

**Community Building in the Digital Age:
Why WeChat IM (Instant Messaging) Social App is
Particularly Important to Chinese International Students
for Integrating into College Life in the United States**

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Abstract

With the advent of the 21st century, studying abroad has become a common practice. The increase in the number of study abroad opportunities has resulted in a growing number of Chinese students studying in American colleges and universities. Although some students encounter language and cultural barriers when they first move to the United States, the use of new technologies such as the Chinese social media application, “WeChat”, allows Chinese students to become more united and comfortable in an alien environment. My project explores how Chinese international undergraduates use WeChat to build communities and aid in their problem solving. For this reason, examining the significance of Chinese international students’ barriers, community building, and the WeChat technology are crucial for the purpose of this project. The research methods consist of three stages: interviewing Chinese international students and educators; conducting a thematic and narrative analysis of the interview data; and using sources from literature review to explain the findings. My research results show that WeChat functions such as “Meeting people nearby” and “Group chat” can enhance the community building experience. This allows Chinese international students to eliminate various barriers, including the ability to find the sources they need to solve their problems and answer their questions. On the other side, WeChat can be a distraction or lead to ethical issues such as cheating, pornography and Internet scams. The final product consists of a report and a list of recommendations for WeChat uses amongst Chinese international undergraduates, which may maximize the benefits of WeChat for them.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Research

With the advent of globalization and internationalization of the world, a large number of Chinese students move to the United States each year for gaining high quality education. However, Chinese international students who studying in the United States have to face various challenges and obstacles due to the difference in language, culture, and social dynamics between the Chinese and American societies. On the other hand, technological advancements in the field of social media are inclined towards minimizing these differences by helping individuals to communicate more effectively with each other. WeChat is a social media application that developed by Tencent, a Chinese information technology company is much popular among Chinese people in comparison to other parts of the world. WeChat plays a vital role in facilitating Chinese international student's social lives, as it provides instant text messaging, voice chatting, video communication, news and information control, and interaction with subscribers through a platform called official account. The primary reason for its popularity refers to that WeChat can help Chinese international students to build efficient social communities and interact with each other, which behaves as a social support system for Chinese international students in the United States. The purpose of my project is analyzing the impact of WeChat on the minimization of barriers faced by Chinese international students in the United States through building a successful community on the digital platform. My final product consists of this report and a list of recommendations for WeChat uses amongst Chinese international undergraduates and school officials, which may potentially improve the quality of Chinese student's study aboard experience and social lives.

1.2 Summary

I have divided my project into seven major sections. The first section refers to the introduction of the project, which includes the background of the problem, project goal, and significances of the study. Accordingly, I discussed the relationship between the importance of WeChat and its function for community building among Chinese international students, in addition to the positive outcomes of WeChat for academic and social growth of Chinese international students in the United States. The second chapter refers to literature review, which I summarized the literatures that based on the analysis of historical research findings. In detail, I divided literature review section into three main sections, including Chinese international student barriers, Community building, and WeChat uses and functions. The third chapter is one of the most important sections as it comprises of my research methods that used to collect and analyze different types of data used. In specific, I conducted Semi-structured interviews to collect primary data from 10 participants. The following section introduced my interview results in the form of themes, as well as findings with the use of narrative analysis. I have included some noteworthy excerpts from interview conversations to show the commonalities among themes that include Chinese international student barriers, community building, and WeChat functions.

The discussion section was formed based on interview findings, as it reflected the main findings of this research study, and analyzed them according to literature review findings. Although it revealed that Chinese international students face various barriers while studying in American colleges, the barriers were reduced through the increased usage of WeChat, as it helps in building a successful community and maximizes problem solving through social and peer support. The discussion section further helped me in developing implications and recommendations of this research study. Lastly, I wrote an assessment section to not only reflect the defects of my study, such as time constraints and limited personal expertise for data collection and analysis, but also I included personal reflection regarding doing this project.

1.3 Project Goal

Through the use of WeChat, Chinese international students can effectively build a community while solving their life and academic difficulties in American colleges. I find that it is meaningful to investigate how and why WeChat is important in helping international students to overcome barriers while helping them build a successful community. Since the knowledge that I gained from this project can be used to further benefit Chinese international undergraduate students in building a community overseas, and the final report and recommendation could potentially improve their adaptability and problem solving in an alien environment through the use of social media technology. I propose to conduct a series of interviews with Chinese international students, an educator, college instructor, and the International Student Service office. This helps me in examining Chinese international students' social and academic performances in American college, and it would allow me to observe how and why using WeChat can be a beneficial tool for them to build a successful community to solve problems. Accordingly, the primary goal of this project is to enhance the efficiency and performance of Chinese international students in American colleges by revealing the benefits of WeChat in building strong communities between Chinese international students that aids in problem solving.

1.4 Assumptions

The very first step of my project is making assumptions for the potential research results, which this step benefits me to develop hypothesis, theories and methods. Accordingly, I created the following statements that they are the primary assumptions for my project:

- I assumed that all Chinese international students face barriers/challenges in the American colleges as well as American community.
- Secondly, I assumed that building community is an effective way for helping Chinese international students to solve their problems.
- Lastly, WeChat serves as a means to aid in Chinese international students to build community. Then combining the previous assumption, WeChat is important for Chinese students to solve problems.

1.5 Significance

As the increased opportunities for Chinese students to study in American colleges, the consistent existence of barriers they faced amplifies the seriousness of their academic and social problems. However, with the dependence of Chinese international students on social communities and the rising popularity of WeChat, which is used by the majority of the Chinese population are inclined towards the decline of obstacles. Therefore, it is necessary for me to investigate this social phenomenon through revealing the truth of Chinese student barriers, Chinese social communities and WeChat. This project would allow me to help minimizing the social and cultural barriers faced by Chinese international students in the United States. In specific, I will be able to help my Chinese community and produce positive outcomes for peers (Chinese international students) to survive in American colleges. Through my project, Chinese international students who studying in the United States will have a better understanding towards their barriers/challenges, community building and WeChat. Accordingly, they will be able to perform better in their academics, and will be socially more satisfied with their lives. Beyond external significances, this project is in line with my interests in digital media and community building. I am thrilled to utilize knowledges that I have learnt in Communication and Community, Environment & Planning (CEP) programs to help Chinese students while strengthen my expertise. Moreover, I hope to gain an in-depth understanding of social media and community engagement, make positive impacts in Chinese international student community and take this experience into graduate study and professional career.

2. Literature Review

The primary focus of my project is on “WeChat” and the way it contributes towards building successful Chinese international student communities within American colleges. WeChat is a third party Chinese social media application that has been developed “Tencent”, which is the biggest Chinese technological company. It provides a unique networking experience and instant messaging service to its users. The primary aim of WeChat is similar to other social media apps such as Whatsapp, LINE, and Facebook Messenger, which is enhance social interaction between its users. However, WeChat is not only built for people to chat, but also it allows users to order food, call a taxi, read news, transfer money, and so forth. Since WeChat combined these functions into just one app, it is multifunctional and provides convenience to Chinese international students for solving problems. As an increased number of Chinese students move to the United States to pursue higher education, which induces various barriers for international Chinese students. Consequently, there is a need to research the impact of WeChat on minimizing or eliminating such barriers experienced by Chinese international students within the United States. Many types of research studies have been conducted in concern to Chinese international students in the United States, community building as well as the effectiveness of WeChat, which includes interviews, surveys and content analyses. In this regard, I divided literature review into three primary sections, including Chinese international student barriers, community building, and WeChat. By taking a close look at past studies and analyzing the findings, these resources can help me to better understand the context and known theories. Otherwise, this preliminary research will also benefit me for later organizing my research scope and methods.

