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Social Media Usage Among University Students in China

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SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN CHINA

BY BRYANA BOHL

INTRODUCTION

Social Media is connecting the world in a way no other technology has before. People around the world are connected to one platform or another, and check in or post almost every day. From the birth of a royal baby to what's happening on the ground in Syria, we can receive live updates from next door to half way across the planet. As a subcontinent where over 513 million people use the Internet and 300 million are using social media sites, China has the most active Internet users in the world (Chiu, Ip, and Silverman, 1). The people in China spend about [40%] of their time online using social media, playing games, for academia, for business et cetera (Chiu, Ip, and Silverman, 1). Subsequently, Chinese and United States' social media users occupy their own space on the Internet because each sub continental country has their own platforms, media coverage, language, interests, beliefs, and identities. In that regard, each country's social media conception and growth have mostly been separate and largely unknown to outside users despite the fact that each sphere shares similar digital-age experiences.

The research question I investigated while in China was: how do college-aged Chinese citizens use social media and what are their current interests and/or concerns with social media use, if any? There is importance in this research question because of how many young adults around the world are immersed in social media. Additionally, there may be issues linked with intensive social media use among youth, such as addiction, which is a significant concern among parents and teachers that still appear to be misunderstood outside academia. The ethnographic emic perspective of young adults regarding social media has not been collected or studied. Meanwhile, we are all part of this expanding era of "digital natives" (Schwartetal. 206). Young people, myself included, are people of the future. How will we continue to explore the bounds of technology with social media? How will we explore the potential of social media and the present and future concerns associated with it?

When studying such a topic, it is important to familiarize oneself with the history and current events of the topic. The United States Social Media Networks (SNSs) have come a long way since their conception in the early 2000s (Boyd and Ellison. 2014). Many of the initial sites began as simple instant messaging platforms without the profile-centric and friend network-centric faculty that SNSs are famously known for today (Boyd and Ellison. 2014). Similarly, a popular SNS in China called QQ "started as an instant messaging service" before it had SNS features such as personalization and "friending" capabilities; "QQ instant messaging service instantly became the largest SNS worldwide when it added profiles and made friends visible" (Chiu, Ip, and Silverman, 1). Once these capabilities became prevalent on social media sites in the United States, new sites such as Facebook were designed with "identity driven categories in mind" (Boyd and Ellison. 2014). There are now sites for specific religious sects, dating sites for certain age groups, and SNSs created for specific ethnic user populations. Contemporary SNSs offer personal, professional, and dating profiles. More popular sites like Facebook, which began as a site exclusively for Harvard students, eventually branched out to include practically anyone and everyone. Parents and teachers use Facebook now, potentially making the site "less cool" to many teenagers and young adults. From what I have heard from friends my age, the latest trend for students today is to join new SNS platforms that are widely unknown to the adult SNS demographic; one such platform in the US, and now at Western Washington University, is Yik-Yak.

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THE INTEREST IN STAYING CONNECTED AND KEEPING UP WITH THE DAY-TO-DAY ACTIVITIES OF THEIR ONLINE FRIENDS HAS BECOME ICONIC OF AMERICAN YOUTH CULTURE.

Every day SNSs are unfolding new and innovative ways to connect people unlike never before and college students are just one demographic of Internet and SNS users. My literature review includes information from contemporary literature about international college student social media use as well as literature focusing on China's young social media generation. Through contrastive research of American social media use, I will create comparisons with the findings from China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Present-day college-aged adults are known as "digital natives"; they are those who have grown up around digital communication (Schwartz et al. 2014). As such, modern college-aged adults are highly involved in social media. Studies done by the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that between 67% and 75% of college-aged young adults (who may not necessarily be enrolled in college) use social networking websites (Junco. 2014). The interest in staying connected and keeping up with the day-to-day activities of their online friends has become iconic of American youth culture. However, the important issue is not just that they are involved but they are involved in social media. In a research study conducted by an American university on the east coast, researchers found that the most popular social

