' unwillingness to adapt to the new digital environment, ignoring new social connections or new digital spaces in favour of pre-existing ones from home cultures. In a qualitative study conducted in Canada, Gomes (2015) found that 47 Asian participants barely engaged with local entertainment media (mobile, web applications, and social media). Instead, they turned to familiar digital experiences subliminally for an active and continuous sense of belonging that reflected their background (nationality, culture, and language) and circumstance (as international students). Similarly, another qualitative research conducted in the US revealed that while social media effectively connected participants to their home culture, it was less successful in fostering connections with the host culture, despite their use of various platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Skype, Viber, and LinkedIn) (Tu, 2018).

Preference to pre-existing digital spaces is particularly pronounced among CSS. Multiple studies have verified CSS' preference for Chinese platforms (e.g., WeChat, Renren, and Weibo) (Chen et al., 2022; Hu & Chen, 2023; Li & Chen, 2014; Saw et al., 2013). One of the reasons participants shied away from new platforms is the extra effort required to fully master a new platform (Hu & Chen, 2023). Other than this, cultural differences, CSS' English unproficiency, and criticism or hospitality (such as racial discrimination) also contribute to a sense of insecurity about engaging actively on non-Chinese social media platforms (Hu & Chen, 2023).

2.2.2 *WeChat and CSS*

Many empirical studies highlight WeChat as an efficient and cost-effective tool for supporting acculturation and social integration (Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019). According to an empirical study conducted in New Zealand, a group of CSS revealed in interviews that WeChat contributed to maintaining and expanding their social connections, sustaining a virtual community, as well as promoting peer interactions and collaboration (Chen et al., 2022). Several quantitative studies (Pang, 2018; Yao et al., 2016) yielded similar results, underlining WeChat's significance in expanding participants' social capital – namely, the tangible and intangible benefits and resources derived from one's social relationships (Yendaw, 2014). For example, a study on 150 CSS in

South Korea found that WeChat played a key role in facilitating interpersonal communication and gaining social capital (Yao et al., 2016). Another study on 228 CSS in Germany highlighted that using WeChat exerted a positive effect on CSS' social integration, strengthening both the bonding relationships with close ties and bridging relationships with loose ties (Pang, 2018, 2019).

In addition, some researchers find that CSS gain both information (Chen et al., 2022; Pascal, 2022; Wang, 2018) and mental support (Pang, 2018, 2019) from WeChat. For example, Pang's (2018, 2019) quantitative study highlighted that enhanced social capital from WeChat contributed to CSS' psychological benefits such as a strengthened sense of belonging and improved life satisfaction. Chen et al.'s (2022) participants studying in New Zealand revealed in interviews that WeChat was a source of up-to-date information that helped them acclimatise to the uncertain environment and served as an outlet for them to release negative feelings such as stress, isolation, and depression. Similar results were found in a case study in Australia where university staff offered CSS participants timely and consistent information through WeChat during COVID-19, such as guidance on how to use important university tools and how to navigate the university system (Pascal, 2022). In a study conducted in the UK, researchers (Cowley et al., 2017) found that WeChat enabled CSS to address key communication barriers and tackle study challenges, leading to increased motivation to engage in learning activities and improved performance and retention. Due to WeChat's efficiency in facilitating informal communication and information exchange, Zhou and Wolstencroft (2022) suggested that British universities build an online WeChat support community for CSS to supplement the 'one size fits all' bureaucratic support structures.

Moreover, some researchers suggest that WeChat help CSS strengthen connectedness with their home culture (Park, 2016) and ethnic identity (Wang, 2018). For example, Park (2016) demonstrated how CSS in California snatched red bags to immerse themselves in the traditional Chinese collective culture of valuing reciprocity and social harmony. According to Park (2016), CSS used WeChat to pursue 'local' Chinese culture in the global context. Wang's (2018) quantitative research on 246 Chinese students studying in the U.S. concurred that content on WeChat reflected Chinese mainstream values, which provided her participants a venue to retain their ethnic identity.

Although previous literature shed light on the influence of WeChat on CSS, very few studies focus on the UK context, which reveals a significant research gap. No previous studies investigated how participants use WeChat to discuss their intercultural encounter (IE) experiences, which is important in understanding how CSS make sense of their IE and potentially gain personal growth. Moreover, there are contradictions between previous studies on WeChat and the wider scope of

literature. To be specific, the reported positive role of WeChat in supporting different aspects of CSS' academic sojourning (Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018; Park, 2016; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019) contradicts the concerns about international students' reliance on pre-existing social media platforms (Chang et al., 2012; Chang & Gomes, 2017; Gomes, 2015; Tu, 2018). WeChat's effectiveness in connecting CSS with co-nationals also reinforces researchers' worries about the predominant position of international students' co-national ties (Brown, 2009), which can hazard sojourners' acculturation and social integration. According to Brown (2009, p.439), failing to maintain strong host connections is seen as a challenge for many international student sojourners and is even regarded as 'a failure of communication'. In addition, findings of previous studies highlight that CSS exhibit very high WeChat use intensity (Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019) and such engagement enables well-being support (Chen et al., 2022; Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018, 2019; Kim & Chang, 2021). However, these contradict researchers' warnings about the excessive smartphone or social media behaviour on mental health, which is often associated with symptoms like depression, anxiety, and stress (Dhir et al., 2018; Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Seabrook et al. 2016; Wu, 2023).

Such research gaps and contradictions in the literature underscore the need for a comprehensive investigation of CSS' WeChat use in the UK and how it influences different aspects of their academic sojourning.

2.3 Theoretical Approaches to Acculturation

Acculturation has emerged as a key concept in previous studies on international students (Cao et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2020; Schartner, 2014). Although many researchers concur on a general understanding of acculturation, its definition continues to be controversial (Berry, 2006a). Originating as an anthropology concept, the well-quoted definition proposed by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, p.146-152, as cited in Berry, 2008) describe acculturation as phenomena 'which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups'. Their definition highlights that acculturation is mutual, with both groups in contact experiencing changes, instead of the assimilation of the non-dominant groups to the dominant ones (Berry, 2008). Building on this comprehensive definition, Berry (2017, p.15) defines acculturation as 'the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members'. Namely, there are two levels of acculturation, group level and individual level (Sam & Berry, 2010). Earlier anthropologists proposed acculturation to be a group-level phenomenon while psychologists focused more on changes in individuals (Sam & Berry, 2010). Berry

(2017) explains that the group level often involves changes in social structures, institutions, and cultural norms, while the individual level involves people's behavioural and psychological changes. Though my research fully acknowledges the importance of contextual features and the group level, this research focuses on the individual level since it primarily investigates the experiences of the individual CSS participants.

Previous studies have proposed different models of acculturation. The U-Curve adjustment theory is claimed to be one of the most popular and well-known theories in the field (Jackson, 2020; Schartner, 2014), frequently cited and adopted in empirical studies (e.g., Chien, 2016; Graham & Ruiz, 2017; Jackson, 2020). The model concentrates on the concept of culture shock, namely the stressful and disordering experience that an individual perceives in a culturally new environment (Ting-Toomey, 1999). According to Black and Mendenhall (1991), there are four stages comprising the U-Curve theory: the *Honeymoon stage*, the *Culture shock stage*, the *Adjustment stage*, and then the *Mastery stage* evidence of the capacity to function effectively in the new culture. However, the central concept of the model - Culture Shock is problematic as it is too negative, neglecting individuals' personal gains, positive experiences, and learning potential (Jackson, 2020; Kim, 2001). In addition, the model lacks sufficient empirical support (Church, 1982; Jackson, 2020; Schartner, 2014). For example, many empirical studies on international students have proved that the Honeymoon stage does not occur in the early stage, instead, they experience severe adjustment difficulties to cope with the abrupt change and sudden loss of previous resources and social support (Brown, 2008; Brown & Holloway, 2008a, 2008b). Several other researchers have developed models that further advance the understanding of acculturation, such as the *Affective, Behavioural, and Cognitive (ABC) Model of Acculturation* (Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2020) and *Acculturation Model of International Students' Adjustment and Adaptation* (Schartner, 2014; Schartner & Young, 2016).

After exploring various models, I found the theoretical framework adopted in the Mutual Intercultural Relations in Plural Societies project (MIRIPS) (hereafter referred to as the *MIRIPS Acculturation Model*) (Berry et al., 2022; Sam & Berry, 2010) most relevant to the purpose of this research. In contrast to the mental health and pathological perspectives of culture shock, this model views interaction with a different culture as a more positive and adaptive process for culture learning and personal growth, a perspective I employ in this empirical research. Moreover, this model distinguishes the acculturation process from its outcomes and provides a detailed explanation of the individual acculturation process to the new environment. Based on the well-acknowledged *ABCs of Acculturation* (Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2020), the MIRIPS model also provides a solid theoretical

foundation for this research. In addition, key concepts and theories of this model are widely used in both theoretical discussions and empirical studies (see Ramdhonee & Bhowon, 2012; Schartner, 2014; Schartner & Yong, 2016; Ward, 2001; Ward et al. 2020), which demonstrates substantial practical applicability for its use in this study. Meanwhile, I realise that this model is not completely applicable to this research. Carried out in 21 culturally plural societies (e.g., Azerbaijan, Belgium, Finland), the MIRIPS model underscores the group-level acculturation that stresses the social and political contexts of the larger societies, which are not the focus of my research. Based on studies on very diverse samples (e.g., adults, school children, and community groups), the model's focus on the individual level is not specifically tailored to the short-term academic pursuits of international students. To address these issues, I have decided to focus on the individual level of the MIRIPS model and refer to models specific to international students, particularly the *Acculturation Model of International Students' Adjustment and Adaptation* (Schartner, 2014; Schartner & Young, 2016), to better suit my participants.

In the following section, 2.3.1 introduces the theoretical approaches of the MIRISPS model to enable readers to understand its mechanism. Then 2.3.2 focuses on the details of the model, especially the individual's acculturation process and how that leads to different domains of acculturation outcomes, while 2.3.3 presents a critical evaluation of various domains of intercultural adaptation and how these domains could be more applicable to international students.

2.3.1 Conceptualising Acculturation

The MIRIPS model is based on the well-acknowledge 'ABCs of Acculturation' (Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2020) that addresses the *Affective* (how people feel), *Behavioural* (how people behave), and *Cognitive* (how they think and perceive) aspects of intercultural adjustment. *Affective* adjustment corresponds to the psychological outcomes that feature psychological well-being and satisfaction. *Behavioural* adjustment highlights socio-cultural outcomes, enabling individuals to gain social skills for effective interactions with people from different cultures. *Cognitive* adjustment, in addition, facilitates cognition outcomes with the development of cultural identity and perceptions (Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2020). Echoing previous research (Berry, 2020, Schartner, 2014; Schartner & Young, 2016; Ward, 1997; Ward et al., 2020), these three domains of acculturation are not independent of each other but interrelated. These three domains are respectively linked to one type of following theoretical perspective: the stress and coping theories, the culture learning approach, and the social identification theories (See Figure 7).

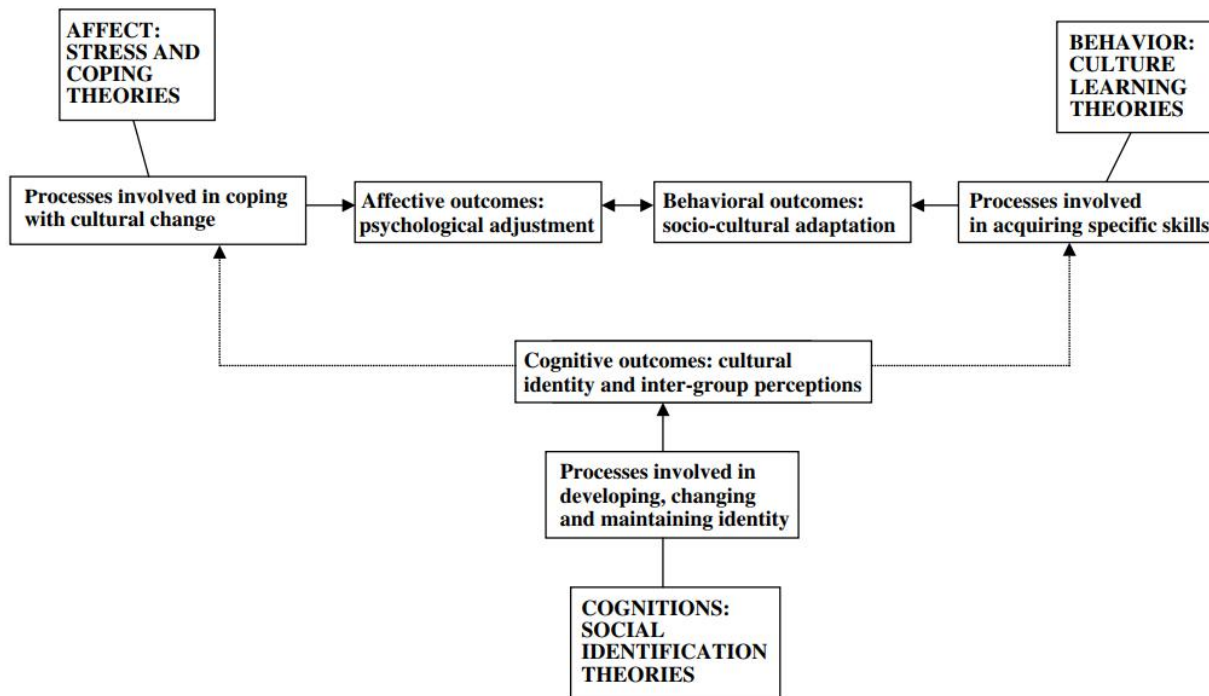


Figure 7:

The ABC Model of Acculturation (Ward et al., 2001)

Affective Aspects: The Stress and Coping Approaches. The stress and coping approaches explain how individuals go through psychological transition (Berry, 2008; Berry et al., 2022). According to Berry (2008), individuals evaluate and appraise the situation for the source of stressors (or sometimes opportunities) after acculturation experiences. Then, they cope with stressors, a process that includes both problem-focused coping (attempting to solve the problem) and emotion-focused coping (attempting to adjust emotions triggered by the problem) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If the experiences are appraised as non-problematic, changes are rather easily made with smooth behavioural shifts to fit in with the expectations of the host society. However, when the experience is appraised as conflicting or problematic, acculturation stress - ‘a response by people to life events that are rooted in intercultural contact’ (Sam & Berry, 2006, p.43) - is triggered. If the stressors are completely surmounted consequently, the stress level will be lowered, while if the coping is unsuccessful, the stress level will be higher with more negative effects. In case the stressors are overwhelming and exceed individuals’ capacity to cope, psychopathological symptoms such as depression and anxiety will occur (Sam & Berry, 2006).

Behavioural Aspect: Culture Learning Theories. Culture learning theory sees acculturation as a growth-facilitating experience, which can ease initial difficulties and lead to steady improvement

(Ward, 2001). This approach assumes that sojourners arrive in the host environment with limited social and cultural skills (Furnham & Bocher, 1982, 1986). To ease difficulties in managing daily life and have a smooth intercultural transition, individuals need to capture salient characteristics of the host culture (communication styles, values, and norms) and tackle how cultural differences influence effectiveness in communication (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Culture learning approaches see language proficiency and communication competence as fundamental factors for effective intercultural interaction and sociocultural adaptation (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Originating to improve individuals' language competence or communicative competence (Argyle, 1982; Bochner, 1982), this approach has been more broadly adopted to investigate its contributions to sociocultural adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

Cognitive Aspect: Social Identification Theories. Changes in identity are one of the most fundamental issues in acculturation and are embedded in affective and behavioural changes (Ward, 2001). Social identification theories, hence, deal with how people recognise, categorise, and identify their cultural identity in relation to their own group (ethnic group) and other groups (Sam & Berry, 2010; Ward, 2001). Categorisation is a tendency for people to compare cultural groups and develop a favourable bias toward a certain group. Identifying oneself to a certain ethnic or cultural group indicates one's pride and positive evaluation of one's group, the behavioural norms, cultural traditions, and values, which provide them with a firm sense of well-being thereby boosting their self-image (Sam & Berry, 2010). Instead of identifying with one culture group, a new trend in social identification theory is the bi-cultural identity, an integration perspective that focuses on an individual's dual cultural identities and how these two identities intersect or overlap (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). Those who identify themselves as bi-cultural tend to find it easy to integrate both cultures (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). Research has verified that through sojourning, individuals' cultural identity shifts to a richer and more multifaceted understanding (Berry, 2008; Byram, 2013; Pitts, 2009; Ward, 2001). Verified by many scholars (Brown, 2009a; Brown & Holloway, 2008a, 2008b; Cushner & Karim, 2004; Kim, 2001; Nadeem et al., 2020; Williams, 2005), cognitive development might facilitate the transformative potential of sojourners.

2.3.2 Acculturation Process and Outcomes

The MIRIPS model focuses on the process of acculturation and how this process leads to different acculturation outcomes. Acculturation is thus differentiated into two terms, with *intercultural adjustment* being the process of acculturation (the dynamic and interactive process with the host culture) (Anderson, 1994) while *intercultural adaptation* refers to the outcomes of the intercultural adjustment

(Pitts, 2005). As mentioned at the beginning of 2.3, the MIRIPS Acculturation Model highlights and investigates the interaction both at the cultural group level (on the left) and at the psychological/individual level (on the right) (see Figure 8). The group level addresses the historical, political, economic, religious, and psychological features of the two culture groups, the initial and continuing interaction between the two groups, and the consequent cultural changes (Berry et al., 2022). Though acknowledging the significance of the features of the cultural groups in contact, this study focuses on the individual level, which will be elaborated below.

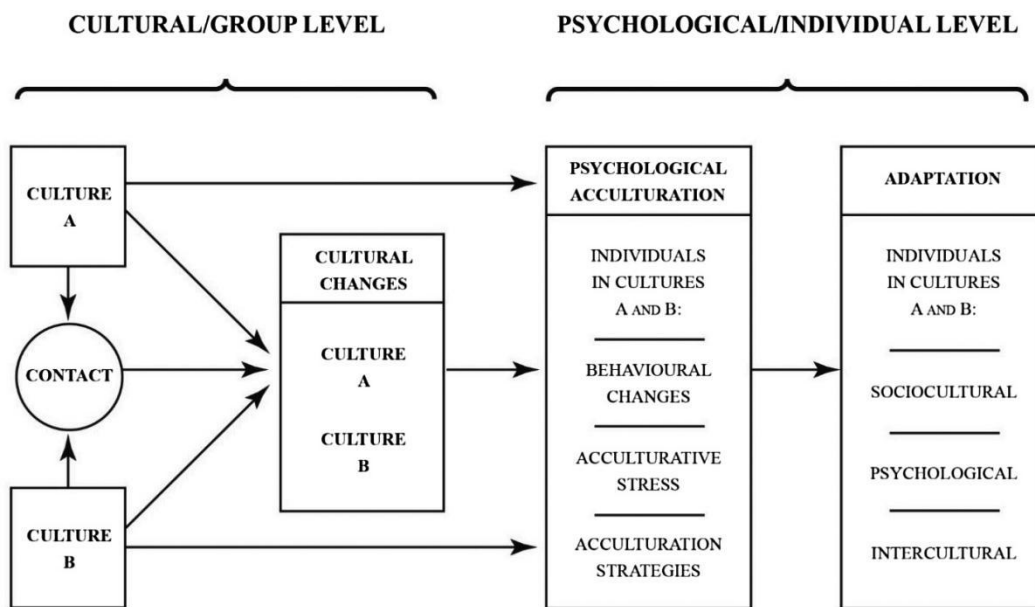


Figure 8:

General Acculturation Model for the MIRIPS Project (Berry et al., 2022)

Intercultural Adjustment - Acculturation Process. Intercultural adjustment may lead to behavioural changes, acculturation stress, and developing and engaging in different choices of acculturation strategies. Behavioural changes include easily adopted ways of dieting, dressing, or speaking, and more challenging behaviour regarding self-concept, cultural identities, and values. When the behavioural changes are challenging or problematic, individuals are likely to encounter *Acculturation Stress*. *Intercultural strategies*, the strategies individuals develop and adopt to cope with the intercultural relation between their own culture and the host culture, are central to acculturation (Berry, 2006b). This is because acculturation strategies influence all aspects of individuals’

acculturation, leading to changes in their behaviour, how they cope with acculturation stress, and consequently acculturation outcomes.

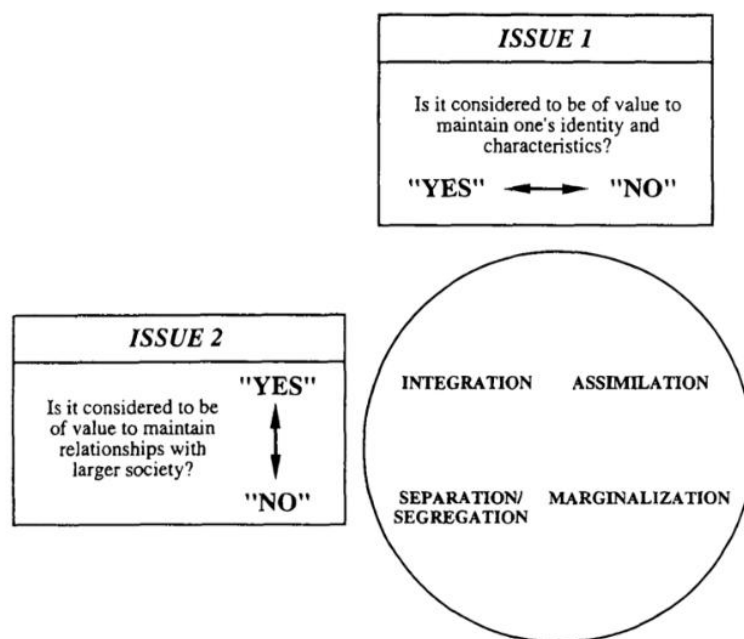


Figure 9:
Acculturation Strategies (Berry, 2008)

Acculturation strategies consist of two components that are demonstrated in daily intercultural interactions: attitudes (the preference) and behaviours (the actual practices) (Berry et al., 2006). These two components are positively correlated though it is nearly impossible to always keep one's attitudes and behaviours consistent. In addition, individuals may explore different strategies during the acculturation, depending on factors such as their personal preferences, intercultural experiences, and length of residence. Despite the complexity and unpredictability, sojourners tended to have a preference towards one of the four types of acculturation strategies: *Integration*, *Assimilation*, *Separation*, and *Marginalisation* (Berry, 2008; Berry et al., 2022) (see Figure 9). A person's choice of acculturation strategies depends on a 'Yes' or 'No' response to the two following questions: 'Is it considered to be of value to maintain one's identity and characteristics?' and 'Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with larger society?'. The first question is about one's maintenance of heritage culture and identity, while the second is about building intercultural relations. *Integration* renders for those who are willing to maintain a certain degree of cultural integrity meanwhile seeking daily interactions with cultural others at the same time. For ones who hold on to their home culture and

cultural identity but avoid intercultural interactions, *Separation* reveals. If a person is willing to discard their original culture for intercultural values and interactions, *Assimilation* is defined. Finally, if someone shows little interest in either maintaining home culture or building intercultural relations, *Marginalisation* is the option. Berry et al. (2022) claimed that integration is the most preferable strategy, enabling sojourners to achieve a higher level of adaptation.

Intercultural Adaptation - Acculturation outcomes. Intercultural adjustment eventually leads to intercultural adaptation. The MIRIPS model highlights three types of long-term acculturation outcomes for individuals, namely psychological, sociocultural, and intercultural adaptation (Berry et al., 2022; Sam & Berry, 2006). The concepts of psychological and sociocultural adaptation are building on the work of Ward (1997, 2001). Specifically, *Psychological Adaptation* refers to affective outcomes such as the sense of personal well-being, self-esteem, or satisfaction (namely ‘feeling well’), while *Sociocultural Adaptation* is usually situated within the behavioural domains and manifested by the competence to execute daily intercultural living activities (namely ‘doing well’) (Berry, 2022). *Intercultural Adaptation*, the third type, refers to individuals' capacity to build intercultural relations that are neither discriminative nor prejudiced (namely ‘relating well’) (Berry, 2022).

Multiple factors influence an individual's adaption. Individual factors prior to sojourning include demographic features such as age, gender, educational background, sojourning status (e.g., refugees, international students, immigrant workers), personality, language proficiency, as well as religious beliefs (Berry, 1992). During acculturation, the social support a person has access to and the length of stay in the host country, as well as acculturation strategies and coping strategies all play a big role in a smooth intercultural transition (Sam & Berry, 2010).

The MIRIPS acculturation model helps us conceptualise individuals' acculturation processes and outcomes, which is vital for understanding CSS participants' experiences. At this point, readers should have grasped some basic concepts of intercultural transition (e.g., acculturation, intercultural adjustment and adaptation, acculturation stress, and acculturation strategies), and understood how intercultural adjustment can lead to affective, behavioural, and cognitive development. However, the MIRIPS model can not fully fulfil the purpose of this study, especially the transition trajectories of the international students. Thus, the following part provides a critical evaluation of the MIRIPS acculturation model.

2.3.3 Critical Evaluation of the MIRIPS Model

The MIRIPS model addresses the importance of international students' psychological well-being and mental health, which is in accordance with current literature (see Brown & Brown, 2013;

Schartner, 2014; Schartner & Young, 2016; Dodd et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2020; Pang, 2018, 2019; Park et al., 2014; Zheng, 2017). It also acknowledges the importance of socialising and associating with other individuals/groups in a new environment, aligning with many other researchers (Schartner, 2014; Schartner & Young, 2016; Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2020). However, this model is not without flaws.

The MIRIPS model's understanding of certain concepts is inconsistent with wider literature. Moreover, its 'one-size-fits-all' model does not adequately account for degree-seeking international students (Schartner & Young, 2016). To start with, Berry et al. (2022) used the term *Intercultural Adaptation* to refer to 'relating well', which is problematic. As explained in 2.3.2, *Intercultural Adaptation* is commonly used to signify more broadly the process of individuals merging into a new environment and achieving certain adaptability (Alamri, 2018; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tomin et al., 2016). To avoid misunderstanding and to align with previous studies, in this research '*interaction adjustment*' is utilised to address individuals' socialising in the new environment. As a concept frequently adopted in previous studies (Black, 1988; Fee & Michailova, 2021; Reade & McKenn, 2022; Waxin, 2004), '*interaction adjustment*' explicitly demonstrates its emphasis on individuals' interactional aspects of acculturation. In addition, Berry et al. (2022) underline that *Sociocultural Adaptation* addresses the behavioural aspects and pertains to the capacity to execute daily intercultural activities. However, their understanding of sociocultural acculturation does not adequately account for degree-seeking international students. This is mainly due to the uniqueness of international students, who come abroad for academic purposes, making academic achievement 'at the centre' of their sojourn (Schartner, 2014, p.32). Therefore, in addition to the sociocultural challenges that almost all sojourners need to face and adjust to, international students are faced with academic challenges. This suggests the existence of two distinct types of adjustment for international students: *general sociocultural adaptation* and *academic adaptation*. *General sociocultural adaptation* refers to adapting to general living conditions and everyday life, such as accommodation, transportation, food, weather, and entertainment (Black, 1988). *Academic adaptation* refers to adapting to specific requirements of academic study in a new environment, involving adjusting to the new learning and teaching styles, relationships with the staff and other students, and assessment procedures (Schartner, 2014). The emphasis on academic adaptation concurs with the increasing research interest of recent empirical studies (e.g., Dodd et al., 2021). Both types fit in the well-accepted definition of sociocultural adaptation that highlights the improvement in behavioural aspects of executing daily intercultural living activities and 'doing well' (Berry et al., 2022; Ward, 1997; Schartner, 2014).

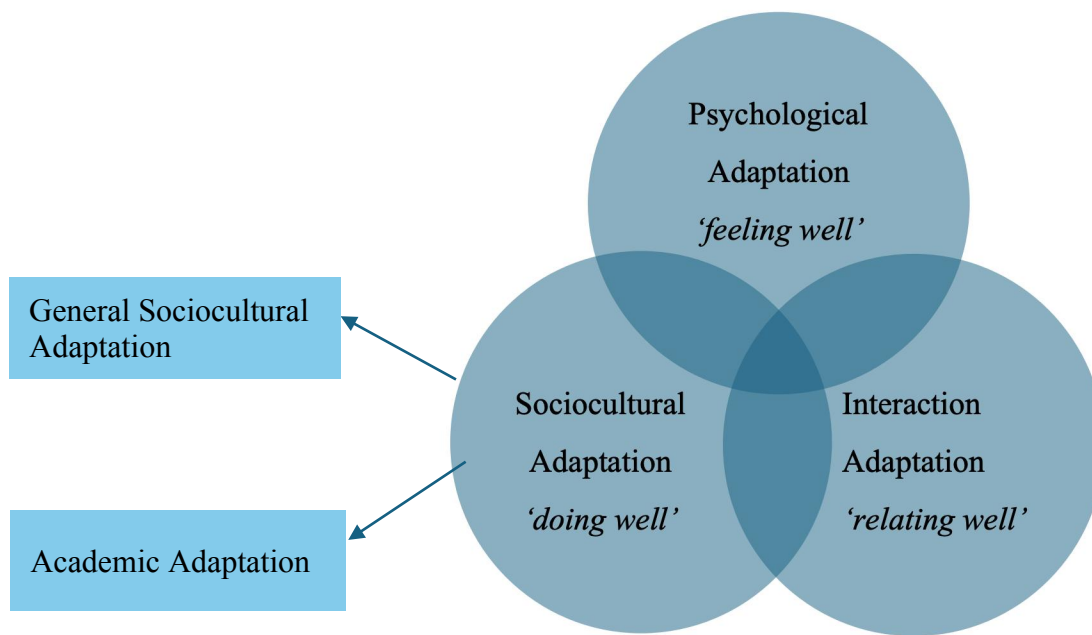


Figure 10:
International Students' Acculturation Outcomes

Based on the previous discussion, the three domains of international students' acculturation include (Figure 10):

- *Psychological Adaptation* - the psychological well-being and satisfaction (namely 'feeling well') (Berry et al., 2022; Ward, 1997).
- *Sociocultural Adaptation* - the capacity to execute daily intercultural living activities (namely 'doing well'). It involves two levels: *General Sociocultural Adaptation*, namely adapting to general living conditions and everyday life (Black, 1988); and *Academic Adaptation*, namely adapting to specific requirements of academic study in A new environment (Schartner, 2014).
- *Interaction Adaptation* - the ability to socialize and associate with other individuals/groups in a new environment, namely the ability to 'fit in' or 'relate well' (Berry et al., 2022; Black, 1988; Ward, 1997).

In addition, the MIRIPS model fails to explore in-depth how sojourners' transformative changes happen (or fail to happen). Being regarded as a 'complex and dynamic' process of personal growth (Kim, 2001, p.37), the intercultural transformative potential of sojourning, especially academic sojourning, has been verified by many researchers (Brown, 2009; Brown & Holloway, 2008a, 2008b; Cushner & Karim, 2004; Kim, 2001; Nadeem et al., 2020; Ngwira et al., 2015; Williams, 2005). According to Berwick and Whalley (2000), transformative changes do not just happen but need

purposeful intercultural learning that develops from the prior interpretation of one's experience. ICC is often used as an indicator of international students' abilities to develop transformative changes.

Previous research reveals that ICC not only indicates a transformative learning process (Randolph & Johnson, 2017) but also studying abroad outcomes (Schartner, 2014). Though some researchers (Byram, 1997; Schartner, 2014) remind us that studying abroad does not guarantee improvement in ICC, it is still worth exploring how sojourning affects ICC.

To investigate the long-lasting and transformative impacts of acculturation on my participants, this research adopts the critical incident approach that investigates intercultural encounters (IEs) as the key to turning experiences into learning and ICC development (Byram et al., 2009; Chang, 2009). Therefore, the next section will focus on how IEs facilitate improvement in ICC.

2.4 Intercultural Encounter and Intercultural Communication Competencies

In this section, 2.4.1 presents key theories and empirical studies on IE. Section 2.4.2 provides an overview of various conceptualisations on ICC, followed by a focus on Byram's ICC model (1997, 2001, 2009, 2020), which is applied in this research to analyse participants' IE experiences and ICC development.

2.4.1 *Intercultural Encounters*

A number of researchers (Barrett et al., 2014; Byram et al., 2009; Donovan, 2018; Lin, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015) have explored the concept of IE. Byram et al. (2009, p.3) emphasise that an IE can be 'an experience you had with someone from a different country, but it can also be an experience with someone from another cultural background in your country'. Barrett et al. (2014, p.16) highlight that IE is more culture-related, describing it as 'an encounter with another person (or group of people) who is perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself'. Such differences involve being of different ages, genders, social classes, and sexualities, from different countries/regions, or from different linguistic, ethnic, or religious backgrounds (Barrett et al., 2014; Byram et al., 2009; Lin, 2012). Several other researchers (Lin, 2012; Sieck et al., 2013) add that IEs are brief interactions, namely with a short duration. The different definitions of IE share the following commonalities, which comprise key IE features: an IE involves a short interaction; it can be verbal or non-verbal; it involves people who are from different backgrounds; and cultural differences play a salient role in the IE interaction. For the purpose of this study, I adopt the definition developed by Holmes et al. (2015) as it summarises the key features of IE. According to Holmes et al. (2015, p.17), IE is an 'interaction (verbal and non-verbal) between two or more people in situations (not necessarily countries) where they may perceive each

other to have different backgrounds and where these differences are salient and affect the nature of the interaction’.

Cultural, personal, and situational factors altogether construct IEs (Donovan, 2018). Cultural factors involve cultural differences in terms of values, attitudes, and communication styles. Contextual factors include situational elements surrounding an encounter, such as the setting (public or private) and interaction styles (formal or informal), while personal traits refer to age, gender, personal experiences, and personality of those involved. Donovan (2018) and several other researchers (Byram et al., 2009; Gill, 2007) claim that reflection, a complex process intertwines with emotions and feelings, plays a vital role in making sense of IE to accommodate the ‘strangeness’ and ‘fit into’ the host social-cultural framework.

Researchers have employed various ways to collect details of individuals’ IE experiences and their reflections on it. Some researchers (Askins, 2016; Donovan, 2017; Yu, 2017) conducted interviews. Kimsesiz and K  ro  lu (2023) collected ‘Vlogs’, namely interactive videos recorded by participants on their IEs, while some other researchers adopted written forms. For example, Meyer and Schuch (2017) asked participants to write diaries to document their experiences of critical encounter experiences, and Chen and Zheng (2019) asked participants to write transformative cultural-learning journals. Among all kinds of collection methods, the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE) (Council of Europe, 2009) is purposefully selected for my research. It is not only an instructive educative tool for users, but also a very useful data collection tool frequently adopted in empirical studies (see Lindner & M  ndez M  ndez, 2014; M  ndez Garc  a, 2017; Mete, 2018). More crucially, the conceptualisation of the ICC underpinning the AIE draws on Byram’s (1997) foundational ICC module, and ICC perceptions in this research are based on a more contemporary understanding of Byram’s model (2020) (to be elaborated later in 2.4.2). Namely, adopting the AIE ensures the theoretical consistency of this research and thus supports my research rigidity. Details about the content of the AIE and how it is adapted to fit the purpose of this research will be illustrated in the Methodology Chapter regarding data collection methods (3.4.2 specifically).

IEs have been proven to have long-lasting and transformative impacts on participants (Byram et al., 2009; Chang, 2009). However, after reviewing almost 100 articles, Donovan (2018) concluded that IEs could result in both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, IEs can increase participants’ knowledge about other cultures and change their values and beliefs (Ponzoni, 2014), improve their language proficiency and communicative skills (Campbell & Li, 2008), develop their cultural sensitivity and awareness (Donovan, 2018), enhance their intercultural competences (Clapp-Smith &

Wernsing, 2014; Donovan, 2018), and increase acceptance and open-mindedness towards different cultures (Chen & Zheng, 2019). Moreover, IEs can facilitate social networks with cultural others (Resch & Amorim, 2021) and help students to become more independent, confident, and open-minded (Chen & Zheng, 2019). On the other hand, IEs do not always produce positive outcomes. As Liu and Qian (2023) highlight, during an IE, individuals' preconceptions are inevitably moulded and fostered by their home culture. Consequently, such preconceptions can result in miscommunication and contradictory interpretations of the same IE, which can further lead to ethnocentrism, everyday othering practice, negative stereotypes towards the hosts and the host culture, prejudice, discrimination, or even hatred (Liu & Qian, 2023; Jackson, 2008, 2009). For international students, evidence of negative IE outcomes is illustrated in daily practices, with their differences (e.g., physical, cultural, and ideological) being constantly brought into prominence in interactions (verbally or non-verbally) with cultural others (Lin & Zhang, 2021). Empirical studies on international students have also found that their integration is frequently inhibited by prejudice and intergroup conflict (Ladegaard, 2017), and some make over-generalised conclusions towards other cultures, evidenced by their using neutral judgment to disguise their ethnocentric opinions (Chen & Zheng, 2019).

2.4.2 Intercultural Communicative Competencies (ICC)

ICC has attracted academic attention for more than five decades (Arasaratnam, 2016). In recent years especially, the intensity of globalisation has brought it back to the centre of academic studies within higher education (Kuada, 2004 as cited in Deardorff, 2011). The significance of ICC is well-acknowledged, with Deardorff (2011, p. 65) summarising that ICC 'is playing, and will continue to play, an ever-increasing role in the future'. In this part, how ICC is conceptualised in previous literature will be summarised followed by the introduction of Byram's (1997, 2020) ICC Model, the model adopted to analyse participants' IE sense-making experiences.

Conceptualising ICC

ICC studies are often transdisciplinary (Arasaratnam, 2016; Deardorff, 2016), covering foreign language education, intercultural education, communication studies (Deardorff, 2016) as well as social psychology and anthropology (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). It should be noted that ICC is merely one of many terms adopted in literature (Fantini, 2007). Other than ICC, there exists a range of similar concepts that vary by discipline and approach (Deardorff, 2011), revealing its terminological ambiguity (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). These include 20 alternative terms, including *intercultural competence* (IC), *cross-cultural awareness*, *intercultural sensitivity*, and *global competence* (Fantini, 2007). These terms have different but often overlapping research emphasis (Fantini, 2007; Matsumoto & Hwang,

2013), with some stressing global knowledge, while others paying more attention to sensitivity or certain skills (Fantini, 2007). Among all terms, a similar concept *Cross-cultural communication competence* is often adopted interchangeably with ICC, which raises concerns of some researchers (Koester & Lustig, 2015). However, *Cross-cultural* studies compare two cultures whose members interact with each other, which are too ‘vacuous’ (Koester & Lustig, 2015, p. 20). In contrast, *intercultural* focuses on the interactions of individuals from different cultures, thus the term ICC is adopted due to this study’s emphasis on individuals. Such a choice shows consistency with wide literature since ICC is widely employed by scholars (Arasaratnam; 2016; Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Byram et al., 2013). Moreover, ICC is adopted to stress perception in the communication discipline (Collier, 1989) though it is also studied within the theoretical backgrounds of social psychology, interpersonal communication, and anthropology (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005).

ICC has been defined in various ways. Deardorff (2009, p.458) defines ICC as ‘complex abilities that are required to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself’. She explains that ‘effectiveness’ refers to the degree to which individuals’ goals are achieved while ‘appropriateness’ refers to the manner and context in which those goals are achieved (Deardorff, 2016, p. 121). Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) share a similar view in highlighting the linguistic and cultural differences between the interlocutors. Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) add that ethnic, religious, national, and geographic variances should also be included. Originating and expanding from its focus on foreign language teaching studies, Byram (2020) highlights ICC to be the qualities required to ‘interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language’ so sojourners can have satisfactory interactions (Byram, 2020, p.71). His ICC understanding is grounded in his earlier analysis of standards for foreign language learners. Specifically, Byram (1997, 2020) rejects the notion of *native speakers* since it is a target impossible to achieve and it ignores the significance of social identity and cultural competence. Instead, he promotes the concept of *intercultural speaker or intercultural mediator*, namely someone who can step beyond their own culture and engage with other perspectives to mediate between people of different cultural origins and establish meaningful relationships (Byram, 1997). This research adopts the intercultural mediator perspective due to its emphasis on individuals’ potential to mediate between people from different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 2020).

There is little consensus among researchers in terms of which elements exactly constitute ICC (Deardorff, 2004; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). In fact, Deardorff (2016) and Fantini (2009) claim that there are over 100 existing ICC models or tools (questionnaire, scale, inventory, assessor, indicator,

index, test, checklist), with most taking a culture-general approach (Barker, 2016; Witteborn, 2003). Each model/tool reflects a slightly differing concept, varying from global knowledge, sensitivity, or skills, to differing application populations and purposes (Fantini, 2007). After reviewing previous studies, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) categorised ICC models into five types: developmental, compositional, adaptational, causal process, and co-orientational model. For example, the U-curve model (Black & Mendenhall, 1991) is a representative developmental model that reveals the evolutionary nature and Byram's model (1997, 2020) is a typical compositional model that lists a comprehensive list of ICC components.

Introducing Byram's (1997, 2020) ICC Model

Among the enormous ICC tools and models, Byram's model (1997, 2020) is found to be the most applicable to my research (see Figure 11). This is due to several reasons, but most importantly its emphasis on language use, since new members of a community socialise to the appropriate and polite norms of the new environment through and into languages (Deardorff, 2016). Byram's perspective of valuing language use is verified by empirical studies on international students (see Ghenghesh, 2015; Martirosyan et al., 2015; Neumann et al., 2019; Young et al., 2013). Another reason for choosing this model is its differentiation of two levels of ICC: the linguistic level of *Communicative Competence* and the intercultural level of *Intercultural Competence* (Byram, 1997, 2020). *Communicative Competence* comprises linguistic competence (the ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances), sociolinguistic competence (the awareness between linguistic signals and their contextual or situational meaning and discourse competence), as well as discourse competence (the ability to use appropriate strategies in the construction and interpretation of texts) (Van Ek, 1980). Meanwhile, *Intercultural competence* refers to a set of qualities (*savoirs*) of an 'intercultural speaker'.

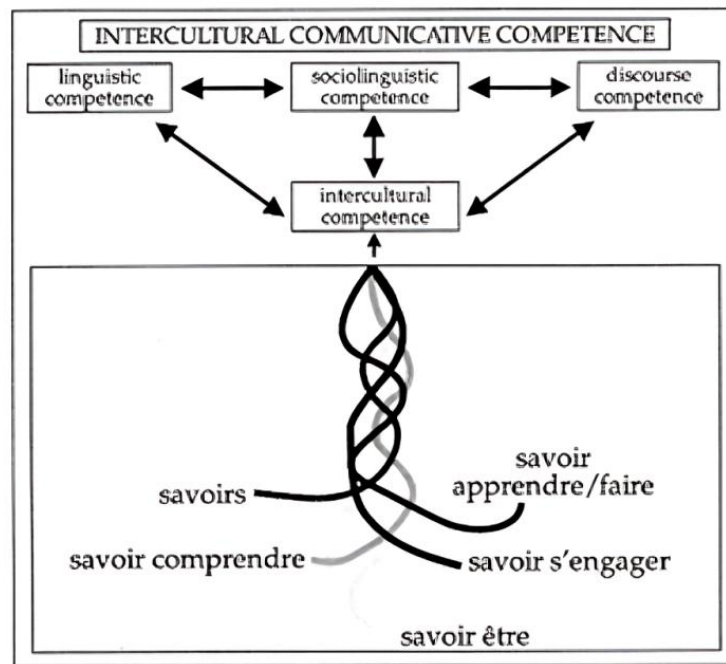


Figure 11:

ICC Model (Byram, 1997)

See below *savoirs* of intercultural competence and the specific meanings of each *savoir*:

- *Savoir être (attitudes)*: the ability to be curious and open-minded, ready to suspend one's judgment and value others' perspectives.
- *Savoirs (knowledge)*: knowledge of the social groups, products, and practices of oneself and others, and how individuals and groups of two societies develop interaction.
- *Savoir comprendre (skills of interpreting and relating)*: the ability to interpret symbols and events of other cultures and to relate such documents or experiences to one's own.
- *Savoir apprendre/faire (skills of discovery and interaction)*: the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills in real-time communication and interaction.
- *Savoir s'engager (critical cultural awareness)*: the ability to evaluate perspectives, practices, and products of other cultures in relation to one's own.

Byram's ICC model has been continuously revised in recent years, which provides us with more holistic components and contemporary understanding of the ICC. The continuous revisions made it possible to apply Byram's model on to not only foreign language learners but also various kinds of sojourners. In his earlier research, Byram et al. (2009) elaborate that the ICC attitudes include respect

for others, empathy towards culture others, acknowledgement of both others and their own identities, and tolerance of ambiguity. Knowledge includes both culture-general knowledge and knowledge specific to a certain culture. Byram (2009a) also underlines the importance of critical cultural awareness skills in the model. This involves not only critical thinking but also social transformation through critical self-reflection, intercultural dialogue, and action (Holmes, 2014). In Byram's more recent work in 2020, he further emphasises the importance of ICC skills, especially the skills of interpretation, skills of interacting to establish relationships with cultural others, and the skills of discovery and interaction. These ICC perceptions construct the theoretical basis when designing the AIE for the Council of Europe, the methodological tool I adopted in this study.

Though Byram's model is well acknowledged in the field and well adopted, empirical studies barely apply it to individuals' IE sense-making process to gain ICC development, which presents a research gap for this study to fill out.

2.5 Summary and Research Questions

2.5.1 Summary

Empirical studies presented in section 2.1 shed light on international students and CSS' experiences, especially potentials and difficulties in their sojourning. In addition to challenges that international students generally experience such as cultural differences, language barriers, and emotional challenges (e.g., longlines, homesickness, isolation, and anxiety) (Fritz et al., 2008; Sawir et al., 2008) and identity conflicts (Kinging, 2013), CSS studying in the UK also experience challenges due to big cultural distance such as different classroom culture (Zhu & Sullivan, 2022), lack of diverse intercultural context due to skewed intake of Chinese students in certain schools (Yu & Moskal, 2019), and the discrimination and xenophobia during the COVID-19 (Zhu et al., 2022).

Section 2.2 focused on international students' social media use and how WeChat influenced CSS' study abroad experiences. Researchers illustrated mixed views of social media use in the international students' experience. Some studies showed that social media platforms were beneficial to international students' sojourning, meanwhile, many researchers (Chang et al., 2012; Chang & Gomes, 2017; Gomes, 2015; Tu, 2018) expressed concerns about sojourners' reliance on pre-sojourning social networking platforms like WeChat. Empirical studies on WeChat showed that it had great advantages in facilitating communication and expanding social capital (Pang, 2018; Yao et al., 2016), providing information (Chen et al., 2022; Pascal, 2022; Wang, 2018) and mental support (Pang, 2018, 2019). However, such claims contradict wider literature, especially researchers' concerns on lacking intercultural interaction during sojourning (Lehto et al., 2014; Wang & Hannes, 2014; Zhang &

Brunton, 2007; Zhu, 2016) and excessive social media use on people's mental health (Dhir et al., 2018; Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Seabrook et al. 2016; Wu, 2023).

To make sense of the empirical studies mentioned above and to provide an analytical framework for my research, section 2.3 introduced several existing acculturation models, especially the well-acknowledged U-Curve Model (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). Then, I introduced, critically evaluated, and adapted the MIRIPS acculturation model (Berry et al., 2022) for international students, highlighting the psychological, interactional, and sociocultural (general and academic) domains of acculturation. This model is based on the theoretical conception of the well-acknowledged "ABC" model (Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2020), emphasising the integration of the Affective (how people feel), Behavioural (how people behave), and Cognitive (how they think and perceive) changes that lead to acculturation. Its solid theoretical foundation, wide applicability, and detailed explanation of an individual's intercultural adjustment process contribute to the analysis of my participants' acculturation.

To figure out CSS' potential transformative changes of acculturation, section 2.4 presents how the critical incident approach (Byram et al., 2009; Chang, 2009) of IE is adopted. After introducing IE theories and relevant empirical studies (2.4.1), 2.4.2 focused on the conceptualisation of the ICC, followed by detailed discussions on Byram's ICC model (1997, 2020) and its development over time. These ICC theories have provided the basis for analysing participants' experiences, especially how they make sense of IEs on WeChat.

2.5.2 Research Gap

The literature review has highlighted several research gaps that this study will address. Firstly, though current studies shed light on the influence of WeChat on CSS's sojourning, previous empirical studies scarcely focus on the UK context and there is even less conducted under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, though previous studies have explored acculturation, few focus on the conceptual model of international students and how social media, especially ethnic platforms, influences students' acculturation. In addition, there is scarce research on how social media (WeChat in this case) affects international students' IE sense-making and its potentially lead to transformative changes evidenced with ICC development.

To fill out these research gaps, my research is necessary and timely. The main research question of my study is: What is the role of WeChat in CSS' study abroad experiences in the UK? Sub-questions include:

RQ1: How do CSS use WeChat in their everyday life?

RQ2: What is the role of WeChat in CCS' acculturation?

RQ3: What is the role of WeChat in making sense of intercultural encounters?

Answers to these questions can help us to understand CSS' daily WeChat use while studying in the UK (RQ1), the role of WeChat in CSS' acculturation (RQ2) and in their intercultural learning process (RQ3).

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology of this empirical study. Section 3.1 *Research Paradigm* provides a rationale for the adoption of social constructionism, 3.2 *Research Approach* explains the rationale for conducting qualitative and ethnographic research. Following, 3.3 briefly introduces the context where this research is conducted. Section 3.4 *Research Methods* elaborates on the research participants, data collection and analysis methods, the ethical issues, why and how I research multilingually, followed by reflexivity and the criteria for judging this study. Section 3.5 *Pilot Study* presents an overview of the pilot study and its outcomes. A summary of this chapter is provided in 3.6.

3.1 Research Paradigm: Social Constructionism

A research paradigm refers to a set of abstract principles that bring together ontological, epistemological, and methodological principles that guide research (Yadav, 2022). In this study, I adopted social constructionism paradigm (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Burr, 2015; Parker, 1998; Gergen, 2009). Stemmed from and influenced by diverse disciplines, the contemporary social constructionism arose from German sociological studies more than a century ago (Allen, 2015). Social constructionism holds that the social practices shape the world (Allen, 2015) and that our knowledge of the world is the product of our thoughts rather than an observation of an objective reality (Burr, 2015). In the intercultural communication field, it stresses the role social construction plays in shaping cultural membership and ‘the subjective nature of meaning-making’ (Zhu, 2015, p. 12).

This theoretical orientation allows researchers to explore and understand individuals' construction of language, culture, and identity as subjective, contextual, and negotiable (Ferdman, 2000; Ganassin, 2020). ‘Cultural others’, namely counterparts of individuals’ intercultural communication, are also correspondingly seen as socially constructed (Eliassi, 2015; Ladegaard & Cheng, 2014; Ladegaard, 2020). Based on this approach, CSS are seen as individuals who keep constructing their language, culture, and identity in the context of study abroad. Moreover, the process of their engagement in intercultural communication and their perception of intercultural encounters (IEs) are also seen as constructed in a dynamic, diverse, and complex process.

Considering the importance of culture and identity in the process of my participants’ sojourning, I will elaborate on how these concepts are understood in this research.

3.1.1 Culture

In 1952, American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn identified over 160 different definitions of culture, and the number has been increasing ever since. Despite researchers’ efforts to define *Culture*, there is still no consensus among academics. One of the existing well-acknowledged

definitions is proposed by Hofstede (1994, p.5), referring to *Culture* as ‘the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another’. However, Hofstede’s understanding is often criticised for adopting an essentialist perspective, describing individuals as homogeneous with a singular national identity (Nathan, 2015). In contrast, Street et al. (1993, p.23) proposed that ‘*culture as a verb*’. They claimed that culture should be treated as a process of active construction of meaning, instead of a static and reified or nominalising sense. His view echoes Kramsch and Hua (2016, p41) in seeing culture as ‘something one does’ rather than ‘something you belong to or live with’, which fits in the social constructionism positionality of this study. Street et al. (1993) were inspired by the metaphor of the ‘*grammar of culture*’ (Holliday, 2018, p. 23), which sees culture as socially and politically constructed with different and interconnected forces acting on it. Therefore, being politically constructed does not mean cultures are not confined within national borders but are fluid and dynamic with blurred boundaries.

Following a social constructionism approach, this study draws more specifically on Holliday’s (2018, p56) definition that culture is ‘the everyday business of engaging with and creating culture’. Holliday (2018) further distinguishes culture into two dimensions: the *large culture* and the *small culture*. *Large culture* focuses on ethnic, national, or international cultural differences; while *small culture* (e.g., families, or work groups) attaches more importance to cohesive social groupings but is not necessarily ethnic or nation related, nor subordinates to large cultures. A very good interpretation of Chinese large culture was conducted by Qian (2020). According to him, traditional and modern cultures are two main components of Chinese culture. Specifically, traditional legacies include Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which competed and struggled with each other in history but integrated into ‘teachings’ that offered the Chinese the philosophy of life (Qian, 2020). Moreover, the long history of emphasis on the prominence of ‘family virtues’ or ‘filial piety’ explains the close family connection of modern Chinese families and strong family influences on overseas Chinese students, meanwhile, the long history of the civil examination system undoubtedly influences Chinese families’ emphasis on education (Qian, 2020). Modernity includes the rise of modern nationalism, the emphasis on science under the influence of Western countries, and the rise of pragmatism to lift people from poverty and gain material richness since the reform and open-up policy began in the 1980s (Qian, 2020).

However, all elements mentioned above view characteristics of Chinese culture ‘as a whole’, which can easily cause essentialist notions of stereotypes and should not be used to predict how a particular individual will behave. Therefore, Holliday’s (2018) small culture theories are drawn on to

understand the Chinese student sojourners' perception of culture. Small cultures are cultural environments, social groupings, or activities where cohesive social reactions happen (Holliday, 2018). Small culture formation on the go is therefore the transient and ever-changing everyday process that takes place all the time, everywhere, with whoever (Holliday, 2018), which allows this research to draw on to understand CSS participants' personal experiences and daily interaction.

3.1.2 Identity

The complex and multifaceted nature of identity should be understood through the interplay of multiple variables including race, ethnicity, religion, gender, nationality, social status, family role, and so on (Holmes, 2015, p.6). As a result, identity can be difficult to ascribe and 'hopelessly ambiguous' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p.6). To provide a practical understanding of identities, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) differentiated between a strong sense and a weak sense of identity. The strong sense emphasises sameness and fixed features of identity over time with a clear boundary between inside and outside (e.g. ethnic, racial), while the weak identity adopts a multiple, unstable, contingent, constructed, and negotiated conception. These claims roughly align with the cultural identity theory (Hall, 2015) that highlights the existence of both fixed (e.g. race, ethnicity) and fluid (e.g. social and economic status) components of identity. However, a strong sense of identity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), or fixed identity (Hall, 2015), can easily incur essentialist ideas like stereotypes, discriminations, or even worse consequences. For example, Blackledge and Creese (2010) cited the notorious persecution of many Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II, illustrating the least wanted result of the imposed identity of the race when being imposed on people.

This research follows a constructionist view in understanding identity as fluid, dynamic, and evolving over time, which is consistent with many scholars (e.g. Holmes, 2015; Ganassin, 2020). The identity construction is thus regarded as a constant and ongoing process, which involves one's 'depersonalisation' to an in-group prototype (e.g. cognition, attitudes, behaviours) to distinguish oneself from the out-group and self-verification of one's consistency in identity standards (meanings and norms associated with the role) among group members (Stets & Burke, 2000). The degree of an individual's commitment and loyalty to one certain identity also varies, depending on one's own goals, desires, the scale of the group, as well as the strength and depth between an individual and another group member (Stets & Burke, 2000). For example, national identity is often seen as rigid and fixed (e.g. *passport identity* suggested by Piller et al., 2023). However, students' national identity is challenged in the intercultural context, enabling them to construct and re-constructed their national identity and develop super identities including international identity (Arrow & Sundberg, 2004),

intercultural identity (Kim, 2001), and intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2009b). Such super identities can rise while national identity remains strong, showing a 'juxtaposition pertinence' (Huang, 2015, p182). Language is also regarded by many scholars as a token of a strong identity and leads to group categorisation according to the language people speak (Byram, 2006). However, the strong language identity is contested since languages and identities are socially constructed, especially in the context of immigrants and foreign language communication (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). These discussions have provided a foundational understanding of how we perceive participants' identities, as they negotiate and construct various identities during their sojourn (e.g., Chinese, international students, male/female, Mandarin speaker, English learner), which can be fluid, dynamic, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory.

3.2 Qualitative Interpretive Research and Ethnography

This research is qualitative interpretive (3.2.1) and more specifically ethnographic (3.2.2).

3.2.1 *Qualitative Interpretive Research*

According to Fossey et al. (2002), *qualitative research* is an umbrella term that refers to methodologies that describe and explain individuals' experiences, behaviours, intercommunications, and relevant social contexts, which does not involve statistical data or quantification. Qualitative research is often associated with interpretivism, which focuses on subjective meanings in the social world (Goldkuhl, 2012). Interpretivism aims to acknowledge the existence of subjective meanings, reconstruct them, understand them, and use them in theorising (Goldkuhl, 2012). Dependent on constructionism ontology (Goldkuhl, 2012), qualitative interpretive studies often include thick descriptions of social life (e.g., experiences and interactions) and how individuals construct their social reality through interpretation (Brewer, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), which is in line with the philosophical position, namely the constructionism paradigm adopted in this research. A qualitative methodology is the most appropriate to fulfil the purposes of this research, enabling me to privilege participants' experiences and perspectives of their WeChat use within the wider social-cultural context of their studying in the UK.

3.2.2 *Ethnographic Research*

Ethnography is one of the qualitative interpretative research approaches that aim to capture the social meanings and activities of people in a certain context (Brewer, 2000). Deeply rooted in sociology and anthropology disciplines (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Jackson, 2015), the birth of ethnography can be dated to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gobo, 2011). 'Traditional' ethnography is characterised by immersions in particular communities of people being studied (e.g.,

living or working together), prolonged observation of their activities and interaction (a year or even years), rich descriptions of the historical and cultural contexts, and detailed analysis of their social behaviours and perception (Hammersley, 2006; Jones & Smith, 2017). In recent years, ethnographic studies have gained increasing popularity among researchers in education and intercultural communication (Jackson, 2015). Compared to early conventions, recent ethnographers often focus on a particular setting (e.g., work environment or educational institutions) and show less engagement within a shorter period of time. This is particularly true for academics working in universities, with increasing pressure on productivity and intensification of research projects. Despite the changes, ethnography is ‘a form of social and educational research that emphasises the importance of first-hand study on what people do and say in particular contexts’ (Hammersley, 2006, p.4). Ethnographic research usually features prolonged contact, employment of different types of data, and indulgence to understand people’s perspectives (Hammersley, 2006, 2018).

My study aligns closely with the definition and well-acknowledged features of ethnographic research outlined earlier. The advantage of such a methodological approach lies in its strength in enriching our understanding of a certain group’s cultural, linguistic, and behavioural practices in a certain context and time (Jackson, 2015). In addition to what people do, this approach looks deeper into why and how members of a certain group do so (Ganassin, 2020; Wolcott, 2008) and acknowledges that a certain group is comprised of individuals who have their own subjective experiences and perceptions (Fossey et al., 2002; Ganassin, 2020; Jackson, 2006). This is in alignment with the focus and purpose of this empirical research in highlighting CSS as a complex and nuanced social group under investigation with group members being heterogeneous.

Howell (2012) summarised the evolution of ethnographic studies and proposed three core approaches of philosophical (both ontology and epistemology) methodology: positivist, post-modern/constructivist, and critical realism ethnography. Positivist ethnographers advocate the objectivity of the research, which requires the researchers to ‘distance’ and ‘detach’ from the object being studied, attaching too much importance to the micro-context but failing to acknowledge the macro-context of social complexity (Hammersley, 2006; Howell, 2012; Ryan, 2017). Post-modern/constructivist ethnography, on the other hand, stresses that reality is socially or individually constructed, therefore it emphasises the interpretation of the focused community and recognises the wider social and political context, but it is often criticised for being highly subjective (Crang & Cook, 2007; Howell, 2012; Ryan, 2017). Critical realist ethnography, in comparison, bridges the conflicts between positivist and post-modernism since it conceptualises reality as stratified, composing the

construction of individual's perceptions (micro-level), the acknowledgement of the wider context (macro-level), and most importantly it investigates how both levels interplay critically (Barron, 2013; Porter, 1993; Ryan, 2017). This research adopts critical realist ethnography since it aligns with the social constructionism paradigm of the study, recognises the inevitable role of the wider context, and helps to address how these two levels act on each other.

