

The Use of Digital Media among China students in Belarusian State University during Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand the views of Chinese students studying in Belarus during the covid-19 pandemic and to reveal the extent to which they use online media. Through in-depth interviews, this study interviewed 10 Chinese students with different majors, genders, rental conditions and residence years in Belarus, hoping to objectively reflect the situation of Chinese students as much as possible. The interview results showed that during the epidemic period, online social media was the main contact information of these students, but Chinese media were more popular. Foreign media are the source of supplementary information for Chinese students during the epidemic. The diversity of media channels and the problems of Chinese social circles in Belarus also make Belarusian students experience information overload and information anxiety. In terms of media trust, Chinese students trust domestic mainstream media more than foreign media and social platform information.

Keywords: Chinese student; media use; Belarus; pandemic

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the comprehensive strategic partnership of mutual trust and bilateral cooperation between China and Belarus has been at a high level and stable operation. According to the information released by the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus situated in China from 2019 to 2020, the number of Chinese students studying in Belarus has more than doubled, and there are about 5,000 Chinese students studying in Belarus (Bo, 2021). Most of these students are concentrated in the capital Minsk, where the Belarusian State University has hosted the largest number of them. The Covid-19 pandemic situation in Belarus is very serious. According to the data from the World Health Organization (WHO), with a population of less than 10 million, Belarus faced more than 400,000 cases affected by the pandemic and nearly 3,000 people lost their lives. Since 2021, the daily number of new cases has increased by about 1,000. As a result, major universities in Belarus decided to teach online to protect students, faculty and staff, but it gave rise to students' self-isolation which restricted their normal social and academic activities as the network became almost the only means of connection between students and teachers. In spite of this, "social media helped learning by facilitating the process of student-student and student-teacher communication as well as circulating prompt, latest information." (Kasuma et al., 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study conducted in-depth interviews with ten Chinese students from Belarusian State University, and then statistical analysis was carried out on the results of the interviews. The basic information of the ten interviewees is shown in Table 1. The study population included 6 men and 4 women with an age range of 19-28 years. The interviewees lived on different campuses and studied at different programs: Ph.D. (10%), MA (40%), and BA (50%). Two of them lived in dormitories with a large flow of people and there was no isolation condition during the pandemic.

The method employed in this research was semi-structured one-to-one in-depth interviews. This research aimed to find out about the group characteristics and the underlying reasons for using the media by the students in Belarus during the pandemic.

TABLE 1. Basic information of interviewees

Student no.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	M	M	F	F	M	M	F	M	F	M
Age	21	24	25	27	28	23	23	25	24	19
Course	Economy	Public Relations	Economy	Economy	Economy	Linguistic	Linguistic	Mathematic	Philosophy	Psychology
Duration (Year)	2-3	4-5	1-2	0-1	6-7	2-3	1-2	0-1	3-4	2-3
Academic level	Bachelor	Bachelor	Masters	Masters	PHD	Bachelor	Bachelor	Masters	Masters	Bachelor
Accommodation	Off-campus	Off-campus	Off-campus	Off-campus	On-campus	Off-campus	Off-campus	On-campus	Off-campus	Off-campus

MEDIA USE

Media use generally refers to the daily use of the media in terms of type, length and frequency, and preferences (Wilczek, 2018). The spell of the COVID-19 pandemic reduced people's outing activities and caused a sense of insecurity about the current situation, which led to an increase in length, frequency and selection of media channels. Clayton's research revealed that individuals who feel excluded and isolated in reality sign up to Facebook earlier and use social media to reduce their loneliness (Clayton, 2012).

ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW RESULTS

INFORMATION ANXIETY OF VARYING DEGREES

Wurman (2001) first proposed the concept of anxiety in his book "Information Anxiety" published in 1989 as "...the sense of disorientation makes people feel strange and scared, so we need a computer database to give us a sense of direction... the state of tension that arises when the information obtained is not what is needed or understood and there is a difference between the information that should be understood." It can be said that one of the causes of information anxiety is lack of information. Some information is needed but cannot be obtained. When in an information vacuum state, people will easily fall into a series of anxiety and tension. Most studies have shown that once information anxiety appears in a group of college students, it will have a grave impact on their growth. A survey of college students found that the higher the degree of information anxiety, the higher the loneliness (Wei, 2010).

