

The role of social media in Chinese students' choice of a
tertiary education provider in New Zealand

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Abstract

With over 25-million subscription accounts on the platform, the official WeChat account is the home of compelling content that inspires Chinese students to study abroad. WeChat official accounts (WOAs) are widely used by Chinese students when deciding on a study destination. However, few studies have focused on the effect of WOAs on prospective Chinese students' choices of study destinations and tertiary institutions. Thus, this study investigates how WOAs influence Chinese students' decision-making process with the aim of assisting education providers, particularly those in New Zealand, to better meet Chinese students' needs and increase the success rate of international student recruitment. The study was conducted in New Zealand and included 37 students who were each offered two WOA posts for preview and evaluation prior to the interview.

The study employed an inductive approach to explore prospective Chinese students' attitudes and user habits and to identify the role of WOAs in choosing tertiary education providers. The researcher utilised a qualitative data collection method, conducting in-depth interviews with Chinese students interested in pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate studies overseas. In total, 31 Chinese students participated in the study and discussed their experiences and perspectives of various aspects of their WOAs. Through thematic analysis, five themes emerged from the data: 1) deciding to study abroad, 2) finding the most popular social media content, 3) creating eye-catching social media posts, 4) how to use social media platforms, and 5) choosing a study destination.

This study found that WOAs play a positive role in increasing brand awareness of tertiary institutions and helping them engage directly with prospective Chinese students. WOAs are a valuable tool for Chinese students searching for relevant information online. Furthermore, WOAs serve as an interactive platform that creates a large social community amongst Chinese students that includes their families and teachers, allowing them to share their views and experiences related to their overseas study plans.

This research contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it provides a thorough understanding of how micro factors related to push and pull theory influence Chinese students' overseas study decisions. Second, prior research has focused on the reflections of students who have enrolled in overseas institutions. This study investigates the views

of prospective students to gain insights into their decision-making process rather than the results of their decisions. Moreover, this study also found that age does not affect preferred content format, which contradicts prior research that has found a favourable association between age groups and preferred social media content format. The findings of this study offer some practical suggestions for tertiary education providers, such as how to create an attractive WOA and connect to their prospective students through the WOA.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

29 May 2022

Signature

Date

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Ethics Approval

Ethics approval from AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEC) was granted on 21 July 2021. The ethics application number is 21/251 (See Appendix A for the Approval letter).

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Research rationale and background

WeChat (Weixin, micro-message), a Chinese social media mobile application, has over one billion active users globally, making it one of the world's most popular social media platforms (Shi, Luo, Guo, Liu, & Liu, 2021). Tencent Holding Limited formally introduced the multifunctional application for smartphones in 2011. Branded as a "super app", it provides a range of functionalities far beyond its counterparts (Montag, Becker, & Gan, 2018). WeChat incorporates a range of features such as a WhatsApp chat function, a Facebook-like news feed function, a PayPal-like wallet payment function, a TikTok equivalent video function, and other useful functions such as ordering a taxi or paying bills (Flemming, 2015).

WeChat not only allows its users to communicate with one another for free, but it also gives companies and organisations the opportunities to attract followers through its service account. WeChat service accounts, known as WOAs, are platforms for businesses to introduce their brands, products, or services to Chinese consumers. Similar to Facebook Page, WOAs enable companies to post content for commercial purposes. With over 25 million WOAs on the WeChat platform, their popularity and effectiveness are undeniable. Businesses can use the platform to engage with their target audience, attract and communicate with their followers and exert leverage among key users (Guo, Zhang, Kang, & Hu, 2017; Shi et al., 2021).

With a population of over 1.4 billion people, it is not surprising that China is widely regarded as the world's leading source country for international students. The growing number of Chinese students studying abroad benefits the host country by providing a significant source of revenue and strengthening China-host country relations. Therefore, understanding Chinese students' institution selection behaviour is critical. In the recent literature, little is known about the influence of WOAs on international students' decision-making when selecting a study destination and tertiary institutions.

1.2 Research purpose and research questions

China is regarded as the world's largest market for international students. According to the 2019 white paper published by New Oriental Education & Technology Group, one of China's most significant educational companies, New Zealand is one of Chinese students' Top 10 most popular study destinations (New Oriental, 2019). As New Zealand's fourth-largest export revenue earner, the education sector is praised for its commercial contribution to the country and its role in improving political relations between New Zealand and China (Education New Zealand, 2018).

China is not only the world's largest source of international students but also the most prominent social media market, which is vastly different from its counterpart's social media market in the West. The advancement of digital technology has opened up new avenues for Chinese students to access information and interact with educational providers. Social media is a powerful tool, with one of its uses being to influence students' tertiary education decisions. However, little is known about how social media, particularly WOAs, affects Chinese students' choice of study destination and tertiary education provider. Thus, this study aims to look into the impact of WOAs on Chinese students' study destination and tertiary education provider choices and the opportunity provided by WOA features and active user base to engage with Chinese students. The main research question is: What is the role of social media in Chinese students' choice of a tertiary education provider in New Zealand? The sub-questions are as follows:

1. How do Chinese students use WOAs to search for information about tertiary education options?
2. How does content available on WOAs affect Chinese students' choices?
3. How do WOAs influence Chinese students' decision-making process?

1.3 Research methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative approach and conducted a pre-interview observation of the WOA posts of several New Zealand universities and education agents. The intention was to gain a general understanding of their contents and to summarise the specific accounts relevant to this study. The researcher then conducted 31 in-depth online interviews with semi-structured open-ended questions. Prospective Chinese

students from an English Language School in Chengdu, China were invited to take part. Participants were those who wanted to undertake undergraduate or postgraduate studies in another country and had prior experience using WOAs to aid their decision making. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, with five themes emerging. NVivo was used to code the data.

1.4 Research findings and contributions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of WOAs in the decision-making process of Chinese students when selecting a tertiary institution. Instead of attempting to understand how Chinese students make decisions, the study sought to identify the format and content of WOAs that were the most popular amongst the prospective Chinese students. The study also examined the most trusted social media platforms other than WOAs and the criteria for choosing a study destination. According to the study's findings, WOAs assist international tertiary institutions to raise their brand recognition and engage directly with prospective Chinese students. WOAs are a valuable resource for Chinese students searching for relevant information online. Moreover, WOAs provide an interactive platform for Chinese students to share their opinions and experiences with a vast social group, including their families and teachers, about their overseas study plans.

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the current literature. First, from a theoretical perspective, it provides a thorough knowledge of pull and push related factors that influence Chinese students' decisions regarding their overseas studies. Second, past research has focused on the views of students who have enrolled in overseas institutions. This research aims to investigate the perspectives of prospective students to gain insight into their decision-making process rather than their opinions of their selected institutions. Furthermore, this study shows that age does not affect preferred content format, which contradicts previous research that has established a positive relationship between age groups and preferred social media content format. The study's findings provide practical recommendations for tertiary education providers, such as designing an appealing WOA and communicating effectively with prospective students. This research also draws on participants'

experiences to shed light on how WOAs could look in terms of content, format, and available functions to better serve Chinese students in the near future.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

This chapter provides an overview of the research topic, introduces the background of the topic, and previews subsequent chapters. The second chapter presents a review of the literature on this topic, including a detailed definition of international students' decision-making process related to tertiary education, both traditionally and digitally, and more information about the importance of social media platforms. Chapter 2 also examines the history and the development of international education, focusing on New Zealand. The research gap is identified through the literature review. The methodology used in this research is described and explained in Chapter 3, including the research approach and design, the data collection process, and the data analysis techniques used. The fourth chapter presents the study's key findings based on the data analysis. Chapter 5 discusses the study's theoretical and practical contributions, its limitations, and future research directions.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Chapter overview

The literature review is based on previous research related to the international education sector, with particular reference to Chinese international students in New Zealand. This chapter focuses on the literature that assesses the impact of social media on the decision-making process of Chinese students when choosing a tertiary education provider. It is structured as follows. In section 2.2, the researcher identifies the theoretical framework guiding this study. In section 2.3, the history of the international education sector is presented, followed by an examination of Chinese students studying at tertiary institutions in New Zealand. The literature on Chinese students' decision-making process in relation to studying abroad is discussed in section 2.4. In the same section, a summary of key and applicable theories related to the growth of the Internet and Web 2.0 and its position in the education field is presented. This section also discusses the literature on key Chinese social media channels, in particular, WeChat and WOAs, and the importance of understanding these platforms. The chapter finishes with an identification of the research gap in section 2.5.

2.2 Theoretical perspective -- Student Integration Model (SIM)

Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM) (1975) is the theoretical framework guiding this research. This section discusses the definition and theoretical significance of SIM, and why the researcher chose this theory on which to base further analysis.

Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM), proposes five assessment variables to determine students' level of integration in a learning institution and their reasons for dropping out: 1. academic integration; 2. social integration; 3. goal commitment; 4. institutional commitment; and 5. the learning community. Recognising these variables may help to improve student retention and explain the facets and mechanisms relevant to an individual student's decision to leave an education provider (Tinto, 1975; Yu & Richardson, 2015). Tinto (1975) ranked social integration and academic integration as the most critical factors for student retention. He believed that social integration is consistent with a student's relationship with both teachers and classmates. In contrast, academic integration relates to a student's academic success

and intellectual growth (Yu & Richardson, 2015). Alexandros, Ejaz, and Rupert (2017) further explain that social interaction can foster a sense of belonging if individual students belong to one or more communities within the university. For example, if students continue to undergo academic and social integration, they will re-examine their institutional obligations, objectives, and intentions and adjust their targets flexibly. While Tinto's model focuses on conventional face-to-face formats and includes elements beyond this research scope, it is relevant as a theoretical framework as it consists of critical aspects that relate to this study (Heublein, 2014).

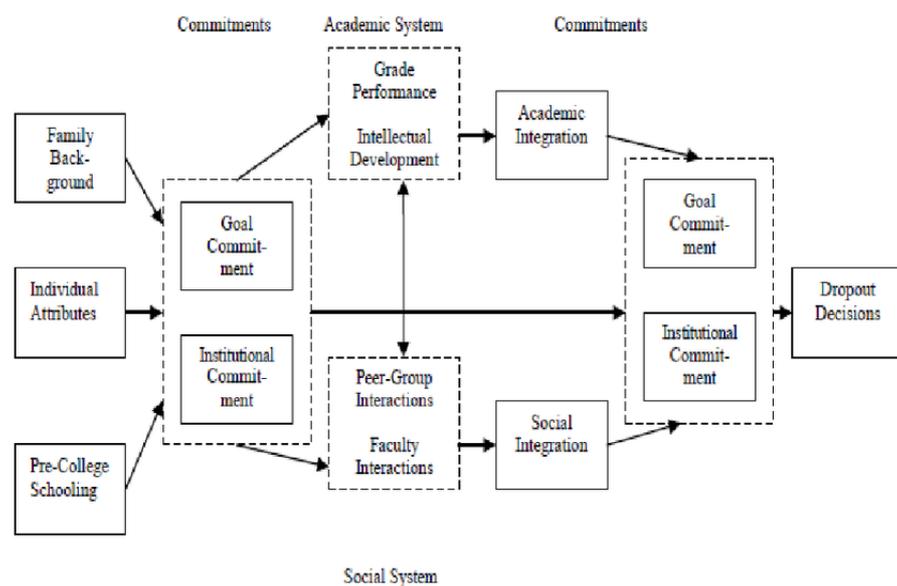


Figure 1: Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM) (Tinto, 1975)

Similarly, communication competencies can be an essential factor in developing student engagement with peers and teachers (Tinto, 1975; Yu & Richardson, 2015). Nonetheless, even if Tinto's student integration model is sound, Emerson (1976) contended that social interaction would occur only if both parties invested equally in the activity. Based on a cost-benefit analysis, Emerson found that one party would feel obligated to give back in exchange for the other party's services (1976). Social media is a medium where the virtual world brings different audiences together. Each user seeks benefits but also sees the benefits in giving. Social media information comes straight from the source rather than through paid advertising, and is therefore perceived as non-commercially focused and both credible and trustworthy (Cheng, Mahmood & Yeap, 2013). The combination

of psychological ownership and social exchange makes social media a useful tool for tertiary providers who seek to recruit more international students (Mohammed Manzuma-Ndaaba, Harada, Nordin, Aliyu, & Romle, 2018; Nyangau & Bado, 2012; O'Toole & Prince, 2015). As a result, institutions can gauge their own likeability based on their users' social media usage experience.

This study also uses SIM as its theoretical basis. Although the SIM model was initially designed to help decrease the student dropout rate, the five retention factors are highly relevant to student integration into the fabric of society, with academic and social integration being of central importance in the sphere of international students (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993). While SIM focuses on existing students' behavioural patterns, this study investigates the prospective Chinese students' behaviour when it comes to student destination selection. Looking at the recruitment situation in New Zealand, Chinese prospective students and their parents tend to emphasise the ranking, facilities, and reputation of local universities, which is compliant with the influencing factors reflected by SIM.

2.3 International education

2.3.1 The history of international education

International education, which historical literature shows has been taking place for almost a thousand years, is recognised as education transcending national borders (Lee, 2012). Emo of Friesland, who studied at Oxford University in 1190, was the first-ever international student in history, before study abroad became a familiar term in Europe in the mid-19th century. The first study abroad programme in the United States was officially approved and initiated at Delaware University in 1923 by the Nobel Peace Prize winners Nicholas Murray Butler and Stephen Duggen. Around the same period, the Chinese Government sent scholars as international students to study in foreign countries (Droux & Hofstetter, 2014; Lee, 2012).

Recognising the strength of globalisation and the need for education, educational leaders, as far back as the mid-20th century, have formulated strategies and recommendations to make educational opportunities accessible internationally so that individuals and countries may engage and reap the advantages of globalisation (Ryan &

Slethuag, 2010). For instance, by entering the global economy, the passion of Chinese students to study overseas developed from Mainland China's economic reform and opening up after 1976; however, it was not until 1992 that many educational establishments across the world saw a gradual rise in the number of students coming from China (Dimmock & Leong, 2010). Approximately 28,000 Mainland Chinese students enrolled in tertiary programmes in the United States in 1988 (UNESCO, 2006). By 2006, UNESCO reported that China had become the world's largest international student source, with more than 19 million tertiary students enrolled outside China (Dimmock & Leong, 2010; UNESCO, 2006). There has clearly been a dramatic rise in Chinese students interested in studying overseas during the last decades. Students' pursuit of international learning has ensured host institutions and their economies are benefitting by offering a profitable financial enterprise (Dimmock & Leong, 2010; Hung, 2010).

2.3.2 Why study abroad?

In recent years, an increasing amount of literature on international education has primarily investigated the influential factors associated with recruiting international students. Several studies have summarised the key factors that attract international students. For example, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) divide the influential factors into five groups: the commonality of languages; the availability of science or technical programmes; the geographical similarity of home and host countries; the expectations of the quality of the tertiary education systems offered in the host country; and the relative wealth of the host country population and the growth rate of the GNP. Using China as an example, the opening of Mainland China has seen a substantial rise in Mainland Chinese students seeking overseas degrees, especially from American, British, and Australian universities, and the present research summarises the influential critical factors as follows: the consistency of teaching and learning; the wealth of opportunities available; the capacity for experiences and cultural exposure; and the job and residency opportunities after graduation (Collins, Ho, Ishikawa, & Ma, 2017; Dimmock & Leong, 2010).

Based on the previous literature, other influential factors are summarised below.

2.3.2.1 Motivation

Anderson (1997, p. 11) believes that "hope" is the reason people decide to go to other countries. Yeung (2012) clarifies that, in general, people looking to move to a foreign country are expecting a better life; they anticipate that not only will things be economically better, but also a social improvement. Zwart (2013) adds that the most critical factor inspiring Chinese students to study overseas is the cultural element. Sánchez, Fornerino, and Zhang (2006) found that common motives can be identified across cultures, although some motives are more prominent in certain cultures than in others. These reasons affect people's decisions and how they will carry out their plan to study abroad. Understanding the motivations, obstacles, and beliefs that affect people's decisions will help in determining what inspires students from diverse cultures to choose to study abroad (Sánchez et al., 2006).

2.3.2.2 Push and pull factors

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) point out that the global trend in the flow of international students is based on push and pull factors. According to Wang (2007) and Waters (2005), there are four main push factors that inspire Chinese students to consider studying overseas: the education system in China is unable to satisfy all Chinese students who seek a higher education; China's economic development has made it affordable for parents to send their children overseas for their education; students are now more mobile due to government flexibility; and students hope to gain international qualifications that will increase their family's overall prestige and offer them a brighter future (Waters, 2005). On the other hand, pull factors for studying overseas centre on the reputation of a particular country and its education providers; the safety of the country; costs; location; employment opportunities; and immigration opportunities (Sánchez et al., 2006). Both push and pull factors have been described as essential contributors to the decision-making process of Chinese students. They motivate many Chinese families to support their children's education in an overseas country.

Scholars have widely used the push and pull concept to better understand why Chinese students want to study in a foreign country or choose to stay in China (Cheng, 2020). Li and Bray (2007, p. 795) maintain that pull factors can also arise in a student's home country, while push factors can originate in host countries and can be referred to as "reverse push-pull factors". They list the following reverse-pull factors that dissuade

Chinese students from studying abroad: a desire to remain with one's family; knowledge of the importance of domestic education; and the rising internationalisation of domestic institutions. They also outline the critical reverse push factors of a host country that discourage Chinese students from studying overseas: rising tuition costs and other expenditures for higher education; restrictive policies on international students; and stricter immigration policies. Li and Bray (2007) suggest focusing on four categories to further improve the push and pull factor framework: academic, economic, social and cultural, and political.

- Academic

Push forces in China and pull factors in host countries work together to allow Chinese students to study internationally in each category listed above. Educational opportunity and educational quality are essential aspects of academics pursuit. This research seeks to determine the criteria used by Chinese students when selecting an overseas academic institution.

- Economic

Before the 1990s, self-sponsored study abroad was only available to China's wealthiest and most powerful elites. However, since the mid-1990s, the 'white-collar' class has also been able to afford to send their children abroad to study (Cheng, 2020). The rise of China's economy can be considered a necessary driving factor for the education industry, particularly international education. It is also commonly acknowledged that hosting and teaching overseas students benefits host countries in various ways, especially in terms of economic benefits as international students pay a much higher tuition fee than domestic students enrolled in the same institution (Cheng, 2020). Although international students are considered an essential source of revenue for education providers, the educational experience offered can be considered the best investment in a person's life.

- Social and cultural

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) suggest that the desire to explore Western culture is a primary driver for Chinese students' choice to study abroad. This desire can be categorised as a social and cultural factor that is part of combined overall pull and push

factors. Furthermore, filial piety is a highly valued characteristic in Chinese culture, and family loyalty, respect, and obedience are widely held values in China. Chinese students are strongly reliant on their families and friends (Sánchez et al., 2006).

- Political

Chinese students choose to study abroad for various reasons, but one which is key is the preference for a less competitive educational environment in a foreign country (Ip, 2006). Each year, millions of Chinese high school students take the Chinese national university entrance exam (Gaokao), which decides their admission to universities or other options such as employment (Davey, Lian, & Higgins, 2007). In China, employment opportunities can be highly competitive, and a qualification from a prestigious university can significantly improve someone's chance of securing a well-paid position in the job market. Because of the exam's competitive nature, parents put a lot of pressure on their children to succeed in school, and exam preparation begins at a young age (Davey et al., 2007). Meanwhile, according to Wang (2007), one of the most important motivations pushing Chinese students to study overseas is the possibility of future immigration. Whether or not Chinese students' desire to immigrate is a factor attracting them to a specific nation, immigration policy will undoubtedly influence their future opportunities within that country.

It is worth noting that these factors are all macro and comprehensive, but do not take into account current factors such as information technology and social media. Because of technological advancements, international students are no longer limited by economic conditions, cultural background, social activities, or policies, but can instead take advantage of an abundance of information channels. However, information leads to challenges as well as opportunities. More readily available and diverse information may help students make better decisions about further education, but it may also increase their time costs and increase their risk of being misled by unofficial WOAs.

2.3.3 Chinese international students studying in New Zealand

Numerous studies have attempted to explain the motivation of Chinese students to study abroad. Ghazarian (2016) believes that the high competitiveness and the low quality of tertiary education in China drives Chinese students to study overseas. Evidence also suggests that the push-pull framework has been commonly used in the

recent literature to better understand Chinese students, especially those in the tertiary sector in New Zealand (Ding, 2016). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) discuss the push factors that motivate Chinese students to study overseas, such as their current wealth and resources, limited training opportunities, too high competition for university places and a shortage of expertise, and family involvement. Pull factors refer to the attractions that the host countries offer to international students such as the prestige of a university's ranking, curriculum, the support services available for international students, as well as the employment and immigration opportunities (Ding, 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Since 1999, there has been a positive change in Chinese students' attitudes toward studying abroad. The number of Chinese students choosing to study overseas has grown at a comprehensive and rapid pace (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010). China has been recognised as New Zealand's primary source of international fee-paying students, contributing 40% of the foreign student population in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2014; Westpac, 2018).

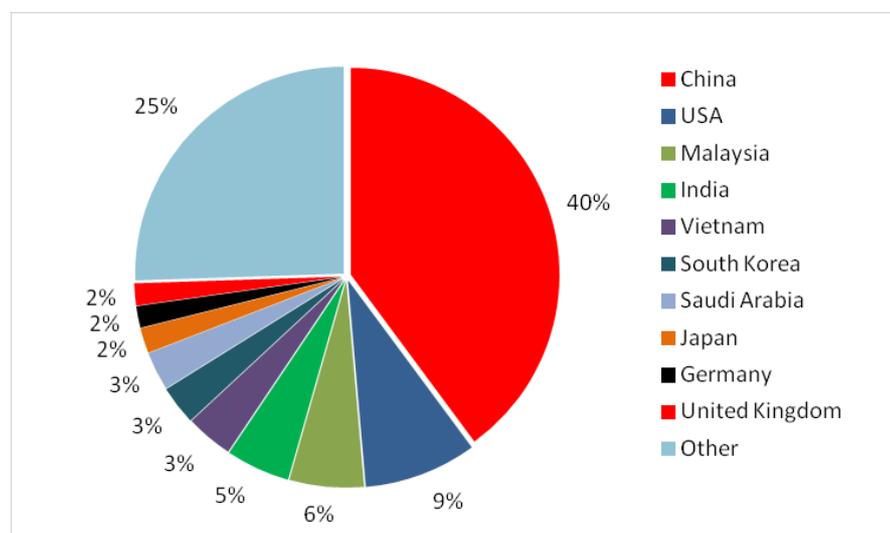


Figure 2: Top 10 source countries of international students enrolled in New Zealand universities, 2014

According to a 2019 white paper published by New Oriental Education & Technology Group, one of the largest educational companies in China, China is considered as a priority market by the international education industry in New Zealand. In 2019, New Zealand was also one of the top 10 overseas education cooperators with China in 2019 (Education New Zealand, 2014; ICEF, 2019; New Oriental, 2019).