In addition to guiding the study, adopting an ethnographic approach facilitates a degree of flexibility in providing rich data collection methods (Ganassin, 2017; Madden, 2022). These include interviewing, participant observation, document analysis, case studies (Atkinson et al., 2001; Hammersley, 2006; Ryan, 2017), and visual methods (Jackson, 2016). Semi-structured interviewing is particularly important in this study, considering its efficiency in capturing and interpreting people's perspectives and giving people a 'voice' (Hammersley, 2006, p. 9). Moreover, the interview schedule facilitates the exploration of the research topic in a focused but flexible and conversational manner. The flexibility of ethnography is also reflected in participant recruitment, with previous empirical studies adopting various ways to recruit and focusing on different sample sizes. Many researchers (Chretien et al., 2015; Higginbottom, 2011; Hirsch et al., 2019) showed preferences for purposive sampling – an umbrella term of various recruitment methods that intentionally select respondents based on their competences to yield information in explicating a research theme or phenomenon (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024; Rai & Thapa, 2015). Sifaneck & Neaigus (2001) specified their adoption of snowballing for its advantage in approaching their 'hidden populations' of heroin sniffers. Sample size also varies, ranging from a small number of participants (e.g., 10 undergraduate students in a study conducted by Zhang-Wu, 2023) to a much larger cohort (e.g., 150 heterosexual college students researched by Hirsch et al., 2019).

The participant recruitment strategy adopted in my research was guided by the methodological flexibility enabled by ethnography (Madden, 2022), which prioritises responsiveness to fieldwork dynamics over rigid adherence to predetermined norms. Specifically, a total of 17 participants were selected, following the qualitative research conventions to capture reoccurring patterns and ensure rich, contextually grounded data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The hybrid purposive sampling (convenience sampling and snowballing) was strategically adopted to balance accessibility with depth. I endeavoured to maintain methodological rigour. Details about how ethnographic approach was applied in data collection and analysis will be elaborated on in section 3.4, following the introduction of the research context.

3.3 Research Context

This empirical research is conducted in a university located in the North of England. According to the university's statement (2024), it is a 'thriving international community' with students from over 120 different countries, and there are more than 1800 Chinese students. The School of Education, Communication, and Language Science (ECLS) where the research was conducted is also highly multilingual and multicultural with students from 40 different countries and many staff with overseas backgrounds. In terms of the CCC course, CSS outnumbered students from other origins, both before and after the pandemic. Based on the CCC student statistics provided by the ECLS (obtained in 2024), CSS accounted for a vast majority of the student cohort during the past five years (2019 -2024) despite the impact of COVID-19. In contrast, British students account for only a very small portion and the other nationalities (e.g., American, French, German, Japanese) take a smaller ratio. The changes in the proportion of student composition are illustrated below (Figure 12). For students enrolled in 2021/22, from whom I recruited my participants, school statistics (ECLS, 2024) show that 107 CCC students from 15 different countries were admitted, making the student cohort seem very diverse. However, most students (68, approximately 64% of the whole cohort) were Chinese and there were very limited local British students (17 students, 16%) (see Figure 13). Other than these two biggest groups, there were five American students (4.7%), and two students from Germany, Italy, and Japan respectively (1.9%).

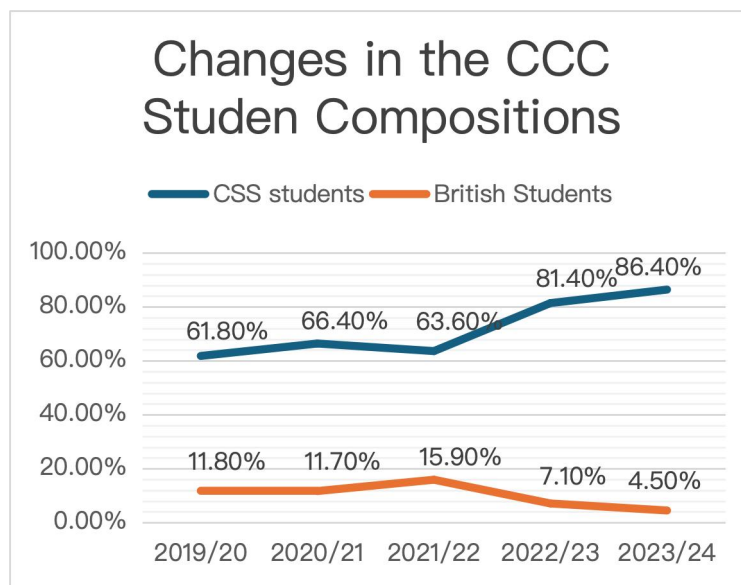


Figure 12:

Changes in the CCC Student Composition at School of ECLS (2019-2024)

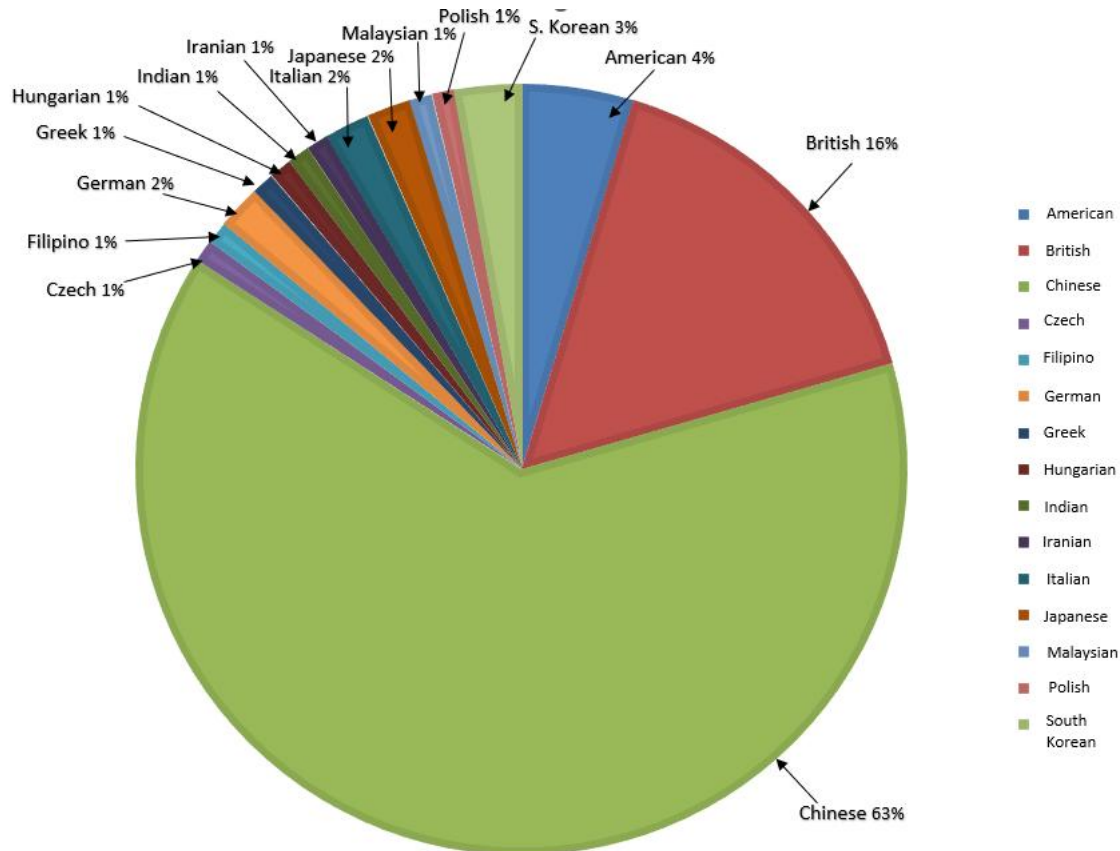


Figure 13:

The CCC Student Composition in 2021/22

Students in the CCC course have different pathways, including International Marketing, International Management, Media Studies, Applied Linguistics, Education, International Relations, and International Development and Education. Though different pathways have different specialist pathways, the training is communication-focused in general, aiming at developing expertise in cross-cultural communication. A key compulsory module is *Introduction to Intercultural Communication*, through which students learn key CCC concepts and theories (e.g., culture, identity, IEs, intercultural communication).

I have chosen to focus on Chinese students enrolled in the CCC course in this particular context for the following reasons. Firstly, focusing on the CSS Chinese students is crucial for understanding shifts in the British HE context. Characterised by the skewed intake of certain student groups, the research context exemplified the ‘structural’ or ‘institutional’ conditions of limited racial or cultural diversity in the British HE (Yu & Moskal, 2019) despite its superficial indications of internationalisation

(Schweisfurth & Gu 2009). Secondly, as many CCC concepts and theories are deeply embedded in the curriculum, the systematic training on CCC enables participants to offer in-depth perspectives highly relevant to this research. For instance, one assignment in the compulsory module *Introduction to Intercultural Communication* requires students to describe an IE and then critically reflect on it using key CCC concepts. Without such academic training, it would be unfeasible for participants to understand key IE concepts and challenging for them to write and reflect on the IEs, all of which are crucial for my data collection process. Thus, focusing on this specific student cohort, as opposed to CSS without such training, enables more effective engagement in the data collection process and guarantees the high quality of the data (to be elaborated below in 3.4.2). Thirdly, based at the same school, I had the privilege of spending a significant amount of time with potential participants - serving as their teaching assistant and actively engaging in their social events- which consequently enabled me to recruit sufficient participants and establish a strong rapport with many of them.

3.4 Research Methods

In this section, I will first describe information about participants (3.4.1), then the data collection methods and the engagement of the CCC participants (3.4.2). How the data were analysed will be discussed in 3.4.3 before I address the ethical considerations in 3.4.4. As this research involves multiple languages, 3.4.5 will discuss the multilingual dimensions and 3.4.6 focuses on my researcher reflexivity. How this research fits the evaluation criteria of qualitative research is explained in 3.4.7.

3.4.1 Participants

There are two recruitment criteria in the study, namely, participants needed to be both Cross-Cultural Communication (CCC) postgraduate taught students and Mainland Chinese. Following purposive sampling strategies, this study employed a combination of convenient sampling and snowballing sampling. Specifically, I used my social networks and started with convenience sampling, recruiting participants who fit the research criteria and were the easiest to recruit for the study (Sedgwick, 2013). This was followed by snowballing by asking the initial small number of participants to recommend other contacts to participate, who then in turn recommended more who fit the recruitment criteria, to increase the chain of participants (Parker, 2019). Eventually, I managed to recruit 17 participants, with two of them in the pilot study and the others in the main study. The sample size was determined by the need to capture reoccurring patterns, a conventional criterion established in qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

I gained access to many participants through working as the teaching assistant for one of their compulsory modules, attending seminars of another compulsory module as an active participant, and

participating actively in CCC social activities (e.g., day trips, Christmas and Easter celebrations). The active engagement with CCC students made it possible for me to meet potential participants regularly and work with them closely to build rapport. In the end, I was able to recruit half of my participants who then recommended their friends or coursemates to participate in my research.

As illustrated in the participants' demographic information in Table 1, all participants were under 30 when they were recruited and most of them (13 students, 76.5%) were between 20-25. A vast majority of them were female. Despite my efforts to keep a more balanced representation of genders, I only managed to recruit five male participants due to the extremely unbalanced gender intake of the CCC MAs. Specifically, among 68 CCC Chinese students, only about 10 were male which made it difficult for me to get enough male participants. A bigger imbalance exists in participants' ethnicity. As illustrated in the form, a vast majority of the participants (15 people, 88.24%) were Chinese Han. Only two (11.76%) were minority ethnic, with one being Buyi (an ethnic group living in Southern Mainland China) and another Hui (Chinese Muslims). Such imbalance is understandable, considering that Chinese Han account for 91.11% of the overall population in China (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Participants were from various pathways, as illustrated in Table 1. Pseudonyms were given to protect participants' privacy and ensure confidentiality. Though all my participants were Chinese, English pseudonyms were used in this study. This was inspired by conversations I had with multiple participants who highlighted their emotional attachment to English names and eagerness to use English pseudonyms. Several participants (e.g., Hal, Phoebe) claimed their Chinese names were given by their parents so they did not have a say, but having an English name enabled them to demonstrate their independence and willingness to embrace a more diverse identity other than being Chinese. Thus, I chose English pseudonyms to respect their choices.

[Table containing pseudo anonymised participant information and has been removed]

When the data collection started, most participants reported having stayed in the UK for no more than seven months, namely halfway through their MA course (See Figure 14). Two participants (Walter and Shirley) stayed patently longer (10 months and 11 months relatively) due to their earlier arrival to attend the Pre-session English course to meet the English language admission requirements, which was no lower than the equivalence of IELTS 6.5 overall (with a minimum of 6.5 in writing, and 5.5 in all other sub-skills). In addition, many of them reported having experience living or travelling abroad prior to studying in the UK. For example, Vera worked in the US for one and a half years and Aquarius studied in a joint degree program in France for two years. Many others had short-term stays in different countries (e.g., summer camps in the US or the UK, a trip to Singapore or Spain). Therefore, though almost all participants came to the UK to study for the first time, they had sojourning experiences before.

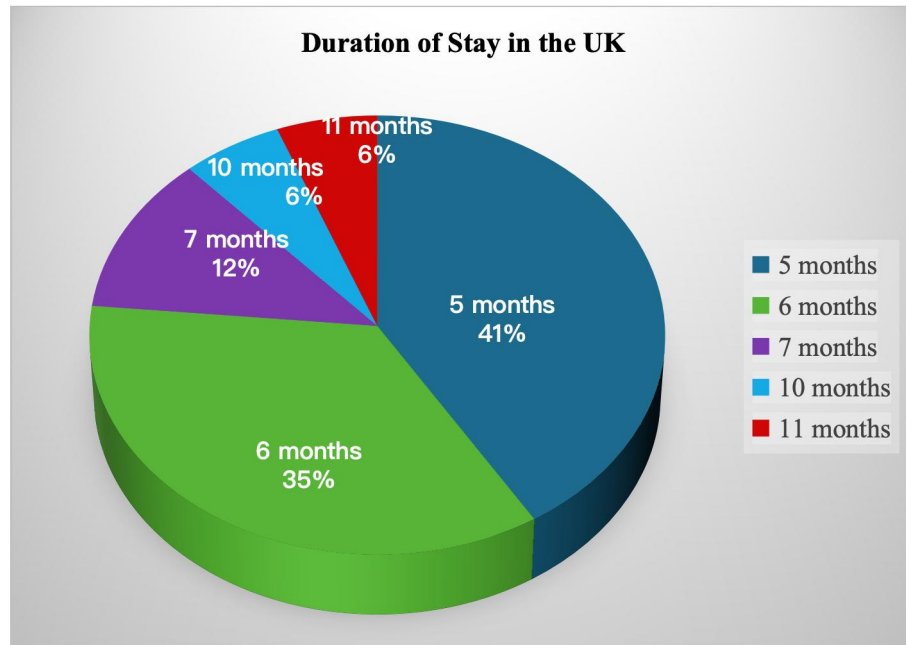


Figure 14:

Duration of Stay in the UK

3.4.2 Data Collection Methods and Participant Engagement

Data were collected through a pre-interview task (the AIE), semi-structured interviews, WeChat screenshots, and field notes. Interviews were the most crucial method as they provided data to address all three RQs. The AIE was used to facilitate the interviews and to provide background information on participants' IE experiences, which was particularly important in answering RQ3. WeChat screenshots were employed to triangulate the interview data and field notes were used to document the pilot study, which helped refine the main research and then supplement or verify the interview data.

The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE)

As a pre-interview task, participants were requested to complete the AIE on their own time and then return it to me before the interviews. In the AIE, they were asked to share a particular IE that: 1. happened during their study in the UK; 2. had been discussed on WeChat with their connections (e.g., family members, friends, roommates, teachers, etc.). This task not only allowed participants ample time to recall and reflect on their IE experiences but also helped me facilitate meaningful discussions related to RQ3 during interviews.

Various tools were adopted in past studies to collect data on participants' IE experiences, such as interviews (Askins, 2016; Donovan, 2018; Yu, 2017), Vlogs (Kimsesiz & Koroğlu, 2023), and diaries (Meyer & Schuch, 2017). After assessing available tools, I found the AIE (Byram et al., 2009)

to be the most suitable for my research. As an educational tool created by the Council of Europe in its *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, the AIE is designed to ‘encourage people to think about and learn from IEs they have had’ (Council of Europe, n.d.). The AIE has well-designed features (clear instructions and prompts) and a solid theoretical basis. Structured as a set of questions and prompts, the AIE encourages people to reflect and learn from the IEs they have had. The theoretical conception behind the AIE is Byram’s (1997, 2009) ICC Model which addresses the importance of four key *competences* (attitudes and feelings, behaviour, knowledge and skills, and action orientation). Such components are based on Byram’s (1997) five ICC components (*savoirs*). The AIE is a narrative tool that not only helps individuals to analyse an IE in retrospect by describing the context and scene and exploring individuals’ feelings but also helps to ‘look back’ and ‘look forward’ to raise intercultural awareness (Méndez García, 2017). In addition to helping individuals to analyse an IE in retrospect by describing the context and scene, the AIE also helps participants explore their feelings and develop ICC through reflecting upon and learning from momentous IEs they have experienced (Méndez García, 2017). Many academics used the AIE to examine how participants interpreted the images of cultural others (Lindner & Méndez García, 2014; Méndez García, 2017), gained intercultural awareness (Cuccurullo, 2019) and ICC development (Mete, 2018; Tutunea, 2021). However, this is the one of few studies where it is adapted to explore the experiences of (Chinese) international students.

To make the AIE more suitable for my research, I revised the AIE to reduce overlaps in topics and to make the structure more user-friendly. To make the form more user-friendly, I shortened the original English version, making the prompts clearer and more instructive while the content and structure remained. For example, one prompt was ‘What were you doing there’, enquiring about the background of the IE. However, multiple-choice prompts asking similar things were listed, including ‘Was it ... study, leisure, on holiday, at work, at school, or other’. Though participants can choose not to answer all the questions, I found the form redundant and sometimes confusing. Therefore, I removed the second prompt to make the form more succinct. This choice was made also because text descriptions could provide richer data compared to ticking choices. In addition, the original version was 13 pages long which could be intimidating for users. In contrast, I redesigned the AIE to use the space more efficiently. I also numbered the questions to make it easier to navigate. An example of the comparison between the original version (Figure 15) and the revised versions (Figure 16) can be found below. The revised AIE can be found in Appendix 3 (in English) and 4 (in Mandarin).

1. THE ENCOUNTER

Title

Give the encounter a name which says something about it.

Description

What happened when you met this person/these people?

Time

When did it happen?

Location

Where did it happen? What were you doing there?

Was it... (please tick one or more)

study –

leisure –

on holiday –

at work –

at school –

other –

Figure 15:

The Original Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

1. THE ENCOUNTER

① **Title:** Please give the encounter a name
(e.g., "Lost a suitcase", "Group discussion", "One volunteering experience")

② **Time:** When did it happen?

③ **Location:** Where did it happen?

④ **Background:** What were you doing there?

Figure 16:

The Adapted Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

In addition, I replaced the IE examples given in the AIE with ones more relevant to CSS' sojourning experiences in the UK. For instance, a given example was 'an English teenager met a foreigner for the first time in Turkey'. I changed examples as such into encounters more relevant to CSS' daily life, such as taking international flights, sharing accommodation, and having seminar group discussions. I then translated the revised version into Mandarin so participants could choose either English or Mandarin version.

In the end, I collected 17 AIEs, which provided me with rich data about participants' intercultural experiences and helped me revise my interview questions to have good discussions.

One-to-one Semi-structured Interviews

As a widely used ethnographic research method, interviewing refers to 'verbal interchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person' (Dunn, 2005, p.79). I adopted one-to-one semi-structured interviews in my research because this method enabled me to collect information about participants' background information, social practices, experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). In addition, semi-structured interviews allowed research flexibility so I could choose a way that best suits participants and situations while focusing on the themes (Ganassin, 2017). Specifically, I prepared an interview guide with a list of

open-ended questions that mainly covered: 1. participants' WeChat use; 2. WeChat's influence on interviewees' sojourning experiences in the UK; 3. how interviewees construct their IE experiences with their WeChat connections (see Appendix 5 for a full list of questions in the interview schedule). The three parts are designed to answer three RQs respectively.

I conducted both in-person and online interviews. In-person interviewing requires somewhere free of disturbance and within participants' reach so I chose my office on campus as the venue. Two participants chose to have the interview online via Zoom to avoid commuting and to ensure their safety amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Most interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour, and interviewing yielded 800 minutes of audio recording and equivalent transcripts. A partial interview example is provided in Appendix 7.

Collecting WeChat Screenshots

To collect visual data to support what participants talked about in the interviews, I encouraged all participants to submit three WeChat screenshots. In the beginning, I aimed to collect participants' chat history about how participants and their WeChat friends talked about their IEs, but I noticed that most of them had either lost their chat history or had the discussion via WeChat calls, so they could not submit corresponding data. Moreover, participants who kept their chat history expressed reluctance to share relevant screenshots, as they viewed their WeChat interactions with close ones as highly private. Because of the above restrictions, I did not have access to their WeChat data and could not choose what to include or exclude as the research data.

Due to concerns about their own and WeChat interlocutors' privacy, WeChat screenshots became sensitive data - data with intensely personal experience that 'potentially poses a substantial threat' to those who involves in it (Lee, 1993, p.4). To minimise the distress to interviewees when collecting such sensitive data, I acknowledged the importance of respecting participants in collective sensitive data (Bastida et al., 2010) and spent time with them to establish rapport and gain trust. More importantly, I emphasised the significance of ethical considerations (to be elaborated in 3.4.4 *Ethical Issues*), especially in making cautious ethical decisions in day-to-day research practices to protect participants' well-being and avoid harm or risks (Kubanyiova, 2008).

Upon further consideration, I made purposeful decisions to grant participants full autonomy in deciding whether to submit and what to submit. To be specific, following the interviews, participants were encouraged to submit three WeChat screenshots, containing content that they found relevant to topics discussed and felt comfortable to share. Consequently, I collected 80 WeChat screenshots in

total. The content of these screenshots varied, covering participants' chat histories, WeChat official accounts they follow, and WeChat moments. All WeChat screenshots were anonymised.

Research Field Notes

Keeping field notes is an 'essential component' of robust qualitative research, a 'standardised criteria' that is central to ethnographic study, and a crucial part of improving the depth of qualitative findings (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018, p.381). Acknowledging field notes as a useful tool to record the research observations, self-reflections, analytical thoughts (Jackson, 2015), and inevitable contextual information (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018), I kept the research field notes during different stages of data collection, especially during the pilot study when many changes were recorded and adapted. My field notes taking followed the guides proposed by Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018), including the geographic setting of the study (e.g., the briefing meeting and interview venue), participants' overarching verbal and non-verbal behaviours, changes to the data collection tools (e.g., AIE forms and interview guide), as well as my critical reflection. I kept very rich field notes during the pilot study, which guided me to develop my research reflexivity (see 3.4.6) and improved my methodological rigour. Due to the heavy workload and tight schedule during the main study, I decided to focus on collecting the more significant research data - the AIE, interviews, and the WeChat screenshots. Despite this, I managed to capture the main contextual information and key self-reflections.

In section 3.3, I have outlined the particularity of CSS participants studying CCC compared with those from other disciplines. Building on that, I will explore how their unique academic background has influenced their engagement during the data collection process.

First, participants' CCC background eased their difficulty in completing the AIE task and ensured the high quality of data collected. Attributed to previous CCC training, the CSS participants demonstrated competences in completing the task, including understanding the concept of IE, showing structured approaches to describe one IE experience and applying retrospective analytical skills. Of the 17 AIE submissions from the CCC participants, none exhibited common pitfalls observed in those without training, such as superficial comparisons of UK-China differences instead of more specific encounter experiences between individuals, or underdeveloped reflections. Consequently, CCC participants contributed to a consistently high standard of data quality.

Furthermore, the CCC participants engaged with exceptional critical depth during follow-up interviews. When discussing key concepts like *intercultural communication* and *IE*, many explicitly referred to systematic CCC training they obtained. For instance, when asked to define 'intercultural communication', Hall addressed how the CCC training had changed her perception fundamentally:

在我开始正式学习之前，我对跨文化的理解其实还是比较片面的。因为说到文化，我们一般就会去想一些比较大的文化-国家与国家之间。但实际上是来了之后进行了深入的学习之后，你就会发现他甚至都不需要深入学习，一个简单的 introduction 它就可以告诉你跨文化它可以是跨不同的性别，不同的专业领域，各种方面都有可能，不同年龄，这些都算是跨文化。

Before I began formal studies, my understanding of intercultural communication was rather narrow. When discussing culture, we often associate it with broad, national-level differences. However, after engaging in deeper learning here (doing the CCC course) —or even a brief introduction to the subject—you'll find that intercultural communication also encompass differences in gender, professional fields, age groups, and other dimensions, all of which fall under the umbrella of intercultural communication.

Similarly, the majority of interviewees demonstrated how their discipline-specific academic background had allowed them to transcend anecdotal accounts of their UK experiences. They displayed theoretically informed reflexivity, demonstrating intercultural awareness, cultural hybridity, and identity negotiation processes, which will be more explicitly discussed in the findings (Chapters 4-6).

3.4.3 Data Analysis

The data collection process yielded rich qualitative data, including 17 AIE forms, 800-minute interview audio and equivalent transcripts, approximately 80 WeChat screenshots, and about 50 pages of research field notes. The overview of the whole data set is demonstrated in Table 2. Overall, textual data – including interview transcripts and the textual content extracted from WeChat screenshots- were central in addressing all RQs, while the multimodal elements found in WeChat data (e.g., images, emojis) provided supplementary contextual cues (see details in Section 3.5 *Pilot Study*). To reconcile the interplay between these two types of textual data and the complexity of the visual-textual components, thematic analysis was employed meanwhile integrating principles of Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis (TVTA) (Trombeta & Cox, 2022), a hybrid approach that ensures methodological rigour by enabling triangulation between textual themes and visual nuances. Content Analysis was adopted on the AIEs to provide background information for the interview data regarding RQ3. TA was applied to the field notes. In this section, I will focus on data sets that contributed to answering the questions.

	Data Collection Methods	Data Type	Data Analysis Methods	Functions
1	Pre-interview Task	17 The AIE	Content Analysis	Provide background information for RQ3
2	Semi-structured Interviews	800mins recording and corresponding transcripts	Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis (TVTA)	Obtain themes to answer RQ 1, 2 & 3 Triangulate themes obtained from the interview data to answer RQ 1, 2 & 3
3	WeChat Screenshots	80 screenshots		
4	Research Field Notes	50 Pages	Thematic Analysis (TA)	Revise the main research after the pilot study and document research reflectivity

Table 2:

Overview of Research Data Set

Thematic Analysis of Interviews and WeChat Screenshots: Integrating TVTA Principles

Though combining different data types can enrich research data and enhance the rigour of qualitative research (Booton, 2018), very few previous studies provided detailed methodological guidance (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). After thoroughly reviewing the existing literature, I have decided to employ thematic analysis while adopting the principles of the TVTA methodological framework developed by Trombeta and Cox (2022). Such a hybrid approach best suits my research since it has its unique strength in collaboratively analysing different data sets, allowing me to triangulate findings revealed from interviews and WeChat screenshots.

According to Trombeta and Cox (2022), the TVTA consists of three stages: 1) analysing textual data through TA; 2) analysing the visual data in conjunction with interviews; and 3) integrating the findings and reporting interrelationships between the two data types. The first stage of TA is the process of identifying, presenting, and interpreting ‘themes’ (patterns of meaning) within qualitative data (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2012; Clark & Braun, 2017), which has been explored repeatedly by

qualitative researchers. The second stage was claimed to be the novelty of the TVTA (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). With TVTA, researchers can triangulate research findings by detecting similarities/overlaps, differences/contradictions, and supplementation between textual and visual data (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). Finally, textual and visual data are carefully selected to complement each other and then findings are reported

I critically adapted the principles of the TVTA framework to account for methodological differences between my study and Trombeta and Cox's prior research. While both studies focused on participant-generated data, Trombeta and Cox (2022) adopted the photo-elicitation approach, asking participants to create photographs and then using the photos as prompts during interviews to evoke participants' memories, emotions, or reflections. In contrast, the screenshots were collected after the interviews. Thus, though they closely aligned with the interview content, the screenshots were not integrated into the interview process. Moreover, Trombeta and Cox's data were generated particularly for research purposes under the researchers' instructions, while the obtained WeChat screenshots were naturally occurring data that reflected participants' authentic WeChat engagement. Specifically, the interviews captured participants' reported WeChat behaviours and perceptions, while the screenshots demonstrated their actual WeChat engagement. Additionally, as opposed to Trombeta and Cox's emphasis on visual analysis, my research prioritised the textual content within screenshots, treating visual elements as supplements rather than primary analytical foci since these elements failed to provide meaningful answers to the research questions (see elaborations in Section 3.5 *Pilot Study*). Given these divergences, I employed TA but applied the three-step TVTA framework flexibly. A detailed explanation of the practical application of these three TVTA stages will be presented below.

Stage One – Thematic Analysis (TA) of Interview Transcripts

TA has been proven useful for examining the perspectives of individuals, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating insights (Nowell et al., 2017). Moreover, TA has great flexibility and accessibility, two key features that benefited my research. As the most prominent feature of TA, flexibility means this analytic method could be adopted in different academic fields of qualitative research, in answering different kinds of RQs, for sample size that is either big or small, various data collection methods and approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Such flexibility not only allowed me to capture themes from the raw interview data to answer RQs but more importantly, it enabled me to revise my RQs to align with the emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Accessibility provided beginner researchers like me with a very practical guide to follow. To be specific, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) underlined the six interwoven steps of the TA: 1) familiarizing

with the data; 2) generating initial *codes* (the smallest analysis units that capture interesting features of the data that are relevant to answering the research question); 3) generating *themes* (a shared idea or larger patterns of meaning composed of codes); 4) reviewing potential themes; 5) defining and naming themes; then 6) producing the report to answer research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

I first applied six systematic stages of TA to the interview transcripts to retrieve themes and sub-themes. I started by listening to the interview recordings multiple times and did the transcription manually to familiarise myself with the interview data. In addition, I read and re-read the interview transcripts numerous times, which helped me identify and highlight information that could be relevant to my RQs. Then I used NVivo, a software for qualitative research to generate initial codes. This involves going systematically through each data item to highlight excerpts that seemed informative to RQs and provided codes, namely brief descriptions but with sufficient details. As advised by Braun and Clarke (2012), I explored both semantic (descriptive) and latent (conceptual and interpretative) codes in this process. After coding the whole data set, I combined codes with shared meanings to identify sub-themes and themes, namely the aggregated patterns that occur repeatedly across the data. Identifying repetition is important in this stage since ‘the more the same concept occurs in a text, the more likely it is a theme’ (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.89). In addition, I drew on several scrutiny techniques Ryan and Bernard (2003) proposed, including making systematic comparisons across data to look for similarities and differences, looking for missing data to discover topics that participants avoided, and searching for metaphors and analogies to highlight cultural connotations that represent participants’ experiences, thoughts, and social actions. After generating a group of candidate themes, I applied Patton’s (1990) due criteria to review and finalise them, namely internal heterogeneity and external heterogeneity. The final themes entailed internal heterogeneity within themes, namely each theme was supported by appropriate and sufficient supporting codes and raw data. Meanwhile, there is external heterogeneity, namely clear differences between themes. These criteria also facilitated my interpretation of the data, based on how I defined each theme.

This research adopted a mix of inductive and deductive approaches in TA. Being described as ‘data-driven’, the inductive approach produces codes that are reflective of the data, while the deductive or ‘theory-driven’ approach is based on a conceptual framework or pre-conceived theories (Byrne, 2022). A combination of both approaches was significant since ‘it is arguably not possible to conduct an exclusive deductive...or inductive analysis’ (Byrne, 2022, p. 1397). More importantly, as opposed to restricting the codes to features of the pre-existing frames, the inductive techniques enabled me to convey participant meanings by giving a detailed description of the dataset (Braun & Clark, 2012). In

addition, the inductive approach aligned with the constructive epistemology stance (Byrne, 2022), a position held in this research. Meanwhile, a degree of deductive analysis was employed since the theories, especially the acculturation and ICC theories that guided the design of the RQs and themes generation, were highly relevant to current conceptions in literature.

Stage Two – Analyse WeChat Screenshots Integrated with Interviews

Trombeta and Cox (2022) proposed four guiding questions to analyse the collaboration between visual and textual datasets - identifying similarities, differences, and how they complement each other. These four questions are: 1) what is in the visual data that supports/reinforces information obtained from the interview data? 2) what is in the visual data that contradicts the information obtained from the interview data? 3) What is in the interviews that is absent in the visual data? 4) what is in the visual data that is absent in the interviews? Adapting from their framework, I asked four similar questions to compare my two data sources, reframing them as: 1) Alignment - How do WeChat screenshots align with interview findings? 2) Contradiction - How do screenshots contradict interview findings? 3) Interview gaps - What interview patterns are absent in WeChat screenshots? 4) Screenshot gaps - What WeChat screenshot patterns are absent in interviews?

While Trombeta and Cox (2022) did not provide actionable methodological guidelines, I developed step-by-step analytical procedures to integrate WeChat screenshot analysis with interview data. Firstly, I familiarised myself with the WeChat screenshots. I immersed myself in the data by anonymising them, which involved extensive picture editing to anonymise usernames, addresses, account numbers, and profile pictures. Subsequently, I listed the codes, sub-themes, and themes obtained from the interview TA, and then manually applied the four aforementioned questions to the screenshots.

For example, the screenshot submitted by my participant Zoe (Figure 17) showed how Jade, her friend and also a CSS peer, forwarded two Red Note (a popular Chinese social media and e-commerce platform among the young) posts in a small WeChat group with only three members. Both posts were about sojourning in the UK, with one regarding CSS peer interaction and another on restaurant recommendation. After applying the four analytic questions to this screenshot, I discovered a lot of similarities/reinforcements with various aspects of the interview findings. Specifically, the screenshot demonstrated how Zoe used the WeChat group, a popular WeChat feature, to communicate. Moreover, the screenshot showed that simplified Chinese characters were used, displaying participants' language choices. These findings echoed interview findings that answer RQ1 (How do participants use WeChat in their everyday sojourning lives). Moreover, the screenshot illustrated that WeChat helped CSS to

connect with CSS peers and provided them with information and entertainment, echoing sub-themes that answer RQ2 (What is the role of WeChat on participants' interactional, sociocultural, and psychological acculturation).



Figure 17:
One of Zoe's WeChat Screenshots

As demonstrated above, the analysis of Figure 17 highlights distinct dimensions of the TA, demonstrating the correlation between WeChat screenshots and interview findings (a one-to-many relationship). Following the same methodology, screenshots were systematically analysed and categorised into corresponding interview codes and sub-themes.

Stage Three – Reporting Findings

The final stage is reporting, which involves synthesising interconnections (alignments, divergence, and complementarity) between findings of different data types (Trombetta & Cox, 2022). I systematically compared themes revealed from the interviews and WeChat screenshots to assess finding consistency – namely whether participants’ self-reported practices matched their WeChat behaviours.

In general, findings revealed that WeChat screenshots predominantly reinforced the interview accounts with occasional contradictions that were likely attributable to memory lapses regarding interaction details. Support for interview findings varied, with screenshots strongly supporting high-frequency themes and sub-themes (e.g., interacting in Mandarin) but limited to supporting less prominent ones (e.g., interacting in foreign languages). To enhance methodological transparency and reporting efficacy, I selected representative screenshots that reinforced key TA insights during data reporting, thereby enriching visual appeal and analytical depth.

Content Analysis on the AIEs

The AIEs provided background information about participants’ IE experiences which was significant in answering the RQ3. I conducted content analysis to summarise key information in the AIEs. Content analysis refers to a systematic analysis approach that reduces ‘phenomena or events into defined categories so as to better analyse and interpret them’ (Harwood & Garry, 2003, p.479). Content analysis is used interchangeably with TA by some researchers for their similarities in searching for patterns or trends and their differences can be vague (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). However, in this study content analysis is viewed differently from the TA for its emphasis on quantification of data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Namely, in CA, the frequent occurrence of a pattern signifies its importance. In addition, in contrast to TA which explores a combination of latent and semantic meanings, content analysis can focus either on semantic meanings to explore categories or on latent meanings to develop themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

In this study, the AIEs were not collected to answer the RQs directly but to facilitate the interviews and supplement the interview data regarding participants’ IE experience. Therefore, I applied content analysis to summarise key information participants shared, which is different from many previous studies on the AIEs that adopted the TA to explore participants’ IE experiences and personal development. Specifically, I explored the semantic meanings and categorised the content in the AIEs according to the frequency of its occurrence. For example, I explored IE topics and categorised the most frequently occurring topics. This information, along with other categories (e.g., IE

background), was summarised to provide an overview of the shared IE experiences (to be elaborated in 6.2.1) where the quantification of data is explicit. The findings of the content analysis on the AIEs offered clear and concise background information, setting the stage for an analysis of WeChat's role in their IE sense-making.

3.4.4 Ethical Issues

In all stages of my research, I was fully aware that as a researcher, I have the responsibility to warrant research ethics and transparency while exercising power in voicing and representing participants (Ganassin, 2020). To research ethically, I adhered to and integrated 'macroethics' (general principles of conduct established by professional codes of ethics) and 'microethics' (everyday ethics that arise from contextualised research dilemmas) (Kubanyiova, 2008).

To warrant macroethics, I embraced procedural ethics in seeking ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee and followed well-established ethical principles of conduct in applied linguistic studies. The ethical review guided me to create, distribute, and collect participants' consent forms cautiously, design RQs ethically, develop data collection methods and tools responsibly, store and disseminate the research data prudently, and foresee potential ethical issues through developing ethical awareness. Specifically, I designed the information sheet (Appendix 1) and consent form (Appendix 2) for potential participants, through which I informed them of the ethical principles regarding anonymity and confidentiality, the right to refuse to answer any questions or provide any information, as well as the right to withdraw from the research at any time of the research without giving any explanation. Moreover, I prioritised protecting participants' well-being and avoiding harm or risks (Kubanyiova, 2008), the two most salient ethical criteria in studies that involve humans. This was particularly important in my research considering that the data collection was amid the COVID-19 pandemic. To protect participants from health hazards, I provided participants the option of having online interviews and took lateral flow tests regularly before in-person interviews. During the interview, I provided interviewees with anti-bacterial wipes and face-covering. Following macroethical principles guided my research.

To make cautious ethical decisions in day-to-day situated research practices (Kubanyiova, 2008), I negotiated macroethics with microethics that deal with 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p.506). Specifically, I addressed the emotions and solidarity of participants in specific situations and developed the ability to negotiate both macroethics and microethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). For example, I designed the research methods carefully to minimise negative consequences on participants which aligned macroethics, but in practice, I noticed that some

seemingly ‘harmless’ research methods could incur participants’ negative feelings if not handled with care. This was evident in interviews when several demonstrated negative feelings when talking about their IE experiences. For instance, when being asked ‘What could you do differently in situations like this?’, my observations on the participant’s non-verbal cues informed me that instead of taking the question as a starting point to prepare for the future, one participant took the question as a criticism for not handling the situation well enough. Thus, I changed the question to ‘What would you suggest people do in situations like this?’. The change enabled participants to detach from their own experiences to release discomfort and embarrassment. Changes as such were not made based on my intuitive responses, but on purposeful decisions after being responsive to non-verbal indications, prioritising participants’ dignity and well-being (Kubanyiova, 2008), and ensuring interaction in a human, nonexploitative way (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

3.4.5 Research Multilingually

This research drew on different language resources (e.g., English and Mandarin), making language a fundamental element. To make clear what language choices were made, at what stage of the research, by and with whom, and why, I drew on the concept and methodological framework of *Research Multilingually*, which refers to ‘how researchers conceptualise, understand, and make choices about generating, analysing, interpreting and reporting data when more than one language is involved’ (Holmes et al., 2013, p.297).

Research Multilingually addresses the importance of realising different language possibilities in the research process, considering these possibilities and particularities, and making informed and purposeful decisions (Ganassin & Holmes, 2020; Holmes et al., 2013; Holmes et al., 2022). This is a non-linear but complex cyclical process impacted by two dimensions, namely research spaces where the research is conducted and research relationships that are enacted within these spaces (Ganassin & Holmes, 2020; Holmes et al., 2013; Holmes et al., 2022). To make my language choices transparent, I will discuss how these two dimensions of research multilingually were relevant to my research.

Research spaces involve the researched phenomenon (what is being investigated), the research context (where), researcher resources (e.g., knowledge, skills, and linguistic resources), and the representational possibilities (where and how can the research be disseminated) (Holmes et al., 2015; Ganassin; 2020; Holmes et al., 2022). My researched phenomenon is the CSS’ WeChat use while they study in the UK, with most participants speaking both Mandarin, certain Chinese varieties (e.g., Cantonese or Sichuan dialects), and English though their proficiency varies. The research was conducted in an Anglophone university, which is multicultural and multilingual, but English is

recognised as the academic language and lingua franca. In terms of the researcher's linguistic resources, I speak Mandarin, Shandong Dialect (a northern Chinese dialect in Shandong), and fluent English. I have more than three years of English language teaching experience and two years of English-Mandarin translation experience, which makes me comfortable enough to navigate between these two languages and translate for this study when necessary. I also speak Italian (upper intermediate), a bit Thai (elementary), and Japanese (elementary), though these were not relevant in this research. Regarding the representational possibilities, my thesis needs to be written and delivered in English according to the conventions of a British university.

Research relationality concerns how different languages function in maintaining multiple relationships (between the researcher and the researched, as well as various stakeholders) in the research space (Holmes et al., 2013; Holmes et al., 2022). The relational aspect has a profound impact on the representation of voices, building trust, and negotiating power relations (Holmes et al., 2015; Ganassin; 2020; Holmes et al., 2022). The relationality in this study primarily involves me, the researcher, and the participants. Considering participants and I shared a similar language repertoire (Mandarin and English), I foresaw the opportunities and challenges of making different language choices. For example, adopting Mandarin helped me build rapport with the participants, enabling them to see me as an 'insider'. This benefited me in recruiting participants and collecting more in-depth information in data collection, as well as in maintaining connections with many of them after data collection was done. Meanwhile, using Mandarin in data collection would require accurate translation, which added to my workload since I did not have funding for a translator. Collecting English data could avoid such issues, but many participants might not be proficient enough to express themselves fully, which would hazard the richness of the data. After realising and considering these two language choices, I decided to give them full autonomy in making their own language choices, which could empower participants and neutralise power imbalances between the researcher and the researched. Consequently, though participants' language choices were not always consistent in different stages of the data collection, approximately 70% of the data was in Mandarin and the rest was in English. According to participants' explanation, reasons for choosing Mandarin focused on its status as a shared language and '母语 (mother tongue)' as well as enabling time and energy efficiency when expressing ideas or going through written files. Reasons for choosing English include confidence in their English proficiency or eagerness to practice English.

In addition, sharing the same language repertoire made it possible for me and my participants to 'code switch' during the interview, namely 'going back and forth from one language to another'

(García & Lin, 2017, p.118). For example, there were situations in which interviewees could not find the exact words to express themselves or used Chinese-influenced English which might be difficult for non-Mandarin speakers to understand. In cases like these, code-switching helped us to understand each other and continue the conversation flow naturally without having it disrupted, as demonstrated in the following two excerpts:

Excerpt 1:

Matthew: I think WeChat also has a picture or video sharing function, which is called ‘朋友圈’, but I don't know what that in English was...

The researcher: Moments.

Excerpt 2:

Phoebe: (I use WeChat) And also to communicate with my teachers.

The researcher: Middle school (teachers)?

Phoebe: 应该是高中.

The researcher: Okay, high school.

Since I could navigate freely in both languages, I analysed raw data without translating all into English to be time and energy efficient. Aligning with the conventions of a British university, I used mainly English in the interpretation, reporting (e.g., to supervisors and panelists), and dissemination (such as conference presentations or less formal meetings, causal talks). Meanwhile, I included the original quotations in Chinese characters (the written form) before presenting the English translation to provide a ‘faithful representation of participants’ voices’ and engage with linguistically diverse readers (Ganassin & Holmes, 2020). Specifically, for data that are in Mandarin (both textual and visual data), I represented the original interview excerpts and WeChat screenshots before providing an English translation.

3.4.6 Reflexivity

According to Grenfell and Pahl (2019, p.19), reflexivity is akin to the concept of ‘reflection’ and ‘reflective’ represents ‘the way that a person’s thoughts and ideas’ integrate into their knowledge and behaviour. Consoli and Ganassin (2023, p.1) provided a more comprehensive definition regarding research reflexivity, referring it to ‘the sets of dispositions and activities by which researchers locate themselves within the research processes whilst also attending to how their presence, values, beliefs, knowledge, and personal and professional histories shape their research spaces, relationships, and outcomes’. There are two interconnected dimensions of researcher reflexivity: *prospective reflexivity* which concerns the effect of the whole-person-researcher on the research; and *retrospective reflexivity*

which regards the effect of the research on the researcher (Attia & Edge, 2017; Consoli & Ganassin, 2023).

I am fully aware that as the researcher, my origins, values, beliefs, personal and professional experiences, and ‘intellectual bias’ were embedded in the content and process of my research (Blackman, 2007; Dean, 2017; Consoli & Ganassin, 2023). However, in contrast to notions that researchers should convey ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutral validity’, I embraced my researcher humanness and research reflexivity for their potential to enhance the credibility of qualitative findings (Berger, 2013). My position was based on current literature (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023; Young et al., 2022), which values and gives prominence to the transformational power of reflexivity in domains of intercultural communication and multilingualism where my research was based. In the following part, I will discuss two interconnected dimensions of reflexivity: *prospective reflexivity* and *retrospective reflexivity* (Attia & Edge, 2017; Consoli & Ganassin, 2023).

Prospective Reflexivity

In this part, I will provide an honest presentation of how my positionality shaped my research process and facilitated the complexity of data analysis and presentation.

Being Chinese international students, Mainlanders, WeChat users, Mandarin speakers, and ‘outsiders’ of British society, I shared complex identities with my participants. This enabled me to approach participants as an ‘insider’ and helped me bond quickly with them in the recruitment stage. Such shared lingual, cultural, and sojourning backgrounds also benefited me in understanding meanings conveyed in the data collection, which was partially illustrated in my competences to research multilingually. For instance, I was able to engage with participants through code-switching when they struggled to express themselves. More importantly, I was able to understand and highlight social and cultural connotations indicated by participants, facilitating rich findings that emerged from the complexity of interpretation and analysis (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023). For example, in one of the visual data Pheobe submitted, she and her friend talked about a small picture she shared (see Figure 18). The picture was so small that it could be easily neglected by those who were not familiar with Chinese culture. Having rich social and cultural knowledge, I was able to acknowledge the importance of it. Specifically, the picture (see the zoomed-out image in Figure 19) showed a whole set of Spring Festival couplets she put on her door during the Chinese New Year, a custom to express good wishes for the coming New Year. Moreover, the calligraphy on the couplets was handwritten, showing great effort and profound calligraphy skills. Therefore, I could interpret that Phoebe was embracing and celebrating her culture (both festival and calligraphy art) and cultural identity with her friend on WeChat.

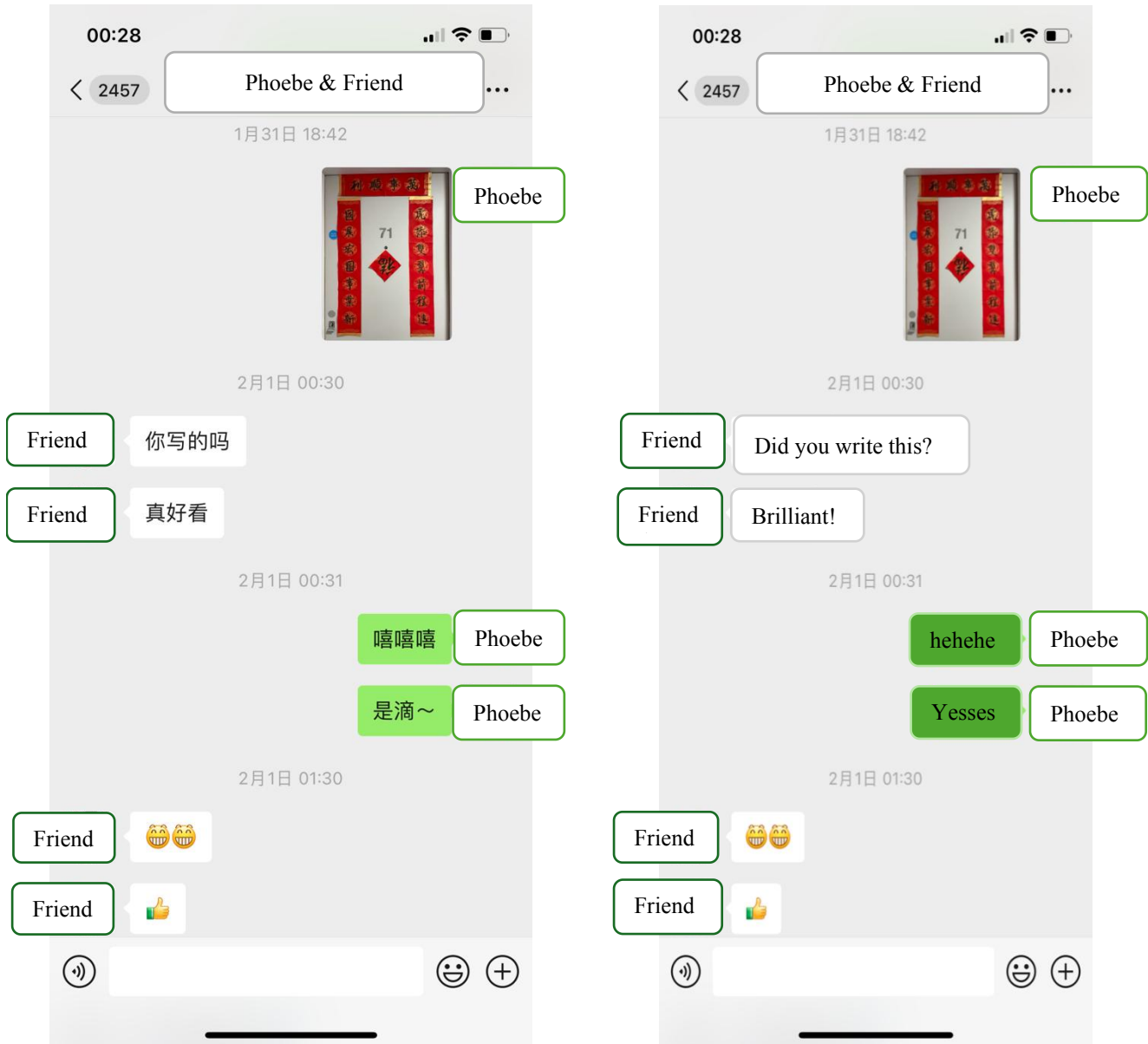


Figure 18:
One of the WeChat Screenshots Phoebe Submitted



Figure 19:

Handwritten Calligraphy - Chinese New Year Couplets

Retrospective Reflexivity

Retrospective reflexivity made me aware that the research changed me as a researcher. Specifically, I realised that the complexity of my identities transcended being merely an ‘insider’ of my participants but also the complexity of being a PhD student, beginner researcher, and author whose readers might not be familiar with Chinese culture and WeChat. This reflexive process inspired me to produce more inclusive research.

In the early stages of data reporting and dissemination, I was not aware that my positionality shaped the researcher-researched dynamic. I also neglected the necessity to provide certain key

information, taking for granted my position of an CSS ‘insider’ and assuming shared knowledge and understanding from readers. For example, in an earlier draft of one finding chapter, I did not explain what WeChat features participants use and how, questions that were important to answer RQ1 but were neglected. This was challenged by one of the supervisors who did not use WeChat, which facilitated my reflexivity in my positionality and consequently helped me produce more inclusive work.

3.4.7 Research Evaluation

A number of researchers (Guba & Lincoln, 2001; Lincoln & Guba 1985; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2002) emphasised the importance of research evaluation in ensuring the quality of a qualitative study but they failed to establish any consensus on quality criteria. Some researchers (Long & Johnson 2000; Morse et al. 2002) argued that the same criteria adopted in quantitative research could be applied to qualitative studies, while others (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2002) questioned the appropriateness of any predetermined criteria since research evaluation could be subjective, depending on individual researcher’s judgment based on their insights and experiences. In this study, I took the third position, namely, a systematic and rigorous approach is needed in research evaluation, but the criteria should be different from judging quantitative research due to philosophical and methodological differences (Rolfe, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 2001; Lincoln & Guba 1985). I draw on the four criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985, 2001) to judge the rigour of this study. Based on the conventional criteria commonly used in quantitative studies, Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed four respective parallel criteria of trustworthiness in judging qualitatively, namely *credibility* (analogue to *internal validity*), *transferability* (analogue to *external validity*), *dependability* (relates to *reliability*), and *confirmability* (relates to *objectivity*). Thus, I will discuss how these criteria were adopted to increase the trustworthiness of my research.

Credibility criteria evaluate the truthfulness of the research findings. Lincoln and Guba (2001) proposed different ways to increase credibility, including prolonged engagement with the phenomena and participants, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checks. Lincoln and Guba’s (2001) criteria guided me in revising my research design and methods to achieve credibility. Firstly, I had prolonged engagement with my participants to have a persistent observation of them. I engaged myself in the participants’ learning and living environment (e.g., in lecture and seminar rooms, and on social events) for a long time before I reached out and recruited them. Then, I spent a long time with each participant so I could have more in-depth observation of their sojourning experiences. Moreover, engaging with them on WeChat expanded my understanding of their WeChat use, which provided me with opportunities to identify ‘characteristics

and elements in the situation that were most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued' (Guba, 1985, p.304). Secondly, I used different sources or research methods to triangulate the data. In addition to verbal (interviews) data, I collected textual data (the AIE and the field notes) and visual data (WeChat screenshots) to triangulate my account, making sure the findings were rich and comprehensive. Thirdly, I adjusted my research design and research process through both respondent checks and peer debriefing. Though I did not conduct a second round of interviews, I updated some of my participants on the findings of my research and they provided me insights on the data interpretation. Moreover, I reported my preliminary findings at the school conferences where many of my participants presented. They exchanged opinions with me informally, which helped me revisit some of my findings. I also received suggestions from peer researchers, such as my PhD peers, supervisors, panellists, and professors at the same school through both formal reports and informal conversations. In addition, I attended multiple regional, national, and international conferences to present my research, which helped me gain a better understanding of relevant theories and data analysis.

Transferability places attention on transferring research findings to other contexts and it can be achieved by providing thick descriptions of data so others can learn more about the context and make judgements about whether the findings apply to other contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 2001). Considering the sample size of participants (17) doing a specific course (CCC), the findings of my research may not apply to all CSS studying abroad, or CSS studying in the UK more specifically. However, based on the rich description of my participants and research contexts provided in this thesis, other researchers can make judgments about whether the findings discovered in this study will apply to their participants.

Dependability entails research findings could be replicated in the same context, using the same research methods, and with the same participants, while confirmability stresses the objectivity of quantitative studies to ensure the findings are 'the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants' instead of preferences of the researcher' (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). Dependability is often criticised for being not feasible since with the ever-changing, multiple, and constructed nature of reality, reaching the same findings is problematic (Ganassin, 2017; Rolfe, 2004). Guba and Lincoln (2005) explained that considering the close ties between credibility and dependability, achieving the former entails the latter. In section 3.4.6, I have explained the endeavour I made to achieve credibility. In addition to that, I adopted the 'prototype model' (Shenton, 2004) to demonstrate the rigour of my research, which is to provide a detailed description of the research design, and detailed data collection process, as well as the reflective appraisal of the research. These were all addressed in detail in this chapter. Such detailed methodological description could also facilitate confirmability, allowing readers to trace the research

step-by-step (Shenton, 2004) so they could check the dependability of an empirical study. By doing so, others can determine whether the methodological decisions were suitable for the aim of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 2001) and whether the truthfulness of the research could be accepted (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Shenton, 2004).

3.5 Pilot study

A well-conducted pilot study encourages methodological rigour and improves the quality and efficiency of the main study (Lancaster et al., 2004). Therefore, I conducted a pilot study to ensure the rigour of my study protocol, test the suitability of the data collection tools, and familiarise myself with the recruitment, data collection, and initial data analysis process.

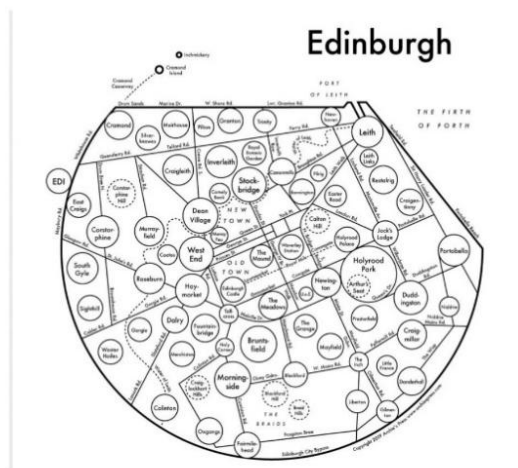
3.5.1 Overview of the Pilot Study

The pilot study took place from February to March 2022. There were two participants in the pilot study, Vera and Aquarius. They were both friends of mine, which means we had a very good rapport. In addition, from initial contact, Vera, a very fluent English speaker and experienced translator, revealed that she would love to use English in data collection while Aquarius said she preferred Mandarin. Hence, a pilot study with them enabled me to test the quality of two versions of all relevant files (information sheet, consent form, AIE, and the interview schedule) and then make revisions accordingly.

I familiarised myself with the data collection process through the pilot study. Aligning with the design of the main research, the pilot study is qualitative ethnography based on a pre-interview task (the AIE), the semi-structured interview, and the submission of WeChat screenshots. I kept very detailed field notes to record the process of the pilot study, documenting and reflecting on what worked and what did not, and how to make improvements. Specifically, I started the pilot study with a research briefing meeting with each participant. We met in a quiet local café so they felt more relaxed and comfortable sharing their ideas freely. During the meeting, I talked them through the information sheet and the consent form. Both participants asked several detailed questions about the research. These were addressed before they signed the consent forms. Afterwards, I presented them with the AIE form and asked them to fill out one IE experience that fits the following two criteria: 1) the IE happened during their study in the UK; 2) the participants shared and discussed this experience with friends or family members on WeChat. After the meeting, they were given one week to fill out the AIE in their own time and then send it back to me. However, the AIE form initially submitted by one of the participants documented an encounter that happened several years ago when she was working in the US, which did not fit the criteria. Moreover, in the latter half of the AIE, she talked broadly about her general

intercultural experiences instead of focusing on one IE. She was very kind and spent extra time to re-submit the form before we conducted the interview, but we had to postpone the interview because of it. In comparison, the semi-structured interviews went smoothly. Both interviews lasted about an hour and participants shared many insightful ideas. The pre-designed interview schedule was proven to be clear and succinct, leaving no space for confusion. After the interview, I asked them to submit three WeChat screenshots that they felt were relevant to the interview. Though participants were aware that their privacy and confidentiality would be guaranteed, they still showed reluctance. They submitted some screenshots after I reassured them that I would anonymise all screenshots I receive and then send the anonymised ones back to them for their approval to use.

The initial data analysis during the pilot study also enhanced my data analysis skills. During the pilot study, I learned how to use NVivo, a digital tool for TA. After transcribing the interview recordings, I used NVivo for initial analysis and was able to find several key themes to answer the RQs. In terms of the WeChat screenshots, I tried to conduct Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), an inter-disciplinary approach that understands discourses to be more than about linguist forms (Brown & Yule, 1983; Jewitt, 2015; Fairclough, 1992). Specifically, in addition to linguistic elements in WeChat screenshots, I tried to use MDA to investigate semiotic resources such as emojis, stickers, images, and choices of colours. However, I found that most screenshots were heavy on text and the limited semiotics were not very relevant to my RQs regarding WeChat but more related to participants' in-person experiences and personal preferences. For example, one of the WeChat screenshots Vera submitted was about an article she wrote and posted regarding her trip to Edinburgh (see Figure 20). The figure provided us with a glance at her sojourning experience, but analysing the Edinburgh map print she downloaded from the internet could not answer any of my RQs regarding WeChat. Similarly, in one of the screenshots Aquarius shared (see Figure 21), there were two pictures she took during her selective photography course with the theme of 'Spring'. Again, applying MDA on these semiotic features on the campus during the spring could not help me address any RQs. Thus, after several tryouts, I discarded using MDA in analysing the screenshots.