media platform among the college students is social networking and the most popular provider is Facebook (Williams et al. 2014). Though the results may not be surprising, it reveals that Facebook is a network where every college student is or could be connected to friends from practically anywhere across the nation. Connection via technological social networks appears to be the theme of this generation. The Higher Education Research Institute in the United States, reported that on average students in American higher education institutions are using nine different social media platforms and twelve different providers, which imply that students connect over various platforms for various interests (Williams et al. 2014). There are five social media behaviors that this study tested for: Spectator, Creator, Joiner, Collector, and Critic (Williams et al. 2014). Seventy three percent of students consider themselves to fit into more than one of the social media personalities (Williams et al. 132). The concept of having multiple social media personalities is fascinating because it demonstrates how students interact with social media: they watch, produce, connect, share, and critique. This concept also expresses the autonomy of social media. Students are able to express various personal interests and behaviors among the hundreds of social media platforms available.

Social media is a particularly popular facet of college students' lives in the United States. From keeping up with hometown relations and adding new friends to following their favorite celebrities, students consistently keep up with social media. One study aimed to show how Facebook influences "real world engagement" of college students (Junco. 2014). In the study, conducted with 5,414 college students, which tested the relationship

between the frequency of "Facebook use and student engagement" and the frequency of "Facebook activities and student engagement", it was found that "students participated in a variety of Facebook activities…viewing photos, commenting on content, and checking in to see what others are doing being the three most popular activities" (Junco. 2014). While there was an overall negative correlation between Facebook use and student engagement, there was positive predictability of student engagement when "commenting on content and creating or RSVP'ing to events" on students Facebook profiles (Junco. 2014). Depending on how Facebook is used by the student, student engagement can be positively linked. Only certain activities were predictive of student engagement, especially when online participation puts students in a position to socialize offline, such as how RSVP'ing to an event leads to a higher likelihood of their attendance.

Faculty members in higher education have also noticed the use of social media like Twitter among their students. A few of my professors at Western Washington University appear eager to latch on to students social media use and incorporate it into academic discussion. Be that as it may, among the various courses I have taken in the last three years, there has been little to no action taken by professors toward incorporating social media into the classroom. Withal, the lag in educational use of social media does not necessarily mean that there is no interest in the subject at all. Professors may be wary of testing out a current and somewhat distracting extra-curricular activity in the context of academics. They may query how a microblogging site like Twitter could affect their students' learning in class, or how Twitter

would influence their grades when used between the professor and the students. Such questions have been tackled in a study published in the *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, yielding conclusive results about the engagement of students when involved in social media conversations outside the classroom with "educationally relevant purposes" (Junco et al. 2014). The study had many positive effects on the students in the test group. Among these benefits were a greater increase in engagement scores, positive effects on grades, and interpersonal connections created using Twitter (Junco. 2014). Additionally, the Higher Education Research Institute found that Twitter created a "culture of engagement" between the students and their instructor (Junco, Heiberger, and Loken, 129). While on the surface Twitter appears to be a phenomenal technological education tool, it is actually simply the infrastructure for a comfortable space that breaks free of "traditional classroom discussion boundaries", such as time limits, specified topics, and rewarded extraversion (Junco. 2014). Students in the test group experienced greater benefit from a democratized platform of communication. However, despite the positive results, this study is not representative of the entire American higher education system or of international higher education. This study used self-response methods, which is why there should be more ethnographic research into technology use for educational purposes.

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HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOUND THAT TWITTER CREATED A "CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT" BETWEEN THE STUDENTS AND THEIR INSTRUCTOR.

At this point in my research I have not come across any scholarly work about the use of social media in China for educational purposes. The information that I found regarding Internet usage and social media is focused on Internet addiction and how to lessen usage in the urban schools where kids have plenty of new media exposure. However, the educators at one middle school in an impoverished rural village hours outside of Lanzhou, China are eager for students to get exposure to the Internet since they are in such a rural area. The school does not have many technological resources ergo they encourage any chance for the students to experience the resources provided on the Internet. Even computer classes, which the students enjoy immensely, are not offered in this district. Despite scholarly enthusiasm, even if educators have considered implementing social media into the classroom, there seems to be no observable momentum for China or the United States in this regard. Perhaps the reasoning is due to several realities about social media incorporation: it is considered a distraction by many, it is not mainstream education, it is not widely established to improve the educational atmosphere, and, in some cases, it may require major revamping of the curriculum. This widespread discomposure may resonate within Chinese academia as well. New media has yet to be harnessed by any breadth of educators at major universities in China or the U.S.