Table 1: Top 10 Study Destinations for Chinese Students between 2015 and 2019



2.4 The decision to study abroad – Chinese students' decision-making process

2.4.1 Consumer decision-making process

Moutinho (1987) defines consumer behaviour as acquiring and organising information, and using and evaluating products and services in the course of a purchasing decision. Studying overseas involves complex decision making, and within the process, adolescents face specific tasks or activities such as exploring various alternatives, comparing suitable options, selecting one option, and conducting a post-decision review at the end of the whole process (Germeijs, Luyckx, Goossens, Verschueren, & Notelaers, 2012). Although different people have different ways of searching for information, other students' role as peers and friends in this decision-making process is significant and perhaps the most critical factor (Slack, Mangan, Hughes, & Davies, 2014). Filial piety is a value of great importance in Chinese culture, and devotion, respect, and obedience to family remain a universally held value (Sanchez, Fomerino & Zhang, 2006) (Sanchez, Fornerino, & Zhang, 2006). While students have an essential role in choosing where to study abroad, their parents often have a tremendous influence over the final destination of study (ICEF Monitor, 2012). Zwart (2013) points out that traditionally, Chinese students have a significantly higher level of dependency on family, and Chinese parents are the key player in their offspring's study abroad decision-making processes. In a Confucian society such as China, students can have a say, but parents are the final decision makers as they are the primary financial providers (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011).

2.4.2 Traditional approaches to obtaining information on the studying abroad experience

2.4.2.1 Third party influence

Traditional sources of information such as advice from parents, friends, other family members, teachers, and educational agents is strongly relevant in international student decision making (Vrontis, Nemar, Ouwaida, & Shams, 2018). In most Asian countries, referral by family and friends is one of the most influential factors when students choose an education destination (Cheng et al., 2013). Cheng et al. (2013) found that parents are cited as the main factors in student decision-making processes in overseas studies. In Chinese culture, filial piety is a concept of great importance, and devotion, respect, and obedience to family in China reflect widely held values. Sánchez et al. (2006) found that Chinese students have a substantially higher level of family dependence. Zwart (2013) also found that many Chinese parents invest in a child's education and are the primary financial providers for a student's overseas education. Hence, parents have a significant effect on the decision-making process. Gatfield and Chen (2006) found that important factors in decision making include the favourable views of parents about a country's safety and the potential job and residence prospects available to the student in that country. Traditionally, parents in China love their children and strongly influence their child's study abroad options (Sánchez et al., 2006).

2.4.2.2 Agents

Educational agents provide students with a one-stop service that includes immigration guidance, job advice, English language preparation, and everyday life assistance (Education New Zealand, 2014). For education providers, Pimpa (2003) found that working with agents is the most efficient way to recruit international students from Asian countries because agents strongly influence whether and where a student pursues post-secondary education. Although agents play a significant role in the decision-making process, less trusted agents can negatively impact students' comprehensive study abroad experience (Hulme, Thomson, Hulme, & Doughty, 2014).

2.4.3 Digital approaches

Social media increasingly influences consumers' attitudes and how they make decisions (Nicholas & Evgenia, 2017). Benson, Morgan, and Tennakoon (2012) discuss how tertiary

education providers adopt social media for marketing and relationship building, career management, and learning and teaching purposes. From the students' perspective, they can search for relevant information on social media platforms and gain support in their decision making when choosing a tertiary education provider. On the other hand, tertiary providers are also highly involved in adopting digital technology to improve their branding and marketing strategies to attract more international students from China. Technology has changed the way existing students connect with their community and has further influenced students and their parents' choices (Sipilä, Tarkiainen, Sundqvist, & Herold, 2017).

According to Camilleri (2019), higher education marketing has more opportunities in this digital era. However, institutions must place a greater emphasis on promotion channels and media registers, such as direct mail solicitations, telemarketing, social platform advertising, and the web. Wong, Tan, Hew, Ooi and Leong (2022) propose that digital advertising can deliver better results for the marketing of tertiary providers when the most cost-effective media combination is used. Paid advertising tools, such as Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising, can be used effectively by institutions. Because these advertising tools only charge for click volume, they help to reduce costs. It is also critical for tertiary providers to research customer preferences and needs before marketing (Paladan, 2018). Paladan (2018) discovered that the similarities of successful digital promotion should be a user-friendly landing page, visionary website design and interface, and diverse content after researching the digital marketing of 25 top universities in Asia and Africa. Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Facebook are among the most popular social media platforms. The official website and interface are the best ways for institutions to increase their visibility among prospective students.

2.4.3.1 The development of the Internet and Web 2.0 and its role in education

- User-Generated Content (UGC)

The wide availability and the development of the Internet has led to its development as a powerful marketing platform for businesses to participate in domestic and global markets (Hopping, 2000). Internet World Stats (2020) reported that the Internet has grown by over 566% in the last decade and has become the most available medium for interactive communication. It also makes it the most sought-after marketing medium

(Gaudin, 2010). Contractor (2009) suggests that the Internet is the most appropriate medium for attaining the highest penetration and maximum coverage. Social media has taken this to another level with its novelty of user-generated content (UGC) and interactivity. Through UGC's ingenuity and accessibility, the Internet and Web 2.0 have become accessible forums for users to build and distribute content on all social networking channels (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020; Liu, Lu, & He, 2020).

- Web 2.0

Web 2.0 has largely overwhelmed communication in the last decade, single-handedly controlling 80% of the world's exchange of information (Sleeman, Lang, & Lemon, 2016). Social networking can be seen as a form of influencer marketing, with a unique capacity that supports word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing campaigns that allow marketers to reach a new category of audience, connect, offer guidance, and build a long-term partnership with future clients (Berne-Manero et al., 2020). Berne-Manero et al. (2020) maintain that the goal of influencer marketing is to relay a brand message across social networking channels to the broader public, enabling marketers to gain control over prospective customers.

2.4.3.2 Influencer marketing and the development of social media

Contractor (2009) points out that the Internet and Web 2.0 allow users to build and distribute content through the functionality and imaginative use of UGC on all social media platforms. Social media platforms can be described as a mediator that uses the link between customers and brands. Influencer marketing aims to deliver a brand message to the broader market through social networking sites (Berne-Manero et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). Compared to traditional marketing methods, influencer marketing creates additional motivation for user engagement on social media platforms. A message delivered on these sites can be very engaging and include motion, sound, and sight (Haimson & Tang, 2017). Bar-Anan et al. (2007) found that distance is a vital component in social psychology and has a significant influence on the quality of the online content experience. Liu and Wu (2019) developed a cognitive paradigm based on social psychologists Nira Liberman and Yaacov Trope's construal level theory (CLT) that maintains that psychological distance influences how people think of objects and social events as either real or abstract. People prefer to concentrate on primary and abstract

knowledge at higher levels, such as value for money, cost, and product feature. At lower levels, people like to focus on non-essential and factual details such as deals and payment methods. CLT theory refers to four types of psychological distance: hypothetical, spatial, temporal, and social (Tseng & Hsieh, 2019). Chou and Lien (2012) found that social space plays a crucial role in purchasing decisions depending on the degree to which multiple persons or classes are situated in the social medium. Similarly, Yan, Sengupta, and Hong (2016) suggest that the more significant the interpersonal gap between people, the less they regard someone as similar to themselves. Lii, Pant, and Lee (2012) add that resemblance and familiarity minimise psychological distance through visual fluidity. Thus, social networking can have a robust social impact as it reduces the psychological difference between the buyer (international students) and the seller (educational providers).

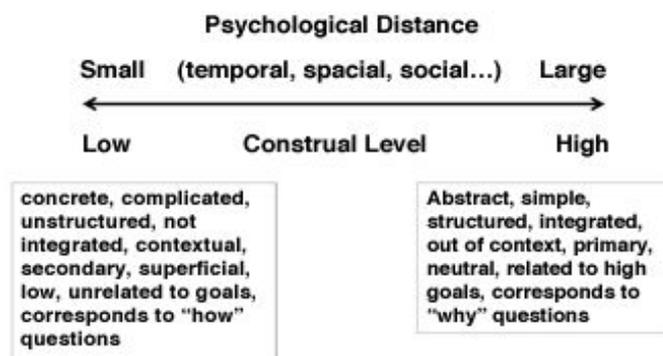


Figure 3: Construal Level Theory of Psychological Distance

Another measurement of the psychological impact of social network sites is the principle of intelligence forging (Tartari & Lutaj, 2021). Tartaji and Lutaj (2021) claim that consumers are entirely reliant on environmental indicators for their perception, acquisition, assessment, and quest for knowledge (Pirulli, 2007). Berg, Stylianou, and Mezei (2018) define intelligence forging as dynamic UGC generated in real-time through text messages, live videos, and feedback on a live-streaming platform. The position of social media platforms can play a critical role in deciding environmental predictors, especially in terms of serendipity. According to McCay-Peet and Toms (2011), serendipity implies the unintentional, unforeseen, and unexpected. The accidental discovery of users' actions on a live-streaming site shows users' choice items affected

by environmental indicators (Liu, Gu, Ko, & Liu, 2020). Stemming from this, the foraging theory of knowledge proposes three consumer involvement mechanisms: (1) product interactivity, (2) instant contact, and (3) peer-related. Here, the commodity's interactivity signifies product confusion reduction through successful live streaming contact (Pirolli, 2007). Pirolli (2007) also recommends marketers produce high-quality commodity information shows, show product features, and provide several sources of information. The real-time three-way contract between the seller (streamer), buyer, and the peer is what qualifies this phenomenon as an observed phenomenon.

In addition to product promotion, user experience is also important. Given the significance of communication in the social media user experience, Li, Tan, Wei, and Wang (2017) suggest that communication immediacy signifies a concomitant use of verbal and non-verbal flexible communication in real-time for an immersive and dynamic user engagement. Peer cues are based on the active exchange of data between peer users, generating unexpected triggers. In this exchange of information, the role of information posted on social media sites may become critical as it can trigger product preferences among peers. This can drive peer users to seek, acquire, and collect data for planned products (Berg et al., 2018). One might argue that social media can exert the necessary social influence on buyers and peer groups, with a likely impact on education (Liu et al., 2020).

2.4.3.3 The most popular Chinese social media platforms

Current international students entering universities for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes belong to Generation Z. According to Bresman and Rao (2017), the current generations can be mainly divided into four groups – Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born 1966-1976), Generation Y (born 1977-1994), and Generation Z (born 1995-2012). In China, generation X is sometimes referred to as the "lost" generation, and they tend to be more traditional and conservative and spend most of their time on online chatting, playing games, and watching the news. Generation Z, who have grown up in the Internet era, spend an average of two hours a day watching videos on social media platforms such as Douyin (TikTok) or Bilibili. Generation Y is less brand loyal and has more diverse characteristics, with the majority of Generation Y preferring traditional social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo (Du & Howden, 2019). As mentioned, Generation Z has grown up in a digital environment and lives in a

world where computers and apps are widely used and accessible. Rather than relying on someone else, people of Generation Z tend to search for information themselves via various social media platforms, and former international students' word-of-mouth references and shared life experiences concerning study abroad are regarded as inspiring (Du & Howden, 2019; Laurenza, Quintano, Schiavone, & Vrontis, 2018). With over one billion users, China is home to some of the world's largest social and messaging networks. Three types of social media platforms currently dominate China, as shown in the table below.

Table 2: The Most Popular Social Media Platforms in China

Types of Social Media	Example	Function
Search Engine	WeChat (Whatsapp-like mobile app), Weibo (Twitter-like mobile and Internet app), and QQ (Facebook Messenger-like app).	Send message, make online payments, share contents (including messages, pictures and videos), and advertising.
Video and Live-Streaming Platforms	Douyin, TikTok, and Bilibili.	Real-time interaction, highly social, engaging, immediate, and immersive experience of short videos and other derivative contents (e.g. animation, comics, and online games).
SEO, SEM, or Q & A platforms	Zhihu, Douban, and Youdao	Answer questions, exchange ideas, translation, online curriculum, and a variety of information search options.

There are a number of similarities and differences between these three types of social media. First, they are all interactive in essence, which is why they are so popular in China and elsewhere. The search engines (or online communication apps) mentioned above enable people to send messages to one another and share information in various forms, while video platforms and third-category platforms (SEO, SEM, or Q & A platforms) now have interactive features. Bilibili and Zhihu, for example, both allow users to send private messages to other users from their home page, and they can also pay for answers to specific questions (Wang, 2022). Furthermore, they all have targeted algorithms to display what a specific user likes the most, which means they are closer to

the preferences of different groups of people, particularly the younger generation, as previously discussed.

In terms of differences between these platforms, information sharing among friends and relatives ranks higher in search engines than other platforms, which is why this study focuses on WOAs (one of the functions of WeChat). Other platforms, on the other hand, attract more strangers (Sindermann, Yang, Yang, Elhai, & Montag, 2022). There are also significant differences in the seriousness (or orientation) of information. WOAs, Q&A, and tool platforms like Zhihu and Youdao, for example, are more knowledge-based. In comparison to the entertainment contents conveyed by livestreaming platforms, those knowledge-specific platforms are more interested in promoting social issues and bringing people together to discuss a specific topic; advertisements or entertainment are more like added value for them (Irawan, Supriyatna, Miharni, Keni, & Anggarina, 2022).

2.4.3.4 E-WOM

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is widely regarded as one of the most effective methods of influencing consumers' decision-making process, and it has a large amount of leverage because consumers often trust their peers more than anyone else (Lee & Youn, 2009; Sen & Lerman, 2007). Since the introduction of the Internet, the power of word-of-mouth has become even greater (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Online WOM platforms, also known as electronic WOM (e-WOM), are an important source of information and play an important role in shaping consumers' attitudes towards their own decision-making process (Sipilä et al., 2017). Consumer-generated content, such as blogs, virtual communities, social media sites, and media files are all examples of eWOM platforms. Although comparable to traditional WOM, eWOM has numerous distinguishing features including allowing consumers to express themselves more openly without disclosing their identity (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Consumers are encouraged to share their experiences with others in order to assist other consumers to obtain information about products, services, and even post-purchase experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Because eWOM can be anonymous, judging the reliability and trustworthiness of feedback on platforms can be challenging. As a result, consumers frequently seek information from a variety of sources (Lee & Youn, 2009).

2.4.3.5 WOAs

WOA is a business purpose account that allows individuals or businesses to publish content for commercial purposes, similar to a Facebook Page – a public account used by many organisations. WOA enables businesses to attract followers, but it also serves as a communication tool for businesses to influence and communicate with their followers. Its popularity and effectiveness are undeniable, with over 25 million WOAs on the platform (Guo et al., 2017).

Of all the social media platforms sweeping China nowadays, WOAs play a fundamental role in stimulating Chinese students' aspirations to study abroad. According to Cheung and Chen (2018), WOAs regularly push a wide variety of information to users with one-way communication. Potential international students can thus capture the key messages communicated by specific agents. Furthermore, the automatic reply function allows platform operators to respond quickly to users' needs, using big data to determine their preferences. To determine how the social media mechanism works on international students, Devon (2015) used the Framing and the Elaboration Likelihood Model to establish what aspects of study abroad the communicators (international offices) are choosing, either consciously or unconsciously, to make more salient on social media. The operating mechanism of WOAs can be summarised as recommendation, interaction, and feedback. In hoping to find relevant information, students may use their social network as an entry point. At the same time, WOAs provide an accessible platform for students to find recommendations and support. With WeChat and other social media, students may find it easier to get involved in a broader exchange (Goldman, 2013).

Domestic research by Chinese scholars on WOAs has focused more on the building of management platforms for international students in China. Focusing on Shanghai International Studies University, Zhang and Zhang (2020) extracted data from Python software that showed that the number of releases from May 2014 to October 2019 increased yearly. Of the 726 articles published, the total reading volume reached 323,813 person-times, while the average reading volume was about 446 person-times. The total thumb-up number was 384 times, and the average thumb-up number was 0.53 times per release. Students showed the most significant concern about activities, followed by official announcements and learning strategies. He (2019) studied the WOA

of the International Student Admission Office of Tianjin Normal University, and found that the push time of posts is mainly between 6pm and 8pm. The function menu primarily comprises enrolment information, learning in TNU, and About Us. The sub-menu for enrolment achieves the highest number of clicks, covering the admission office's daily functions.

In terms of the practical effects of WOAs, Cheung and Chen (2018) also found that the information exposure rate of WOAs can reach 100%. Thanks to the portability of mobile phones, WOAs can produce positioned promotions at any time aimed at any targeted group. Simultaneously, they also reduce the time lag between the audience and promotion push notifications, thus easing users' burden of receiving miscellaneous information. Also, students with different economic, social, cultural, and educational backgrounds can use the message function of WOAs to pass their ideas on to the operators. Through the automatic question-and-answer module embedded in WOAs, students' personalised needs in learning, living, and acculturation can be better dealt with (Liang, 2019).

Nevertheless, the assistance offered by WOAs for student recruitment is insignificant in certain circumstances. Since one-to-many mass communication represents the primary function of WOAs, it is only suitable for an accurate push if not expanded to wider contexts. However, the lack of quantitative evaluation methods also makes the promotion effect of school brands less direct. In this situation, the impact of information transmission seems better than that of school brand promotion (Wang & Fang, 2020). Deans (2012) also notes that the WOAs of some overseas education agencies are extremely homogenised and the navigation section is oversimplified. The pushed content is limited to integrating previous articles, lacking high-quality resources. Most agencies have promising projects and cooperating universities, but they prefer to be comprehensive in overall business modules and lose initiative capacity in this regard.

2.4.3.6 The impact of social media in China

China has become New Zealand's most significant source of international students, with close to 80,000 Chinese students choosing to pursue their studies in New Zealand between 2009 and 2019 (Immigration New Zealand, 2019). Traditional marketing strategies still work well for most tertiary providers in a small country like New Zealand.

However, the effective use of social media allows international students instant access to a large amount of necessary information.

While different countries have various regulations, cultures, and economic situations, educational providers must follow the most effective marketing strategies to establish efficient transnational education with consistent budgets, expenses, and course objects (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). However, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google are not allowed in China; instead, China has its own social media platforms but the world's largest social-media market is vastly different from its counterpart in the West. Thus, understanding the space is vital to anyone trying to engage Chinese consumers. Most importantly, social media is a more significant phenomenon in the second-biggest economy globally than in other nations, including the United States. However, Chinese consumers pursue the same path of decision-making as their counterparts in different countries and are reassuringly familiar with the basic rules for successfully communicating with them (Chiu, Ip, & Silverman, 2012). In 2018, the total number of active Internet users in China reached 500 million, representing 57.7% of the total population (Jiang & Kontauts, 2019).

2.4.4 Traditional channels vs. digital channels

It is clear that technology has changed students and their parents' choices and how existing students share and connect with their community. In the past, most Chinese students applied to study overseas through educational agents. Educational agents are the intermediaries between education providers and students and often play an essential role in the application process. They guide students through the application and visa procedure by helping students overcome language barriers and their limited knowledge about their choice of country and its education providers (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011).

As is generally understood, the digital era is changing how consumers behave, with social media being considered one of the most powerful tools with which to impact students' decision-making processes related to tertiary education (Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017). China's economic surpluses have accelerated travel and higher education (Lee, 2017) for a number of years, but conducting marketing activities for higher education providers through social media is not a recent phenomenon (Bado &

Nyangau, 2012). Depending on *Gaokao*, families who can afford to send their children to study overseas are looking for opportunities to counter China's overtly competitive education culture. Barnes and Mattson (2009) found out that over 89% of the universities worldwide are increasingly experimenting with social media to recruit students, with higher education institutions using social networking sites, video blogging, and blogging to reach prospective students. In a similar study, Spraggon (2011) argues that higher education institutions use social media for branding, but they lack a coherent social-network marketing strategy.

Choudaha (2013) argues that social media's universe does not belong entirely to Google+, Twitter, MySpace, and Facebook. What local social media platforms do is fill the gap between culture and language by bringing end-users or consumers as close as possible to the product or service (Khan, 2013). Therefore, from the marketing perspective of higher education, the localisation of social media through local social networking and regional web pages is extremely advantageous. Choudaha (2013) discusses how The University of Kentucky College of Arts and Science created localised pages on websites in China, such as Sina, Weibo, and Renren, to advertise its available programmes to Chinese students. Such engagement through Chinese social media platforms helps universities make their content visible to a more 'receptive' customer base than "carpet bombing" them .

Moreover, Heffring (2012) argues that localisation is not just about local language or local web pages but about effective localisation strategies that successfully create a local 'fan' community. An Alumni event can be an excellent example of a feasible approach. Columbia International University is one such example where an Alumni event has been used successfully for connecting with past students through experience-sharing, counselling, and reunions (Makrez, 2011).