(本图来源于网络)

A classic line in Roman Holiday:

《罗马假日》里有一句经典台词：

You can either read or
travel, either your soul or
your body must be on the
way. 你要么读书要么旅行，
灵魂和身体必须有一个在路
上！

Figure 20:

One of the Screenshots Vera Shared

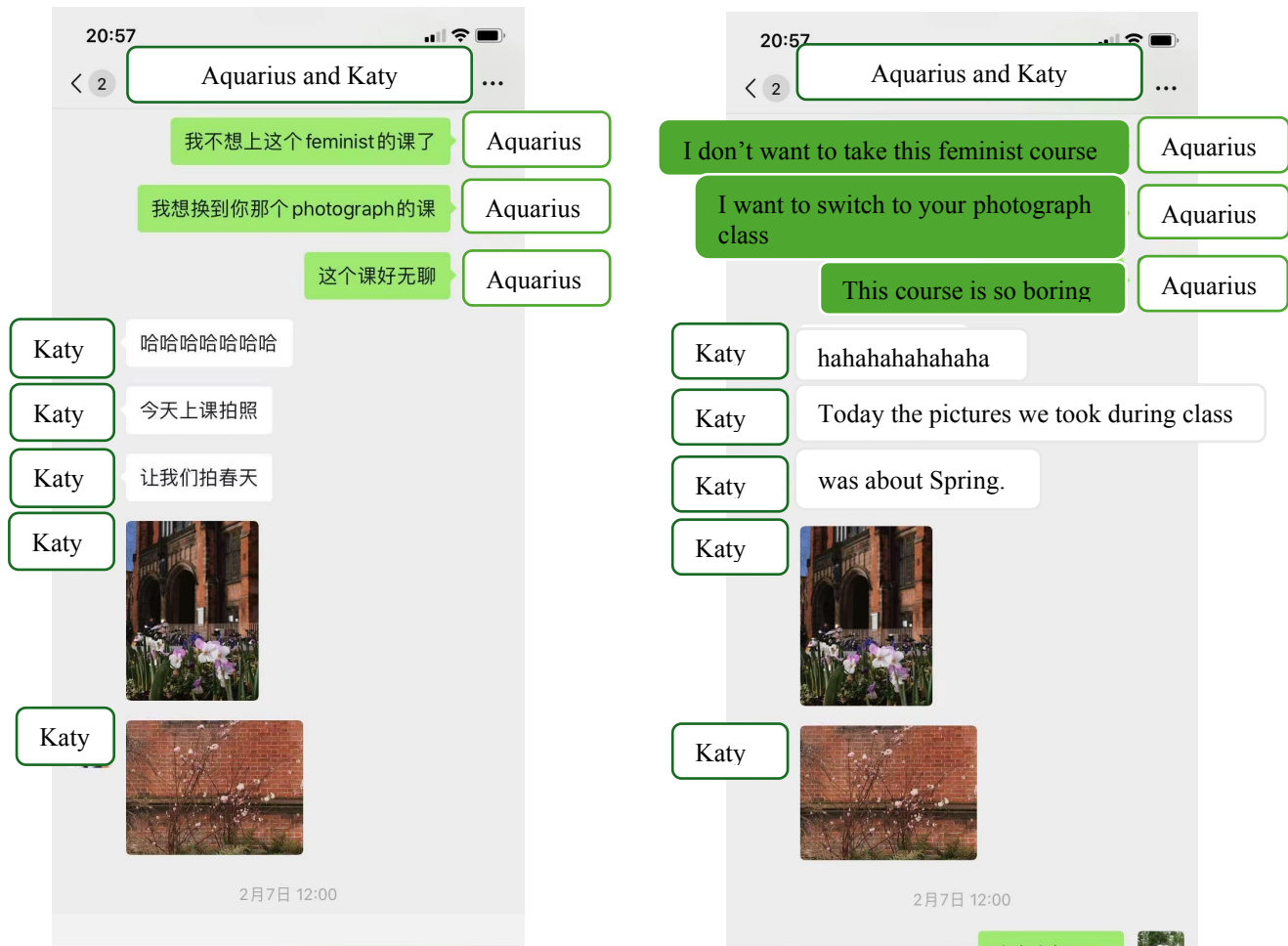


Figure 21:
One of the Screenshots Aquarius Shared

Overall, the pilot study was successful. Both the English and Mandarin versions of the data collection tools were proven to be clear and succinct, and I managed to collect enough high-quality data. I learned to use NVIVO, successfully conducted initial TA on interview transcripts, and explored applying MDA on WeChat screenshots. Moreover, through the pilot study, I improved my communication and interviewing skills and practiced how to explain my research to participants in a more organised way, which benefited the main study.

However, as illustrated above, three issues were revealed from the pilot study: 1) the IE one participant shared in the AIE did not fit the requirements; 2) participants showed concerns about their privacy and confidentiality when submitting WeChat screenshots; and 3) MDA on WeChat screenshots

failed to provide answers to RQs. The first issue regarded data collection, the second was about ethical issues and the third concerned data analysis.

3.5.2 Adjustments Based on the Pilot Study

Adjustments informed by the pilot study insights will enhance the data collection efficiency of the main study and the data analysis rigour. In this part, I will elaborate on what adjustments I made to tackle issues revealed in the pilot study (see Table 3).

Issues Revealed in the Pilot Study	Adjustments
Data collection: 1. IEs in the AIE	• Emphasising the criteria for the IEs in the briefing meeting; • Revising the AIE to highlight the criteria.
Ethical consideration: 2. WeChat screenshots	• Providing an example of how WeChat screenshot will be anonymised; • Sending the anonymised screenshots back to participants for approval.
Data Analysis: 3. MDA on screenshots	• Using WeChat screenshots as supplementary data for themes generated from interview transcripts.

Table 3:

Adjustments Based on the Pilot Study

Firstly, to make sure that the submitted IEs in the AIE fit the criteria (1. happened in the UK, and 2. were discussed on WeChat), I realised the importance of emphasising these requirements repeatedly to participants. Consequently, in the following data collection, I introduced the criteria in the briefing meeting and explained how this pre-interview task was relevant to the follow-up interview. In addition, I revised the AIE form, highlighting the criteria, and changed the given IE examples from various contexts (e.g., Turkey, Egypt, France) to those that were specifically for CSS studying in the UK. The original examples were taken from the original AIE (Byram et al., 2009b) and most of them were not relevant to international students in the UK. Vera revealed that it was for this reason that she

got distracted, thinking she could share any experience she had before. Therefore, I replaced these with new examples that participants would find familiar with, such as accommodation and travelling experiences. These changes were proven to be successful in later data collection since all other participants managed to follow the requirements. Later participants commended that the instructions on the AIE were clear and instructive.

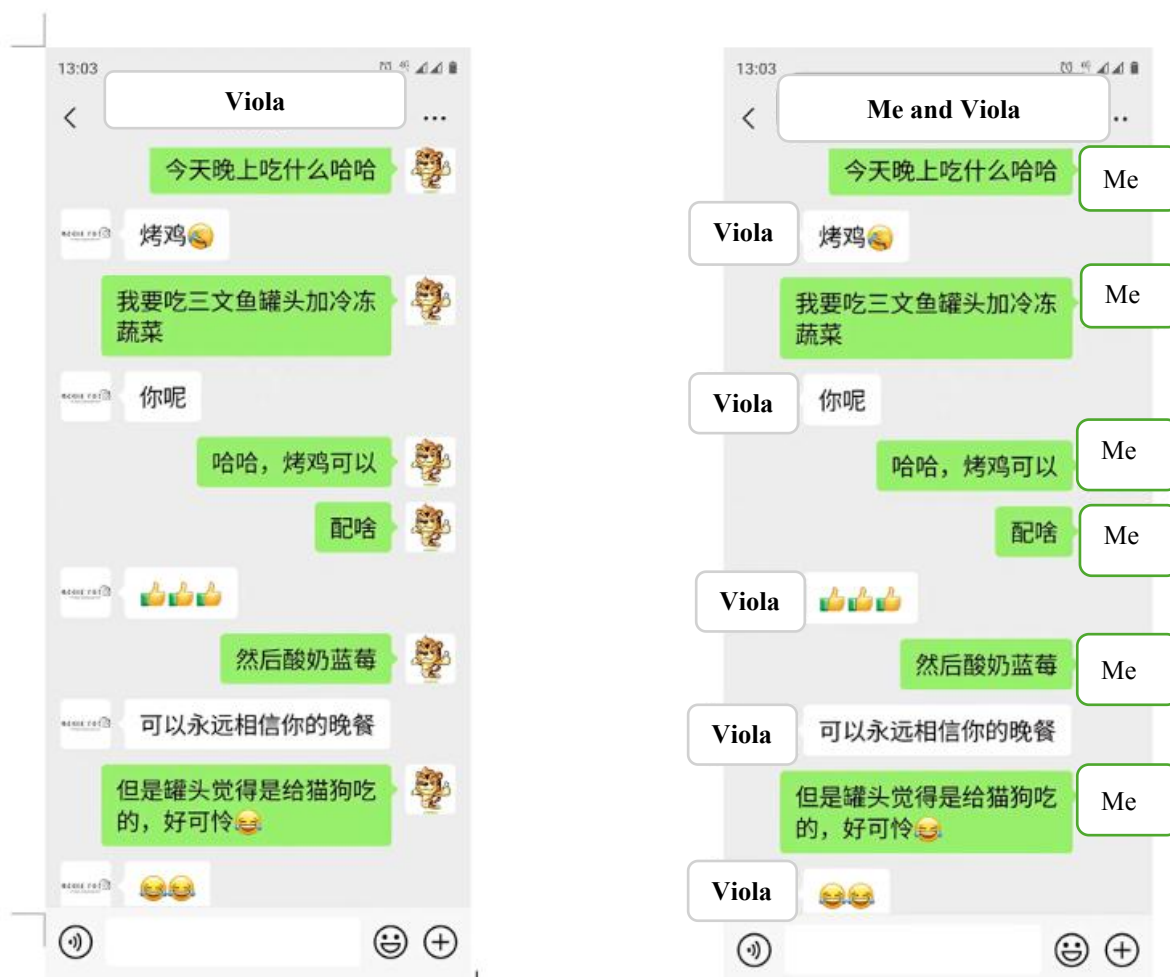


Figure 22:
An example of Anonymised Screenshot Shown to Participants

Secondly, regarding ethical considerations about participants' privacy and confidentiality, I decided to implement further measures to gain their trust, so that they could feel more comfortable in sharing WeChat screenshots. Specifically, in addition to highlighting the ethical approval I gained from the ethics committee and explaining statements regarding anonymity and confidentiality in the

information sheet and the consent form, I took a screenshot of my WeChat interface with a very close friend and anonymised it (see Figure 22). I then presented this example to the participants and highlighted that all screenshots they submitted would be anonymised in the same way. Moreover, I sent the processed screenshots back to them within one week to get their final approval to use. These microethical-oriented measures greatly eased participants' worries and encouraged them to share their screenshots.

The last area of concern that the pilot study uncovered involved data analysis of the screenshots. As stated in 3.7.1, MDA did not prove to be the most efficient method to address my RQs. I then applied TA on textual elements of screenshots, which enabled me to extract some useful codes and (sub-)themes. However, I still struggled to integrate these findings with those obtained from the interview TA. After reviewing available analytic tools, I decided to triangulate findings gained from different data sets by applying the Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis (TVTA) (as explained in 3.4.3).

3.6 Summary

Section 3.1 presented why I adopted the social constructionism paradigm to gain an in-depth understanding of CSS participants' experiences and perspectives. Section 3.2 explained my rationale for adopting the qualitative approach, and more specifically the ethnographic approach, emphasising their strength in collecting rich data and maintaining flexibility. Section 3.3 provided a brief description of the research context (a school based in a university in northeastern England), including the geographic location, student composition, English proficiency entrance requirements, and CCC course pathways which were all highly relevant to my participants. In Section 3.4, I introduced the detailed research methods. Specifically, my participants were 17 CCC students from mainland China and I used different qualitative data collection methods to retrieve data, including collecting textual data (the AIE), audio data (semi-structured interview), visual data (WeChat screen), and keeping research fieldnotes. TA was conducted on the interview transcripts, while TVTA principals were applied on WeChat screenshots to explicate the finding correlation with the interview analysis. I addressed ethical issues in 3.4.4, including macroethics that called for procedural standards and good research conduct following basic ethical principles, and microethics that occurred in practices. Section 3.4.6 illustrated my reflexivity, namely how my humanness influenced the research (prospective reflexivity) and how the research influenced me in return (introspective reflexivity). Section 3.4.7 showed how I followed the criteria for judging qualitative empirical studies to strengthen the rigour of my research. An overview of how the pilot study was conducted and what adjustments were made accordingly was elaborated in 3.5.

Chapter 4. Everyday WeChat Use

4.1 Overview

This chapter addresses the first research question: how do Chinese Student Sojourners (CSS) use WeChat in their everyday life? Four prominent themes were revealed from the interview data to answer this question. Section 4.2 *High Use Intensity* demonstrates participants' WeChat behaviours, attitudes towards the platform, and the relevant consequences. Section 4.3 *Popular WeChat Features* focuses on what WeChat features participants commonly used and how. Section 4.4 *Languages* explores the overlooked linguistic aspects, especially what languages participants adopted when interacting on WeChat and what role each language played in their online communication. Section 4.5 *Unwelcome Interlopers* introduces the alarming issues caused by ghostwriters (individuals or agencies that provide contract cheating services) and scammers that disrupted participants' sojourning. All these findings provide a holistic picture of participants' WeChat use, especially how they integrated WeChat into their daily sojourning. Then, a summary is presented in Section 4.6. Key themes and sub-themes are illustrated in Figure 23 to enhance readers' understanding.

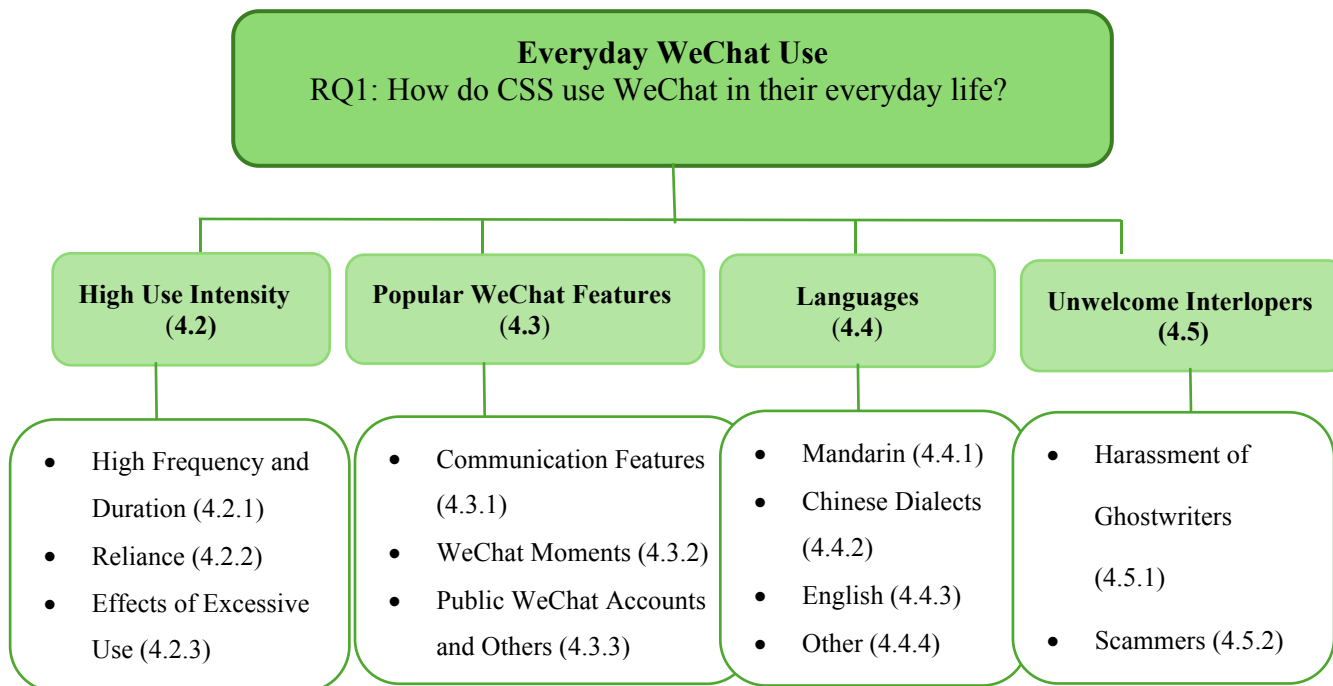


Figure 23:

Structure of the Chapter: Themes and Sub-themes

Before exploring each section, it is important to note that all interview excerpts and WeChat screenshots used in this chapter are presented in their original form – mostly in Mandarin but sometimes in English. The English translation is provided for data originally in Mandarin.

4.2 High Use Intensity

According to the interview data, participants reported having a high WeChat use intensity exemplified by their high use frequency and duration (4.1.1), and substantial reliance (4.1.2). Drawing on Ellison et al.'s (2007) well-quoted classification of social media intensity, the first sub-theme reflects participants' behaviours, namely how the participants actively engage in social media activities, while the second sub-theme refers to attitudinal aspects. Section 4.1.3 captures signs of participants' excessive WeChat use and demonstrates how it has affected their daily lives.

4.2.1 *WeChat Use Frequency and Duration*

All participants reported very high WeChat use frequency and duration, which aligned with previous research (Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019). Firstly, almost all of them acknowledged themselves as frequent WeChat users who '每天都用 (used (WeChat) every day)'. For example, Zoe described herself as a '深度用户 (deep user)' and Walter reported using WeChat '比较频繁 (rather frequently)'. Several claimed with exaggeration that they used WeChat '无时无刻 (every single minute)' (Jade) or '时时刻刻 (all the time)' (Walter). Similarly, Nick confessed that he checked WeChat 'frequently maybe every 5 minutes or ten minutes'. Nick also highlighted that: 'I HAVE TO look at it and make sure I won't miss any messages', showing the fear of missing out (Vorderer & Kohring, 2013), evidence of compulsive behaviours, and reduced self-regulation that characterises social media addiction (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Traş & Öztemel, 2019).

Secondly, it was evident participants spent long hours on WeChat. Other than making long video/audio phone calls, participants summarised that the time they spent on WeChat was '都是很碎片的事情, 没有说很大段 (very fragmental, not a long period of time)' (Hal). However, all these time '碎片 (fragments)' added up, taking a lot of participants' time. According to either participants' self-report or their screen time records (an APP equipped on some mobile phones to record how much time users spent on a certain platform), the average time spent on WeChat was more than three hours per day. To be specific, only three spent less than two hours per day on it, eight spent two (including) to four hours daily while more than six interviewees reported spending more than four hours (including) on it (see Figure 24). Zoe, a 'deep user', claimed that she spent approximately seven hours on WeChat per day.

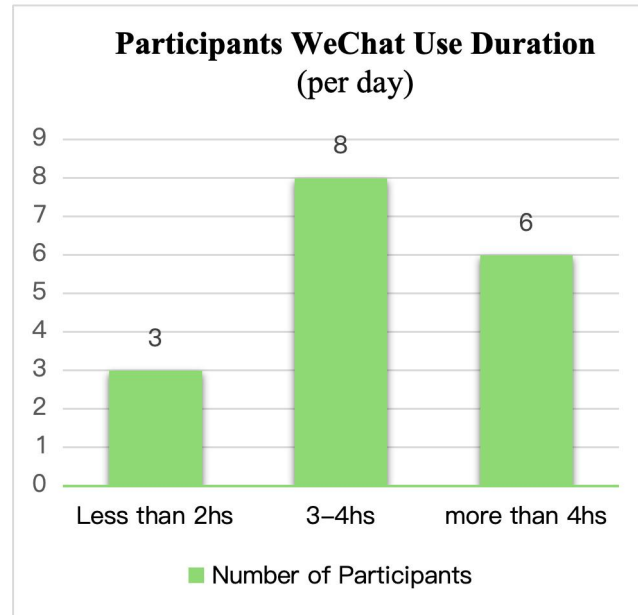


Figure 24:
Participants' WeChat Use Duration

Aemon highlighted that the intensity of her WeChat use was especially high during the weekends:

每天用多长时间微信...如果工作日有上课的话, 每天应该至少也有 3~4 个小时。然后如果是休息日的话, 可能会到六七个小时以上, 就可能会更高。

How long (do I) use WeChat every day... If there are classes on weekdays, it should be at least 3 to 4 hours per day. Then if it is a weekend, it may be more than six or seven hours, or even higher.

The WeChat use behaviours mentioned above (frequency and duration) demonstrated signs of excessive WeChat use. In terms of the attitudinal level, participants demonstrated great reliance on it.

4.2.2 Reliance on WeChat

Participants generally commented very positively on WeChat and demonstrated great reliance on it. Most highlighted relying on WeChat to stay connected with others. For instance, Phoebe compared different social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, QQ, Weibo) and referred to WeChat as 'the king of my (social media)'. Phoebe's words represented many others who underlined the prominent role of WeChat in their social media use, echoing previous studies that highlighted WeChat being the 'dominant' platform (Park, 2016, p.6). WeChat was given significant importance

that Aemon summarised that for many CSS, WeChat had become a ‘必需品 (necessity)’, an integral part of their daily lives that she ‘没有办法离开它 (could not live without)’. She commented that:

微信应该是成为大部分人,当然也成为我的一部分了。如果你没有微信的话...基本上对于中国大陆的学生来说,你日常跟人沟通,然后甚至连你自己的生活都会出现很多的困难。

WeChat has become a part of most CSS' lives, including mine of course. If you don't have WeChat... basically for students in mainland China, you will have a lot of difficulties communicating with people, and even difficulties maintaining daily life.

Hal explained that such reliance on WeChat was a ‘从国内带过来的习惯(a habit brought from China)since many platforms popular in the UK (such as Facebook and Instagram) were not available in China, which left her no choice but to use WeChat to ‘跟大陆的朋友还要再继续联系 (maintain connections with friends based in Mainland)’’. In addition, participants also reported relying on WeChat to contact their Chinese connections based in the UK. Without WeChat, Aemon commented that she would be ‘没有办法跟大家同频道的沟通 (unable to communicate with others via the same channel)’ and consequently feel ‘极大的不合群 (extremely unsociable)’.

The reported reliance on WeChat illustrated participants’ attitudes towards the platform, highlighting the attitudinal aspects of their use intensity. These findings added to the behavioural aspects discussed earlier in 4.1.1 in verifying the very limited studies (Yu et al., 2019; Wang, 2018) that explored the issue. Moreover, for some participants, their WeChat reliance revealed evidence of WeChat addiction. For example, Stephanie commented that:

使用微信已经形成一个习惯了。不管是国内还是现在,好像它是一个很很自然的事情。如果有一天限制你今天不能用微信,你就会觉得很难受。

Using WeChat has become a habit. Whether (when you were) in China or now, it seems to be a very natural thing to do. If one day you are restricted from using WeChat, you will feel very uncomfortable.

The above remarks revealed that Stephanie’s reliance on WeChat has become so substantial that depriving her of WeChat would make her feel ‘很难受 (very uncomfortable)’. According to Park (2005) after summarising empirical studies in Korea and the U.S., such feeling of uncomfortable is a sign of a withdrawal symptom of addiction, which is worrying. Though not all participants were found to develop WeChat addiction, many of them were aware of their excessive WeChat use and its detrimental effects.

4.2.3 Effects of Excessive WeChat Use

Many participants showed concerns about their WeChat overuse. These involved different aspects of their sojourning experiences. For example, Ameen discussed how using WeChat excessively could lead to a waste of time and neglect of the physical environment:

可能你去使用它用的太多了... 导致了你对身边的一些东西的忽视。因为基本上它会侵占你生活的各个方面, 各个角落... 然后更多的也是会占用自己的生活时间吧。

You may use it excessively... leading to neglect of some aspects of your surroundings. Essentially, it can invade every aspect and corner of your life... taking up a lot of your personal time.

Ameen's comment emphasised the ubiquitous role of WeChat and how such excessive engagement in virtual life could disrupt connection with the local surroundings. Lexie shared similar opinions, commenting that this was a '负面影响 (negative influence)' of using WeChat. She remarked:

比如说有些时候我觉得好像微信用太多了, 好像营造了一种我还在中国的那种感觉, 好像不是在英国感受一些不一样的文化。

For instance, sometimes I feel like I'm using WeChat so much that it creates the illusion that I'm still in China, rather than experiencing a different culture in the UK.

Lexie's words showed how WeChat helped her to connect with China and Chinese culture but at the same time disconnect from the environment and the culture of the UK, which could be detrimental to her acculturation. Considering Chapter 5 especially focusing on WeChat's role in different aspects of participants' acculturation, I will not expand here.

In addition, Hal noted problems caused by the time difference between China and the UK (seven hours in summer and eight hours in winter) and communicating via WeChat across these time zones. She described that:

有的时候聊天上瘾了... 你可能今天晚上本来要早睡, 然后你就熬夜。因为本身就是时差的问题... 然后就可能出现一个你要熬夜聊天的这样一个情况, 就是你为了 *catch up*, 你做出了你休息上的这种牺牲, 然后它会影响第二天的各种事情的精神状态。

Sometimes you get addicted to chatting... you might plan to go to bed early that night, but you ended up staying up late because you stayed up chatting due to the time difference (between China and the UK). Namely, you sacrificed your resting time to catch up, which affected your energy in doing all sorts of things on the following day.

Here, Hal pointed out that WeChat excessive use disrupted her sleeping schedule, caused a lack of sleep and fatigue, and low functionality. These roughly aligned with previous studies that highlighted the detrimental damage of mobile phone addiction in causing sleep problems (Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Wu, 2023), fatigue (Dhir et al., 2018), and hence reducing individuals' functionality because of deteriorated physical and psychological conditions (Park, 2005). Hal summarised that such inappropriate WeChat use ‘影响到我在这边的正常生活了，它其实也是一个不利因素 (affected my normal life here (in the UK) and is actually a detrimental factor)’.

Moreover, Aemon and Jade stressed the reduced independence due to over-reliance on WeChat. Jade remarked that:

负面影响可能它(微信)让我太依赖国内的支持，可能让我自主性降低。我可能一遇到什么问题自己自己想了一下，解决不了，我可能就是求助于国内一些朋友或者是家人。

The negative impact of using WeChat is it makes me overly reliant on support from people back home, which could decrease my independence. Whenever I encounter a problem, instead of solving it on my own, I tend to immediately turn to friends or family back in China for help.

Jade's comments revealed the convenience and efficiency of WeChat in facilitating communication across geographic borders hazarded her willingness to solve problems independently, which was not observed in previous studies. Aemon, whereas underlined her conformity behaviour enhanced by using WeChat. See below:

(用微信)对于自己真正需要追求的东西的一些关注就会变少。你可能在微信上就看到说别人怎么样去到了哪里，喜欢什么东西。你可能自己本身对这个东西没有什么感觉，但是大家突然这么一说，你又觉得我是不是也应该去追求一下这个东西？

(Using WeChat) reduces your focus on what you truly need to pursue. You might see on WeChat lives of others, where they went and what they liked. Probably you do not have any interest in those things, but when everyone talks about them, you might start to question whether you should also pursue them.

Aemon's words exemplified what Chen and Zhuang (2024, p.3) defined as ‘conformity’, namely ‘aligning one's behaviour or attitude to another person or group’ as a result of social influence. According to Chen and Zhuang (2024), conformity behaviours are commonly observed in the social media age and can be explained by the social influence theory that individuals accept information from others assuming they know more (information social influence) and comply with the expectations of

other people or a group (normative social influence). The conformity behaviour Aemon observed, together with the lack of independence in problem-solving emphasised by Jade, indicated participants' reduced independence due to increased WeChat use.

The above observations depicted how excessive WeChat use might disrupt participants' everyday sojourning lives. Though social media overuse is not a novel phenomenon, many studies on WeChat overuse were conducted in the context of China (e.g., Cao et al., 2020; Li et al., 2019) but often overlooked in the sojourning context. Therefore, these observations contributed to a lack of investigation in previous literature on CSS.

4.3 Popular WeChat Features

Two key words, '方便' and its English equivalent 'convenient', occurred repeatedly when participants talked about WeChat features. Among the multiple features that WeChat enabled, participants stated that several were particularly utilised, with the instant messaging features (one-to-one chat and WeChat groups) being the most prominent (4.2.1), followed by Public WeChat accounts (as mentioned in the *Introduction*, also known as *Official Accounts*, namely accounts that allow enterprises, media outlets, content creators, and even authorities to publish content and directly interact with WeChat users) (4.2.2), WeChat Moments (equivalence of Facebook posts) and several others (4.2.3). See below how they used these features while sojourning.

4.3.1 Instant Messaging Features

Despite its multiple functions, almost all participants viewed WeChat primarily as a '功能比较强大的交流软件 (powerful communication platform)' (Walter) to stay connected with others 'across geographical distance' (Mathew) and such powerful communication affordability were mainly enabled by instant messaging features. To be specific, through one-to-one chat and group chat, participants were able to have '实时的通讯 (instant communication) (Lexie)' through making video/audio calls and exchanging texts or semiotic features such as images, emojis, and voice messages. Interviewees elaborated that they had both one-to-one communication with their WeChat friends (those who had been added to their contact lists) and group communication in various WeChat groups (where participants may not have members' contact information).

One-to-One Chat

The number of participants' WeChat friends ranged from approximately 100 (Jade) to more than 1,000 (Vera). On average, participants reported having approximately 500 WeChat friends, with most of them being Chinese (such as family, friends, some former teachers or classmates, and CSS peers) and very few from other countries. For example, Elena said she had about 400 WeChat friends

with only 20-30 of them were not from China, while Anne had about 500 WeChat friends, and ‘基本没有 (basically none)’ of them were not Mainlanders.

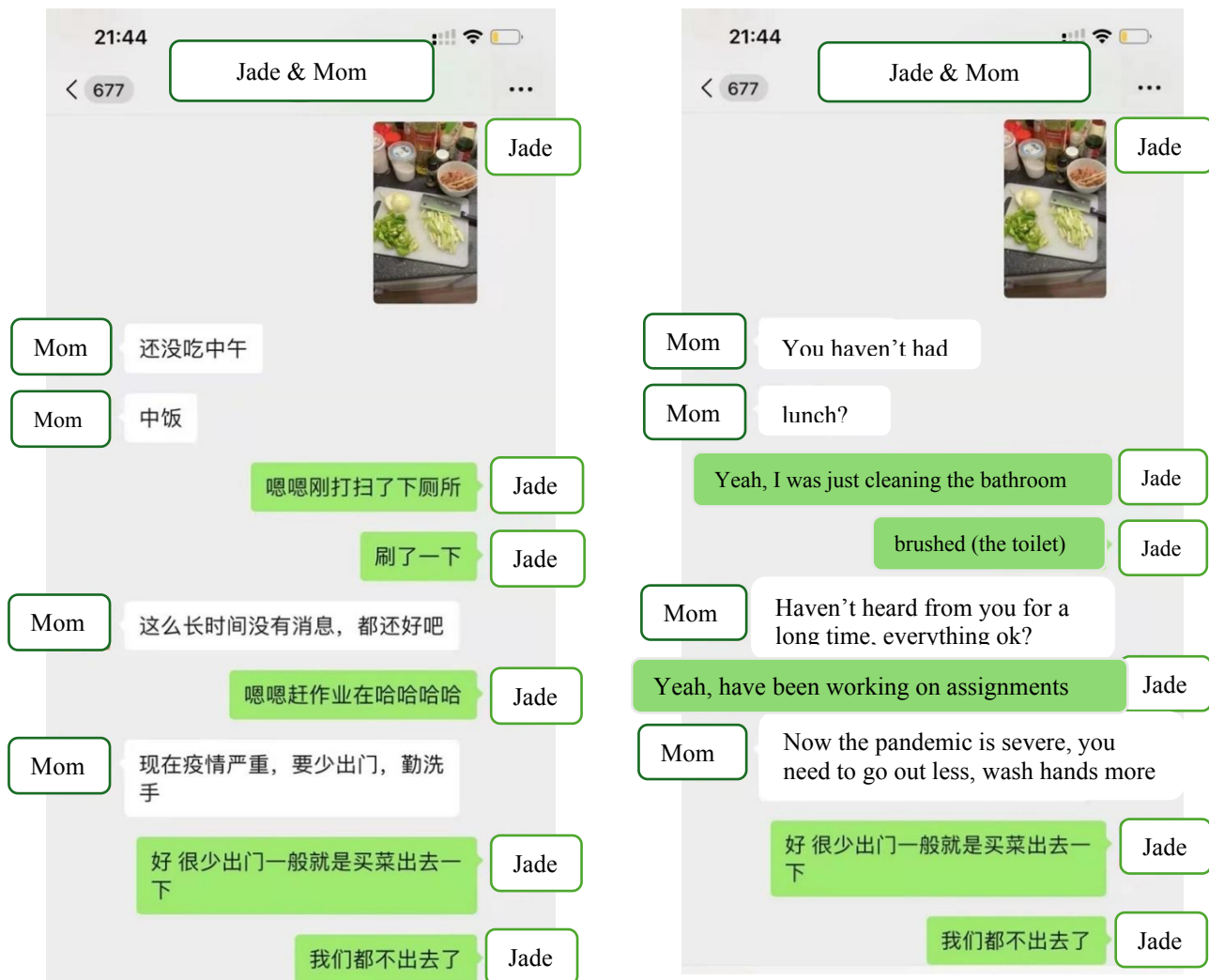


Figure 25:

Jade's One-to-one WeChat Interaction

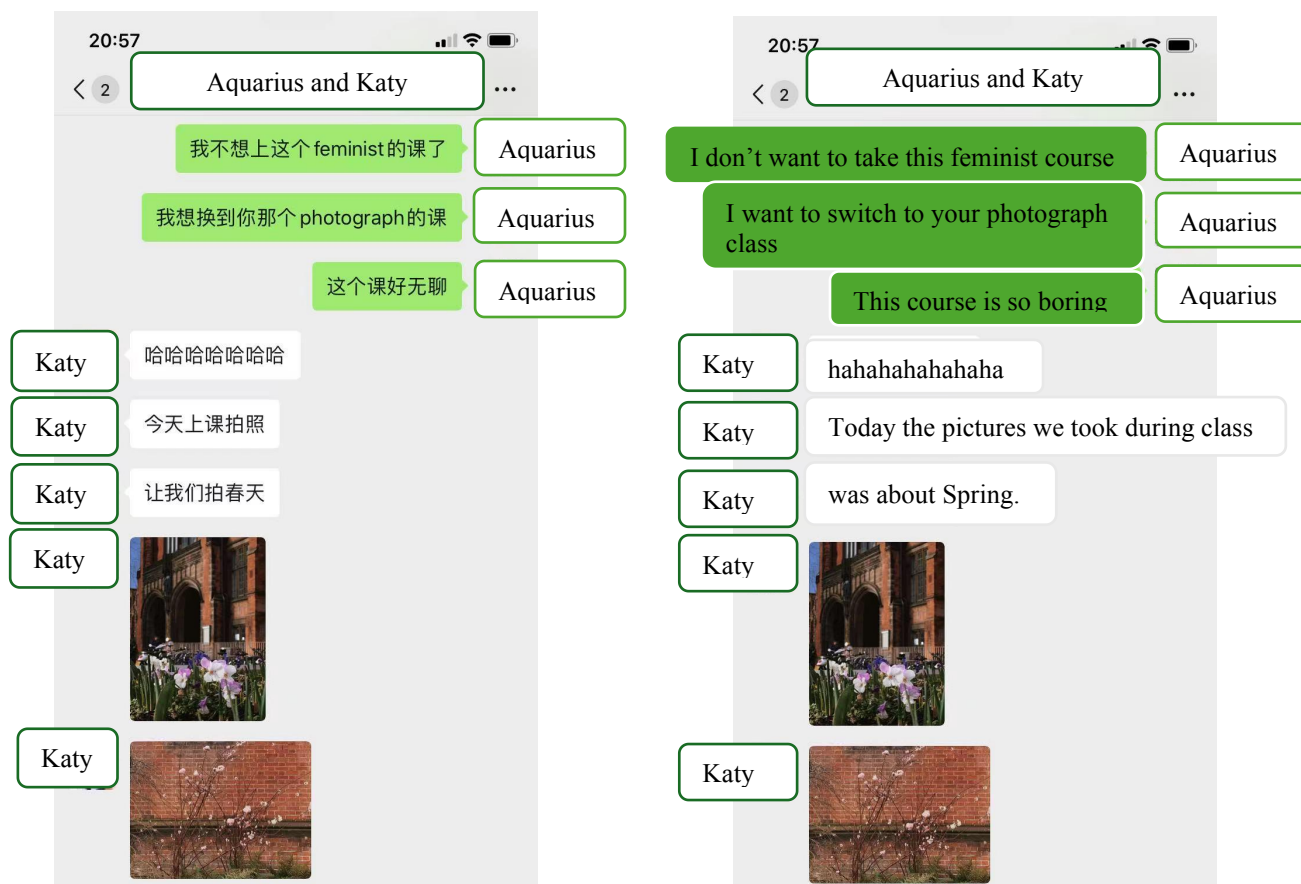


Figure 26:

Aquarius Exchanging Experiences of Having Selective Courses with a Friend

With WeChat, participants could have regular communication with their close ones, with whom they could update their daily lives, discuss COVID-19-related topics, and exchange experiences, views, opinions, or feelings. For example, Vera claimed that she ‘mostly uses it for chatting with my parents or family member(s)’ and Phoebe said that she ‘always chats with my classmates and shares the life in the UK and sometimes I send some photos to them’. The WeChat screenshots participants submitted could support these claims. For example, in Figure 25, Jade updated her mother on her daily routine amid COVID-19. Jade shared a picture of her cooking ingredients first, and then her mom inquired about her daily routine and reminded her to stay safe. Their conversation consisted of short text messages and semiotic features (e.g., pictures). These observations also apply to Figure 26, where Aquarius and a CSS coursemates exchanged experiences of having selective courses.

Participants highlighted using two types of groups. The first one was made up of only a small number of close friends or family members, which enabled more privacy and better rapport. Figure 27

illustrates an example of such groups – a family group, where Nick and his family members discussed the positive COVID-19 cases in the UK.

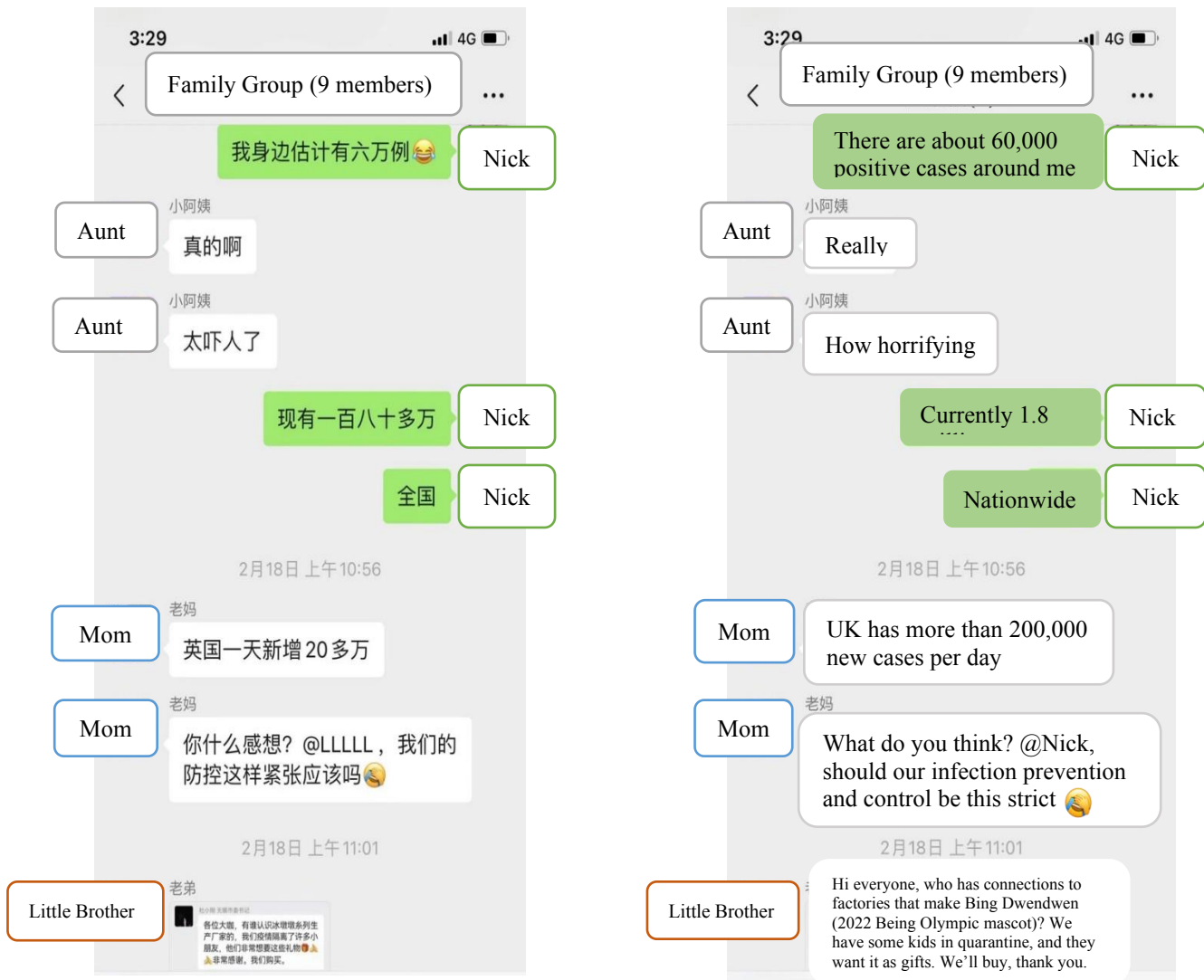


Figure 27:

Nick's Family WeChat Group

The second group type was what participants highlighted as ‘互助群 (groups that provide mutual help) (Ameon, Jade, Anne)’, namely bigger-size WeChat groups that comprised up to 500 members, with most of whom participants did not know in person. Several spoke highly of the rich ‘功能性 (functionalities)’ and the popularity of such groups. The frequently mentioned ones included ‘新生群 (Group for Newly Admitted Students)’, second-hand trading groups, and accommodation groups

(where members were mostly CSS living in the same accommodation), many of which were set up by ‘学长学姐 (senior students)’ enrolled in the previous year. Ameen commented that ‘大家在里面互动的也很频繁 (people interacted very frequently)’. Participants reported gaining a lot of information from such groups, which benefited many aspects of their acculturation (this will be elaborated in Chapter 5). However, several participants pointed out that the amount of information in these groups could be overwhelming. For example, when talking about the drawbacks of using WeChat, Aquarius noted that: ‘我觉得稍微会有点乱吧。...信息会很多。然后你进一个群, 可能一会不看就会有几百条消息 (I think it might get a bit chaotic... There is so much information that when you join a group, there could be hundreds of messages if you don't check it for a while)’. Hal, whereas, commented that the very rich information such groups provided ‘既是优点也是缺点 (was both advantages and disadvantages)’:

信息很杂, 很碎片化, 有的时候你没有办法...更高效的去获得一些你想要的信息。...有的时候你的大脑处理不过来。...因为他们就真的是非常多的信息非常广的面。

The information is very scattered and fragmented. Sometimes, you can't... how to put it... efficiently get the information you want. Sometimes, your brain can't process it all because there's just so much information covering such a wide range of topics.

The remarks of Aquarius and Hal articulated exemplified what researchers addressed as information overload (Zhang et al., 2020; Pang & Ruan, 2023), namely the phenomenon that individuals are beyond their capabilities when being confronted with too much information. Information overload can lead to social media exhaustion (Pang & Ruan, 2023), explaining Aquarius and Hal's negative attitudes towards the overwhelming amount of text messages in WeChat groups.

The current investigation found that participants primarily used instant messaging communication features, which aligned with Pang's (2018) research in the context of New Zealand that WeChat helped CSS' living and study by building relationships amongst each other. My contribution particularly lies in the detailed depiction of how participants used these features, especially different types of groups, which previous studies failed to do. In addition, participants' comments on their perceived information overload confirmed that the phenomenon that was often observed in users within China (see Zhang et al., 2020; Pang & Ruan, 2023) was also noted on CSS.

Now we have discussed how participants engaged with WeChat communicative features, the next part will focus on WeChat Moments, the second frequently mentioned feature.

4.3.2 WeChat Moments

In interviews, most participants mentioned they often ‘发朋友圈 (posted Moments)’ and ‘刷朋友圈 (went through others’ Moments)’. Contents of their WeChat Moments varied, depending on participants’ experiences and personal preferences. WeChat Moments could facilitate brief interaction, allowing their WeChat friends to simply ‘like’ or ‘comment below’ (Mathew). For example, Shirley shared her experiences and feelings about attending a welcome party for international students on her Moments and then had brief interactions with several friends in the comment area (see Figure 28).

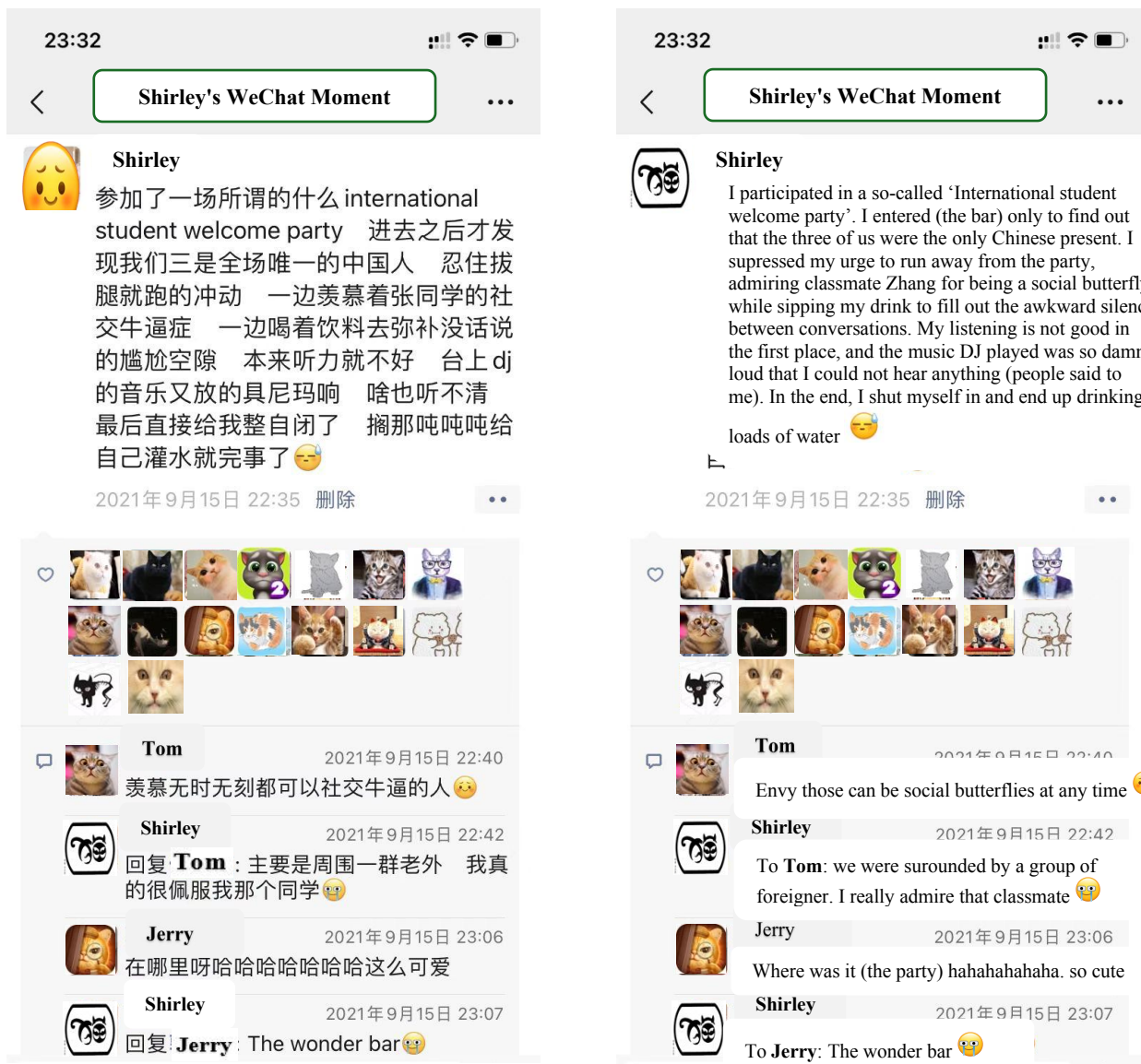


Figure 28:

One of Shirley's WeChat Moments

Participants reported posting Moments for a combination of various reasons, including to ‘记录自己的生活 (document my life)’ (Hal) or ‘想法 (thoughts)’ (Winston), to satisfy ‘分享欲 (desire to share)’ by ‘展示自己的生活 (presenting my life)’ and (Aemon), or to maintain connections even without direct communication. For example, Hall stated that posting Moments enables her friends to know how she had been without her ‘不用一个个去跟他们打招呼 (speaking to them one by one)’, or else, people would ‘忘掉你这个人是在干嘛 (forget about you and what you have been up to)’ (Ameon).

Most participants reported enjoying going through their WeChat friends’ Moments as a way of entertaining. ‘刷朋友圈也挺开心的 (going through WeChat Moments could be rather enjoyable)’, Shirley exclaimed. In contrast, several participants reported being cautious about posting Moments since it could ‘会无形间泄露一些你的隐私 (reveal your privacy without you knowing it)’ (Winston). This echoed previous studies that WeChat users are often cautious of their privacy (Chen et al., 2022). Winston explained that this was to avoid revealing his location since posting Moments about having food with friends then people would know about their whereabouts. He added that he was also concerned about incurring unwanted attention or criticism since WeChat Moments only demonstrated ‘片面的...一部分你生活中的碎片 (partial, fragments of your life)’ but people would ‘不了解你的时候去评价你 (criticise you based on their limited understanding of you)’. As a result, several participants said they stopped posting WeChat Moments or changed the privacy setting to limit who could access their Moments. Hal, for example, chose to categorise her WeChat friends into groups and limit her Moments visibility. She said that:

我是一个分组非常精密的人，所以我会选择性的说是这部分人可以看什么，那部分人可以看什么，我非常严谨在上面。

I am very meticulous about grouping, so I selectively decide what each group can see. I'm very careful about it.

Observations on WeChat Moments demonstrated participants’ mixed feelings towards this feature. On one hand, many reported using this feature actively for communication, information, everyday life documentation, or entertainment, while on the other hand, many revealed concerns regarding their privacy. Their privacy concerns and corresponding coping strategies challenged the so-called ‘privacy paradox’, namely the discrepancy between participants’ concerns about privacy risks and their information disclosure (Chen, 2018). This contradicts Chen and Cheung’s (2018) empirical study that observed the privacy paradox in urban Chinese young adults’ WeChat use behaviour. Such

differences could be explained partially by participants' increased awareness to protect their privacy over the years as the technology has been rapidly developed. Moreover, such different findings verified the difference between participants' sojourning context in the UK where WeChat was found to be mainly for personal use, and the context of China where boundaries between the public and the private were blurry (Chen & Cheung, 2018).

4.3.3 Public WeChat Accounts and Others

The third WeChat feature that was repeatedly brought up was the Public WeChat Accounts, which was commented very positively on. In this section, I will discuss how interviewees use this feature and then brief through two more features, WeChat Pay and file transfer, that participants touched on.

Public WeChat Accounts

Public WeChat Accounts were highlighted as an '信息平台 (information platform)' (Lexie). According to participants, a trustworthy public WeChat account could provide them with rich and high-quality information, so they '会筛选...比较有公信力的一些公众号去多读一读 (would scrutinise... some more credible public accounts to read)' (Hal). Among the prominent accounts were those that disseminate the latest news updates, how CSS could enhance their living and academic experience in the UK, English learning, or interest-driven accounts (e.g., theatre, football) that are tailored to their interests and personal preferences. For example, Hal subscribed some accounts to '看一些新闻...还有一些评论文章, 科普之类的 (read news... some commentary articles, popular science, and so on)', while Walter elaborated that the news public accounts he subscribed to covered '不光是有国内新闻, 还有一些比如说英国本地的新闻, 或者是就是杂七杂八的什么娱乐体育什么都有 (not only domestic news, but also UK local news, or all sorts of things like entertainment and sports)'. Meanwhile, Lexie spoke highly of '雅思哥 (IELTS Bro)' (Figure 29), an account that offers online IELTS training resources and services for study abroad applications that '所有留学生都会有关注 (all (Chinese) students who study abroad would subscribe').

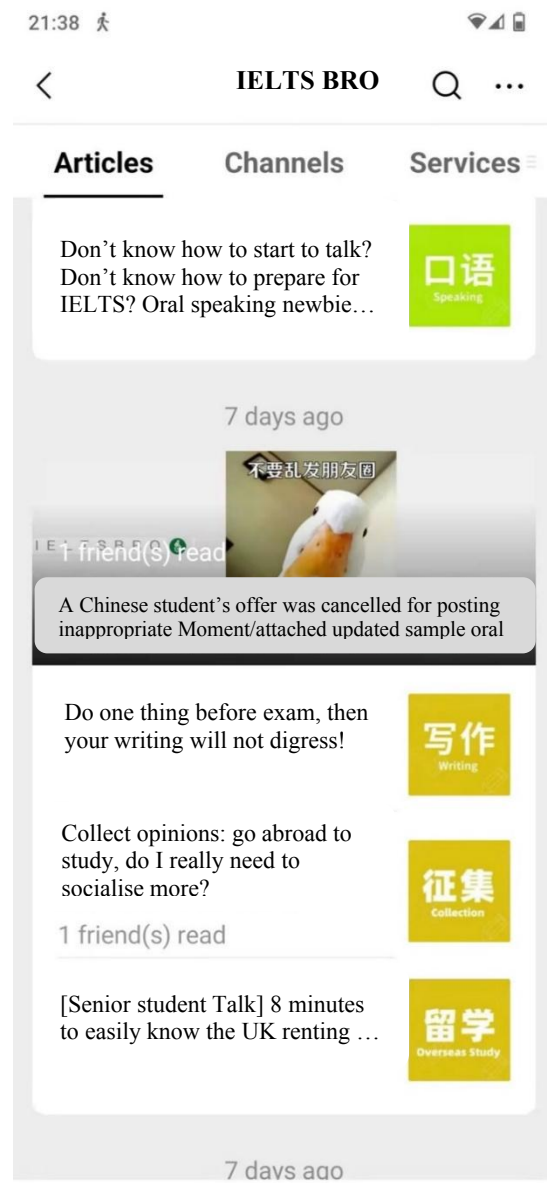


Figure 29:
WeChat Public Account of 雅思哥 (IELTS BRO)

Other Features

A brief discussion on two more features, WeChat Pay and file transfer, follows, as these aspects were only briefly touched upon by a minority of participants.

WeChat Pay

Multiple participants highlighted the convenience of WeChat Pay for facilitating mobile payments and transferring money between WeChat contacts. For instance, Elena remarked on the advantages of using WeChat pay, noting that it allowed her to make payments while travelling abroad

and split the bills by transferring money to her travel companions. Jade added that she could get ‘物质支持, 经济支持 (financial support)’ from her parents via WeChat Pay and enjoy an exchange discount with WeChat payment:

你可以选取微信海外支付, 然后有汇率优惠。当然在中超要是可以扫微信的地方, 都是可以用最优惠的汇率去进行支付, 所以还是可以省一点点钱。

You can choose WeChat Pay for overseas transactions, which offers favorable exchange rates. Of course, if you can use WeChat Pay at Chinese supermarkets, you can enjoy the best exchange rates, which can save you a little bit of money.

In addition, with WeChat Pay, Aquarius pointed out that she received WeChat packets on WeChat, which made her feel involved in the Chinese Spring New Year celebration though she was unable to go back to China to celebrate with her family. Elena also sent red packets to her foreign WeChat friends who were working in China during festivals like Chinese New Year or Christmas.

File transfer

Several (Walter, Amy, Hal, Elena) appreciate the convenience of transferring files from phone to laptop using WeChat. Walter said the files could be ‘课件 ppt, 还有一些比如说我们共同完成的报告什么的 (lecture slides or things such as some group reports that we did together)’.

With detailed descriptions, 4.3.3 have provided a comprehensive overview of how my CSS participants used different WeChat features and how they embedded these features in their daily lives. Participants reported using instant messaging for communication as the most prominent WeChat feature, followed by WeChat Moments and Public Accounts. These are consistent with contemporary literature that depicts WeChat as a multi-function platform enabling communication and social interaction, providing access to information, mobile payment, and entertainment (Chen et al., 2018; Montag et al., 2018; Ju et al., 2019). Meanwhile, these findings demonstrated how CSS in the UK showed different WeChat use behaviours from users in the Chinese context. Specifically, quite different from my findings, Verot’s (2023) statistic report on WeChat showed that WeChat moments ‘holding its position at the top’, followed by WeChat Pay, Mini-programs, communication features like video calls and messages, and public accounts. One explanation is that in the context of China, boundaries between the public and the private lives were blurry and many use WeChat for work or study purposes (Chen & Cheung, 2018, p.288) while in contrast, my participants mainly used it for personal purposes. Due to such differences, my participants showed concerns about their privacy on WeChat while Chen and Cheung (2018) claimed that many WeChat users in China would compromise their privacy. Moreover, many WeChat functions, such as hailing a taxi or ordering delivery food with

WeChat mini programs, were not available in the sojourning context, requiring participants' WeChat behaviours to change accordingly due to different contexts. In addition, some participants were found to experience information overload, which aligned with previous studies on social media users (Zhang et al., 2020; Pang & Ruan, 2023).

In the next part, we will focus on participants' language choices during WeChat communication.

4.4 Languages

When asked what languages they used on WeChat, participants reported drawing on their rich language repertoires, making WeChat a multilingual virtual space. Specifically, Mandarin was perceived as the dominant language in interactions (4.3.1), supplemented with various Chinese dialects (4.3.2). In addition, English was employed albeit less frequently (4.3.3) as well as several other foreign languages (e.g., Japanese, Korean, French) (4.3.4). In addition to what languages they adopted, participants explained the reasons behind their different language choices, the respective roles they played in communication, together with how their language behaviours reflected and constructed their identities.

4.4.1 Mandarin

When discussing their language choices on WeChat, all participants unanimously reported that they primarily used Mandarin, asserting its predominant role. However, they used a variety of terms to refer to Mandarin, reflecting the complexity and nuanced nature of Chinese language terminology. Some referred to it simply as 'Chinese' (Vera), '中文 (Chinese)' (Lexie), or 'Mandarin' (Nick), while others used terms such as 'Chinese Mandarin' (Matthew), '简体中文 (simplified Chinese)' (Ousmane, Stephane), '普通话 (Putonghua)' (Winston, Zoe). With the interviewees' further explanation, it became evident that all these terms referred to Mandarin, though '简体中文 (simplified Chinese)' emphasised the written forms and '普通话 (Putonghua)' referred specifically to the spoken form.

Many explained that Mandarin was adopted '因为我这都是中国朋友 (because all these (on my WeChat) are Chinese friends)' (Stephanie), showing a clear linkage between Mandarin and their Chinese nationality. Similarly, Hal elaborated that:

一般来说是用中文，这个是肯定的，因为大部分人他们是中国朋友。然后我们肯定为了交流方便，不会去选择使用另一种语言。

Generally speaking, (I) use Mandarin. This is for sure because most of them (my WeChat connections) are Chinese. To communicate conveniently, we won't choose another language.

Several participants (Phoebe, Walter, and Jade) added that Mandarin was not only a common language among Chinese Mainlanders but also Chinese overseas. For example, Walter pointed out that he also uses Mandarin to communicate with some WeChat friends from Malaysia, because they ‘要学中文的, 他们好多中文说得很好 (need to learn Chinese, and many of them speak very good Chinese)’.

The emphasis on Mandarin as a common language to communicate with their ‘中国朋友 (Chinese friends)’ or other Chinese speakers highlighted users’ communication purpose, which is recognised by linguists and philosophers as the primary function of languages (Joseph, 2004). Meanwhile, they constantly related Mandarin with their national and ethnic identity as Chinese, which provided them with a sense of belonging to a particular group (Ganassin, 2017) and differentiated them from non-Mandarin speakers. This verified that language is often perceived as an identity marker, allowing speakers to seek affiliation with certain groups (Wu, 2006) and to distinguish them from members of out-groups (Byram, 2013).