2.1 Chinese International Student Barriers

Students from diverse backgrounds have different cultural values, social norms, and primary language are most likely to face barriers while studying in a multicultural environment like American college. For this reason, I first started research with the different types of Chinese international student barriers. When Chinese international students study abroad in the United States, there are various barriers that hinder their ability to adapt to American college life. These barriers act as an obstacle for them to succeed socially and academically. In Kun Yan’s article about *Chinese International Students’ Academic Stressors in the United States*, he outlines the barriers that Chinese international students face that contribute to extremely high academic stress and hinder their process in adapting to the American educational environment. These barriers include “culture and education disparities between China and America, together with Chinese students’ language deficiencies, ineffective integrations with American faculty members, and their high motivations to achieve,” which contribute to their academic stress (Yan et al.). The findings suggest that language deficiencies, culture and education differences, motivation to achieve, and interactions with faculty mixed together make up the larger problem: academic stress. Based on the findings, the authors recommend that American schools publicize the university counseling services, and that international students’ advisors

should develop some knowledge of Chinese students' academic stress and stressors (Yan et al.). This study is closely related to my research because it hints me to think about the types of barriers that Chinese international students may encounter, and it suggests me to make different recommendations for various audiences. In addition, Helene Tenzer's study on *The Impact of Language Barriers on Trust Formation in Multinational Teams* found that language barriers influenced a person's perceived trustworthiness and intention to trust. This in turn affected trust formation and impacted integration negatively (Tenzer et al.). These articles made me realize that language barriers are the most significant problem since it is the root for both academic problems and social problems.

In addition to the language barrier, social and institutional context can also lead to some social problems for Chinese international students such as difficulties faced while interacting with local communities. A study by Poyrazli and Kamini suggested that "in the wake of 9/11, it may well be that the challenges these students confront have intensified because of the increased scrutiny to which they are subjected by the state and because of the suspicion with which foreigners are perceived in the broader community" (Poyrazli and Kamini). The varying dynamics of distinct societies and communities, may induce obstacles for some local groups and immigrants not only because of their different culture, but because they are very cautious about accepting foreigners to be part of their community. Therefore, such dynamics result in integration failure as well as lack of perceiving a welcoming environment by some students. Otherwise, in Mark Sherry's study on the experiences of international students at the University of Toledo, where international students comprise only approximately 10% of the student population, he highlights more problems that are also worth paying attention to, such as: adapting to a new culture, financial problems, and lack of understanding from the broader University community (Sherry). Other than language barriers, these studies draw my attention to other varieties of barriers that hinder Chinese international students to succeed.

When it comes to coping with a variety of barriers, a researcher named Meifen Wei's study on *Forbearance Coping, Identification With Heritage Culture, Acculturative Stress, And Psychological Distress Among Chinese International Students* provides me with a great explanation on how Chinese international students solve their barriers. Meifen Wei mentions a strategy that Chinese students commonly used is forbearance coping, which can be defined as the minimization of problems or not taking active actions to deal with concerns in order to maintain social harmony along with not bother others. Through analyzing survey data from 188 Chinese international students, the study found that those who frequently use forbearance coping hold a weaker identification with their heritage culture and are at risk for psychological distress and higher levels of acculturative stress. However, for those holding a stronger identification with their cultural heritage, the associations between forbearance coping and psychological distress are close to zero regardless of the level of acculturative stress (Wei et al.). As addressed in the research, those with a stronger identification with their heritage culture may more likely to form a sense of community, have friends from their own cultural heritage and enjoy social activities with those friends. These friends are likely to be aware of each other's difficulties and provide comfort and support even though Chinese international

students may conceal their problems in order not to burden others (Wei et al.). This research is important to my study because it well interprets that building a community and having friends from one's own heritage culture is a key to solving their problems. Although Chinese international students always silence themselves and use the forbearance coping strategy, forming a community with people from one's same heritage culture is healthy for their problem solving. This is because a community connects students with those who from the same heritage culture, and those people usually understand each other and can offer mutual help to overcome barriers.

2.2 Community Building

Previous research findings analyzed above reveal that community building is an effective approach to solving Chinese students' barriers. Community can be defined as "a social unit of any size that shares common values" (Del). By conducting social surveys and gathering data from over 30,000 respondents in 160 regions in 19 countries, a study on social capital and generosity by Jennifer Glanville suggests that community is important because of its positive features, such as: resolving social dilemmas, promoting sharing, generosity, and individual action for public benefit (Glanville). These results enlightened me to consider the importance of building a Chinese international student community. According to this study, the benefits of building a community corresponds with the needs for Chinese international students because they can improve their living experiences overseas by solving social problems and sharing resources. On the other hand, there is a controversial issue regarding the formation of social communities. For example, a researcher named Keely Jones recognized that community ties within a physical place draw people into common interests and public engagement (Jones). Such findings imply that the traditional concept of community exists only in a physical world.

However, with the emergence of technology, "virtual community" has come forward to refine the concept of community. One definition, offered by Constance Elise Porter in *A Typology of Virtual Communities*, states that "a virtual community is defined as an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the intersection is at least partially supported or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or rules" (Porter). Meanwhile, comparing virtual with traditional community, another study says, "the development of virtual community addressed by sociological theories that address the increasingly disembodied nature of the social structure, even so, the virtual community still reveals a phenomenon that does exhibit many characteristics of a traditional community" (Nieckarz). Even though, the shared interest and common value is the key to form a community regardless of forms of interactions. Glanville and Jones show how traditional community is the foundation to understand the formation of a Chinese international student community, while Porter and Nieckarz show how virtual communities can be built through technological platforms. These studies prove that people can build communities through using technology such as WeChat.

Taking an in-depth account of the measures and indicators of a successful community, author David McMillan and his colleagues from *Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory* and Anita Blanchard from *The Experienced Sense of a Virtual Community: Characteristics and Processes* asserts that successful community building achieves much more than just uniting a bunch of individuals. This is based on the findings that successful social groups are characterized as having clear purpose, socialization, and engagement (McMillan et al.). They also include associations that are mutually rewarding for everyone such as having shared emotional connection, which exist beyond common values (McMillan et al.). Otherwise, Blanchard argues that one characteristic of successful communities are distinguished by members' helping behaviors and emotional attachment to the community and other members (Blanchard et al.). According to both studies, although the detailed definition is varied, there is a common recognition that successful community building is more than just having a shared interest. Successful community building also means equipping other attributes such as socialization, engagement, having emotional connection, and helping behaviors (McMillan et al.). McMillan and Blanchard's findings are valuable and very close to my research, as both of them reflected on the methods of building successful communities as well as maximizing the community quality and functions.

The study has observed that immigrant students in the United States, such as from China, are inclined towards building Chinese communities, in addition to interact with other multicultural social groups (Zhou et al.). As for international community building in the United States, for example, Chinese immigrants also have their Chinese community overseas. Through analyzing community-building behaviors among people from different home countries in the United States, authors Zhou and Lee concluded, "immigrants often engage their ancestral homelands via organizations and that organizational transnationalism contributes to strengthening the infrastructure and symbolic systems of the ethnic community and enhancing the community's capacity to generate resources conducive to immigrant incorporation" (Zhou et al.). This work emphasizes the importance of community building for immigrants and how they form a community, which is in line with the theory that Chinese international students use community building within their ethnic group as a resource to get support. Today, in the digital age, they form online communities that support each other which further aid in achieving the adaption.