2.5 Identifying the research gap

Social media is regarded as a new-age digital marketing means with a unique capacity that can help brands attract a particular audience, communicate, guide, and establish a long-term relationship with potential consumers through an eWoM marketing strategy (Riegner, 2007; Xue & Zhou, 2011). An examination of the literature shows there are a number of gaps in this area of study. Those researchers who have recognised the

influence of social media on its users and their education decisions have given more attention to platforms like Facebook and Weibo, while few dabble in the influence of WOAs. Even though researchers may recognise the importance of platforms such as WeChat and its accompanying WOAs, most of their research tends to focus narrowly on the social function of the platforms. This means that there is little attention given to the influence of WOAs on promoting education decisions. Thus, this research plans to analyse the specific impact of WOAs on international students, especially those who hope to study abroad, and to gather more relevant information from WOAs. To be more specific, many researchers have focused on the influence of WeChat, especially its communicative characteristic, yet few findings are related to the impact of its additional function-public accounts. According to researchers like Godwin-Jones (2016), the advantages of social media can mainly be attributed to cross-cultural learning and communication. Little attention has been paid to the effective promotion, social network extension, and integrated development brought about by the WOAs. Moreover, even though some scholars have recognised the importance of WOAs in overseas education, most studies conducted in China have continued to focus on the management of overseas students in Chinese colleges and universities, and almost none have explored the role of WOAs from the perspective of higher education institutions. This constitutes a large research gap.

This research examined the WOAs of eight New Zealand universities in order to understand how the WOAs assist Chinese students in their search for information about tertiary education options and what information is publicised or highlighted by those official WOAs. As well as Lincoln University and Victoria University of Wellington, six other universities have an existing WOA. After the initial research of the six institutions' WOAs, the underlying reasons for the research gap can be divided into three categories: (1) Most overseas education providers are aware of the promotional opportunities of the Internet and social media. However, few of them have designed different functional sections based on the needs of potential students, or the content is not pushed in a timely way, and thus fail to attract users' attention for an extended period. (2) Prior qualitative researches have mainly concentrated on feedback from students, educational agents, or academic staff, and the views and traffic of WOAs themselves are often ignored. (3) Some educational providers rely heavily on traditional recruitment

channels. Even if they use social media such as WeChat, the ultimate purpose is to introduce educational agents to the student recruitment process. Therefore, the information interaction function of WOAs is weakened.

Having looked at the gaps in the current research, this research intends to explore the operation of educational WOAs based on SIM theory and utilise feedback from information senders and receivers to fill the gap in current domestic and foreign researches on the role of WOAs in the decision-making process of Chinese students when choosing a tertiary education provider. The following table summarises key research gaps, as well as key findings from the push and pull framework and literature on WOAs, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Table 3: Key Research Gaps and Main Findings

Key studies	Main findings	Research gaps
Guo et al. (2017); Dillard & Shen (2013); Devon (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WOA is a business account that allows individuals or businesses to publish content for commercial purposes, attract followers, and communicate with them. • WOAs improve the efficiency of response and collaboration between agents and the audience. • A WOA is a helpful platform for students to get information, recommendations, interaction, and feedback. • Framing and the Elaboration Likelihood Model support the evaluation of the considerations/critical information selected by the international education offices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overlooks the feedback mechanism of WOA (i.e., two-way communication). • Does not take the information types, channels, sources, and external links into account.
Zhang (2020); He (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some Chinese universities have established their own WOAs and applied them to attract international students. • The best push time is between 6pm to 8pm. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not take a step further to look into the top considerations of international students and the most attractive forms of expression.
Cheung & Chen (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WOAs help promote information to users with one-way attention. • With a high shooting rate and shortened time lag, a WOA is more targeted and efficient in meeting individual needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overlooks two-way exchange.
Wang & Fang (2020); Deans (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information transmission facilitated by a WOA may be more effective than school brand promotion. • Homogenised WOA contents: some overseas education agencies prefer to display their information comprehensively and in an oversimplified way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses narrowly on existing students while giving no details about the successful features of WOAs in attracting prospective students. • Fails to put forward solutions to the homogenised content.
Wang (2007); Waters (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major drivers for Chinese students to consider studying overseas: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses mainly on the macro factors that influence students' education preference

Sánchez et al. (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient education resources: the education system in China cannot satisfy the needs of Chinese students for higher education. • Economic development: many Chinese families can now afford to support their children's overseas education. • Government flexibility: students are allowed to study freely abroad. • Future aspiration: students hope to move up the social ladder by gaining international qualifications. • Pull factors of overseas education: the reputation and security level of the nation and education providers, living costs, location, employment and immigration opportunities. 	<p>while caring little about the students' personal/family/social conditions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The macro/visionary factors put forward are difficult to quantify.
Li and Bray (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reverse push-pull factors (push factors in host countries): a desire to stay with one's family, knowledge of the importance of domestic education, and accelerating internationalisation of domestic institutions. • Reverse push factors: rising tuition costs and other expenditures for higher education, restrictive policies on international students, and stricter immigration policies. • Improvement of the push and pull factor framework: academic (education opportunity and education quality), economic (family assets, macro-economic prosperity, and investment in human capital), social and cultural (aspiration for Western culture and filial piety), and political considerations (less competitive college entrance system, employment and migration opportunities). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The summary of pull factors is mainly based on previous literature and experience, which lacks updated considerations. • Neglects the role of modern technologies and channels, such as information technology and social media. • The interviews with students in this research are relatively out-of-date. Thus the experience drawn is not reliable for further research. • Fails to consider the mixed challenges and opportunity costs experienced by students.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

3.1 Chapter overview

First of all, Section 3.2 describes how the research was carried out and discusses the research methodology, followed by the data collection methods (Section 3.3) and the research design used in this study (Section 3.4). Section 3.5 outlines the data collection procedures, while Section 3.6 addresses the ethical considerations when conducting WOA observations. Section 3.7 introduces the demographic background of the interview participants, and Section 3.8 discusses the data analysis technique and procedures. Lastly, section 3.9 summarises the chapter.

3.2 Research methodology

3.2.1 Exploratory qualitative research

The criteria for choosing appropriate research methodologies were based on the research questions and the understanding that quantitative and qualitative approaches are the most common methodologies used in marketing research (Hu, 2017). Although the qualitative method may not allow a high degree of generalisation through statistical analysis, it provides the researcher with a comprehensive insight to analyse lived experiences and clarify underlying social phenomena (Hu, 2017; Silverman, 2017).

In this study, the main research question was to determine the role of social media, WOAs in particular, in Chinese students' choice of a tertiary education provider in New Zealand. The primary research question aimed at revealing descriptive and interpretive insights into the decision-making process of Chinese international students. With this aim, the research was unlikely to meet the criteria of hypothesis development for any deductive analysis. Furthermore, the non-specific aspect of the research question made this study exploratory rather than explanatory. This allowed the researcher some leeway in describing and comprehending the decision-making process of Chinese international students in detail. Thus, the qualitative approach was the most appropriate for investigating these issues. The focus was on how Chinese international students perceive content on WOAs and how those WOAs influence their decision-making process when choosing a tertiary provider. The qualitative components of this study

included the observation and analysis of the posts promoted by these WOAs and semi-structured interviews.

3.2.2 The inductive approach

Because of the exploratory nature of this research, the researcher adopted the inductive approach for qualitative data analysis for two reasons.

First, this study investigated the perspective of Chinese students and their individual experiences of information searching in the digital space and their decision-making process related to WOAs. Because this research aimed to obtain knowledge of the significance of WOAs and their impact on the decision-making process of Chinese students, an inductive, interpretive methodology was the best fit.

The second criterion for selecting the inductive approach was that its objectives were consistent with the design of this study. The inductive approach is used to observe patterns or findings in the data and to develop a concept or theory based on the researcher's conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inductive approach is a structured method for evaluating contextual data that is motivated by particular appraisal objectives. The approach produces findings focused on constant, prevailing, or relevant patterns implicit throughout the original data without constraints enforced by structured methods (Thomas, 2006). It critically describes the phenomenon, process, perspectives, and worldviews of the people involved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inductive approach attempts to compress raw data into a simple version, create direct ties between the research goals, summarises critical findings, and construct a model about the underlying nature of experiences, procedures, or expectations extracted from textual data (Liu, 2016). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the inductive approach emphasises the personal context and the significance of interpreting the nature of a scenario. In this study, the researcher analysed the data and found that the relevance of the data depended on each participant's individual experience in social media. The approach of this research had the same objectives in that it attempted to summarise the description of Chinese students into themes and create links between the research goal and these themes. This ensured that, regardless of how the social media impact was perceived by Chinese students, an inductive approach was still the best fit for the research (Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Liu, 2016).

3.3 Data analysis methods

Thematic analysis was used as an analytical experimental tool for systematically defining, arranging, and developing observations into the different themes that appeared as a pattern in the research. Thematic analysis has been described as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Clarke & Braun, 2006). Compared to the quantitative method for analysing sales values, conversion rates, media value, and click-through rates, the thematic analysis helped explore the subjective realities of the phenomena. As an observational, experimental tool, the thematic study allowed the researcher to see and understand the common or cultural context of social media experience (Braun, Clarke, Terry & Hayfield, 2019). Moreover, thematic analysis can also make the research more flexible as it allows the researcher to extend the data basis, either theoretically or epistemologically (Johnson, 2020).

Thematic analysis was also used to clarify the data base before conducting the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To answer the research questions, the researcher prepared by observing 10 selected WOAs related to the education sector in New Zealand and conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Chinese students currently studying in an English language school in Chengdu, China. The researcher carefully selected this particular group to ensure they had experience using WOAs to search for information about studying overseas.

3.4 Research design

In recent years, qualitative data collection approaches such as interview, observation, and document review have been grouped under the umbrella category of ethnographic methods (Kawulich, 2005). The data generated in this study came from in-depth interviews with Chinese students. In qualitative analysis, observation, especially participant observation, has been used in several disciplines to gather data about individuals, procedures, and cultures. In this study, data collection and participant observation were regarded as having equal importance. Specifically, the researcher undertook pre-interview observations of the posts of several New Zealand universities' WOAs, aiming to get a general understanding of their contents and to summarise the specific accounts this research aimed to study. Its researcher then took a step further by

interviewing the participants in a semi-structured way. The interviews aimed to look into the effect of WOAs on Chinese students' preference for tertiary institutions abroad. In the data collection, reasonable sized sampling was employed, followed by careful coding and analysis as the foundation for the discussion in Chapter 4. It is important to note that the whole process of interviewing and data collection prioritized ethical considerations and the interviewees' privacy. Fuller details are provided below.

3.4.1 Pre-interview preparation

Sampling in online observations drew from WOAs. The observational sampling consisted of what the researcher observed while viewing WOA posts. Online observation was a challenge as it required the researcher to make a relatively long-term commitment to gain detailed insight into posts by the WOAs; however, the researcher made use of observational method (Ellis, 2021; Kawulich, 2005). The technique helped in evaluating viewers' engagement level with the posts in an official WOA account and identifying the most popular posts that attracted viewers' feedback about a particular topic.

To prepare for the interviews, the researcher observed a number of WOA posts related to the education industry, particularly in New Zealand. Observation means to gather evidence obtained by the process of observation. The observation was conducted as per the process outlined below.

To select WOA benchmarks, the researcher first searched all the eight universities in New Zealand, six of which have their own WOAs. Further, two top educational consultancy companies were identified based on their performance – IDP Education Ltd and Byron International Group. IDP Education Ltd is a global educational company that sends students to Australia, New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and Canada. IDP Australia collaborates with the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations and the British Council for IELTS examinations. The company has played a significant role in worldwide education and development for almost 50 years, establishing a vast network of opportunities with offices in over 30 countries (IDP, n.d.). Byron International Group was founded in 1994 and is New Zealand's oldest educational company. Byron International Group's headquarters are in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, with Christchurch, Shanghai, and Seoul branches. As an industry leader in New Zealand, Byron represents all eight universities in the

country and has been ranked as the number one agent for the University of Auckland for five years in a row. Byron excels when representing other universities such as Auckland University of Technology and the University of Otago (Byron, n.d.).

Because the purpose of the research was to determine potential international Chinese students' experience with WOAs, a current international student who is the owner of a WOA was included in the research to share their expertise about New Zealand, Auckland, and the University of Auckland. Lastly, Education New Zealand's WOA is recognised as the official government account for advice on studying abroad in New Zealand. Chinese international students are encouraged to use the tool to help them get to know New Zealand. Education New Zealand's WeChat shares stories and information with international students and allows students to search for programmes and education providers.

In summary, 10 WOAs related to New Zealand education were selected: two well-known educational consultancy companies, six New Zealand universities, an educational government agency, and an account managed by an international student from the University of Auckland. The selection represented a range of content from agents, government, tertiary providers, and international students. Table 4 below outlines the name of each account, the nature of each business, and a short description of each business and why their account is chosen.

Table 4: WOAs Selected for the Research

Name of the WOA	Type of Business	Description
IDP Australia and New Zealand	Educational Consultancy	One of the largest B2B education consultancies globally with 35 offices worldwide. The account has information about studying in Australia and New Zealand, and includes 168 articles.
Byron International	Educational Consultancy	The largest agency based in Auckland, New Zealand, with an office in Shanghai, China. The official account has 464 articles and focuses on education and immigration to New Zealand.
UoA Box	University of Auckland's student account	An account registered by a University of Auckland student with information about UoA from an international student's perspective and 114 articles.
Education New Zealand	Government Agency	ENZ's official account providing information about education in New Zealand from primary to tertiary level. The account has 580 articles.
Auckland University of Technology	University in New Zealand	AUT's international office's official account focuses on everything international students need to know about the university.
University of Auckland	University in New Zealand	The official account posts up to three articles every week and has information available to international students about the university.
University of Waikato	University in New Zealand	The account was registered in September 2020 and only has seven articles as this is a relatively new account.
University of Canterbury	University in New Zealand	U.C.'s international office's official account has 17 articles.
Massey University	University in New Zealand	This is run by Massey's international office and has 115 articles.
University of Otago	University in New Zealand	The official account has 76 articles and has information about the university.

In the second stage, the most popular posts were selected for analysis and to direct warming up questions during the interviews with students. Data were obtained from ten WOAs by photographing the top-ranked posts and comments. The researcher recorded all details in an Excel spreadsheet for future review. The researcher translated the critical points of the article summaries from Chinese into English as well as the most popular comments. Among the welcome posts, the researcher also chose issues of significant concern to Chinese students according to the China Annual Conference for International Education & Expo (e.g., academic resources, support facilities, and teaching staff at the universities) and asked the interviewees to go through these posts before participating in the interviews. The interviewees were also asked to note their reflections on the posts in order to share them with the interviewer, indicating their interests or concerns. During the interviews, the researcher asked the participants to discuss their opinions about the WeChat posts and answer relevant questions in order to understand Chinese students' preferences regarding specific posts.

Based on the university, discipline, faculty, and infrastructure presented in the following four types of WeChat posts (plain text posts, image posts, video posts, and combination posts), the author refined the fundamental concerns of the students and the core information the institutions desired to present to the targeted students. The analysis included randomly selecting sample posts and showing them to the participants to get them involved in the interviews. The critical information contained in these posts also suggested what the tertiary institutions valued about themselves and what information they wanted to share with visitors. To investigate the research issues, descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and underlying pattern identification were carried out using NVivo. The researcher also looked at existing WOAs to understand the trend and used the sample posts as warming up questions during the interviews to better prepare for the complete interviews. According to the researcher's findings, there are four distinct ways to present WOAs.

1. Plain text posts

Compared to other formats, plain text message posts allow users to see the content directly. Editing and publishing text message posts is the easiest, most intuitive, and most traffic-saving practice. In many scenarios, it is time and traffic consuming for users

to open a tweet that contains images or videos. However, the disadvantages of text posts are also evident, particularly the fact that they cannot share a more significant amount of information. The presentation of the text is also relatively simple and boring. Therefore, it is generally more appropriate to use text messages for short messages of the notification type.

2. Image posts

An image post can be a step up from a text message by presenting the text in the form of a picture. A picture is better than words, and graphics are more powerful than text. An image post is commonly used for an event. The downside is that an image post consumes more data than a text message.

3. Video posts

Because videos can be posted as part of a combination of posts, few WOAs post videos directly. The video files are relatively large and consume a large amount of data therefore, even if a video message is posted, users may not open the post to watch it. In addition, WeChat stipulates that the size of a video message posted by a WOA must not exceed 20 MB, limiting video content. Therefore, it is relatively uncommon for WOAs to post video messages.

4. Combination posts

Most WOAs push content that combines text, images, and video to increase the readability and viewability of the posts and encourage more interaction. Combination posts can also include music, audio, or even polling functions based on the user's characteristics and the company's needs. However, adding too much multimedia content can cause great inconvenience to users and slow down the page opening speed, which requires editors to use multimedia features wisely according to the content they publish.



Figure 4: The types of WOA content

3.4.2 In-depth interviews

This study investigated social media's effect on Chinese students' tertiary institution decision-making process, focusing on WOAs. To determine this effect, rich data from in-depth interviews were collected, and detailed information on the factors that could affect the results of the findings was sought. For this study, interviewing was considered an appropriate research approach. Even though conducting, transcribing, and evaluating

several interviews is more time-consuming than quantitative analysis, interviews are the most commonly utilised qualitative study approach, according to Bryman (2007).

The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions, so participants had the opportunity to talk about their experiences at flexible lengths, and exploratory questions were asked. Semi-structured interviews, according to Bryman (2007), typically require the use of interview manuals and question lists on particular topics; the questions on the agenda cannot always be posted by interviewers, enabling them to change and explain their questions or be selective based on the ambiguity of interviewees' responses. The specific method allowed the researcher to probe the interview questions when the interviewees did not understand the questions completely. The researcher decided to use the participants' first language to conduct the interviews. This was to make sure the participants understood the questions and felt more comfortable expressing their thoughts or asking questions throughout the interview.

While focus groups (group interviews) can quickly produce a massive volume of data, individual interviews were selected for this research. The researcher decided against a focus group because of challenges that group interviews can bring up. For instance, it can take a long time for participants to get familiar with each other and feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences. In contrast, one-to-one interviews allow the interviewees to express themselves.

For this research, data were collected through the most popular virtual meeting application – the Zoom meeting. This allowed attendees to join meetings on mobile phones, laptops or desktops. This approach took into consideration the cultural and language barriers that Chinese students may face when conducting interviews. As a result, reliable data were obtained, allowing a clear interpretation of the participants' experiences.

3.4.3 Interview techniques

Interview techniques should be decided on before any interviews are undertaken so that a researcher can follow a guideline to conduct trustworthy interviews (Opdenakker, 2006). Interview questions play an essential role in the interview process, so when

designing the interview questions, the researcher followed the techniques outlined below (Salmon, Pipe, Malloy, & Mackay, 2012):

- Questions must be brief and straightforward. Specifically, broad questions that have no direct relevance to the research topic must not be selected.
- Questions must focus on a single issue or topic to avoid misunderstandings caused by irrelevant information. In this research, the research focused on the impact of WOAs and other social media was rarely considered.
- Questions must be grammatically simple to ensure all the interviewees, regardless of their age, education, or social background, understand the questions well.
- “Leading” questions should be avoided during an interview. The researcher should not ask questions that guide the interviewees towards a specific answer or add any subjective opinion.
- Overstatement is also discouraged when conducting interviews, as this can place undue emphasis on some aspects of the topic that should not show up.

In summary, in the interview process, the researcher tried to ensure that the questions were specific, explicit, and with no leading or provocative aim to ensure that the results obtained were authentic. The interviewees were not guided to provide specific answers to help the researcher achieve any predicted answers. (The interview questions can be found in Appendix D)

3.5 Data collection procedures

3.5.1 Sampling

Farrugia (2019) refers to data processing and interpretation as the sampling approach. Coyne (1997) maintains that the researcher should be able to identify the group of interviewees using an approach based on the participants’ age, ethnicity, profession and where the best location is to collect samples in the initial stage of a study.

As the purpose of using WOAs varies, prospective international students view posts to search for and collect information to help them to choose a study destination. In contrast, international students in New Zealand use the same channel to meet their daily needs. Therefore, the researcher decided to focus on Chinese students in China who

were planning to study in a foreign country on either undergraduate or postgraduate programmes. It was more reliable to research the English language students in China than those who had been studying in New Zealand for several years.

Chinese students studying academic English courses at the Amazing IELTS English Language School were selected and invited to participate in the research. The researcher contacted the founder of the Chengdu-based English language school and asked the founder's permission to reach out to the school's students through an email invitation. The vast majority of students who study IELTS at an English language school in China intend to study overseas. Selecting a particular group of students from the same educational provider ensured the interviewees had the same intention to study in a foreign country in the first place, and most of them had relatively targeted institution choices. For example, students who aspired to governance or macroeconomy were likely to prefer institutions that have a good reputation in public policy.

The reason for choosing an education provider in Chengdu was because it is the provincial capital of Sichuan – China's panda capital – which formalised its sister city relationship with Hamilton, New Zealand, in 2015 (Hamilton City Council, 2015). Moreover, access to education in Chengdu surpasses that of many of its rivals, ranking seventh place among all Chinese cities (Education New Zealand, 2018). Furthermore, in 2017, the passenger numbers transiting through Chengdu's airport were the fourth highest in China, reaching 49.8m. In 2017, Chengdu's tertiary sector remained the most significant contributor to the economy, at 53.2% of the total GDP, compared to a 43.2% share for the secondary industries over the same period (Education New Zealand, 2018). Education links are also gaining momentum. Several New Zealand education institutions, such as the University of Auckland and Unitec Institute of Technology, have formal relations with partner institutions in Chengdu, while others are benefiting from the opening of the New Zealand Consulate-General office, the Immigration New Zealand office, and the direct flights between Chengdu and Auckland.

3.5.2 Interview sampling

In qualitative research, the first stage is to select participants willing to express their personal experiences and those who have an intimate and immediate understanding of the research topic (Gill, 2020). This means that interviewees can assist the researcher in

understanding the study phenomena by sharing their perspectives related to the research topic.

3.5.3 Sample size

Young and Casey (2019) address the relevance of predetermining the study's sample size. Even if there are no definitive criteria for predicting sample size, as a researcher, it is vital to obtain sufficiently high-quality data to answer the research questions. It may be that the prescribed sample size is unrealistic, or the area of research requires extra participants; therefore, it is acknowledged that the optimal sample size will adjust as the investigation develops (Gill, 2020). A broad sample scale is usually used for quantitative studies, while qualitative samples can be much smaller, focusing on exploring a phenomenon in detail (Hennink, Kaiser, & Weber, 2019).