4.4.2 Chinese Dialects

Some participants whose first language was not Mandarin expressed using Chinese dialects on WeChat such as Cantonese, Hakka, Henan, Sichuan, and Shandong dialects. For example, Anne said she sometimes communicated in Cantonese on WeChat and Lexie employed the Chaozhou dialect (a dialect spoken in Chaozhou, southern Guangzhou Province of China). Zoe specified that ‘我母语是客家话...但是我是在粤语地区出生, 然后长大 (My native language is Hakka... but I was born and grew up in a Cantonese-speaking area)’ so she uses both Hakka and Cantonese on WeChat. They reported that though their primary language on WeChat was still Mandarin, they used their dialects to communicate with people from the same region or linguistic background. The dialects, therefore, represented their regional, lingual, and sociocultural identity.

Since many Chinese dialects do not have written forms, some participants mentioned having mainly oral conversations on WeChat or using Mandarin characters or Pinyin as substitutes when written forms were required. For example, Stephanie who spoke Henan and Sichuan dialects said she would ‘发拼音 (send Pinyin)’ when talking about certain words in dialects and several said they substituted some dialects’ pronunciation or meanings with Mandarin characters.



Figure 30:

Communicating in Cantonese on WeChat

Consequently, some participants reported unconsciously mixing Mandarin with certain dialectal expressions. For example, Anne's interactions were often a mix of Mandarin and Cantonese since she '有些字是可以打, 但是我不能打一句完整的句子 (can type certain Cantonese characters but not a whole sentence)'. This was illustrated in Figure 30 when Lexie discussed their struggles during the initial stages of the course with another Cantonese speaker Julie, who was also her coursemate. The Cantonese expressions were highlighted. Take the first highlighted expression for example where Julie

wrote ‘其实有滴懵 (Actually, I am a bit confused)’. In this sentence, the Chinese character ‘dī 滴’ originally means ‘a drop of liquid (e.g., water, tear)’, but here its meaning was discarded. Instead, its pronunciation ‘dī’ was borrowed for its proximity with ‘a little bit’ in Cantonese expression. The same situation could be observed in all other highlighted expressions, demonstrating dialectal complexity and WeChat’s capacity to accommodate dialects.

In addition to lacking written forms, it is worth noticing that language hierarchy was observed between Mandarin and dialects. One participant, Zoe, highlighted the unprivileged status of her dialects, Hakka and Cantonese. While making audio/video calls on WeChat, both she and her family deliberately decreased their use of dialects. She explained that ‘因为还有个弟弟，就是要教他说普通话，所以现在家里在说普通话 (I have a younger brother and we want to teach him to speak Mandarin, so now the family speaks Mandarin)’. This presented how Mandarin, the official language of China that is employed nationwide, was positioned at a higher status over the regional dialects. This aligns with Heller’s (2007) argument that language hierarchies are not inherently linguistic, but social and political.

4.4.3 English

When communicating with non-Mandarin speakers on WeChat, English was viewed as the lingua franca, namely ‘the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2009, p.200)’. For example, Zoe mentioned ‘跟外教联系可能会有英文 (when contacting foreign language teachers, I most likely use English)’. Similarly, Elena illustrated that: ‘For (talking to) foreigners, like the Japanese or Americans, (I use) English... as a common language’. Figure 31 demonstrates how Elena exchanged ideas in English about working online during the lockdown with Brian, a British English language teacher who used to teach in China.

However, due to participants’ very limited number of foreign WeChat friends (less than ten on average) and the reported low frequency of their communication, chances of employing English as a lingua franca were very limited. For example, Phoebe confessed that she ‘hardly chats with them (her foreign WeChat friends)’. She said that she only sent greetings to them on festivals or expressed concern for her friends’ safety in case of special occasions such as ‘俄乌战争 (Russian-Ukraine War)’. Walter clarified that WeChat was not the right platform to use English, since ‘如果要是跟其他外国朋友交流的话，就会在其他平台上进行交流 (if we want to communicate with other foreign friends, we will do it on other platforms) (Walter). Consequently, Nick reflected that using WeChat could not achieve improvement in English proficiency.

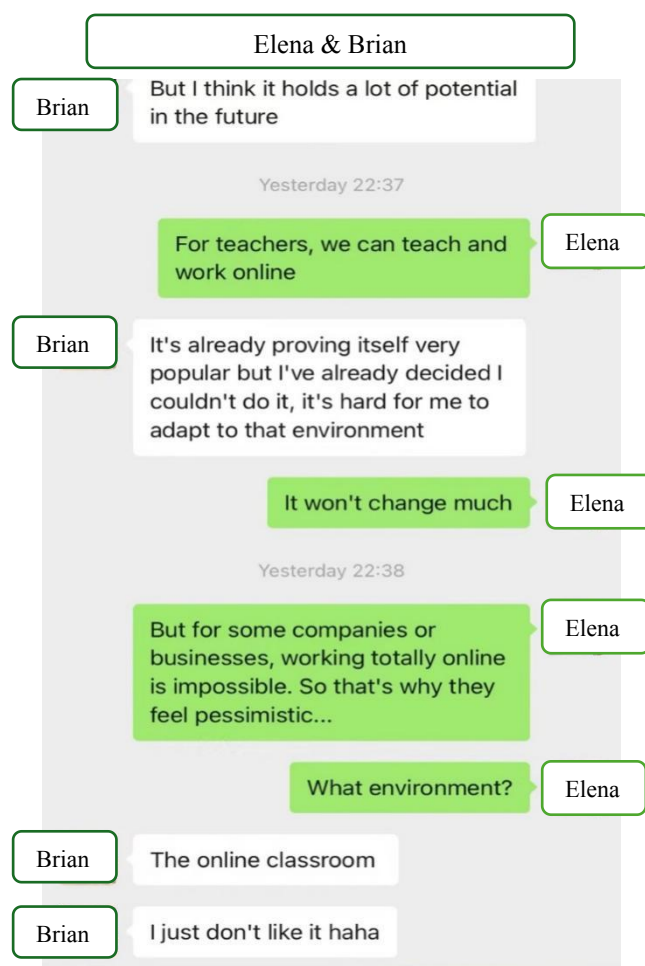


Figure 31:

Elena Communicate in English with Brian

In addition, participants reported using English for translanguaging, namely ‘the flexible use of linguistic resources by bilinguals as they make sense of their worlds’ (Velasco & García, 2014, p. 7) based on their shared language repertoires about language and communication, a phenomenon commonly observed among multilingual students in the context of the international higher education (Ou et al., 2023). Specifically, participants reported mixing linguistic forms from diverse language sources (Li & Zhu, 2013), especially certain English terms, concepts, or expressions with Mandarin. These included certain academic-related English terms that participants adopted in their daily sojourning (e.g., ‘deadline’, ‘due’, ‘assignments’, or ‘task’, Mathew and Jade). Participants claimed that it was ‘easier’ (Mathew) or ‘更贴切 (more appropriate)’ (Hal) to express themselves in English without having to translate them back into Mandarin. This verified that translanguaging enabled participants to take flexible and meaningful actions to communicate appropriately (Velasco & García,

2014). For instance, in Figure 30 demonstrated earlier, Lexie and her friend used several English terms including ‘recap’, ‘assignment’, and ‘me toooo’ in Figure 32, Aquarius used the course name ‘photojournalism’ and ‘leader’ without translating them.

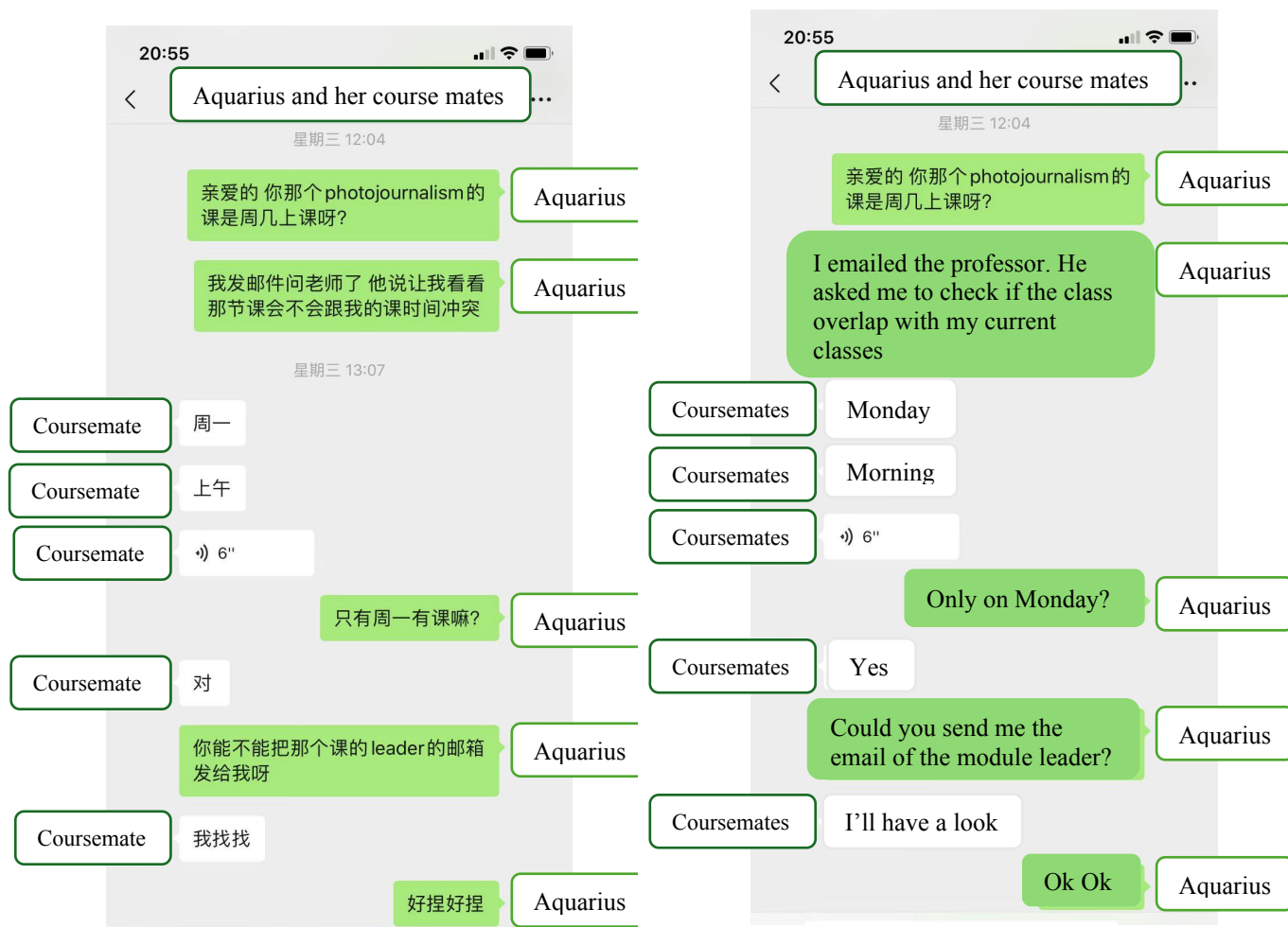


Figure 32:

Elena Communicate in English with Brian

When talking about using English as lingua franca, the emphasis of ‘foreigner’ or ‘外国朋友 (foreign friends)’ demonstrated participants’ differentiation from them. Meanwhile, participants’ translanguaging practice illustrated how they went between and beyond different languages dynamically and flexibly and how they constructed affiliation and disaffiliation toward cultural memberships (Zhu, 2015). Specifically, other than affiliated with language variety groups (e.g., Mandarin, Cantonese, English speakers) and region-of-origin groups (e.g., Chinese Mainlanders, Shandong) (, the adoption of English terms regarding academic study reflected their identity as

international students. This was consistent with Darwin's (2015) argument that the digital age has shaped users' language practices and provided them with dynamic ways of making meaning, as well as new opportunities to construct and represent identities.

In addition, participants demonstrated creative translanguaging practices. For example, when Jade updated Zoe on an argument among several CSS in a WeChat group, Zoe commented '喝点 Innocent 吧哥哥姐姐们 (have some Innocent brothers and sisters)' (Figure 33). Here Zoe suggested 'Innocent', a well-acknowledged British brand that produces fruit and veg drink products, would help people remain calm. Her comment added humour to the conversation and brought laughter.

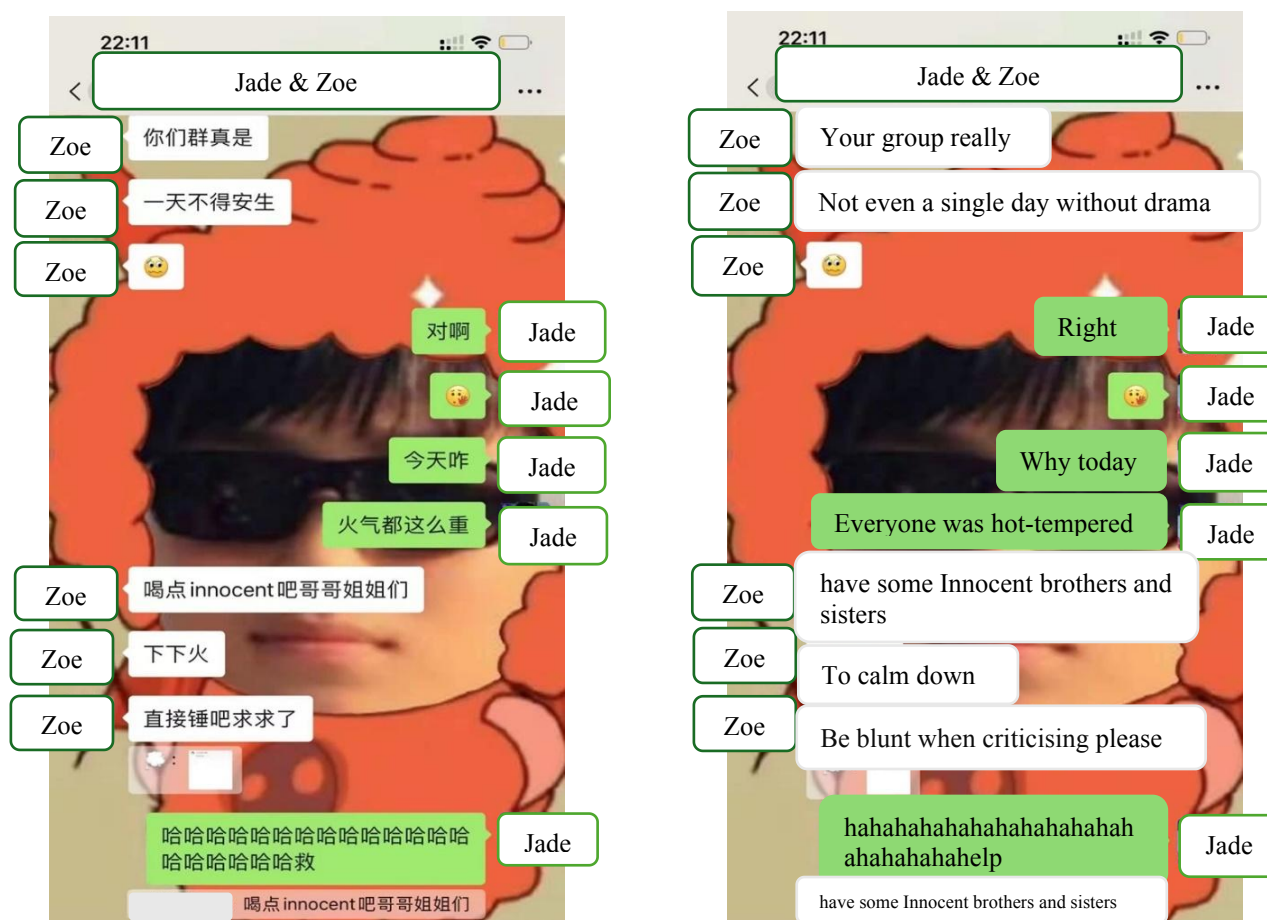


Figure 33:
Creativity Translanguaging Practice

Similar cases of 'ludic' language play in spontaneous peer conversations (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005) also involved other foreign languages.

4.4.4 Other Foreign Languages

Several participants mentioned using also French, Korean, and Japanese on WeChat. However, other than Aquarius who studied French in her undergraduate, others could not use these languages to communicate due to reported language unproficiency. Instead, they engaged in ‘language play’ for enjoyment and relaxation (Cook, 1997) to add exotic flavour and fun to the conversation. Aemon reported using Japanese occasionally when ‘打趣的时候大家用 (when we joke with each other)’ but her Japanese ‘没有说做专业沟通的那种程度 (was far from the proficiency of making fluent communication)’. Hal commented that she and one friend would ‘偶尔会 switch 日语一下, 对在某些特定的情况下讨论一些事情很酷 (occasionally switch to Japanese when discussing certain things, which is very cool)’. Elena also claims that if she interacted with her WeChat friends who were Japanese or Korean, she ‘would like to try some words I learned from films, movies or anime’.

For example, when recommending a nice local seafood restaurant to her friends (as illustrated in Figure 34), Jade used a serial of exclamation ‘哦莫莫哦莫莫哦莫莫 (omo omo omo, which means ‘Oh my God’, a Korean expression that was commonly used by middle-aged women (Nie, 2023))’ to express her excitement and disbelief dramatically. In response, her friend Zoe joked ‘本 Gucci 女到 (the Gucci girl is in)’ (referring to herself), representing the ‘ludic’ language play atmosphere. This verified the existence of language play in a virtual place. It also demonstrated that language play could occur among speakers with very basic language proficiency, which aligned with previous studies that often focused on language learning (see Bell, 2012; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Cook, 1997, 2000). However, different from studies that asserted language play benefited language learning or acquisition (Cook, 1997; Rampton, 2002; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005), no improvement in participants’ proficiency was reported, nor was more evidence on how they engaged with the language play, which opened the window for future research.

The discussion above about participants’ language use on WeChat highlights the multilingual nature of cyberspace, even on ethnic platforms. With Mandarin and Chinese dialects being prominently used on WeChat, participants strengthened their sense of affiliation to the national and ethnic identity as Chinese (Ganassin, 2017). Their use of English and other foreign languages showed flexibility in their adopting different language repertoires through translanguaging, and language play, which were overlooked in previous studies on WeChat. However, I argue that participants’ use of foreign languages on WeChat could not improve their proficiency due to limited opportunities for in-depth communication.

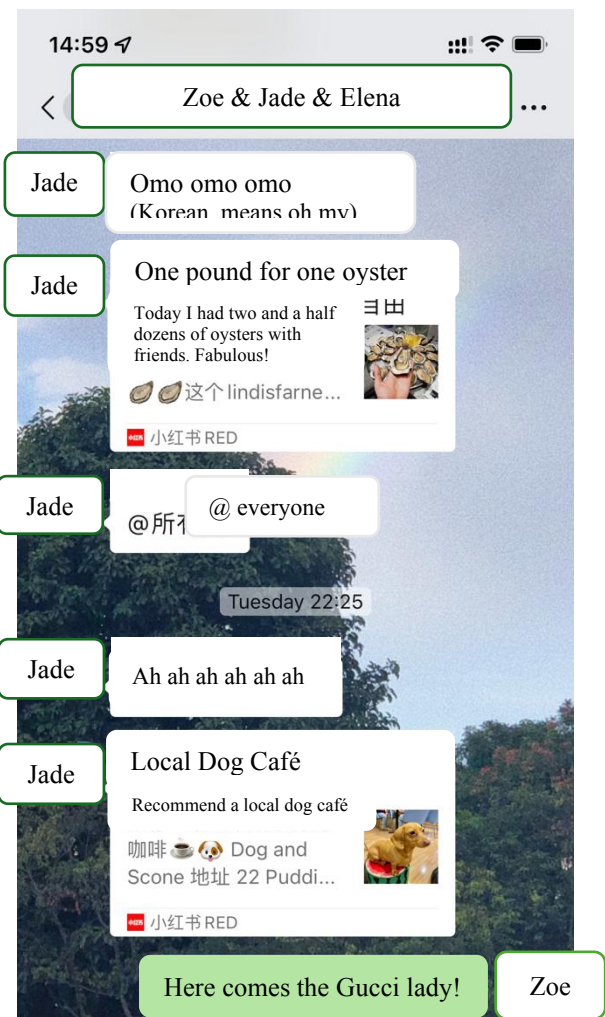


Figure 34:
Employing Multiple Languages in Conversation

After unveiling the under-researched linguistic aspects, the first three sections have presented thoroughly how CSS participants engaged actively with WeChat. The next section focused on the often-overlooked aspect of this virtual world that participants tried to avoid.

4.5 The Unwelcome Interlopers

The last theme *the Unwelcome Interlopers*, focused on the ghostwriters and scammers that often posed disruptions to participants' sojourning, both in the virtual world and real life.

4.5.1 The Ghostwriters

Ghostwriters, more commonly known as ‘代写’ by participants, refer to individuals or agencies providing contract cheating services. When talking about their WeChat use experiences, several participants complained about the ghostwriters who would guise as students' CSS peers and then harass

them to promote their services. Aquarius explained that these ghostwriters usually got access to her WeChat account through various WeChat groups:

群里会有各种人来加你。他们其中很大部分都是代写，但是他们会伪装一下，就是说‘同学我是哪个学院的，然后也是 XX 大学的，可不可以认识一下’。但是我加了以后，然后发现他们就会给我发一些要代写的一些信息。

Various people add you through those groups. Most of them are ghostwriters, but they disguise themselves, saying, ‘Classmate, I am from XX school, and we are in the same university. Can we get to know each other?’ However, after I added them, I found that they only intended to send me information about ghostwriting.

Aemon had similar experiences. She concurred that the ghostwriters ‘经常会伪装成你同学什么的去加你 (often disguised as your classmate to add you (via WeChat))’, which was condemned by members in groups. Zoe, for example, noted that: ‘你出来读书就自己学，没有必要去找代写 (you came abroad to study so you should not hire ghostwriters)’. Another participant, Jade, also showed her disbelief and contempt when talking about a classmate who paid ghostwriters to do all her assignments:

她申请读博士，结果她之前的论文全部都是找代写，还挂了两科。...然后她还读博。救命!

She applied for a PhD, but all her previous assignments were written by ghostwriters. Despite this, she failed two subjects... And she wants to do a PhD. For God’s sake!

Their comments on how ghostwriters could easily access CSS on WeChat evidenced that ‘the contract cheating industry...is evolving’ (Lancaster, 2019, p.7), with many individuals and companies using social media to encroach into users’ cyberspace to recruit potential customers (Bidgoli & Grossklags, 2017). This underlined the privacy issues that were also reported in previous studies (Chen et al., 2022). Moreover, given that cyber harassment has been identified as one form of cybercrime (Almadhoor et al., 2021), these ghostwriters’ marketing strategies and conduct on WeChat were not only unethical but also illegal and thus need more institutional regulation. Though none of my participants reported hiring ghostwriters and some demonstrated disapproval towards cheating behaviours, their observations on the frequent emergence of ghostwriters and the easy accessibility of such paid essay writing services on WeChat warned us how CSS’ academic integrity could be hazarded if they are not diligent. Therefore, instead of treating WeChat as merely students’ personal space, I would argue that higher education institutions need to be aware of the evolving cheating industry in cyberspace of WeChat and its potential threat to students’ academic integrity.

4.5.2 Scammers

Other than ghostwriters, two participants warned other CSS of scammers who posed risks to their financial security and psychological well-being. Despite the very small number of interviewees highlighting this phenomenon, the two cases being shared were so alarming that I kept it as a sub-theme. Specifically, Walter was once scammed of ¥7,000-8,000 (approximately £1,000 according to the exchange rate at that time). Walter explained that the scammer was a ‘so-called’ travel agent who disappeared after taking his money for flight tickets. To warn others, Walter shared his experiences, especially how he knew and then trusted the scammer:

在新生群里加(一个人)了, 然后他介绍的票代, 飞机机票票代。当时我们来英国的机票就是他帮忙订的, 所以说也算是有过合作, 然后合作性也挺愉快的。

I added one person through the newly admitted students' WeChat group, and then he introduced me to a ticket agent, a flight tickets agent, who helped us book the tickets (from China) to the UK. Therefore, we cooperated before, and the cooperation was quite pleasant.

Walter's case was not isolated. Aemon shared another shocking incident where one of her friends was scammed out of over ¥800,000 (approximately £90,000):

他一开始好像被骗了 30 万, 但是他整个人已经陷到骗局里面去了, 他还瞒着家里跟家里要了 40 多万这样又给人家转过去。...就被骗了 80 多万。很大的, 我当时听到也吓了一跳。

Initially, it appeared that he was scammed of ¥300,000 (approximately £35,000), but he had already fallen for the trap, so he even kept it hidden from his family and requested another ¥400,000 (approximately £45,000), which he then transferred to them (scammers). ... He was swindled out of over ¥800,000 (approximately £90,000) in total. It was a huge amount, and I was shocked when I heard about it at the time heard of it.

Both cases exemplified the danger of scams, one of the unlawful actions in cybercrimes (Almadhoor et al., 2021). Walter and Aemon condemned the audacity and cruelty of the scammers but were saddened by the fact that tracing the money back was very difficult due to various reasons. According to them, lack of information regarding the scammers' identity, complexities within cybercrime jurisdiction, intricate procedures involved in case investigation, as well as the tremendous time and energy needed in the process were the main challenges victims faced. In fact, Walter found after being scammed that he did not have any accurate information about the agency's identity since they had been ‘一直是微信上联系, 然后没有跟他见过面什么 (contacting each other on WeChat,

never met in person)’. Then he tried to call the Chinese police in Shanghai for help as a registered residence, but he was saddened that he ‘没法报案 (could not report the case)’ considering both his current place of residence and the site of the crime were not in Shanghai. This was not rare considering inconsistency of laws and regulations makes it especially difficult for cross-national cooperation when investigating cybercrimes (Broadhurst & Chang, 2012). As a result, Walter’s case was ‘不了了之 (let unsettled)’. Grieved, Aemon acknowledged that many victims like Walter had no other choices. She commented that ‘就算最后追回你也是自己要很坚定的意志以及要走很多程序的 (even if you can trace the money back in the end, you need to be very persistent and determined and must go through a lot of procedures)’. Both cases presented the vulnerability of CSS facing the challenges of cybercrimes and that WeChat is not a safe digital space.

In essence, the disruptions caused by ghostwriters and scammers in participants’ experiences highlighted the security issues in cyberspaces and demonstrated how social media platforms like WeChat could be used for unlawful actions and thus have the potential for ‘destruction’ as well as construction (Almansoori et al., 2021, p. 615). Such destruction could impose threats on their privacy and academic integrity and might cause financial loss accompanied by mental issues such as stress and anxiety. All these alarming hazards in CSS’ sojourning experience enriched our understanding of the destructive aspects of CSS’ WeChat use, which have not received adequate academic attention. In addition, these findings give reference to CSS to be cautious about how to use WeChat to avoid these problems.

4.6 Summary

This chapter centres on four distinct themes regarding participants’ WeChat utilisation in their daily sojourning experiences. Section 4.1 demonstrated participants’ high WeChat use intensity evidenced by their WeChat behaviours (high use frequency and long use hours (4.1.1)) and attitudes (profound reliance on WeChat (4.1.2)), verifying previous literature in proving the prominent and ubiquitous role of WeChat in participants’ social media use (Pang, 2018; Park, 2016; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019). Data showed that many participants demonstrated excessive WeChat use, and some even showed signs of WeChat addiction such as compulsive behaviour and withdrawal symptoms when they could not access WeChat. This incurred various detrimental influences, including wasting time, neglect of the physical environment, sleeping problems, fatigue, lower functionality, and reduced independence (4.1.3). These findings depicted how important WeChat was for participants’ everyday lives on one hand, and how overuse could cause disruptions if users were not cautious of the time and energy being invested in WeChat.

Section 4.2 provided a comprehensive overview of how participants used different WeChat features and how they embedded these features in their daily lives, which had been significantly under-researched in current empirical studies. It has been discovered that participants used WeChat mainly for communication (with instant messaging and Moment features, 4.2.1), but also for entertainment (e.g., scrolling WeChat Moments, 4.2.2). In addition, they gained information from both their WeChat connections and WeChat publish accounts and enjoyed the conveniences of the Pay and Transfer features (4.3.3). Moreover, the findings revealed the complexity of participants' WeChat use: while many relied on it to maintain social connections, they also expressed concerns about privacy and felt overwhelmed by information overload. My findings on participants' adoption of WeChat features depicted how sojourners' WeChat behaviours changed in the context of the UK, which was different from the context of China (see Chen & Cheung, 2018; Verot, 2023).

Section 4.3 discussed the linguistic aspects of participants' social media behaviours, depicting how participants drew on different language repertoires on WeChat and made the online space multilingual. Mandarin was acknowledged as the dominant language (4.3.1), which showed a higher hierarchy over regional languages and reflected participants' language maintenance and social identities as both 'Mandarin speakers' and 'Chinese'. Chinese dialects were employed too (4.3.2), reflecting participants' affiliation to their region-of-origin groups (Li & Zhu, 2013). In addition, English was employed for both lingua franca and translanguaging (4.3.3). In addition, participants were found to engage in creative practices with English, namely signs of 'ludic' language play in spontaneous peer conversations (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). Such 'language play' for enjoyment and relaxation (Cook, 1997) was more observed when participants engaged with Other Foreign Languages on WeChat (4.3.4). With limited opportunities to practice and engage with more advanced expressions, participants were unlikely to significantly improve their proficiency in English and other foreign languages.

Section 4.4 *The Unwelcome Interlopers* discussed how Ghostwriters and scammers disrupted participants' online and offline experiences. The harassment of ghostwriters (4.4.1) raised participants' concerns about their privacy and demonstrated how 'the contract cheating industry...is evolving' (Lancaster, 2019, p.7). With many individuals and companies using social media to encroach into users' cyberspace to recruit potential customers (Bidgoli & Grossklags, 2017), such paid essay-writing services were found to be more accessible to participants on WeChat, a platform that all CSS participants relied on. In addition, cybercrimes such as harassment of ghostwriters and scams (4.4.2) exemplified the 'destruction' potential of social media (Almansoori et al., 2021). These findings

deserve more institutional attention to protect participants' privacy, address their academic integrity, and raise CSS' awareness of using WeChat cautiously.

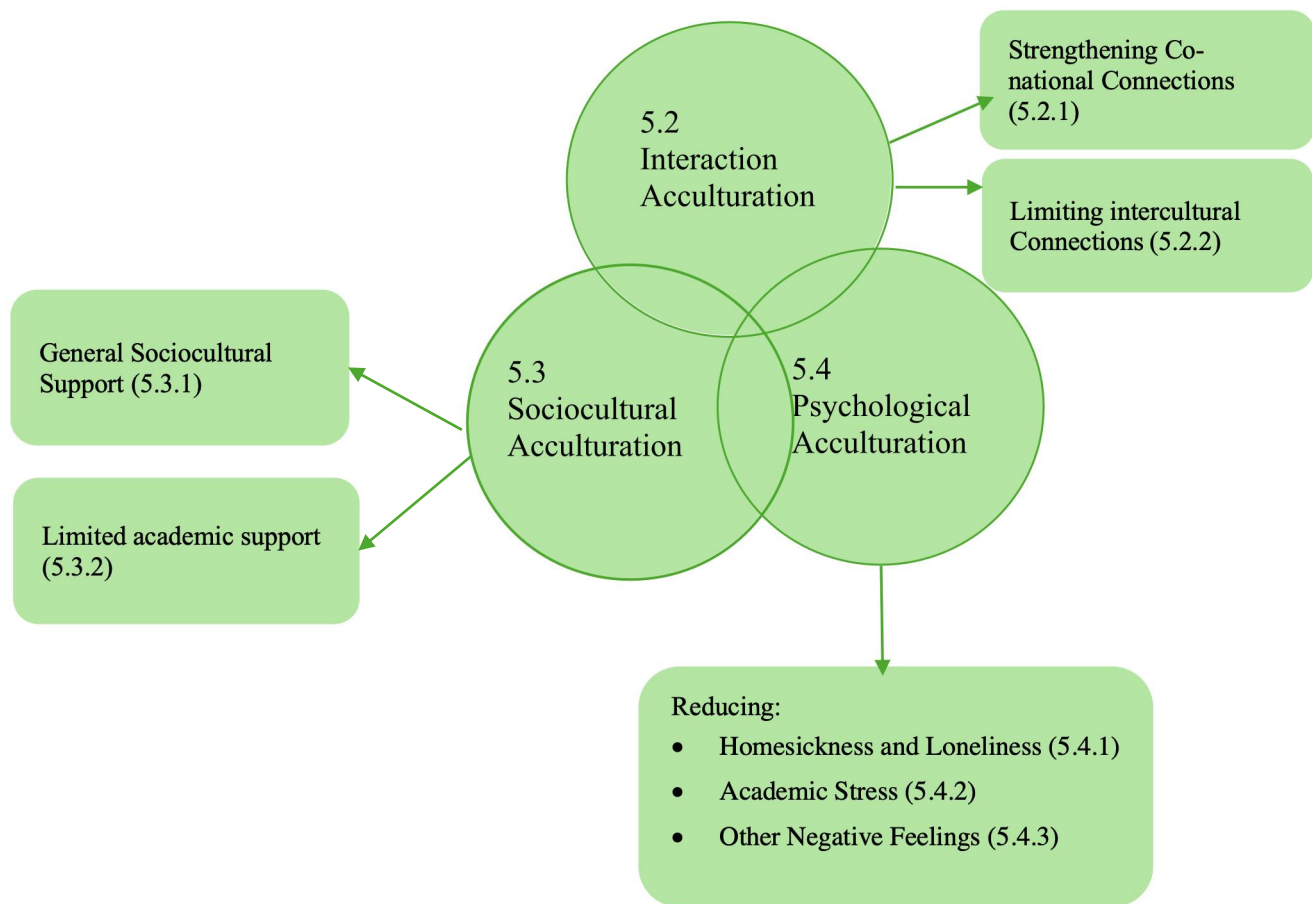
These four sections presented a holistic picture of how my CSS participants used WeChat in their everyday lives, which was scarce in the current literature. These findings not only answered my first research question but also provided an in-depth understanding of the social media behaviours of CSS participants on WeChat, which differed from those in the context of China.

Chapter 5. WeChat on CSS' Acculturation

5.1 Overview

This chapter addresses the second research question: What is the role of WeChat on CSS' acculturation? Key themes include CSS' *interactional acculturation* (5.1), *sociocultural acculturation* (5.2), and *psychological acculturation* (5.3). These themes were revealed from the textual-visual thematic analysis (TVTA) but were also grounded in the analytical framework of acculturation. As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), I adopted the acculturation model from the Mutual Intercultural Relations in Plural Societies (MIRIPS) project (Berry et al., 2022; Sam & Berry, 2010). According to the MIRIPS model, there are three types of long-term acculturation outcomes for individuals, namely psychological, sociocultural, and intercultural adaptation (Berry et al., 2022; Sam & Berry, 2006). In essence, *Psychological Adaptation* refers to affective outcomes of 'feeling well', *Sociocultural Adaptation* is usually situated within the behavioural domains and manifested by 'doing well', while *Intercultural adaptation* refers to individuals' capacity to build intercultural relations, namely 'relating well') (Berry, 2022). When conducting the thematic analysis (TA), I first focused on the interview data itself to look for codes and then I applied the MIRIPS module to categorise codes into sub-themes and themes.

Section 5.2 investigates how WeChat use influences participants' co-national social connections (5.2.1) and international ties (5.2.2), which were not limited to the virtual world but extended into their in-person communications. Section 5.3 focuses on WeChat's role in their general sociocultural acculturation to adapt to general living conditions and everyday life (5.3.1) and their academic studies (5.3.2). Section 5.4 focuses on WeChat's efficiency in providing participants with support in their psychological acculturation, which helped them to overcome various negative emotions such as homesickness and loneliness (5.4.1), academic stress (5.4.2), and others (5.4.3). After summarising key findings, Section 5.5 provides a comprehensive conclusion of the key findings and discusses the interrelationship among them. To make it more accessible to readers, key themes and sub-themes of this chapter can be found below in Figure 35.



35:

Themes and Sub-themes of CSS' Acculturation

5.2 WeChat and CSS' Interactional Acculturation

In this section, I will elaborate on two key themes extracted through the TVTA, namely WeChat helped participants strengthen co-national social capital (5.1.1) but limited their intercultural communication (5.1.2). To make the structure of this section clearer, themes and sub-themes, as well as some key codes were illustrated in Figure 36.

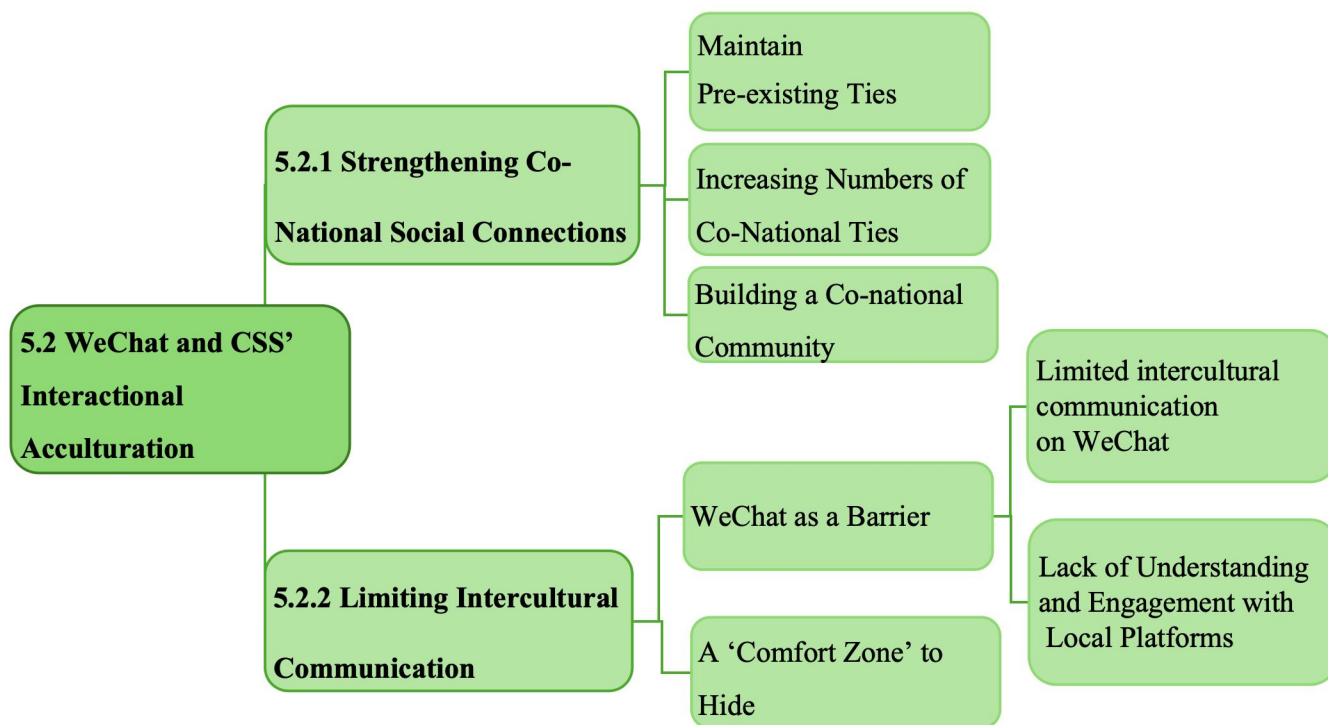


Figure 36:

WeChat and CSS' Interactional Acculturation

5.2.1 Strengthening Co-National Social Connections

All participants reported using WeChat to maintain their pre-existing co-national ties they already had before coming to the UK and further increased the numbers of their co-national ties during sojourning. Moreover, through WeChat, they managed to build a co-national community that was not only effective in the virtual world but also integrated with their everyday life.

Maintain Pre-existing Ties

Participants reached a consensus that WeChat served as a great platform to maintain their pre-existing connections free of geographical restraints, especially with their family and friends such as former college or high school classmates and teachers. Specifically, through WeChat, participants could update their daily lives with these pre-existing ties, discuss the latest experiences or perceptions, exchange news such as COVID-19-related regulations, and show care and affection to each other.

Consequently, they could ‘维持一下感情 (sustain relationship)’ (Shirley) and ‘保持着一个相对紧密

的一个联系 (maintain a rather close connection)’ (Hall). For example, Winston explained how he and his family used WeChat to maintain closeness:

微信让我们能够时常把一些生活中的事情和经历, 我在这边所看所见的能够及时和他们沟通。他们也能第一时间了解到我的身体状况, 我的生活状况, 我的学习状况。

WeChat enables me to communicate with them (parents) about my daily life, experiences, and what I see here. They can also get to know immediately my health condition, my life, and my learning status.

Aquarius added that though she was unable to go back to China to celebrate the Chinese Spring New Year, she received red envelopes on WeChat from her family members and relatives, which made her feel involved in the family festival celebration.

Similarly, Stephanie shared how WeChat supported her to maintain closeness with her friends. Initially, she was concerned that studying abroad for one year might make her and her friends distant from each other, but she found out that through contacting via WeChat regularly, their ‘感情可以像我出国前一样好 (relationships could remain as close as before I came abroad)’.

It needs to be noted that these pre-existing social connections included not only ones in China but also those who were currently studying or working in other countries. Sharing similar experiences of living and adjusting to lives in the new environments, participants and these pre-existing friendship networks were found exchanging and comparing their sojourning experiences. For example, Aquarius talked about having a middle school classmate who went to the US to study after graduation, with whom she regularly exchanged experiences of living in the UK and the US via WeChat. Likewise, several others mentioned connecting with either friends or relatives living in other countries (e.g., the US and Canada) through WeChat.

Increasing Numbers of Co-National Ties

Almost all interviewees highlighted that during their study in the UK, they greatly increased the numbers of their co-national social ties in the UK, including mainly peer CSS. For example, Aemon emphasised that the most significant benefit she gained from using WeChat was ‘扩大了我的交际圈 (expanding my social circle)’. She reflected that when she first came to the UK, she had ‘一无所有的, 你是孤身过来 (nothing, all but yourself)’ but with WeChat, she managed to ‘构建了自己的朋友圈 (built my friend circle)’.

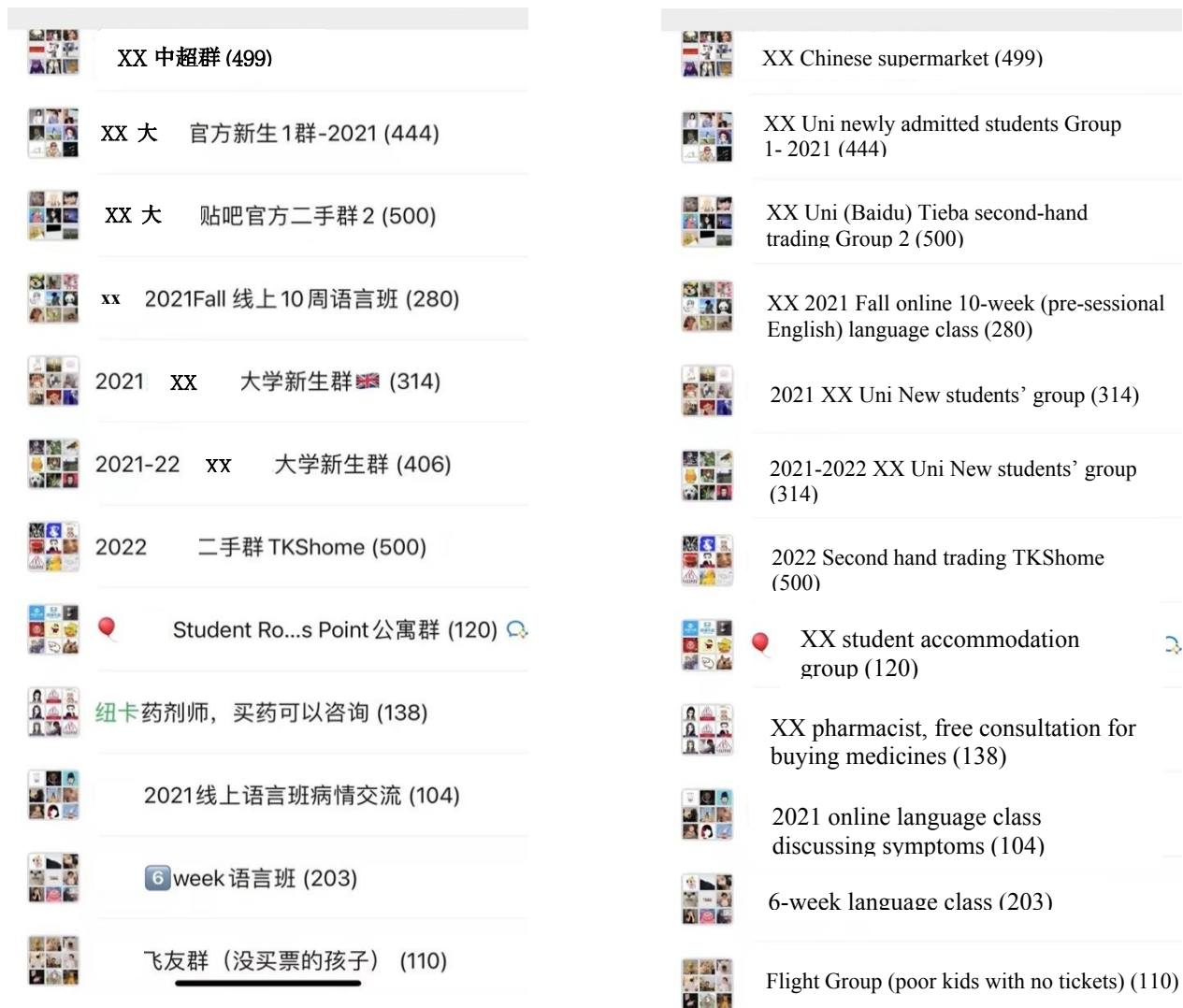


Figure 37:
Some of Jade's Local WeChat Groups

Participants reflected that they increased their new co-national ties on WeChat either through adding people directly to their contact list to become each other's WeChat friends or through joining various WeChat groups. According to their self-report, nearly half of the participants added over 50 WeChat friends living in the UK, with a maximum number of over 100. Meanwhile, members in WeChat groups were so large and ever-changing that all participants struggled to evaluate the exact numbers. However, through the screenshot of some local WeChat groups Jade joined (Figure 37), it could be observed that there were thousands of people she could connect with. These included three

groups for newly enrolled CSS (499, 314, and 406 members respectively), two second-hand trading groups (500 members respectively, the maximum capacity), an accommodation group (120), and so on. Jade explained that like many other CSS, she joined multiple groups. Therefore, the members of these groups were overlapping, making the overall number of her connections nearly impossible to evaluate. But overall, in these groups, Jade could communicate with thousands of co-nationals who were based in the same city. Aemon concluded that through WeChat, ‘你认识了更多更优秀的人...更多新的人 (you've gotten to know more outstanding people... new people).’

Building a Co-national Community

With the very large numbers of co-national ties WeChat enabled, participants built a co-national community that was not only efficient in virtual life but also deeply integrated with their everyday lives. On one hand, participants reported sharing and discussing their real-life activities and experiences or seeking help from the Chinese community on WeChat. On the other hand, WeChat enabled participants to organise real-world meetups with their co-nationals. As a result, WeChat became a ubiquitous part of many participants’ sojourning lives.

CSS peers comprised a vital position in such a co-national community. This was not only evident with the large number of CSS in participants’ various WeChat groups and contact lists but also the frequent online and in-person interactions. As Nick explained, ‘每天不管是日常生活还是学习上面的，肯定会跟同学有很多的交流 (every day, in terms of both daily life and study, I surely communicate a lot with classmates)’. For example, Aquarius talked about arranging travel plans or whether to go to classes together with coursemates via WeChat while Winston elaborated on how the peer interactions covered various aspects of his study abroad experiences. See his comments below:

和朋友可能聊的更多是学习侧重会更多一点，然后涉及一些新闻观点。比如说我们对时下的一些事件会有一些讨论，然后平时生活化的东西也有，比如说小到我们去哪吃饭，大到去哪旅游...包括定一些机票住宿这些都会(聊)。

With friends, we might talk more about study-related topics and perspectives towards news. For example, we discuss current events. And everyday life matters, ranging from where to eat to where to travel... as well as planning things like booking flights and accommodations.

Previous studies claimed that international students experienced severe adjustment difficulties in coping with the sudden loss of previous resources and social support (Brown, 2008; Brown & Holloway, 2008a, 2008b). However, I discovered that with the development of technology and the increased popularity of WeChat, my participants used WeChat as a powerful tool in strengthening their co-national capital. This aligned with more recent empirical studies (Cao et al., 2018; Pang, 2018) that

underlined the significance of WeChat in maintaining pre-existing social connections in the home country and creating and maintaining connections in the host country. The findings also verified the vital role of WeChat in sustaining a virtual community and promoting peer interactions and collaboration (Chen et al., 2022). In addition, my findings regarding WeChat's efficiency in building a community that integrated online and offline settings challenged Nie's (2001) assertion that excessive internet use would ultimately lead to lower general social capital by depriving people of face-to-face communication (La Greca & Lopez, 1998; Nie, 2001). Instead, the findings showed that participants' WeChat use enhanced both their online and offline co-national social support, which aligned with Wang et al.'s (2019) quantitative studies on 432 undergraduate and graduate Chinese students in the context of China.

Compared to its efficiency in keeping participants connected with co-nationals, WeChat was found to be less beneficial in strengthening their international ties.

5.2.2 Limiting Intercultural Ties

Interview data showed that using WeChat limited their chances of communicating with intercultural ties, which challenged the previous assertions that WeChat supported international students' social integration (Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019). Two key sub-themes supporting this claim are *WeChat as a barrier* and a *'comfort zone' to hide from intercultural communications* (both online and in-person).

WeChat as a Barrier

Most participants showed awareness that the employment of different social media platforms had become a barrier between CSS and their foreign peers, leading to unsatisfactory intercultural communication. On one hand, participants confessed that there were very limited chances of having intercultural communication on WeChat. On the other hand, reliance on WeChat resulted in low motivation to navigate host social media platforms that they were not familiar with.

Limited intercultural communication on WeChat

Participants reported having intercultural ties on WeChat, including international students from other countries (such as Japanese, Thai, Philippines, or Malaysians), former foreign language teachers who used to work in China, and Chinese overseas such as '美籍华裔 (American Chinese)' and '当地华人 (local Chinese)'. However, the numbers of such international ties were very few (less than 10 on average). Nick explained that this was because WeChat served as an 'internal app for only Chinese'. He added that 'the UK students seldom use WeChat' and Ameen explained that they '肯定还是有他们

固有习惯用的东西 (definitely have stuff they were accustomed to using)’. Sharing similar views, Shirley commented that:

我几乎加的国外的同学都用 WhatsApp, 所以用微信的频率去加国外的同学并不是特别高。因为很少有国外同学就是说会特地用微信去加你。

Almost all of my international classmates use WhatsApp, so I don't often use WeChat to connect with them. This is because it is rare for international classmates to add you specifically on WeChat.

In addition, participants reported having either no interactions or very shallow ones with them. For example, Shirley illustrated that there was ‘没有什么过多的交流, 就完全跟...跟中国的同学肯定是不能比的 not much communication (with her foreign friends), which was completely... incomparable to interactions with Chinese students’. Likewise, Ameon stated that she and her foreign colleagues ‘偶尔说一下工作事项, 或者是过年过节祝福一下 (occasionally talk about work or send greetings during the Chinese New Year or other festivals)’ but nothing more than that.

Lack of Engagement with the Host Social Media Platforms

Though many mentioned using host platforms such as WhatsApp to communicate with cultural others, reliance on WeChat resulted in a lack of engagement with other platforms. This aligned with previous studies (Chang et al., 2012; Chang & Gomes, 2017; Kim & Chang, 2021; Gomes, 2015; Tu, 2018) that warned us about international students’ preference for the pre-existing digital environment and unwillingness to adapt to the new ones. For example, Jade claimed that ‘我觉得微信比 WhatsApp 要好太多 (I think WeChat is way much better than WhatsApp)’. However, when asked to specify, Jade confessed that she was not sure: ‘我对于 WhatsApp 的功能不是很熟悉, 我觉得它的功能没有微信健全? 我不知道 WhatsApp 可不可以语音 (I was not familiar with the functions of WhatsApp, I think its functions are not as rich as WeChat? I don’t know if you can make calls with WhatsApp)’. After I informed her that WhatsApp enabled both video and audio calls, she concluded that ‘我们对于微信更熟悉, 更习惯于去用微信 (we are more familiar with WeChat and more accustomed to use WeChat)’. Similarly, Lexie reflected on her social media choices and behaviour and then concluded that her reliance on WeChat only resulted in a barrier to facilitating intercultural communication:

(微信)让我产生一种惰性, 就是我不想去探索一些比如说 WhatsApp。虽然我有它那个号, 可是我就很少用它, 去问一下外国朋友说‘要不要加一下你的 WhatsApp’这种就

感觉。没有那种使用外国软件去的那种意愿，因为觉得‘你没有微信啊，那就算了！’就那种感觉。

(WeChat) made me lazy, namely I don't want to explore things like WhatsApp. Although I have an account, I rarely use it or have the urge to ask foreign friends 'Do you want to add WhatsApp?' I have no desire to use foreign software since 'If you don't have WeChat, then never mind!' That's how I feel.

Consequently, participants observed a lack of engagement with the host platforms. Anne claimed that compared to WeChat, she ‘在 Instagram 上面加的外国人也多一些，但是我不怎么用它聊天 (added more foreigners on Instagram, but I barely use Instagram to chat). Winston highlighted that his use of host platforms had increased, but his social media use ‘还是以微信为主，大概时间分配可能是 6:4 (was still dominated by WeChat, with the approximate time allocation being 6:4)’.

A ‘Comfort Zone’ to Hide from Intercultural Communication (both Online and In-person)

Many participants highlighted that WeChat had created a ‘舒适圈 (comfort zone)’ with ‘Zero pressure’ that inhabited their motivation to engage with cultural others. Mathew explained that the ‘pressure’ he talked about refers to ‘the risk of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the foreigners’. Phoebe and Shirley, whereas, talked about lacking confidence in their language proficiency. As a result, Shirley confessed that she developed an ‘逃避的感觉 (avoidance tendency)’ when communicating with ‘本地人 (the locals)’. She would only ‘被逼无奈去跟他们交流，而不是说我主动自愿甚至积极的 (interact with them when she had to, rather than doing it voluntarily or actively)’. In addition, Walter exemplified how having different lifestyles and personal COVID-19 prevention measures discouraged him from socialisation with cultural others:

他们不管是吃还是玩什么的，我都很不喜欢很不习惯，比如他们就可能娱乐就是开 party 喝酒什么的。我又不爱喝酒，又不爱闹腾，反正我想融入也融不进去。而且现在是因为特殊的背景疫情情况下，然后他们外国人就是不喜欢戴口罩，所以说更不敢去跟他们去多接触。

I really don't like or get used to whatever they eat or play. For example, their idea of entertainment might be having parties and drinking alcohol. I don't like drinking or noisy activities, so I find it hard to fit in even if I try. Also, given the special circumstances of the pandemic, they, being foreigners, don't like wearing masks, which makes me even more hesitant to interact with them.

This concurred with Schartner's (2013) claim that international students demonstrated reluctance to initiate interactional engagement.

In contrast, due to users' common language background, national identity and ethnic backgrounds, and shared difficulties with co-nationals (Schartner, 2014), many perceived WeChat as a virtual place that was free of linguistic challenges or cultural differences. Namely, Phoebe and Mathew were able to communicate in Mandarin and Walter felt more comfortable interacting with those who shared '生活背景生活环境都一样, 所以大家三观什么的高度一致 (same life backgrounds and environments thus our worldviews and values are highly consistent)'. Consequently, many acknowledged their indulgences in the safe space created by WeChat though they also reported dissatisfaction with their lack of intercultural communication. Phoebe explained such contradiction was a consequence of '待在舒适圈, 待习惯了, 跳不出来了 (staying in the comfort zone, and getting too used to it to jump out)'. Nick summarised that using WeChat 'somewhat hinders cultural communication'. Lexie elaborated that:

有些时候我觉得好像微信用太多了... 交际圈好像都是中国人的那种感觉。因为感觉跟英国的中国同学连接更深了之后, 你可能自然而然身边的朋友就都是中国人, 可能没有什么外国朋友。

Sometimes I feel like I use WeChat too much... it seems that my social circle consists mostly of Chinese. Because I formed deeper connections with Chinese classmates in the UK, naturally most of your friends are Chinese and you might not have many foreign friends.

Thus, almost all encouraged the newcomer CSS to reduce WeChat use so they could explore other platforms and make more friends from different cultural backgrounds. As Hal suggested, CSS should '不要太依赖微信 (stop relying on WeChat)' and '走出你的舒适区 (go out of your comfort zone)' to have meaningful intercultural communications, both in-person and online. See her comments below:

我觉得既然来留学, 你不光是在学习, 你也是在这边生活, 所以要试着去可能融入一下这边的生活, 然后走出你的手机在外面跟大家有一些线下的交流, 所以你不要太依赖微信, 光在跟你的国内圈子聊天, 你永远没有去走出你的舒适区。

I think since you've come to study abroad, you're not just here to study but also to live. So, you should try to integrate into the local life and keep away from your phone to have some offline interactions with people here. Therefore, don't rely too much on WeChat. If you only chat with your Chinese circle, you'll never step out of your comfort zone.

So far, we have discussed how WeChat supported participants in strengthening their connections with co-nationals but limited them from strengthening online and in-person international ties. These findings provided us with a comprehensive picture of WeChat's role in participants' interactional acculturation, which supplemented previous studies on WeChat (e.g., Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019) that failed to address its different role on these two types of interactional acculturation. In addition, these findings provided insights into participants' acculturation strategies. To be specific, participants reported reliance on their co-national capitals on WeChat and avoidance of cultural others on both local platforms and in-person interaction. Therefore, for many, WeChat served as a space (or as addressed by participants, the 'comfort zone') to hold on to their home culture (e.g., language, social and communication norms) and cultural identity. This was in line with Wang's (2018) research where she claimed WeChat strengthens maintenance to the Chinese culture. Wang's research adopted the quantitative method, while mine adopted the thick description of qualitative data that enriched insights into participants' interactional acculturation that was not only on WeChat but also on other virtual spaces created by the host platforms as well as in-person interactions. Meanwhile, participants showed reluctance to socially integrate into the host environment, confirming Schartner's (2013) claim. This issue was made more salient with WeChat providing CSS easier ways to avoid social integration. According to the acculturation strategy theories (Berry, 2008), participants manifested evidence of adopting the *Separation* strategy, which was criticised for not being as effective as the integration strategy (engaging both host and home cultural groups) in achieving successful adaptation (Berry et al., 2022). In 5.2.2, we have discussed multiple reasons for such segregation strategy such as linguistic difficulties, cultural differences, and different preferences towards social media choices. Considering my participants were only halfway through their study program when the data was collected, one more possible reason for their separation acculturation strategy is their length of stay in the host country since it also plays a big role in smooth intercultural transition (Berry, 1992).

These findings are valuable and fundamental in understanding other aspects of participants' acculturation since most sociocultural support and psychological support they gained on WeChat was from their social connections, especially their co-nationals. To be discussed in the next two sections.

5.3 WeChat and CSS' Sociocultural Acculturation

My research indicates that through WeChat, CSS gained tremendous support in their *general sociocultural acculturation* to adapt to general living conditions and everyday life (5.2.1) but *limited academic support* to adjust to the requirements of the new academic environment (5.2.1). Themes and sub-themes of this section are illustrated in Figure 38.