When researchers examined the relationships between "sociocultural and psychological aspects of cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students in the United States", they proved that "perceived support from interpersonal networks in the host country and online social groups was negatively related to social difficulties, while perceived support from interpersonal networks and long-distance networks in the countries of origin is negatively associating with mood disturbance" (Ye). Chinese international students who received additional support from online communities in the United States are able to easily solve their problems in comparison to Chinese international students without any additional support (Ye). Even having such interpersonal networks with friends in China can also help them to improve their moods. This shows that building a community through an online platform such as WeChat benefits their ability to solve social difficulties. In the same

study, research also found that “compared to those who had lived in the United States for a longer period, new arrivals reported higher perceived support from online ethnic social groups, and the more students perceived receiving support from these groups, the more likely they were to be actively engaged in online group activities” (Ye). Such findings reveal another critical aspect that international students new to their host country are more likely to feel connected and supported due to the continuous interaction through an online community while residing in a multicultural environment. For this reason, it has been concluded that Chinese international students would receive various benefits from an online community, such as getting support and help from group members (Ye). Accordingly, building an ethnic and online community can achieve the demand of successful community building. On the other hand, researcher Jin in his study *WeChat as a Medium to Socialize into Chinese Culture: The Persistence of Explicit Hierarchy* highlighted the limitations of increased usage of WeChat. According to his views, despite the advantages of WeChat for socializing into the Chinese culture, WeChat also limits the ability of Chinese people to interact with different cultures (Jin). For this reason, the increased dependency of Chinese international students on WeChat for social interaction mostly increases their dependency within Chinese communities while reducing their social acceptance and interaction in the American culture.

2.3 WeChat

Technological advancements in the 21st century have contributed towards the emergence of online communities, social media platforms, and increased flow of communication in a global level. Through combining technology and building a community, this approach helps Chinese international students to cope with barriers. In particular, with the popularization of digital devices, social media applications such as WeChat provide a different user experience in social network services. Chinese students have a special interest in WeChat with regards to community building through social media. In an up-to-date article written by Guo, it is said that WeChat plays a similar role as Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites. However, WeChat is a comprehensive mobile application and has a vital role in China’s mobile communication market. Interestingly, the popularity of WeChat in China is in part premised on the government’s ban on foreign social networking sites. WeChat, or “Wei Xin” in Chinese, is a free, “all-in-one” mobile application that presents a combination of various features of different emerging media and technology platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Apple pay.

WeChat operates as an integration of instant messaging (IM) communication tools in such a way that users can send individual or group text messages, voice messages, photos, videos, and money transfers. Moreover, another outstanding feature of WeChat is called “Moments”, which is similar to Facebook’s Newsfeed. The function of “moments” is to enhance social networking between friends. Moments allow WeChat users to acquire access to the information of WeChat friends, which helps them to create an intimate and close social circle for private communication. “Moments” dwells on picture sharing, status updates and sharing. However, unlike Facebook, WeChat’s social media feature is more “private” than Facebook because WeChat users can only view others’ comments and “likes” if they

have added each other as contacts on WeChat. Besides the personal use, similar to a Facebook Page, WeChat allows organizations and Chinese citizens to register an “official account” (similar to Facebook page) to push feeds and interact with subscribers. This feature makes WeChat not only an IM app, but also a specialized channel for disseminating and receiving news as well as information. According to Guo’s research article, most WeChat users (77%) use Movements (like Facebook Newsfeed), 61.7% use Group Chat, and 41% follow the news media’s official account (Guo). This article reveals the purpose and essence of WeChat in its simplest form. For this reason, I would like to dig deeper into the application of WeChat that may benefit Chinese international students in building a successful community to solve barriers.

Through the exploration process, I found that various researchers have mentioned the benefits of WeChat for Chinese international students to build successful communities. For instance, an article published in the *Chongqing Social Sciences* journal stated that WeChat is vital in transmitting media based on the relationship, while providing an opportunity for the users to spread the information in an efficient manner among their communities (Hui). Interestingly, “WeChat integrates abundant resources from other smartphone applications such as QQ (another IM software developed by the same owner company of WeChat). With the help of such rich media as text, voice and video, WeChat transmits some selective and fragmental information to the narrowing ‘friend circle’ dejectedly, so as to enhance communion efficiency and improve social ‘moisture’” (Hui). Such feature of WeChat is one unique aspect this social media application. By increasing features and making the app more vivid, its users such as Chinese international students will get an advanced user experience in forming the online community while strengthening an emotional connection. In a similar study concerning the framework of WeChat, researcher Huang claims that WeChat is making its efforts to break the boundary between the mobile Internet world and the physical world by providing a unified infrastructure and permitting integrated models, addressing issues from both worlds simultaneously (Huang).

Huang raised an interesting point that WeChat can be used to solve problems effectively through its “all-in-one” feature. WeChat also offers a broad range of support and service through the library. The app can be utilized in many contexts including virtual service to create student engagement, to promote library services, and to create an online community of student users through features like file-sending, group video-chat, and location-sharing services. These features enable students to use WeChat to build online communities, and maximize the use of WeChat as a library virtual service (Pun). In essence, the findings of both studies suggested the benefits of WeChat for successful community building and efficient problem solving. On the other hand, researchers have also identified the shortcomings of WeChat that are inclined towards its adverse impact on its users. For instance, WeChat is just like any other social media platforms, can result in waste of time, appear detrimental to psychological and physiological health of its users, increases risk of theft of personal information, and amplifies the risk of virus threats, and provide avenues to access pornographic content (Liu). This research is important for me to

think critically about WeChat since it is a double-edged sword that could potentially bring benefits as well as harms to its users.

2.4 Methodology

To make my project more valid and sound, it was crucial to conduct further research on Chinese student's barriers, community building and WeChat. Thus, I decided to conduct semi-structured interview to gather more data from relevant subjects. To begin with, I did research on articles that introduce about semi-structured interview. For example, Whiting's article *Semi-Structured Interviews: Guidance For Novice Researchers* was used to aid in defining the meaning of semi-structured and in outlining an interview process. First, he defined "interview" as "a method of data collection in which another person (a respondent): interviews are conducted either face-to-face by telephone" (Whiting). He borrowed the definition from *The Qualitative Research Interview* to define "semi-structured" as one type of interview that is "more open, direct and verbal questions are used to elicit detailed narratives and stories" (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree).

Moreover, Longhurst's *Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups* offered similar opinions as Whiting. They both claimed semi-structured interviews as verbal interchange where a researcher attempts to elicit information from a participant by asking questions. Longhurst raises an interesting point that since the outcome relies heavily on interaction between interviewee and interviewer, the researcher should be very careful on not only formulating questions but also in thinking about ethical issues and developing a relationship with the interviewee. Longhurst suggests, "researchers need to think carefully about how to interview or run focus groups in different cultural contexts" (Longhurst). Together, with confidentiality and anonymity, making a respondent feel more comfortable during the conversation will lead to a higher level of reflexivity about the process of research and make data more valid. Whiting and Longhurst advocate the idea that semi-structured interviews are a safe open space for an interviewee to share their point of view on certain matters. Otherwise, through the interaction with members of a focus group, the personal experiences of a participant can be revealed. Moreover, to some extent, well-prepared questions and flexibility also allows for an interview to run smoothly and increase its validity.