Due to the impact of the Covid-19, most of the international students interviewed chose to move out of overpopulated school dormitories to protect themselves against the high risk of pandemic. All the international students interviewed in Belarus expressed that they had a certain sense of insecurity studying and living in Belarus. Regarding this kind of insecurity, most of them said that it was due to the obstruction of information, specifically school announcements related to them. Respondent No. 8, who still lives in the dormitory said: "Compared to the risk of the virus, I am more afraid of outliers. I live alone; I am not good at

Russian, and I don't have any friends. I won't be able to receive any notification from the school. Life and study will be more difficult. No one will know if you die outside".

Because Chinese students are usually assigned to the same room, the dormitory is an important place for them to exchange information, but once you leave the group, you will inevitably be alienated from the Chinese student group. If your language skills are not good enough to obtain important information on your own, you will inevitably fall into a situation of isolation and helplessness. In this regard, Respondent No. 5 said, "The school's notifications are first given to various overseas study agencies, then to some senior students and eventually, the Chinese students can learn about them. If you don't know these large agencies and responsible people, you basically don't know anything."

Most of the interviewees agreed with the question "After moving out of the dormitory, will the efficiency of information communication be lower than before?". Respondent No. 5 said, "The news network here usually starts from the old students who are good at Russian, and then goes around. When you receive the news, it depends on where you are in the news network, as a vast majority of Chinese people do not have the habit and ability to check school announcements and local government announcements." For example, on June 8, 2021, from 19:00 to 21:00 Minsk time, the Federation of Chinese Students in Belarus set up two WeChat groups; the education team of the embassy invited the staff responsible for the review and issuance of the "health code" (Electronic voucher issued by the embassy in the country for returning to China) of Air China flight CA722 and nearly 800 students were inside the group for inquiry purpose. However, the ten interviewees were not aware of the existence of this Wechat group; and nearly half of them were not aware of the organization of the Chinese Students' Federation, either.

It should be pointed out that digital media is not used only as a learning and social tool here. In fact, it has become more of a spiritual bond, connecting international students to the school as well as to their distant relatives and friends; it is the only tool to meet social needs. For respondent No. 4, the feeling of loss and alienation between teachers and classmates is the most intolerable. "The Internet is the only link between me and my classmates and the teachers. It's been a year, and I don't know my classmates. "After class, I can't contact my classmates. There is no one to chat with, I can only talk to my domestic undergraduate friends."

The number of Chinese in Belarus is objectively small, less than 10,000, and they do not have the conditions to form a relatively complete and authoritative Chinese communication platform. At the same time, most of the foreign students are overseas students who live only for a short period of time, so the personnel mobility is relatively large. It is also impossible to form a stable Chinese settlement area like European and American countries or even Japan and South Korea. The dissemination of information mainly relies on the small circles connecting to large circles, but there is an obvious lag and introversion. Thus, news is relayed with much delay. Therefore, new international students are inevitably in a more marginal position at the periphery of the circle. At the same time, based on the field of study, the degree of information-related anxiety is lower in the language and economics departments with a large number of Chinese students than that in the Departments of Mathematics and Philosophy.

In contrast, the overload of information can also lead to information anxiety. If a person receives a large amount of complex information in a short period of time and has no time to decompose and digest it, it will cause a series of self-compulsion and tension, which is very close to anxiety symptoms in psychiatry, so it is called "information anxiety. As Respondent No. 6 said: "Want to see the news about yourself, can't you see it, but you can always see the news of all kinds of overseas Chinese being beaten when going out. It makes me nervous every time I go out."

Likewise, Respondent No. 7 said, "The various domestic and foreign media outlets are tired of fighting over the origin of the virus. I don't want to read it anymore." When the students

searched for and received information about the Covid-19 pandemic, they hoped to see objective and true reports, but the results were often affected by various conspiracy theories and rumours. In such an environment, users' pressure originated in information selection is greatly increased; excessive information will cause information redundancy, and once it exceeds the user's processing, the ability to absorb information may trigger negative emotions related to media use. Too much information makes it difficult for people to find trustworthy sources of information and reliable guidance, and this may even harm people's health.