In China, Facebook, Youtube and Twitter are all banned by the government (China Blueprint Online 2014). However, China has achieved near "information sovereignty" by creating domestic email systems, search engines, and versions of social media for the nearly one and a third billion people who inhabit China (Diamond and Plattner 2012). These resources are set up specifically to serve a large Chinese population with distinctively Chinese platforms. By the same token, the Chinese social media sector has limited Western infiltration and Western countries have scarce information regarding social media in China.

Media coverage of China's social media and Internet rights is consistently about censorship and government control. A recent article published in *China Digital Times* was titled "Censors Keep Mainland in the Dark About HK Protests." It appears to be widely known outside of China that the Chinese government is censoring their information and blocking information from the rest of the world. According to a new media

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professor Clay Shirky (2014) who teaches at New York University, "Authoritarian governments [like China] stifle communication among their citizens because they fear, correctly, that a better coordinated populace would constrain their ability to act without oversight". Periodically the Chinese government preforms in-person "crackdowns" at Internet cafes, not necessarily for concern of "access to Western ideas" but because of a concern for leaking of government information (Dillon, 2009). For whatever reasons the government may have to block access and censor, it may not have a huge effect on the interests and concerns of Chinese college aged students who are using social media; because such a small portion of the population is affected by censorship. The ultimate question that keeps reoccurring in the democratic developed world is: "do digital tools enhance democracy?" (Shirky 2014). Events such as the fall of the communist party in the Republic of Modolva, the Million People March in the Philippines, and protests in Spain were all organized via social media. Likewise, Chinese citizens could obtain social media power to mobilize against the government (Shirky 2014). Therefore, it is important to be prepared to ask questions that concern the Internet rights of Chinese citizens, but not expect to get responses of concern equivalent to those of the U.S. media. The U.S. media tends to use a democratic paradigm when analyzing and reporting on China. Students may be more concerned with more tangible and observable topics regarding social media usage among their demographic.

China's large population has experienced great increases in social media access and in turn social media use. In the past decade, researchers have investigated a tendency

MEDIA COVERAGE OF CHINA'S SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERNET RIGHTS IS CONSISTENTLY ABOUT CENSORSHIP AND GOVERNMENT CONTROL.

of addictive traits among young adults who use social media (Wu et al. 2011). However, the research of college students has occurred in the Republic of China and Taiwan yet not among college students in the People's Republic of China or Mainland China. In Taiwan, there is a word that means "room-bound male"; "Chai-nan" is someone who spends much of his waking hours on the Internet engaged in social media, games, and other non-academic Internet activities (Wu et al. 2011). At the National Chiao Tung University researchers are interested in the emergence of RBM's (room-bound male) and especially how other students perceive them. At four universities, surveys were given to both male and female students from each year as well as graduate students. The surveys were composed of statements, which had the students answer on a scale of 1 to 5 (Wu et al. 2011). The statements included self evaluation and evaluation of others (Wu et al. 2011). In the results section, the researchers claimed that professors and student-affairs officers have observed specific behaviors where RBMs "spend most of their time in their residence" and have the leisure to do so since Taiwan campuses now have food delivery services in place (Wu et al. 2011). They also tend to avoid face to face communication and prefer Internet mediated communication when interaction is necessary (Wu et al. 2011). While the idea that someone appears to be confined in their dorm room for most of their college experience may seem dire, the researchers acknowledge that RBMs may find solace in the social communities

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RESEARCHERS FOUND THAT SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION SYMPTOMS ARE CONSISTENT WITH SUBSTANCE DEPENDENCE ADDICTION.

and interactions that they have over the Internet (Wu et al. 2011). Researchers also acknowledge the results showing that "respondents tended to assign negative connotations to the term 'room bound male'" and use of that term could be harmful to those considered to be an RBM (Wu et al. 2011). Besides this study, there is a lack of information and understanding about RBMs and their Internet mediated social experiences among researchers. Despite showing signs of new media addiction they appear to have developed a personal social sphere in the digital world in which they can thrive (Wu et al. 2011).