2.5 Conclusion and Literature Gap

After I examined the literature above, I found a literature gap in regards to the impact of WeChat use on the academic and social performance of Chinese international students in the United States. Otherwise, no study has yet been done regarding on how WeChat relates to Chinese students learning and social experience in the United States. Despite the fact that WeChat has various benefits for reducing barriers and enhancing problem solving through successful community building, there are also some negative effects of using WeChat. In this regard, it was necessary for me to further collect data by conducting interviews in addition to the existing findings. On the other hand, through writing this literature review, I have expanded my knowledge from the importance of community building, Chinese

international students' barriers, to WeChat's features and developing methodology. In the following chapters, I will continue digging through the complicated relationship between WeChat uses, community building in cyberspace, and the difficulties that Chinese international students may encounter. This process is meaningful to my research because it offers me an opportunity to explore the existing theory that relates to my topic and lays the foundation for my project.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

After I conducted research on historical studies, I investigated the perception of Chinese international students and educators about Chinese international students' barriers, community building, and the usage of WeChat. In order to accurately gain their personal experiences and opinions, I used a qualitative research method through conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 people who are either Chinese international students or educators. The participants answered three categories of questions that represented the question: "What is the relationship between Chinese international students' barriers, community building and WeChat?" A qualitative form of research is crucial for analyzing the perception and views of the participants. Since qualitative research allows me to collect large amount of personal data by asking them to share their personal experiences. After the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify similar patterns and significances from the conversations. Lastly, I applied theories that I found from the past studies to explain the interview findings.

3.2 Semi-Structured Interview

To further collect data, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 7 Chinese international students from 3 different college programs in the United States, including University of Washington, ESL (English as a Second Language) bridge program in Shoreline and North Seattle Community College as well as 2 college faculties from the University of Washington and 1 educator from Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco. A Semi-structured interview is a method of data collection that offers participants opportunities to narrate their personal stories, experiences, and opinions about a certain issue. However, different from other interview approaches such as the "Q & A" format, semi-structured interviews are facilitated by an interviewer but allow participants to control the conversation. Whiting's article provides a checklist of points to explain to the participant before an interview, such as defining the purpose of the interview, clarification on questions, assure the participant that he or she can decline to answer a question, and having the opportunity to ask questions. Whiting argues that researchers should be very careful and attentive during the interview. With the nature of semi-structured interviews, researchers should facilitate participants in a way that lets them to control the conversation and narrate their sides of stories. Whiting's work helps me in formulating interview questions and prepares me to facilitate interviews. This is crucial to keep the focus of the conversation that in line with the purpose of the research. For this reason, the participants were guided with various open-ended questions regarding their feelings about Chinese international students' barriers in the United States, their interactions with friends, and building communities in American colleges, perception about usage, benefits, and disadvantages of WeChat. The guiding questions focused on investigating the difficulties and challenges faced by Chinese international students', as well as their perceptions on community building and WeChat use.

Semi-structured interview is a valuable strategy for my research. This is because of the nature of semi-structured interviews that provide participants with a sense of flexibility without imposing rigidity and strictness of sticking to particular responses. Thus, participants viewed the interview process as a comfortable atmosphere to speak out their stories, feelings, concerns and experiences without pressure. This helped me in collecting high quality of data, which resulted in limited amount of biasness. So that being said, all interviews were designed to be open and direct to receive detailed, comprehensive, and non-biased information from the conversations.

3.3 Thematic and Narrative Analysis

I used both thematic and narrative analysis as methodology in my research, which thematic analysis was supported with narrative analysis. In detail, thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that allows me to identify the common patterns and themes among the responses of the interviewees through breaking of large data (Transcript of conversations) sets into smaller themes, whereas narrative analysis allows me to further investigate the specific results. Narrative analysis is particularly used for narratives or stories, and it serves as a means to find similar patterns, commonalities and significances from the mass of conversations. This is a beneficial assessment to my research because it tailors to a specific theme of storytelling from an individual's perspective. Furthermore, the composition of thematic and narrative analysis was not only a good way for me to organize data, but also it helped me in understanding the logic behind participants' life experiences in the United States.

3.4 Study Procedure

The whole research process, including the data collection, took place in Seattle, Washington, from February 15th, 2017 to April 16th, 2017. The interview subjects included current Chinese international undergraduates in American colleges, Chinese international students in the ESL bridge program, the Educational Consul from the Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco, and college instructors from the University of Washington. The participating group consists of 10 people, which are 7 Chinese international students, 1 educational consul and 2 college faculty. Each interview took approximately 40 minutes and all conversation was transcribed. In addition, Chinese language was spoken during all interviews with Chinese native speakers. This is because that Chinese was their preferred language, and communicating in Chinese allowed me to generate more accurate responses from Chinese participants. Based on the interview data, I conducted a composition of thematic and narrative analysis. Specifically, I coded commonality from the transcripts into various themes and subthemes, and then broke down the varieties of commonality into different categories. I found that each participant shared multiple commonalities across different categories. Such categorization of data with the help of theories that identified from the literature review allowed me to conduct a detailed data analysis. Accordingly, I applied the

theories from the literature review to further explain the results of this research study that extracted from thematic and narrative analysis.

3.5 Limitations

My research methodology comes with various limitations, which is common practice in the most research studies. The first limitation refers to the time constraint, which restricted the usage of large sample size to collect data. In specific, I only interviewed participants from the western coast of the United States, and the majority of interviewees were from the same state (Washington state) and educational institution (University of Washington, Seattle). This resulted in a sample size that was not very comprehensive or diverse, which could influence variability and lack of bias. Furthermore, based on the fact that interview data often relies heavily on the expression and interaction with the interviewer, there are some possible disadvantages that need to be considered, including: subjectivity, personal bias, and generalization.

4. Findings

4.1 Themes and Subthemes

Thematic analysis is the essential part in my qualitative research since it breaks down the large data into particular sets of results in an efficient manner. Therefore, I divided three major themes in terms of the research question, objectives, and findings of the literature review. Within each theme, I further wrote various corresponding subthemes based on the variation as well as similarity in the responses of the interviewees. Moreover, I coded data for groups along with similar responses of the participants, which ensures the analytical process goes smooth and easier. In specific, I identified the theme as follow:

- **Chinese international students' barriers**
 - Lack of problem solvers
 - Cultural barriers
 - Communication barrier (based on language difference)
- **Community building**
 - Perception of successful community
 - Ways to build community
 - The importance of successful community building
- **WeChat functions**
 - Favorite function of WeChat
 - Meet people nearby
 - Moment
 - Voice message
 - Group chat
 - Video chat
 - Functions for strengthening community sense
 - Voice message
 - Group chat
 - Moment
 - Downsides of WeChat
 - Pornographic content
 - Cheating
 - Scam
 - Distraction
 - Spam / junk Advertising

4.2 Narrative Analysis and Coding of Data

Coding of data is an analytical process that used to categorize research and analyze data. According to all the significant findings from semi-structured interviews, I have categorized three major themes to explain the interview results, which refer to Chinese international students' problems, participant's perception of community

building, and WeChat functions. Each theme comes with corresponding subthemes that highlight commonalities based on the frequency repetition from the conversation with participants. I have made the 54 excerpts as a table format (see Table 1), which can be more visually accessible for readers to understand the interview result. Each excerpt has been coded with “E” and each participant has been coded with “P”. For example, “E1-P3” refers to excerpt 1 that represents the views of participant 3.