Sample sizes may differ dramatically based on each research type. A qualitative study is based on text interpretation — mostly captured by individual participants in interview formats (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). According to Cobern and Adams (2020), an interview evaluates the interviewees' perceptions. Even if a research uses a qualitative approach, the interviewer has to interview enough participants to get all potential opinions. In other words, a reasonably large sample size can bring more comprehensive insights into the research questions. The purpose of qualitative interviews is to collect most of these opinions, if not all, and to interview a sufficient number of people so that finally no new views are provided (Seidman, 2019). The interviews aim to identify opinions and then approach a level of saturation. Since opinions may vary among interviewees, the fundamental meaning of their statements should be extracted to avoid misunderstanding or conflicts (Cobern & Adams, 2020).

Although there is no straightforward answer concerning an acceptable sample size for qualitative studies (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017), Gibson, Underwood, and Cobern (1999) found that they had reached saturation in their research after 16 interviews. However, other researchers have concluded that saturation of themes can be reached anywhere between 7 and 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Francis et al. (2010) recommend that researchers undertake a minimum of 10 interviews before screening for saturation. Galvin (2015) maintains that 14 interviews are sufficient to identify themes shared by 20% of the population with 95% certainty. More recently,

many researchers have proposed that a research's most prevalent themes can be identified and that code saturation can be reached after an average of 9 to 14 interviews (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Hennink, Kaiser, & Weber, 2019). Based on the previous literature, the researcher proposed that the data gathering process in this study would be halted after data saturation had been attained. The researcher conducted 31 interviews and found that the coding created from responses supplied by the last respondents merely added to existing conceptual categories and did not lead to the establishment of any new ones.

3.5.4 Recruitment for interviews

After approval was gained from the Ethics Committee at the Auckland University of Technology, the researcher approached the principal of Amazing IELTS English Language School in Chengdu, China, to get permission to recruit prospective students who intended to study in a tertiary institution overseas after the completion of their English study.

A purposive sampling process was adopted because the interviewees needed to have experience with WOAs when thinking about their tertiary education overseas in order to articulate their experience. Purposive sampling can be tailored to the specific objectives of the research, assisting both the researcher and those who may benefit from focusing on a specific population. To select interviewees, the study uses homogeneous sampling. Participants, for example, are all Chinese students studying at Amazing IELTS English Language School in Chengdu who hope to study abroad in the future. Because the research aims to determine the influence of WOA on students' decisions for overseas education, homogeneous sampling is used to ensure that they share at least the aspiration for overseas education. These similar characteristics among interviewees help to reduce the sampling scale and make the results more relevant to the Chinese overseas education market.

Each interview took between 30 minutes to an hour and was conducted in Mandarin and audiotaped. All interviewees were awarded Whittaker's chocolate worth about \$10, purchased at Taobao and sent to the students to show appreciation of their participation in this research.

3.5.5 Interview Framework

The interview process can be divided into three parts. Firstly, the participants will be asked to read the two selected WOA posts (from Massey University and Auckland University) within five minutes, in order to help them get an initial recognition of the WOA contents. Later, the participants will be invited to share their feelings about the posts and answer the prepared questions (see Appendix D) online. The researcher will record their answer for following analysis and observe their reaction (e.g. eye contact, facial expression and body language) during the whole process. After that, the researcher will inform the participants about where the data will be used on and extend gratitude for their contribution.

Participation was entirely voluntary, all responses were handled with strict confidentiality, and there were no ethical threats in this research. A participant electronic information sheet containing information about the research purpose and the interview procedures was sent to the participants before the interview session to inform them about the interview steps and to obtain their consent. It was requested that both documents be return to the researcher by email.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Executing high-quality research entails more than just performing detailed analysis: it often includes complying with ethical research standards (Peng, 2017). In particular, the employment of the interview method raises ethical issues about the participants' privacy and right to know when participating in an interview.

To address this issue, the researcher first applied for the approval of the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) to ensure that the inclusion of Chinese students in this study complied with academic ethics. The approval was granted on 21 July 2021, under the AUTEC application number 21/251. After obtaining the approval, the researcher approached the principal of Amazing IELTS English Language School, Danqi Di, and explained the research and asked Danqi's permission to send an email invitation to the students studying at the institution.

- This research used various safeguards to assure the participants' rights and avoid ethical concerns. The following ethics documents were included:

- An email invitation was sent to the students at Amazing IELTS English Language School through the institution.
- A participant information sheet was sent to each of the participants who accepted the invitation to be part of the study, explaining the purpose and scope of the research and the participant's rights to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality.
- A consent form was also distributed to each interviewee.

Educational researchers often gather data in another language (Eaton, 2020). Based on the participants' level of English proficiency, the researcher decided to conduct all the interviews in their first language of Mandarin to better engage with them. By using their first language, each participant was given a complete and detailed description of the procedure before the interviews and was fully informed about the research and the interview procedures orally. Throughout the interview process, interviewees were granted the right to ask questions or address any issues they might have. Furthermore, they were told that they would remain anonymous and that no personal questions would be addressed without their consent.

3.7 Demographic profile of the participants

After explaining the research purpose and the participant selection criteria, the researcher sent emails to 37 students from the Amazing IELTS English Language School, who had been selected according to the homogeneous standard and remained anonymous for this research. The emails also informed students that their privacy would be safeguarded before, during, and after the research. The researcher received the list of 37 students from the principal of the Amazing IELTS English Language School, Mrs Danqi Di. The list contained students' names, email addresses and their WeChat IDs to allow the researcher to send them an email invitation with details about the research. A total of 31 students responded to the invitation and agreed to participate in the interviews. The Appendix C includes an overview of the interviewees' profiles. The researcher conducted 11 interviews between July and August of 2021, then 20 interviews in December 2021.

All 31 participants were studying English to improve their English language skills to meet the English entry requirements at their desired overseas university for either

undergraduate or postgraduate study. According to the principal, females dominate the sample because the English Language School has more female students than male students, so the proportion of female students was relatively higher than that of male students when the sample was chosen. Even though female participants were overrepresented, the sample demonstrated an adequate representation of the participants' level of educational background. In total 54.8% of the participants were hoping to study for a Bachelor's Degree, while 45.2% were interested in either a Master's Degree or a PhD. Most of them were preparing for the IELTS exam, while others wanted to take the TOEFL test.

During the interviews, the demographic profiles of the 31 interview participants were collected with the participants' permission. The participants' profiles are shown in Table 5 below, including information on their gender, age, and educational background.

Table 5: Demographics of the Participants

		Research Stats Count (%)
Gender	Male	8 (25.8)
	Female	23 (74.2)
Age	18-21	17 (54.8)
	22-30	10 (32.3)
	30-40	4 (12.9)
Educational Background	High School Graduate	7 (22.6)
	University Student	10 (32.3)
	University Graduate	14 (45.2)

3.8 Data analysis

The data analysis procedures that contributed to bringing the critical findings of the research to light are demonstrated in this section. Thematic analysis was used, which involves a bottom-up or inductive analytical procedure guided by the data.

Clarke and Braun (2006) define thematic analysis as a technique for detecting, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, and the six steps of the approach used in this research are discussed in the following sections.

- Familiarisation with the data

Firstly, Clarke and Braun (2006) recommend that the researchers connect and become intimately acquainted with the data obtained. In this research, iFlytek, a leading artificial intelligence (AI) voice recognition software, was used to process the voice recording of each interview and then the transcripts were carefully reviewed in Mandarin line by line. By manually translating all the transcripts from Mandarin to English, the researcher became well-acquainted with both the Mandarin and English versions of the transcripts.

- Coding

Following the interviews, the initial coding process began parallel with the data collection. NVivo was used to process the data, and each participant's transcripts were meticulously examined and subdivided into key extract phrases. The processed data will then be submitted to the supervisor and the coding process for her review to ensure the reliability of the coding data and the integrity of the entire process.

- Searching for meanings to form themes

By meticulously examining all-important codes and categories, the researcher hoped to capture the core of the data within the context of the original issue. The acquired data was divided into relevant divisions during this stage and then carefully examined for common concepts that may indicate themes. The researcher then reviewed and determined the meaning of the data by re-visiting the transcripts in both Mandarin and English to reveal clusters of acceptable purposes and identify the parallels and contrasts between participants' utterances. Eight themes were found based on the participants' shared stories at this stage.

- Reviewing themes

During this stage, the researcher first evaluated whether the selected themes were connected to the data and then identified individual themes and investigated their relationships. According to Clarke and Braun (2006), two themes may merge, one theme may be split into two or more themes, or another theme may be developed. Data for this study were carefully sorted into groups after being reviewed for similar themes throughout the themes evaluation phase. As a result, five themes were developed based on the number of times a theme was presented.

- Defining themes and modifying them where necessary

The researcher attentively analysed each of the interview participants' responses during this stage and compiled a summary of all the themes drawn from them. The researcher looked to determine if the themes presented a relevant storyline to the research topic.

- Writing up and making a composite summary

The researcher merged the themes and codes throughout the writing up step to provide the readers with reference to previous literature.

3.9 Summary

This chapter laid the methodology foundation for the statement of findings in the following chapter. It explained the selection standards of interviewees, interview design, coding process, sampling method, and morality-related considerations. The researcher chose these methods in the hope of adding further details to the methodology and improving the reliability of this research. After establishing the methodology, the researcher conducted the interviews based on the interview design and simultaneously took care of ethical problems. The interview data were coded and selected to serve the research objects. Combined with selected WOA posts, the interview results and quotes derived from the interviews will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 Findings

4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter summarises the key findings derived from the qualitative data of 31 Chinese students interviewed online. Following the thematic analysis approach established in the previous chapter, a complete overview of the findings for each interview question in the current research is provided. As this research is to investigate the role of WOAs in the decision-making process of Chinese students when selecting a higher education provider, the researcher explored the themes that emerged throughout the process. When choosing a tertiary provider in a foreign country, the participants shared their experiences of using social media platforms, particularly WOAs. Five themes were found based on the interviews:

- Theme 1: Deciding to study abroad
- Theme 2: Finding the most popular social media content
- Theme 3: Creating eye-catching social media posts
- Theme 4: How to use social media platforms
- Theme 5: Choosing a study destination

Theme 1 reveals how Chinese students' decision to study overseas is based on an information search and initial evaluation, while all 5 themes indicate the factors that influence Chinese students when choosing an international education destination. Themes 2, 3 and 4 identify factors that affect users' experience when searching for information on social media platforms, particularly WOAs. Theme 4 reveals why students use social media platforms when engaging with an education provider during the decision-making stage. Themes 3, 4 and 5 present the participants' specific social media usage experience and its effect on their application decisions.

Table 6: Five Themes and Key Codes

Theme	Key Codes
Deciding to study abroad	Information search using different platforms Evaluating information Influence of word of mouth
Finding the most popular social media content	Text-based posts Incorporating video and photo visualisation Multimedia combination of text, video clips, and images
Creating eye-catching social media posts	Use visual content to engage with users The one-stop-shop: information convenience Creating easy to understand quality content The ideal length for social media posts Newsworthy Match the headline to the story The value of originality Use colour with a purpose Typography Get to know your audience better
How to use social media platforms	To gain credibility in social media The ways to better engage with users on social media The effective frequency of social media usage Favourite social media functions The impact of price sensitivity The power of social media influencers The importance of interaction on social media
Choosing a study destination	Cost of tuition or living costs The importance of safety Ease of finding a job followed by migration Lifestyle and culture University rankings or brand Quality of the university programmes

The following questions assisted the researcher in exploring the role of WOAs in the decision-making process of Chinese students when selecting a higher education provider.

1. How do Chinese students use WOAs to search for information about tertiary education options?
2. How do contents available on WOAs affect Chinese students' choices?
3. How do WOAs influence Chinese students' decision-making process?

Although a variety of factors can impact the decision-making process of Chinese students concerning their study destination choice, in this context is various types of social media platforms (Benson et al., 2012; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011; Zwart, 2013).

4.2 The impact of social media platforms on Chinese students' decision-making process

According to China's Ministry of Education statistics, over 700,000 Chinese students studied abroad in 2019, almost quadruple the number in 2008. The United States is the most popular study destination for Chinese students, followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Germany, and Japan (Kennedy, 2019). As its largest source of international students, New Zealand welcomed over 190,000 Chinese students to study in the country between 2011 and 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2021). Understanding international students' journey in the digital space is more important than ever for any marketer, especially for higher education providers. Knowing what information Chinese students are searching for when deciding to study overseas can help education providers establish a strong strategy to increase the impact of marketers.

4.2.1 Deciding to study abroad

The data shows that in the first stage of decision making, Chinese students explore the idea of studying in a country other than China. Prospective students begin to evaluate the idea of studying in an overseas country as a viable option at this point. The main reason for Chinese students to consider studying overseas is based on number limits – China's higher education system cannot accommodate the number of students who wish to pursue a university education, especially in a prestigious university. Chinese students choose to study abroad with the expectation of gaining internationally recognised qualifications and experience that will improve their family's status and provide them with a brighter future.

At the initial stage of the decision-making process, it is common for Chinese students to look for information about overseas study opportunities from a variety of sources, such as talking to their family, friends, and teachers at school or consulting with educational agents. The researcher asked the participants about factors that may have been influencing their decisions at this stage, including the social media platforms they were relying on when comparing information in terms of fees, scholarships, rankings, and other vital factors that could influence their final decision on a university. The first developed theme is 'deciding to study abroad' which includes three codes listed in the Table 7 below.

Table 7: Deciding to study abroad Codes

Codes	Number of Quotes	Sample Quotes
Information searching using different platforms	31	"I discovered official accounts through sharing in WeChat Moments, which my friends share."
Evaluating information	22	"As a student, I would like the information on official websites to be more detailed and clearer."
Influenced by word of mouth	29	"Since my cousin is studying in this university, I have never thought of going elsewhere. I knew she had graduated, and she said the university was excellent. That is why I want to go to this university."

The first question in the interviews was whether the participants trusted the information available on the providers' official channels such as their websites, Weibo, or WeChat. Alternatively, as students they may have preferred a third-party view that included current students and Alumni. One participant, Katy, did not trust information from platforms other than the official channels. She explained:

I do not believe anything other than our university's official channels, ... in my opinion, anything else can only be used as a low-credibility reference. [Katy, female, 19 years old]

Nicole had a similar opinion about the credibility of the official channels. However, she pointed out she was more interested in international students' experiences, and she rarely saw these on the official accounts. Compared to the Chinese social media platforms, Judy felt the quality of information available in English was much better and more accurate:

I prefer the university's English social media channels over its Chinese ones, and they seem more accurate to me. [Nicole, female, 21 years old]

Laura shared a similar comment that criticised the quality of the WeChat posts available in Mandarin on official accounts. When asked why she felt the quality of some of the Chinese articles was not as good as the English ones, she explained,

I believe it is possible that the employee who wrote the articles in Mandarin for the university is not as skilled as those in that country. [Laura, female, 31 years old]

On the other hand, participants who relied on unofficial platforms such as TikTok, Zhihu or Xiaohongshu (Xiaohongshu, often termed Little Red Book, is a social media and e-commerce website) claimed they were willing to trust someone who had gone through the journey as an international student. When asked why experience sharing is important to them, many participants said it was because it gave them a sense of belonging. The participants perceived influencers to be similar to themselves, with a similar background and age group and many of the same feelings. Another of the participants, Sunny, stated several times that she trusted Zhihu more than any other official platform because she believed universities only show the best side to their students. Nonetheless, Zhihu had both positive and negative views about the

universities that were shared by other participants. While Ameko also trusted the unofficial channels, she emphasised the importance of analysing the information herself based on who had posted it. She claimed that if praise for a particular university came from a well-known KOL (Key Opinion Leader), also known as an influencer, she would be more inclined to trust the post. In other words, if the article or recommendation came from an international student, she would not have any concerns, and she would allow the post to impact her decision-making.

David was the only participant who claimed that anything he saw online was a point of reference only. When making his final decision on a study destination, he affirmed the influence of social media channels:

I take everything online as a reference only. However, social media platforms can assist me in making decisions when choosing a study destination. [David, male, 33 years old]

When the participants were asked who had the power to influence their decisions other than on social media channels, the typical answers were agents, friends, or family members. Emma's cousin, as previously stated, graduated from Lincoln University in New Zealand, where she had a very good experience that ultimately influenced Emma's decision. Despite consulting with an agent about study options, Emma trusted her cousin's advice more than that of anyone else:

Even though I consulted with an agent, I have never considered going to another university because my cousin was a student at Lincoln. I knew she had graduated, and she had an extraordinary journey with that university, which is why I am interested in going to Lincoln University. [Emma, female, 18 years old]

Sunny's mother made the decision for her to study in a country other than China. Sunny's mother even advised her on which university to attend because she felt Sunny's personality would not fit in with the academic environment in China. Celia's cousin, who was currently studying in the United States, on the other hand, advised her not to come to the United States because it was unsafe. That is why Celia excluded the United States from the start. Ameko and Alan both took their teacher's or the agent's advice and consulted with friends who were currently studying abroad to confirm their experience.

I talk to my closest friends, and family members who are mostly my age. Their recommendation will undoubtedly influence my decision.
[Ameko, female, 22 years old]

I ask for advice from agents, classmates, and friends already studying abroad. I believe in their personal experience and think it is highly credible. [Alan, male, 20 years old]

Vivi mentioned in her interview that her agent would be the one who made the final decision on her behalf at the end of the day. She would decide on the location, and the agent would decide which was the best university to go to. She would then follow the agent's guideline accordingly:

My agent will make some recommendations. I will tell them where I want to go, and they will tell me which universities to go to. [Vivi, female, 25 years old]

Kelly brought up the significance of having staff in China available to meet students in person. She acknowledged the availability of opportunities to attend face-to-face exhibitions, meet university representatives, and ask questions. She expressed a preference for professional advice from the staff of a university over agents and stated that she would consider their recommendations.

Spring was the only participant who believed she should be the one who took complete control of her life, including where to study:

If, for example, I choose Auckland as my destination, I will inform my friends and family of my decision. [Spring, female, 19 years old]

4.2.2 Finding the most popular social media content

Typically, once prospective international students are motivated to study somewhere other than their home country, they will begin to look for information on where to go. Traditionally, Chinese students tend to seek advice from family and friends, peers, and teachers at school, as well as seeking professional advice from educational agents or attend a physical education exhibition organised by agents or education providers. In recent years, social media platforms have provided students with a 'one-stop-shop' experience and assisted them in their decision-making process when selecting an education provider (Sipilä et al., 2017).

This study looked into the participants' content format preferences based on their gender and age group. Most people have a preference when searching for informing on social media platforms, and it is important to recognise the factors that influence their decisions. First, Theme 2 identified the most popular social media content to understand participants' preferences. Table 8 below presents the codes of this theme.

Table 8: Finding the Most Popular Social Media Content Codes

Codes	Number of Quotes	Sample Quotes
Text-based posts	28	"Besides, written articles are easier to get information from. I think a long video is a waste of time."
Incorporate video and photo visualisation	22	"I like the second one more since it has some pictures on it, which makes the content more direct and understandable."
The multimedia combination of text, video clips, and images	30	"The combination of text and pictures attracts me at first glance."

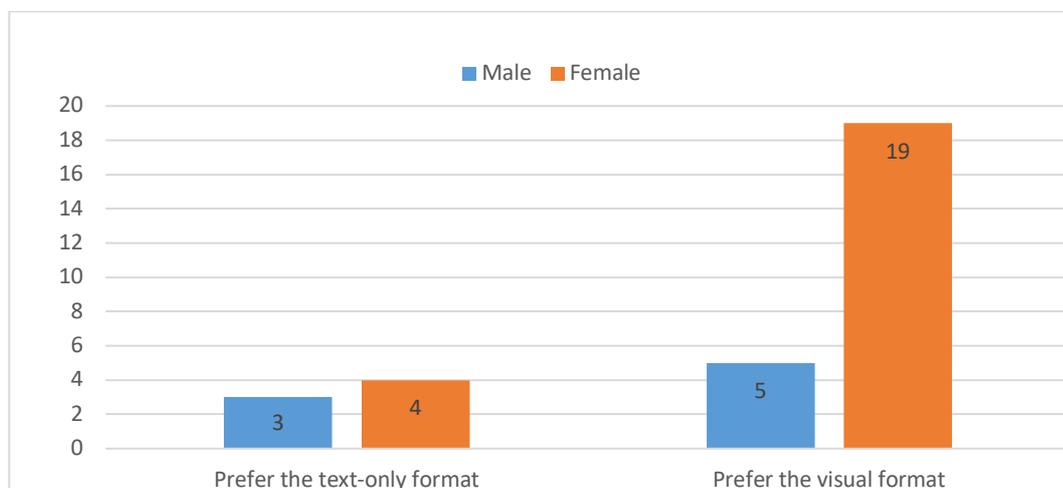
As mentioned in the previous chapter, 31 participants were invited to participate in an online interview, encompassing 8 male and 23 female English language students ranging from 18 to 40 years old. Despite their diverse educational backgrounds, all of the participants were well-educated. Some of them were about to start their university studies and were currently enrolled at a Chinese university, or were thinking about pursuing a postgraduate degree abroad. The researcher investigated the factors influencing the participants' information searching preferences based on their gender and age difference, regardless of their educational background.

At the start of each interview, the researcher incorporated a warm-up question based on two WOA posts that were shown to the participants. The posts were from the University of Auckland and Massey University's WOAs, offering offshore learning centres as a solution to the COVID-19 pandemic that was stopping Chinese students from returning to New Zealand. Massey University chose a formal text-based press release to inform current and prospective students that Massey University had opened a new China learning centre in Hainan. The second post was on the University of Auckland WOA. The university employed a current student enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts programme at one of the University of Auckland's China learning centres in Chongqing,

housed at Southwest University. The post combined photos, a vlog (video), and text content to tell the story of Luqi's day studying and living at Southwest University. Participants were given both posts to read through before discussing their preferences.

When asked to share their thoughts on the two posts, 7 participants preferred the text-only post, while the other 24 preferred the post that included both pictures or videos. According to the graph below, the majority of female participants expressed their preference for the WOA post with photos or videos.

Table 9: WeChat Post Preference Based on Gender Difference



Overall, the majority of female participants thought the text-based post was overly wordy and could easily cause visual fatigue.