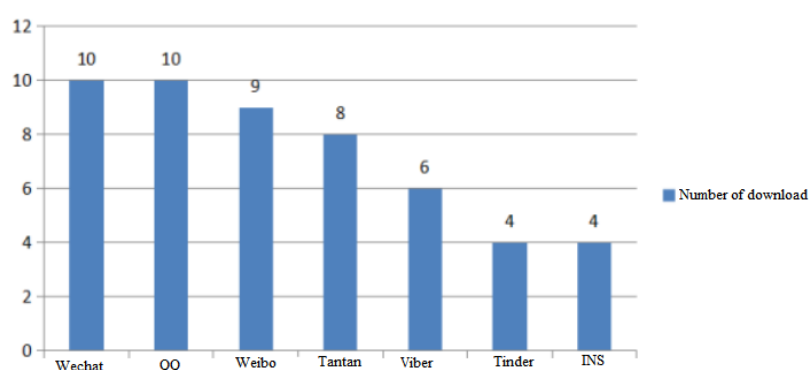
THE EMERGENCE OF DIGITAL SOCIAL DILEMMAS

Insufficient social interaction will bring people certain negative emotions. Therefore, as users are afraid of missing information, they often log in to these social networking sites and seem to actively use them. However, they are, in fact, passive and this further deepens their negative emotions. As findings show, almost all the interviewees said that during the pandemic, they used digital media more than they were in school, and they watched their mobile phones more frequently. Most of the interviewees believed that learning efficiency of digital online courses conducted through the Internet was lower than that of studying at school. "Technology, therefore, has yet to replace the teachers' roles as facilitators of academic learning and should be used realistically" (Henderson, Selwyn & Aston, 2017).

At the same time, most of the interviewees showed a certain degree of social anxiety which is an emotional reaction and avoidance behavior filled with serious worry, nervousness, or fear for one or more interpersonal situations (Guo, 2000). Studies have also revealed that information anxiety caused by information quality and information acquisition has an impact on students' social interactions (Zhang & Wang, 2012) and this means that the information anxiety of Belarusian international students is one of the factors that triggers this type of social anxiety.

Figure 1 shows the type of social media apps installed on the mobile phones of Chinese students studying overseas. It also displays the amount of downloads on each individual application.

FIGURE 1. Social software downloads of Chinese students studying abroad



It is possible that the life and social goals of Chinese students who leave their country are based on Chinese social apps, such as WeChat QQ and Weibo, which are all Chinese local applications while foreign social software downloads are personalized, such as the popular instant software communication Viber and social media platform INS in Belarus and Russia. Student No. 7 said, "Since Covid-19 broke out in China, people in Belarus have not been

friendly to the people from China. They thought that we were “unclean” and were unwilling to engage with us.” The public health crisis and the special background of some local people who were hostile to the Chinese led to more and more restrictions on the social scope of the foreign Chinese students, and they could only conduct social activities within the Chinese student communities.

TABLE 2. Summary of interviewees’ social situations

No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Are there any Belarusian friends	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Gathering with friends during the pandemic	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Is online social networking the main social mode?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is there a state of information anxiety?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
With or without social anxiety	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Frequency of communication with teachers and classmates	Occasionally	Occasionally	Often	Rarely	Often	Occasionally	Occasionally	Often	Rarely	Rarely

Socialization is not easy for the Chinese students to develop. Due to the pandemic, the possibility of studying together in the classroom and visiting each other offline is basically eliminated, and friendship between classmates has become weaker than before. Yang (2009) also pointed out that there is a negative relationship between the development of online friendship and the establishment of online intimacy. Respondent No. 2 said, “The long-term online chat is very boring, and everyone is really unfamiliar. After a long time, no one will find anyone. But I think a basic social interaction is very important, so I downloaded Tantan and Dating software like Tinder.”

Excessive use of social media has made the interpersonal communication of college students more casual, utilitarian, indifferent, virtualized and vulgar (Chen & Chen 2014). Compared with more open social software like QQ and WeChat, the social objects of this kind of social software are more purposeful and private, reducing the burden of public social interaction. Indeed, the social support provided by interpersonal relationships can help individuals relieve stress in many ways, including regulating bad emotions, sharing

responsibilities, providing advice, imparting skills, and providing material assistance (Zheng, 2005). The students are eager to get rid of low-quality and ineffective social interaction, thinking that it will consume a lot of time and energy, but they cannot get social support.