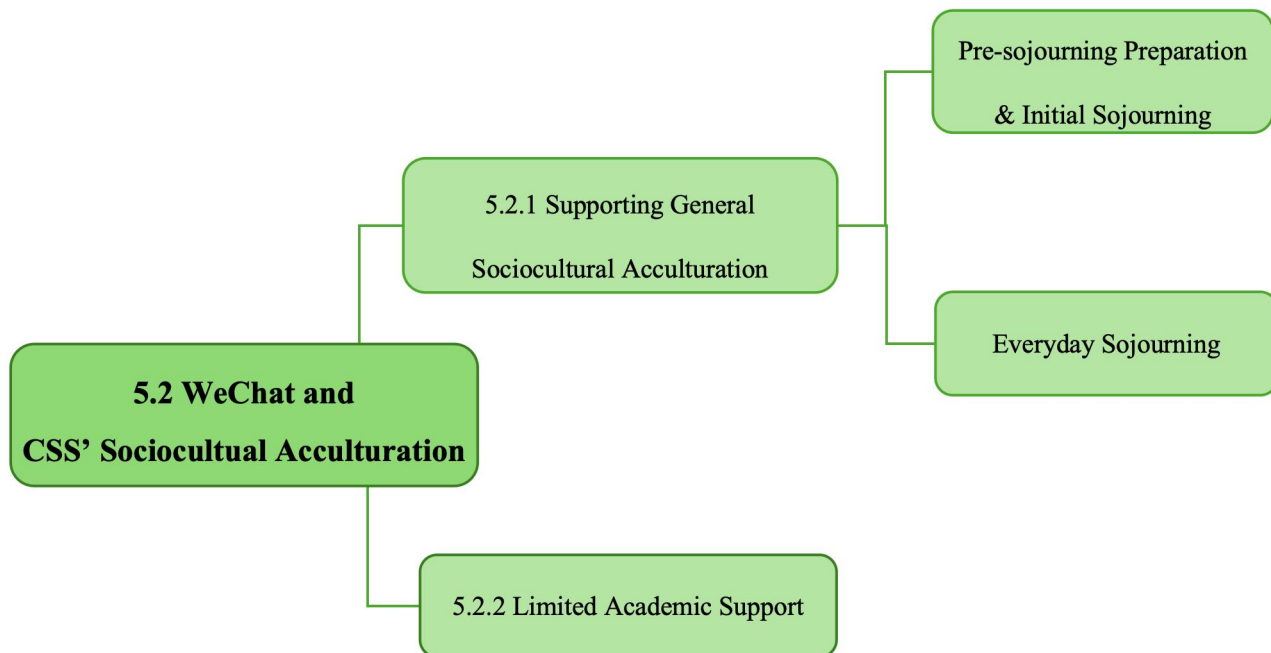


Figure 38:

WeChat and CSS' Sociocultural Acculturation

5.3.1 Supporting General Sociocultural Acculturation

All participants spoke highly of WeChat in providing them with general acculturation support. Such support covered different stages of their sojourning, initiating from their pre-sojourning preparation stage to their initial sojourning, and then integrating into their daily lives. This support was partially obtained from various Public WeChat Accounts and partially from participants' WeChat social connections, particularly their co-nationals.

Pre-sojourning Preparation and Initial Sojourning

To cope with the abrupt change of the environment and the challenges of adjusting, participants reported gaining comprehensive and instructive information from various WeChat Public Accounts they subscribed. Specifically, one public account named the Chinese Students & Scholars Association (referred to as CSSA) was spoken highly of by participants. Lexie highlighted that the CSSA provided

them ‘蛮多行前准备这方面的东西 (a lot of things regarding pre-departure preparation)’ that was helpful for her. Stephanie added that articles published by the CSSA were very instructive, since it ‘把所有信息集合发给我们了, 然后我们就只去看, 然后跟着操作就可以了 (comprised all information needed, so we just need to read then follow its instructions)’. She elaborated that the information included various ‘对于刚来英国的朋友就是一件很必要的事 (matters that are essential to those who newly arrived in the UK)’, such as how to ‘交学费, 住宿费, 办银行卡, 怎么挑选学生公寓 (pay tuition fee and accommodation fee, apply for a (local) credit card, pick student accommodation)’. To illustrate the functionality of the WeChat CSSA public account, Figure 39 presents its homepage and how it covered academic-related topics such as exam support, while Figure 40 presents several articles it published in May 2022, covering content related to ‘行前准备 (pre-departure preparation)’ that assist CSS with their arrival and accommodation arrangements.

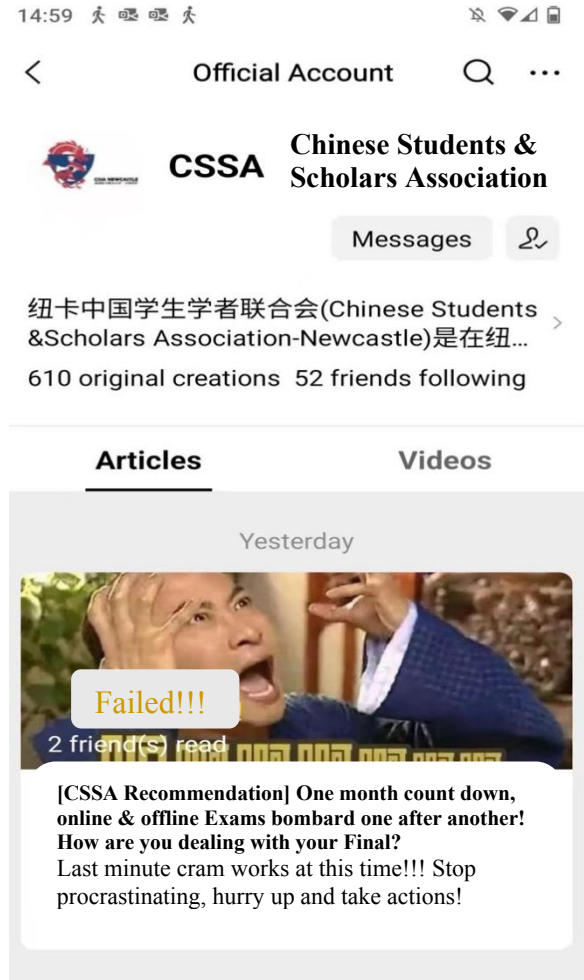
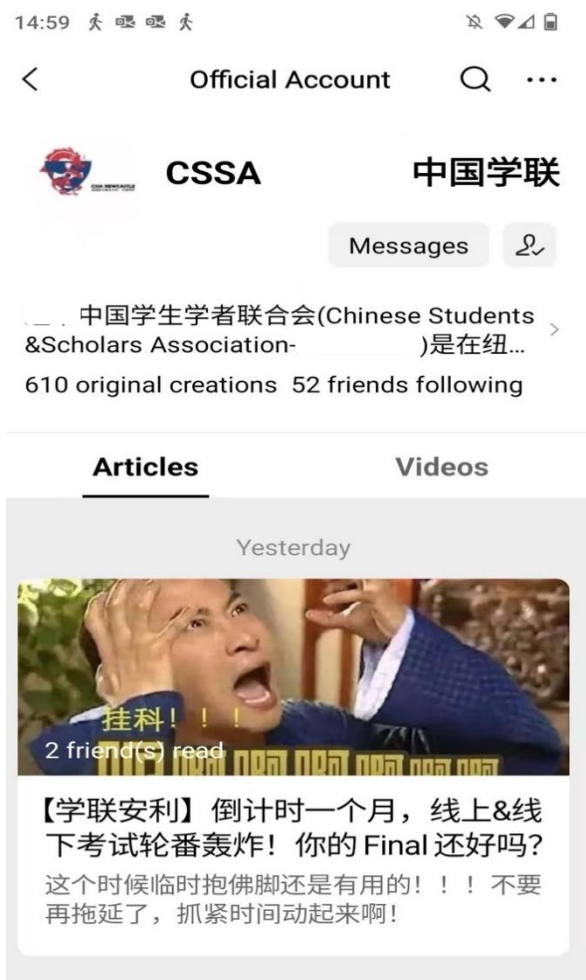


Figure 39:

Public WeChat Account of the Chinese Students & Scholars Association

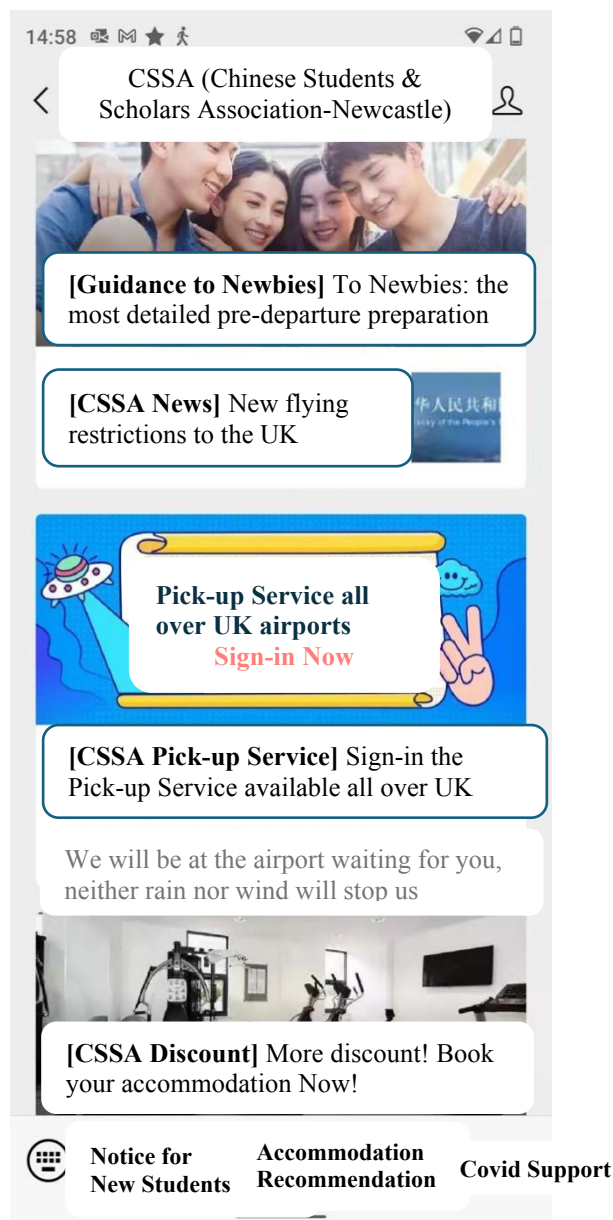


Figure 40:

Articles of Chinese Students & Scholars Association (CSSA) (May 2022)

The information gained from their CSS peers via WeChat also helped participants overcome sojourning challenges. Specifically, several (e.g., Ameen, Anne, Lexie) highlighted the importance of various ‘互助群 (groups that offer mutual support)’ they joined, where they gained more updated and instructive information. Aquarius elaborated that ‘比如说...新生群, 因为一开始不了解学校是怎样的, 然后会在群里面问各种问题, 然后会有人来解答 (for example... the Newly Admitted Students’

groups. We didn't know what the school was like at first, so we asked all kinds of questions in the groups, which were answered by others). Zoe explained that the information disseminated in these groups was contributed by many CSS peers, either new students like her or '学长学姐 (senior students)', who provided their personal experiences for others to refer to. Take paying tuition fees, for example, Zoe explained that:

比如说他们有的说今天开始可以交学费了, 哪里汇率更低, 就会有人在群里说。...有一些是新生本人, 他刚交完学费, 他就会告诉你他哪里交多少钱。不同的人就有好几个渠道, 都在群里发了之后, ...你就可以挑一个你觉得最好的。

For example, some of the students might remind us in (WeChat) groups that we can start paying tuition fees from today and where we can go to have a lower exchange rate... Some of them are new students who have just paid their tuition, and they will tell you where to pay and how much it is. Different people had different channels, and after they posted in the groups... you can pick the one that you think is best.

Likewise, Anne shared her experiences of finding her lost suitcase at the airport, which demonstrated how seeking information on WeChat could be both time and energy efficient. Specifically, shortly after they landed in the UK, Anne and 38 people (most of them being Chinese) who took the flight found that the flight company lost their luggage. They set up a WeChat group to '天天都在那里 update 那些行李的信息 (update information about luggage every day)'. After two weeks of waiting, Anne knew from the group that some managed to find their suitcases at the airport, so she went to try her luck. However, she made several phone calls and enquired to several staff members but '没得到什么有效信息 (did not get any useful information)'. Then she turned to one girl in the WeChat group, and with step-by-step instructions, she managed to find her suitcase (see Figure 41). When reflecting on the whole experience, Anna commented that '中国人爱抱团这件事有时候还是有帮助的 (the tendency of Chinese people to stick together can actually be helpful)', highlighting the significance of WeChat in building a small community of Chinese passengers that helped her solve problems efficiently.

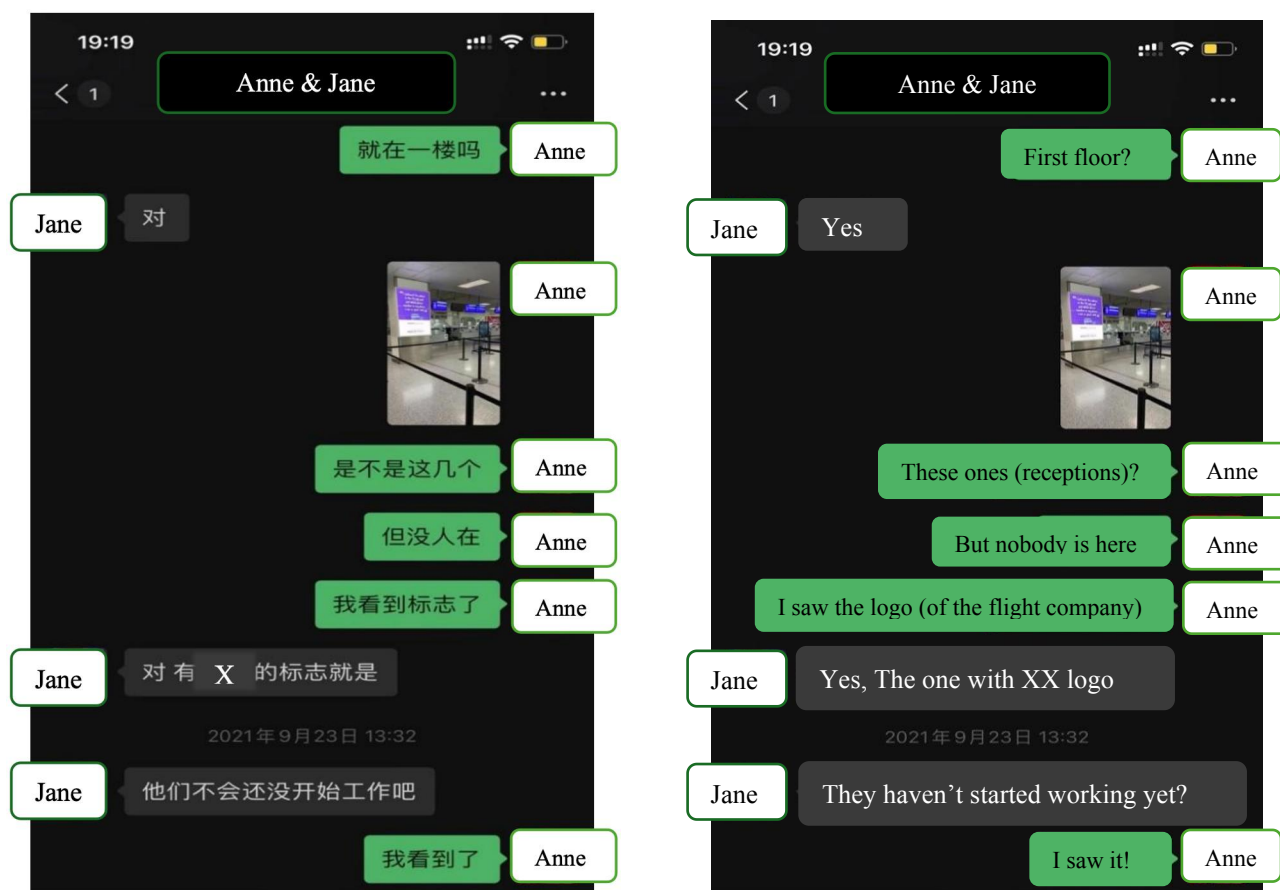


Figure 41:

Jane Providing Anne Step-by-step Guidance

Everyday Sojourning

After going through the difficulties in the early sojourning stage, participants continued gaining various information that helped them navigate comfortably with the local environments. Such information covered aspects of the local logistics, social events, and elaboration of local culture or history. Namely, different from the support regarding mostly ‘很必要的事 (very essential matters)’ in the previous stage, the general sociocultural support participants reported at a later stage of their sojourning was more about leisure and entertainment. For example, Nick inquired me how to get bus tickets via WeChat when planning for a daytrip, Mathew sought information about using the local pool facilities (see Figure 42), and Zoe’s friend recommended her local restaurants and café to explore (see Figure 43). Aquarius, whereas, reported that she was updated information about the facility maintenance and social events in the accommodation group:

比如说公寓洗衣机坏了，或者是一些各方面的问题。或者说公寓有没有谁想来哪个活动、哪个聚会什么的，然后他们也会在公寓(群)里面叫人。

For example, the washing machine in the apartment breaks down, or various other issues. Or inviting people to join an activity or a gathering in the apartment (group).

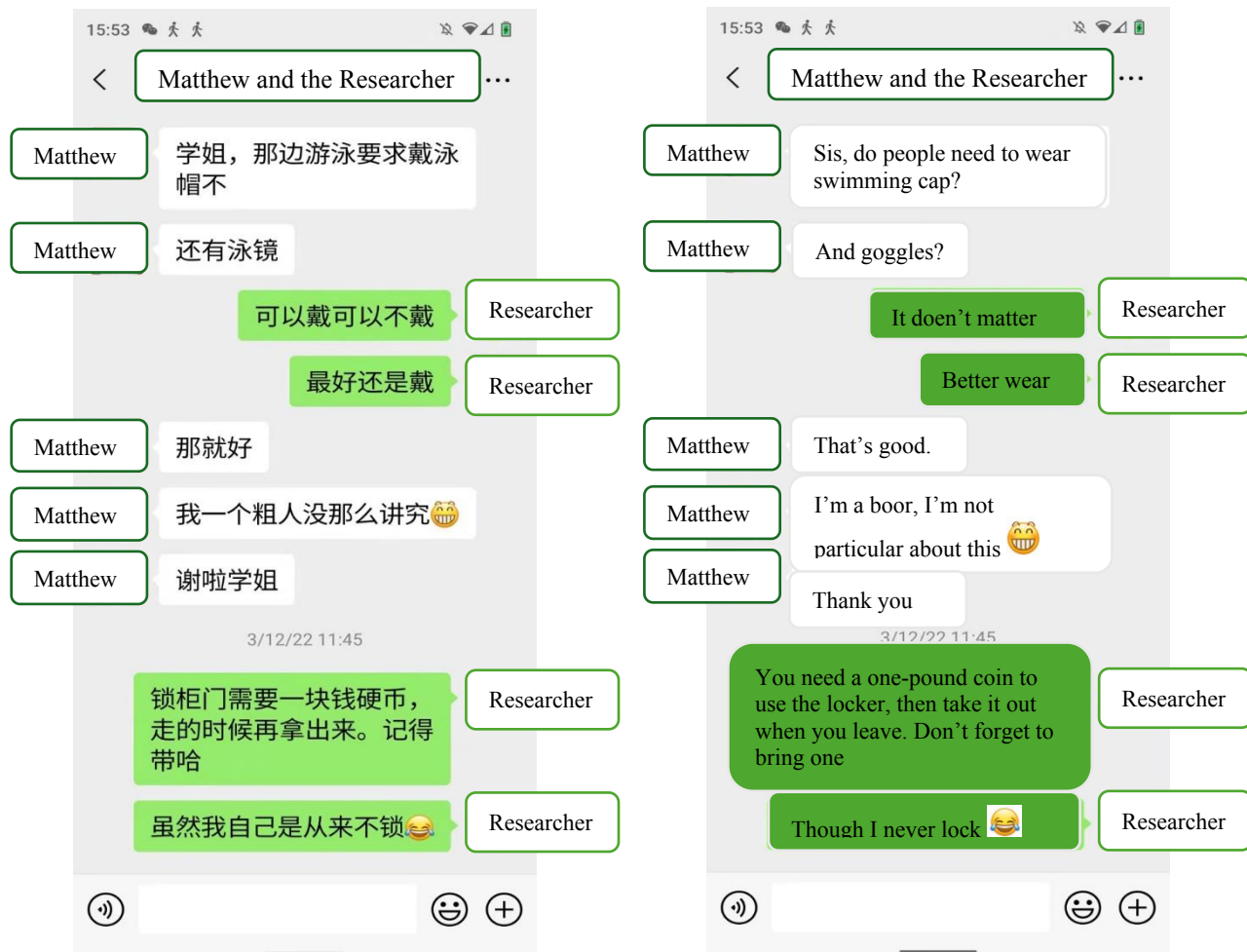


Figure 42:

Mathew Seeking Information about Local Pool Regulations

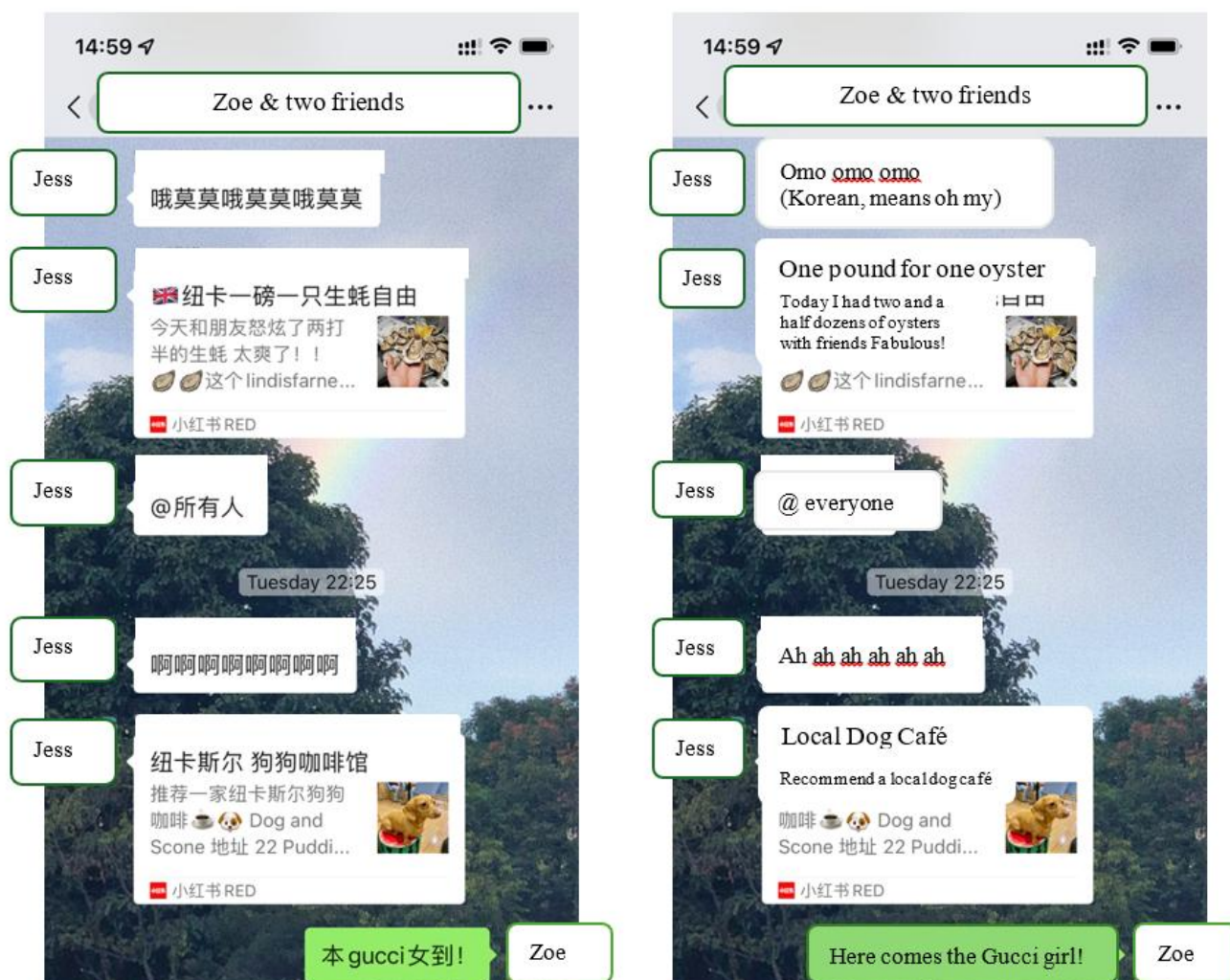


Figure 43:
Sharing Information about local Restaurants and Café

As a football fan, Winston added that conversations on WeChat also enriched his understanding of the local football culture. He said that:

在英国这边看球赛...我把这件事情分享给我国内这个球队的球迷，他可能会对你们当地的文化比我了解更多。虽然他没有来过这儿，但是他会...告诉我当时为什么会有人在球场唱这种歌曲，为什么会有人对另一个城市人这么有敌对感或者等等，都是一些城市背景化的普及。

I watched football matches in the UK ... I shared this experience with a Chinese fan of that team, and he might know more about the local culture than I do. Even though they have never been here, they can tell me why people sang certain songs in the stadium, why people

(fans of one city) showed so much hostility towards people from another city, and so on. These are all about the cultural backgrounds of the city.

The data above verified that social media platforms could serve as an information source (Chen et al., 2022; Hamid et al., 2016; Pascal, 2022; Sandel, 2014; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019). Moreover, participants reported gaining tangible assistance from their WeChat connections. According to Taylor and Friedman (2007, p.145), tangible assistance includes ‘services, financial assistance, and other specific aid or goods’. According to the interviews, some participants highlighted getting access to services which ‘解决很多生活上的需要 (addressed many daily needs)’ (Walter). Walter mentioned renting cards from the local businessmen and Jade talked about buying products not available in the UK from the ‘代购 (purchasing agencies)’ via WeChat. In addition, several mentioned gaining material support from their WeChat connections. For instance, Jade explained that due to the geographic adjacency and good rapport among members, CSS living in the same accommodation building was able to gain material support by seeking help in the accommodation group. See below:

确实是互帮互助! 大家群里缺什么, 然后直接在群里说, 然后就说: 我们门牌号是多少, 你直接过来拿就行了。

It is indeed mutual help! If we need anything, we can just say it in the group, and then (whoever has it) will tell you (his/her) room number and ask you to just go and get it.

In addition, Jade highlighted that when she needed some essential supplies, she could get them through the following information in the second-hand trading groups, a place where ‘很节省时间, 然后也可以认识朋友 (saved your time and let you meet friends)’.

These findings demonstrated that other than the information provided by one of WeChat’s functionalities – the public accounts, a lot of information and tangible assistance participants gained at different stages of their sojourning was provided by the powerful co-national community enabled by WeChat. This verified the social support theory that individuals could gain tangible assistance and information support that help them better understand stressful events and ascertain resources and coping strategies needed (Taylor, 2011). The findings discussed above also highlighted the efficiency of WeChat in enhancing participants’ *competence* to execute daily living activities in the host environment, enabling them to adapt to general living conditions and everyday life.

Evidence of information support and aspects of WeChat’s functionality also supported participants’ academic support.

5.3.2 Limited Academic Support

Several participants reported using WeChat for academic purposes, which aligned with previous studies (Cowley et al., 2017; Kim & Chang, 2021; Pascal, 2022). Specifically, several talked about checking class schedules, exchanging experiences of having different courses, confirming assignment deadlines and requirements, or discussing module group work with their CSS peers via WeChat. E.g., Figure 44 illustrates how Aquarius gained information about a selective module from her friend Mirra via WeChat.

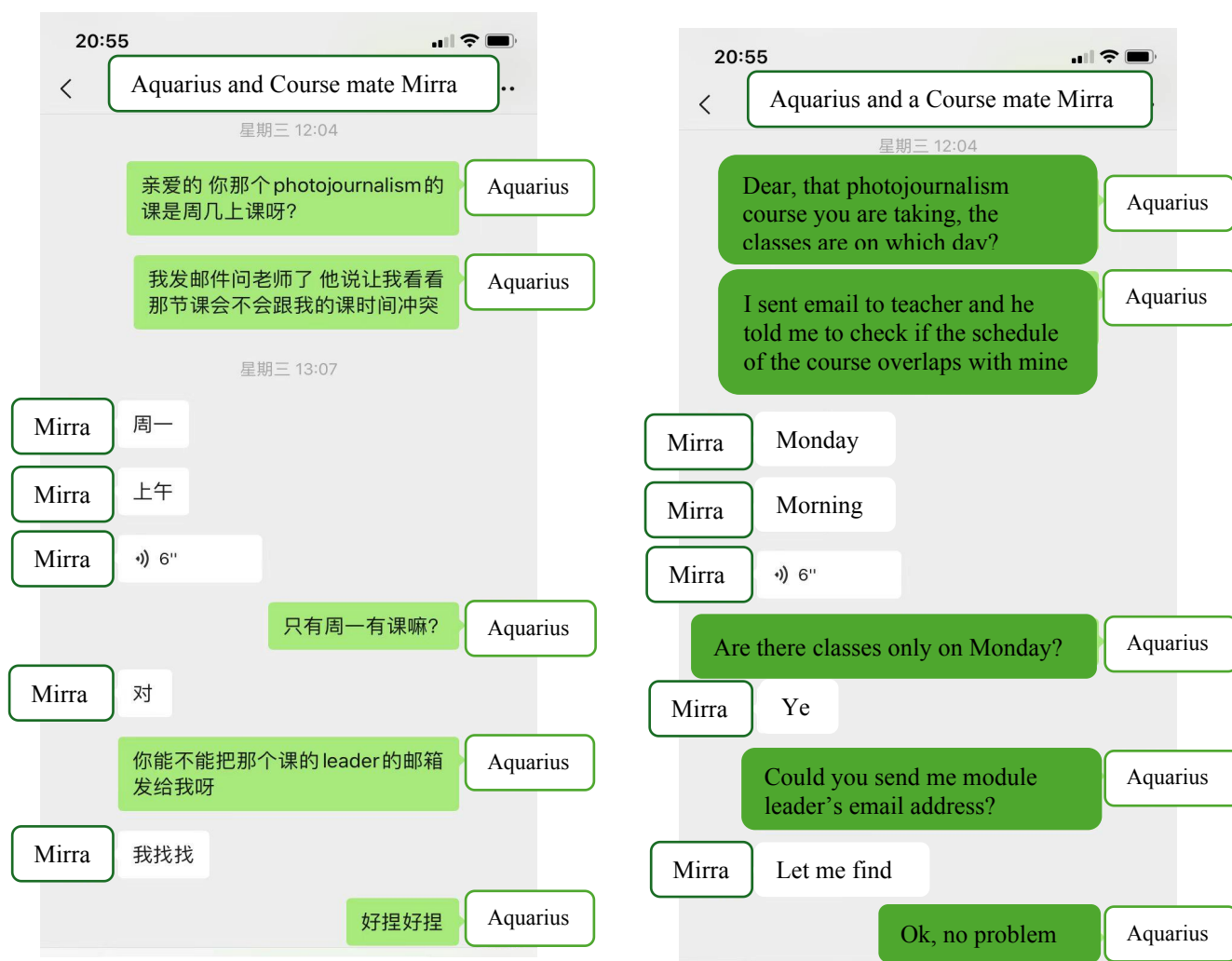


Figure 44:
Aquarius Gaining Information about a Selective Course

Several others mentioned using WeChat features for academic purposes. For example, Winston mentioned searching articles published by certain public accounts to ‘在写论文的时候会需要找一些论点 (to find some argument when writing reports)’. Walter commented he used WeChat transfer to

‘传文件什么，就是课件 Ppt，还有一些比如说我们共同完成的报告什么的 (send documents, such as lecture slides or reports that we accomplished together)’. Such use assisted participants’ academic life to some extent, or as Nick put it, these were ‘important’ in helping him ‘get a good grade’.

However, compared to the significance of WeChat in facilitating general sociocultural acculturation, support in participants’ academic acculturation was very limited. Such use could be problematic too. For example, regarding group work, several participants (Lexie, Walter, Phoebe) illustrated that they set up WhatsApp groups that more inclusively include local peers and other international students, but they and their CSS coursemates often ‘先在这边聊完了再去跟外国的组员再去谈 (firstly discuss here (on WeChat) before we go discussing with the foreign team members)’ (Lexie). This further verified that participants showed avoidance in discussing with people from different lingual and cultural backgrounds as discussed in 5.1.2. As a result, participants reduced engagement with the local academic environment. This challenged Cowley et al.’s (2017) research that noted the significance of WeChat in relieving communication barriers and enhancing engagement with the university. Considering Cowley et al.’s (2017) research focused on staff-led activities on WeChat, I assume that such a difference was due to a lack of staff involvement in my study.

In this section, 5.3.1 addressed how participants gained information and tangible help to adapt to general living conditions and everyday life, while section 5.3.2 discussed how participants gained limited academic support by sharing learning materials and discussing assignments in WeChat study groups. Based on Berry’s (2022) definition of sociocultural adaptation that addresses the behavioural domains and is manifested by the competence to execute daily intercultural living activities (namely ‘doing well’), I could conclude that using WeChat provided participants great support with their general sociocultural acculturation and limited support on their academic acculturation. However, it is worth noticing that in dealing with both everyday life activities and academic-related problems, participants were found to highly rely on WeChat and the Chinese community instead of solving the difficulties independently by engaging with the host community. This echoed our earlier findings that excessive use of WeChat could lead to reduced independence (4.2.3) and limit opportunities to have meaningful intercultural communication with international ties (5.2.2). This problematic issue related to WeChat raised intriguing questions regarding the acculturation theories, especially the definition of key terms such as sociocultural acculturation.

5.4 WeChat and CSS' Psychological Acculturation

Participants reported gaining great ‘心理上的帮助和支持 (psychological help and support)’ from their WeChat connections, which helped them reduce or release various negative emotions or stress and thus benefited their psychological acculturation. Specifically, three key sub-themes were revealed from the interview data, *overcoming homesickness and loneliness* (5.3.1), *reducing academic stress* (5.3.2), and *alleviating other negative emotions* such as anger, fear, or frustration (5.3.3). The structure of this section is illustrated in Figure 45.

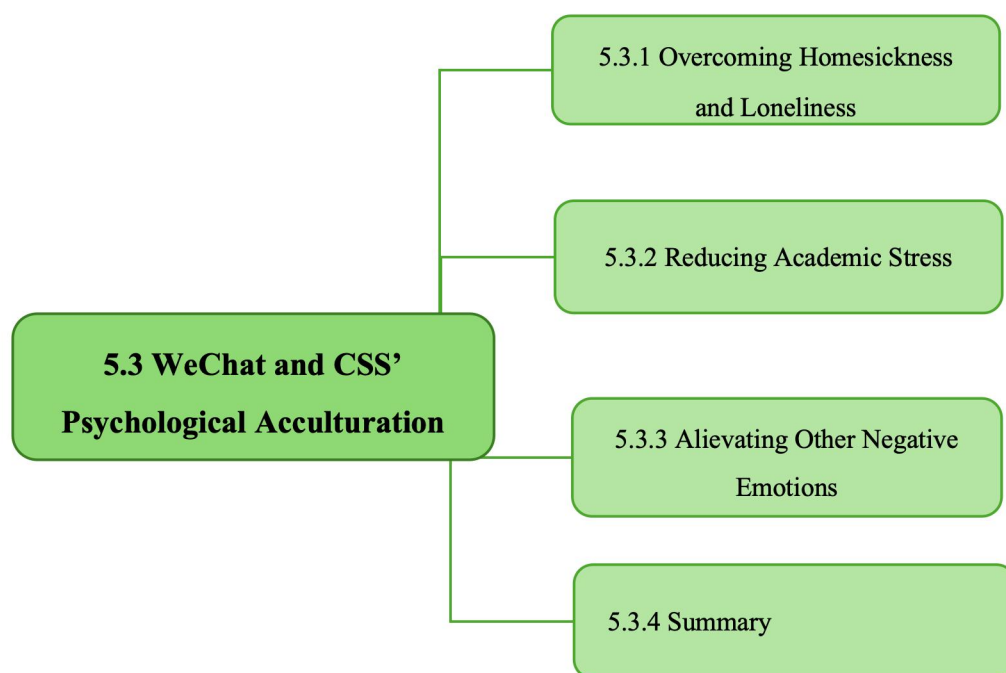


Figure 45:

WeChat and CSS' Sociocultural Acculturation

5.4.1 Overcoming Homesickness and Loneliness

Many expressed that with WeChat, they could interact with their close ones despite geographical distance, which eased their homesickness and loneliness. For example, Winston commented that WeChat serves as a bridge of communication between him and his family, which ‘让我和家人减少一些思念感 (makes me feel less homesick)’. Similarly, Stephane commented that the biggest benefit she gained from WeChat was to feel ‘不孤单 (less lonely)’. She explained that with

WeChat, she could interact with her parents and her friends in China, making her ‘就感觉好像你的朋友还在身边一样 (feel like your friends are still by your side)’.

Jade shared the same opinions. She made a comparison between her studying abroad life and that of her godmother who studied in the USA almost twenty years ago before WeChat became popular, emphasising how WeChat made a big difference in improving CSS’ experiences by releasing their loneliness and homesickness:

比如说我干妈...她当时就觉得很孤独。很可能当时没有微信这种很先进的应用程序, 然后就没有办法跟家里人沟通。...所以她那段时间在国外过得不是很开心。可是我出来之后, 我以为会在异国他乡那感觉到很彷徨, ...可是并没有那种感觉。

For example, my godmother... she felt very lonely at the time. It's probably because there were no very advanced apps like WeChat at that time, and she could not communicate with her family so back then, she was very unhappy during her time abroad. But when I came here, I anticipated feeling helpless in a foreign country, but I didn't feel that way.

Jade appreciated WeChat for making her feel that ‘家里人还是在身边 (my family is still by my side)’. She summarised that in terms of her psychological well-being, ‘微信还是对我有很大的帮助 (WeChat is of great help to me)’. Similarly, Nick confessed that when he arrived in the UK, he had no friends, but by using WeChat, he connected to other CSS in the UK, therefore ‘WeChat let me feel not alone’. These findings aligned with previous studies that highlight WeChat’s significance in helping CSS release loneliness and isolation (Chen et al., 2022; Pang, 2018; 2019).

5.4.2 Reducing Academic Stress

Many participants underscored that they addressed their academic stress on WeChat. For example, Shirley joked that during the assessment season, the WeChat moments of her CSS peers were full of ‘抱怨 (complaints)’. This echoed Chen et al.’s (2022) claim that CSS often used WeChat as an outlet to ‘rant’ about stress and many other negative emotions. However, participants highlighted that their stress was reduced by gaining comfort, encouragement, or company from their WeChat connections. For example, Jade exemplified how her friends in China provided her ‘很大的心理支持 (great psychological support)’ through WeChat when she was overwhelmed with academic stress:

赶作业的时候...然后有一天我真赶不下去, 我就赶得非常崩溃。...国内的朋友就直接一个电话打过来...我是熬大夜, 然后她一直打, 从凌晨 2 点一直打到早上 7 点我赶完, 就这么长时间。其实我们也不说话, 我们把电话开着, 然后就觉得给我很大的支持!

When rushing assignments towards deadlines... one day I really couldn't work, and I was devastated. ... My friend in China called me (using WeChat) ... I was staying up all night (to work on the assignment) and she was there the whole time, from 2:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. until I was done. It was such a long call. We didn't talk actually. We just kept the video call on, and then I felt she's given me so much support!

The silent support from this friend assisted Jade in overcoming her academic stress so she could finish her assignment on time. Similarly, when Phoebe found an assignment 'boring and stressful', she highlighted that 'by chatting with my friends, they help me to down my pressure and also improve my happiness' so she could be 'happier or relaxed'. Their cases showed us the process of emotion-focused coping, namely attempting to adjust emotions triggered by the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Meanwhile, several others added that their academic stress was alleviated by solving the academic-related problems with others' help on WeChat. Nick, for instance, revealed that in addition to the emotional support, he gained support in what Lazarus and Folkman (1984) addressed as problem-focused coping. Specifically, he would spend up to two hours with his friends when facing study difficulties so he could 'solve the problem', a process that helped him 'reduce anxiety about my study'.

The process of alleviating academic stress demonstrated both emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping, which aligned the stress and coping approach regarding how sojourners cope with their acculturation stress (Berry, 2008; Berry et al., 2022). More evidence of this process was also observed and illustrated in 5.4.3.

5.4.3 Alleviating Other Negative Emotions

Many interviewees revealed that sojourning experiences also triggered other emotional challenges such as anger, fear, awkwardness, uncertainty, and frustration, concurring with previous studies (Brown & Brown, 2013; Fritz et al., 2008; Kinginger, 2013; Sawir et al., 2008). However, interviews noted that these could be reduced by seeking support through WeChat. Walter explained that this was because his close ones could '站在你的角度去理解你, 去考虑你 (stand in your shoes to understand you, to consider for you)', which facilitated him to '心理会有一个疏导 (experience a process of psychological counselling)' in releasing the negative emotions.

Walter shared an example of how his family comforted him when he and an old friend cut connections with each other after having '挺激烈的讨论 (quite a heated argument)' due to holding different political stances. Walter confessed that he was overwhelmed by frustration and grief. He then sought support from his close ones (e.g., girlfriend, family, close friends) who '照顾我情绪 (cared about my feelings)' and '帮我抚平...造成的伤害 (helped him soothe the pain it caused)'. His mother,

for example, soothed him that ‘人生就是这样一段旅程，老朋友有时会渐行渐远，但新朋友却会出现 (life is such a journey, with old friends drifting away sometimes, but new friends occurring)’ (See Figure 46). She also helped him to analysis the fallout, saying that ‘每个人经历都不不一样，三观也不一样 (Everyone experiences different things, thus will have different world views, outlook on life, and values)’ enabling him to understand why his friend had changed so much. Walter added that conversation as such did not change his opinion towards the incident, but could help him gain ‘之前没有接收到信息什么的，会是帮我想的更立体 (information that I hadn't received before, so will help me think more comprehensively)’ when digesting his experiences and feelings. Winston agreed, addressing communication with others on WeChat could ‘帮助你进行反思，或者说意识到自身的不足 (help you make self-reflections, or realise your shortcomings)’.

Similarly, Nick showcased how validation, encouragement, comfort, and affection he gained played a vital role in releasing his anger after being insulted by several British teenagers only seven days after he arrived in the UK. He declared that he was so overwhelmed with anger that he ‘grabbed my fists’ with anger even when recalling the experience. After sharing this negative experience with his friends on WeChat, Nick revealed that all of them validated him that racism should not be tolerated. They also expressed their sympathy and demonstrated care about his safety. They also tried to comfort him, so he did not develop stereotypical ideas towards the locals: ‘Most British people are friendly to foreigners, but just a small part of the society are racists. Racism doesn't represent all people's views’. With enough emotional support, Nick concluded that: ‘my friends gave me more confidence and power’.

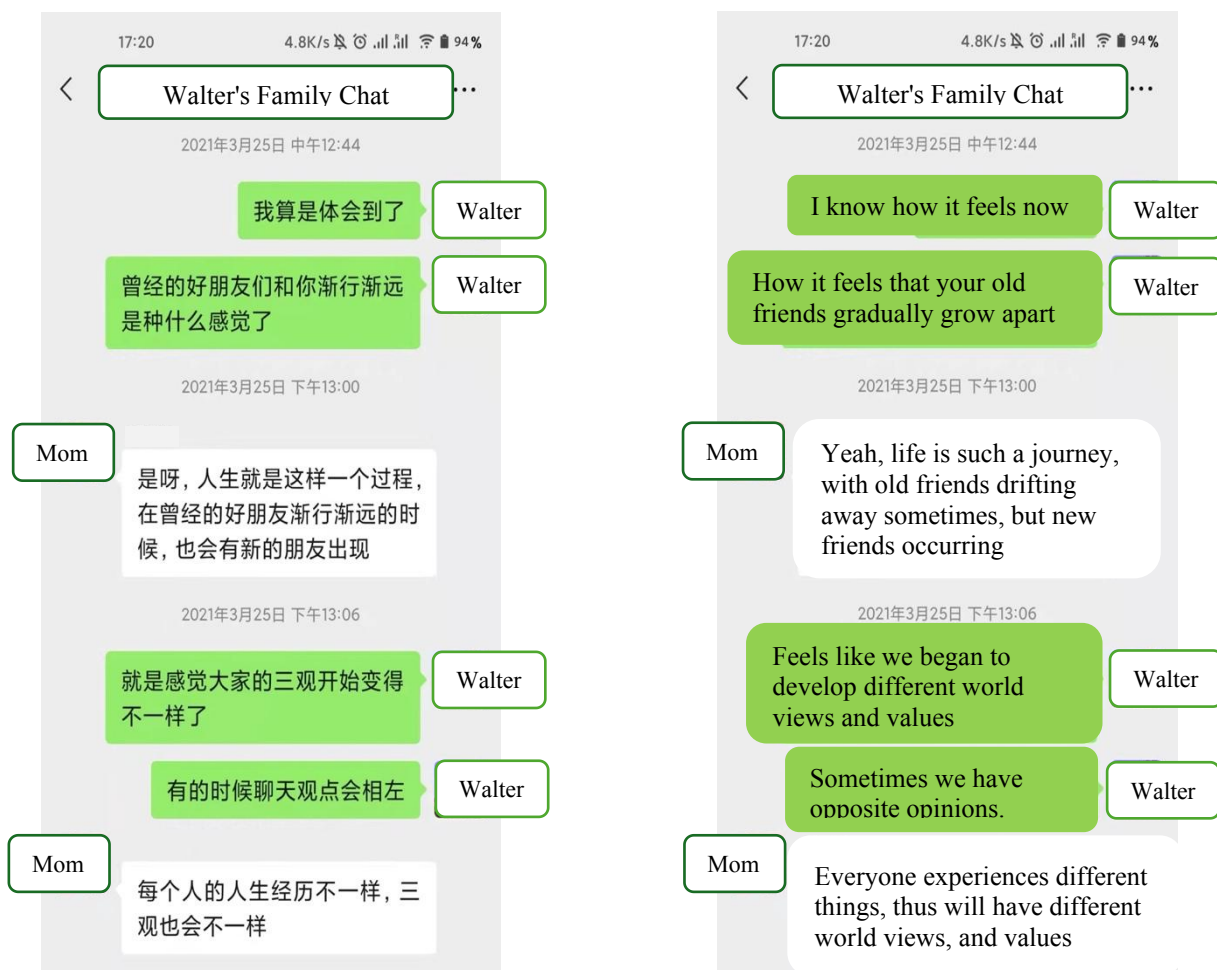


Figure 46:

Walter's Mother Comforting Him after He Fallout with a Friend

In addition to the emotion-focusing coping highlighted above, several participants stressed how receiving assistance that directly addressed the problem reduced their negative emotions. This was particularly evident in Jade's case when she had an unpleasant experience with her accommodation receptionist regarding claiming parcels. See her experience below:

我收到的(邮件)是让我领取两个包裹，结果她(前台)只有一个包裹给我。然后我去询问她，她断言说是我已经领取了另外一个包...然后我就很懵的拿着我的另外一个包裹就回到了我房间。

The email I received noticed me to pick up two packages, but the front desk only handed me one. When I asked about the other package, she insisted that I had already picked it up. Feeling very confused, I took the only package I got and went back to my room.

Jade claimed that she was ‘完全被说懵了 (totally confused by what she was told)’. In addition, she did not like the receptionist’s attitude. She was ‘很气愤 (very angry)’ because the receptionist insisted that she had already taken all her parcels, meanwhile, she was also worried about losing one parcel. Then her friends offered her timely support via WeChat. By analysing the whole situation, they validated that she did not do anything wrong, and then gave her very clear instructions about what to do next to solve the problem:

他们就说‘这完全前台的问题! 因为是前台给你发的邮件, 然后你的物流也是直接发到了前台, 她接收的包裹, 所以你就看你的单号, 然后看时间, 然后把这一系列证据留存下来, 然后你要去找前台理论。这就是前台的问题!’

They said, ‘This is completely the receptionist's fault! It's people in reception who sent you the email, so your packages were delivered directly to them. She should have received the package, so you should check your tracking number and note the time (when the parcels were delivered). You keep all these as evidence and then go argue with her. This is her problem!’

Both her friends’ encouragement and suggestions for tackling the problem enabled Jade to clear her confusion and frustration. After the problem was solved, Jade expected an apology, but she did not get it. ‘我对我们公寓的服务态度就很愤怒 (I am very angry about the service attitude of our apartment)!’, she stated. Again, her friends offered her great support in tackling her anger. Her friends either ranted with her or ‘安慰 (comforted)’ her, saying ‘别想了 (stop thinking about it)’, ‘马上复活节假日就来了 (soon it will be the Easter holidays)’, ‘开心点 (cheer up)’!

Through Jade’s experience, we can conclude that her friends on WeChat both helped her deal with negative emotions (uncertainty, anxiety, and anger) and assisted her solve the problems that triggered such emotions. This verified the stress and coping strategies proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and highlighted by Berry (2008, 2009). In addition, it provided evidence of how such stress coping process can be done not only individually, but also collectively in the virtual space of WeChat. As a result, participants reduced or alleviated their acculturation stress, which was beneficial for their psychological acculturation.

In this section, participants reported overcoming multiple psychological issues (e.g., homesickness and loneliness, academic stress et al.) by using WeChat. More specifically, they gained mental support from their powerful Chinese community fostered and strengthened via WeChat, a community that was comprised of members not only back in China but also those based locally in the UK and in other regions/countries (e.g., Canada, USA.). The findings evidenced how social support

(support gained from Chinese co-nationals on WeChat) assisted participants in coping with acculturation stress. Namely, through WeChat, participants gained both direct emotion-focused support in coping with the stress and problem-focused coping to address the problems that triggered the stress, aligning the stress and coping approach (Berry, 2008; Berry et al., 2022). After this process, many stressors reported were surmounted, evident with the release of various negative emotions and better well-being. These findings verified previous studies that indicated WeChat's significance in providing CSS mental health support (Chen et al., 2022; Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018, 2019) and underlined the importance of international students' pre-existing social media platform in terms of their well-being (Li & Peng, 2019; Misirlis et al., 2020; Sandel, 2014; Yu et al., 2019).

However, given that my participants showed evidence of excessive WeChat use or even WeChat addiction (discussed in 4.2), these findings contradict various studies that have discovered the detrimental impact of excessive social media use or addiction on mental health, causing symptoms like depression, anxiety, and stress (Dhir et al., 2018; Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Seabrook et al. 2016; Wu, 2023). One possible explanation is that the stress-and-coping process addressed in this section provided only immediate psychological support, e.g., calling their family when they feel homesick or talking to friends when they were upset or angry, which failed to address the detrimental influence of the excessive WeChat use in the long-term. This echoed what has been addressed in the literature review about the MIRIPS acculturation model which differentiated intercultural 'adjustment' as the dynamic and interactive process of acculturation (Anderson, 1994) while 'adaptation' as the long-term outcome of the intercultural adjustment (Pitts, 2005). Therefore, how WeChat influences participants' mental health in the long-term and in different stages of their sojourning need more exploration in the future.

5.5 Summary

Based on the TVTA and the analytic framework of the adapted MIRIPS acculturation module (Berry et al., 2022; Sam & Berry, 2010), this chapter investigated the role of WeChat in three domains of CSS participants' acculturation: interactional (5.2), sociocultural (5.3), and psychological (5.3). In this section, I will summarise the important findings of each section, the complexity interrelationship between the findings, and how these findings relate to the previous literature.

Section 5.2 reported the influence of using WeChat on participants' interactional acculturation. Findings revealed that WeChat plays a significant role in connecting participants with their co-national ties (5.2.1). WeChat not only helped participants maintain their pre-existing ties but also increased their new ties, which enlarged their social connections. In addition, WeChat enabled CSS to build a strong community with their co-nationals, not only those back in China but also those based locally in the UK

and in other regions/countries (e.g., Canada, USA.). Participants' powerful Chinese community was proven not only efficient in the virtual space of WeChat but also integrated into their in-person lives. The powerful co-national community that fostered and strengthened by WeChat provided participants with tremendous sociocultural and psychological support, hence this domain was first introduced. Section 5.2.2 talked about how over-reliance on WeChat hazarded participants' intercultural communication. Specifically, due to different preferences for digital spaces, WeChat became a barrier between CSS and their local peers. On one hand, participants failed to have much intercultural communication on WeChat given that they had few international ties and shallow conversations. On the other hand, due to their preference for pre-existing digital spaces, they showed less engagement and understanding of the host social platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook. More importantly, WeChat created a 'comfort zone' so participants could 'hide' in this safe place free of linguistic and cultural challenges. Namely, WeChat made it easier for participants to avoid interactions with both online and in-person international ties. In addition, participants demonstrated signs of adopting the separation acculturation strategies, which was criticised for failing to lead to successful social integration (Berry et al., 2022).

Section 5.3 discussed the sociocultural aspect of their acculturation. Interview data has proven that WeChat provided timely, instructive, and rich information and some tangible assistance, which facilitated participants' general sociocultural acculturation (5.3.1). Particularly, apart from following the WeChat public accounts, participants gained up-to-date information from their WeChat connections, especially their CSS peers. Such support was on various aspects of their sojourning lives, starting at the very early stage of pre-sojourning preparation and initial sojourning and lasting in participants' everyday lives. Compared with such strong support, participants revealed gaining academic support (5.3.2). This included checking class schedules, discussing assignment deadlines and requirements, as well as talking about group work, though such support was limited and arguably problematic. However, in both aspects of sociocultural acculturation, it was observed that participants showed great reliance on WeChat and the Chinese community meanwhile reduced independence to deal with challenges on their own and increased avoidance to engage with the local community. This aligned with previous claim that excessive WeChat use could lead to reduced independence (4.2.3) and deepen reluctance to avoid international ties (5.2.2).

Section 5.4 focused on participants' psychological acculturation. It was evident that using WeChat enabled participants to gain well-being support from their social connections, so they managed to cope with various negative emotions generated in the sojourning process such as homesickness and

loneliness (5.3.1), academic stress (5.3.2), and other negative emotions (5.3.3). Specifically, participants gained both emotional-focused support in coping with the stress and problem-focused support to address the problems that triggered the stress, demonstrating stress and coping processes (Berry; 2008, 2009; Berry et al., 2022; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Figure 47 demonstrated how this stress-and-coping process functions with the support of participants' Chinese WeChat community in the virtual space of WeChat. After this process, many stressors were reported as being surmounted, evident with the release of various negative emotions and better well-being.

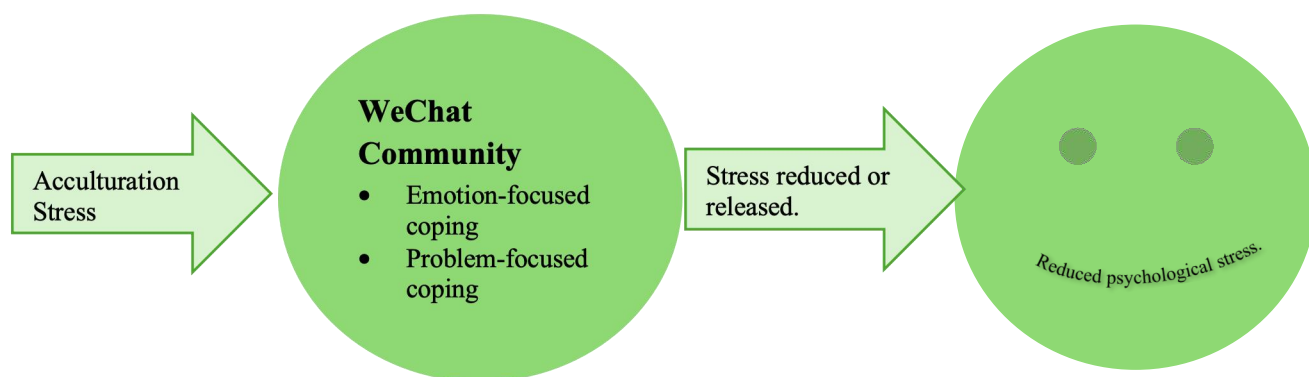


Figure 47:
WeChat and CSS Participants' Psychological Acculturation

However, the reported support for better psychological well-being contradicted previous research on the detrimental effects of excessive social media use (or addiction) on individuals' well-being, causing depression, anxiety, and stress (Dhir et al., 2018; Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Seabrook et al. 2016; Wu, 2023). Such contradiction represented the difference between the intercultural adjustment, namely the process of acculturation and the intercultural adaptation (Anderson, 1994), the long-term acculturation outcomes (Pitts, 2005). These findings indicate that future more academic attention is needed to explore the long-term outcomes of WeChat on participants' psychological acculturation.

In sum, this chapter depicted how WeChat served as a double-sided sword for CSS participants. On one hand, participants reported gaining significant support from WeChat in strengthening their co-national ties, which consequently assisted them in coping with their acculturation stress. In addition, the social support they gained from WeChat, together with the various information, enabled them to solve daily life challenges so they could have a smooth intercultural transition. On the other hand,

WeChat was found to limit participants' international ties, which restrained their interactional acculturation. However, a more in-depth investigation of these findings and the interrelationship between them indicated that WeChat plays a more complex role in participants' acculturation. Though WeChat seemed to be beneficial to their sociocultural acculturation at first glance, a deeper investigation revealed that lack of independence and reluctance to engage with the host community was salient. In addition, the well-being support participants gained mainly focuses on the short-term stress release while the long-term influence of excessive WeChat use remained unclear.

Chapter 6. Making Sense of Intercultural Encounters on WeChat

6.1 Overview

This chapter focuses on the third research question: How do Chinese international students make sense of intercultural encounters (IEs) through WeChat? To answer this question, it is essential first to investigate the IEs participants experienced and subsequently discussed on WeChat, therefore Section 6.1 provides a summary of the IEs participants shared. Following this, two themes regarding their sensemaking progress were revealed through analysing the interview transcripts, namely ‘*extending intercultural discussion*’ (Section 6.2) and ‘*negotiating attitudes and cultural identities*’ (Section 6.3). The first theme focuses on how participants facilitated *interpreting and relating* (6.2.1) and *reflecting* (6.2.2) during their discussion on WeChat, while the second theme talked about *negotiating attitudes towards otherness* (6.3.1) and *constructing cultural identities* (6.3.2). These two themes, together with their initial IE experiences, form a nonlinear process (see the thematic map below in Figure 48). Section 6.4 summarises and discusses the key findings.

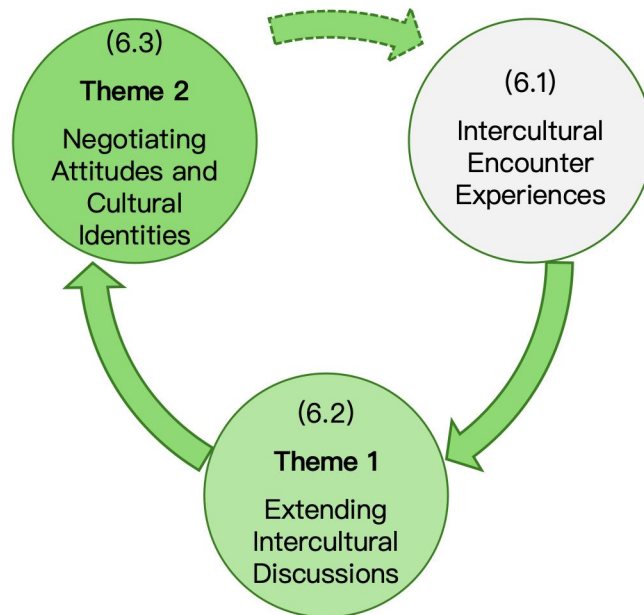


Figure 48:

Key Themes on Research Question Three

6.2 Understanding Participants' Intercultural Encounter Experiences

To learn about participants' IEs, I asked them to complete a pre-interview task, namely *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (the AIE) (Byram et al., 2009), an educational tool designed by the Council of Europe to encourage people to learn from their IEs. The AIE not only serves as an effective narrative tool in this research to help participants retrospect their IEs by describing the context and scene and exploring individuals' feelings but also helps individuals to 'look back' and 'look forward' to raise intercultural awareness (Méndez García, 2017).

To provide readers with a basic understanding of the IEs participants shared, conversation analysis was conducted on the AIEs and an overview of the encounters can be found in 6.2.1. Details of seven representative IEs that can best represent key themes and sub-themes obtained from the interviews are represented in 6.2.2. This is followed by a summary of key intercultural topics evident in the IEs in 6.2.3, and an exploration of participants' feelings triggered by these IEs (6.2.4). All data to be presented and discussed in this section are based on participants' pre-interview task – the AIE.

6.2.1 Overview of the Intercultural Encounters

As discussed in the literature review, IE is a topic explored by many (Barrett et al., 2014; Byram et al., 2009; Donovan, 2018; Lin, 2012; Holmes et al., 2015) but no consensus on its definition was reached. In the AIE, Byram et al. (2009, p.3) defined an IE as 'an experience you had with someone from a different country, but it can also be an experience with someone from another cultural background in your country'. For the purpose of this research, a more detailed definition proposed by Holmes et al. (2015) was adopted for its capacity to summarise key features of the IE. According to Holmes et al. (2015, p17), IE refers to an 'interaction (verbal and non-verbal) between two or more people in situations (not necessarily countries) where they may perceive each other to have different backgrounds and where these differences are salient and affect the nature of the interaction'. Researchers have discovered the long-lasting and transformative impacts of the IEs on participants (Byram et al., 2009; Chang, 2009) though both positive and negative effects were observed (Donovan, 2018).