[T]he first post appears to have too much text, which makes me feel confused as I do not know what they are trying to do, it does not appeal to me in any way. [Aisha, female, 20 years old]

I am not interested in reading the first post because it contains too much text that causes visual fatigue... If it is a text-only post, it will immediately put me off reading it. [Emma, female, 18 years old]

Delphine, another female student, also commented on the first, text-only post in support of Emma and Aisha's views on the post.

[T]he plain text format does not support me in learning everything I need to know, there were no pictures or visuals, only words. Furthermore, the texts were relatively uninteresting, prompting me to skip to other articles instantly. [Delphine, female, 18 years old]

On the other hand, four female participants enjoyed reading text-only articles. Among them was Cynthia, who stated the following:

It is easy to get information from articles written in words. A long video seems to be a waste of time. [Cynthia, female, 20 years old]

Nicole stated that articles with text-only were her preference, as it allowed her to use her imagination to interpret the articles. In terms of the male participants, 3 indicated that they preferred text-only posts while the other 5 liked virtual opinions. David expressed that he preferred text articles, but he did not mind photos or videos.

I prefer text-only articles, especially when looking for information about courses or entry requirements.... However, if I look at the university's campus environment or events, I do not mind looking at photos or watching videos. [David, male, 33 years old]

Allen shared a similar view. When reading the articles from the official accounts, he stated that his focus was on the content. However, Allen did not mind having images included in the post to avoid visual fatigue.

I like plain text posts because I can quickly identify what the post is about; it saves time and is more effective. However, I do not mind photos... The pictures do not need to have a meaning; they assist me in avoiding visual fatigue. [Allen, male, 19 years old]

In contrast, Leo, a fan of vlogs and videos, suggested that videos helped him gain information from a WOA post quickly.

In general, if a video is embedded in an article, it allows me to learn more and better understand the content. [Leo, male, 21 years old]

The researcher also considered age when looking at the participants' gender differences. Among the 31 participants, 17 were between 18 and 21 years old, 10 between 22 and 30 years old, and 4 participants between 31 and 40 years old. The researcher investigated whether age group affected user preference and found that the majority of the participant aged between 18 and 21 preferred visual content that included either pictures or videos, as indicated in Table 8 below.

Table 10: WeChat Post Preference Based on Age Group Difference

Age Group	Number of Participants	Preferred Format	
		Text	Visuality
18-21	17	3	14
22-30	10	2	8
31-40	4	1	3

- 18-21 years old

There were 17 participants aged between 18 and 21 years old. While 3 participants emphasised they preferred text-only posts, the majority supported the combination format containing visual components. While Cynthia thought it was a waste of time to watch a video, Allen loved how text-only posts could save time as he could skim-read the information needed. As well as the time-saving factor mentioned by the other 2 participants, Nicole also enjoyed the comprehensive information included in the text-only posts:

I believe the first post is more official. Because it is so comprehensive, the key points are easy to understand. Articles with text-only are my preference, and I can use my imagination to interpret the piece. [Nicole, female, 21 years old]

- 22-30 years old

Within the 22-30-year-old age group, Spring stated that she liked the text-only posts more now than when she was younger.

I am a content person, which does not mean I do not love photos and videos, but I prefer informative posts. I like written posts because I can read them anywhere, including public areas... I would not say I liked plain-text articles when I was younger, but as I have grown, I have come to appreciate them. [Spring, female, 19 years old]

Although Vivi said she preferred text posts, she chose her desired university based on a TikTok video where a group of McGill University students shared their daily life. Vivi admitted that she was influenced by the group of students and that made her feel she would love to be part of the university in the near future.

If you are wondering why I chose McGill University, I saw a video on TikTok. It was a video of the McGill University soccer team's daily activities... Because of this blogger, I got to know the city and the university well. [Vivi, female, 25 years old]

On the other hand, Kelly supported using videos to attract international students from China as she felt that as a student in China, the visual content attracted her more. Another participant, Katherine, even suggested a new video function for the education providers to use within WeChat.

The education provider would use the new WeChat feature known as video accounts. It is similar to TikTok, but it is on WeChat... It is an excellent way to promote themselves and they can post videos introducing the university. [Katherine, female, 27 years old]

Maggie, a 28-year-old mother, indicated she was not a fan of long text articles as she felt that time was critical when bringing up a child. She preferred to get information visually, accompanied by a summary highlighting the key points to help her read through faster.

- 31-40 years old

There were 4 participants aged between 31 and 40 years old. While one preferred the text-only format, the others liked the visual method of presenting information.

At 33 years old, David was the only supporter of text-only posts within the age group. However, he mentioned that he did not mind viewing photos or videos if the content had something to do with the campus environment or facilities.

If I am looking for a student's experience or something very relaxing like food or travel, I want to see more pictures and videos. It gives a more direct image of what the articles are talking about. [David, male, 33 years old]

Celia was not only a WOA user, but she was also running an official account for work. She shared her personal experience:

I do not simply publish posts by using words only. I usually add videos and images to support my ideas, and the utilisation of images is more appealing than articles solely written in words. [Celia, female, 33 years old]

Laura, who was a big fan of professionally shot videos, emphasised the importance of professionalism. She enjoyed watching videos in the WeChat updates that were shot by professional teams and introduced a university's facilities and surroundings. Videos, therefore, provide an opportunity to create eye-catching social media posts.

4.2.3 Creating eye-catching social media posts

Theme 3, 'creating eye-catching social media posts', included 10 codes used to investigate the most popular WOA posts among Chinese students.

Table 11: Creating Eye-catching Social Media Posts Codes

Codes	Number of Quotes	Sample Quotes
Use visual content to engage with users	23	"I mean that I would like to see some visual information if it is anything to do with overseas life and the university environment."
The one-stop-shop: information convenience	4	"Sometimes, if I want to know some important information, I just need to go to certain WOAs to check the info."
Creating easy to understand, quality content	5	"The wording used in the second article is more like a daily conversation – interesting and easy to follow."
The ideal length for social media posts	5	"I like long answers. I don't care about the popularity of the answer – the quality and detailed extent of the answer is the most important."
The value of originality	11	"I have discovered a lot of articles are plagiarised by some official accounts. I don't like it. I prefer the original. I will unfollow those accounts that plagiarise."
Newsworthy	16	"The newest information has more reference value."
Match the headline to the story	27	"A catchy headline and pictures will attract me to click on the post for sure."
Typography	22	"I appreciate well-designed typesetting with a variety of styles."
Use colour with a purpose	12	"You would not be interested in reading a post if the entire article was in black and white."
Get to know your audience better	15	"I'm anticipating a short article and video."

There were several codes associated with the presentation of a WOA post, including colours and the adoption of different typography to create a compelling presentation aimed to keep the target audience engaged from beginning to end.

- Use colour with a purpose

Even though participants had different colour preferences, 'bright colours' was the most mentioned term.

The post that has a brighter background and pictures attracts me more.
[Izzie, female, 26 years old]

Using different colours and font sizes to emphasise the post's main point will benefit it. [Aisha, female, 20 years old]

If the whole article is either black or white, people will be bored to tears if they had to read it. [Mesi, female, 18 years old]

However, some participants shared different views. Lyn was one of the participants who liked exceptional colour and shining effects in WeChat post presentations, but she added the following:

Posts with gleaming effects may impress me [but] I want the special effect to be provided in the appropriate amount. Otherwise, I would not like it. [Lyn, female, 19 years old]

Spring was the only participant who focused on the content more than the presentation:

I dislike complicated font colour combinations. To me, it appears to be a visual conflict. If the colour combination is too complex, I will not concentrate on the content. [Spring, female, 19 years old]

- Typography

Besides using colours, adopting different fonts in different sizes was also commonly mentioned in the interviews. One of the participants, Aisha, provided the researcher with an example of what she liked from one of the WOAs she followed.

P&G club is one of the university clubs that we have... because of the typography... Because I have to read a lot of literature, I would appreciate a change in how the WeChat posts are formatted. The way they present the articles usually catches my attention quickly because

they use a larger font and different colours to highlight the main points and make reading enjoyable. [Aisha, female, 20 years old]

Other participants also mentioned they had followed one or more WOAs because of their excellent typography. Allen said,

I believe some famous official accounts I follow, like People's Daily, have perfect typesetting. [Allen, male, 19 years old]

There were four codes related to effective ways to create content and which therefore explained the most popular WOA content. The first step was to get to know the target audience well by asking what they wanted to see in WOAs.

- Get to know your audience better

Participants were asked to describe what they liked or disliked in WOA posts related to education. Several participants mentioned they wanted to know more about a university's entry requirements, acceptance rates, employment rate, internship opportunities, and other relevant international student information. Videos or photos about student experiences shared by current students or Alumni, facilities, online and on-campus events and student activities, campus tours, and even food options nearby were also mentioned in the interviews. One of the participants, Izzie, recognised the potential challenges that an international student might face, and she appreciated the opportunities to see things visually:

As an international student, I might face numerous challenges as I adjust to a new environment, and I need helpful information to help me settle down. I am curious about international students' life. The campus's photos and videos are welcome on the WOA. Information such as the employment rate can also attract my attention. [Izzie, female, 26 years old]

Terry also spoke about what he would like to see the most: the policies and entry requirements.

I am keen to know more about international student policies and admissions requirements. However, some data, such as acceptance rates, are challenging to find. [Terry, male, 21 years old]

When asked about what they did not like, the most commonly mentioned term was 'advertisements'.

I will unfollow accounts constantly tweeting commercial advertisements that I am not interested in. [Cynthia, female, 20 years old]

What don't I like? I would say those articles with product placements, in my opinion. I would not say I like advertisements embedded in articles at all. [Leo, male, 21 years old]

When participants were asked to share their favourite type of content, several mentioned the appropriate length of an official account post they liked. Both Gary and Izzie preferred a detailed, high quality post as both were looking to learn from it.

I enjoy reading long articles. I am not concerned with the post's popularity, but the quality and depth are critical. [Gary, male, 26 years old]

Earth Knowledge Bureau, for example, is one of my favourite official accounts. It is about culture and history. Even though it always posts lengthy articles, I can learn a lot from their posts. [Izzie, female, 26 years old]

Unlike Gary and Izzie, Judy liked everything that was short but still informative:

I do not want the video in the article to be too long. I anticipate a brief article and a relatively short video. This is more attractive to me. [Judy, female, 24 years old]

As a mother of a 2-year-old, Maggie did not have much time to read a detailed post. She would prefer it if all the key points were highlighted in a different colour or used a different font, or even if a summary was provided – something that would be highly appreciated by someone like her. She also commented on the advantage of having videos or audio available within the official account's posts. This means that people who do not have time to read can listen to or watch the content while doing something else like the housework.

- Creating quality content

Participants were also asked to share their preferences on WeChat content in terms of quality. One of the participants, Mesi, shared her view on the impact of quality content:

I will follow WOAs with detailed and logical content. [Mesi, female, 18 years old]

Ameko further defined the importance of having quality content on education providers' social media platforms related to the choice of a university:

If the university is trying to build a decent WOA with quality content, I presume they are a good university. This will have an impact on my university selection. [Ameko, female, 22 years old]

Emma commented on content available on current social media platforms:

The content is more transparent and easily accessible. Unlike in the past, when I did not know where to go or what to study, the advancement of social media has provided me with more information. I do not even need an agent because I can find all the information I need online. [Emma, female, 18 years old]

When the participants were asked to share their thoughts on the factors that influenced their decision to read a post, 27 mentioned it depended on the story headline. The headline of an article is one of its most essential components: the rest of the piece will not be read without a good headline. Participants were asked about their preferences, and the majority stated that they would scan the headline and make an instant decision whether or not to open the post. The most frequently used keywords in the interviews were 'relevance', 'unique', and 'meaningful'. Participants stressed that the headline should be relevant to the article or it would lose users when they noticed a discrepancy. It should also be interesting and meaningful and entice users to read the rest of the article.

The headline is significant. I will read an article with a catchy headline. [Vivi, female, 25 years old]

The headline, in my opinion, is the most crucial factor. The headline directly reflects the content. [Aisha, female, 20 years old]

Other than the headline, the post's cover image was also mentioned as one of the critical factors. Some participants said they would read a post if they liked the cover image.

I will read the post if I like the headline and cover images. [Izzie, female, 26 years old]

I will look over the headlines and covers of the articles. I will not read that article if I am not interested in it. [Alan, male, 20 years old]

A catchy headline and cover image will attract me to click on the post. [Kelly, female, 24 years old]

- The value of originality

The participants also commonly mentioned that they were keen to read high-quality original content rather than content plagiarised from other social media platforms. Original content can relate to any type of information such as video, photo, or a combination of visuality and text. A WOA post that has never been published online elsewhere is an excellent example of a piece of original content. One-third of the participants emphasised that having original content available on the WOA was critical – otherwise, they may choose to unfollow the accounts.

One of the participants, David, mentioned that he followed many WeChat accounts and received multiple updates a day. He wanted to see original content that was not available anywhere else as originality was crucial to him:

Too many official accounts talk about studying overseas, and information is constantly repeated. I might have to ignore some information. [David, male, 33 years old]

It is clear that with billions of social media posts and campaigns available online daily, being distinctive is one of the most important tools in attracting followers to read and continue to follow an account. Providing original content that is also novel can provide a large competitive advantage. This approach demonstrates a good understanding of a topic or an industry and can help to increase a platform or an official account's credibility.

Gary and Laura's quotes provide an example. While all universities believe they are offering international students' unique information, most of it looks the same to students.

Universities often assume they are different from one another, but in truth, they are all the same. It is impossible to tell who is better because everyone is talking about the same thing unless you show us something different. [Gary, male, 26 years old]

All of the universities' social media account content appears to be very similar to mine. [Laura, female, 31 years old]

International students are looking for good-quality original content from the providers' WOAs. Such content demonstrates a provider's ability as well as their knowledge of the education industry, which can help in establishing its position as the industry leader. Reading posts online can affect students' decision-making process. As Ameko mentioned in her interview, if the university makes high-quality content available to their students, it means they are a good university. The content available on a university's social media platform can impact students' university selection. Maggie shared the same view as Ameko, and stated that she would unfollow any account if she discovered that its content was plagiarised from other official accounts.

I found many articles that were plagiarised by some official accounts. It irritates me greatly as I prefer the original content. I will unfollow those accounts that plagiarise other accounts' content. [Maggie, female, 28 years old]

A post's originality can also influence the engagement of users and WOAs. In total, 29 participants shared the ways in which they engaged with WOAs. When they encountered high-quality original content, they valued it. They did not just read the content but also either saved it or shared it with their connections. Appreciation was shown by reposting the article on their personal WeChat moment, forwarding it to their friends or family members who might be interested in the topic, or even clicking on 'Wow' on the bottom right corner. What is Wow? In 2019, WeChat launched a new function to replace the traditional 'Like' function within WOAs. When someone clicks the Wow sign for a post on a WOA, it will be added to their Top Stories section and is available to all of their connections within WeChat to read. Alan was one of the participants who loved to share his favourite posts with his friends and family:

If I like it, I will add a Wow [add to Top Stories] to that post. As a result, my friends and family on my WeChat can see the post, and, on occasion, we will discuss it together. [Alan, male, 20 years old]

In contrast to making the post visible to all of their WeChat connections, other participants chose to keep it to themselves for later by saving it or sharing it with people they thought might benefit from reading the post. Both Laura and Celia mentioned in their interviews that the best approach to engage with a particular post was to save it or send it to people who needed it.

So, if I believe an article will be helpful, I will save it. I will save it then share it on my WeChat Moment. If I genuinely think an article will benefit a friend or family member, I will share it privately. [Celia, female, 33 years old]

I try to save it as much as I can. I will save any information that I believe is valuable and would like to share with my friends in the future, but I will never share it widely. However, I would consider sending it to some of my WeChat groups. [Laura, female, 31 years old]

Reposting an article on their personal WeChat Moment or even clicking the Wow sign can be considered a third-party influence whereby the reposters friends then look for a particular WOA and follow it. In total, 28 participants indicated that they followed a specific WOA under third-party influence, and several of them shared their experiences.

Most of the official accounts I follow were recommended to me by others, particularly those about studying abroad. [Cynthia, female, 20 years old]

I followed most of the WOAs because my friends had shared their articles on WeChat Moment. [Gary, male, 26 years old]

My classmates shared the articles from the official accounts with me, and I am drawn to their headlines. Moreover, I have been following them ever since. [Vivi, female, 25 years old]

- Accessibility

The ‘one-stop-shop: information convenience’ and ‘newsworthy’ codes focused on accessibility. ‘One-stop-shop: information convenience’ sought to determine the impact of convenience on students' decision making. ‘Newsworthy’ referred to the factors considered necessary when searching for information. Several participants indicated

that it had become much easier to get information online, but there was still information that they could not access. One of the interviewees, Aisha, explained the difficulties of getting information such as a programmes' acceptance rate, research topics, and even a supervisor's profile on either a university's website or its WOA. She expressed her frustration but provided positive feedback about using an app called Xiaohongshu. It has been branded as China's Instagram and has been very popular among young people, predominantly female users. In the interview, Aisha said,

I found it difficult to search for information on the university's official account or even the website, so I stopped searching for answers through these channels. However, apps such as Xiaohongshu are beneficial. It only takes one click to get the information I require. [Aisha, female, 20 years old]

Terry regarded it as convenient to use the WOA to meet his needs. However, he mentioned in his interview that knowing where to go to get information was critical. On the other hand, Gary was the only participant who felt that no matter what he needed to know, he was confident that he could get an answer online.

When the participants were asked to share the most important factors in a WOA post, the answer was often 'the most updated information'. Emma explained why she liked Education New Zealand's official account as it always had the most up-to-date information on topical issues such as immigration-related news.

Education New Zealand's official account has up-to-date information about the immigration policies and covers topics such as the border situation for international students. That is my most concerned question at the moment. [Emma, female, 18 years old]

On the other hand, Jerry had unfollowed Massey University's official account. He described their official account as 'terrible' as they did not often update their account and offered no helpful information. Like Jerry, and as someone in the marketing industry, Maggie loved reading the most recent posts. When asked if she was following any university's WeChat account, she said she followed one, but they only updated it once a month, which she disliked. One of the participants, Celia, wanted to study in New Zealand and she was following the WOAs of several universities as well as that of Education New Zealand. When asked about her thoughts on these WOAs, she also commented on frequency as a significant consideration. Similar to the other two

participants, Jerry and Maggie, she said that compared to the websites, the official WOA accounts she followed did not update frequently enough, and she was about to stop using them.

Compared to their official websites, the official accounts hardly ever update. The last update was a long time ago, and it was about how many international students could enter New Zealand's border. That is why I have stopped checking the official accounts. [Celia, female, 33 years old]

4.2.4 How to use social media platforms

Theme 4, 'how to use social media platforms', contained seven codes that helped the researcher investigate participants' preferences when using social media platforms to search for information related to their overseas studies. Often, Chinese students are looking for ways to connect with their desired education providers. Deciding which platforms to use might be the first step. Students have usually been asked questions via email or phone calls in the past. Nowadays, social media has become a popular way for students to engage with providers. The researcher asked several questions to investigate the participants' social media platform usage preferences.

Table 12: How to Use Social Media Platform Codes

Codes	Number of Quotes	Sample Quotes
To gain credibility on social media	30	“But if it is from the official account, I think the information will be more comprehensive.”
Ways to better engage with users on social media	29	“I will save it. If I think the information is useful for others as well, I will share it.”
The effective frequency of social media usage	29	“I would like it to be twice to three times a week. I don’t like them to update every day. It is easy to ignore it if they update too often since there are too many accounts.”
The most favourite social media functions	29	“I would like to have a customer service function.”
The impact of price sensitivity	9	“Some official accounts start to charge for resources after a while, and I won’t use them anymore.”
The power of social media influencers	28	“I believe in students sharing more since they have had personal experience.”
The importance of interaction on social media	7	“Consultation. There is such a service in some official accounts, I think. I would like to see this kind of service in official education accounts. If I have some questions or ideas, I would like to have someone answer my questions.”

- Favourite social media functions

Participants’ favourite social media functions were also discussed to understand what they liked currently and what they would like to see in the future. In total, 29 participants shared their thoughts on this.

Katherine acknowledged the importance of having WeChat in her life:

WeChat is more than a daily communication tool for me; and it is also an APP for work. I use it to communicate and collaborate with my colleagues and customers all the time. [Katherine, female, 27 years old]

Some participants mentioned it would be a good idea to integrate a university's website into WeChat, where one click could take them to the right page to find information. For example, Aisha explained she would like to know a university's achievements and rankings. It would save her time if the WOA had the information or a link could be embedded to take her to the right page on the website. Allen shared a similar view on this – he would love to have student stories available or embedded. Other participants described the functions they wanted that related to their lives such as information on student services within the university, a mini-programme to check the availability of a lecture or computer room, course options, a Q&A function, study-related resources, prize draw function offering an on-campus discount, campus map, and GPA calculator.

Both Celia and Kelly wanted a function related to search articles available on official accounts. Celia would have liked to have a 'history' link available to see the articles she had searched in the past. Kelly wanted a virtual assistant, something like Siri, to help search articles using keywords.

Several participants mentioned the importance of being able to communicate with the education providers directly. Most social media channels allow users to communicate by leaving a comment, but it is up to the account administrator to decide whether the comments will be replied to. Most WOAs have a filter function that only allows the most popular comments to be shown under the articles. Usually, these comments are addressed by the account administrator. Some WOAs have a live-streaming function or an embedded chat function that allows users to ask live questions. Several participants mentioned that social media platform 'interaction' or 'online consultation' is a popular function they would love to have at the inquiry stage. Laura expressed concern that she had never received a reply after leaving a message on universities' official accounts. She was unsure why these universities were unable to provide students with a two-way communication method:

I have never had the experience of a university official account responding to my questions or messages after I left them in their official account chats. I do not understand why there is no customer service function in the official account. It should not be a one-way communication method. [Laura, female, 31 years old]

When the researcher asked if the participants would prefer to talk to an AI chatbot or a real person, most participants preferred the 'real person' experience.

Different people have various inquiries, and I would rather talk to a natural person. [Ameko, female, 22 years old]

Apart from talking to staff within the universities, Terry also commented on the importance of having a chatroom within the WOA to allow prospective students to talk to each other. He suggested that having such a function available would allow students planning to attend that university to get to know each other before departure.