The most prominent study on social media addiction in China was conducted with middle school students as subjects. It is likely that the study intended to uncover information in time for parents and teachers to discuss and stage interventions with children found to have a social media addiction. Since there have been perceived dependence issues with social media, "both researchers and the Chinese government have paid a great deal of attention to internet addiction problems among adolescents in China" (Huang 2014). Researchers found that social media addiction symptoms are consistent with substance dependence (Huang 2014). The symptoms that are usually seen among adolescents who are considered addicted are "more emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and less pro-social behaviors than the normal group" (Huang, 24). Although only about fifteen percent of the middle school students in the study were found to be addicts, social media is on the rise and electronic devices are getting cheaper.

From my own experience observing other American college students, I find that there are American counterparts to the Taiwanese and Chinese room bound male (Wu et al. 2011). I knew people in my freshman dorm that would play video games constantly; they lived above me and their victory celebrations were usually quite loud. Consequently, it is not just the RBM types that appear to need constant connection. On an average day walking campus, I observe students using their smart phones, laptops, or other Internet compatible devices. Wherever I go, whether travelling to someone's house or a new location, I find myself asking if there is free wifi. I know of friends who will have to delete their Facebook profiles in order to get through finals week without procrastinating. What is more, I know many people who share their life almost exclusively via Snapchat stories. It is the age of social media and the capabilities that are available merely foreshadow the wave of social media technology to come. I am part of a generation that can text faster than it can type and promotes its political views on Facebook. I believe that this generation of Americans has much in common, as far as social media, with its Chinese counterpart; we are the netizens, the bloggers, the friend 'adders' and 'followers', of the world. Our parents and educators may believe we are the generation of Internet addiction, but perhaps we are simply the forerunners of a new way of life.

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RESEARCH METHODS

While in China, I collected most of my data via interviews and observations of twelve individuals. Three interviews were done with café workers where our research advisor, Elena, aided as a translator. The other nine interviews were done with graduate students: two of the interviews were conducted on pairs of students and the seven others were done individually. The demographics of my interlocutors, to my knowledge, were: eleven raised in China and one raised in India, nine graduate students (two students from Renmin University of China, four students from Zhejing University, and three students from Lanzhou University), one international student, three café workers, six male identifying and six female identifying, all of whom appeared to be in their twenties. The interviews ranged from about five minutes of impromptu conversation with the café workers to arranged interviews of an hour with the graduate students. I also interviewed the students over WeChat after returning to Washington state. WeChat proved to be a valuable research tool for me, not only giving me the opportunity to add students and chat with them while in China, but also to continue the conversation from the United States. Everyone I interviewed was interested in conversing with me and voicing their thoughts when I asked them questions. Notably, the difference I observed between Lanzhou university (LZU) and Zhejing university (ZJU) is their English abilities. ZJU students were able to understand and respond with much more comprehensive English than the LZU students, therefore the interviews went much more smoothly for

both parties with the ZJU students than with the LZU students. Two of the students I interviewed are from Renmin University, and I happened to meet them at a café in Lanzhou. They were in town because they had just taken a major college exam at LZU. I was lucky to meet them and just as lucky that they spoke fluent English. Understandably, the interviews with the better English speakers proved to be more comprehensive than the interviews with those who understood very basic English.

In my research proposal I intended to do more in-depth examinations than I made in reality. The interviews were decidedly helpful for my research, hence I did not focus on observation as much as I had originally planned. The information I observed, however, I have as headnotes. Headnotes is the anthropological term for notes that are not written down but remain in memory. On LZU and ZJU campuses I noticed that many people whom we met had smartphones and almost all of them had WeChat, a popular Chinese multifunctional messaging app similar to Facebook Messenger. Since only one of us American students had phone data capabilities while in China, WeChat was a valuable way for us to connect with the graduate students on a day-to-day basis. It proved to be a valuable tool for us, now back in the United States, in order to continue communication with the students in China. Additionally, I observed that many of the middle school students whom we met in Suichang were eager to