Table 1: Coding of Data into Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes	Coding of Data (Interviewees' Responses)
Chinese International Students' Barriers	Lack of problem solvers	<p>E1-P3: <i>“It was my first year at American college, I felt like, not only course works were so heavy but also class materials and even American college system such as choosing and dropping courses were confusing. Whenever I had problems about academics, I really wish someone could just help me out and provide valuable advice”</i></p> <p>E2-P5: <i>“...Remember the first week I got here, I didn't know where to find Chinese foods nearby. I really miss Chinese food.”</i></p> <p>E3-P6: <i>“Because of my personality, I am very shy to make friends. I tried to make friends with classmates and I was hoping to find someone in class to be my problem solver, but couldn't due to my unsocial personality...So I studied alone for the whole quarter, no one helped me and I barely passed course.”</i></p> <p>E4-P9: <i>“Having someone who can help them to solve problems is the key...But I noticed that, the majority of Chinese international students do not know where to find people to solve their problems”</i></p> <p>E5-P5: <i>“I can't find information on solving my social problems at the college campus. For example, I have to search Chinese restaurants on Google, which is not a very reliable source for personalized feedback”</i></p> <p>E6-P1: <i>“I feel like campus is the best place for helping me to succeed academically ... But when I was trying to find roommate to move off campus, I couldn't find resources to help me pairing a roommate.”</i></p> <p>E7-P5: <i>“My problem got solved when I met my classmate Chen. He was a Chinese junior student. He recommended me his favorite Chinese restaurants, until then I realized that there was a Szechwan restaurant just few blocks away from the campus... Without a doubt, community building is the key.”</i></p>
	Cultural barriers	<p>E8-P9: <i>“When Chinese international student travel from China to America, things are a quite different. I see a lot of Chinese international students get lost</i></p>

		<p><i>and fell into the cracks since they are not familiar with how American educational system works.”</i></p> <p><i>E9-P4: “Because I am coming from different cultural background, I can’t come up with interesting topics when I chat with my American classmates...Conversation usually does not last very long...So that I barely speak with American and make friends with them.”</i></p> <p><i>E10-P7: “I have no idea what to say when I face an American student. Besides talking about course, instructors, I don’t know what I can talk with them.”</i></p>
	Communication barrier (based on language difference)	<p><i>E11-P2: “...I was confused by the lecture and assignments. There are so many words that I don’t understand and I have to look up each words from the dictionary...”</i></p> <p><i>E12-P1: “Before I came here, I studied English for almost 11 years. Also, I passed TOEFL (English as Second Language) test. Accordingly, some of my friends who have less prior experience with English language face numerous communication issues while interacting with native Americans.”</i></p> <p><i>E13-P5: “I was pretty nervous at the beginning since I was afraid that others won’t understand my accent.”</i></p>
Community Building	Perception of successful community	<p><i>E14-P3: “To me, community means a group of people who have same interest.”</i></p> <p><i>E15-P4: “Community consists of a group of people who shared same interest, they often move forward to the same direction to achieve their common goals.”</i></p> <p><i>E16-P10: “I see community is distinguished by people’s backgrounds, such as culture, ethnic, economic and educational level...Take Chinese international students for example, they are from same culture and ethnic, they apparently belong to the same community.”</i></p> <p><i>E17-P7: “...I think community is nothing more than a group of people who live together in the same place....”</i></p> <p><i>E18-P1: “In my opinion, a successful community means that all members in that community are all very active, rather than like simply having class in a same classroom but never talk to each other or do something together.”</i></p> <p><i>E19-P4: “A successful one means a lot more than doing project together but every member should help each other when one feels confused or has problem.”</i></p>
	Ways to build community	<p><i>E20-P2: “I often go to the event that hold by CSSA on campus, they regularly hold event like new student’s welcoming meeting, new year party and internship</i></p>

		<p><i>affairs. It provides me opportunities to meet people who shared same interest with me.”</i></p> <p><i>E21-P10: “I would highly recommend Chinese international students to join Chinese students’ club on campus. They did a very great job on helping Chinese student to build community. They brought people together, including new arrivals, alumni and upperclassmen.”</i></p> <p><i>E22-P5: “One day my classmate sent me a link to me to join a WeChat group called “Chinese Student foodie”. There are over 400 people in this group and we can chat with each other. I met so many friends in this group and we have same interest, which we all like food! We chat in this group every day and share each other’s eating places and food pictures. It is really cool to build a sense of community with similar people on WeChat.”</i></p> <p><i>E23-P4: “I met my work out buddy on WeChat through using ‘meet people nearby’. We chat for few days and he invited me to his ‘work out group’ on WeChat. There are 6 people in this group and we often go to the gym together. WeChat definitely has helped me to find my ‘work out community’.”</i></p> <p><i>E24-P1: “Once I saw an article that published by CSSA official account on WeChat that said they would hold a welcoming event in Beijing. I first got into a WeChat group that consists of many incoming Chinese students and then I went to their event. I met a quite few classmates in WeChat group and event. Since me and some students have same intended major so that we registered same classes and we took introductory courses together at the beginning of the quarter.”</i></p>
	<p>The importance of successful community building</p>	<p><i>E25-P3: “Building a successful community can help me to solve problem easily.”</i></p> <p><i>E26-P8: “A successful community helps students to achieve adaption easily and quickly. As a successful community always comes with mutual helping behavior, which they can help each other to solve problems. Their problem solvers are their community members.”</i></p>
<p>WeChat Functions</p>	<p>Favorite function of WeChat</p>	<p><i>E27-P4: “I like ‘meet people nearby’ most because it makes me to know more people around me.”</i></p> <p><i>E28-P6: “Every time when I want to make friends, I would use meet people nearby. Although I feel nervous when I talk to someone face to face, I feel very comfortable when I meet and communicate with others on a social media platform like WeChat.”</i></p>