According to the collected AIEs, the IEs participants shared included both positive and negative experiences. Specifically, eight IEs were found to be negative experiences (e.g., being assaulted by racists or confrontations), six were positive (e.g., gaining help, or pleasant interactions), and three were neutral. The IEs topics covered various aspects of their sojourning lives, ranging from academic aspects such as group study to daily sociocultural experiences (e.g., taking a taxi, shopping at local supermarkets, playing football, and interacting with airport staff or stranger pedestrians). Regarding the

cultural backgrounds of participants' IE interlocutors, although some did not have the opportunity to ask due to very brief interactions, most cultural others were identified as local British. Several others were known as international students from various backgrounds (Iran, Hong Kong, the U.S., and Slovenia), illustrating increased opportunities to interact with other international students in the multicultural context of British higher education (Schartner, 2014; Pho & Schartner, 2021). The contexts of almost all IEs were based in the UK, except for one instance where a participant shared travelling experiences in Canada. Most participants (12) shared their IE experiences in Mandarin and only five used English.

Based on the AIEs, an overview of basic information about the IEs is illustrated in Table 4, including the encounter summaries, contexts, and introductions to the cultural other(s). Due to space restraints, an example of participants' AIE is presented in Appendix 6.

No.	Participant	Summary	Context	Culture Other(s)
1	Vera	Amazed by how homestay parents supported children's small interests	In a small city in the UK	Homestay hosts, British, in their 60s.
2	Aquarius	Not sure if an Iranian coursemates was mad at me for dropping out of her	In the classroom of the university	A female Iranian classmate. In her late 20s.
3	Hal	'你好 (Nihao, Hello)' – why did strangers greet me in Chinese?	In two different cities in the UK	Two strangers, white British males, about 50 years old.
4	Walter	Different understandings of football as a competitive sport resulted in playground	A local football playground	Two male students, one from Hong Kong and one from the U.S.
5	Ousmane	Volunteers kindly gave me metro-taking guidance.	In a metro station while traveling in Canada	Several volunteers. Two are white, one black, and one Asian.
6	Aemon	Interacting with airport staff about my lost suitcase.	At an international airport in the UK	A middle-aged female airport staff. British.
7	Winston	'She speaks Mandarin!' Accepting a British coursemates as 'one of us'.	In the classroom	A British girl who did her undergraduate in Japan and then worked in China

No.	Participant	Summary	Context	Culture Other(s)
8	Phoebe	Went for ear-piercing but got perplexed with the different responsibilities of	In a local beauty shop	Two local British staff. One is 50 (female) and one is 30 (male).
9	Shirley	Using Mandarin and avoiding eye contact in a group discussion led to	In the library	A female Iranian coursemates who speaks Persian and English.
10	Stephanie	Squat toilets or toilet seats? Different toilet-using habits and preferences.	In the flat of a British friend	Two male graduates in their 20s. One British who travelled to China before
11	Matthew	Comparing COVID-19 prevention regulations in China and in the U.K. with	On the way from the airport to accommodation	A local taxi driver, middle-aged, white, male, local British.
12	Anne	Overcoming challenges in finding lost suitcase after taking an international flight	At an airport (UK)	Several airport staff, one female and three males.
13	Nick	Being insulted by a racist British teenager	In the city centre	A local British, about 16 years old.
14	Jade	Unpleasant interactions with the receptionist when trying to find a missing parcel	At the reception of my apartment	A female receptionist, white British.
15	Zoe	‘Do you need a bag?’ Shopping in the local supermarket but was stared	In a local supermarket.	A local British cashier.
16	Elena	‘Chinese should eat like Chinese do’. Foreign flatmates were surprised	In my flat kitchen	Two flatmates, one local British student and one Slovenian.
17	Lexie	A random ‘巴铁 (ba tie, Iron Pak)’, a coined term reflecting the unbreakable ties with Pakistani)’ helped me carry my luggage.	On my way home from the metro station	A Pakistani passer-by, male, in his twenties.

Table 4:

Overview of Participants' Intercultural Encounters

Participants shared rich details about their experience. Due to the space restraints, it is impossible to elaborate on each of them. Meanwhile, to enable readers' richer understanding of the IEs and further discussion on participants' IE sense-making process on WeChat in 6.2 and 6.3, it is necessary to present details of some IEs.

6.2.2 Representative Intercultural Encounters

Though other encounters will also be touched on, I decided to focus and elaborate on the following six encounters: IE7, IE8, IE9, IE10, IE15, and IE17. These were chosen mainly for them for being representative in conveying key themes and sub-themes. For example, IE9 and IE15 are selected to explain theme one *extending intercultural discussions on WeChat*. Since compared to other IEs, discussions on these two could best represent how participants (Shirley and Zoe specifically) conducted the intercultural discussion by interpreting and relating their IEs and making reflections on WeChat. In the same lane, to represent reflecting (6.2.2), a key sub-theme of theme one, IE15 was chosen for the in-depth reflection participant Zoe demonstrated when talking about her IE sense-making process with her WeChat friends. To make clear how the chosen IEs are to be used in the rest of the chapter, key themes, sub-themes, and corresponding IEs are listed in Table 5.

Themes	Subthemes	IE
Theme 1: Expanding the Intercultural Dialogue on WeChat (6.2)	Interpreting and Relating (6.2.1)	IE9, Shirley
	Reflecting (6.2.2)	IE8, Phoebe
Theme 2: Negotiating Attitudes and Identities (6.3)	Negotiating Attitudes (6.3.1)	IE7, Winston IE10, Stephanie IE 17, Lexie
	Constructing Cultural Identities (6.3.2)	IE10, Stephanie IE15, Zoe

Table 5:
Representative Intercultural Encounters, Themes and Sub-themes

To make it easier for readers to follow, the seven IEs will be introduced in anecdotes below in the same order as they will be discussed in the upcoming sections of the chapter (displayed in Table 5). All seven IE anecdotes were adapted from the *Encounter Description* part of the AIE form. I tried to

adopt participants' original descriptions as much as possible while trying to keep the anecdotes concise and clear if the original data was too long. To be consistent with the language choices participants made when filling out the AIEs, all encounters are presented in original data in Mandarin and then translated into English. Information covered in the anecdotes includes the number of the IE (e.g., IE9), the title of the encounter, anecdotes of the IE, and the English translation if the original language is in Mandarin. Based on collected demographic data, background information about the participants was provided before the anecdotes.

1. IE9 – Confrontation in a Seminar Group Discussion

Shirley is a 23-year-old student from Jiangsu province, southeastern China. She had stayed for 10 months in the UK by the time the research was conducted. Here, she talks about a seminar group confrontation.

在小组讨论的时候，小组里只有一位来自伊朗的外国同学 Julia，因此其他中国同学在聊天的时候不由自主的说起了中文，但是也仅限于私下聊天，并不涉及小组讨论的实际内容。但是那位伊朗同学因此感到冒犯并提出希望大家不要再继续说中文；与此同时她希望大家发言时可以看着她的眼睛而不是低着头。说实话在她提出这两个建议后气氛有些尴尬。

During a seminar group discussion, Julia, an Iranian coursemates, was the only foreign student in our group, thus two Chinese classmates began to speak Mandarin while chatting among themselves. It was just small talk that was not relevant to the group discussion. But Julia felt offended and asked them not to speak Mandarin. She added that she hoped everyone could look into her eyes while talking instead of bowing their heads down.

2. IE8- Waiting to Get Ears Pierced

Phoebe was a 23-year-old student from Zhejiang, southeastern China, who had stayed in the UK for five months. Here, she talks about her experience of getting her ear pierced at a local shop.

我去一个商店打耳洞。我以为很快就会轮到我，但是等了一会儿后还没到我，我开始有点儿不耐烦。我想去问一下打耳洞的工作人员还有多久轮到我，然而工作人员把我赶走了，所以我不得不去让前台帮我去问工作人员打到哪一个了。如此操作进行了三次，后来前台到下班点走了，工作人员才让我进去问进度。

I walked into a shop to get my ears pierced. I thought it would be my turn soon but after waiting for a while, I started to get impatient and wanted to ask the piercing artist how long it would be my turn, but she asked me to leave, and I had to communicate with the receptionist

about it. The same thing happened three times until the receptionist got off work. Then finally, the piercer allowed me to communicate directly with her.

3. IE7 – ‘She speaks Mandarin!’

Winston was a 27-year-old student from Beijing who had stayed in the UK for five months. Here, Winston talks about how he accidentally found out a British coursemates could speak Mandarin during a seminar discussion.

上课分组讨论的情况下，我和我的同样使用普通话的同学交流的时候，被另一个就是英语为主的一个英国女孩 Ash 听到了，然后她复述了我的口头禅‘快点儿快点儿’。我一下就感觉很意外，她能够会说我的语言，并且她还能够复述出来，她能了解什么意思，所以当时因为这个契机我们俩就聊起来了。然后我发现她虽然是一个英国人，但她有很强的跨文化的一些经历，比如说她到过日本去留学，然后她到香港去工作，她有很多的就亚洲背景的朋友和同学，所以我又在她身上找到了我熟悉的一些方面。

During a group discussion in class, while communicating with my classmates who also spoke Mandarin, I was overheard by another English girl named Ash, who repeated my mantra ‘快点儿 (kuai dianr, hurry up) 快点儿’. I was amazed at how she could speak my language and repeat my words, understanding what it meant, so we started talking. Then I discovered that although she is British, she has a rich intercultural experience. For example, she went to Japan to study abroad, then she went to Hong Kong to work. She also has a lot of Asian friends and classmates. These enabled me to find more aspects of her that I am familiar with.

4. IE10 - Squat Toilets or Toilet Seats?

Stephanie was a 23-year-old student from Henan, central China. She had stayed in the UK for five months when she participated in the research. Below, Stephanie tells us how she and a British friend talked about different types of toilets in China and in the UK.

我跟我的英国朋友 Jack 聊到了如厕文化的区别。中国会有蹲便，但是英国没有。作为女生，我认为蹲便更卫生。Jack 说他去过中国旅游，但是完全不会用蹲便。他并没有办法像中国人一样双腿分开蹲下，只能双腿并拢蹲下。蹲便对他来说是个很高难度的事情。因此，在中国旅游的时候发生了一些有趣的故事。例如，他需要选择是在左边还是右边双腿蹲下，而他的朋友会将衣服脱下避免弄脏。我教了 Jack 怎么‘亚洲蹲’，但是他学不会，还差点儿摔倒。

I talked with my British friend Jack about the differences in toilet culture. In China, there are squat toilets, but not in the UK. As a girl, I think squat toilets are more hygienic, while

Jack said he travelled to China but couldn't use squat toilets at all. He couldn't squat with his legs apart like the Chinese and could only squat with his legs together. Using squat toilets was very challenging for him, and because of this, many interesting things happened during his trip to China. For example, he had to choose whether to squat with his legs to the left side (of the toilet) or the right, while his friend took off his clothes to avoid getting them dirty. I taught Jack how to do the 'Asian squats' but he couldn't do it and almost fell.

5. IE 17 – A Random ‘巴铁 (ba tie, Iron Pak)’ Helped me Carry My Luggage

Lexie was a student from Guangdong, southern China. Here, she describes her experiences of accepting help from a stranger Pakistani who carried her suitcases.

我假期刚从巴黎回来，带了非常多行李从地铁站出来，磕磕绊绊走到马路边等红绿灯。一个巴基斯坦人帮我把行李箱送到公寓。在异国他乡遇到好心人，心中还是非常感激的，我们分享了各自去不同国家旅游的经历，还聊起了中国和‘巴铁’的友谊。在大门口道别时，他给了我一个友好的拥抱。我欣然接受了，并再次感谢了他今天的善意之举，最后还抖机灵地祝福了一下中巴友谊天长地久。

I just returned from Paris after holidays, and I was carrying a lot of luggage. I stumbled out of the metro station and was waiting for the traffic light. A Pakistani man helped me take my suitcases to my accommodation. I was grateful to meet such a kind person in a foreign land. We shared our travel experiences in different countries and talked about the friendship between China and Pakistan. When we said goodbye at the entrance of accommodation, he gave me a friendly hug. I gladly accepted it, thanked him again for his kindness, and wittily wished for the everlasting friendship between China and Pakistan.

6. IE15- ‘Do you need a bag?’ Shopping in the Local Supermarket

Zoe is a 23-year-old student from Guangdong, China. She had stayed in the UK for five months when she participated in the research. Here, she describes her shopping experiences in a local supermarket.

结账的时候，收银员问我需不需要袋子，我直接说了‘no’。收银员看了我一眼没有说什么，但是让我觉得很奇怪。后来我通过观察本地人购物得出结论，他们如果对提出的建议并不感兴趣时，并不会直接的拒绝，而是比较委婉的说‘I’m good, thank you!’。

When checking out, the cashier asked me if I needed a bag, and I said ‘No’. The cashier gave me a strange look but didn't say anything which made me feel odd. Later, I noticed

through observing local people shopping that if they need to say no, they will not reject it directly, but rather say ‘I’m good, thank you!’

6.2.3 Categorising Intercultural Encounters

When reflecting on their IE sense-making process on WeChat during the interviews, participants highlighted their IC lens. After conducting a content analysis of participants’ AIEs, all the IEs are grouped into four categories, namely: cultural issues, attitude, identity, and linguistic issues. Most IEs (nine) focused on cultural aspects such as social culture, working culture, or sports culture. Four IEs explored attitudes towards cultural others or a cultural phenomenon. Additionally, three IEs focused on identities, especially inner and outer group identities, while another two IEs centred on linguistic issues such as English pragmatics. Table 6 provides a summary of these four categories. To assist readers in navigating, the data source was specified.

Category		Intercultural Topics Covered in the AIE
1	Cultural Issues	Different working culture: at the airport (IE6; IE12) and in a beauty shop (IE8)
		Different parenting styles (IE1)
		Sports culture: different perceptions towards football culture and face-threatening acts (IE4)
		City hospitality (IE5)
		Different politeness norms about having eye contact and inclusive language use (IE9)
		Perceptions of everyday behavioural routines of using toilets (IE10)
2	Attitude	Attitudes towards vaccine and COVID-19 prevention measures in China and UK (IE11)
		Combating racism (IE13)
		Unsuccessful social interaction with accommodation receptionist (IE14)
		Stereotypes towards Chinese (IE16)
3	Identity	assumed identity and othering (IE3)
		Shared linguistic and cultural background led to acceptance and inclusion (IE7)
		Hospitality of a ‘巴铁 (ba tie, Iron Pak)’ (IE17)
4	Linguistic Issues	Different politeness norms about accepting apologies (IE2)
		English pragmatics of using courtesy words (IE15)

Table 6:

Thematic Analysis of Participants’ Intercultural Encounter Experiences

It needs to be mentioned that though some intercultural topics seem similar, they were classified into different categories due to participants' different interpretations. For example, regarding stranger pedestrians' hospitality, Ousmane (IE5) attributed his experience in a Canadian city to cultural differences during the interview, claiming that '不同城市之间的城市文化不同 (different cities have different urban cultures)'. In contrast, Lexie (IE17) addressed the importance of her interlocutor's identity as '巴铁 (ba tie, Iron Pak)', emphasising the close tie between Pakistanis and Chinese and how such perception enhanced their mutual trust and successful interactions. Consequently, IE5 was classified into *Cultural Issues* and IE17 into *Identity*.

6.2.4 Investigating Feelings

The IEs prompted individuals to draw on feelings about their interactions (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012). Since the importance of those feelings in participants' WeChat IE sense-making process was frequently addressed during the interviews, this section provides a brief summary of those feelings.

According to the AIEs, participants demonstrated various feelings after their IE experiences. Negative feelings primarily included: distressed (anxious/nervous/stressed) (reported by four), confused (three), upset (two), and angry (mad/furious, two). Positive feelings included: surprise (due to pleasant experiences) (reported by four); joy (glad/enjoyable/pleasant) (three); and gratitude/thankful (two). In several cases, participants reported having mixed feelings that fluctuated from positivity to negativity, or vice versa. For example, when talking about a positive experience of accepting help (IE17), Lexie reported having '过山车式体验 (a roller-coaster experience)' that started with positive feelings of '惊喜、感激 (surprise and grateful)' to negative ones of '紧张、有压力甚至有点害怕 (nervous, stress, and even a bit of fear)', which demonstrated the complexity of participants' feelings. Terms and expressions participants used to describe their feelings are listed below in Table 7.

No.	Participant	Participants' Feelings
1	Vera	Surprise, moved
2	Aquarius	担心, 困惑 (worried, confused)
3	Hal	Confused, annoyed
4	Walter	迷惑, 搞笑, 甚至有一点点 shame (Confused, funny, and even a bit ashamed)
5	Ousmane	Honored and thankful
6	Aemon	紧张, 不知所措, 不安 (nervous, at a loss, anxious)
7	Winston	非常享受...从惊讶到高兴。骄傲, 钦佩 (enjoyable, surprised, pleasant, proud, admire)

No.	Participant	Participants' Feelings
8	Phoebe	不耐烦 (impatient)
9	Shirley	尴尬 (awkward)
10	Stephanie	惊讶 (surprised)
11	Matthew	惊讶, 欢乐(乐坏了)(surprised, joyful, overjoyed)
12	Anne	挺生气的 (pretty mad)
13	Nick	quite angry
14	Jade	怒火中烧 (furious)
15	Zoe	紧张和疑惑 (nervous and confused)
16	Elena	Glad then upset
17	Lexie	从惊喜、感激到紧张、有压力甚至有点害怕的过山车式体验 (a roller-coaster experience from surprise and grateful to anxious, stress, and even a bit of fear)

Table 7:

Key Terms Describing Participants' Feelings

Motivated by these strong emotions, all participants reported discussing their IE experiences on WeChat. They either elaborated with their close ones (e.g., parents, friends, girlfriend/boyfriend) or those who were relevant to the encounter (e.g., coursemates, football team members). Then they shared and articulated feelings and explored respective intercultural issues. Since I have discussed how participants reduced negative emotions and gained mental support elaborately in 5.3 *WeChat and CSS' Psychological Acculturation*, I will not elaborate on them again here to reduce repetition.

After summarising key information on participants' IEs, the following two sections (6.3 and 6.4) will discuss two key themes regarding participants' IE sense-making on WeChat. The theme articulation was based on the interview data and triangulated with the WeChat screenshots.

6.3 Extending the Intercultural Discussions on WeChat

The first theme that emerged from the interviews is '*extending the intercultural discussions on WeChat*', which was supported by two sub-themes based on Byram's ICC model (1997, 2020). The first one is '*interpreting and relating*' (6.2.1), which means participants and their WeChat interlocutors trying to interpret and explain their IEs by comparing the cultural phenomenon, and behaviours and attitudes of cultural others with that of their own culture or previous experience. The second one is '*reflecting*' (6.2.2), which means the intercultural discussions on WeChat stimulated participants to

conduct reflection, which increased their critical cultural awareness. The structure of this section is presented in Figure 49.

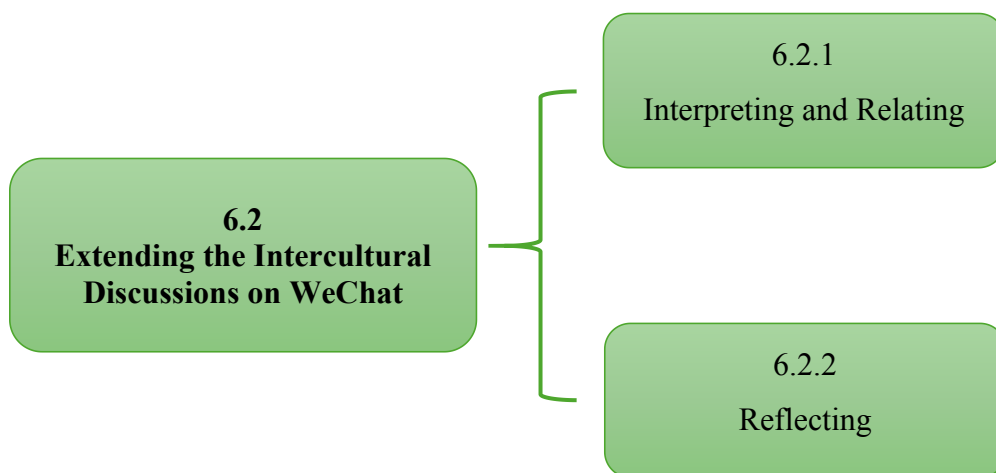


Figure 49:
Section Structure

6.3.1 *Interpreting and Relating*

Interpreting and relating are important ICC skills (Barret, 2008; Byram et al., 2009; Byram, 2020). According to Byram (2020, p.61), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) refers to the ‘ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own’. Byram (2020) further explained that by drawing upon existing knowledge, those with interpreting and relating skills could identify causes of misunderstanding and dysfunctions in interactions and relate behaviours to those in their socio-cultural group. More importantly, they can explain the phenomenon after mediating conflicting interpretations, which helps interlocutors resolve differences and find common ground (Byram, 2020). However, such skills were not well researched in empirical studies since very few researchers explored how the interpreting and relating process was conducted by individuals. In my research, participants shared rich details about how they and their WeChat interlocutors collectively conducted the non-linear process of interpreting and relating, which compensated lack of empirical studies and contributed to theories regarding these important ICC skills.

Interpreting and relating were discovered in almost all participants’ WeChat discussions of their IEs. Specifically, many reported exchanging knowledge and perspectives with their WeChat

interlocutors to comprehend IE experiences to clear confusion about the IEs, and understand the feelings, feelings, and attitudes of their own and others. This process involves a lot of comparison that helped individuals mediate cultural differences.

For instance, after going through a confrontation with that Iranian coursemates during a seminar group discussion (IE9), Shirley and her Chinese seminar group members collectively interpreted their experiences on WeChat. According to Shirley's narrative during the interview, they started with interpreting their own behaviours and feelings. Specifically, the two Chinese coursemates who were directly involved in the confrontation first explained that the Iranian classmate used '语言太过生硬, 然后比较直接 (language that was so rigid and direct)' that it made them feel '比较受到冒犯 (very offended)'. Then they used WeChat as an outlet for their negative emotions. Shirley recalled that they were so overwhelmed with anger that they began to '口不择言 (speak without thinking)' and '说了一些比较过激的话 (said things that were rather inappropriate)'. Shirley then stepped in to remind them to be mindful of their words to de-escalate the situation and tried to provide more perspectives in interpreting the incident. On one hand, she comforted her CSS peers by verifying their position. She commented that: '大家的想法都是比较愤怒的, 因为可能很少被人直接指到台面上说 'Please don't do something' (everyone was so angry because it's rare to be directly called out by others and be told 'Please don't do something'). On the other hand, after her coursemates' anger release, Shirley tried to analyse '这次事件中的矛盾是由于什么引起的, 然后再通过这个源头去双方的劝解一下 (what triggered the confrontation in this IE, then to mediate between both parties by addressing the root cause)'.

Shirley began by addressing the cultural difference regarding having eye contact. She highlighted that many Chinese tend to avoid eye contact, which was regarded as impolite in many other cultures such as Iranian and British cultures. Her interpretation made others aware that '双方都由于文化背景不同而与对方产生了误解 (both parties misunderstood each other due to different cultural backgrounds)'. Eventually, members of that WeChat group reached a consensus that they should respect others' cultures and maintain eye contact. It needs to be mentioned that relating here transcended what Byram et al. (2009) claimed as comparing an event or practices from another culture to those of one's own and involved comparing cultures of and experiences in third places (the Iranian culture). Similar situations were observed in many other participants' experiences, where they related not only to the British culture but also to cultures of other countries/regions (e.g., Canada, USA, Hong Kong) that either themselves or their WeChat friends experienced.

In addition, Shirley attempted to address the language issues, which were another factor that triggered the seminar confrontation. By putting herself in the stance of the cultural other, Shirley made her CSS peers aware of how the Iranian girl might feel being left out and excluded from the discussion. She elaborated that:

她是觉得我们在聊课业的事情，所以她就直接指出来了，说‘你们不要讲中文我听不懂’。所以如果说她真的能了解到，我们只是在聊额外的别的事情，比如说生活当中或者是两个人私下的一些小秘密什么的，可能她就不会太去在意你们是否说的是中文。

She (The Iranian course mates) thought we were talking about schoolwork, so she pointed it out directly, saying, ‘Don't speak Chinese, I could not understand’. So, if she could really understand that we were just talking about other things, such as private life or some little secrets between them two, maybe she would not care too much about whether you are speaking Chinese or not.

Shirley's explanation made her CSS peers acknowledge the importance of making their language use more inclusive, which consequently played a positive role in facilitating mutual understanding and successful mediation of this intercultural confrontation. Realising that they were not sufficiently aware of their cultural other's background and feelings, one student involved in the argument apologised to the Iranian classmate after the discussion.

Shirley depicted to us how she and her Chinese seminar group members collectively interpreted their IE experience, where many different interpretations of IE aspects (e.g., behaviours, attitudes, and perspectives of both interlocutors) were involved. Due to privacy concerns of other members in the WeChat group, Shirley decided not to share their chat history or screenshots with me thus I could not triangulate her narrative with corresponding WeChat screenshots. Different from Shirley who elaborated on her WeChat conversation, another participant Phoebe (IE8) did not detail how she and her friend interpreted her intercultural experience during the interview, but she compensated for that by submitting all screenshots of her WeChat conversation with her friend, which comprised rich information on how interpreting and relating were conducted. Moreover, the screenshots explicated how the discussion on IEs via WeChat was conducted in the form of dialogues, where various interpretations were proposed, challenged, then re-proposed, and contested/confirmed. Before elaborating on Phoebe's experiences, it is important to note that she adopted Mandarin on WeChat but English during the interview, thus some of the data regarding WeChat screenshots involves both Mandarin, the original data, and the corresponding English translation.

Specifically, after her ear-piercing experience in a local beauty shop (IE8), participant Phoebe reported during the interview that she was confused about why she had to communicate with the piercing artist through a receptionist, which was both inconvenient and time-consuming. Then Phoebe commented that to clear her confusion towards this ‘奇怪 (strange)’ incident, she continued her intercultural conversation on WeChat with her friend Anne. They explored reasons ‘why the workers don't have direct communication with me’ and then reached an agreement that ‘maybe she (the ear-piercing artist) doesn’t want me to bother her’. Phoebe concluded that the explanation of this IE ‘comes back to the cultural difference’.

Phoebe did not unfold sufficiently on their IE interpreting process during the interview, but the WeChat screenshots she submitted revealed valuable information (please refer to Figures 50 to 53 for parts of their conversation).



Figure 50:

Phoebe Making Sense of her Intercultural Experience on WeChat (1)

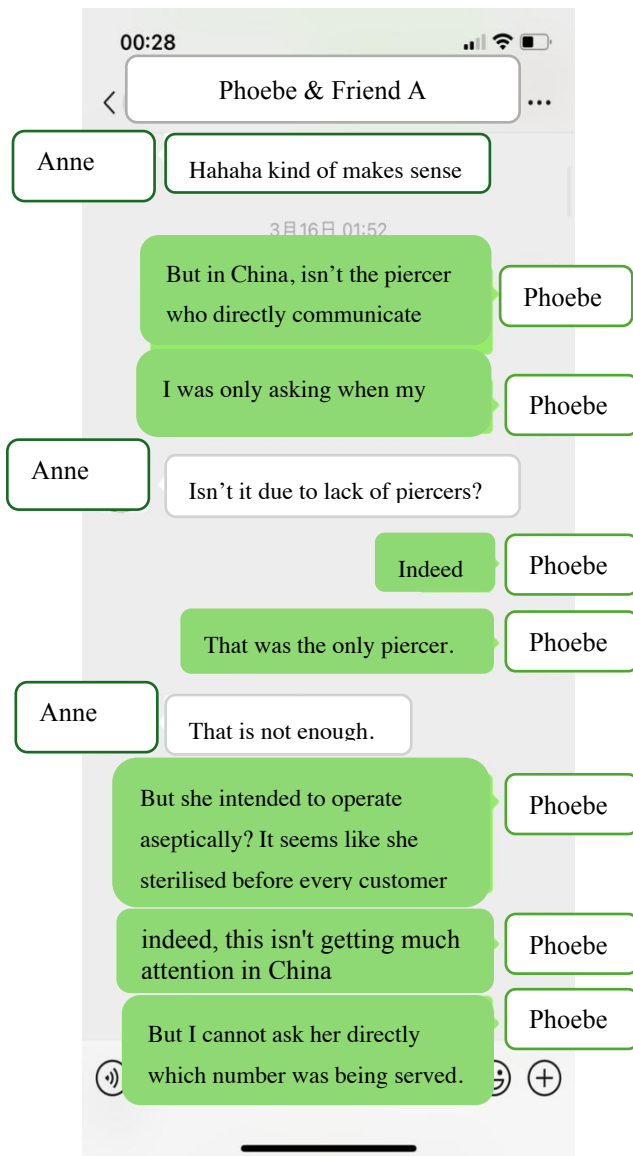
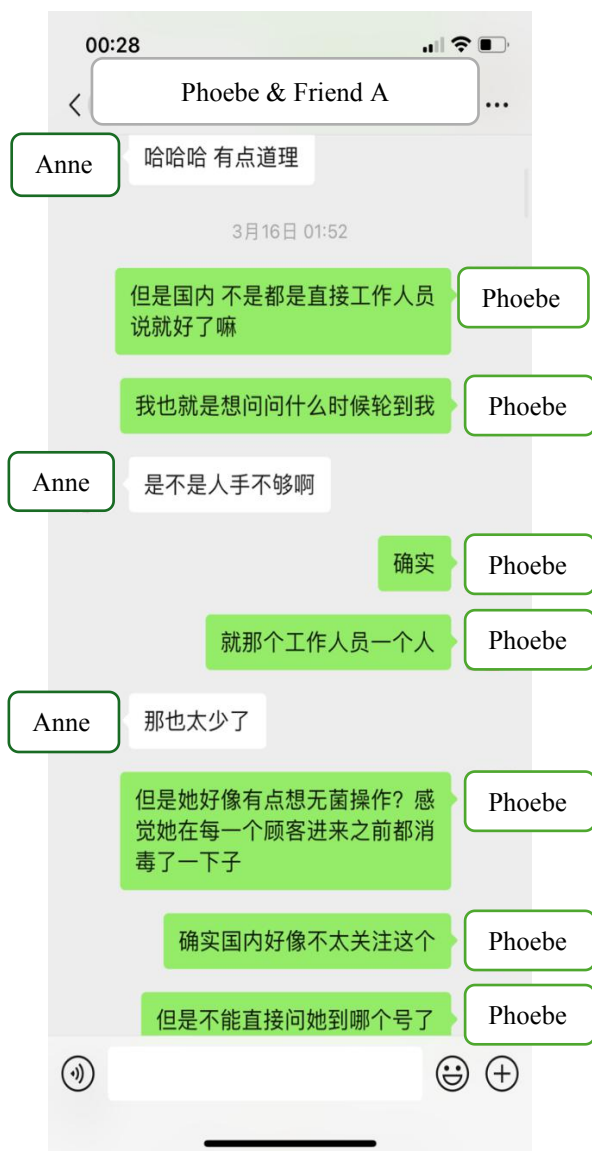


Figure 51:

Phoebe Making Sense of her Intercultural Experience on WeChat (2)

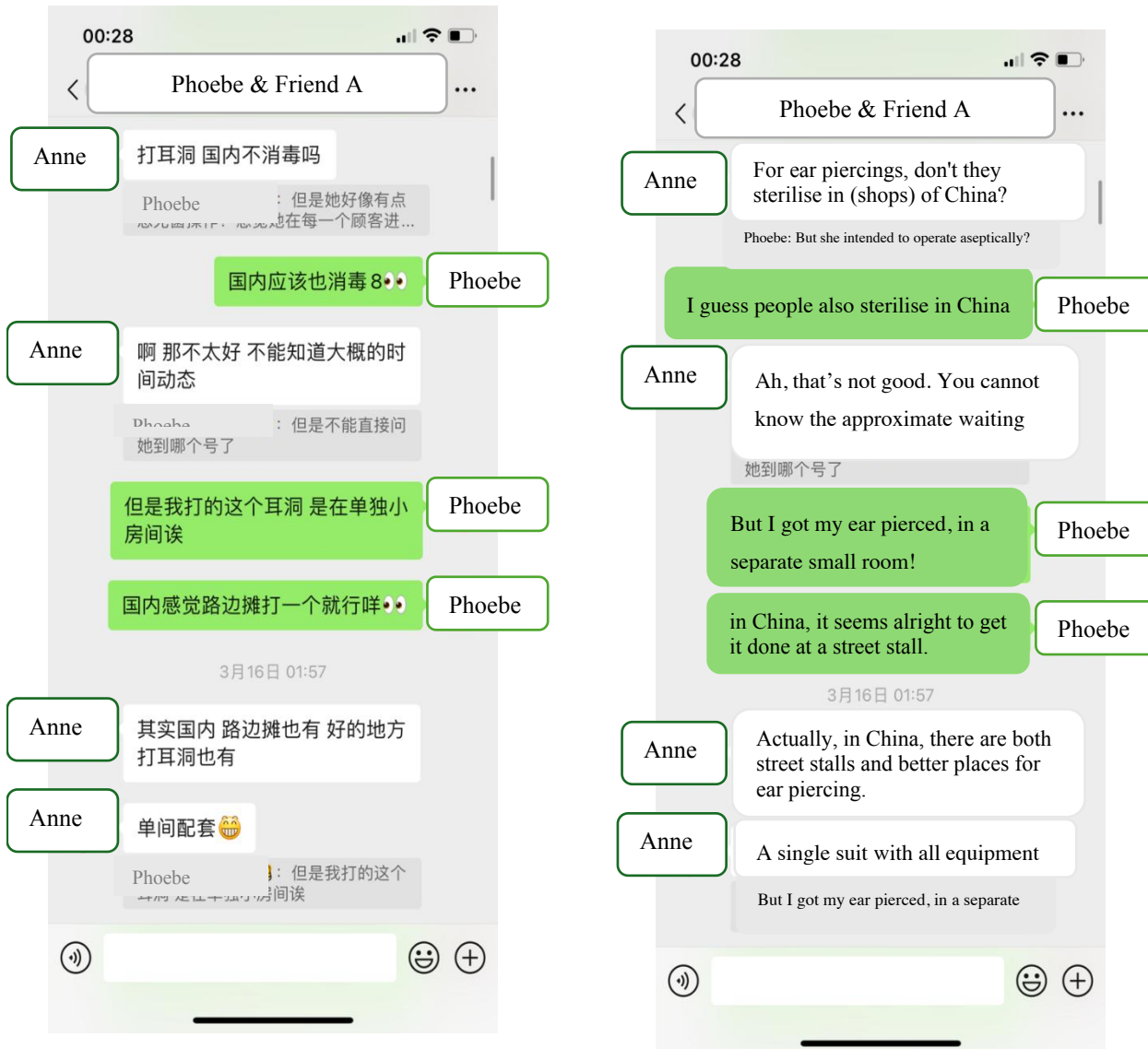


Figure 52:

Phoebe Making Sense of her Intercultural Experience on WeChat (3)



Figure 53:

Phoebe Making Sense of her Intercultural Experience on WeChat (4)

Particularly, they explored possible reasons for cultural differences that caused their confusion and proposed multiple possible interpretations. First, Phoebe speculated that she was requested to communicate through the receptionist since ‘打耳洞的工作人员怕我插队 (the piercer was afraid that I might cut in the line)’ (see Figure 50). Her claim amused Anne though Anne also admitted that this interpretation ‘有点道理 (kind of makes sense)’ (see Figure 51) since the receptionist could take control of the sequence that customers being served. Then Anne proposed a second interpretation, asking if it was due to ‘人手不够 (lack of piercers)’ (see Figure 51). Her interpretation was confirmed by Phoebe, who added that there was only one female piercer in the shop. Moving their attention to the

piercer, Phoebe proposed the third interpretation that the piercer intended to ‘无菌操作 (operate aseptically)’ (Figure 51) since she was in a ‘单独小房间 (small separate room)’ where she can keep the operation space sterilised (see Figure 52). In contrast to observed better hygiene conditions, Phoebe compared piercing shops in China and commented that ‘确实国内好像不太关注这个 (indeed, this isn't getting much attention in China)’ (Figure 51) and ‘国内好像路边摊打一个就行 (in China, it seems alright to get it done at a street stall)’ (Figure 52). However, Anne showed her disagreements with Phoebe’s comparison and interpretation, asking rhetorically: ‘打耳洞国内不消毒吗 (For ear piercings, don't they sterilise in China?)’ (see Figure 52). In addition, Anne pointed out that ‘其实国内路边摊也有, 好的地方打耳洞的也有 (Actually, in China, there are both street stalls and better places for ear piercing)’, contesting Phoebe’s over-generalised and over-simplified opinions on differences between local British piercing shops and those in China. When being asked about her interpretation of the encounter, Anne summarised that ‘还是人太了, 工作人员不想被打扰 (there are few piercers, and the staff doesn't want to be disturbed)’ (see Figure 53). This was followed with more relating to situations in China, with Phoebe remarking ‘但是在国内的话好像直接跟工作人员聊起来了 (but in China, (customers) probably would start chatting with the staff)’ (Figure 53), indicating that instead of preferring to be left undisturbed, piercers in China would like to interact with costumers. Consequently, Phoebe summarised different phenomena she and Anne observed and concluded that ‘可能这就是中西文化差异 (this is probably cultural differences between China and the West)’ (see Figure 53). During the interview, Phoebe revealed that the intercultural dialogues she had ‘changed some of my opinion(s) to this encounter’ and enriched her ‘understanding to (of) the workers and receptions’.

In sum, the above discussions enriched our understanding of how collective interpreting and relating were conducted in real life. With multiple perspectives being proposed, challenged, and negotiated, such interpreting and relating consequently led to a better understanding of the IE, cultural others, and relevant cultural differences, which either mediated intercultural confrontation (e.g., between Shirley’s CSS seminar group members and their Iranian classmates) or improved willingness and openness to engage with cultural others (e.g., Phoebe and Anne). In addition, discussions on the WeChat screenshots Phoebe shared illustrated how individuals can conduct interpreting and relating in a cyclic process of intercultural dialogues on social media. These findings not only enhanced our comprehension of the IE sense-making process but also deepened our insights regarding how this process can be done collectively on social media. These findings supplemented the lack of empirical studies. Moreover, these findings enriched our understanding of how IE could be done collectively in

virtual spaces, which supplemented previous studies that investigated how international students interpreted and learned from their IEs individually in the form of interviews (Askins, 2016; Donovan, 2018; Yu, 2017) or diaries (Meyer & Schuch, 2017), transformative cultural-learning journals (Chen & Zheng, 2019) or the AIE (Lindner & Méndez García, 2014; Méndez García, 2017; Mete, 2018). These studies were based in various contexts (Australia, China, UK, USA, Germany, and Spain) but unfortunately, none of these investigated how participants can make full use of modern technology (social media) to make sense of their IEs with others. Moreover, the aforementioned data collection methods these researchers adopted required the involvement of researchers (e.g., by asking questions during the interview, or requesting participants to write materials in a certain form and cover certain content). In contrast, the intercultural dialogues participants had on WeChat were natural conversations initiated by themselves without researchers' interventions where an in-depth interpreting and relating process was explicated. Such findings were both novel and unique to IE studies.

6.3.2 Reflecting on their Intercultural Encounters

For many participants, the IE sense-making processes on WeChat involved reflection, which played a vital role in helping them accommodate the strangeness and learning from their concrete experiences (Donovan, 2018; Gill, 2007). Both self-reflection and collective reflection were observed, which resulted in an increase in their critical cultural awareness.

Hal, one of the participants, highlighted that the IE discussions on WeChat were ‘蛮有意思的, 是个愉快的过程 (quite an interesting and pleasant process)’ and ‘把它好好思考一下对人才是积极的 (reflecting on it (IE experience) is beneficial for individuals)’. She elaborated that:

人需要有一个平台去把这个事情讲出来。如果它只是在你脑海里, 它可能就是不大会去成型...尤其是你在去描述这个事情的过程, 它本身是一个思考的过程, 它会帮助你把这个事情理清楚。所以我觉得还挺好的...不管是生活方面还是说学术方面。

People need a platform to talk about it (the IE). If it remains only in your head, (your ideas) might not fully take shape... Especially during the process of describing it, you engage in a thinking process that helps you clarify ideas. So, I think it's quite beneficial ... whether for personal life or academic purposes.

Another participant, Winston, emphasised the importance of collective reflection, namely ‘the talk and interaction between people who view being together as a time to learn with and from each other’ (De Lawter & Sosin, 2000, p.1). In other words, participants reflected collectively with their WeChat interlocutors and drew on multiple perspectives they contributed. He commented that:

我会时常会反思一些自己生活中遇到的事情。但是和微信好友的沟通,我觉得也是非常重要,起到一个很好的辅助作用。因为在分享经历的过程中,别人会去感同身受去评论你这个事件,这会更让我从不同的角度看到这个事件的一个结果和产生的影响,也会促使我更多的去反思我这个事。

I often reflect on things that happened in my life. But I think communication with WeChat friends is also very important in playing a good supplementary role. Because in the process of sharing experiences, others will empathize with you when commenting on your encounter, which could enrich my perspectives in viewing the result and impact of this event. It also prompts me to reflect more on my encounter.

Though others did not comment directly on how discussions on WeChat facilitated their reflection, investigations on their intercultural dialogues on WeChat revealed dialogic reflection as a collective reflection approach (Foong et al. 2018), an approach proven to be efficient in the field of education for teachers' professional practices or students' team learning (Foong et al., 2018; Ohlsson, 2013) but was inadequately researched in the field of intercultural communication and IE studies. Such dialogic reflections and participants' self-reflections transcend concrete experiences and contribute to the construction of understanding in a more general sense.

For example, after discussing on WeChat a seminar confrontation with an Iranian coursemate (IE9, explored in 6.2.1), Shirley (IE9) and her peers critically evaluated norms of having eye contact in different cultures (the Chinese, the British, and the Iranian cultures) and reached consensus in respecting others' cultural norms. Moreover, she critically evaluated and reflected on her and her WeChat CSS peers' different perspectives and behaviours towards language choices, which deepened her understanding of the heterogeneity in the CSS community. She specified that ‘关于可能像跨文化这类话题上可能我们自己中国的同学之间会有一些不一样 (regarding intercultural topics, we Chinese students may also have differences among ourselves)’. Shirley explained that she and some CSS were trying to make their language use more inclusive to ease communication discomfort and barriers for their intercultural interlocutors. However, she acknowledged that this was difficult for many of her CSS peers since ‘很多中国同学就是说中文已经成为了一个自己没有办法避免的一个习惯 (it has become an inevitable habit for many CSS to speak Mandarin)’. Shirley elaborated that:

就算是可能中国的同学想法也会不同。可能他们觉得当着国外的同学说中文没什么, 然后比如说像我还有别的一些同学就会觉得还是最好不要说中文。... 也是看个人性

格, 有的同学可能就会说更多的是想在乎交流的时候对方舒不舒服, 然后可能有的同学就更多的是在乎自我的感受。

There are different opinions even among Chinese students. Some may feel that speaking Chinese in front of foreign classmates is no big deal, while others, like me and several others, think it's best to avoid speaking Chinese in such situations. ... It partially depends on personality, because some students may care whether the interlocutors feel comfortable during the interaction, while others only care about their own feelings.

Phoebe's reflections showed increased critical cultural awareness ('savoirs' engager'), namely the capacity to conduct 'a critique of our own communities and societies as well as that of other countries' (Byram, 2012, p.10). Being regarded as one of the central elements in Byram's ICC model (1997, 2009b), such evidence of increased cultural awareness aligned with previous studies that IE can form the basis for further intercultural learning experiences that lead to ICC improvement and transformative changes (Donovan, 2018).

A combination of self-reflection and dialogic collective reflection as well as consequent increased critical awareness were also evident in Phoebe regarding her WeChat discussion on an ear-piercing experience (IE9, explored in 6.2.1). Phoebe demonstrated an enhanced understanding of different work styles of piercing shops in China and the U.K., which resulted in a better understanding of the unfamiliar social-cultural norms and better coping strategies for the future. Moreover, their discussion contested Phoebe's original over-generalised and over-simplified opinions that people could get their ear-pierced in a '路边摊 (a street stall)' and hygiene conditions were '确实国内好像不太关注这个 (indeed not getting much attention in China)', which improved comprehensions of situations in China. In addition, when being asked to conclude her WeChat discussion with Anne during the interview, Phoebe commented that despite their efforts to reflect on various aspects of their IE experiences, their interpretations lacked the involvement of cultural others, thus she would like to 'went (go) back to the time when I get ear piercing and maybe I can ask the reception why the (ear-piercing) worker didn't reply (to) me'. Her remarks showed strong curiosity and eagerness to engage with and understand her IE interlocutor and demonstrated strong action orientation, an important outcome of IE reflection (Byram et al., 2009). Moreover, Phoebe added that she should adjust to local lifestyles '一个慢生活的节奏, 有可能英国这边咱还需要适应一下 (the slow living pace that we may need to adapt to it here in the UK)' and affirmed that 'I just met too less of the situation' as such and 'I should go out a lot and to have a look for the cultural difference to experience to get used to them'. These remarks demonstrated that Phoebe's reflection extended beyond this concrete experience and explicated

increased cultural awareness, improved initiatives and openness to interact with the local environment, as well as enhanced action orientation.

The findings of this section enriched insights into how participants conducted a combination of self-reflection and dialogic collective reflection on their IE experiences via the social media platform - WeChat, which contributed to empirical studies. Especially, my findings highlighted how dialogic collective reflection, an approach that was proven to be efficient in the field of education for teachers' professional practices or students' team learning (Foong et al., 2018; Ohlsson, 2013), can be effective in IE sense-making. This supplemented the lack of empirical studies since as mentioned in 6.2.1, current studies on IE experiences mainly focus on individuals' sense-making process, thus many previous studies on participants' IE sense-making process emphasise their self-reflection (e.g., Chen & Zheng, 2019; Holme; 2012; Méndez García, 2017). In addition, my participants either claimed their intercultural dialogues and reflections as '愉快 (pleasant)' and '积极的 (beneficial)' (Hal) or engaged actively and passionately in it (Shirley and Phoebe), which was contrary to the findings of Méndez García (2017, p.97) who underlined the 'initial reluctance to self-reflection and introspection because facing difference may be distressing'. Retrospections on differences between our research and how our participants conducted reflections in different ways, I discovered that Méndez García asked her participants to fill out the original version of the 20-page long AIE promoted by the Council of Europe (2009), which was lengthy and formal, thus was commented as 'a really hard exercise of reflection' by one of her participants. In contrast, the reflections my participants demonstrated happened in the forms of casual interactions with their close ones on WeChat, their favourite social media platforms, which made their reflections easier and more inviting.

Regarding the outcome of reflections, I discovered that participants gained self-growth, especially in increasing their critical cultural awareness and improving their action orientation, two important factors in Byram's ICC models (Bram, 1997, 2020; Byram et al., 2009). These findings concurred with Jackson (2012) who noted the development of ICC development due to intercultural experience and roughly aligned with researchers (Chen & Zheng, 2019; Holme; 2012) highlighting critical awareness underpinned by self-reflection. However, my findings on individuals' casual and self-initiated dialogic collective reflection challenged Jackson's (2012) argument that careful guidance was necessary before, during, and after individual's IE experiences for transformative changes. Considering my participants were all CCC students who received ICC training in their program and had conducted guided reflections on their IEs, whether similar casual dialogic reflection and self-growth can be found on CSS in other fields deserves future academic attention.

6.4 Negotiating Attitudes and Cultural Identities

The IE sense-making process on WeChat has been proven to be effective for participants in negotiating their attitudes and cultural identities. ‘*Negotiating attitudes*’ here refers specifically to how the WeChat discussion facilitated participants to construct or reconstruct their attitudes towards cultural otherness, while ‘*negotiating cultural identity*’ refers to how participants’ cultural identities were made relevant in the process. These two aspects will be elaborated below in 6.3.1 and 6.3.2 respectively. The structure of this section is illustrated in Figure 54, including theme, sub-themes, and key codes.

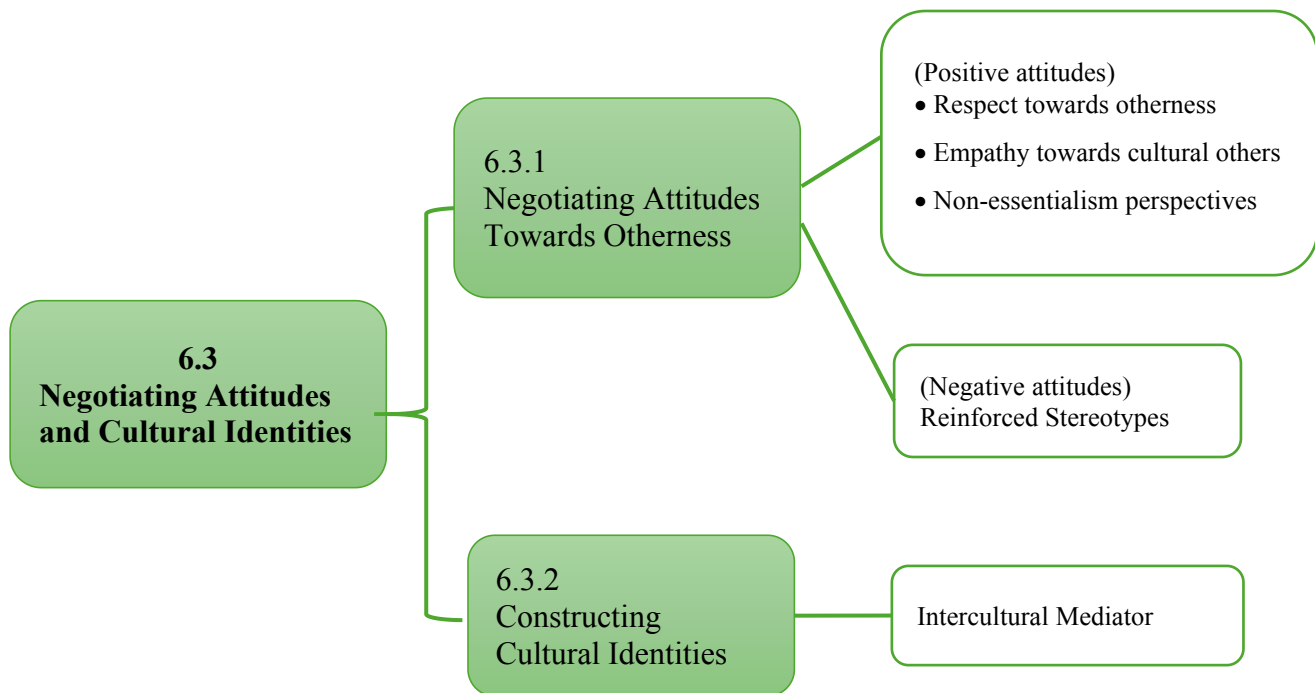


Figure 54:

Section Structure

6.4.1 *Negotiating Attitudes Towards Otherness*

Though nearly half (eight out of 17) of the IEs participants shared were negative experiences, most interviewees reported developing very positive attitudes towards cultural otherness and only several revealed negative attitudes. Key sub-themes regarding positive attitudes included *respect towards otherness*, *empathy towards cultural others*, and *anti-essentialism perspectives*. Negative attitudes mainly focused on *reinforced stereotypes*.

Before elaborating on these sub-themes, a key issue to clarify is to what extent the WeChat discussions have changed participants' attitudes. Are changes in participants' attitudes the results of their WeChat discussion? How did WeChat discussions influence their attitudes? To answer these questions, I asked all interviewees to compare the similarities and differences between their own attitudes and perceptions with those of their WeChat interlocutors during the interview and to conclude the influence of the WeChat discussion on them. According to participants' self-report, they shared either the same or similar attitudes with their WeChat interlocutors, which validated or even amplified their pre-existing attitudes and perspectives. In terms of disagreements, pre-existing attitudes still prevail, and no big changes were reported. Walter summarised this phenomenon and commented that WeChat friends '会是帮我想的更立体, 但是不太会改变就是核心的思想 (could help me think things more thoroughly, but that will not change my core ideas). A similar pattern was observed repeatedly in other participants' experiences. See the elaboration of the sub-themes below.

Respect towards Otherness

According to Byram (2009), respect for otherness is manifested in curiosity and openness, as well as readiness to suspend belief about one's own culture and other cultures. Respect for otherness was regarded as very important attitude factors of ICC (Byram, 1997, 2020; Deardorff, 2016).

Participants demonstrated respect towards local culture, openness, curiosity about, and eagerness to learn from people affiliated with different cultural groups, and willingness to seek out opportunities to engage and cooperate with them. Open-mindedness was evident in previous discussions on Shirley and Phoebe's IE sense-making process via WeChat (6.2) where they learned to accept and respect local norms of maintaining eye contact or enquiring receptionist instead of piercers for ear-piercing. Similarly, Aquarius, another participant, claimed that her parents encouraged her to '尊重别人 (respect others)' from different cultural backgrounds, which made her aware that she needed to be more open-minded towards behaviours and cultural norms that are different from her own. Such open-mindedness helped her reflect on and contest her initial ethnocentric perspectives. When being asked to conclude her WeChat discussions, Aquarius commented that she '不能用中国人的想法来要求其他国家就其他文化的人 (should expect people from other countries with different cultures to conform to Chinese ways of thinking)'

A more detailed example can be seen in Winston and his CSS peers' WeChat discussion. Specifically, during the encounter he titled 'She speaks Mandarin!' (IE7), Winston observed that Ash, one of her British seminar group members, could not only speak Mandarin but also had rich working and studying experiences in various countries/regions in Asia, which made him surprised and admired.

During the interview, Winston shared this experience with his parents and many other CSS via WeChat, and they all showed openness and curiosity about his IE interlocutor, Ash. He commented that Ash ‘让我们对这个女孩感到亲切且钦佩 (made us feel warm and admiringly)’ by her rich intercultural experiences and adept competences in speaking Mandarin and navigating Asian culture so ‘大家都很喜欢这个女孩 (we all like this girl)’. Consequently, such curiosity, admiration, and acceptance towards Ash later led to increased interactions with her, as Winston confirmed that many of his CSS peers ‘这个事件之后都是对她比较有好感 (feel so positive about her after this encounter)’ that they ‘很自然的就把她视作我们这个团队的一份子 (naturally regarded her as one of our team)’ and ‘大家在平时沟通，在做活动的时候都会邀请到她 (invited her to join our interactions or social activities)’.

In addition, encouraged by his parents, Winston boosted his eagerness to learn from Ash about her courage in exploring and emerging herself in different cultures. He said that his parents ‘非常鼓励我能够在向她去学习，未来也能够有更多这样的机会去交流 (greatly encouraged me to learn from her, so in the future, I could have more opportunities to communicate as such)’. His parents made him reflect on the dilemma he found himself and many CSS like him were in:

我觉得我们中国人是特别渴望热情，其实渴望与别人交流的。但是由于文化的一些束缚，可能我们觉得有些情况下我们虽然很想，但是又不太敢。

I think we Chinese are particularly eager and passionate to interact with others.

However, due to constraints of culture, though sometimes we are longing to (interact), we are a bit intimidated.

Winston’s reflection on not taking chances to interact with cultural others revealed what Wright and Schartner (2013) highlighted as being caught ‘at the threshold’, a common phenomenon observed among international students. However, inspired by intercultural dialogues and critical reflection upon them, Winston noted that he enhanced his confidence and willingness to interact with people from different cultural groups. He stated that:

(微信上的有关讨论)影响更多的是积极且正面的。因为大家一致的这种讨论下... 我们很羡慕对方有这样一个阅历和能力，激励我在未来提升我自己的时候会有一个具体的方向，或者说如何更好的融入另一个群体也会给我一些个人的经验。...我在下一次和别人交流的时候，使我更有信心。

The influence of such discussion on WeChat was mostly positive and proactive. Through our discussions, we all admired her for having such rich experiences and being so capable. It motivated me and guided me in terms of how to self-improve in the future. It also provided me

with personal experience to learn from for better integration into another group... It gave me more confidence to interact with others.

Our findings confirmed that IEs and corresponding meaningful sense-making could lead to improved respect towards otherness and thus attitudinal development in ICC. These findings are roughly consistent with the research of Holmes and Neil (2012) where participants were found to move from feelings of superiority to respect for better communication and understanding of cultural others after experiencing and reflecting on their intercultural interactions, which exemplified their ICC development. Similar findings were observed in German and Spanish participants of Lindner and Méndez García (2014) who developed respect for otherness after their telecollaboration.

Empathy towards Cultural Others

Empathy towards cultural others refers to taking another person's perspectives, motives, feelings, and ways of thinking (Byram et al., 2009). It is regarded as one of the attitudes emphasised in Byram's ICC model (2009) though few empirical ICC studies explored empathy.

Empathy was frequently evident when participants and their WeChat interlocutors took cultural others' stances when interpreting the IE and then deciding on actions for the future. Participants showed different degrees of empathy and a rather interesting example that can best represent participants' improved empathy can be found in Stephanie's discussion on her encounter - 'Squat toilets or toilet seats?' (IE10). Specifically, Stephanie and a British male friend joked about how inconvenient it was to use public toilets in each other's countries (China and the UK respectively). Stephanie lamented that using public toilet seats in the UK was not hygienic, especially for girls. Meanwhile, her British friend complained doing deep squats (addressed as '亚洲蹲 (*Yazhou dun-pinyin*, Asian squats)' to use a squat toilet was quite challenging or nearly impossible. After the IE, Stephanie and her friend Hellen had quite an interesting conversation on WeChat (see part of their discussion in Figures 55 and 56).