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STUDENTS ARE EXCITED TO CONNECT WITH US OVER SOCIAL MEDIA. I THINK IT IS THE CULTURE OF YOUTH TODAY, CHINESE AND AMERICAN ALIKE.

add us on QQ, another major social media application in China; these students were excited to connect with us over social media. I think it is the culture of youth today, Chinese and American alike. Another observation I made at ZJU is of an institution near the university campus where students go to play virtual reality computer games. The building had about 50 computers mostly occupied by male students. Perhaps this is a way to institutionalize the room bound male community in a physical space. Despite there being an abundance of predominantly male players there was female presence as well. I think this observation could undermine some aspects of the room bound male phenomenon being studied by researchers because there are situations, as I observed, where students are not isolated in their rooms when playing these virtual reality games.

FINDINGS

I went into my data collection with the intent of learning about the use of social media by Chinese students. Via my supportive interlocutors and further research my questions for university students on Chinese social media were answered. Social media connects many people in China from the cities to the remote rural areas; social media is social connectivity.

WeChat, QQ, RenRen, and Sina Weibo are among the most popular social media sites in China. QQ is an older platform, starting up in 1999 that still maintains popularity among young social media users today. QQ offers many options for users including, but not limited

WITH SOCIAL MEDIA SITES AND THE PROFILES OR AVATARS THAT CAN BE CREATED, THERE SEEMS TO BE A NEW WAVE IN DEFINING PERSONAL IDENTITY.

to, "text messaging, high-definition video calls (one-on-one and group), online and offline file transmission, customizable avatars, online games, [and] massive chat rooms" (QQ 2014). WeChat is like the younger sibling of QQ; WeChat is a newer platform that was launched by Tencent Inc., which is the same Internet provider that founded QQ. The platform launched in 2011 as Weixin but was later changed to WeChat in 2012, broadening its service to international users (Chao 2013). I would describe WeChat as Facebook messenger site with additional features like a newsfeed, games, and "people nearby". RenRen launched in 2005 under the title "Xiaonei" before its current name was established. This platform allows users to create a profile much like that of Facebook. Individuals can create photo albums, upload videos, play games, listen and share music, all under the philosophy of "staying connected with old friends and making new ones" (RenRen 2014). Last but not least, Sina Weibo is a micro-blogging site similar to Twitter that launched in 2009 (Custer 2014). Its user-ship has been rocky over the past few years but some students whom I spoke with still use this platform (Custer 2014). These make up the widely used platforms that are well established among university students in China. Out of the four, QQ and WeChat seem the most popular among my interlocutors as they are fresh new media sites that offer the latest in social media technology. With such trending technology, students in China are not likely to pass up the chance to use platforms like these.

Initial inquiries to my interlocutors were circled around what they like to post on specific social media sites as well as what their friends like to post. The answers to this question give a sense of how people interact with their friends and followers on the various platforms. I received answers like "career plan" and "life philosophy", "jokes [from] the internet", "news", things that "happen to me" or "my feelings", when "something embarrassing happened" to them. Friends who are Ph.D. students post links to studies related to their research, articles and videos, and there are advertisements from friends promoting their products. There is a wide range of what people will post but it appears that all these things are about profiling oneself among others and staying connected to others via forwarding or sharing things that other people will like. In this way, university students maintain their friendships, "staying connected

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with old friends and making new ones" as the RenRen philosophy proclaims. These students form their Internet identities, posting about career plans, life philosophy, and advertisements for their products. They create a sense of self with their personalized avatar as a social media profile. This idea of identity sparked the question of whether these students feel that people are narcissistic on their social media profiles. When asked this question there was some agreement among the students that there are "so many people" who are self-important supported by the statement that "lots of people like to post their selfies" on social media sites. Hu explains why he agrees that there is narcissism on social media: "so many people believe themselves are very important and they think others will pay more attention…[to their] feelings or ideas" on social media sites. As Jie pointed out, "too [many] selfies" seem to be the pinnacle of narcissism. This seems to be true on social media all over the world. Selfies are a worldwide trend, although according to Joy, another student, she refrains more than her friends. Just as in the United States, students tend to want to express themselves in the best light possible over social media, either through their humor, achievements, knowledge, or their physical beauty. I think there may be a particular interest in defining yourself from the rest in China, contrasting with the older generation which had been more interested in collectiveness and the nail that sticks out gets pounded down type of mentality. With social media sites and the profiles or avatars that can be created there seems to be a new wave in defining personal identity. Although, as is made clear by these students, there are boundaries, such as posting too many details that are seen as adverse and narcissistic.