If there is a function for international students to communicate with each other, that would be perfect for students to express their thoughts and experience. [Terry, male, 21 years old]

Participants were also asked about initiatives that could enhance their relationships with other students in order to help them have a memorable study abroad experience – and which could also help them grow into solid Alumni ambassadors. One of the participants, Laura, shared her thoughts on a new function within a WOA that would allow someone like her to register as a new student and get a welcome pack from the university:

For example, if we show our offer and flight information, the mini programme could organise a welcome pack that includes a SIM card, insurance card, and maps. Alternatively, sending some merchandise, such as masks with the university logo, would be fantastic... it could serve as a good advertisement for the university. [Laura, female, 31 years old]

As potential international students who had never studied or lived in another country, support from the universities that made the transition as easy as possible would be highly appreciated. Terry also commented on the importance of having online engagement available to students who were about to start their journey, showcasing what university life is like.

I hope the university that I am going to can offer me some online experiences such as live streaming online events or online activities for new students about to start their university journey. [Terry, male, 21 years old]

- To gain credibility on social media

Another area is how participants decide which platform to use when asking questions via social media. The code 'to gain credibility on social media' was commented on 30 times by the interviewed participants. The most popular Chinese social media platforms were mentioned in the interviews, including Zhihu, Xiaohongshu, TikTok, Weibo, and WOAs. Overall, participants felt the most trustful platforms were still the education providers' official channels, such as Weibo and WOA and university websites. However, platforms such as Zhihu, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu were also commonly used by the participants. When the participants were asked to compare platforms such as Zhihu, TikTok, or Xiaohongshu with the university's official channels, participants were divided into two groups. Group 1 trusted information from a third party, such as the story sharing on Xiaohongshu or the answers available on Zhihu. Some participants said that compared to universities that only shared something positive about themselves, people who shared their real overseas life experiences were much more reliable.

Universities are good at showing off the best part of themselves, but there is no way of knowing whether the information is accurate or not as we are far away from them. On the other hand, if the stories come from a third party, they will likely tell you the actual stories. [Cynthia, female, 20 years old]

In comparison, I believe Zhihu has more credibility when checking information about university life and the physical environment. I do not mind checking Xiaohongshu and other social media sites. [Katherine, female, 27 years old]

Even though there was a debate whether the best information came from staff or students, Group 2 represented the vast majority of participants who believed that official channels, such as a provider's Weibo and WOA, were the best source to trust.

Professional advice, in my opinion, is preferable from the standpoint of the staff. [Delphine, female, 18 years old]

I will only take unofficial channels such as personal experience as a reference. I have seen information such as study options shared by universities in New Zealand, and it appears to be very reliable. [Celia, female, 33 years old]

The university's information is highly credible. A student's point of view is an individual's perspective. We can only get a scientific result after collecting the data of over 10,000 students. [Allen, male, 19 years old]

I would say information from the university's professional staff is more accurate. Nevertheless, students' stories are more persuasive. [Amelia, female, 20 years old]

- The effective frequency of social media usage

The code 'the effective frequency of social media usage' refers to how often users checked WOAs and their posts and the frequency at which they liked to see the posts updated. In terms of WOA usage frequency, all participants were active WOA users and spent an average of between 15 minutes and two hours each day on reading WOA posts. The aim of the code was also to allow analysis of students' reading habits to determine the best time to publish an article update on WeChat. Even though participants were of different ages, in the interviews the majority mentioned that they usually checked the official accounts' updates when they first woke up in the morning, during break time, or before they went to bed at night.

I will take a look at the official accounts when I wake up. If an article piques my interest, I will read it for 5 to 10 minutes. I spend more time reading at night or on weekends. [Celia, female, 33 years old]

I do not spend much time on official accounts... and it takes approximately 10-15 minutes. However, if I want to learn something from one of WeChat's official accounts, I spend about an hour on it. [Kelly, female, 24 years old]

When the participants were asked how often they liked WOAs to be updated, the majority of the participants regarded the most appropriate update frequency at 2-3 times a week. In contrast, some participants did not mind receiving a daily update. However, several participants mentioned that if the official accounts were updated too often or not often enough, they would unfollow the account.

Every one to two days. Those who update too frequently may be unfollowed. [Cynthia, female, 20 years old]

Three times per week, in my opinion, is more appropriate. The quality of a daily update may be inadequate. [Izzie, female, 26 years old]

It is a disaster. I have already unfollowed it. It is updated once a year. This account provides me with very little information. [Jerry, male, 36 years old]

I would like to see the update twice or three times per week. They do not have to update every day, which I dislike. Because I follow so many accounts, it is easy to miss things if they update too frequently. [Spring, female, 19 years old]

- The power of social media influencers

The researcher also asked the participants about their involvement in social media, especially when deciding which social media platform to use. The majority of the participants indicated they chose to use a particular social media platform based on third-party influence, while some claimed it was usually their personal choice.

Two scenarios were discussed in the interviews among the participants who indicated that a third party might influence their usage of a social media platform. Firstly, several participants mentioned in their interviews that they had had experience in either reading an article from their friends or family members' WeChat Moment and then followed a particular WOA, or were referred.

I look into my friend's official account posts in their WeChat Moment. [Katy, female, 19 years old]

My friends and family have mostly recommended the official accounts I have followed. [Izzie, female, 26 years old]

Cynthia, among the participants who had been influenced by a third party, also explained that based on trust, she followed most official accounts recommended by her friends, especially those which had information about studying abroad.

Most of the accounts I follow were recommended to me by others, particularly those about studying abroad. [Cynthia, female, 20 years old]

Jenny explained trust was the reason why she would follow an account recommended by her friends or teachers:

I am more likely to trust the advice of my friends and teachers. [Jenny, female, 22 years old]

Secondly, some participants said they were asked to follow an official account or use a particular social media platform by a third party to get the product or services offered. Sunny described her experience of being asked to scan a QR code to follow a WOA in order to listen to lessons required by her class teacher. Terry claimed that whenever he visited KFC, their staff would ask him to follow the official account to get the discount. Similarly, Nicole also found that to get a free service in a shop she had to follow the official account:

I believe it was when I was attempting to print some photos in a shop and discovered that I needed to follow the official account to receive free service. [Nicole, female, 21 years old]

Despite the fact that most participants had been mostly influenced by other people, some claimed that other people had nothing to do with their choices. When asked where she had found the official accounts and why she followed them, Cynthia explained she followed a university's official account because she knew she would study there. On the other hand, Emma always knew that she wanted to study at Lincoln University in New Zealand as that was where her cousin went, and she praised the university all the time in front of Emma. Since then, Emma had used the search function within WeChat on accounts related to study in New Zealand, particularly those official accounts that she believed were highly creditable. The official account run by Education New Zealand was one of the best accounts Emma had followed. When asked why, she explained,

I was looking for more information about New Zealand and came across this account when using the search function. I believe it is a well-known official account that is trustworthy, so I followed it. [Emma, female, 18 years old]

On the other hand, Gary mentioned how he usually discovered official accounts through websites. It could be the university's website when looking under contact details or through a website with information about a particular WeChat account that he thought he might be interested in.

4.2.5 Choosing a study destination

The theme 'Choosing a study destination' contained six codes – as listed in Table 13 below. These addressed criteria discussed by students' as related to their overseas study destination choice. The rankings of the university, as well as the lifestyle and culture of the study destination, were frequently mentioned by interviewees.

Table 13: Choosing a Study Destination Codes

Codes	Number of Quotes	Sample Quotes
Cost of tuition or living costs	4	"I think it's cheaper to study in Singapore."
The importance of safety	5	"Singapore is so much safer and closer to home. Besides, Singapore has a good relationship with China. "
Ease of finding a job followed by migration	5	"I will consider the chances of migrating after studying in that country. That's why I think Australia and New Zealand are ideal places to study in."
Lifestyle and culture	16	"The primary reason is the location. Imperial College London is located in London. I think the atmosphere and culture of the city attract me."
University rankings or brand	15	"Universities in the U.K. are highly recognized in China."
Quality of the university programmes	12	"Some websites show that AUT has a high ranking in photography courses."

When selecting an overseas study destination, Chinese students often consider the reputation of the country and education provider, safety, affordability, location, and career and immigration opportunities. These factors have been highlighted as critical contributors to Chinese students' decision-making processes, driving many Chinese students to pursue higher education in a third country (Sanchez et al., 2006).

The two codes, 'quality of the university programme' and 'university rankings and branding', represented the respondents' preference when asked how they would choose a study destination and why. Mexi and Sally, hoping to study an undergraduate programme overseas, said that ranking was the most crucial influencing factor in their decision about where to study.

Since I am studying a media-related major, Singapore National University has a high ranking in that field. [Mexi, female, 18 years old]

I would like to get the qualification from a top-ranked university, and the University of Auckland is ranked number one in New Zealand. I think the qualification will be well-recognised in China. [Sally, female, 20 years old]

As an international student who wanted to apply for a Master's Degree, Laura also suggested that a university's overall ranking and its subject ranking were of equivalent importance to her when applying for a university.

Firstly, I would look at the university's rankings in their research fields, which is the most crucial part. Furthermore, the second one is the university's overall rankings. [Laura, female, 31 years old]

China's economic boom has enabled many Chinese families to self-fund and send their children to study in an overseas country. The growth of China's economy can be considered a necessary driving factor for the education industry, particularly in terms of study abroad. It is also commonly acknowledged that hosting and teaching overseas students benefits host countries in various ways, especially economically as international students pay a much higher tuition fee than domestic students enrolled in the same institution (Cheng, 2020). Despite the fact that international students are considered an essential source of revenue for education providers, some participants believed that studying in an overseas country could be the best investment in their lives. Two codes, 'cost of tuition or living costs' and 'ease of finding a job followed by migration', are also part of the same theme – 'the decision to study abroad'. Gary was one of the participants looking for a postgraduate qualification, preferably in a prestigious university in the United Kingdom. He said in his interview that investment in studying in English was high, but the return values were also high.

Even while tuition fees in the United Kingdom are expensive, the returns are often worthwhile. I chose to study in the United Kingdom because it offers good value for money and the programmes are often shorter than in other countries. [Gary, male, 26 years old]

Maggie highlighted the importance of employment opportunities for overseas students:

Employment opportunities are an essential criterion when choosing the destination. The country where I would love to go has a lot more

chances to get employment in the industry that I want to study.
[Maggie, female, 28 years old]

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) suggest that the aspiration to explore Western culture is a primary driver for Chinese students to study abroad. Meanwhile, filial piety is a highly valued characteristic in Chinese culture, and family loyalty, respect, and obedience are widely held values. Chinese students are substantially more reliant on their families and friends (Sánchez et al., 2006). Several participants mentioned that they decided on a study destination because they had either friends or family members in that country. Another code, 'lifestyle and culture', developed under the same theme, 'the decision to study abroad', represented a group of participants who chose either culture or lifestyle as the main reason for considering a study destination. Aisha had friends studying in Singapore but fell in love with New Zealand's culture:

I considered studying in Singapore because I had friends who studied there. After my English teacher told me about New Zealand, I fell in love with the lifestyle in New Zealand. I love the rich culture, with many unique characteristics, breath-taking scenery, and its clean and green look, which is much-desired worldwide. [Aisha, female, 20 years old]

Jenny emphasised the importance of having friends and the desire to live in a city that was close to the beach.

I would like to study at the University of Southampton because most of my friends go there... and I feel that having friends studying in the same place would make things a lot easier. Furthermore, I appreciate the university's location and physical surroundings. It is a port city on England's coast where I wish to live. [Jenny, female, 22 years old]

Meanwhile, Gary chose to study in the United Kingdom because of the cultural aspects.

I want to go to universities that have a long history and culture, such as Durham University and Lancaster University. Universities in Scotland like Glasgow University and the University of St Andrews are also on my favourite list. I do not really like universities in London as I prefer universities with rich cultural atmospheres in northern England. [Gary, male, 26 years old]

Chinese students choose to study abroad for various reasons, but one of the key reasons is that they prefer the less competitive educational environment in countries other than

China (Ip, 2006). Each year, millions of Chinese high school students take the Chinese national university entrance exam (Gaokao), which decides whether they are admitted to universities or if they should select other options such as employment (Davey et al., 2007). In China, employment opportunities can be highly competitive, and a qualification from a prestigious university can significantly improve someone's chance of securing a well-paid position in the job market. Because of the exam's competitive nature, parents put a lot of pressure on their children to succeed in school, and exam preparation begins at a young age (Davey et al., 2007). Meanwhile, according to Wang (2007), one of the most important motivations pushing Chinese students to study overseas is the possibility of future immigration. Whether or not the desire of Chinese students to immigrate is a factor attracting them to a specific nation, immigration policy undoubtedly influences their future opportunities within that country.

The code 'ease of finding a job followed by migration' can be a key influencing factor, especially for adult students studying for an overseas postgraduate qualification. Kelly mentioned in her interview following graduation, she would look for opportunities to get a job followed by settlement:

I will be looking at the university's employment rate after graduation. Besides that, I will also consider settlement opportunities after studying in that country. That is why Australia and New Zealand are ideal places to study. [Kelly, female, 24 years old]

Elaine had decided not to pursue her study at a university. Instead, she was keen to get some hands-on job-related experience followed by migration. She explained,

Studying at a polytechnic such as Unitec Institute of Technology will simplify finding employment and getting a residency permit in New Zealand. [Elaine, female, 28 years old]

Gary aimed to study in the United Kingdom. He acknowledged that the working rights provided by Australia and New Zealand once he graduation would be very attractive to him as an adult student looking at postgraduate level study:

Australia shares certain similarities with the United Kingdom, and it has recently been a popular study destination. As an international student, I will apply for a post-study work visa in Australia after completing my studies. I believe New Zealand has a similar policy. [Gary, male, 26 years old]

Safety is another critical factor for Chinese students to consider when deciding on a study destination. Gatfield and Chen (2006) suggest that learning in a safe country gives Chinese students and their parents peace of mind. A lower crime rate allows international students to concentrate on their studies while enjoying the life that a country provides. The code 'the importance of safety' is a crucial influencer for political reasons. Several female participants had concerns about safety issues and mentioned in the interviews that this would affect their decisions. The decision to avoid a particular country such as the United States was mentioned the most.

One of the reasons that might affect my decision to study in a particular country is the safety of the country that I am going to... The United Kingdom is on my wish list, rather than the United States that I chose in the past... I am concerned about the safety issues in the United States, which is why I have given up going to study in America. [Ameko, female, 22 years old]

The main concern is public safety. I cannot imagine studying in a dangerous place. [Kelly, female, 24 years old]

Apart from the safety issues, Nicole mentioned her concerns around the racist issues within a university campus:

I wish to study at an institution where international students are safe. I am terrified about going to a university with many racist domestic students. [Nicole, female, 20 years old]

As well as safety, political problems such as the relationship between China and the host country were also considered. Mesi was keen to study in Singapore, and this was not only because of the comparative safety of Singapore but also because of the good relationship between China and Singapore:

According to global trends, Singapore is considerably safer and closer to home. Singapore also enjoys a positive connection with China. As many Chinese people are there, the Chinese culture will also be readily accepted. [Mesi, female, 18 years old]

4.3 Summary

The purpose of this study was to look at how WOAs influence Chinese students' educational decision making. Rather than learning how Chinese students make decisions, it discovered the most preferred format and content of WOAs. This study also discovered the most trusted social media platforms that Chinese students rely on when looking for information about studying abroad and the criteria they use when choosing a study destination. The findings are thoroughly examined in the following chapter.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1 Chapter overview

Chapter 5 explores Chinese students' decision-making processes based on social media use, specifically their experiences with WOAs, and their need to gain information about studying abroad when using different platforms. The study also looked into the issues they encountered while using the platforms and ways to improve their experience. This chapter is divided into sections that investigate the major themes that emerged from the findings presented in Chapter 4. The chapter begins by revisiting the research question and sub-questions and discussing the significance of the findings. The chapter ends with a conclusion that highlights the research implications, addresses the limitations, and proposes several directions for future research.

5.2 Addressing the research questions

Even though using social media to conduct marketing activities for higher education is a new phenomenon, an early study in 2009 found that universities around the world were already experimenting with social media student recruitment strategies (Bado & Nyangau, 2012; Barnes & Mattson, 2009).

An initial objective of this study was to explore the role WOAs play in the decision-making process of Chinese students when choosing a higher education provider overseas. Little was found in the current literature on the influence of WOAs on international students' decision-making when choosing overseas higher education providers.

The researcher was not only interested in investigating participants' experience when using WOAs to search for information about studying abroad but also in what can be improved to provide students with a much better experience. This research contributes to the current literature by allowing the participants' experiences to shed light on how WOAs could look in terms of content, format, and functions to better serve Chinese students in the near future. Using thematic analysis, this study presented five themes that emerged from the data that helped the researcher answer the research questions listed below.

1. How do Chinese students use WOAs to search for information about tertiary education options?
2. How does content available on WOAs affect Chinese students' choices?
3. How do WOAs influence Chinese students' decision-making process?

5.3 How do Chinese students use WOAs to search for information about tertiary education options?

It is clear that technology has transformed students' perspectives on accessing information. The primary goal of social media is to bridge the cultural and linguistic divide by bringing end-users or consumers as close to the product or service as possible (Khan, 2013). Zhang and Hagedorn (2011) found that in the past, most Chinese students relied on the traditional method of obtaining information – that is, consulting with an agent. In the past, agents have played a crucial role in providing information and guidelines on visa applications and procedures to overcome various barriers such as language and knowledge. In recent years, the digital era has transformed how people behave, and social media platforms have been seen as the most effective tools for influencing how students behave (Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017). The primary reason for study participants' use of WeChat was information seeking, which corresponds with Luo, Chea, and Chen (2011), who consider information seeking the most prominent reason to use digital media. Among China's most popular social media platforms, WOAs have grown to become one of the most critical services offered globally. Because a WOA is a free service, both domestic and international education providers, government organisations, and businesses are taking advantage of WOAs to disseminate information to the public and to promote and market products (Liang & Yang, 2018).

The first research questions investigated how Chinese students use WOAs to find information about higher education providers. WeChat features a comprehensive built-in search engine and enables users to locate official accounts or content on the platform and other online resources. While some of the interview participants indicated that it is simple to use keywords to search for information, many participants stated that they had never used the search function of a WOA. Instead, the participating students would typically obtain information by viewing other people's posts on WeChat Moment or were recommended to follow official accounts by friends or family members. Moreover,

the participants explained that they viewed and followed an account shared by someone they knew based on trust and the difficulty of locating the correct account or information themselves.

Availability

As previously stated, some participants showed a preference for options provided or suggested by relatives or friends. This type of familiarity, according to Myers (2021), is beneficial for social media promotion. In contrast to brand or social influencer familiarity, information shared by those around us is always more appealing. This is due not only to trust in familiar people, but also to the availability of information. Word-of-mouth reputation is difficult to establish in the first place, but it has low promotion costs and high reliability.

Trust

When making decisions, Chinese students are significantly dependent on family or friends due to the cultural importance of trust of family and friends (Gatfield & Chen, 2006; Sánchez et al., 2006). Filial piety is a highly valued attribute in China, and it is described as a family tradition unique to Chinese culture. Filial piety serves as the moral foundation for Chinese patterns of parent-child relationships, which means that family loyalty, respect for superiors, and obedience are generally strongly held values in China. Chinese people are significantly more dependent on their relatives and friends than are people in Western countries (Sánchez et al., 2006).

In this research, participants frequently stated that their use of WOAs was influenced by someone they knew. Overall, participants expressed their willingness to believe the information shared with them by someone they trusted. Three scenarios came up frequently during the interviews: 1) Participants read an article shared on WeChat Moment by their networks and then followed the account. 2) The article or account was shared with them by someone they knew. 3) Either the article or the account was shared in a WeChat group, and it was the participant's choice to view the article or follow the account. Several participants stated that if they liked an article, they shared it with people they believed would benefit from it. As an illustration, all of the participants in this study were learning English in order to study abroad. If the participating students came across an article about overseas studies, in particular about a study destination of

their choice, they shared it with others they knew had the same goal. Therefore, it is critical for an institution to first understand its target audience to create content tailored to the demands and interests of that audience.

In this study, it was noted that information sharing among specific social circles was quite frequent. Any concerns about studying abroad are able to emerge during the information-sharing process. For example, the participants were willing to share WeChat articles with others who also desired to study abroad. Such sharing allows for consequent debate about the destination country, institution, or even specific majors. For this reason, it is important that an institution provides both relevant and targeted information in an article – for example, information about an institution’s enrolment rate and application support. This will result in an article being more audience-friendly. In an ideal world, institutions would encourage audience segmentation, categorising audiences based on their level of aspiration, economic foundation, and academic performance, and then targeting their information to most benefit their different audiences.

Secondly, the importance of accessing information through a reliable third party must be addressed. The target audience should not be limited to students but should include parents, peers, teachers, and agents since they may be influential. Once the target audience and content are determined, the institutions could use various strategies to encourage the audience to share or re-post an article in exchange for a reward. Some participants mentioned that they would either follow an account or re-post an article to receive a discount voucher or a free service, and the same method could apply to educational institutions. For example, an institution could invite its followers to participate in a survey and in exchange, the institution could choose the best answers and reward winning participants with a prize such as university merchandise or a gift card that can be used in the students’ home country.

Improve the WeChat search experience

Other than searching for a specific official account, most participants expressed a willingness to follow an account referred to them by someone else. When asked why, some admitted having difficulty finding the proper official account they were looking for. With over 25 million WOAs existing across the platform, many have similar names.

Finding the WOA users need or the information they are looking for can be challenging at times (Guo et al., 2017).

To begin with, choosing an appropriate name is critical for overseas institutions that want to be more easily recognised by Chinese students. The name of the WOA should be the institution's name as it is known to the audience. Furthermore, the name should also include keywords representing the service type or its demographic location.