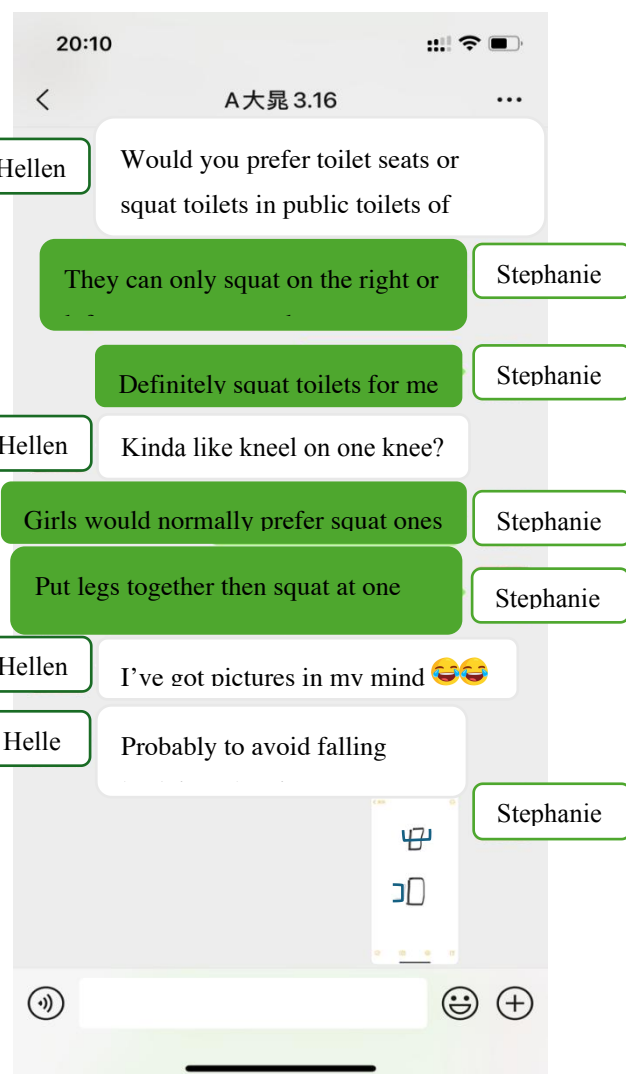


Figure 55:

Discussing the Intercultural Encounter 'Squat Toilets or Toilet Seats?' (1)

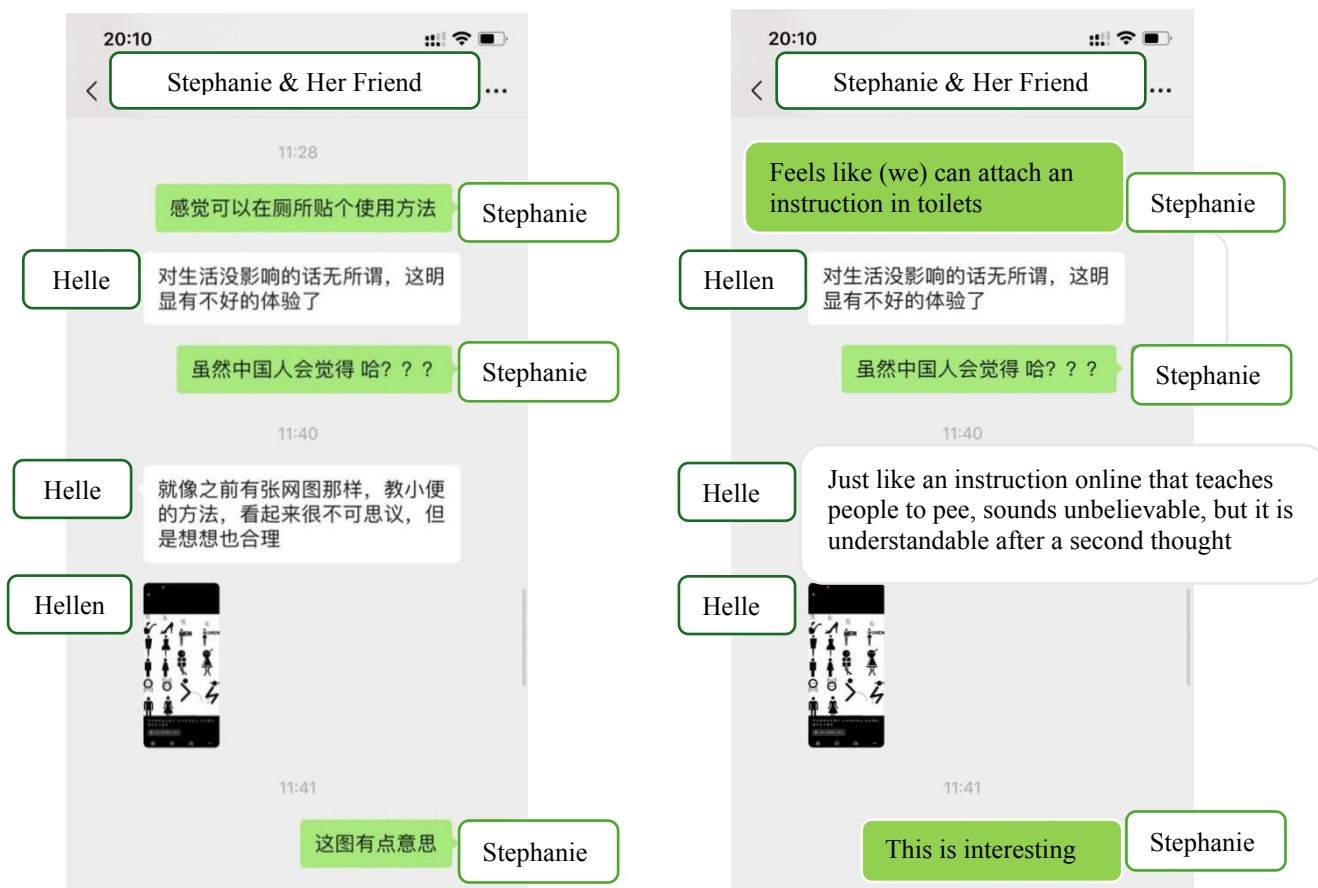


Figure 56:

Discussing the Intercultural Encounter - 'Squat Toilets or Toilet Seats?' (3)

In addition to submitting these screenshots, Stephanie shared her WeChat discussions with Hellen during the interview. However, after deeper investigation and comparisons of these two types of relevant data (screenshots and interview), I found that these screenshots displayed their original interaction with much richer and accurate details thus I decided to investigate these screenshots first before introducing Stephanie's explanation and interpretations during the interviews.

Hellen first talked about their preferences towards these two different types of toilets, then addressed how challenging the squat toilets are for many foreigners like this British friend to use (Figure 55). Despite their Acknowledgement of such difficulties, Stephanie initially thought that '他们也不用学习 (they do not need to study)'. Meanwhile, Hellen commented that '无法改变环境的，就要适应环境 (If you cannot change the environment, adjust to it)', regarding it is sojourners' responsibility to adjust to the new environment. She even said that '三急来了用(也)得想办法解决，没有坐便他们也能蹲着 (when nature calls, they will have to find solutions, they can squat if there are

not toilet seats)’. Her comments did not show much sympathy towards cultural others in China who struggle with challenges using squat toilets. Then Stephanie referred to her British friend’s experiences of ‘弄到过衣服上 (getting stuff on his clothes)’ and commented that that was ‘有点儿惨 (miserable)’ (Figure 56). Stephanie then proposed that a possible solution that could avoid similar situations and help others could be ‘在厕所贴个使用方法 (putting up instructions in the bathroom)’. Her remarks and proposal changed the conversation atmosphere and both of them began to shower greater empathy. Hellen acknowledged that: ‘对生活没影响的话无所谓, 这明显有不好的体验了 (It’s ok if this does not affect their lives, but obviously it has hazarded their experience)’ and took initiatives to find suitable instruction signs (Figure 57). Stephanie commented that the signs Helen suggested were ‘有点意思 (quite interesting)’.

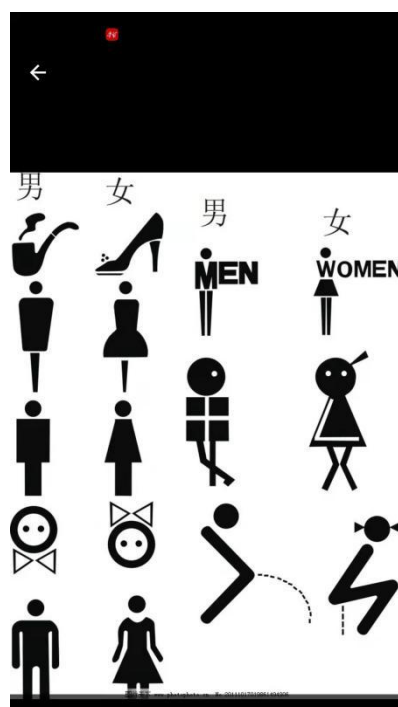


Figure 57:
Recommended Toilet Use Instruction Sign

Later in the interview, Stephanie explained that ‘贴个类似于小图片就比较可爱 (putting on a picture sign is rather cute)’ and ‘确实是能比较幽默的去展现一下你是要怎么蹲 (can certainly demonstrate how you use squat toilets in a funny way)’. She added that more support should be given to those who struggle to adjust to the new environment in China, showing great sympathy. Stephanie

then reflected that such empathy was a result of her sojourning experience since ‘我没有来英国之前是没有想到这个东西的...我出来以后会比较感同身受 (before I came to the UK, I didn't think about such things... I started to empathise more since I came abroad)’. Influenced by her during the WeChat conversations, Hellen, her WeChat interlocutor also showed improved sympathy. Stephanie revealed during the interview that such conversations also enabled her to ‘从一个出发点去一起探讨 (explore these topics from one starting point)’ with her WeChat interlocutors, which made her ‘更容易去接受跨文化交流 (accept intercultural communication more easily)’ and ‘互相理解一下彼此 (understand each other)’.

Evidence of empathy towards cultural others verified participants’ attitudinal development addressed in Byram’s (2020) ICC model. These findings also showed consistency with the empirical study of Chen and Zheng (2019) on 41 Chinese undergraduate participants, which discovered more objectivity and empathy for others in their participants’ IE reflective journals. In comparison to Chen and Zheng’s (2019), I have illustrated not only the presence of empathy but also how empathy was developed and manifested through WeChat dialogues, which contributed to our understanding of individuals’ attitudinal development.

Challenging Essentialism Perspectives

The concept of essentialism is rooted in philosophical principles (Bradley, 2018). Endeavouring to discover the ‘essence’ (the characters or traits that constitute reality), ‘the essentialist is committed to the view that the human mind can come to know the essence of things’ (Oderberg, 2008, p. 19). Adapted from the four elements of essentialism proposed by Philips (2010) regarding gender theory, Bradley (2018, p.3) explicit the elements with easy-to-understand examples: essentialists attribute specific characteristics to all members of a social group (‘All Japanese are polite’); attribute these socially constructed characteristics to the group which members belong to (‘He is polite because he is Japanese’), regarding the group as a homogeneous block (‘You Japanese...’), and carry out ‘policing’ of the group in a way that non-adherence to such characteristics undermines an individual’s group membership (‘He is not really Japanese because he is not polite’).

Thematic data analysis on the interviews revealed some participants demonstrated anti-essentialism perspectives when summarising their discussions on WeChat though many of them went through negative IE experiences. For example, Jade had unpleasant interactions with the receptionist when trying to find her missing parcel (IE14), but she acknowledged that not all cultural others were rude and held negative perspectives (e.g., discrimination, stereotyping) towards CSS. When asked to conclude her discussion on this experience on WeChat, Jade concluded that she was fully aware that

‘不能因为一个外国人跟你没有好的文化交流，就对整个群体都抱有很不好的印象(you had an unpleasant intercultural communication with one foreigner, but you cannot have a negative attitude towards the whole group just because of it). She further explained that this was ‘这是唯一一个让我印象很深刻让我很不开心的一次遭遇 (this was the only one encounter that made me impressive since it made me quite upset)’, but other than this encounter, she also shared with her close ones via WeChat many positive sojourning experiences, depicting a very positive image of many cultural others. Jade elaborated that:

我觉得不能一概而论。... 你看市场的奶奶啊，对于我们来说就像自己的那种孙子的感觉，就是对我们都很亲和。然后餐厅的服务人员，学校老师、学校的同学其实对我们都是很好的。所以我觉得英国的经历是很愉快的。

I think you can't generalise. ... Take the elderly ladies in the market, for instance, they treated us like their own grandchildren, being very kind to us. As for the restaurant staff, school professors, and classmates, they are all super nice to us. So, I find my experience in the UK very pleasant.

Aligned with Jade, Mathew refuted the idea of over-generalizing certain individuals’ behaviour to the whole group of cultural others when discussing negative IE with his WeChat friends. He pointed out that:

I also have several negative encounters with the local people, but I just shared them with my friends and mentioned that, for example, this person was drunk, had a lot of alcohol and he lost his mind. But it's one person and it cannot represent the whole. (Mathew)

Stephanie agreed that:

不能为了个别不正常的人,上升到种族或者是国家或者是人群...然后去对这个群体去做一些负面评价。我觉得这样对这个群体的不公平。

(We) could not overgeneralise (the behaviour and attitude of) several ‘abnormal’ individuals to their whole race or country or group...and make negative comments about them. I think it's unfair.

Instead of being intimidated by negative experiences, Stephanie noted that ‘遇到就是那种没有接触过的外国朋友的话...还是要抱乐观的态度去跟他们接触的 (we still need to hold a positive attitude towards foreign friends that we have not interacted before)’.

From above, it can be observed that participants did not attribute traits of some individuals (e.g., being discriminative, rude) as the ‘essence’ of all group members and did not see groups of cultural

others as homogeneous, which challenged what Philips (2010) and Bradley (2018) defined as *essentialism*. Overwhelmingly seen as a negative force (Bradley, 2018; Holliday, 2011; Philips, 2010), essentialist beliefs are often criticised for resulting in increased stereotypes (Holliday, 2013). Previous empirical studies explored how participants foregrounded essentialism perspectives are scarce, while more explored more specifically the relationship between IE experience and stereotypes (Holmes & Neil, 2012). Considering the close interrelationship between essentialism and stereotyping and my next sub-theme is about stereotypes, I will investigate the next themes before relating my findings with previous studies.

Reinforced Stereotypes

Based on Hilton and Von Hippel's (1996, p.240) well-quoted article, stereotypes are 'beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of members of certain groups'.

Reinforced stereotypes towards cultural others were underlined by several participants. In particular, when talking about her experiences of losing suitcases after taking an international flight from China to the U.K. (IE12), Anne admitted that she kept reinforcing her mom and friends' impression that '欧洲人 (Europeans)' were low in efficiency. Going through a similar situation, Aemon (IE6) concurred that both she and her WeChat connections considered '外国人 (foreigners)' being '有时候会懒懒散散一些, 或者说就是办事没有那么的严谨 (lazy and sloppy sometimes, or in other words, not very meticulous in handling things)'. Namely, both Anne and Aemon over-generalised their negative experiences with the staff at the airport to the whole group of 'Europeans' and 'foreigners' and they kept reinforcing such over-generalised stereotypes for their WeChat interlocutors.

In addition, after a Pakistani stranger helped Lexie carry her luggage (IE17), Lexie shared this experience with her parents who '赞颂了一下巴铁友谊 (praised the China-Pakistan friendship)'. During their interaction on WeChat, both Lexie and her family used the term '巴铁 (ba tie, Iron Pak)' to address the stranger, indicating their amiable attitudes towards Pakistanis (see Figure 58). When being asked to explain such an attitude in the interview, Lexie revealed that it was due to the close national relationships between China and Pakistan, which was stressed repeatedly in various channels such as '国内的这种新闻, 抖音 (Chinese news and Douyin (Chinese counterpart of TikTok))'. Because of this, she confessed that she '天然的会觉得有点亲切 (naturally felt warm and familiar)' towards Pakistanis, showing signs of positive stereotypes which were reinforced after the IE. Such attitudes demonstrated by Lexie and her family corresponded to what Czopp et al. (2015, p.451) defined as *positive stereotypes*, namely 'subjectively favourable beliefs about members of social

groups'. This deserves further academic attention considering the advert influence of positive stereotypes in interpersonal and intergroup relationships (Czopp et al., 2015).

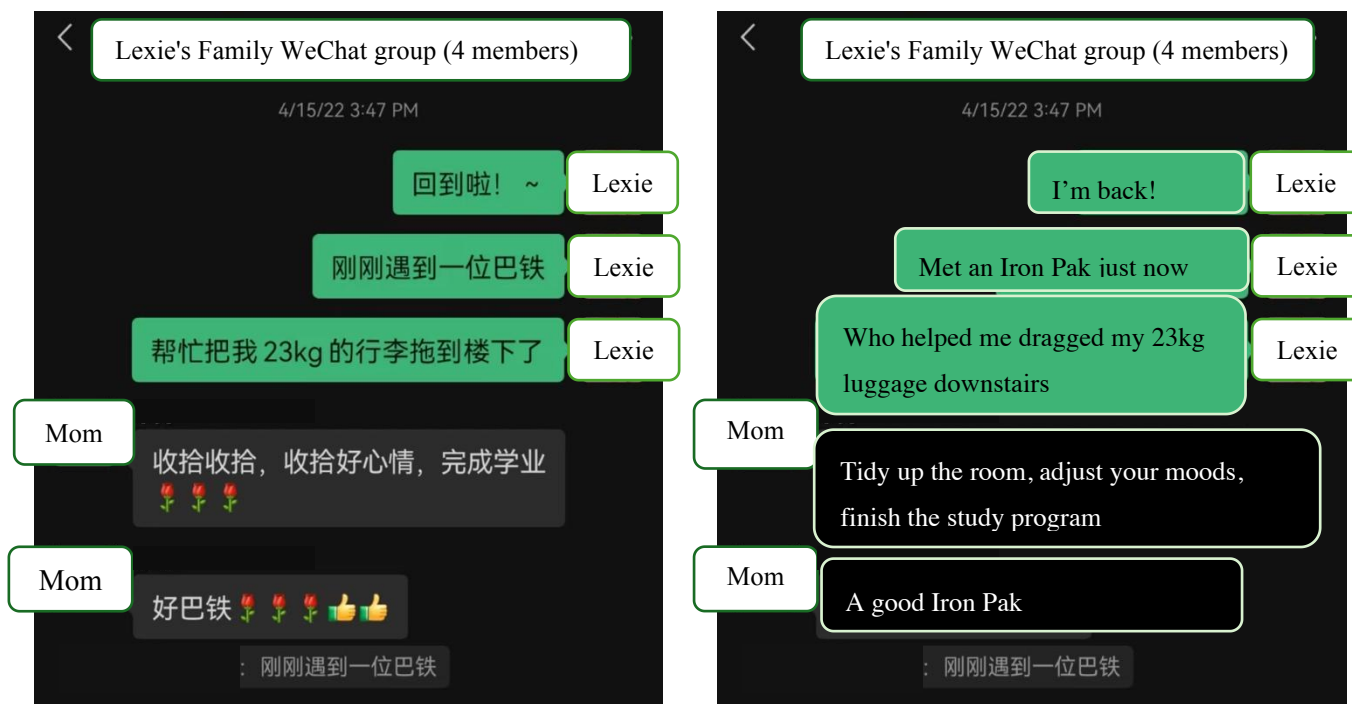


Figure 58:

Lexie Talking about Her IE with Family

Findings on some participants' reinforced stereotypes showed signs of over-generalising traits of certain individuals to be characteristics of wider social groups. Similar findings were discovered by Chen and Zheng (2019) on their Chinese participants, who displayed non-judgemental attitudes on the surface during intercultural interaction but revealed problematic over-generalisation tendencies. These findings seem to contradict my previous sub-theme challenging essentialism perspectives. However, after exploring previous literature, I discovered that such contradiction was not uncommon. Dervin and Gross (2016, p.5) explained that despite efforts in combating essentialism and stereotypes, 'failures' in meeting the 'noble objectives' of non-essentialism can be inevitable no matter how hard we try. Indeed, I agree that we should accept the fact that in everyday life, individuals constantly navigate between views of simplification (essentialism) and complexity (non-essentialism) (Dervin & Gross, 2016), which can be fundamentally important for individuals' intercultural learning and ICC development process (Zhou & Pilcher, 2018).

6.4.2 *Constructing Cultural Identities*

As detailed in the *Introduction*, cultural identity theory emphasises how identity is negotiated based on shared history, contexts, and cultures (Hall, 2015). Linked to intercultural communication and IEs in particular contexts, cultural identity theories confirmed the existence of both fixed (e.g. race, ethnicity) and fluid (e.g. social and economic status) components (Dervin, 2012). In this research, an individual's cultural identity is viewed as dynamic and fluid for its recognition of interaction shaping and constructing process (Chen & Collier, 2012). Studying abroad might incur identity-related conflict since student sojourners need to integrate and construct multiple identity categories such as nationality, 'foreigner', linguistic heritage, ethnicity, gender, and age (Kinging, 2013). However, researchers (Liu & Kramer, 2019, p.449) highlighted solving identity inconsistency arising from IEs is 'the ideal way' to adapt successfully to the host society. Identity formation was made complicated in the digital age, allowing international students to enjoy the convenience of joining or forming communities based on their sense of belonging and identities but potentially causing increased isolation from the real world (Chang & Gomes, 2017). A previous study conducted by Park (2016) highlighted that Chinese students sending and snatching the red packets strengthened their connectedness with home culture.

Interview data revealed that participants demonstrated multi-faceted identities during the IE sense-making process on WeChat, including being Chinese (nationalities, ethnic), international students, members of the local community, cultural outsiders, and so on. However, the in-depth investigation revealed that the identity that participants most prominently exhibited in their IE sense-making process was intercultural mediators. Both participants and their WeChat interlocutors engaged and contributed to the IE sense-making process, but further investigation found that when discussing their IE experiences with their WeChat interlocutors, participants frequently engaged in intercultural mediation, namely an active involvement in meaning-making activities to develop shared understandings between people of different cultural backgrounds (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Two aspects of mediation were found, with the first one being mediating for self and the second one being mediating for others (their WeChat interlocutors). Mediating for the self was evident since most sections of this chapter (6.2 and 6.3.1) focused on how participants mediated other cultures for themselves with the help of their WeChat interlocutors through interpreting, relating, and reflecting on their IE experiences. Consequently, participants gained an understanding of the IEs, increased their critical cultural awareness, and negotiated their attitudes towards cultural otherness. These have been thoroughly addressed previously thus I will not repeat them here and will focus mainly on how participants mediated for others. The second type was evidenced when participants mediated between

their Chinese WeChat interlocutors and the cultural otherness involved in their IE experiences (as demonstrated in Figure 59). Specifically, the mediation started with participants sharing their IE experiences with their WeChat interlocutors who, in many cases, had little or no previous knowledge or experience of the cultural otherness. Through sharing, relevant intercultural phenomena, cultural others, and various relevant intercultural issues were introduced and addressed. Then participants facilitated the intercultural discussion by guiding the IE interpretations. They proposed possible interpretations and facilitated their WeChat interlocutors' engagement, a process that involved rounds of cultural comparison. Participants also sought to negotiate differences between different perspectives and attitudes for common grounds, constructing a process of intercultural learning. Consequently, participants enriched many of their WeChat interlocutors' cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and capacity to decentre their own culture to embrace cultural diversity. Additionally, many participants reported influencing their WeChat interlocutors' attitudes towards cultural others and otherness. These included positive attitudes (e.g., openness and respect) in most cases though reinforced essentialism or even stereotypes were observed when the IEs they discussed were not pleasant.

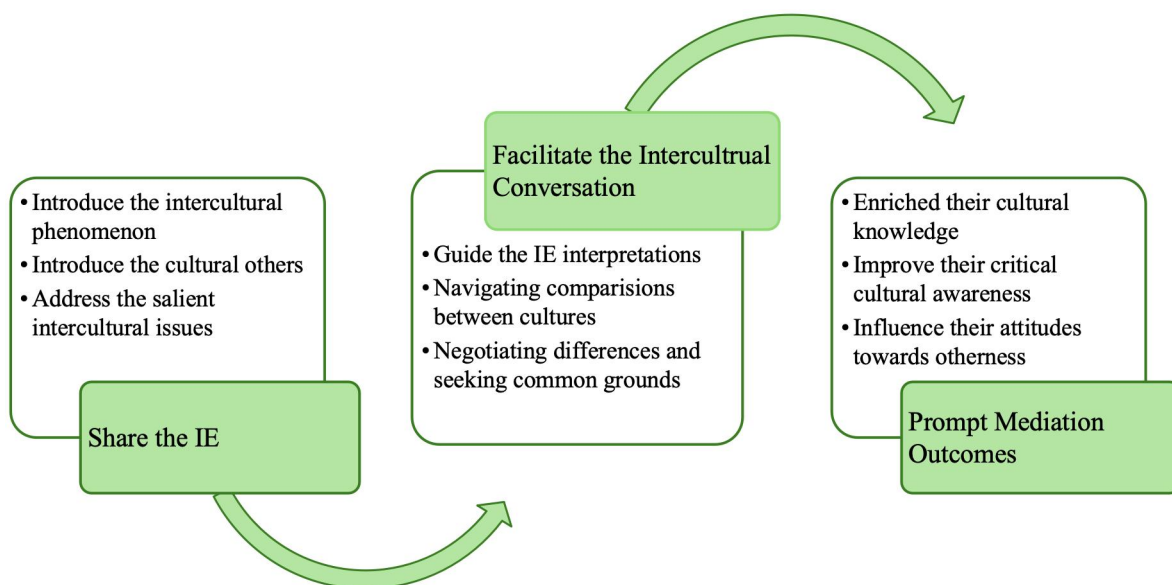


Figure 59:

CSS Participants Served as Intercultural Mediators for Their WeChat Interlocutors

Evidence of this process can be found in most IE sense-making processes discussed above. For example, when Stephanie discussed her 'Toilet Seat or Squad Toilet' IE experiences (IE10, discussed

in 6.3), her role as an intercultural mediator was salient. She introduced novel cultural phenomena (different toilets in China and the U.K. and people's different toilet-using habits and preferences) to her friend Hellen, elaborated on experiences and perceptions of the IE interlocutor (her British friends), and guided their discussion on intercultural adjustment, which increased her WeChat interlocutor's cultural knowledge. In addition, Stephanie made Hellen aware of how challenging the sojourning experiences could be, which developed Hellen's sympathy towards sojourners who struggle to adjust in China. With improvement in the attitudinal aspects of her ICC, Hellen took the initiative in finding signs to support cultural others, illustrating strong action orientation. Therefore, we can conclude that Stephanie served as a successful intercultural mediator for Hellen.

In addition, Stephanie commented that:

跟那些还没有过来的朋友在聊天中先去给他们讲一讲你遇到了一些尴尬的跨文化交流, 然后让他们尽量去避免这些。

Informing friends who haven't arrived (in the U.K.) yet about these awkward cross-cultural encounters you had in conversations could help them avoid those situations as much as possible.

These remarks evidenced that sharing and discussing her IE experiences were purposeful decisions Stephanie made to mediate a different culture for future newcomers to help them prepare for their sojourning. In addition, Stephanie also introduced ICC-related knowledge she learned from her course to her WeChat connections. See below how she enlightened her parents about relevant ICC terms:

我爸妈给我的反馈可能觉得比较惊喜, 然后感觉'原来外国是这样'。...他们可能都不知道这种可能叫做跨文化事件。但是因为我是学CC的, 我可能就跟他们普及一下。

My parents found (the IE experience) quite surprising, and they were like, 'So this is what life is like abroad.' ... They probably didn't even know this is called an 'IE'. Since I study cross-cultural communication, I explained it to them.

Accordingly, we can conclude that Stephanie actively engaged herself in increasing her WeChat interlocutor's knowledge about cultural otherness, facilitating their cultural awareness, and improving their ICC, which explicated her role as an intercultural mediator.

Another typical example can be found in Zoe's IE15 sense-making process on WeChat. Specifically, when shopping in a local supermarket, Zoe simply said 'No' to a cashier who asked if she needed a bag for her groceries. The supermarket cashier gave her a strange look as if she had done something wrong which made her feel both 'nervous and confused'. To make sense of this experience,

Zoe first ‘回到家之后马上就先看一下小红书’ (went back home and searched resources on Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book, also known as RED, a popular Chinese social media platform)), exploring English resources regarding pragmatics. She learned from the resources that it is rude to simply say ‘No’ and she should use more courtesy words such as ‘I’m fine, thank you’. Afterwards, Zoe ‘把这个事情问了一下 asked about it’ via WeChat. She discussed it with her cousin and several of her friends. See below:

他们(我的朋友们)首先也是觉得不解。我的朋友们毕竟平时在国内可能会比较直接一点, 也不会觉得不礼貌或者怎么样, 但是我把那些英语教学(资料)也一起发过去给他们看了, 他们才知道原来是这么回事。

At first, they (my friends) were also perplexed. My friends are based in China, and they are usually more direct so they didn't consider it (my response) impolite. Only after I shared those English learning materials with them did they understand.

Zoe not only introduced her IE experiences but also led the IE interpretation by sharing relevant resources with her friends. With her help, her friends cleared their confusion, gained more knowledge regarding English pragmatics, and enriched their understanding of appropriate politeness norms. Zoe explained that, through their conversation, both her and her friends ‘学到了需要怎么样在英国超市里礼貌用语 (learned how to use politeness expressions in British supermarkets)’. She added that though her friends might not come to the UK soon to have similar experiences themselves, they ‘多了解了一个知识 (gained more knowledge)’. All these exemplified how Zoe served as the intercultural mediator for her friends.

Zoe’s role as an intercultural mediator was also evident in her discussion with her cousin who had lived in Canada for almost ten years. Zoe reported having an insightful intercultural discussion with her cousin, who adopted different adjusting attitudes and strategies. Zoe reported that:

我就问她加拿大也是这么问, 需要这么回答比较委婉? 然后她就跟我说好像也没有特别要注重委婉的一些语句, 就觉得可能是英国人比较注重这方面。... 表姐觉得你怎么舒服就怎么说, 但是我觉得还是稍微注意一下比较好。

I asked her if people in Canada also ask like this, and if so, do they need to respond more politely? She told me that there doesn't seem to be an emphasis on politeness of expressions (in Canada) compared to the British who attached more importance to it. ... My cousin thinks you should say in whichever way you feel comfortable, but I think it is better to pay a bit more attention to it.

After critically evaluating disagreements, Zoe revealed that she was more assured that CSS should ‘注重一下本地人的那种礼貌 (attach importance to the politeness (norms) of the local)’ after the discussion. Her remarks showed great respect for local cultural and increased cultural awareness, which was made explicit for her cousin during their discussion. Zoe added that ‘你既然都来了这个地方了，你就稍微更融入大家的做法，不要做一些争议类的 (since you have come here, you should endeavor to adopt everyone's practices and don't do anything controversial)’.

Findings on how participants acted as intercultural mediators during the IE sense-making process on WeChat aligned with the intercultural mediation theories proposed by Liddicoat (2014), verifying that the participants formulated understandings of cultures for themselves (mediating for self) on one hand, and clarified cultural differences for those who have limited, or no knowledge of the cultures being mediated (mediating for others) on the other hand.

My research confirmed the complexity of identity formation in the digital age (Chang & Gomes, 2017) and contributed to our understanding of international students’ identity formation on social media. As intercultural mediators, with both aspects of mediation (mediating for self and other) involve interpreting perspectives of a certain cultural phenomenon of both one’s home culture and cultural others’ (Liddicoat, 2014), participants’ identity as intercultural mediators proved that WeChat to be a space to connect identities of home culture and in the host culture. These enriched insights that highlighted social media’s role in both maintaining identities related to home culture and building new identities as members of the host culture (Yau et al., 2020). Furthermore, these findings also supplemented the lack of empirical studies more specifically on WeChat and CSS identity formation. Based on a detailed analysis of participants’ experiences and perceptions, my research demonstrated the complexity of CSS participants’ identities that extends beyond ethnic identity, even on the Chinese social media platforms like WeChat. This contradicted research that underlined WeChat’s role in providing a venue for CSS to retain their ethnic identity (Chang & Gomes, 2017). Considering the study of Chang and Gomes (2017) relied on quantitative data, I would argue that their argument lacks depth. Moreover, with the fast-developing technology and change in the sojourning environment over the years (e.g., increased CSS studying in the UK), I would argue that my findings provided a more up-to-date representation of reality.

6.5 Summary

This chapter addressed the third research question: How do Chinese international students make sense of IEs through WeChat? Section 6.1, Understanding Participants’ Intercultural started with an overview of the intercultural encounters (6.1.1). According to the TA, it was salient that the IE topics

covered various aspects of participants' sojourning, from their academic sojourning (e.g., seminar group discussion) to their daily sociocultural sojourning in various contexts (e.g., accommodation, supermarkets, airports). Eight IEs were about negative experiences, six were positive, and three were neutral. Among them, six IEs are elaborated in 6.1.2, Representative Intercultural Encounters to make the presentation forms of the IEs consistent, and the later discussion on IEs easier for readers to follow. Then, based on the TA of participants' AIEs, 6.1.3 summarised the intercultural issues evidenced in IEs, which include cultural issues (e.g., social culture, working culture), attitudes (e.g., stereotypes and racism), identity (e.g., othering and affiliation), and linguistic issues (e.g., English pragmatics). The last part of the section, 6.1.4 summarised various feelings participants reported as the result of their IE experiences. These include both positive feelings and negative ones, or a mixture of both.

Section 6.2, *Extending the Intercultural Discussions on WeChat* comprises discussions on two sub-themes, namely *interpreting and relating* (6.2.1) and *reflecting* (6.2.2). *Interpreting and relating* explored how participants and their WeChat interlocutors engaged in the non-linear process of proposing multiple interpretations and negotiating different interpretations (thus interpreting) while comparing the IE factors with cultures of their own or cultures they experienced in a third place (relating). In addition, discussions on the WeChat screenshots illustrated how individuals conducted interpreting and relating in a cyclic process of intercultural dialogues. Consequently, participants were found to be able to clear confusion about the IEs and understood the feelings and attitudes of their own and others. Plenty of studies have examined IEs, most researchers focused on an individual's sense-making in various forms such as interviews (Askins, 2016; Donovan, 2018; Yu, 2017), diaries (Meyer & Schuch, 2017), transformative cultural-learning journals (Chen & Zheng, 2019) or the AIE (Lindner & Méndez García, 2014; Méndez García, 2017; Mete, 2018). These findings explicated how they developed relevant ICC skills of interpreting and relating, two imported skill factors emphasised in Byram's ICC model (1997, 2020). *Reflecting* (6.2.2), whereas, discussed how participants conducted both self-reflection and collective dialogic reflections on WeChat, which enhanced their critical cultural awareness. Aligned with Donovan's (2018) claim that IE could develop people's cultural sensitivity and awareness, the findings also confirmed that reflection can transcend concrete experiences and facilitate more general understandings for further intercultural learning experiences (Gill, 2007). These findings echoed previous studies (Byram et al., 2009; Donovan, 2018; Gill, 2007; Kolb, 1984) that underlined the vital role of reflection in making sense of IEs to accommodate the strangeness and fit into the host social-cultural framework.

Section 6.3, Negotiating Attitudes and Cultural Identities discussed how the WeChat discussion facilitated participants to construct or reconstruct their attitudes towards cultural otherness (6.3.1) and how participants' cultural identities were made relevant in the process (6.3.2). Regarding attitudes (6.3.1), most participants demonstrated open-mindedness towards otherness during their WeChat discussions on IEs, which are roughly consistent with previous studies that highlighted IEs' potential for individuals' attitudinal development (Holmes & Neil, 2012; Lindner & Méndez García, 2014). Specifically, participants revealed respect towards local culture, openness, curiosity about, and eagerness to learn from people affiliated with different cultural groups and indicated willingness to seek out opportunities to engage and cooperate with them. In addition, most manifested empathy towards cultural others. However, unlike previous studies with similar findings (Chen & Zheng, 2019), I have illustrated not only the presence of empathy but also how empathy was developed and manifested through WeChat dialogues. These findings verified ICC attitudinal development addressed in Byram's (2020) ICC model. In addition, some participants revealed challenging essentialism perspectives while some reinforced their stereotypes towards cultural others, holding essentialism assumptions. These seemingly contradictory findings exemplified the inevitable co-existence and constant navigation between views of simplification and complexity (Dervin & Gross, 2016), which can be fundamentally important for individuals' intercultural learning and ICC development process (Zhou & Pilcher, 2018).

In terms of cultural identities (6.3.2), it was discovered that participants served as intercultural mediators in the IE sense-making process. Specifically, they navigated between their home culture and a different culture to help their WeChat interlocutors understand the cultural otherness. Specifically, through sharing IE experiences, and facilitating the intercultural dialogues, participants helped their WeChat interlocutors enrich their understanding of certain intercultural phenomena, practices, and perspectives, which increased their cultural awareness and capacity to decentre their own culture to embrace cultural diversity. These findings confirmed the complexity of identity formation in the digital age (Chang & Gomes, 2017) and roughly concurred with Yau et al. (2020) in highlighting social media's role in both maintaining original identities and building new identities. These findings also supplemented the lack of empirical studies more specifically on WeChat and CSS identity formation, enriching our insights that as intercultural mediators, WeChat provided CSS participants a space to connect their identities of home culture and the host culture.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

7.1 Overview

This empirical study has investigated the role of WeChat, the Chinese social media platform, on the study abroad experiences of Chinese Student Sojourners (CSS) during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this conclusion Chapter, I will first provide a summary of the study in 7.2, explaining the background of the study, how I conducted this research and answered the research questions. Then, I will elaborate on the theoretical, practical, and methodological contributions of this study (7.3) before addressing the limitations (7.4). Section 7.5 discusses suggestions for future research and then Section 7.6 provides the concluding remarks.

7.2 Research Summary

Though many previous studies highlighted the significant role of social media for international students in adjusting to the host environment (Hamid et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2012; Li & Peng, 2019; Martin & Rizvi, 2014; Misirlis et al., 2020; Rui & Wang, 2015; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Sandel, 2014; Yu et al., 2019), there has been a dearth of research on international students' use of their home social media platforms, especially in the context of the U.K. Studies exploring CSS' use of WeChat were even fewer, with some explored rather narrowly certain WeChat features such as the WeChat red packets (Park, 2016) or WeChat study groups (Cowley et al., 2017), or the limited domain of CSS' sojourning such as social capital and well-being (Pang, 2018). Moreover, few studies investigated CSS's social media performance and adaptation in response to the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. To add knowledge to previous literature and to enrich our understanding of the CSS, the biggest international student cohort in the UK, I conducted this research on 17 postgraduate students doing a Cross-cultural Communication course in the 2021/22 academic year, exploring how WeChat influenced their daily lives, their interactional, sociocultural, and psychological acculturation, as well as their sense-making of the intercultural encounters (IEs).

The research data include 17 *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE) that were originally proposed by the Council of Europe (2009) but were adapted for the purpose of my study, approximately 800 minutes of semi-structured interviews, and over 80 WeChat screenshots. To analyse the interview transcripts and textual content of WeChat screenshots, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) well-adopted principles of thematic analysis (TA) and then the Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis (TVTA) principles (Trombeta & Cox, 2022) to integrate findings obtained from different data sets. The AIEs were subjected to content analysis to provide background information about participants' IE experiences.

After introducing the research background, aim, and methods, I will revisit the key findings of the three sub-questions which collectively addressed the role of WeChat on participants' sojourning experiences (summarised below in Table 8).

Domains	Sub-Domains	Benefits	(Potential) Detrimental effects
WeChat and CSS' everyday life (Chapter 4)	Daily Use	• Enjoy the rich affordance facilitated by WeChat features: communication; entertainment; and information.	• WeChat reliance and addiction, which caused fatigue, a waste of time, sleeping problems, information overloading, and reduced functionality and independence
	Language use	• Using multiple languages on WeChat, including Mandarin, Chinese dialects, and foreign languages such as English	• Unable to develop foreign language proficiency
	Cyberspace safety		• Privacy concerns • Potential cybercrimes (harassment by ghostwriters and scams) that lacked institutional regulation
WeChat and CSS' acculturation (Chapter 5)	Interactional acculturation	• Strengthening co-national connections	• Limiting international ties • Developing a separation acculturation strategy
	Social cultural acculturation	• Great support in general sociocultural acculturation, especially in pre-sojourning preparation and initial sojourning • Limited support in academic acculturation	• Lack of independence in dealing with difficulties • Lack of engagement with the host environment and cultural others
	Psychological acculturation	• Immediate stress-and-coping effect in reducing negative emotions	• Potential long-term hazards to their well-being due to WeChat overuse and addiction

Domains	Sub-Domains	Benefits	(Potential) Detrimental effects
WeChat and CSS' IE sense- making (Chapter 6)	IE interpreting and relating	• Interpret the IEs collectively while relating to their own culture and experiences	
	Reflection	• Facilitated self-reflection and collective reflection • Increased critical cultural awareness	• Lack of perspectives from different cultural backgrounds.
	Attitudes	• Developed open-mindedness and sympathy • Navigating between essentialism and non-essentialism	• Limited opportunities to conduct IE sense-making due to their limited IE experiences.
	Identity	• displayed diverse cultural identities as intercultural interlocutors for their WeChat interlocutors	

Table 8:

Key Findings on the Role of WeChat on CSS' Study Abroad Experience

RQ1: How do CSS use WeChat in their everyday life?

Chapter 4 explored the complexity of participants' WeChat use during sojourning. On the one hand, participants reported enjoying the rich WeChat affordance facilitated by various features, making it a '必需品(necessity)' and an integral part of their daily lives for communication, entertainment, and information. These findings echo previous literature in proving the prominent and ubiquitous role of WeChat in participants' social media use (Pang, 2018; Park, 2016; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019) and are consistent with contemporary literature that depicts WeChat as a multi-function platform enabling communication and social interaction, providing access to information, and facilitating entertainment (Chen et al., 2018; Montag et al., 2018; Ju et al., 2019). Additionally, findings depicted how participants' WeChat behaviours in the sojourning context were different from those of users based in China. Specifically, CSS participants stressed the prominent role of instant messaging, followed by WeChat Moments, and Public Accounts, while WeChat Moments 'holding its position at the top' among users in China, followed by WeChat Pay, and Mini-programs (Verot, 2023).

On the other hand, participants have developed very high WeChat use intensity, and even addiction, resulting in detrimental effects such as fatigue, disrupted sleep and schedule, and reduced

functionality. These findings on WeChat overuse have been frequently overlooked in the sojourning context but are consistent with researchers' warnings about WeChat overuse in the context of China (Cao et al., 2020; Li et al., 2019). Moreover, these findings echo the increasing academic attention on smartphone addiction (Park, 2005; Wu, 2023) or social media addiction (Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Dhir et al., 2018). In addition, some participants highlighted that using WeChat excessively resulted in neglect of the physical environment and reduced independence and some reported being cautious about their privacy and experiencing information overload that could lead to social media fatigue (Zhang et al., 2020; Pang & Ruan, 2023).

The complexity of participants' WeChat use is also demonstrated in their language use. Most participants highlighted drawing on diverse language repertoire (Mandarin, Chinese dialects, English, and other foreign languages such as Japanese and Korean) when interacting on WeChat, which made the online space multilingual. These findings have verified that cyberspace, including co-national platforms like WeChat, has multilingual capabilities in digital communication and creates an important dimension of global linguistic ecology (Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009). In addition, evidence of engaging with 'language play' was discovered in spontaneous CSS peer conversations, highlighting ludic second language use for enjoyment and relaxation (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Cook, 1997) in the WeChat cyberspace. However, it was found that participants were unlikely to significantly improve their foreign language proficiency due to very limited opportunities to practice them through meaningful communication.

In addition, several participants reported experiencing cybercrime disruptions such as scams and harassment by ghostwriters, which exemplifies the 'destruction' potential of social media (Almansoori et al., 2021) and raises our awareness of the safety in the cyberspace. The observation that participants' personal digital space was invaded by ghostwriters aligns with Lancaster's (2019, p.7) claim that 'the contract cheating industry...is evolving' (Lancaster, 2019, p.7), highlighting the need for CSS to uphold academic integrity.

RQ2: What is the role of WeChat on CSS' psychological, interactional, and sociocultural acculturation?

Participants highlighted the positive role WeChat played in strengthening their connections with co-nationals. With WeChat, participants built a strong co-national community by maintaining pre-existing connections in China and increasing new ones in their sojourning environment (especially with other CSS peers). Due to geography adjacency with the new social connections in the host environment, this Chinese community enabled by WeChat was not only powerful online but also extended in

participants' real lives. The findings have verified the vital role of WeChat in sustaining a virtual community and promoting peer interactions and collaboration (Chen et al., 2022) and underlined the significance of WeChat in enhancing social connections both in the home and host country (Cao et al., 2018; Pang, 2018). Meanwhile, my findings have challenged the assertion that excessive internet use would ultimately lead to lower general social capital since it deprives people of face-to-face communication (La Greca & Lopez, 1998; Nie, 2001). Instead, the findings on WeChat's efficiency in building a community showed that participants' WeChat use enhanced their social support in both online and offline settings. These co-national connections, together with the rich information available on various WeChat public accounts, enabled participants to solve various practical logistical difficulties (e.g., transportation and accommodation) in participants' pre-sojourning preparation and initial sojourning stages. Consequently, they had a smooth transition to the sociocultural requirements of the new environment. In the same way, participants gained some academic support.

Additionally, the powerful WeChat community, especially participants' close family and friends, provided them with psychological support to tackle both their negative emotions (homesickness, anger, anxiety etc.) and the problems that triggered these emotions. This verifies WeChat's significance in providing CSS mental health support (Chen et al., 2022; Cowley et al., 2017; Pang, 2018, 2019) and more broadly underlines the importance of international students' pre-existing social media platform in terms of their well-being (Li & Peng, 2019; Misirlis et al., 2020; Sandel, 2014; Yu et al., 2019). Unlike previous studies, my research revealed that the process of participants' negative emotion relieves displayed both collective emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping, aligning with the two types of stress-and-coping process highlighted by previous researchers (Berry, 2008; Berry et al., 2022).

However, these interactional, sociocultural, and psychological benefits were accompanied by corresponding negative elements. To start with, the preference for the ethnic platform of WeChat and the enhanced co-national WeChat community reduced their motivation to engage with international ties both on other social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and Facebook) and in-person communication. This finding concurs with Tu's (2018) observation that social media effectively helps participants maintain connections with their home culture but falls short in facilitating connections with the host culture (Tu, 2018). Consequently, participants demonstrated evidence of adopting the separation acculturation strategies (holding on to their home culture and cultural identity but avoiding intercultural interactions), a approach criticised by Berry et al., (2022) for not being able to lead to successful acculturation.

Moreover, the seemingly smooth general sociocultural acculturation and academic support were problematic, since participants reported a lack of independence in dealing with challenges and illustrated avoidance of the host environment and the host community. In addition, the psychological support participants addressed was found to be the immediate effect of the stress and coping, while the long-term influence of WeChat on participants' well-being remained unclear. Given that multiple studies have underlined the detrimental impact of excessive social media use or addiction on mental health, causing symptoms like depression, anxiety, and stress (Dhir et al., 2018; Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Seabrook et al. 2016; Wu, 2023), it is essential for future studies to explore whether the long-term effects of WeChat use are similarly harmful.

RQ3: How do Chinese international students make sense of Intercultural Encounters through WeChat?

Participants reported making sense of IEs with their WeChat interlocutors. Through intercultural discussions, participants and their WeChat interlocutors were able to collectively interpret their IEs and relate them to their own culture or previous experiences of other cultures. Consequently, participants cleared confusion about the IEs and enhanced their understanding of IE interlocutors and culture otherness. In addition, through sharing, discussing, and then comparing IE interpretations and perspectives, participants had both self-reflection and collective reflection on their IEs, which increased their critical intercultural awareness. These findings align with Donovan's (2018) claim that IE could develop people's cultural sensitivity and awareness. These findings also echo previous studies (Byram et al., 2009; Donovan, 2018; Gill, 2007; Kolb, 1984) that underline the vital role of reflection in making sense of IEs to accommodate the strangeness and fit into the host social-cultural framework . Moreover, participants explicated how dialogic reflection was conducted on WeChat, verifying that this collective reflection approach is not only efficient in the field of education (Foong et al., 2018; Ohlsson, 2013) but also in IE sense-making. Moreover, these findings confirm that reflection can transcend concrete experiences and facilitate more general understandings for further intercultural learning experiences (Gill, 2007). However, as one participant pointed out, these reflections were limited to the Chinese WeChat community and thus lacked perspective from the IE interlocutors' cultural background.

During the IE sense-making process on WeChat, participants not only negotiated their attitudes towards cultural otherness but also constructed their cultural identities. Most participants demonstrated attitudinal developments, echoing previous studies on the potential of IEs (Holmes & Neil, 2012; Lindner & Méndez García, 2014). Specifically, most participants demonstrated open-mindedness

towards otherness, respect towards local culture, openness, curiosity about, and eagerness to learn from people affiliated with different cultural groups, and willingness to seek out opportunities to engage and cooperate with cultural others. Some also manifested empathy towards cultural others. Meanwhile, some participants revealed challenging essentialism perspectives though some reinforced their stereotypes towards cultural others, holding essentialism assumptions. These seemingly contradictory findings exemplified the inevitable co-existence and constant navigation between views of simplification and complexity (Dervin & Gross, 2016), which is fundamentally important for individuals' intercultural learning and ICC development (Zhou & Pilcher, 2018). In addition to attitudinal development, participants were found to serve as intercultural mediators between their Chinese WeChat interlocutors and the cultural otherness involved in their IE experiences, enabling them to navigate between their home culture and a different culture. Specifically, through sharing IE experiences, and facilitating the intercultural dialogues, participants helped their WeChat interlocutors enrich their understanding of certain intercultural phenomena, practices, and perspectives, which increased their cultural awareness and capacity to decentre their own culture to embrace cultural diversity. These findings have supplemented Wang's (2018) study that highlights CSS's ethnic identity on WeChat and affirms the complexity of identity formation in the digital age (Chang & Gomes, 2017), providing additional insights into the under-researched area of WeChat and CSS identity formation.

These findings show how participants' IE sense-making process on WeChat leads to intercultural learning and ICC improvements. Evidence includes enhanced interpreting and relating skills and reflecting skills, improvement in their critical cultural awareness, and attitudinal development, which are all important ICC factors stressed in Byram's ICC model (1997, 2020). Additionally, participants acted as intercultural mediators in this process, navigating between their home and host cultures. These findings align with previous research that highlights the long-lasting and transformative impacts of IEs such as increasing participants' knowledge about other cultures and changing their values and beliefs (Ponzoni, 2014), developing their cultural sensitivity and awareness (Donovan, 2018), and enhancing open-mindedness (Chen & Zheng, 2019).

In sum, this research verifies that WeChat serves as a double-edged sword for participants, affecting not only their virtual lives but also their lives in reality. On the one hand, using WeChat provided CSS participants with various benefits such as expanding co-national social support, enabling them to have a pleasant experience while studying in the UK. These benefits explain participants' high WeChat intensity, as reflected in their reliance on WeChat and its frequent, prolonged use. On the other hand, using WeChat led to many issues that disrupted participants' sojourning experiences, especially

in limiting their international connections (both virtually and in-person) and reducing independence and engagement with the host environment. Given that a major prerequisite for acculturation is contact, particularly direct interactions (Sam & Berry, 2006), using WeChat shows evidence of unsatisfying acculturation. WeChat's role in participants' psychological acculturation and IE sense-making also evidenced how it served as a double-edged sword for CSS. Participants reported experiencing improved well-being due to the collective stress and coping with their WeChat connections, but the long-term effect being highlighted as detrimental by previous researchers (Dhir et al., 2018; Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Seabrook et al. 2016; Wu, 2023) remained unclear. Similarly, though the IE sense-making process was found to be an enriching process of intercultural learning and ICC development, opportunities to conduct such meaningful discussions and gain personal growth were limited due to the lack of chances to have intercultural interactions.

The discovery of participants' everyday WeChat use has deepened our understanding of how WeChat user behaviours are different from those in the context of China, and how WeChat could lead to construction as well as disruption. Findings on WeChat's role in CSS' acculturation and IE sense-making supplemented a lack of previous empirical studies.

7.3 Contributions

After addressing the key findings and the empirical contributions of my study in 7.2, I will focus on my theoretical (7.3.1), methodological (7.3.2), and practical (7.3.3) contributions in this section.

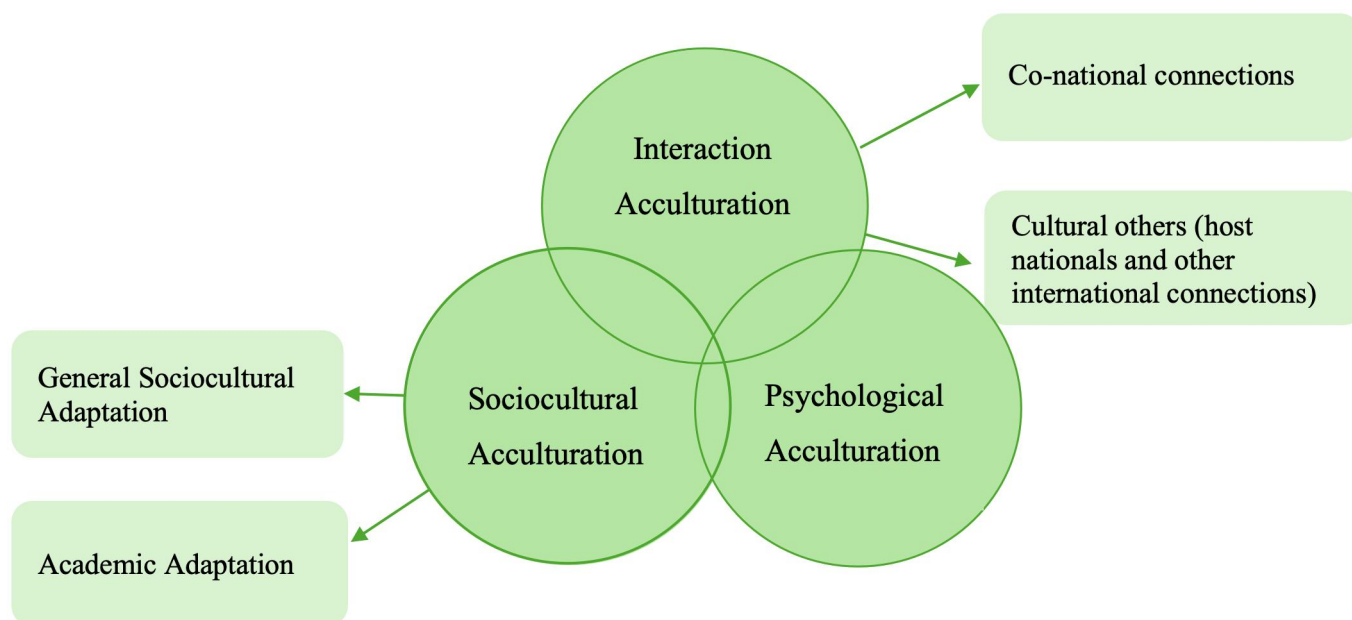
7.3.1 Theoretical Contributions

My research increases insights into three areas of pre-existing literature, including acculturation theories, IE sense-making and ICC studies, and social media studies.

Increased Understanding of Acculturation Theories

The theoretical framework of my study adopted the acculturation model of the Mutual Intercultural Relations in Plural Societies project (the *MIRIPS Acculturation Model*) (Berry et al. 2020). While the MIRIPS model has been well-acknowledged and widely used in both theoretical discussions and empirical studies (see Ramdhonee & Bhowon, 2012; Ward, 2001; Ward et al. 2020), it was originally designed for different types of immigrants across 21 countries therefore this 'one-size-fits-all' model was inadequate for addressing the needs of degree-seeking international students (Schartner & Young, 2016). My study advances the acculturation field through three key contributions: empirically validating the applicability of the MIRIPS model to individual's acculturation in an updated digital era; contextualising the MIRIPS framework and proposing an acculturation model tailored to international

students (Figure 60); and advancing insights into how theories underpinned the acculturation model function operate within international students' online spaces.



60:

International Students' Acculturation Outcomes

To start with, my findings verify that three acculturation outcome domains suggested in the MIRIPS model also apply to international students in cyberspace. Specifically, the acculturation will lead to three outcomes, namely *psychological adaptation* ('feeling well'), *interactional adaptation* ('relating well'), and *sociocultural adaptation* ('doing well') (Berry, 2022). *Psychological Adaptation* refers to affective outcomes such as the sense of personal well-being, self-esteem, or satisfaction (Berry, 2022). *Interactional Adaptation* acknowledges the importance of socialising and associating with other individuals/groups in the new environment (Alamri, 2018; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Scharntner, 2014; Scharntner & Young, 2016; Tomin et al., 2016; Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2020), while *Sociocultural Adaptation* addresses the behavioural aspects and refers to the capacity to execute daily intercultural living activities (Berry et al., 2022).

Compared with the original MIRIPS model, changes are made to address international students' acculturation, especially regarding aspects of interaction and sociocultural adaptation (illustrated in Figure 60). Aligning with previous studies that investigated the complexity of international students' social connections (Alibhai, 1985; Bochner et al., 1977; Scharntner, 2014; Wright & Scharntner, 2013),

research findings demonstrated that CSS' interactional adaptation included engagement with both their co-nationals and the cultural others (host nationals and the other international connections). However, this is not explicit in the MIRIPS model and risks misleading people into believing that interactional acculturation only involves socialising with cultural others. Therefore, I explicated different types of social connections in the model tailored for international students so it illustrates their interactional adaptation. Additionally, the change indicates international students' acculturation strategy, an important indicator of successful acculturation (Berry et al., 2022). Regarding sociocultural adaptation, given that international students come abroad for academic purposes, academic achievement is 'at the centre' of their sojourn (Schartner, 2014, p.32) and should be differentiated from other types of sociocultural behaviours. Therefore, in the adapted acculturation model for international students, academic adaptation is presented as the primary sociocultural adaptation aspect, which aligns with the increasing research interest in it in empirical studies (see Dodd et al., Li et al., 2014; 2021; Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Schartner, 2014). For clarification, academic adaption refers to adapting to specific requirements of the academic study in the new environment. This involves adjusting to the new learning and teaching styles, relationships with the staff and other students, and assessment procedures (Shartner, 2014). In comparison, another type involves general sociocultural acculturation, namely adapting to general living conditions and everyday life, such as accommodation, transportation, food, weather, and entertainment (Black, 1988). Both types were observed in my empirical research. More importantly, both types align with the definition of sociocultural acculturation of 'doing well' since they manifest the behavioural competence to execute daily intercultural living activities (Berry, 2022).

Moreover, my study advances insights into how theories underpinning the acculturation model operate within online spaces, including acculturation strategies, stress-coping theory, and social support theory. Firstly, my findings verified the complexity and unpredictability of acculturation strategies, as participants demonstrated inconsistency between their attitudes (preference) and behaviours (actual practices) in daily intercultural interactions (Berry et al., 2006). Specifically, contradictions were observed between participants' social media behaviour and their expressed attitudes. While most participants reported indulgence in Chinese (both online and offline) communities and avoidance of intercultural interactions (discussed in 5.2), they demonstrated very positive attitudes towards otherness during their IE sense-making process, especially respect towards otherness manifested by curiosity, openness, empathy, and readiness to suspend assumptions about their own and other cultures (6.4.1). These findings align with Marangell et al.'s (2018, p.1444) observation of discrepancies between 'what students seem to 'know and how they behave'. Despite such contradictions, my findings demonstrate

that IE experiences and IE sense-making process facilitate intercultural learning and ICC development, indicating shifts in acculturation attitudes and behaviours, and potential transitions from a separation strategy to integration.

Secondly, my study enriches insights into international students' psychological acculturation by contextualising the research in the WeChat digital space and the British HE. Previous researchers (Berry, 2008; Berry et al., 2022) emphasised how individuals managed acculturation stress and navigated intercultural transition by adopting stress-and-coping approaches. My research enriched understanding of how collective stress-and-coping was conducted in virtual spaces (see Figure 61). Consistent with individuals' coping process that involves evaluating and appraising the situation (Berry, 2008; Berry et al., 2022; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), my research findings illustrated how WeChat Chinese communities provided participants with both emotional-focused coping to adjust emotions triggered by the problem and problem-focused coping. Consequently, participants reported reduced negative emotions and enhanced well-being, indicating successful psychological adjustment. Additionally, my research opens the window for future exploration of the interrelationship between psychological adjustment (process) and adaptation (outcomes), challenging the seemingly 'taken-for-granted' causal interrelationship. To be specific, my findings disclosed contradictions between the successful psychological adjustment and the long-term issues linked to social media overuse and adaptation highlighted in previous studies (Dhir et al., 2018; Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Seabrook et al. 2016; Wu, 2023).

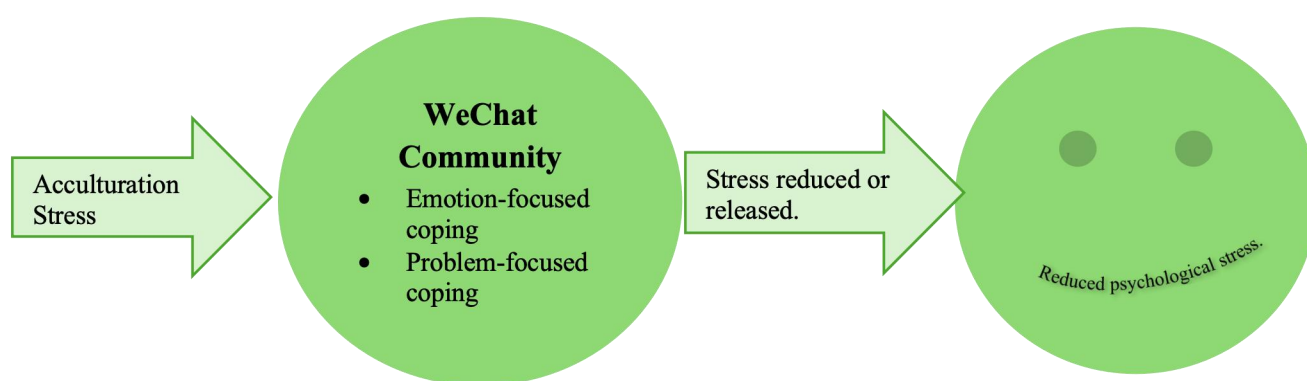


Figure 61:
WeChat and CSS Participants' Psychological Adjustment

Thirdly, my research enhanced understanding of the interplay among different acculturation domains. Previous research (Berry, 2020, Scharntner, 2014; Scharntner & Young, 2016; Ward, 1997; Ward et al., 2020) highlighted that the three acculturation domains are not independent of each other but did not elaborate on how they interconnect. In contrast, my study explicated the vital role of interactional acculturation in facilitating other acculturation domains. To be specific, participants reported gaining sociocultural support from WeChat, particularly from the Chinese WeChat community. In terms of psychological aspects, the evidence demonstrated how co-national ties buffered their acculturation stress, provided emotional support, and facilitated cultural understanding. Reflecting on the acculturation strategy theories, my study showed that even when participants adopted segregation strategies to avoid interactions with international ties, they could still develop the capacity to manage psychological and sociocultural difficulties, attributing to the robust social support and extensive information resources available on WeChat.