		<p>E29-P1: <i>“Moment is the best thing ever. I can see other’s lifestyle and what they are doing without talking to them. It is just like newsfeed of friends.”</i></p> <p>E30-P5: <i>“I check Moment on my WeChat every day. It is so interesting to see other’s lifestyles, songs, articles and events. I can also make comments and interact with them under their posts.”</i></p> <p>E31-P7: <i>“I like the privacy of Moment because only friends can view my posts and I can select whoever I want in my friends list to see my posts.”</i></p> <p>E32-P2: <i>“I like reading news and articles that shared by my friends on Moment. I don’t usually spend time on checking news outlets, but on Moment, my friends share both local news and Chinese domestic news, which saves my time on checking news. Also, some of my friends post job opportunities too.”</i></p> <p>E33-P3: <i>“When I need help, I immediately think of posting on Moment. One time I posted a homework question on Moment, and within few minutes a lot my friends posted solutions and their opinions under my post. Their comments were extremely helpful.”</i></p> <p>E34-P1: <i>“Voice message is convenient; it saves my time on typing.”</i></p> <p>E35-P6: <i>“Voice message definitely. I can feel other’s mood and attitude according to the tone and manners of speaking. I cannot discover these simply from the text.”</i></p> <p>E36-P8: <i>“Voice message makes WeChat feel like an interphone. It makes people easier to communicate.”</i></p> <p>E37-P3: <i>“When I want to discuss homework with friends, I like to use group chat because we can all chat simultaneously. It just like we discuss things together but we are physically in different places.”</i></p> <p>E38-P7: <i>“Group chat is a useful tool for me to meet more friends. My best friend Han organized and invited me into a medium size WeChat group where I meet so many new friends. Although we don’t know each other before, after few days of chatting, joking and sharing resources like places for hiking, hanging out, new restaurants and karaoke, etc., we became friends!”</i></p> <p>E39-P1: <i>“Starting from the last quarter, for every class, me and other Chinese classmates will organize a group on WeChat. We often discuss assignments, projects and arranging time for exam review sessions. I found group chat is very helpful for me to study as a group. I can ask questions anytime when I have problems about class and others will help me to solve</i></p>
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		<p><i>my problems.”</i></p> <p><i>E40-P5: “I use video chat mostly for communicating with my parents in China because I miss them a lot.”</i></p> <p><i>E41-P2: “I like video chat. I used to video chat with my friends in China. Even though we are in different countries, I feel like we are so close because we can see each other’s face while chatting.”</i></p>
	<p>Functions for strengthening community sense</p>	<p><i>E42-P10: “... Voice message can not only convey message and content, but also it reveals some other information which makes communication easier.”</i></p> <p><i>E43-P4: “Having a group discussion on WeChat can help improve group consciousness because it connects me with other friends in an efficient way.”</i></p> <p><i>E44-P8: “Chinese international students can find their helpers in different groups on WeChat. Some WeChat groups have more than 500 members.”</i></p> <p><i>E45-P2: “...Group chat helps me to find many people who have same interests as me. It definitely promotes community building and strengthen our community sense.”</i></p> <p><i>E46-P1: “Through Moment, we can see each other’s life style, it helps me to understand my friends more. For example, some people used to share network events and articles that talk about business, so that I can tell he is an outgoing businessperson. Since I am also interested in business too, I will be more willing to chat with him and form our little business community.”</i></p>
	<p>Downsides of WeChat</p>	<p><i>E47-P6: “I’ve been invited to some “weird” WeChat groups, as they share lots of porn videos every day, which really scares me.”</i></p> <p><i>E48-P7: “...some ‘girls’ added me and tried to sell me their nude pictures and videos on WeChat...”</i></p> <p><i>E49-P1: “I was invited to a “ECON” study group on WeChat...people in this group sometimes share homework answers and even discuss questions during the exam.”</i></p> <p><i>E50-P3: “When I was taking architecture class, we have many online quizzes that supposed to be done individually. I know some WeChat study groups that were sharing quiz answers within members....”</i></p> <p><i>E51-P5: “Since WeChat allows us to transfer money. I once bought an iPhone from a seller, but he blocked me after I sent him the money...”</i></p> <p><i>E52-P3: “I can’t control myself from checking Moment and chat with my friends on...As the result, I only wrote a small paragraph...I feel very guilty.”</i></p> <p><i>E53-P2: “I used to chat with friends on WeChat while</i></p>

		<p><i>having lectures and I have to borrow other's notes to make up for the missed lectures.”</i></p> <p>E54-P6: <i>“I see spam is one of the serious problems on WeChat. I received lots of junk messages from marketing account about selling their products.”</i></p>
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4.3 Findings

All the research findings are based on the excerpts, which have been extracted from the conversations that I had with each interviewee. In accordance with the themes and subthemes that mentioned in previous table section, I converted findings into the following paragraphs to better inform readers about the interview result.

Chinese International Student Barriers (Theme 1)

According to the conversations, many of the participants narrate similar stories regarding the social and academic problems in American colleges that Chinese international students consistently experience. Academic problems are issues that negatively affect student academic performance outcomes whereas social problems refer to the issues that minimize the quality of students' social lives.

Lack of Problem Solvers (Subtheme 1)

I asked the same first question to all the participants: “what was the biggest challenge you have met in American college?” The majority of the participants (7/10) reveal that the primary challenge for Chinese international students is not the existence of barriers but instead the absence of solutions or resources that may solve academic and social problems. For example, the first participant revealed how he was eager to find a problem solver to solve his academic problems (E1). When it comes to Chinese international student's social problems, another participant mentioned a problem of finding food options that affects his social life (E2). Furthermore, finding a problem solver becomes a challenge due to the limited access to resources and personality traits, which Chinese international students as new arrivals, they didn't know where to find people to help them, in addition to the introverted personality, which makes them afraid to communicate with people as well as find problem solvers. In this regard, Participant 6 really impressed me by revealing about his introverted personality (E3). Participant 9, in excerpt 4, reported a similar issue in which Chinese international students fail to realize there are abundant resources on campus where students can reach out and find problem solvers. It was challenge for participant 1 and participant 5 to find problem solvers to address their social problems, despite the fact that they view college administration as a primary key for addressing academics related problems. However, 7 out of 10 participants claimed that once they find a problem solver, problems are easily solved. For instance, one of the participants concluded that he was facing problems about discovering Chinese restaurants, when he met his “problem solver” in class, who was a junior Chinese international student and solved his problem by recommending close by Chinese restaurants. (E7-P5).

Culture barriers (Subtheme 2)

Another stand out obstacle is cultural barriers, which limits their ability to understand class content and make friends as well as communicate with American students, or even understand others' viewpoint. All 10 participants agreed that there is culture barrier between Chinese international students and other students in American colleges. Participant 9, as reflected in excerpt 8, claimed that Chinese international students grow up in Chinese environment, which is significantly different from American social environment. Such difference undoubtedly causes culture barriers (E8-P9). Furthermore, 6 out of 10 participants recognized that they faced difficulties while interacting and communicating with American students. For example, a participant revealed that she was unable to find conversation topics with American students (E9-P4; E10-P7).

Communication barrier (Subtheme 3)

Language is the least concern among all barriers faced by Chinese international students in the United States, as American society is a multicultural environment. Only 2 participants reveal that it was a challenge for them to speak and write in English, understand class material, and interpret lectures effectively (E11-P2). However, the majority of interviewees hold different opinions on language barrier. All the participants are of the view that language barrier does not cause serious problems. One claimed that he has no problem with communicating and writing in English because he received decent English training in China (E12-P1). On the other hand, participant 5 viewed English as a difficult language but he got familiar with it in a short while (E13-P5).

Community Building (Theme 2)

Perception of successful community (Subtheme 4)

Participants' views on "what makes a community" were more or less varied. Although majority of the participants (6/10) mentioned that community is a group of people who share similar interests or have similar goals (E14-P3; E15-P4). Another point of view on the definition of community is very interesting, which 3 out of 10 participants told me that a community can be defined by different elements, including culture, ethnics, and economic backgrounds and so on (E16-P10). When revealing about the traits of successful community building, some of the participants were not sure about them. Instead, few participants perceive successful community as a group of members who facilitate each other whereas an unsuccessful community is just a group of members, such as merely doing projects together or sitting in the same classroom with minimum interaction with each other (E19-P4; E18-P1). Even though, 2 participants said they perceive a community as successful when its members are very engaging and actively doing something (E18-P1).