In order to better prepare for the interviews, the researcher observed a variety of official New Zealand accounts related to education. According to the researcher's own experience, when searching using the keyword "AUT" (which stands for Auckland University of Technology), the results included several institutions and businesses with AUT in their names (see Figure 5). The closest match was an account called AUT Public Relations, which used AUT's official logo. The researcher had to search again to determine whether AUT had another official account, as the most recent update in that particular account was in November 2021. After several searches with different keywords, including AUT's full name – Auckland University of Technology – there was no match between English and Mandarin. When the researcher searched for the demographic location "Auckland" and the service type "university", AUT's official account appeared alongside the University of Auckland and Massey University under the keywords "The University of Auckland".

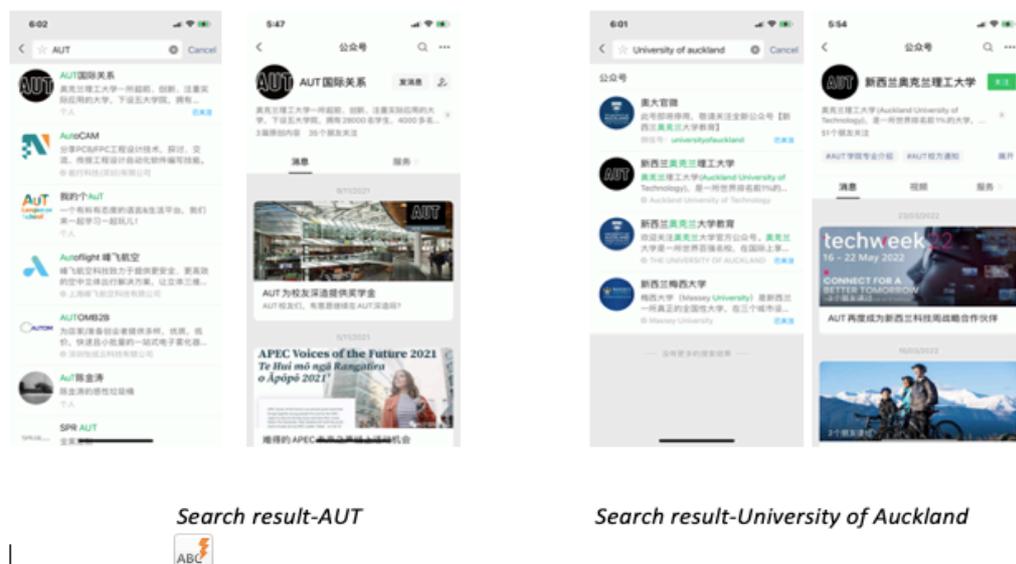


Figure 5: Search results – AUT and UoA

Institutions need to better understand the available search function and the challenges that prospective students face when using the search function. Having a meaningful official account name that best represents the institution is an excellent place to start. The search function is not only available to students, but it may also be helpful to institutions. The search function's primary goal is to help institutions understand what their competitors are doing to improve the content, article headlines, and keywords.

Another suggestion is to strengthen the visibility of an institution's WOA for the sake of prospective students, parents, and agents to counter the possibility of confusion when searching by the WeChat name. The institution could include the WeChat QR code on banners and publications and make these available in physical and digital formats. The institution could also encourage staff members with a position in the Chinese market to promote the platform by including the official account's QR code in their email signatures or using it as the closing slide in presentations. Institutions may also consider using the official WeChat account as a mini-website to display the most popular information in Mandarin. The mini-website could include contact information and content about available programmes, entry requirements, application procedures, and popular videos that showcase a campus and student stories.

5.4 How does content available on WOAs affect Chinese students' choices?

The second research question regarding WOAs focused on participants' opinion of the effectiveness of official account content. Compared to other popular Chinese social media platforms such as Zhihu, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok, WOAs are considered a one-stop-shop platform for up-to-date official information. Some Western universities have adopted social media content in the students' native language as a superior approach to engaging students (Choudaha, 2013). The research highlights the Chinese aspect, whereby both students and their families widely welcome information available in Chinese via an institution's WeChat account.

While some participants appreciated articles that were from official sources and recommended them as reliable, other participants wanted to see more content, particularly videos provided by current students, because the official information was described as "too serious" and "only one side of the story". In terms of overseas

education, these two points speak well for students' preference for a lively tone and detailed information. Institutions, in particular, should adopt a more student-friendly attitude, including more images or life-like details in their articles. Stories from students studying at specific universities in the destination country may also be useful. These personal experiences can provide potential newcomers with all-around guidance on daily life, study, and even career planning, as well as increase their enthusiasm for an ideal school life. More importantly, peer sharing is more reliable amongst young students, bringing the official WOAs even closer to them online and mentally. Other studies have looked at current students' impact on prospective students. According to Makrez (2011), it is a popular for education providers to connect prospective students with current students or Alumni through experience sharing and counselling, which is consistent with the findings of this study.

Although the participants in this research focused on the content itself and the headline, length, format, and even presentation of an article, a large percentage of them would have appreciated more visual content about campus life, facilities, events, activities, and even the demo classes. After seeing what an institution looked like and the campus experience, the participating students expressed a sense of being connected to the educational provider in the country where they hoped to study. The participants' comments pointed to what they valued most about studying abroad, which is exactly what an education service should be aware of. Aside from hard benchmarks such as QS, ARWU, and THE, the soft environment is extremely important. As a result, institutions must consider students' diverse needs and strive to cater to them by providing the most authentic campus experience possible. Only in this way can both students and institutions achieve long-term development, because education is not limited to high academic success, but rather to assisting students in better adapting to foreign education systems, undertaking self-improvement, and developing into people of high character.

5.4.1 The popularity of visual content on WeChat

In this study, a variety of interview questions were asked about content. For instance, while a small number of participants were interested in text-only WeChat articles, most students who participated preferred visual content. The researcher attempted to investigate the impact of age and gender on the preferred WeChat format when it

discovered that the vast majority of female participants favoured visual content. Although the text-only content allowed participants to gain in-depth knowledge about a specific area, such as study options or entry requirements, it also caused visual fatigue and discouraged them from reading it. Because Chinese students frequently do not have the opportunity to visit their preferred education provider before making their final decision, seeing the facilities, the campus and living environment, and the provided activities and events can be critical when making decisions. The interviews also revealed that most participants valued their time and preferred short videos. The most popular type of post was one that included a short video (1-3 minutes) and a summary of the article's key points.

Unlike gender difference, the participants' age did not affect their preferred content formats. In comparison to Generation Z (born 1995-2012), who have grown up in the Internet era and spend an average of two hours per day watching videos on social media platforms, Generation Y (born 1977-1994) is traditionally perceived as the generation that prefers traditional text-focused social media channels (Du & Howden, 2019; Laurenza et al., 2018). Surprisingly, according to this research, most Generation Y participants preferred visual content over text content. Despite the perception that young people prefer to watch long videos while mature students prefer to read long in-depth articles, the findings revealed that Generation Y participants spent less time on social media text content. Generation Y female participants stated that they would prefer visual content simply because they had so many other things to do, and there were always so many trending new things to follow. Thanks to the visual content, the female participants could watch or listen to the content while doing housework or exercising in the gym.

Overall, the data analysis suggests that WOAs should incorporate a variety of approaches when presenting visual content, such as video, images, and other graphics, and participants highly valued the use of unique designs. The content available on WOAs do not have to be confined to opinions on study but may also include things like storytelling by current students or Alumni. For example, higher education providers could think about boosting the use of visual content to highlight the campus environment, activities, and events. A live streaming session to either showcase the campus or demonstrate a class would be highly welcomed by prospective students, as

well as a video to showcase the institution. When composing the text content for an article, institutions should try to avoid overly wordy, long articles and the use of black and white colours only. To make the text easier to read and follow, it may be preferable to mix text content with innovative typesetting, such as bold or colour fonts.

5.4.2 Quality content enablement

The interviews also revealed the significance of an appealing headline, unique content of an appropriate length, and a timely push manner to entice people to read an article posted on a WOA or to continue following the account. In terms of content, participants usually looked at the headline first to ensure that it was appealing and appropriate for the content. The majority of participants disliked long articles or videos, and they also took into consideration the content's originality and newsworthiness. Several of the students who took part in this research stated that they were uninterested in plagiarised content and would rather be the first to receive any information. The study also focused on the need to create visually appealing content to keep the target audience engaged. The following section discusses the importance of content credibility and frequency and how to present content.

Credibility

During the interviews, participants expressed concerns about why the content on Chinese social media platforms was not as good as the English version available on institutions' websites and English social media platforms. Prior to 2018, WeChat did not enable foreign companies to register their WOA in the Chinese market (DeGennaro, 2019). Most overseas companies or education providers had to rely on a third-party company in China to maintain the account and publish translated content. Moreover, it was difficult for education providers to have complete control over managing and publishing content on the platforms at that time. Since 2018, more institutions have managed their own official accounts rather than relying on marketing agencies. The benefit of institutions having full access to official accounts is that it allows them to include various features that provide prospective students with a better experience and better quality.

Previous studies have shown that accessing information straight from the source provides the most credible and trustworthy content (Cheng, Mahmood, & Yeap, 2013).

Even though some participants acknowledged the professionalism of some of the content available on a platform, others expressed frustration when they saw only positive descriptions of studying in an institution. Almost all of the students who participated in the interviews were curious about the challenges that an international student might face while living and studying in a preferred destination. The unexpected finding of this study suggested that, while participants agreed that the information provided by institutions was somewhat reliable, the majority of them did not trust all of the available content, particularly content aimed at demonstrating how good an institution was. Participants also stated that despite seeing a variety of answers to issues, determining who is telling the truth was difficult. Some participants used content from various social media platforms as a reference, combining it with professional information from universities' WOAs to make their final study decision.

When the researcher asked the participants to share the platforms they used in order to gain insight into all the pros and cons of institutions, most participants preferred the content available on either Zhihu (text-only) or TikTok (videos). There is a great deal of sharing by individuals on both platforms, including both positive and negative comments about a specific topic on studying abroad. Most participants believed they were of a similar age to the people sharing this information online and believed they could easily be one of them. In general, they felt closer to other students presently studying or graduating from their desired university. This finding is consistent with Yan et al. (2016), who suggest that the more significant the interpersonal gap between people, the less someone is similar to themselves. In this sense, it is understandable that, while participants may not have followed all of the information provided by WOAs and other social media, they preferred to use them as a bridge to a virtual community where they could learn about institutions or study destinations through other students' online sharing.

Based on the findings, institutions should consider expanding the use of current students as ambassadors to promote their institutions in a number of ways. For example, student ambassadors could record a typical day as a student, including *where to eat and what to do after class*. Sharing should go beyond articles and include videos, online chatting, and even live streaming sessions to engage potential students.

Frequency

There were two related questions that sought to determine the participants' preferred frequency of WOA updates, how frequently they check the updates, and how long they would generally spend viewing articles on WeChat. The majority of participants were pleased with how frequently the official accounts they followed were updated. According to their comments, some accounts updated once a day, while others updated once every two days to a week. Some participants also suggested that WOAs should prioritise quality over quantity. In other words, if the official account can post something useful, a once-a-week push frequency is both acceptable and ideal. Several participants, however, stated that they had unfollowed official accounts because the updates were too infrequent.

Overall, most foreign institutions would benefit from posting valuable and professional content on a weekly basis. Each post could include several articles to meet the audience's needs for comparison purposes. As discussed in the previous session, the audience includes students and their parents, friends, peers, teachers, and agents.

When asked how long they would spend reading articles on WeChat daily, the participants' responses ranged from 5 to 10 minutes to several hours, subject to time available. He (2019) conducted research in China on WOA user behaviour to determine the best update time, and it was suggested that the best time to push a WOA article in China is between 6pm and 8pm. This study's findings go beyond previous research by demonstrating that participants would typically read an article when they woke up in the morning, finished work or study, during breaks, and before going to bed. When opening an update, participants frequently ensured that they had enough time, and most of them had the habit of checking or reading articles on official accounts more than once a day. These findings could be leveraged by WOAs to keep their followers interested in their content. Because many participants checked WOA articles during a specific period of time, account owners could publish articles during that time period. Meanwhile, institutions are advised to shorten the passages and highlight key information within a reasonable range in order to capture the audience's attention more effectively.

Participants frequently expressed a desire to open the latest update from their favourite official account and scan the headlines of the articles to see if there was anything of interest to them. When asked to describe the type of article that attracted them, the participants stated that it should have an appealing headline, a critical message that is relevant to their interests, and incorporate a creative presentation, such as utilising interactive campaigns that include animations.

Presentation

Social interaction creates a more intimate atmosphere than the basic video that is generally used on other traditional social media platforms (Chen, Yeh, & Chang, 2020; Hwang & Lee, 2018). According to the participants, a WOA should include a variety of methods for presenting media content, such as videos, images, and other infographics. It should also use colour and different typography and visual content to create a compelling WeChat post that keeps the target audience engaged from start to finish. The participating students also indicated that the use of innovative designs would be genuinely valued. For instance, higher education providers could consider using comics and animations to create DIY content to promote their programmes rather than just text and photos.

During the interviews, a few participants shared their knowledge of HTML5 (H5), which is the most creative and interactive way to run a WeChat campaign. H5 is a WeChat-based interactive feature that allows users to create collaborative campaigns that can be included in a post or an article. Ursell (2017) suggests that H5 should incorporate interactive features such as comments, votes, or online forums in addition to animation. H5 is well known in China and widely used by organisations and companies. The Forbidden City in China launched a very successful H5 campaign, which was downloaded over 800 million times in two days (see Figure 6). The campaign entailed animating several aspects of Yuanshang Zhu, the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty. The Emperor guides people through WeChat Moments, video clips, and other QQ emojis and then the user is directed to the Next Idea website, which presents a clear call to action (Ursell, 2017).



Figure 6: An example of the H5 campaign by Forbidden City

According to feedback from several participants, H5 is also frequently used by top universities in the United States and the United Kingdom as a way in which to engage and recruit Chinese students via WOAs. The majority of participants indicated that the content available on the social media platforms of higher education providers was similar. The participants wanted the official account to be more “fun”. Using vibrant colours, different fonts and sizes, and animated features to present information in an article may help keep the audience engaged from beginning to end.

Institutions in New Zealand could use H5 pages to improve their campaigns or as a simple mini-site that contains the most commonly requested information such as rankings, programmes, lifestyle, and culture-related content as suggested by participants. The methods for integrating WOAs with H5 pages are beneficial for

international institutions whose websites do not load quickly enough in China and they can also be presented creatively in students' native language.



Figure 7: An example of an H5 campaign by agents

5.5 How do WOAs influence Chinese students' decision-making process?

In most Asian countries, particularly China, advice from a third party such as parents, friends, peers, teachers, or agents is still the most influential factor when making educational decisions. However, with the recent development of social media platforms, international students now have instant access to a wide range of information that influences their education decisions (Cheng, Mahmood, & Yeap, 2013; Vrontis et al., 2018). Stageman (2011) claims that social media platforms used by higher education providers have no impact on students' decision-making processes. However, participants in this study emphasised the significance of affiliation development through WOAs and the impact on their decision-making process when selecting an institution.

Like Facebook Page, a public account used by organisations, a WOA is a business user account that allows individuals or companies to post content for commercial purposes. The function enables businesses to attract followers and acts as a tool to influence and communicate with their followers. With over 25 million WOAs on the WeChat platform, its popularity and efficiency are indisputable (Guo et al., 2017). However, even though a WOA is the home for compelling content that inspires Chinese students to study

abroad, the previous literature has acknowledged the traditional one-way approach adopted by most WOAs (Cheung & Chen, 2018). The findings of this study revealed that, in addition to being a communication tool, most participants would like to use the platform to engage with institutions and their peers.

5.5.1 The importance of interactivity

Previous qualitative research has primarily focused on the social interaction associated with social media platforms. What is not yet clear is the information interaction function of WOAs (e.g., how can institutions respond to their followers via WOAs?). The ultimate goal for institutions is to encourage potential and current students to engage with them through social media platforms in order to impact their decision-making positively. Participants proposed several strategies to help audiences like them become more engaged with official accounts. For example, the availability of a live chat function would enable students to ask questions in Mandarin. Some participants appreciated the live streaming or pre-recorded virtual campus tours and demo classes that helped them to understand the institutions better. Several participants also suggested hosting online activities and events for potential students to help them better engage with the institutions before they start their studies. Such academic and social integration would lead to potential students re-examining their institutional obligations, objectives, and intentions and adjust their targets flexibly. This finding supports the belief that social interaction fosters a sense of belonging if students are part of one or more communities within the university (Alexandros et al., 2017)

Rather than the current one-way communication method available on WOAs, nearly all participants preferred the idea of chatting with someone who could immediately address their concerns. The majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction about the difficulty of contacting institutions directly and suggested that communicating via WeChat is preferable to emails. A live chat sessions would be an excellent way for international students to interact with the education providers they are interested in. If prospective students have any questions, they could be directed in the right direction by staff or student ambassadors who speak their language.

Because Chinese students were unable to travel for more than two years due to COVID, the demand for virtual resources such as demo classes and virtual campus tours

increased. Several participants expressed a desire for institutions to include such pre-recordings on their official WeChat accounts. They also suggested that by providing a live streaming session to showcase the campus and facilities, or a demo class, an institution would be a better able engage with students. Furthermore, some participants expressed an interest in participating in activities or events hosted by their desired institutions. The participants indicated that this would not only be a chance for them to engage with institutions but also with other prospective students. The opportunity to get to know other students interested in attending the same institutions before leaving China would allow them to make new friends and exchange information. An institution could use giveaways to encourage their audience to interact with them through the official account's mini-programme or reward them for sharing an article and accumulating enough likes to leverage engagement with prospective students. By doing so, the institution would not only be engaging with its current audience but would also have the opportunity to reach a broader audience.

Institutions could also create WeChat groups and assign one of their staff members or a student ambassador to manage and nurture a group. The benefit of forming smaller WeChat groups of students who are either at the same stage of their student journey or who have similar interests in a particular programme is that institutions can share customer content relevant to the right audience at the right time.

5.5.2 The impact of WOAs on Chinese students' study destination choice

While Stageman (2011) maintains that the social media platforms of higher education institutions have little effect on students' decision-making processes, other scholars have different views. Khan (2013) suggests that the purpose of social media is to bridge the cultural and linguistic divides by bringing end-users as close to a product or service as feasible. In contrast, Choudaha (2013) highlights the successful story of The University of Kentucky College of Arts and Sciences that uses the most popular Chinese social media platforms to engage with Chinese students. Although a range of factors may influence Chinese students' choice of study destination, the most frequent usage in this context is on various social media platforms (Benson et al., 2012; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011; Zwart, 2013).

The first step in researching the influence of social media on Chinese students' destination choices is to identify the influencing factors. While social integration refers to the consistency of a student's relationships with staff and peers outside of the classroom, academic integration focuses on the student's academic success. (Yu & Richardson, 2015). Essentially, if institutions offer good opportunities for students to connect with them, students will become integrated and more likely to persevere. Tinto (1975) contends that students are more likely to continue their enrolment at an institution if they become involved in its social and academic life. Students who become integrated into an institution through making connections with people, joining clubs, or participating in academic activities are more likely to stay than those who remain on the perimeter. Similarly, students who are isolated or who do not participate in social activities within the institution are less likely to stay (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2010). While previous studies have focused on existing students, this research examines the influential factors that impact future students.

In this study, participants frequently stated that their use of WOAs was influenced by someone they knew. When making educational decisions, advice from a third party is still regarded as the most influential factor (Cheng et al., 2013; Demetris et al., 2018). This study found that while interviewees differed on whether a third party influenced their study decisions, most agreed that they had considered social media content when making final decisions. Most participants suggested that WOAs could help with affiliation development by exposing prospective students to information about their desired education provider. The research conducted by Lee and Hong (2016) supports this finding by demonstrating that social media users' intentions to connect with a brand may be influenced by the beliefs of their significant others and acquaintances.

This study found that official accounts could leverage users' experience by creating awareness of the university brand and sharing information about its services and programmes with potential students and their families. Several factors were discussed in the interviews that impact Chinese students' destination choices. The majority of the participants indicated they chose a university based on its international ranking, the quality of the programmes, and the lifestyle and culture of the study destination. The majority of participants also suggested that the official account of an institution should

not be limited to content available only from the perspective of its staff; instead, it should include students' input.

Lastly, the majority of participants praised institutions' efforts in making Mandarin content available to them on their WOAs. However, while professional content related to programmes and other academic content is appreciated, most participants would have liked to see more sharings from students' perspectives. Other social media platforms, such as institutions' official websites, Zhihu, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok, are crucial for choosing an institution.

5.6 Contributions

5.6.1 Theoretical implications

This forward-thinking study contributes to the existing literature on the international education sector. The analysis and concerns for the next generation of international students represent a macro trend in the evolution of the education industry. Because of the growth of the Internet and emerging social media platforms, international students are promised a more convenient and accessible understanding of the destination countries and institutions. This study anticipates future needs and generates new research ideas on the development orientation and core value of international education services.

The uniqueness of this study was its selection of the most popular social media platform in China, with the aim of investigating the link between the platform and Chinese students' intention to study abroad. Because of WeChat's large user base and its competitive features, its WOAs were the primary focus of this research. From a theoretical perspective, the critical contribution of this study is its provision of an in-depth understanding of the WOAs and their impact on Chinese students' decisions when contemplating a study destination. The following theoretical implications emerged from this research.

As the most basic way of describing migration, factors related to push and pull can vary depending on people's socioeconomic status, age group, gender, and ethnicity differences (Tan, 2013). While previous studies have acknowledged the importance of push and pull factors and their impact on international students' study abroad intentions, scholars have focused primarily on macro factors such as academic, economic, social, cultural, and political factors that are difficult to quantify (Sanchez et al., 2006; Wang, 2007; Waters, 2005). As a result, research conducted prior to the development of the Internet and Web 2.0 has less reference value as the data is relatively out of date.

The current study expands on previous research and fills a gap in the literature by focusing on micro factors influencing Chinese students' intentions to study abroad. Money, safety, employment opportunities, lifestyle, rankings, and programme quality

are among these factors. Chinese students seek more than just an educational opportunity: they actively seek a comprehensive life experience. The study's findings show that prospective Chinese students are looking for information beyond traditional academic and programme-specific content. According to the findings, Chinese students place a high value on a comprehensive student journey. To attract greater attention from their target audiences, institutions must consider incorporating content related to the micro factors mentioned above. Furthermore, by providing up-to-date data collected from prospective Chinese students, the study contributes to a better understanding of WOAs.