With all the excitement Chinese students feel toward these platforms, the topic of social media addiction is raised. How do the students view the amount social media their generation consumes? I asked the students whether they think there is social media addiction among university students. They were consistently in the
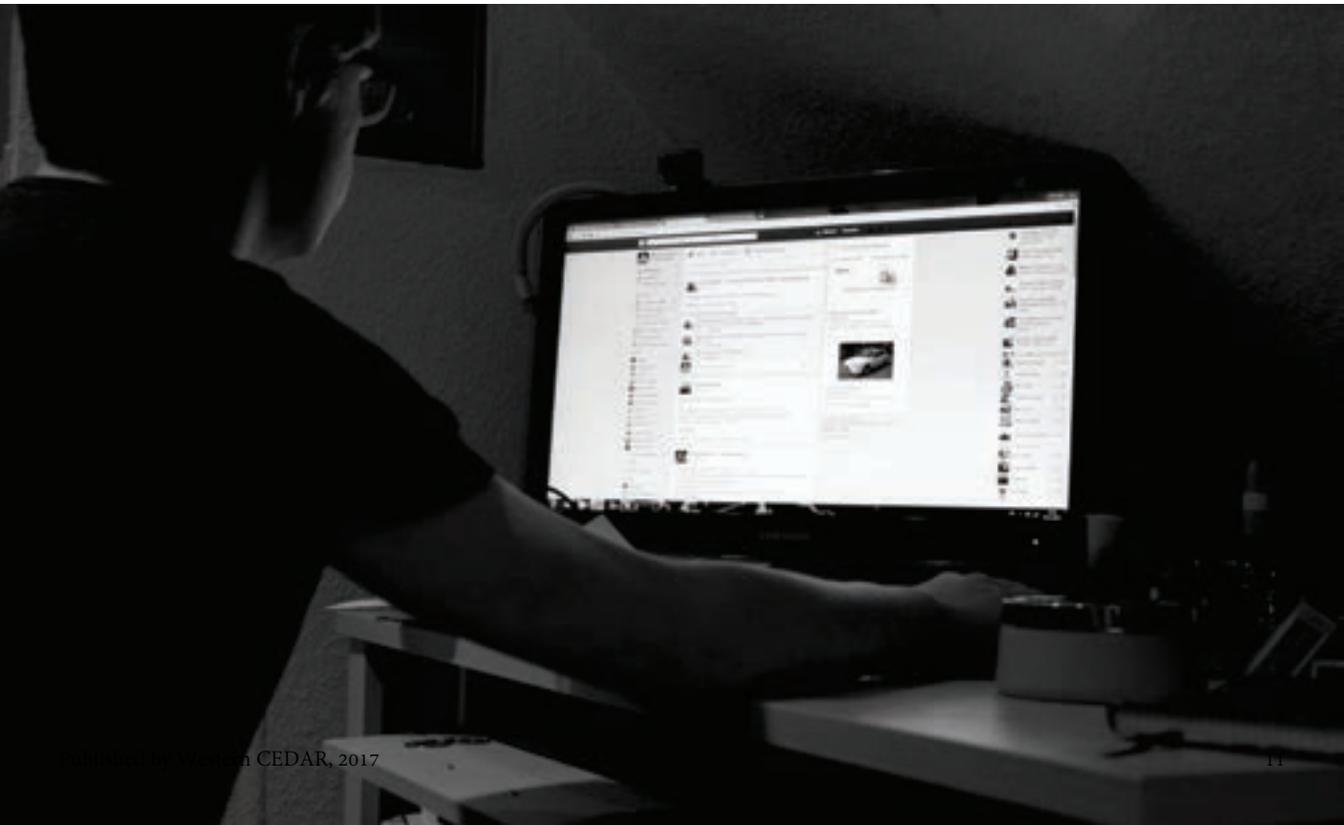
affirmative about social media addiction among students and were quick to use themselves as examples. Checking their social media platforms "often" and "every hour" is common, as Hu told me about his own use. Sherry explained to me that "students count on [social media] contact and communicate and [for] sharing". There seems to be a growing reliance on social media like never before because it is the new media way to involve oneself socially. The students even feel that social media is replacing text messaging and talking on the phone. Jie expressed her regret that her and her boyfriend spend time on social media while waiting for food at the restaurant. She confessed, "that's bad" and that she is "working on it" when it comes to her addictive behaviors toward social media. The many new applications on social media in China today perpetually raises a sense of urgency to know what is happening even when there are no notifications. Four of my interlocutors described themselves as "frequently" checking their social media, one of the main occasions being when they are bored. For students social media serves the purpose of entertainment as well as communication since many of the students look at their sites even when they were not prompted by notifications or any desire to post for themselves. They check their sites during downtime to see if there is something "funny" or "interesting" happening. It appears that these students are quite aware of their social media usage and the usage of other students.