Ways to build community (Subtheme 5)

According to the viewpoint of the interviewees, although some answers for the ways of building community were different, there are two significant ways that Chinese international students use to build successful communities, including engagement through student clubs and social media platforms like WeChat. Half of the participants mention that they usually build community through engaging in student clubs or events (E20-P2; E21-P10). Meanwhile, 8 participants (6 Chinese and 2 American faculties on campus) told me that community building through social media technology WeChat is an essential method. They mostly use WeChat functions of “meet people nearby” and “group chat”, which allow them to meet new friends and interact with new group members without the need of physical interaction (E22-P5; E23-P4). Interestingly, Chinese student club and WeChat often forms a collaboration to better serve Chinese students through formation of communities (E24-P1)

The importance of successful community building (Subtheme 6)

All participants are of the opinion that building a successful community is important for Chinese international students. This is because a successful community provides abundant resources to Chinese students and it can effectively solve their problems. (E25-P3; E26-P8). So that, building successful communities is much more important than building communities that are unable to provide benefits to Chinese international students.

WeChat functions (Theme 3)

As WeChat is an application that possesses variety of functions, different interests and inclinations of participants were revealed when discussing WeChat functions. Based on the interviews, 9 out of 10 participants are aware of as well as use WeChat. In addition, 8 out of 10 participants (all Chinese participants) use it as an everyday communication tool. The participants frequently used words like efficient, easier and convenient while talking about WeChat.

Favorite function of WeChat (Subtheme 7)

In order to know the main benefits of WeChat that can help Chinese international students to overcome barriers during their undergraduate study in American colleges, I further categorized another subtheme, which refers to the favorite functions of WeChat. Amongst the large number of WeChat functions, I extracted the most significant ones that frequently mentioned during the conversation as follow:

- 5/10 participants like and use “meet people nearby” (E27-P4; E28-P6).
- 8/10 participants (all Chinese) like and frequently use “Moment” (E29-P1; E30-P5; E31-P7).
- 7/10 participants like and frequently use “voice message” (E34-P1; E35-P6; E36-P8).
- 9/10 participants like and frequently use “group chat” (E37-P3; E38-P7; E39-P1).
- 4/10 participants like and frequently use “Video chat” whereas 6 out of participants use video chat to connect with their family and friends in other

countries (E40-P5; E41-P2).

Functions for strengthening community sense (Subtheme 8)

While exploring the major benefits of WeChat, functions for strengthening community sense were also revealed from the discussion, which I categorized in the following sentences:

- 3/10 participants think voice message can strengthen community sense (E42-P10).
- 9/10 participants are of the view that group chat can strengthen community sense (E43-P4; E44-P8; E45-P2)
- 5/10 participants think Moment can strengthen community sense (E46-P1).

Downsides of WeChat (Subtheme 9)

Besides the benefits that WeChat bring to Chinese students, all participants perceive that WeChat may pose some negative concerns and disadvantages for its users. Specifically, distraction and ethical issues such as pornographic content is worthy to pay attention.

- 5/10 participants claim that they experienced pornographic on WeChat (E47-P6; E48-P7)
 - 4/10 participants said academic cheating frequently happens on WeChat (usually happens in WeChat group) (E49-P1; E50-P3)
 - 3/10 participants said they experienced scam on WeChat (E51-P5)
 - 6/10 participants said they spend average 2 hours per-day on WeChat. Their activities involve mostly chatting and refreshing Moment on continuous basis, which may cause distraction from their studies
 - 4/10 participants reported that they study while multitasking with WeChat (E52-P3; E53-P2)
 - 3/10 participants said there is a lot of junk false advertising and spam on WeChat (E54-P6).
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5. Discussions

After I discussed the significant findings from the interview result through conducting thematic and narrative analysis, I applied the literature review findings to explain the significances that mentioned in previous sections. The aim of this process is to make conclusions in accordance with theories from past studies as well as the interview result. As the result, I found that Chinese international students indeed face barriers in the form of lack of problem solvers, cultural barriers, and language-based communication barriers. Among these barriers, different from literature review, communication(language) barrier is the least important. Since Chinese students have gained a decent training in their home country for years as well as English as a second language can be easily learnt from the multicultural environment in American society. However, excerpts reflect that those who speak poor English still face various challenges, which include understanding class content and making friends with American. On the other hand, the lack of problem solvers that supported by literature review findings appears to be another newfound issue. For instance, the majority of participants revealed that they experience difficulties in findings ones who can help them to solve problems. This corresponds with literature review that Chinese students face barriers due to the absence of knowledge in institution context in American college, which a researcher claimed that Chinese students often lack of understanding from the broader University community (Sherry). In addition, cultural barriers faced by Chinese interviewees were the most significant factor that mentioned by both interviewees and previous researchers. For example, besides the fact that all interviewees recognized the existence of culture barriers, researcher Yan et al. also revealed “culture and education disparities between China and America, together with Chinese students’ language deficiencies, ineffective integrations with American faculty members, and their high motivations to achieve”. Such findings reflect the demotivation of Chinese international students in American educational environment, which reduces the academic and social performance for Chinese students, making it difficult for them to grow and survive in the American community (Yan et al.). The varying dynamics of distinct societies may induce obstacles for some local groups and immigrants, not only because of culture difference, but because local communities are very cautious about accepting foreigners to be part of their community (Sherry). Accordingly, such dynamics result in integration failure as well as lack of perceiving a welcoming environment by some Chinese students.

In order to overcome the barriers faced by Chinese international students, building a successful community has been recognized as an important approach. This argument is supported by both interview results as well as literature review findings. In specific, participants perceive that a successful community as a group of members who facilitate and help each other, whereas an unsuccessful community is nothing more than a group of members sit in a classroom or merely do project together but not helping each other. This is because a successful community provides abundant resources to Chinese students and it can effectively solve their problems. In depth, the findings from literature review reveal that community is important because of its positive features, such as: resolving social dilemmas,

promoting sharing, generosity, and individual action for public benefit (Glanville). Otherwise, a successful community offers the necessary traits for Chinese students to solve problems, which was revealed by the majority of participants. Similarly, from literature review, Blanchard also makes conclusion that one characteristic of successful communities is distinguished by members' helping behaviors and emotional attachment to the community and other members (Blanchard et al.). Regarding on the way that Chinese students build community, all Chinese interviewees responded that they use WeChat to build community and 8 participants were of the view that community building through WeChat is an essential method for building successful communities, which actually helped Chinese international students to solve problems.

Mentioning about the way that Chinese students use WeChat to solve problem through building a successful community, during the interviews, numerous WeChat functions were mentioned, which participants revealed that functions “meet people nearby”, “moment”, “voice message”, “group chat”, and “video chat” were the most important ones. These are also the primary functions that are used by Chinese international students to maximize their academic and social performance through building a successful community in American educational and social environment. Among these functions, “moment”, “voice message”, and “group chat” are considered as the most effective ones. The effectiveness of these functions can be explained by literature review, which a study mentioned that WeChat is vital in transmitting media based on the relationship, while providing an opportunity for the users to spread the information in an efficient manner among their communities (Hui).