The current research has also expanded on previous studies that have focused on the impact of social media on current students (Karp et al., 2010; Tinto, 1975; Yu & Richardson, 2015). The study is the first to examine the impact of WOAs on prospective Chinese students in detail. The key findings of this study enable institutions to better understand their target audience at the beginning of their journey, allowing them to develop marketing strategies to better cater to the needs of prospective students. The study focuses on engaging prospective Chinese students, and it identifies the most effective way to communicate with them through WOAs. The study first examined how prospective Chinese students search for information on WOAs, then looked at the most popular content format and presentation of these WOAs among Chinese students. Other important factors considered in the study that may affect the student user experience are the best time to push a post and the best frequency at which to post content on WOAs. While Cheung and Chen (2018) acknowledge that WOAs help promote information to users using a one-way communication system, the findings of this study emphasise the importance of interaction between WOAs and prospective Chinese students.

Lastly, in contrast to previous research that has found a positive relationship between age groups and their preference for particular social media content formats (Du & Howden, 2019; Laurenza et al., 2018). The study's findings show that age does not affect the preferred content format. Contrary to popular belief, young people prefer to watch videos while mature students prefer to read in-depth articles. Our findings indicate that, when compared to young adults, mature students have less time available for detailed text content because they have to balance study, work, and family life. Instead, mature

students are more interested in video or audio content because the majority of them intend to multitask; that is, they prefer to listen to or watch content while doing housework or leisure activities. As a result, institutions may consider increasing the amount of video or audio content available to mature students during a specific time period during the day that matches their activities. On the other hand, the ratio of written articles to video content should be kept within a reasonable range or combined. For example, as an information supplement for the viewers, a brief introduction can be attached to any video content.

5.6.2 Practical implications

This study also has several practical implications. For higher education institutions and education agents, this research highlights several opportunities to strengthen engagement with prospective Chinese students from the beginning of their journey through WOAs. This, in turn, could help education providers and education agents engage in successful student recruitment and improvement of students' experiences throughout the process. The study could also benefit other government agencies such as Education New Zealand and Study Auckland.

Firstly, a WOA can be used as more than just a communication tool. Institutions could create a mini-website on their official account to display the most popular content in Mandarin. Embedded video could showcase the campus and highlight student stories, which would be welcomed by prospective Chinese students. A one-stop user experience would provide institutions with an opportunity for better engagement with their audiences, resulting in a much better user experience and a positive impression of the institutions.

Secondly, the WOA search experience could be improved further. To assist potential students to quickly locate a WOA and to reduce the disruption caused by other WOAs with a similar name, institutions should emphasise their official name first and foremost. In some cases, official WOAs could include subtitles or additional explanations in their introduction to demonstrate their authority. Furthermore, it is recommended that a WOA's demographic location and service type is very clear in order to prevent a frustrating user experience, as some accounts are registered by private companies and may have few updates, or even misleading information in the worst-case scenario.

Third, in addition to the search process, the layout of WOA articles could be improved significantly. To provide a better user experience, institutions could use interactive tools such as H5. As previously stated, H5 can engage users in editing, commenting on, reviewing, or even voting on WOA programmes. Participants in this study also reported a positive experience with the H5 interface developed by some foreign universities. Overall, H5, ARKie, Xiumi, and other interactive tools can help increase the attractiveness of official WOAs while also making it easier for followers to obtain desired information.

Fourthly, institutions should not take a one-way approach when reaching out to prospective Chinese students. Even though some providers offer chatbot (AI) functionality, prospective Chinese students seek in-person interactions. In this study, the majority of participants wanted the opportunity to communicate with a staff member who could assist them in addressing their concerns. Peer-to-peer communication was also considered to be very effective. Institutions would benefit from encouraging their current students or Alumni advocates to share their study and life experiences through official accounts.

Lastly, despite the fact that Chinese students are exposed to a large amount of information on the Internet, third-party influence is still considered an important factor in making educational decisions. As stated by this study's participants, information recommended or shared by their WeChat friends is more appealing, and many rarely use the inserted search function of a WOA. As a result, institutions should place a greater emphasis on peer influence and encourage readers to share relevant information with those around them. Institutions should acknowledge that their target audience includes more than just students but also their parents, peers, teachers, and agents. Institutions should develop a variety of marketing strategies to ensure that content is available in a format that is accessible to everyone.

5.7 Limitations

The primary goal of this research was to explore the influence of social media platforms, particularly WOAs, on Chinese students' decision-making when choosing an overseas higher education provider. Additionally, the objective was to understand what can be done to improve students' experience when using social media to search for information

about studying abroad. However, throughout the research investigation, there were limitations that might be avoided in future studies.

Firstly, to gather the needed data, the researcher initially proposed interviewing Chinese new arrivals currently studying in New Zealand at either undergraduate or postgraduate levels to share their experience. The reason for inviting new arrivals rather than Chinese students who had studied in New Zealand for several years is that the new arrivals would still remember what they did when using social media in China to assist them in searching for information. The aim was to conduct face-to-face interviews in Auckland with open-ended questions. However, due to the impact of COVID and New Zealand's closed borders since March 2020, the researcher was not able to find any new arrivals to conduct face-to-face interviews with between July and December 2021. While many would agree that the resulting video interviews provided a more intimate connection than phone conversations, meeting students in person would have provided the best opportunity for meaningful interaction. In-person interviews could have offered a much higher level of engagement and a higher quality of answers.

As a result of the border closure, the researcher approached an English Language School in Chengdu, China, inviting students studying academic English to participate in an online interview. The study was performed with participants from this one English Language school in China. Therefore, the second limitation of this study was that it addressed the proposed research questions from the perspectives of the Chinese students in Chengdu only instead of seeking the perspective of students from other regions who could have shared something different. Therefore, was a limitation in the objective validity of the information acquired from participants throughout the interviews.

Thirdly, even though the researcher attempted to find students of different age groups of both genders, it was challenging as most students were only there for a brief period before heading to their selected study destinations such as Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Among the 31 participants, there were only 4 male students due to time limits. Thus, this research may not represent the entire range of experiences that every Chinese student who wants to study overseas has to contend with.

For future studies, a larger sample size that includes students from different regions in China could benefit the researcher by providing more accurate data when analysing the results. The quantitative approach could be adapted by using a survey to test the validity of the findings when dealing with a larger sample size.

5.8 Directions for future studies

First, the sample of future research needs to be extended. In particular, the gender distribution should be more balanced to draw more reliable conclusions. Although the researcher was able to recruit participants of various ages, the gender balance was not reached since only four male participants were interviewed. It is important to have gender diversity and an equal number of male participants should be recruited in future studies to compare the influence of social media. Participants also need to be more diverse in terms of geographical and age distribution. More students from various regions of China, as well as a variety of age groups and gender balance, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the overseas education industry and its future orientation.

Second, future research could combine a qualitative and quantitative analysis of WOA followers to investigate why some institutions have extremely large followings. The researcher could use a questionnaire to investigate what has been done, followed by in-depth interviews to explore opportunities for what can be improved to better serve Chinese students at each stage of their student journey. Furthermore, more institutions could be involved in the qualitative research to help delve into the WOA operation framework in different institutions, which may provide more valuable guidance for new entrants or existing peers to develop targeted strategies for potential students.

5.9 Conclusion

The study was inspired by the importance of WOAs and their various impacts on people's daily lives. Because of WeChat's large market share and highly competitive functionalities, institutions worldwide have discovered the value of having a presence on this platform. WeChat is regarded as a recruitment and promotional tool and a means for institutions to engage prospective and current students and Alumni. As a result, people working in the education sector should constantly improve their WeChat practice

by understanding their target audience. The current research aimed to investigate Chinese students' WOA usage habits related to higher education, the impact of content on their choices, and the influence of WOAs on Chinese students' decision-making when choosing a study destination.

In response to the research question – “What is the role of social media in Chinese students’ choice of a tertiary education provider in New Zealand?” – social media, specifically WOAs, play both positive and negative roles for Chinese students.

When investigating the negative impact of social media on prospective Chinese students, it is worth noting that participants of this study were dissatisfied with some aspects of WOAs. For example, because WOAs gather a great deal of information, the contents may be too comprehensive for students to follow. Moreover, institutions tend to emphasise only their advantages, despite the fact that the situation may differ significantly from what students learn through other channels. Furthermore, a homogenised push form (lack of visual content) reduces WOA's attractiveness, whereas frequent push without a fixed schedule is perceived as a burden rather than a help. In terms of reputation and authenticity, too many advertisements and reposts from other sources undermine the institution's credibility and occasionally cause students to question the institution's attitude towards students. Some interviewees said rampant copycats irritated them, as they disliked repetitive content and redundant information that only delayed their decision-making process. Furthermore, students reported that when they asked questions via WOAs, institutions rarely responded in a timely manner. As a result, participants questioned the effectiveness of the WOAs' interaction function made available to Chinese students.

On the other hand, social media remains an important decision-making tool for prospective students. The study's findings are consistent with the conclusions of previous similar research. According to the literature, the most popular social media platforms in China can influence consumer behaviour and students' choice of overseas tertiary institutions (Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017). WOAs serve as a one-stop-shop for Chinese students seeking information on study abroad opportunities. WOAs are incredibly effective at disseminating information and can even provide a bilingual search module for both students and parents. Furthermore, some participants of this study

stated that excellent videos posted on the WOAs of several institutions had drawn them in. Participating students praised the visual content for showcasing campus life and the academic environment.

In conclusion, the current findings suggest that Chinese students have a distinct demand for the content and format available on WOAs. Most Chinese students appreciate visual content and detailed information such as study options, entry requirements, scholarships, and internship or employment opportunities. The research highlighted the positive impact of a third party when using official WeChat accounts and the influence of this party on decision-making when choosing a study destination. Furthermore, study participants suggested that two-way communication should be available to help them engage with education providers. In addition to other factors that influence Chinese students' choice of a study destination, Chinese students highly value an institution's overall ranking, the quality of the programmes, and the lifestyle and cultural aspect of the study destination.

The study supports current literature regarding the positive role and influence of WOAs on Chinese students' decision-making processes. However, the current research has filled a gap in the previous literature by investigating the impact of WOAs related to studying abroad. This study also explored the perspective of Chinese students' WOA usage and its influence on their study destination choice, which has not previously been studied. The findings of the current study form factors that will shape future Chinese students' recruitment by institutions, and help institutions reach out to these prospective students. As a result, this research provides insight into the role of WOAs for university staff, educators, and international student ambassadors alike. The findings also include suggestions for how institutions can improve their engagement with their prospective Chinese students.

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Appendices

Appendix A Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
 D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
 T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
 E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

12 July 2021

Yingzi Xu
 Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Yingzi

Re Ethics Application: → **21/251 - The role of social media for Chinese students in choosing a tertiary education provider in New Zealand**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 12 July 2024.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. → The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. → A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. → A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. → Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. → Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. → Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. → It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
 Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee
 CC: csn1625@hotmail.com

Appendix B Tools

a) Interview invitation email

Email Invitation to Participate in Research ¶

Dear student, ¶

My name is Shengnan (Jessica) Chen, and I am a Master student studying the Master of Business major in Marketing from Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. I am currently undertaking a research project to explore social media platforms, particularly WeChat public accounts, and their impact on Chinese international students' decision-making related to choosing a tertiary education provider. ¶

The project that we seek your involvement in entails an interview that will take between 30 minutes and an hour to complete. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and whether or not you choose to participate will not affect you. You will be given at least two weeks to consider your involvement in this research, and all responses to the interview questions will be kept entirely confidential. The data collected would be used exclusively for research purposes. The researcher's responsibility is to store all data and the interview transcriptions in a safe space for at least six years. ¶

The purpose of the study is to understand how Chinese international students interact with WeChat public accounts and investigate how the contents available on WeChat public accounts affect Chinese international students' decision-making process related to education provider's choices. Thus, the interview will help the researcher develop a deep and rounded understanding of Chinese students and potentially contribute to research findings valuable to education providers in New Zealand. ¶

You have been chosen as a potential candidate in this research project because of your position as a student studying English and studying overseas after completing your English studies in China. As the primary researcher, I will contact you within two weeks of receiving this email invitation to determine whether you would like to participate in this study. ¶

Thank you. ¶

Kind Regards, ¶

Jessica Chen ¶

b) Participant information sheet



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

Participant Information Sheet ¶

¶

- **Date Information Sheet Produced:** ¶
10 July 2021 ¶
- **Project Title** ¶
The role of social media for Chinese students in choosing a tertiary education provider in New Zealand ¶
An invitation ¶
My name is Shengnan (Jessica) Chen, and I am a Master student studying the Master of Business major in Marketing from Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. I am currently undertaking a research project to explore social media platforms, particularly WeChat public accounts, and their impact on Chinese international students' decision-making related to choosing a tertiary education provider. The interview will help me develop a deep and rounded understanding of Chinese students and potentially contribute to research findings valuable to education providers in New Zealand. ¶
- **What is the purpose of this research?** ¶
The research will form the basis of a Master thesis, and the findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations. The purpose of the study is to understand how Chinese international students interact with WeChat public accounts and investigate how the contents available on WeChat public accounts affect Chinese international students' decision-making process related to education provider's choice. ¶
- **How was I identified, and why am I being invited to participate in this research?** ¶
As the primary researcher, I explained the research purpose and the suitable participants that I am currently looking for with the principle of Amazing IELTS English Language School Mrs. Danqi Di, and send Danqi the information sheet along with the introductory email that can be shared with suitable students. Danqi then asked the teachers to compile a list of suitable students and send the list to the administration staff. The Administration staff will help to send an introductory email and the information sheet about this research for you to consider to participate in this research. ¶
You have been chosen as a potential candidate in this research because of your position as a student studying English and studying overseas after completing your English studies in China, as well as your experience in using social media platforms in particular WeChat public accounts. ¶
- **How do I agree to participate in this research?** ¶
Your participation in this research is voluntary, and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. Signing and returning the consent form indicates an agreement to participate in this research. You can withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to do so, you will be offered the choice between having any identifiable data as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used for the data analysis. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible. You will be given two weeks to consider your involvement in this research. ¶
- **What will happen in this research?** ¶
You will be invited to a semi-structured online interview up to an hour-long, and the interview will be conducted in Mandarin and audiotaped. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher will explain the procedure before ask you to sign the Consent Form in front of the camera. You will be also given the opportunity to ask questions or raising concerns anytime during the interview. ¶
Each interview contains up to 15 questions, and the purpose of the research is to investigate the social media's effect on Chinese students' tertiary institution decision-making process, focusing on WeChat public accounts. ¶

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This version was edited in November 2019¶

→ ¶

■ **What are the discomforts and risks?** ¶

- There will not be any discomfort or risk in participating in this research. ¶

■ **How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?** ¶

The confidentiality of the participants' opinions will be respected by both the researcher and her supervisor. All information provided will be accessed only by the researcher and her supervisor. The data will be used only within an academic context. ¶

■ **What are the benefits?** ¶

The anticipated benefits of the research are completing a Master thesis and a better understanding of how Chinese international students use social media platforms. In addition, the study will also benefit the tertiary education sector in New Zealand in terms of communicating with Chinese students effectively. ¶

■ **How will my privacy be protected?** ¶

All information will be summarized and either reported in general terms or, if quoted, quotes will be anonymous, not linked to anyone. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to any information, which will be held securely. ¶

■ **What are the costs of participating in this research?** ¶

The interview will take up to an hour. ¶

■ **What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?** ¶

You will be contacted by email or WeChat within one week of receiving this invitation to ascertain whether or not you would like to participate in this research. ¶

■ **Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?** ¶

Feedback will be provided in written or oral form as appropriate for those interested in receiving feedback on the research findings. ¶

■ **What do I do if I have concerns about this research?** ¶

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Yingzi Xu, yingzi.xu@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 5033. ¶

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, ethics@aut.ac.nz (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038. ¶

■ **Whom do I contact for further information about this research?** ¶

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows: ¶

Primary researcher: Shengnan (Jessica) Chen, csn1625@hotmail.com, (+6427) 298 8729. ¶

Project supervisor: Dr Yingzi Xu, yingzi.xu@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 5033. ¶

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Researcher Contact Details: ¶

Primary researcher: Shengnan (Jessica) Chen, csn1625@hotmail.com. ¶

Project Supervisor Contact Details: ¶

Project supervisor: Dr Yingzi Xu, yingzi.xu@aut.ac.nz ¶

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee to type the date final ethics approval was granted, AUTECH Reference number type the reference number. ¶

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c) Consent form



Consent Form

Project title: → ***The role of social media for Chinese students in choosing a tertiary education provider in New Zealand***

Project Supervisor: → ***Dr Yingzi Xu***

Researcher: → ***Shengnan (Jessica) Chen***

→ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 5th July 2021.

→ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

→ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

→ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.

→ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.

→ I agree to take part in this research.

→ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature: →

Participant's name: →

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

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Date: →

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 12 July 2021 AUTEK Reference number 21/251

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix C The participants

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Education Background	Interview Date
Jacky	Male	18	High School graduate	23/07/21
Lyn	Female	19	High School graduate	25/07/21
Delphine	Female	18	High School graduate	25/07/21
Sally	Female	20	High School graduate	26/07/21
Amelia	Female	20	University Y2 student	2/08/21
Allen	Male	19	University Y2 student	6/08/21
Sunny	Female	18	High School graduate	7/08/21
Leo	Male	21	University Y3 student	8/08/21
Mesi	Female	18	High School graduate	12/08/21
Katy	Female	19	University Y2 student	13/08/21
Alan	Male	20	University Y2 student	15/08/21
Laura	Female	31	University graduate	2/12/21
Gary	Male	26	University graduate	2/12/21
Emma	Female	18	High School graduate	2/12/21
Ameko	Female	22	University graduate	2/12/21
Maggie	Female	28	University graduate	3/12/21
Aisha	Female	20	University Y3 student	3/12/21
Celia	Female	33	University graduate	3/12/21
Kelly	Female	24	University graduate	4/12/21
Judy	Female	24	University graduate	4/12/21
Izzie	Female	26	University graduate	4/12/21
Spring	Female	19	University Y2 student	5/12/21
Elaine	Female	28	University graduate	5/12/21
Jerry	Male	36	University graduate	5/12/21
Cynthia	Female	20	University Y2 student	5/12/21
Vivian	Female	25	University graduate	6/12/21
Nicole	Female	21	University graduate	6/12/21
Terry	Male	21	University Y3 student	7/12/21
Jenny	Female	22	University Y4 student	7/12/21
David	Male	33	University graduate	7/12/21
Katherine	Female	27	University graduate	8/12/21

Appendix D Interview questions – English

All participants will be presented with the two WeChat public account posts below at the beginning of the interview. The research will allow up to 5 minutes for an interviewee to quickly read and share their thoughts about the posts.

The first post comes from Massey University's WeChat account. It is a text-only announcement about the availability of the China Learning Centre for Chinese students who cannot return to New Zealand due to the impact of COVID-19.

The second post contains a Chinese student's story about her day studying and living at Southwest University in Chongqing, China. Luqi, an international student enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts programme at the University of Auckland, shares her experience, including a video of her day in one of the University of Auckland's China Learning Centres. Like the Massey University post, this post focuses on promoting the China Learning Centres to students who cannot come to New Zealand due to border closures.



Post 1



Post 2

Figure 8: Interview posts

Here are two WeChat public account posts.

- Can you tell me what you think of these posts?
 - Which do you like the most? And why do you like it?
 - What do you think of the other one?
1. What is your favourite type of WeChat article content (text only, video/image, or a combination), and why?
 2. What are some of the best/worst WeChat public account posts you have ever seen? What did you like/dislike about them the most?
 3. Have you followed a particular WeChat public account? Do you mind telling me which account?
 4. Why did you decide to follow this particular WeChat public account? (Which function of the public account is the most attractive to you?)
 5. In what ways do you think this WeChat public account is beneficial for you? Can you give examples based on your recent experience?
 6. How often do you check WeChat public accounts? How much time do you spend on checking these accounts?
 7. Apart from reading the WeChat articles, is there any mini programmes embedded within a particular WeChat account that attracts you?
 8. What function/mini programme would you like to see if it is not currently available on the WeChat public account?
 9. Can you tell me which university you would like to apply for after graduating from the Amazing IELTS English Language School? And Why?
 10. As a student looking at studying overseas, where are you getting information about this particular university that you would like to study at?
 11. Are you following this university's social media platforms, such as the WeChat public account? If so, what do you think about the information available on their WeChat public account? Is anything missing but you would like to see included in the future?

Thanks for your time and contribution to this research. I would like to incorporate your thoughts into my research and continue engaging with you as our research moves forward. Your help is much appreciated.

Interview questions- Chinese

这里我有两个微信公众号帖子。

- 你能告诉我你对这两个帖子的看法吗？
 - 你最喜欢哪个？你为什么喜欢它？
 - 另外一个呢？
1. 你最喜欢的微信文章内容的类型是什么（纯文字、视频/图片或两者的组合），为什么？
 2. 你见过的最好/最差的微信公众号帖子是什么？为什么你最喜欢/不喜欢他们？
 3. 你是否关注过某个微信公众号？你可以告诉我哪个微信号吗？
 4. 你为什么决定关注这个微信公众号？（公众号提供的哪个功能最吸引你？）
 5. 你认为这个微信公众号在哪些方面对你有帮助的？你能根据你最近的经验举个例子吗？
 6. 你多久查看一次微信公众号？当你查看这些帐户时一般会花多少时间？
 7. 除了阅读公众号上面的文章外，有没有相关的小程序吸引你？
 8. 如果微信公众号目前没有，你想拥有什么功能的小程序？
 9. 请问在新奇雅思毕业后想申请哪所大学？为什么？
 10. 作为一名考虑出国留学的学生，你从哪里获得有关你想就读的大学的的信息？
 11. 你是否关注你所心仪的大学的社交媒体平台，例如微信公众号？如果是这样，你如何看待他们微信公众号上目前所提供的资讯？有什么目前没有，但希望你希望看到的？

感谢你为这项研究付出的时间和贡献。我想将你的想法融入我的论文研究中，并在我们的研究向前发展时继续与你互动。非常感谢你的帮助！