When asked if something should be done about student social media usage in China, the students had a variety of answers. Sherry replied that "social media is everywhere in [their] life" and that social media brings convenience, which is a positive outlook on its prevalent usage. She also suggested that students should avoid becoming addicted to social media by not counting on it for all communication, and perhaps people should be encouraged to meet in person and do more activities with friends and classmates. Her approach is to not avoid social media altogether, but to self-monitor one's social media use and to encourage others to be physically social. Joy and Jie reflected on their own social media use and described the amount of social media use as a way in which people choose to "spend their time". Joy blames social media addiction on people rather than the fact that social media is ubiquitous. Jie perceives that those who spend so much time on social media have little else to do, unlike her. Students seem to think that social media usage is to be controlled by the individuals themselves, although Sherry did have one suggestion. Social media has become a natural part of life and monitoring social media usage could be compared to monitoring your diet—everything in moderation. Jie acknowledged that social media can be distracting at times and she shared her method of "[putting] her phone away" when she needs to work or study. University students do not seem to be complacent about their social media usage but the desire to stay connected in the era of new media remains.

Social media platforms are widely used by university students in China, so I figured that students were likely to have opinions about censorship of social media. The further I delved into the topic of censorship the more I discovered about the relationship between the people and their government. What is important to know about this relationship between the people and the government is that it is not one of hatred; the Chinese students do not hate the government but given they are not completely satisfied, they are not interested in complete overthrow of the government as westerners may think. One student

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from Zhejing University told me that "western media simplifies the situation in China" in regard to the people-government relationship. It is not surprising that American media would sensationalize a complicated issue such as this seeing as the issue of freedom of speech is one that westerners hold dearly and are strongly opinionated about.

According to a journal article done by researchers at Harvard, "the Chinese censorship effort is designed to limit the freedom of speech of Chinese people" (King et al. 2014). Nevertheless, the more likely scenario is that "the Chinese censorship effort is designed to…reduce the probability of collective action" and incidentally "limits the freedom of speech of the Chinese people" as well (King et al. 2014). It is evident that one main goal of the Chinese government is to quell any collective uprising or demonstrations, which results in limited freedom of speech amongst the Chinese people. Still, I do not have the impression that the government wants to oppress their citizens into silence when it comes to political issues, rather they want to maintain a harmonious nation and maintain the one party government by defusing protest. The amount of people who are affected by censorship on social media sites is negligible.

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IT SEEMS THAT IN SOME CASES FREEDOM OF SPEECH CAN CREATE MORE DRAMA THAN PUBLIC ACTION.

Americans have freedom of speech, some of which have a tendency to abuse their right. Over social media, there is a continuous slamming of the president and the government in every way possible that is seems the important issues are not always addressed. As with the Affordable Care Act, people and the media were more focused on how the new healthcare bill is so thick in volume and about the website accessibility rather than what the act says and provides U.S. citizens. It seems that in some cases freedom of speech can create more drama than public action. Some Americans will talk constantly over social media about government but not always step forward and contribute time or money to any public cause.