On the other hand, by integrating all features together and making the app more vivid, WeChat users such as Chinese international students would get an advanced user experience in forming the online community while strengthening an emotional connection (Huang). Although the majority of literature review minimizes the negative effects of using WeChat, interview participants revealed that WeChat can also bring negative effects, including exposure to pornography, cheating, scam, distraction, and spam / junk advertising. All these negative uses of WeChat bring down student academic and social performance. As a number of participants revealed, Chinese international students are exposed to not only pornographic content, but also they experienced cheating, scams, and junk advertising through WeChat, in addition to getting distracted all the time. Likewise, few literatures reflect the same story regarding on the negative effects of using WeChat as just like any other social media platform. For instance, the consistent usage of WeChat results in waste of time, appear detrimental to psychological and physiological health of its users, increases risk of theft of personal information, and amplifies the risk of virus threats, and provide avenues to access pornographic content (Liu). Furthermore, literatures also reveal that WeChat is not an ideal social media for Chinese international students to integrate one culture to another, even WeChat negatively affects their efficiency in cultural integration. This means that WeChat allows Chinese international students to stay dependent mostly on Chinese communities rather than developing social interaction with American students (Jin). Such literature review findings reveal that although WeChat helps in community building for Chinese

international students, it only limits to Chinese communities, which raises a concern for increased usage of WeChat for limiting cultural integration and acceptance.

Combining all the significances of literature review, interview results, and discussion, I concluded that WeChat is considered as a vital communication tool among Chinese international students for enhancing student performance socially and academically. Due to the reason that WeChat allows Chinese international students to build successful communities, interact with each other, and find problem solvers with convenience. In this way, Chinese international students are able to cope with barriers and challenges they face in the American educational and social environment. As the result, I concluded that Chinese international students should maximize the use of WeChat for the purpose of interacting with other students and community members in the American context to acquire academic and social help that may directly increase their networking skills and ability to solve problems. The ultimate goal of the extensive use of WeChat is enhancing social engagement, which enables Chinese international students to form purposeful and successful communities for overcoming challenges and barriers in American educational and social environment.

6. Implication and Recommendations

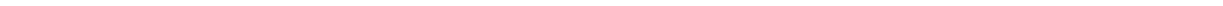
To further help Chinese international students to get over various challenges and survive in American colleges, according to the analysis result, I made the implication of this research study as a list recommendation for both Chinese international students and college officials regarding on WeChat use. These recommendations may potentially improve study abroad experience for Chinese students who studying in American institution. In detail, I segregated the recommendations into the following paragraphs:

- **WeChat as a communication tool for Chinese international students to build successful communities and solve problems:**
 - Chinese students should be advised to use WeChat for successful collaboration and interaction with other Chinese students in the United States. Along with, existing Chinese international students should facilitate new Chinese international students for teaching uses and functions of WeChat.
 - Chinese international students should follow Official Account on WeChat that is created by local Chinese organizations, school officials and student clubs.
 - Chinese international students should use WeChat to maintain relationship with friends and parents in China. Because many Chinese use WeChat in China.

- **WeChat as a communication tool for Schools and Colleges to enhance problem solving for Chinese international students:**
 - Create school official account on WeChat to increase the flow of information. This is based on the reason that students may not always check email but they do check WeChat frequently, as it is easy to share information with friends on WeChat.
 - Schools and college administration should watch closely about “cheating community” on WeChat groups. This will help in increasing the quality of education.
 - Schools and college administration should monitor and inform scams as well as spams messages.

- **Ethical considerations for students while using WeChat:**
 - Avoid access, involve or spread pornographic content. It may contradict with schools and colleges’ codes of conduct.
 - Cheating should be prohibited on WeChat groups. Accordingly, it is school’s responsibility to monitor the activities of all students on WeChat.
 - Students should be discouraged from increased usage of WeChat that may hamper their academic performance.
 - Schools and college administrations should also monitor scams. On the other hand, students should inform proper authorities and other students regarding on potential scams.

- Increased usage and dependency of Chinese international students on WeChat for social interaction and building communities may reduce their culture integration ability in the American culture.



7. Assessment

Research Limitation

The main limitation of my research was time constraint, which restricted the usage of large sample size to collect data. Accordingly, I was only able to interview with 10 participants who were selected from 3 colleges and universities as well as the majority of participants was from a particular state (Washington State) and the same institution (University of Washington, Seattle). Due to the reason that interview is my primary research methodology, limited size of interview participants may limit the scope and generalizability of the research findings in different geographical settings. In addition to the factor of personal ability of analyzing the perception and viewpoints of participants, the quality of data analysis was also limited. Furthermore, since Chinese language was spoken during all interviews with Chinese native speakers, I only translated the part of conversations, which are my significant findings into the English language. My limited skills for extracting information from participants along with my expertise of translation may restrict readers to fully understand the original intentions and meaning of interviewees. Otherwise, my presence during the data collection process through semi-structured interviews could have limited the responses of the participants. For this reason, the quality of data was limited as participants may selectively share the stories. Lastly, I recognize that the qualitative research is often not well understood in the scientific community as compared to quantitative research due to the unavoidable bias, subjectivity, lack of comprehensive data collection and replicability. Consequently, the semi-structured interview as a qualitative research method may influence my research conclusion and implication.

Reflection

The study was accomplished within my expectation upon incessant efforts and hard work. It is noteworthy to reflect what I have gained from doing this project, and how I was able to apply lessons learned to continue forward and create better work. One of the biggest successes of my project included the creation of a list of recommendations for WeChat uses amongst Chinese international undergraduates and school officials. I am thrilled that I was able to produce valid recommendations that may potentially improve the quality of Chinese student's study abroad experience and social lives through conducting qualitative research. This research was based on interviewee's viewpoints and my expertise in community building and digital media. I feel very proud that I performed such an ethical responsibility in helping my Chinese community to integrate into college life in the United States, and revealing the benefits of WeChat in building communities.

From doing this project, I have made a positive impact in my community, strengthened my academic knowledge in research, community engagement, and social media by conducting a literature review and interviews. I also solidified my professional skills in project management and interpersonal communication when I designed this research study, well-managed the project timeline and outreached to

the people concerned. Since I will become a digital media graduate student in the next academic year, and I intend to pursue a digital media profession, the skills that I have developed from this project are extremely valuable. Specifically, when I study graduate-level courses, I would be able to understand the in-depth view of social media's influences on individuals' social lives based on the foundational knowledge of community engagement and digital media. Otherwise, project management and interpersonal communication skills would allow me to deal with complex project, teamwork and produce positive outcomes for clients when I enter the professional world.

In addition to the success that I have made from this project, the whole study process was also worthy of reflection. I deeply understand that I could not have had such achievements without the full support from my friends, mentors, and instructors. Although I had met various challenges and difficulties, I was appreciative of mentors and instructors who guided me step-by-step when it came to tasks such as increasing the focus from writing the project proposal, abstract and literature review, to developing the methodology. In this regard, such help motivated me to produce high quality research by facilitating me to form a strategic research plan, enhancing my understanding of research methods, and building a solid foundation for further study. My friends also played a vital role during the data collection process by sharing their personal stories and viewpoints to me regarding their WeChat use, as well as their study abroad and community building experiences. It was with their tremendous help that enabled me to produce the following outcomes. Data collection and analytical process appeared to be challenging tasks due to my limited research experience. However, all of my friends, mentors, and instructors came forward and supported me with their flexibility and time to provide valuable opinions to my research. Their helps assisted me to maximize my efficiency and the quality of this project.

To me, this was not merely a project but a stepping stone to my graduate studies. In the following months, I will become a digital media graduate student at the University of Washington. From all of the experiences that I have gained from doing this project and from the help of friends, mentors and instructors, I know I will become a qualified graduate student, and will continue exploring my interests in community building and digital media.

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