When interviewee No. 10 was asked, "How do you feel using WeChat (social software) now? Do you want to take the initiative to chat?". The interviewee replied, "At first, I didn't go to school. Everyone chatted happily on WeChat. But now there is no (chat) at all. I am autistic. The circle of friends is very boring, and chatting is also very boring. I don't even want to click on WeChat. In the end, it's just those few things."

THE SOURCE OF INFORMATION IS STILL MAINLY CHINESE MEDIA

According to the interviews, it can be learned that the students have a certain degree of news literacy; their locality is more obvious, that is, even if they are abroad, they have a high degree of dependence on Chinese media and a low degree of concern for local news. Among the many stressors, language ability has been recognized as one of the important indicators to measure the pressure of cross-cultural adaptation. Language barriers not only affect the performance of students in academic life, but also hinder their social interactions, leading to the emergence of social-cultural life pressure (Constantine, Okazaki & Utsey, 2004). The news media that Chinese students often browse during the pandemic is still the domestic Chinese news media. Most of the interviewees mentioned that they would get the latest information quickly through Chinese media (such as Douyin, and Weibo); then through authoritative and mainstream Chinese news media (such as Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily Online, and CCTV). To obtain more accurate information about the pandemic. In the end, it is more convenient to use the external network and browse the news media of Western countries.

Most of the interviewees said that because of their limited language ability, they could not read local news in Belarus. Insufficient Russian language ability is a huge problem faced by the students in their daily study and life. At present, the main foreign language taught in the primary, middle and high stages of our country is English. Most of the Chinese students do not have a Russian learning background and had only one year of preparatory language courses but still unable to meet the requirements of daily study and life. Russian is a very systematic language with considerable rigor, complexity and structure. Different from English words, the learning of Russian word inflections requires considerable energy, not to mention that most of the students learn it as a second foreign language, which is especially difficult with respect to vocabulary and morphology. Most of the Chinese-Russian sentence translations on translation software are inaccurate, undoubtedly making it more difficult for the white students to understand the local culture and meet local friends. Major universities in Belarus have not established a comprehensive service management system for Chinese students, such as off-campus accommodation recommendations, Chinese news announcements, and psychological counselling services.

Facing the slander attacks of the Western media on the Chinese government during the pandemic and the counterattack of the Chinese mainstream media, most of the students who left Belarus maintain a correct standpoint: "This pandemic has shown me the shamelessness and reality on the side of the British and American media, and the humiliation of our Chinese people in YouTube comments is really unfair." Respondent No. 6 said, "The news about the pandemic is subject to the official information of the Chinese government and the news released by the WHO."

Through this interview, it can be learned that the most trusted media among students who leave the country is the official Chinese government news agency such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other authorities like the United Nations and the World Health Organization. Chinese students still maintain a high level of trust in official news, and even for

overseas students studying in Belarus, the credibility of the Chinese government is still not shaken. At the same time, the Chinese students showed a more or less cautious and distrustful attitude towards the news published by the Western media. In this regard, Respondent No. 4 said that “news must have a standpoint, and there is absolutely no objective news. It is more or less affected by some links and factors that produce bias. These are understandable, but I cannot tolerate them. Some Western media ignore the objective facts and deliberately discredit them.”

RESULTS AND FINDING

This study uses one-on-one focus interviews and attempts to explain the characteristics of Chinese students studying in Belarus who used digital media during the pandemic. There are three influencing factors, namely, user emotion and differential order, and media.

USER EMOTION ELEMENTS

At the beginning of the outbreak, the students from Belarus were concerned about the number of infections in China and Belarus. They browsed a lot of relevant content every day, and many social activities were carried out around this theme as they had a cognitive tendency of "negative information attention", as browsing relatively negative information for a long time made them have greater demand for such reports. When people have negative emotions, due to the influence of the emotional consistency effect, they will give priority to the negative information, which triggers more negative emotions, and then this intensifies the attention bias of negative information, thus forming a vicious circle (Luo, 2017). In the face of the Corona virus pandemic, Chinese students in Belarus instinctively searched for its spread trend, as well as prevention and treatment drugs.