From the perspective of Chinese students like Jie, social media is not a political platform but one where she can post funny cat videos and keep up with her friends on the "moments" feed of WeChat or the Qzone feed on QQ. She commented, "most ordinary people don't express politics on SNS". Jie herself would not express her political voice on social media as she believes "it is too hard to be neutral". Her use of social media, like many American students, is to keep up with friends and sharing her non-political interests with them.

Another major question that I had for the university graduate students whom I interviewed was whether their professors use social media to interact with students and for what purpose(s) they use it to interact. From the literature review, I gathered information about a handful of universities in the United States that have tested social media such as Twitter as an educational application, creating a autonomous setting in which all students would

THE INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INTO THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION SEEMS TO BE EMERGING IN AT LEAST TWO UNIVERSITIES FOR SOCIAL PURPOSES AND ONE FOR AD HOC EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES.

get equal opportunity to participate beyond the hour to two hours allotted for a class session. However, I did not find any academic writing regarding Chinese students that focus on social media correspondence between professors and students. I asked my student interlocutors whether their professors use social media and if so, how they use it to correspond with students? The response I received from three of my interlocutors is their professors did use social media to correspond with students, and a fourth interlocutor said that they have never experienced inclusions of social media in the classroom. Sherry told me that "especially some young professors" use social media to communicate with students but for social purposes, not educational. However, when Jie responded to my question she said that her professors will "answer questions" including "math questions" over social media. She has experienced professors who use social media platforms for both social and educational purposes. The integration of social media into the context of education seems to be emerging in at least two universities for social purposes and one for ad hoc educational purposes. What is not happening, according to the information from my interlocutors, is the purposeful integration of social media by professors into the curriculum. Using

social media to spark academic discussion and to foster an academic community for university courses could be a very good thing. What does appear to be happening in China are ad hoc social and academic conversations between a few professors and students.

DISCUSSION

Compared to the studies in the literature review for this research paper, the data collected for my research question are dissimilar in two main ways: the data were collected from interviews and by a university student versus by professional researchers. In my initial research of peer reviewed journals online I did not come across literature where an American university student collected data on student counterparts in China; a faculty-led study abroad creates unique circumstances and opportunities in and of itself. The literature focuses mainly on the perspectives of educators and researchers due to the fact that they are conducting the research. The data I collected are important additions to the current literature because the information is from the perspective of the users themselves. To compare the results from my data and that of the scholarly work mentioned in my literature review, there are very different focuses. The university student interlocutors have different interests than the educators who teach them. Moreover, the reality of the matter is that students, myself included, have different priorities than educators when it comes to social media.

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PERHAPS THERE CAN BE A MERGER OF STUDENTS' SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL.

In researching my question about social media in China, I found value in researching this topic from the perspective of a "digital native". I do not know Mandarin, I do not know if I ever will, but I connected with students over social media. I can see students' pictures, and I can translate their postings if it is not in English. Social media has features that allow people to transcend language barriers, especially with other "digital natives". I realize that my research also has its limitations. Being in China for only a month is a limitation in and of itself, and I visited only two Chinese universities and a vocational college for less than a week. The time limitation means that I met with a limited number of interlocutors and because of the language barrier it was difficult to convey some ideas and questions. It worked well to write down my inquiries or to transcribe them over WeChat because Chinese students are highly capable of reading and writing in English. If I had done surveys perhaps I would have had a much higher quantity of responses but I felt from the beginning of my research that conversational interviews would create comprehensive and valuable data. I do not believe that my research is all encompassing by

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any means. What it does is shed light on answers from a small portion of the human experience within China.

I think my data could benefit the future of social media and how it is designed to work for students as well as educators. Currently, Chinese educators and researchers are discussing issues with social media use (i.e. social media addiction). Perhaps there can be a merger of students' social media use and educational potential. I think that future research could be spent examining the effect of social media on student participation in academic and extra-curricular activities. It would be compelling to see a new model in Chinese higher education integrating social media into the curriculum and for professor-student correspondence to promote further academic discussions and participation. Research on social media could help educators and students interact in the new media world by integrating social media into academia and steering conversations online. This discussion gives one contemporary perspective on social media and how it can be used for liberating controlled peoples. For my purposes, the article gave valuable information regarding China's government and its future interests in social media.

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