Enhanced Insights into IE sense-making and the ICC

This study provided rich data that underlined the effectiveness of the collective IE sense-making process in virtual spaces and provided insights into ICC theories.

Many previous IE sense-making studies relied on data generated with researcher intervention. For example, some researchers requested participants to complete guided writing tasks like diaries (Meyer & Schuch, 2017) and intercultural journals (Chen & Zheng, 2019), or semi-structured interviews that required responding to purposefully asked questions (Askins, 2016; Donovan, 2017; Yu, 2017). In contrast, my study examined participants' self-initiated, peer-driven IE sense-making in naturally occurring contexts (as illustrated in WeChat screenshots) and focused on organic discussions between participants and their WeChat contacts. Participants autonomously chose topics, interlocutors, and timing for their discussion, which enabled me to document interactions that occurred prior to my engagement. This approach uncovered collective IE sense-making within WeChat virtual spaces. Participants not only conducted self-reflection (individual processing) but also collective reflection (group processing) embedded within dialogic reflections, namely reflections contributed by different interlocutors in the forms of dialogues. Consequently, participants and their WeChat interlocutors facilitated intercultural learning and improved aspects of their ICC (e.g., interpreting and relating skills, critical cultural awareness, and respect for cultural others). These findings illustrated that in addition to solidary IE reflections, self-directed dialogic reflections on IE experiences could enhance intercultural potentials of international students.

My study also enriched insights into ICC studies, particularly regarding interpreting and relating skills and individuals' identity formation. While affirming the significance of interpreting and relating skills in the IE sense-making process, my research challenged previous perceptions towards the skills. According to Byram's ICC model (1997, 2001, 2009, 2020), interpreting and relating skills refer to the skills of interpreting symbols and events of other cultures and relating them to one's own. However, my findings revealed greater complexity as this process involves more than host and home cultures. As illustrated in Chapter 6, some participants' IE interlocutors were from third cultures (e.g., Iran, Pakistan) meanwhile residing in the UK, all discussions ultimately referenced host culture expectations. As a result, participants' IE interpreting and relating involved three parts: the home (Chinese), host (British), and the IE interlocutors' (Iranian or Pakistani) cultures. Such complexity also emerged when participants or their WeChat friends drew on pre-existing intercultural experiences. For example, when reflecting on her shopping experiences with a British cashier in a local supermarket (IE15), Zoe and her cousin living in Canada related to social norms from China, the UK, and Canada. This supplemented previous understandings and indicates that international students require more sophisticated interpreting and relating skills to navigate multicultural contexts.

Complexity is also evident in participants' intercultural attitudes and identities. While Byram's ICC model (2009, 2020) emphasises certain attitudinal factors (e.g., respect for otherness, empathy), this empirical study has increased insights into sojourners' engagement with essentialism, highlighting the inevitable coexistence and ongoing navigation between simplification (essentialism) and complexity (non-essentialism) perspectives (Dervin & Gross, 2016) that shape individuals' intercultural learning and ICC development (Zhou & Pilcher, 2018). This is evidenced by some participants reporting reduced essentialist perspectives after their WeChat discussions, while some others exhibited reinforced essentialism. Regarding cultural identity, participants were found acting as intercultural mediators for their co-national WeChat interlocutors. This validates Byram's (1997, 2020) assertion that individuals can transcend their own culture to engage with other perspectives so they have the ability to mediate between people of different cultural origins and establish meaningful relationships. Additionally, the findings verify Byram's understanding of 'intercultural speakers' (2020) and affirm the dynamicity and fluidity of an individual's cultural identity (Chen & Collier, 2012).

Increased Knowledge on Social Media Studies

My study advances insights into social media studies, particularly international students' excessive use of national-based social media platforms. The observations on CSS' excessive WeChat use and even WeChat addiction align with the increasing concerns about smartphone addiction (Park,

2005; Wu, 2023) and social media addiction (Hussain & Griffiths, 2021; Dhir et al., 2018). As briefed in 4.2, while social media overuse is not a novel phenomenon, prior studies on WeChat overuse focus predominantly on contexts in China (e.g., Cao et al., 2020; Li et al., 2019). My research increases our knowledge of CSS' social media behaviours in the sojourning context and raises concerns about international students' excessive use of national-based social media forms, which was often overlooked by previous literature. Furthermore, these findings verify international students' preference for pre-existing digital tools over host country platforms (Chang et al., 2012; Chang & Gomes, 2017; Gomes, 2015; Tu, 2018). Consequently, ubiquitous pre-existing platforms like WeChat strengthen co-national community and shape multiple aspects of international students' experiences. This explains why social connections of international students in different sojourning contexts (Hong Kong, Australia, UK) are 'exclusively made up of fellow international students' in the updated context of the digital age (Ladegaard, 2017; Ladegaard & Chen, 2014; Gomes, 2015, p.515). These findings illustrate the potential for supporting international students' academic sojourning by improving their social media behaviours.

7.3.2 Methodological Contribution

This study has three methodological contributions. Firstly, I revised the AIE (Council of Europe, 2009), making it a more user-friendly tool for CSS. Secondly, employing multiple languages in different research stages, I enhanced researchers' understanding of multilingual research. Thirdly, I applied principles of Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis (TVTA) (Trombeta & Cox, 2022) to TA, which contributed to improving the rigour of qualitative research by adopting this newly developed methodological framework.

Revising the AIE

As highlighted in 3.4.2 *Data Collection Methods*, the original AIE is 13 pages long which is so lengthy that it could be intimidating for users. Therefore, I revised and shortened the AIE to make it more concise. Redundant questions were removed, the form was redesigned for greater space efficiency, and clearer instructions were provided to avoid confusion. In addition, I made the AIE more relatable to CSS by replacing IE examples based in various contexts on different types of sojourners (e.g., international travellers) with ones more relevant to their sojourning experiences. In addition, CSS with different English language proficiency can choose from English and Mandarin versions (attached in Appendix 3 and 4). This contributed to the language diversity of the AIE since so far, the original AIE was translated into multiple languages including French, Italian, Polish, Spanish, and Russian (Council of Europe, n.d.), but not in Mandarin.

The tailored AIE for Chinese students allows CSS to analyse IEs in retrospect to gain self-growth. It is such a useful and hands-on tool that even without the interventions of the researchers or teachers, students can use it intuitively to reflect on their experiences and then gain intercultural learning. Meanwhile, the revised AIE can also serve as a teaching resource for CSS as a part of ICC training, which is more instructive and time-efficient compared with the original version. On top of these, it can benefit researchers' data collection on CSS' IE experiences for academic purposes. Considering the large number of CSS in the UK and all over the world, the CSS' IE experiences create great research potential for researchers who might find the revised AIE a useful tool in their projects.

Research Multilingually

This study contributes to the existing literature on research multilingually, especially in how the framework proposed by Holmes et al. (2013) enhances researcher reflexivity and empowers research participants.

Research Reflexivity

There are two interconnected dimensions of researcher reflexivity, namely prospective reflexivity which concerns the effect of the researcher(s) on the research, and retrospective reflexivity which reflects on the effect of the research on the researcher (s) (Attia & Edge, 2017; Consoli & Ganassin, 2023). Following Holmes et al.'s (2013) framework (discussed in 3.4.5), I was able to conduct both prospective reflexivity and retrospective reflexivity. Firstly, as the researcher of this study, I made purposeful decisions regarding the complexity and possibilities of language issues. I realised the importance of different language possibilities and considered these particularities before making decisions (Ganassin & Holmes, 2020; Holmes et al., 2013; Holmes et al., 2022). I was also able to be more comprehensively aware of different language options available in the research spaces (the researched phenomenon, context, resources, and representational possibilities) and considered how different choices could influence the research relationships (between the researcher and the researched, as well as various stakeholders) before making informed decisions. As a result, I collected multilingual resources, including mainly Mandarin and English data but also some Cantonese, Korean, and Japanese. Secondly, the research made me aware of the diversity of my identities, as both a Chinese Mainlander, an English learner, a speaker of Shandong dialect (a regional dialect in Shandong province in northern China), a beginner researcher, a PhD student, and lower-level speaker of Cantonese, translator of English and Chinese languages, Korean, and Japanese.

More importantly, by adopting the researching multilingually framework, I not only drew on my pre-existing multilingual resources but also learned new language knowledge and practices adopted

by others. For example, before the data collection, I could understand some basic Cantonese, but could not speak. This limited proficiency helped me understand participants' explanations of their Cantonese use on WeChat during the interview. More importantly, it helped me understand the Cantonese WeChat screenshots they submitted and made it possible for me to analyse the screenshots and present them in my thesis (see 4.4.2 *Chinese Dialects*). Meanwhile, I enriched my knowledge of Cantonese by engaging with the Cantonese data, especially in how Cantonese was adopted in written forms on WeChat. By analysing relevant WeChat screenshots, I learned that participants borrowed many traditional Chinese characters when typing on WeChat. Some of these characters were borrowed for both pronunciation and meaning for their consistency with Cantonese while some were borrowed only for their similarity to the Cantonese pronunciation. Similarly, I learned from participants of other regional dialects that they used certain dialectal words in Pinyin and mixed them with Mandarin when typing, making doing this research an informative process that interconnected the two dimensions of researcher reflexivity.

Empowering Participants

Adopting Holmes et al.'s (2013) framework also allows me to acknowledge and address the power imbalance to empower participants. By investigating how different languages function in maintaining multiple relationships (between the researcher and the researched, as well as various stakeholders), I considered the relational aspect of the research, which had a profound impact on the representation of voices, building trust, and negotiating power relations (Holmes et al., 2015; Ganassin; 2020; Holmes et al., 2022). Specifically, I gave participants full autonomy in making their own language choices. I provided them with both Mandarin and English materials (information sheet, consent form, AIE, and the interview schedule) to choose from and encouraged them to decide on their interview languages. Consequently, participants made their language choices based on different considerations. Some chose Mandarin since it served as the shared language with me and the '母语 (mother tongue)', or enabled time and energy efficiency. Some chose English for their good proficiency or willingness to practice English. Namely, the methodological approach I adopted in this study created spaces for participants to have greater control over their involvement in research endeavours, which evidenced research empowerment (Ross, 2017).

These findings underline that Holmes et al.'s (2013) framework enables methodological empowerment. According to Ross (2017), empowering methodologies involve specific methods for data collection and analysis, the overall research design, and the empowering methodological moments across the research. My research has provided the evidence that Holmes et al.'s (2013) framework

encourages appraisal and evaluation of the researcher-participant relationship, which provides methodological guidelines for informative decisions regarding both research design and research empowerment moments. This affirms Ganassin (2020), who highlighted how relationality considerations helped her neutralise the inbuilt power imbalance with participants of the Chinese migrant community.

Applying the Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis (TVTA) Principles

This study makes a significant methodological contribution by applying principles of a recently developed framework, the TVTA, (Trombeta & Cox, 2022) to triangulate TA findings of different data sets (interview transcripts and WeChat screenshots). By demonstrating how this novel approach can be effectively applied in empirical studies, this study provides a practical example of its implementation. It supplements previous studies that lack detailed methodological guidance on how textual and visual data interact (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). Specifically, Trombeta and Cox (2022) proposed three stages of data analysis: 1) Thematic Analysis (TA) on the interviews; 2) visual analysis integrated with interview data; and 3) relating findings and reporting data. Following these three stages as an overarching analytical framework, I employed practices to integrate themes obtained from interviews and textual content of WeChat screenshots.

As explained in 3.4.3 Data Analysis, my practices differ from those of Trombeta and Cox's (2022) photo-elicitation study. Their study used photos taken by participants as interview prompts, while my raw visual data included much private information (e.g., usernames, addresses, account numbers, and profile pictures) thus requiring a significant amount of time editing them during the data anonymisation process (explained in 3.4.4, *Ethical Issues*). These practices of ethical considerations also contributed to the visual data familiarisation, a key aspect of the initial visual data analysis. Moreover, I exemplified clearly how I applied the four TVTA questions to the visual data in stage two and then how I related the two data sets in stage three (3.4.3). This application validates TVTA's potential in providing instructive guidance for qualitative researchers to collaboratively analyse the interactions between the two types of data sets.

Moreover, the application of the TVTA principles in TA highlighted the significance of combining different data types in enriching research data and enhancing qualitative research rigour (Booton, 2018). This is particularly important given that interview self-report data is often criticised as 'marred by a range of cognitive and motivational biases' (Latkin et al., 2016). Though a study conducted by Latkin et al. (2016) highlighted that only a minority of participants might not provide self-report data truthfully, there might be response bias such as social desirability responding with

interviewees presenting a favourable image of themselves (Van de Mortel, 2008), concerns about the potential exposure of the information they disclosed, or cautiousness of their time and energy (Latkin et al., 2016). My employment of the TVTA has proved that in addition to enhancing the data truthfulness of interviews (e.g., building rapport with the interviewees, generating long and uninterrupted narratives, minimising researcher bias), integrating other data sets (written or visual data) to triangulate the interview transcripts can greatly enhance the research rigour.

7.3.3 Practical Implications

This study has several implications for CSS, other groups of international students, as well as for Higher Educational (HE) institutions and law enforcement.

Implications for CSS and Other International Students

This study has highlighted how WeChat serves as a double-edged sword for CSS in the sojourning context, which gives references to CSS to use it cautiously and critically. On the one hand, given the great support available on WeChat on various aspects of their sojourning, CSS can use WeChat to avoid sudden loss of social support, especially in their initial sojourning. This aligns with previous empirical studies that highlight the importance of social support (English et al., 2021; Li & Peng, 2019; Young et al., 2013). Moreover, CSS are suggested to make the virtual space a platform for intercultural discussions on their IE. By doing this, they can collectively make sense of the IE to practice their ICC skills of interpreting, relating, and reflecting. Moreover, they can develop more open and sympathetic attitudes towards cultural otherness to improve their initiatives for more intercultural interactions in the future. Such enriching experiences of intercultural learning can also help CSS to overcome challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences (Aksoy, 2017; Dovchin, 2019; Gong et al., 2020; Wright & Schartner, 2013).

On the other hand, CSS need to be cautious of using WeChat excessively. This is because excessive WeChat use or addiction is detrimental to their functionality, disrupting their daily schedule and causing social media fatigue. In daily practice, they can monitor the duration and frequency of their WeChat use to limit indulgence in the virtual world. Alternatively, they can check if they feel anxious or unsettled when WeChat is not accessible, which are typical withdrawal symptoms as claimed by Park (2005). If students notice signs of excessive use or addiction, they should take intervention measures or seek professional help to minimise the consequent detrimental effects. Moreover, participants should be aware of safety issues on WeChat, such as privacy issues, cyber harassment by ghostwriters, and scams. After all, WeChat is not a completely safe place, but can be both constructive and disruptive like other virtual spaces (Almansoori et al., 2021).

In addition, CSS should be cautious of over-reliance on their co-national WeChat connections and recognise the importance of exploring both the host platforms and in-person interaction with the host environment. They are encouraged to overcome the initial discomfort in new digital spaces and to engage more with the host platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat. Meanwhile, they should participate in more in-person extra-curricular intercultural activities to expand their intercultural connections. This is particularly important for those who study in courses with limited cohort diversity. After all, a major prerequisite for acculturation is contact, particularly direct interactions (Sam & Berry, 2006). Increasing intercultural communication is also important for CSS to reconsider their acculturation strategies. With increased opportunities to have IEs, they can potentially improve their cultural knowledge (Ponzoni, 2014), skills (Campbell & Li, 2008), and attitudinal development towards cultural others (Donovan, 2018; Holmes & Neil, 2012; Lindner & Méndez García, 2014). Consequently, they can maintain a certain degree of cultural integrity while seeking daily interactions with cultural others, developing the integration orientation - an acculturation strategy claimed to be the most preferable for achieving a higher level of adaptation (Berry et al., 2022).

This set of implications is also potentially relevant to other groups of international students since researchers have found that different groups of international students share similar struggles such as language barriers, emotional challenges, and acculturation struggles (e.g., lack of host connections (Fritz et al., 2008; Sawir et al., 2008; Schartner, 2014), as well as similar social media behaviours such as preference to pre-existing platforms (Chang et al., 2012; Chang & Gomes, 2017; Gomes, 2015; Tu, 2018). Indulgence in pre-existing co-national platforms can limit their integration into the host culture. Therefore, international students should actively interact with people from different backgrounds to enhance their opportunities for better acculturation and self-growth.

Implications for the British Higher Education Institutions

Taking into account the large and increasing number of CSS, my research has enriched the lack of understanding of CSS. Many researchers (e.g., Ha & Li, 2014; Wang & Moskal, 2019; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2022) focus on CSS' classroom behaviours, investigating factors contributing to their silence or reluctance to engage in discussions. My research further explained what was going on with the CSS beyond the classes and their virtual experiences, which was even more latent but equally (if not more) important in understanding the CSS. This is vital since the more thoroughly the universities understand the students, the better the chance they can provide teaching that meets students' needs (Felder & Brent, 2005) to aid their adjustment process. In return, a satisfactory academic experience can contribute to the future retention of CSS, which is vital for ensuring the competitiveness of the HE

institutions in the international market and guaranteeing corresponding economic, political, cultural, and educational benefits (Zhu & Sharp, 2022). After all, being the biggest income generator of the British market-led HE (Sheng, 2023), CSS deserve more support from the universities in enhancing their learning experience.

Support in CSS's Pre-sojourning Preparation and Initial Sojourning

Schartner's (2014) study found evidence of anxiety in international students' initial sojourn stages. Consistently, my study highlighted that CSS increased their involvement with WeChat from their pre-sojourning preparation stages to gain information about the host environment and expand their co-national connections to cope with the potential challenges. To reduce CSS' reliance on WeChat and the co-national community, the host universities can offer CSS online resources in new digital places that are easily accessible. This may include the website with general information about the host environment, such as the campus, departments, local accommodation, transportation options, shopping options, and useful digital tools (e.g., social media and university apps). More importantly, the information should cover course-specific pre-arrival knowledge about the academic requirements and basic terminology. These resources should be hands-on (e.g., use visual aids and have user-friendly functionality) with streamlined information to minimise students' efforts in digesting them. Another suggestion is to make full use of WeChat's vital role in CSS. To be specific, the host universities can set up WeChat public accounts where important resources are published on it simultaneously with their official websites. In this way, the host universities assist CSS in using WeChat as a 'springboard' to get used to both the physical environment and the new digital environment. Moreover, the universities can offer activities such as guided tours of campus or city to transform content knowledge into knowledge in action (Etherington & Spurling, 2007; Schartner, 2014) so new CSS can practice their newly acquired knowledge in 'safe' environments and mingle with their peers. In this way, CSS can reduce their reliance on WeChat and have a smooth sojourning transition.

More Opportunities for Intercultural Engagement

As highlighted repeatedly in this thesis, though the presence of international students contributes to the internationalisation of the British HE (Bolton et al., 2024), the ever-increasing number and skewed intake of CSS students form 'structural' or 'institutional' conditions in many departments that lack racial or cultural diversity (Yu & Moskal, 2019). This phenomenon challenges the idea that diversity is an inherent part of British universities and requires an update of the understanding of the context of CSS' studying experience (Yu & Moskal, 2019). Correspondingly, it is important to provide CSS with more opportunities for high-quality intercultural engagement and personal growth. Universities can organise more collaborations between CSS, home students, and

international students from different backgrounds. These can include the ‘buddy schemes’ (Neri & Ville, 2008) or intercultural encounter workshops that involve a more diverse cohort. Meanwhile, the universities can expand their efforts from campus to the wider community in the internationalisation process (Marangell et al., 2018; Schartner, 2014) since they do not adequately offer an ‘equitable student experience’ for the international students (Proctor & Arkoudis, 2017, p. 129). To be specific, the host universities can facilitate more extra-curriculum activities, such as cooperation with local charity organisations or neighborhood associations. Such a community-based approach enables universities to ‘establish safeguards’ (Marangell et al., 2018, p.1451), protecting CSS from unfair treatment from employment agencies or commercial accommodation companies. According to Marangell et al. (2018), this approach can not only offer interaction opportunities for international students but also foster a more tolerant host culture that eases greater social issues such as racial tensions.

Combat Contract Cheating

The HE institutions should attach more importance to combating contract cheating. This is particularly urgent with individuals or agencies accessing students’ personal digital space (WeChat) to promote their contract cheating services (Lancaster, 2019), making their service more accessible to CSS to recruit potential customers (Bidgoli & Grossklags, 2017). These findings concur with Lancaster’s (2019, p.7) claim that ‘the contract cheating industry...is evolving’, which poses a serious threat to the quality of the HE (Awdry & Newton, 2019). More alarmingly, one of my participants, Jade, disclosed that a CSS peer paid for ghostwriters to complete all her assignments without being detected by the institute. In a study conducted by Medway et al. (2018), it was also underlined that some essays written by ghostwriters passed the university plagiarism detection system of Turnitin check and achieved good grades from markers. This makes assignment-based tasks, prevalent in the humanities and social sciences, vulnerable due to the difficulty of detecting such academic misconduct (Medway et al., 2018). Faced with these challenges, universities should increase staff’s awareness of contract cheating and upgrade their plagiarism detection mechanism with both technology advancement and staff training on marking. Moreover, some courses can consider changing the assessment strategies from essay writing to assignments that involve timed and invigilated exams, or more sequential, personalised, and interactive assessments (e.g., oral presentation) (Walker & Townley, 2012). More importantly, the host universities need to design prevention measures such as clear penalty policies for those who use the contract cheating services and provide students support in developing their academic skills to maintain a robust academic environment. In the meantime, it is important to

note that overreactions towards a few students' academic misconducts are unnecessary since it may hinder the trusting relationships between students and staff (Walker & Townley, 2012).

Implications for Law Enforcement

Participants in this study reported a variety of cybercrimes, including cyber harassment by ghostwriters and scams. Unfortunately, several reported that due to geographical jurisdiction, they failed to report their scam cases and get their scammed money back, illustrating the difficulties for cross-national cooperation when investigating cybercrimes (Broadhurst & Chang, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary for the law enforcement of China (where CSS' frequent residence and the WeChat platform headquarters are based) and the UK (the location of CSS when scams happen) to cooperate to combat cybercrime and to protect individuals' lawful rights. This might be a long and complicated process due to the inconsistency of laws and regulations and complicated bureaucratic procedures. However, such issues will be more severe in the future if no measures are taken.

7.4 Limitations

While my research has made many contributions and implications, it has limitations. The first limitation is the lack of variety in participants' educational backgrounds. Specifically, my research focused only on 17 CCC (Cross-cultural Communication) MA students. These participants received systematic training on ICC theories and learned concepts covered in my study (e.g., IE and intercultural communication) before they were recruited. Their CCC academic background might not make them ICC experts or more competent interculturally but made them different from students doing other courses. Moreover, CSS constituted the biggest cohort at the school where my participants were based, which concurred that the ever-increasing number and skewed intake of CSS students formed 'structural' or 'institutional' conditions that lack racial or cultural diversity (Yu & Moskal, 2019). Therefore, my findings may not be applicable to CSS doing different courses in other fields or studying at schools with a more diverse student cohort.

In addition, my research was conducted in the middle of participants' sojourning (approximately six months after they arrived in the UK) but failed to monitor the changes in WeChat's influence over time. Participants reported being influenced differently by WeChat at different stages of sojourning. For example, they gained a lot of information and timely help to deal with logistic challenges (paying tuition fees, taking flights, finding accommodation, etc.) during their pre-sojourning preparation and initial sojourning stages. As time went on, such support became more about entertainment such as travelling or exploring the local environment (shops and restaurants, etc.) in the later stage of their sojourning. Moreover, findings on participants' well-being focused on them gaining

immediate psychological support but lacked data on the long-term influence of WeChat use. Therefore, conducting only one round of data collection might not be able to capture the whole picture of WeChat's role in CSS' sojourning experience thoroughly.

Another limitation of my research is that it was conducted under the impact of COVID-19, which affected my participants' sojourning experiences. This was evident in the finding chapters (Chapters 5 to 6) with participants discussing COVID-19-related topics on WeChat (e.g., participant's family and friends showing concern about their safety, 5.2.1) or making sense of relevant IE experiences (e.g., Mathew discussing local residence's attitudes towards vaccination, IE11, 6.2.1). As illustrated in the introduction, this context made some participants reduce their in-person interaction, especially with non-Chinese, due to their health concerns, experiences of being discriminated against, or holding health beliefs and ideologies that were distinct from the host community, which resulted in them staying 'tightly connected and oriented to the homeland' (Zhao, 2023). However, it remains unclear whether (and to what degree) the COVID-19 pandemic increased participants' WeChat use intensity and avoidance acculturation strategy towards cultural others.

7.5 Implications for Future Research

The limitations mentioned above highlighted the need to further explore WeChat's role on CSS. Future research could investigate CSS from different academic backgrounds, covering participants from arts and humanities backgrounds and in hard sciences. Since many CSS are based in 'Chinese schools' where CSS make up a majority of the student composition (Yu & Moskal, 2019), another suggestion for future research is to investigate whether similar findings will be applicable to CSS who have access to peers with diverse backgrounds.

Future research can also focus on the long-term impact of WeChat through a longitudinal study on how the role of WeChat changes throughout the CSS' study. I suggest collecting four rounds of data throughout participants' sojourning. The first round can start before they come to the UK to investigate CSS' sojourning pre-preparation, then at their initial sojourning (approximately the second month). The third round can be collected in the middle of their study (approximately six months after their arrival) while the last one at the final stage of their sojourning (approximately eight to nine months after their arrival) for them to summarise their experiences. In this way, we can monitor participants' WeChat behaviour and how WeChat affects their sojourning at different stages. Additionally, self-report data is significant in many studies, but it is important to adopt multiple research methods to ensure the rigour of the analysis (Fryer & Dinsmore, 2020). Longitudinal studies can enrich the self-report data to

provide valuable insight into participants' social media use and acculturation strategies in the post-COVID era.

7.6 Final Remarks

This ethnographic study provides an in-depth investigation of CSS' WeChat use and its role in their sojourning experiences in the UK. This study contributes to the practical understanding and current literature in various ways. Firstly, this research enhances understanding of the CSS and their virtual lives. It reveals how WeChat, the most popular platform among CSS (Pang, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yu et al., 2019), functions as a 'double-edged sword' for participants. On the one hand, WeChat provides participants with convenience and efficiency in communication, entertainment, and gaining information, which facilitates their connection with the co-national, provides them with support in adjusting to the logistics requirements of the host environment, and helps them cope with negative feelings. On the other hand, WeChat affects participants' engagement with the international connections and the host environment. This can be detrimental to their functionality, independence, and privacy if used excessively. Moreover, with limited regulation, WeChat provides a virtual space that could facilitate potential cybercrimes (e.g., cyber harassment and scams). Secondly, this study provides practical references not only to the CSS in the UK but also to CSS in other regions worldwide so they can use WeChat more critically to have better sojourning experiences. These findings also provide reference to other international students who have similar social media behaviours in various sojourning contexts.

Thirdly, this study enriches our understanding of the CSS, the largest international student cohort in the UK. This not only helps the British HEIs guide CSS' acculturation but benefits them in increasing CSS' satisfaction for better student recruitment in the future. Fourthly, this research contributes to ICC studies. By exploring previous theories (e.g., the acculturation model, IE sense-making and ICC theories), this study suggests an acculturation model for international students and explains how the pre-existing social media of WeChat affects different domains of acculturation. Moreover, this study provides insights into how IE sense-making is collectively conducted in virtual space, and how this process contributes to ICC development.

My data was collected in the year 2022 during the COVID-19. Since then, the number of CSS in the UK kept growing, which created an even larger CSS cohort (Statista, 2024). WeChat is and will continue to play a vital role in CSS' lives. I am sure this research is of great value in helping the CSS better integrate into the local environment meanwhile facilitating understanding towards them. How we

can maximise the positive effects of home social media platforms while minimising their detrimental influences is worth considering by all international students, the host institutions, and ICC researchers.

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Appendix A. Information Sheet



Information Sheet for Research Participants

Title of Study:

The role of WeChat in relation to Chinese International Students' Studying Experiences in the U.K.

Invitation and Brief Summary

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read this information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without any penalty or loss of benefits.

The study is conducted by Wenwe Zhang of School and is supervised by Sara Ganassin & Adam Brandt from the School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences at Newcastle University.

The purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to find out the role of WeChat in Chinese students' studying experiences in the U.K. Specifically, the research will study using WeChat in relation to students' everyday life, intercultural communication, and the sense-making process of intercultural encounters. The research aims to supplement the insufficient current research and to give reference to Chinese international students in terms of their WeChat usage and intercultural adaption. The research can also help the local community to better understand the Chinese international students and reduce stereotypes.

The reason you have been invited to take part

You have been invited to take part in this research because you are a Cross-Cultural MA student from mainland China.

Participants' taking part in the research involves:

- filling in the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE) (about 20 minutes)
- filling in a pre-interview questionnaire (about 10 minutes)
- participating in a semi-structured interview (about 40 minutes).
- submitting WeChat chat history / screen shot relevant to the intercultural encounter mentioned in AIE (10 minutes)
- sharing movements with the researcher

You are supposed to meet the researcher two times. Firstly, participants join in the pre-research incentive to get more information about the research, sign the consent form, get the researcher's WeChat contact information, know more about the two pre-interview tasks and ask questions. Secondly, take the semi-structured interview.

The following information is to be collected:

1. Questionnaire, which covers

- Some of your personal information (gender, age, pseudonymise, telephone number, WeChat account, etc.) for better understanding of you for further interaction and to contact you during the research.
- Information about your WeChat usage (frequency, purpose, self-evaluation) and its influence on your intercultural communication to figure out the role using WeChat plays in your everyday life and your intercultural communication.

Information Sheet Version 1 / Date 05/01/2022

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Information Sheet for Research Participants

2. Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE), which summaries

- Detailed information concerning one particular intercultural encounter that you went through (when, where, what happened and with whom, both sides' reaction, etc.)
- Your reflection on the intercultural encounter (on your values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge).

3. Interview, which includes your perception and self-evaluation on your WeChat usage concerning three aspects

- Your daily life while studying in the U.K.
- The influence of WeChat usage on your intercultural communication and most importantly
- Your sense-making process of the intercultural encounter described in AIE.

No particularly sensitive issues will be asked.

4. WeChat chat movements and chat history, screen shot relevant to the intercultural encounter mentioned in AIE.

Access to the information collected

We will use your name and contact details (telephone number, WeChat account) to contact you about the research study. We will use your pseudonymise to process your data. Individuals at Newcastle University may look at your research data to check the accuracy of the research study. The only individuals at Newcastle University who will have access to information that identifies you will be individuals who need to contact you to conduct the research or audit the data collection process.

If you agree to take part in the research study, your data will become part of a dataset. We would like to upload your non-identifying data to a repository (the Open Science Framework) to be shared with other researchers for research purposes only.

The information collected from you will be stored separately in two different password-protected computers accessible by the researcher and other members of the research team (supervisors, panellists) during collection, analysis and on study completion. It is very unlikely that anyone outside of the research team will be able to identify you as an individual. All information will remain confidential and will be retained for 10 years after the completion of the project. No personal data will be used in machine learning or other technologies that will result in a decision about you (a diagnosis for example).

To support data sharing

If you agree to take part in the research study the data provided will be de-identified and made available as "open data" through a research data repository. This means the de-identified study data will be publicly available and may be used for purposes not related to this study. It will not be possible to identify you from the "open data".

The data controller for this research

Newcastle University is the sponsor for this study based in the United Kingdom. Newcastle University will be using information from you to undertake this study and will act as the data controller for this study. This means that Newcastle University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

The lawful basis for carrying out this study under GDPR is Task in the Public Interest, (Article 6,1e) as research is cited as part of the University's duties.

Information Sheet for Research Participants

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as Newcastle University needs to manage your information in specific ways for the research to be reliable and accurate under UK General Data Protection Regulations. If you withdraw from the study, Newcastle University will keep the information about you that has already been obtained. To safeguard your rights, the minimum personally-identifiable information will be used. You can find out more about how Newcastle University uses your information at <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/research/researchgovernance/ethics/gdpr/> and/or by contacting their Data Protection Officer Maureen Wilkinson, rec-man@ncl.ac.uk.

If you wish to raise a complaint on how your personal data is handled, you can contact our Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter: Maureen Wilkinson, rec-man@ncl.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with their response you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO): <https://ico.org.uk/>

Possible benefits of taking part

Through taking part in the research, you get the chance to reflect and get a more in-depth understanding of your intercultural encounters and intercultural communication in relation to your WeChat usage. You also get to know more peer students and researchers to strengthen your social capital. Moreover, participating in the research can give you a reference to your future study or research. To compensate you for your time, you can get small gifts and all support we have during your study abroad.

Possible disadvantages and risks of taking part

There are no known disadvantages or health risks associated with this research.

Attained ethical approval

This study has received ethical approval from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee on 25/01/2021.

You are free to decide whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences for you. You may also decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study without penalty of any kind. Once research has been completed, I will debrief you on the main findings of the research via email or another meeting if you wish.

After reading this information, please complete the informed consent form if you would like to take part. If you have any future questions regarding your participation in this project, please do not hesitate to contact:

Wenwen Zhang

Email: c0038927@newcastle.ac.uk

Phone: 07393 057877

Appendix B. Consent Form



Consent Form for Research Participants

Title of Study:

The Role of WeChat in relation to Chinese International Students' Studying Abroad Experiences in the U.K.

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research study. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form.

Please initial box to confirm consent		
1	I agree to take part in this research project, the purpose of which is to find out the role of WeChat in Chinese international students' studying experiences in the U.K.	
2	I confirm that I have read the information form dated // //2022 (version) for the above study.	
3	I have had the opportunity to consider the content of the information form, ask questions and I have had any questions answered satisfactorily.	
4	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty of any kind. I understand that if I decide to withdraw, any data that I have provided up to that point will be included.	
5	I consent to the processing of my personal information (name, pseudonymise, age, phone number and WeChat account etc.) for the purposes of this research study, as described in the information sheet dated // //2022 (version).	
6	I consent to my pseudonymized research data being stored and used by others for future research.	
7	I understand that it will not be possible to identify me as an individual from this information alone.	
8	I understand that my research data may be published as a report.	
9	I have been informed that the researchers may wish to share non-identifying information in a public repository.	
10	I consent to being audio and/or video recorded and understand that the recordings will be stored anonymously on two password-protected computers and used for research purposes only.	
Participant _____ Name of participant _____ Signature _____ Date Researcher _____ Name of researcher _____ Signature _____ Date		

Appendix C. The Revised Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (English)

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE)

(Adapted from the AIE by the Council of Europe, 2009)

Intercultural Encounter

An intercultural encounter can be an experience you had with someone from a different country, but it can also be an experience with someone from another cultural background in your country. It might be, for example, someone you met from another region, someone who speaks a different language, someone from a different religion or from a different ethnic group. An intercultural encounter can happen anywhere you happen to be, and it can happen between you with somebody you already know or have known for some time. The event could be a meeting with someone from a foreign country or another region of your own country, a visit to that person's house, or something that happened whilst on a trip abroad. Here are some examples from other people:

- *Shiyi* is a Chinese student who just arrived at the London Airport. It was her first time going abroad so she was very nervous. She couldn't find her suitcase and didn't know what to do. She turned to a staff member for help but struggled a little bit with several expressions in English. The staff was patient the whole time and with gestures, they managed to communicate successfully. The staff helped her find her suitcase. Shiyi was glad that she managed to communicate well with the staff member. After this, she felt more confident in speaking with the local people in English.
- *Tianqi* is a Chinese student who lives in the university accommodation with several other international students. He and his flatmates planned to celebrate Christmas together, but while discussing the celebrations they found out that students from different countries celebrate Christmas on different dates: some want to celebrate on Christmas Eve (December 24th), but some celebrate on Christmas Day (December 25th). Tianqi used to celebrate Christmas Eve, but one roommate told him that most British celebrate on Christmas Day, so he decided to "Do as Romans do".

What is the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters?

This *Autobiography* has been designed to help you analyse a specific intercultural encounter you experienced by asking questions about it. The focus is on **ONE** event or experience which you have had with someone different to yourself. Please avoid talking in general terms about a holiday which you have had, and instead choose just one specific encounter or meeting which you have had with a particular person from another country or culture.

Completion Instructions:

1. Please choose an experience which was important for you. It does not matter if the experience is positive or negative. **All experiences are important.**
2. Try to answer the following questions as honestly as possible. The answers to the questions all depend on your personal experiences and perceptions, so there are no right or wrong answers.
3. If some questions are unrelated to the experiences you share, you can skip them.
4. If there is not enough space to fill in, you can add rows by yourself. Thank you!

Please note, all the following questions are about ONE intercultural encounter.

1. THE ENCOUNTER

1 Title: Please give the encounter a name
(e.g., "Lost a suitcase", "Group discussion", "One volunteering experience")

2 Time: When did it happen?

3 Location: Where did it happen?

4 Background: What were you doing there?

5 The other person or people: Who else was directly involved in this encounter?
(e.g., the airport staff member, British classmates, international volunteers).

6 Describe her/him/them:

Please describe anything you think is relevant and important about her/him/them. For example, gender, age, nationality, religion, major (if they are students), profession (if they work) etc.

7 Encounter description:

What happened when you met this person/these people? What did you say or do?

8 The other person's reaction: why do you think the other person do/say that?

9 Your performance: what do you think of your own performance in the encounter?

10 Importance : Why do you chose this experience to share? What is special about it?

2. FEELINGS

1 Your feelings: please describe how you felt at the time.
(e.g., Glad, surprises, upset, angry, annoyed, or ...?)

2 The other person/ people's feelings: How do you think the other people felt in the situation at the time?

What makes you think so? (e.g., according to what they did / said and/or how they looked)

3. COMMUNICATING WITH EACH OTHER

1 When you communicated with the other person/people in this intercultural encounter, did you have any problems? What problems?

2 Did you make communication adjustments to solve the problems? What adjustments you made? (e.g., simplifying your expressions, using gestures, explaining an unfamiliar word)

3 (If applicable) How were the effect of these adjustments?

4. USING COMPARISONS TO UNDERSTAND

People often compare things in other groups or cultures with similar things in their own. For example, British V.S. Chinese, British culture V.S. Chinese culture.

1 Did you do it in this intercultural encounter? Did it help you understand what was happening?

2 This experience shares some things in common with my interacting with people in my group.

Similarities:

3 There were some things which were different from my own group. The differences are:

5. FINDING OUT MORE

There may have been things in the experience which puzzled you and you tried to find out more at the time.

❖ Was there anything puzzled you during the encounter? What was it?

❷ Did you try to find more information about it? If you did so, how did you do it?
(e.g., asking directly at the time, reading about it afterwards, searching the internet, asking others)

❸ Did the information you found inspired any new thoughts? What thoughts?

6. THINKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

❶ When you look back, what conclusions do you draw about the experience?

❷ Did this encounter change any of your thoughts, attitudes, or views? Can you explain?

❸ Did you do or plan to do anything differently because of this encounter? What are they?

Thank you for completing the AIE!

Your time and effort are very much appreciated!

Appendix D. The Revised Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (Mandarin)

跨文化事件反思表

(精简版)

跨文化事件

跨文化事件可能发生在您和来自不同国家的人之间，也可能发生在您和与您来自相同国家但拥有不同文化背景的人之间。例如，这个人或是不同种族、民族的人，或是来自同一个国家的人但生活在不同地区、说不同语言、信奉不同宗教。请注意：跨文化事件可能发生在任何地方；与您进行跨文化事件的可以是陌生人，也可以是您已经认识的人。如，跨文化事件可以是去某人的家拜访，与某人的一次会面，或是你出国旅行时发生的某件事。

以下是几个中国留学生经历过的跨文化事件示例：

• 诗怡刚刚抵达伦敦机场。她十分着急，因为她的一件行李找不到了。机场的一名工作人员热情地帮助了她。

• 潇潇在上一门选修课。课上老师让大家进行小组讨论，她试探性地和几个已经开始讨论的外国同学们打了招呼，然后他们邀请她加入。

• 明宇参加了一个学校组织的志愿活动。他和几个来自不同国家志愿者们一起整理捐赠物资。他们边工作边聊，聊的很开心。

《跨文化事件反思表》

《跨文化事件反思表》旨在以提问的方式帮您分析您所经历的某次跨文化事件。

《反思表》中强调的是您和与您来自不同国家/文化的的某次特定事件或经历。因此，请选择某次具体的事件或会面，避免笼统地谈论跨文化经历（如度过的假期）。

填写说明：

1. 请选择一个对你来说很重要的跨文化事件。你选择的跨文化经历可以是积极的，也可以是消极的。所有的经历都很重要。
2. 请尽量诚实地回答表中的问题。问题的答案没有对错之分，完全取决于您的个人感受和体验。
3. 如有问题与您分享的经历不相关，可不作答。
4. 如填写空间不够，可自行添加行。谢谢！

请注意：回答以下内容时，请专注于某一个跨文化事件。

1. 跨文化事件

① 请为这次跨文化事件取个概括性的名字

(如 “行李丢失”，“小组讨论”，“志愿活动”)

② 事件发生时间：

③ 事件发生地点：

④ 事件发生背景（当时你在做什么？）

⑤ 此次跨文化事件的另一方参与者是谁？

(请说出对方的身份，如“机场工作人员”、“我的印度同学”、“志愿者们”、“骑自行车的人”)

⑥ 请介绍一下对方。

(如：男性还是女性？比你年长还是年轻？他/她（们）来自哪个国家或地区？有什么不同的语言、宗教、教育背景？还有没有其他你认为重要的事情需要补充？)

⑦ 描述事件过程：发生了什么？你们说/做了什么？

⑧ 请你站在对方的立场，设身处地想一想：对方当时为什么这么做/说？

⑨ 你如何评价这次跨文化事件中你的表现？

⑩ 你为什么选择这次经历进行分享？该经历有何特殊之处？

2. 双方感受

①当时你的感受如何？快乐、惊讶、沮丧、紧张、生气、不耐烦，还是...？

②你认为当时对方的感受如何？

你为什么这么认为？（通过对方的语言、表情、动作或是其他？）

3. 与对方的交流沟通

①你和对方的交流沟通过程中，有没有遇到什么交流障碍？

②（如遇到交流障碍）你有没有调整你的交流方式？你做了哪些调整？

（如：简化表达/使用手势/说得更慢/解释对方不明白的词语等）

调整的效果如何？

4. 通过比较加深理解

人们经常将其他文化、群体与自己的文化、群体进行比较。如，中国文化 V. S. 英国文化；中国人 V. S. 英国人。

①在这次事件中，你做比较了吗？这样做有助于你理解此次跨文化事件吗？

②这次事件和我与中国同胞的交流有相似之处。相似之处在于：

③这次事件和我与中国同胞的交流不同。不同之处在于：

5. 获取更多信息

跨文化事件发生的过程中可能会出现一些你不了解的信息。因此你需要通过各种渠道了解相关信息。

① 当时，你有遇到什么不了解的信息吗？

② 你有尝试了解相关信息吗？是当场还是之后？你通过什么途径获得信息的？

（如：当场向对方提问/之后查阅相关信息/上网查资料/向别人请教）

③ 了解到更多信息后，你有什么新想法？

（如：我发现对方和我成长的社会有相似/不同之处...）

6. 回顾与展望

① 回顾这次跨文化事件，你得出了什么结论？

② 这次跨文化事件有没有改变你的某些想法、观点或态度？你能具体说说吗？

③ 这次经历有没有改变你的某些做法和行为？如有，是什么？

非常感谢您的分享与参与！

祝您留学生活愉快！

Appendix E. Interview Guide

Part I: General questions about WeChat

1. Are you a frequent WeChat user?
2. On average, how much time do you use WeChat every day?
3. Do you have any idea how many WeChat friends you have in total?
How many of those are not from mainland China?
4. What language(s) do you usually use on WeChat?
5. What other social media do you also use while studying in the U.K.?
Compared to WeChat, do you use these media more or less frequently?

Part II: The Impact of WeChat on Studying Abroad Experiences

6. How do you use WeChat every day while studying here in the U.K.?
7. What are the benefits of using WeChat in your study abroad life?
8. What are the drawbacks?

Part III: Interactions on WeChat

9. Who do you usually interact with? What do you talk about?
10. How often do you share your study abroad experiences with your WeChat friends? Can you give me some examples?
11. Do you have in person interaction with your WeChat friends who also live in the U.K.?
How frequently do you do so?

Part IV: WeChat and Intercultural Communication

12. Intercultural communication is an important part of our studying abroad experience.
Could you explain how you understand intercultural communication?

13. Do you feel that people can have intercultural experiences with people from the same country? Why yes?/why not?

further questions: Have this ever happened to you? Can you tell me more about it?

14. Have you experienced intercultural communication with co-nationals on WeChat? What's the impact of these experiences on you?

15. In general, how does WeChat influence your intercultural communication? Supports it or hinders it? Can you give me some examples?

16. In terms of WeChat usage, what change could you make to improve your intercultural communication?

Part V: WeChat and Intercultural Encounter (IE)

17. What is your understanding of an IE?

18. Before the interview, you have completed the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounter(AIE). How did you find the AEI? (Time-consuming? Confusing? Helpful?)

19. Can you briefly introduce the IE you described in the AEI?

20. During or after the IE, with whom have you shared this experience through WeChat?

21. How did they react towards the intercultural encounter? In the same way or differently?

22. What help or support did you gain through discussing this IE with them?

23. Did you share the same views about the encounter? Or were they different? How?

follow up question: What did you do about these disagreements ?

24. How does such discussion impact your further IEs?

Part VI: Advice to others and closure

25. What suggestions you would give to newcomer Chinese students on their WeChat usage?

26. What else you would like to add about the topics we discussed today?

Appendix F. An Example of Participants' AIE

Please note, all the following questions are about ONE intercultural encounter.

1. THE ENCOUNTER

① **Title:** Please give the encounter a name
(c.g., "Lost a suitcase", "Group discussion", "One volunteer experience")

Racism from a British teenager

② **Time:** When did it happen?

The seventh day I arrived in UK, 19th of September 2021

③ **Location:** Where did it happen?

④ **Background:** What were you doing there?

I just finished dinner with my friends.

⑤ **The other person or people:** Who else was directly involved in this encounter?
(c.g., the airport staff member, British classmates, international volunteers).

My five Chinese friends were directly involved.

⑥ **Describe her/him/them:**

Please describe anything you think is relevant and important about her/him/them. For example, gender, age, nationality, religion, major (if they are students), profession (if they work) etc.

The British man who insulted me looked like a teenager in a high school, around 16 years old.

According to the accent and the white face, I guess he was British local.

⑦ **Encounter description:**

What happened when you met this person/these people? What did you say or do?

He shouted "Fuck you" to me even from the other side of the street, and keep showing me his middle finger. I strike back with some bad languages. We deadlocked on both side of the street for ten minutes

⑧ **The other person's reaction:** why do you think the other person do/say that?

He was brainwashed by the Western media, resulting in strong hostility to Chinese.

⑨ **Your performance:** what do you think of your own performance in the encounter?

I believe I did pretty well. I successfully fought back and did not give that racist any chance to keep insulting me.

⑩ Importance: Why do you chose this experience to share? What is special about it?

This encounter happened when I just arrived in UK. I used to hear that British people have the characteristics of “gentleman” or “lady”, but the truth is not.

2. FEELINGS

① Your feelings: please describe how you felt at the time.

(e.g., Glad, surprises, upset, angry, annoyed, or ...?)

I feel quite angry and even wanted to fight with him.

② The other person/ people's feelings: How do you think the other people felt in the situation at the time?

My friends are all very angry. I think they have the same feeling of me

What makes you think so? (e.g., according to what they did / said and/or how they looked)
They all helped me strike back.

3. COMMUNICATING WITH EACH OTHER

① When you communicated with the other person/people in this intercultural encounter, did you have any problems? What problems?

I tried to stop the white teenager, but he never listened to me and keep saying “Fuck you”

② Did you make communication adjustments to solve the problems? What adjustments you made? (e.g., simplifying your expressions, using gestures, explaining an unfamiliar word)

I tried to explain why his behaviour was wrong, but it did not work. So in the end, I decided to fight violence with violence.

③ (If applicable) How were the effect of these adjustments?

Actually any adjustment cannot stop a racist.

4. USING COMPARISONS TO UNDERSTAND

People often compare things in other groups or cultures with similar things in their own. For example, British V.S. Chinese, British culture V.S. Chinese culture.

① Did you do it in this intercultural encounter? Did it help you understand what was happening?
Yes I do. The racism in Britain is not a rare situation, but in China, few people show hostility to foreigners.

② This experience shares some things in common with my interacting with people in my group.

Similarities: If the person in my group is also a racist, I will not hesitate to protest against him.

③ There were some things which were different from my own group. The differences are:

In fact, people in my own group rarely attack a stranger with words on the street like this.

5. FINDING OUT MORE

There may have been things in the experience which puzzled you and you tried to find out more at the time.

① Was there anything puzzled you during the encounter? What was it?

I wonder why even when he is so far away from me, he can recognize that I am Chinese and does not stingy time to scold me.

② Did you try to find more information about it? If you did so, how did you do it?

(e.g., asking directly at the time, reading about it afterwards, searching the internet, asking others)

I discussed this problem with my friends for a long time and asked for help on online social media.

③ Did the information you found inspired any new thoughts? What thoughts?

Most racists are at the bottom of society without good education and job, so they have so much time and energy to look for minorities on the streets.

6. THINKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

① When you look back, what conclusions do you draw about the experience?

We must not be weak in the face of racists and let them know that ethnic minorities are not easy to bully.

② Did this encounter change any of your thoughts, attitudes, or views? Can you explain?

From then on, I felt a sense of crisis when I walked down the street, and my trust in any white man decreased.

③ Did you do or plan to do anything differently because of this encounter? What are they?

Go to the gym more frequently and work hard on Brazilian jujitsu to prepare for conflict with racists.

Thank you for completing the AIE!

Your time and effort are very much appreciated!

Appendix G. Part of Mathew's Interview Transcript (Participant No. 11)



Wenwen: First of all, thank you very much for participating the interview.

Matthew: My pleasure.

Wenwen: We have already known each other, but still before we start the interview, please allow me to introduce myself. My name is a willing john second year PhD student to applied linguistics. Today's interview is part of my PhD research project, the topic we will discuss today is the same, and my PhD project, which is to discover the role that WeChat played in Chinese international students' studying abroad life in the UK. The sample of this research is CCC Chinese students from Midland and again I really appreciate your participation! How about you? Can you briefly introduce yourself?

Matthew: Okay, my name is ... and you can also call me Marcus. I am a student majoring in cross cultural communication and education at Newcastle university. That's all.

Wenwen: Okay, great! Thank you! Today's interview might take about 40 minutes during the interview you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to. You may end the interview at any time, the answer to the interview questions totally depend on your personal experiences and the perception. There is no right or wrong answers, and you can freely share your thoughts. All responses you give today will be kept confidential and anonymous. I can email you a copy of the transcripts in two weeks if you want. So... do you need the transcript?

Matthew: Yes, please.

Wenwen: Okay, great! I need to record. Is that okay?

Matthew: And yeah, it's okay.

Wenwen: Are there any questions you want to ask before we started?

Matthew: No.

Wenwen: Okay, great! First, I'm going to ask you several short questions about your daily WeChat use, while studying in the UK. Are you a frequent WeChat user?

Matthew: Yes, of course. I use WeChat every day communicating with my parents and friends in China.

Wenwen: Great. Considering the time you spend on texting, or reading articles, making voice or video chat, playing games, etc, how much time in total do you spend on WeChat every day?

Matthew: It depends on my agenda. If I have a lot of assignment to do, then I think the time might be half an hour or less. If I don't have assignments to do, then that time might be longer, about one or two hours a day.

Wenwen: Okay, do you have any idea like how many WeChat friends you have in total?

Matthew: About 300.

Wenwen: hmm. Okay, and how many of those are not from mainland China?

Matthew: I think I only have one... local British Friend.

Wenwen: Oh Okay, so is that a he or she?

Matthew: Is it's he.

Wenwen: Okay. Is he currently here in the UK?

Matthew: yeah. he's a local people.

Wenwen: Okay. Do you interactive frequently with this British friend?

Matthew: Not very often. Maybe ...maybe twice a month.

Wenwen: Twice a month... Okay? Do you also meet in person?

Matthew: Meet... who?

Wenwen: This British friend.

Matthew: Oh, oh okay. Not, not very often.

Wenwen: Okay, so you guys chat like once a month ... and how often do you meet in person?

Matthew: I have only met him once.

Wenwen: Do you also have in person interaction who are from mainland China?

Matthew: Yeah, most of them are my Chinese schoolmates or classmates, and we usually use WeChat to communicate and to discuss... like, where are we going to have to dinner or something or have other activities.

Wenwen: Okay, so how many of these WeChat friends are here in the UK?

Matthew: So... you mean I have in person communication?

Wenwen: No, just a number, a basic number.... How many of your WeChat friends are currently here in the UK?

Matthew: May I have a check on my WeChat?

Wenwen: Yeah, sure, sure! Take your time! But it doesn't have to be very accurate.

Matthew: Approximately 30 people. 30.

Wenwen: OK, so do you interact in person with these 30 WeChat friends?

Matthew: Sorry?

Wenwen: Do you interact in person with these 30 WeChat friends who are here in the UK?

Matthew: interact... yes.

Wenwen: how frequently do interact in person?

Matthew: Maybe ... maybe twice a week.

Wenwen: okay. Do you guys go to same courses together?

Matthew: yeah the same session. Sometimes we go back home together.

Wenwen: Okay, so what language or what languages, do you usually use on WeChat?

Matthew: Of course, our mother tongue, Chinese Mandarin.

Wenwen: Any other languages you use?

Matthew: yeah, English when we need to express some concepts that is more easier for English language, then we can use English language. For example, 'deadline', or 'assignments' or 'task' or something ...yeah we will use English.

Wenwen: In addition to WeChat, what other social media do you currently use?

Matthew: Well, I also use Instagram and WhatsApp, but they are not often used.

Wenwen: Comparing to WeChat, do you use these more or less frequently?

Matthew: Less frequently.

Wenwen: hmm OK. Now let's talk about the impact of using WeChat on your study abroad life. How do you use WeChat every day during your study here in the UK? You mentioned briefly that you will chat with your parents and friends, right?

Matthew: Yeah.

Wenwen: Can you be a little bit specific about this?

Matthew: Okay, for my friends or classmates we normally talk about our activities or our studies. For example, what time we met and have dinner together? what kind of what kind of assignments is required to submit? Something like this. For our parents, we talk about my life in the UK, or their status in China.

Wenwen: Okay, so these are all about communication with people or interaction with people, right?

Matthew: Yeah.

Wenwen: What other impacts does use WeChat have on you other than interpersonal communication? What else do you do on WeChat?

Matthew: I think WeChat also has a picture or video sharing function, which is called '朋友圈', but I don't know what was that in English...

Wenwen: Moments.

Matthew: Sorry?

Wenwen: Moments.

Matthew: Moments, okay yeah I think the function, moment function also has some characters or you know image sharing and social ... everybody every friend can comment below and or they can give you a like. So I think WeChat also has this function.

Wenwen: Anything else?

Matthew: Anything else...

Well, I have to say that's the frequently used functions for me.

Wenwen: Okay, great! Then how often do you share your study abroad experiences with your WeChat friends?

Matthew: Through moments, or, individual (sharing)?

Wenwen: Both.

Matthew: Both... okay for individual chats maybe it depends on the relationship between my friends and me. If we have very intimate relationship, then the frequency tends to be higher. For example, maybe three or two days I will chat with my friends via WeChat but as far as the moments ... I'm not a frequent user of this function, maybe I will send my posts or images like one month ... sorry, once a week.

Wenwen: Okay yeah because I followed you and I didn't find much information haha.

Matthew: Okay.

Wenwen: Then what benefits do you gain from using WeChat while you're studying abroad?

Matthew: Well, I think...It provides a platform for a cross cultural communication? Sorry sorry! I mean... I mean this this APP can help me start communication across geographical distance.

Wenwen: Okay, what are the drawbacks? Any experiences you want to share?

Matthew: Drawbacks.... Okay, I think the quality of network is not satisfactory. When I have a live video with my family or my friends, then the image or the videos' quality is not very good, it is not clear.

Wenwen: So it's got compressed right?

Matthew: yeah got compressed.

Wenwen: But for the image, you can share the original image, right?

Matthew: Yes, yes.

Wenwen: Okay anything else you want to add?

Matthew: Drawbacks.... Well, I think it makes me more dependent on our communication between

the contacts in China, rather than... rather than with local people in the UK.

Wenwen: okay. yeah, so that's about intercultural communication right?

Matthew: yeah.

Wenwen: We will talk about it in details in a bit. How do you understand the concept of intercultural communication?

Matthew: That's a ...that's a tough question. So, I think it's about the communication between people from different social, cultural backgrounds. It's about their identity, their beliefs, their cultures or subcultures and their social status etc. I think it's very general, but I think, maybe each... every two person... The communication between every two... between each two person is intercultural communication, because they have different status, or conditions or beliefs or cultures. I think this concept is a very general...

Wenwen: Can you give me an example of intercultural communication?

Matthew: Yeah. imagine that I were a practicing teacher ... practicing English teacher in China, and the process of English language teaching is intercultural contact. For example, my students, you know they speak Chinese mandarin, and their identity is Chinese. But for me, I obviously have oversea study experience, and I speak English, which is, which is not your mother language, so I think this can also be considered an intercultural company encounter.

Wenwen: Communication or encounter?

Matthew: Both, I think both.

Wenwen: Okay yeah because we are also going to talk about the concept of Inter-country encounter. These two concepts are a bit similar, right? Because the next question is, do you feel that people from the same country can have intercultural encounter experiences?

Matthew: Of course, of course! Because you know China has a very massive territory, and they have distinct geographical differences and different cultural areas. For example, Cantonese, they have distinct different cultures from mainstream culture in China, I think.

Wenwen: Have you had intercultural experiences with the Chinese co-nationals?

Matthew: Chinese co co-nationals? Could you explain it?

Wenwen: With other Chinese people, have you had any intercultural experiences?

Matthew: Yes. Once a time I went to Chengdu, Sichuan province, I find their dialect is very hard to understand. And also they celebrate different festivals, unlike where I live. Also the concept about this festival is far different from where we live.

Wenwen: So which festival are you talking about?

Matthew: And it's called Zhongyuan festival.

Wenwen: Okay so... they celebrate in a different way you did in your hometown, right?

Matthew: yeah.

Wenwen: The next question is: are you satisfied with your current intercultural communication? and why?

Matthew: Well, it is hard to ...it's hard to say it's satisfactory or it's unsatisfaction. Because I tend to stay at my dormitory, and I have less opportunity to go outside and chat with local people. Because... because I don't know them.

Wenwen: You don't know them, ah..

Matthew: They are strangers, yeah I tend to communicate with our Chinese people group.

Wenwen: Okay, so. From one to 10, how would you rate your intercultural communication? How satisfied are you with your current intercultural communication?

Matthew: five.

Wenwen: okay good! now let's coming back to the discussion about WeChat. Please try to think: have you experienced the intercultural communication with the Co-nationals on WeChat? With the other Chinese WeChat friends.

Matthew: I think I cannot observe remarkable differences. Several communication reason: Because we are nearly and of the same age group; we have same level of educational status. So I think it's hard to tell if there's any differences between the cultural differences.

Matthew: yeah.

Wenwen: You mentioned earlier that people from China might speak a different dialect or have a different regional culture, so did you notice this happening also on WeChat?

Matthew: No, because we prefer to use text rather than audio or video, so I think it makes no difference.

Wenwen: Okay, good. In general, how does WeChat influence your intercultural communication, supports it or hinders it?

Matthew: Sorry. Could you repeat your question?

Wenwen: Yeah sure! How does WeChat influence your intercultural communication, supports it or hinders it?

Matthew: I think it hinders my intercultural communication.

Wenwen: Why? Can you explain?

Matthew: Yeah. Because I'm more reliance on this APP and in my friend list, the majority of contact

are Chinese, so I will become more dependent on using this APP, which means that I have less opportunity to use another social networking application with people of different nationalities or cultural backgrounds.

Wenwen: Okay, so you mean you are being very dependent on WeChat.

Matthew: Yeah.

Wenwen: and you're using less of the other social media.

Matthew: Yeah.

Wenwen: Okay, so in terms of your WeChat use, what changes would you make to improve your intercultural communication?

Matthew: Well, I think I need to have more interaction with, you know, local people or foreigners through Instagram or WhatsApp. Only in this way, can I have more chance to communicate with different people who have different cultural backgrounds.

Wenwen: Are you implying that you might need to use the WeChat a little bit less?

Matthew: Yes, absolutely.