The quality and quantity of information cannot be effectively controlled and information with uneven quality fills the entire network. Therefore, users are prone to negative emotions in the process of screening and identifying a large amount of information (Zhou, 2019). Thus, the international students in Belarus experienced a certain degree of social burnout. During the pandemic, various platforms used this as the main topic to push content. During this period, the homogeneity of media content became more prominent, resulting in more intense competition among various media channels. As a result, many rumors and shocking news headlines appeared. The Chinese studying in Belarus had language barriers and had a low degree of integration with the local society. Therefore, they were more concerned about the pandemic. They were also more eager to receive true and accurate information, but the differences in reporting stances between Chinese and foreign media, differences in reporting content, and propaganda on the origin of the Chinese virus caused them greater information selection costs and psychological burdens. Studies have found that an increased cost of perception (i.e. the time spent reading information and the effort required to process the information) will make users suffer burnout (Li, 2018). Another reason for social media users' burnout is that the amount of information is too large and is not, in fact, what they need, which leads to a sense of fatigue in the process of using social media (Dai, Luo & Yang, 2019).

The negative social emotions of users will eventually manifest themselves in negative social behaviors. It is usually manifested as the user's information ignorance (Neglect) behavior. The user's information ignorance behavior refers to ignoring information notifications, increasing unread messages, and decreasing desire to click. It also leads to user shielding behavior, which means that users become conscious due to various reasons. It is an information behavior that neglects and avoids certain information in order to improve the efficiency of information activities and enhance self-efficacy (Li, 2018). The inner principle is as follows: when negative emotions occur, cognitive dissonance occurs between the negative emotions and behaviors. In

order to balance this cognitive dissonance, people tend to choose to change as few emotional factors as possible, and change behaviors to maintain recognition (Wu, 2018).

USER DIFFERENTIAL ORDER ELEMENTS

Interpersonal communication in traditional Chinese society reflects the "differential order" supported by the logic of "we- relation- based egocentrism" (Fei, 2013). Such a typical Chinese social style still exists in the virtual world constructed by digital media. The concept of "differential order" itself is an individual-centred relationship structure that expands from near too far. In this small Chinese society of thousands of people in Belarus, this element is particularly important in the dissemination of information. "Differential order" means that there are close relatives and distant relatives. The importance of each level in the network of relations is different, and each level does not have an equal status; people handle the relationships according to the principle of closeness. The person who can grasp the information quickly is the central person, so people within the social circle can always get useful information from it. In this kind of relatively closed social circle with obvious differences, there is pressure brought by the psychological dependence and the internal group norms of the Chinese, coupled with the limitation of individual ability. It prevents individuals with insufficient ability from being separated from the group, so they must remain in harmony with the group. The psychological status of many students studying in Belarus is worrying about being on the edge of information in the social circle of students studying in Belarus, and thus being unable to receive important news.

MEDIA ELEMENTS

Media rumours contain rich connotations, including media types, content, and beliefs. In short, under the dual impact of overseas life and public health crisis events, the use of media is likely to be more complicated. From the perspective of media types, social media has formed more forms, including Chinese and foreign language platforms (e.g., Viber in Russian, Twitter in English). In the context of the attacks by the Western media on China and occasional incidents of harm, the students who left white community would go to foreign media more cautiously. The Western media labelled the new Corona virus as "Chinese/China virus" and "Wuhan virus". It is actually the interference of Western politics and the game of state power. "The Wall Street Journal" used the title "China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia"; "Ding Spiegel" directly used "Coronavirus Made in China" to say that the virus originated in China; "The Australian" uses schools' isolate students in danger of China virus" and so on in the title (Chen, & Lin, 2021).

Due to the different attributes of the media in different countries, audiences often have different judgments on the credibility of the media under different national systems, and because of language barriers, the white students lack motivation to read foreign news. And basically, people in all countries tend to believe the reports of their own media. Therefore, Chinese media is the main source of information for white students (Li et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

According to the survey, it is very important to build a stable and efficient social network for local overseas students, especially during the outbreak of such a public health crisis. Therefore, in the future, schools and student groups themselves should actively organize online and offline activities for international students to form a good community relationship among international students. At the same time, the psychological construction and emotional management of international students have a very clear impact on their media behaviour; schools should

consider strengthening the construction of international students' mental health and provide psychological counselling services in certain periods. The emergence of social media could have made communication more convenient, but the over-reliance on digital media in daily social interaction causes real-life problems and increases their level of social anxiety. Finally, we must strengthen our own media literacy, cultivate independent thinking ability and develop a critical spirit so that we can keep a clear mind to understand the world and face crises.

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